

THE COPTIC ORTHODOX CHURCH IN THE
GREATER TORONTO AREA

**THE COPTIC ORTHODOX CHURCH IN THE
GREATER TORONTO AREA:
THE SECOND GENERATION, CONVERTS AND GENDER**

By

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ABSTRACT

In 1965, the first Coptic Orthodox church in Canada was established in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) by Abuna Marcos, the first Coptic priest sent to minister to the Coptic diaspora in North America. Until the 1980s, the Coptic community in the GTA concentrated on the needs of the new immigrants arriving from Egypt. At present, however, the Coptic Church has had to re-ascertain its position in the Coptic community and Canadian society. The needs and desires of the second generation are now focused upon.

This thesis examines the adaptations made by the Coptic community in the GTA as it faces the issues of language and intermarriage. Strategies of adaptation include the process of separating the community's Egyptian or ethnic identity from its religious identity and the construction of authenticity through reference to the community's Pharaonic heritage, apostolic foundation and the history of the Council of Chalcedon. Until recently, the Coptic Church did mission work only in Africa. However, with the founding of the first missionizing Coptic church in North America, located in the GTA, the Church is taking on a new adaptive strategy: missionization. Through outreach to non-Copts and non-Egyptian converts, the Coptic Orthodox Church is ensuring its survival in the diaspora.

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Due to confidentiality concerns, I am unable to list, by name, all of the individuals who have helped me in the pursuit of my study. However, I would like to offer a heartfelt thank you to all the people who took the time to answer my questions after, and during, meetings and sat down with me for intensive interviews. Without your help, interest and concern, this thesis would not have been completed. I must, however, draw attention to the particular actions of two Coptic Orthodox priests in the Greater Toronto Area. For the past five years, on numerous occasions, Abuna Moses has taken the time to sit down with me and answer any questions that I might have concerning Coptic rites, practices and beliefs. No matter how confrontational I may have seemed at the time, Abuna Moses showed only compassion and concern for me and my research. For many months, Abuna Pishoy allowed me to act as his shadow. His interest in my study gave me access to many different meetings and his support helped me to feel comfortable when attending these meetings.

My mother and father are owed a debt of gratitude because they always taught me that I could do anything or be anyone when I grew up. Many parents might question their daughter's interest in the field of religious studies. However, I have only felt love and support in my pursuit of higher learning. My in-laws have also aided me in my research. They took the time to introduce me to different members of the Coptic community who could answer the questions that they were unable to resolve.

Finally, I dedicate this thesis to my husband, Ash, whose constant questioning and puzzled inquiries into my interpretations of Coptic symbols forced me to continually re-evaluate my theoretical positions.

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I

Introduction

The Coptic Orthodox Church in the Greater Toronto Area

The Coptic Orthodox community is a relatively new addition to the multicultural landscape of the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). However, since the 1960s, the community has established itself as a permanent fixture by building more than ten churches, as well as cultural centres, a Coptic museum and an elementary school in order to support the needs of its ever growing numbers. The growth of the community is due in part to the constant arrival of new immigrants from Egypt.¹ Plans are also in motion for the construction of a Coptic Village that will include a cathedral, a school, retirement home and a building for professional offices. Also, a new phase in the Canadian Coptic experience is just beginning. In 2007, a Coptic church was founded with the sole purpose of ministering to non-Copts and non-Egyptian converts, which is the first of its kind in North America.²

For close to fifteen hundred years, the Coptic Orthodox Church survived in almost complete isolation from other Christian communities. It was, and still is, a national church with a strong ethnic identity. Copts are proud of their Egyptian heritage. In the past fifty years, however, the Coptic hierarchy and community have had to face an extremely rapid rate of change in their political, economic,

¹ This thesis will only be focusing on the Coptic immigrants from Egypt in the GTA. The Copts from the Sudan or Ethiopia fall outside the scope of my study's analysis.

²From this point on in my thesis when the Coptic Church or Coptic church is discussed, I mean the Coptic Orthodox Church. Also, when the Coptic community is mentioned, it is the Coptic Orthodox community that is being talked about.

social, cultural and religious systems. The Coptic Church has become a transnational body that has had to adapt to new situations on a global scale.³ The churches in the GTA have had to balance the needs of the incoming new immigrants from Egypt along with those of the newly Canadian born, and growing in numbers, second generation. This thesis is a study of the adaptive strategies adopted by the Coptic Orthodox Church in the GTA to cope with issues of language, conversion and gender, just to name a few.

My Coptic Identity

I am one of the “converts” with whom the Coptic Orthodox Church in the GTA has had to learn to deal with. In this thesis, “convert” does not necessarily indicate a person of non-Christian upbringing or faith. The majority of converts that take part in the rites, meetings and activities of the Coptic churches in the GTA come from a Christian background and have had varying levels of contact with the teachings of the Bible. Some have been baptised twice. The Coptic hierarchy, until recently, only recognized baptisms within the Oriental Orthodox churches. However, baptisms of all Orthodox churches are now accepted.⁴ All baptisms performed by other Christian denominations are not recognized and

³There are varying statistics available on the population of Copts in Egypt. However, the number usually cited is six million. Some sources, such as www.copts.net, offer the higher figure of ten million for the number of Copts living in Egypt, but the truth probably lies somewhere in between the two numbers. The answer to the question of how many Copts live in the diaspora is just as ambiguous. Botros (2005:8) cites Khalil's (1999:73,34) population estimates of “700,000 Copts in the United States, 200,000 in Canada and 400,000 in Australia”.

⁴The Oriental Orthodox community includes the Syrian Orthodox Church and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

Coptic priests will insist on (re)baptizing the convert.⁵ Although a convert may choose not to be (re)baptised, this choice limits not only his or her access to the rites of the Coptic Church, but also those of his or her spouse. To get married in a Coptic Church with a Coptic priest conducting the Sacrament of Marriage, both the husband and the wife must be baptised in an Orthodox Church. If a Copt gets married in a non-Coptic ceremony, or at least a non-Orthodox ceremony, he or she will no longer be allowed to take communion in the Coptic Church. Therefore, membership within the Coptic community is extremely controlled. There are non-Christian converts in the Coptic community in the GTA, but this situation is still quite rare.

As I mentioned earlier, I am a Coptic convert. Almost two years ago, I married a Copt in a Coptic ceremony in one of the Coptic churches in the GTA. Although I do come from a Christian background, my baptism in the Mennonite Church was not recognized by the Coptic Church and Abuna, the priest, requested that I be baptised in the Coptic Orthodox tradition. There is not enough space in this introduction to outline the rite of baptism for adult converts, but let me simply say that most baptism basins in Coptic churches are meant to immerse a small child, not a grown adult.

My participation in two of the Coptic Orthodox Sacraments, the Sacraments of Baptism and Marriage, gave me an extension of what Lila Abu-Lughod (1991:137) identifies as a “halfie” identity. Abu-Lughod (1991) defines

⁵ Some priests will accept Roman Catholic baptisms and only make the sign of the cross in oil on the new member’s forehead.

“halfies” as “people whose national or cultural identity is mixed by virtue of migration, overseas education, or parentage” (1991:137). Through marriage, my national and cultural identity became mixed. Although I still identify myself as Mennonite when I am asked, “What religion are you?” by Copts, they also consider me to be Coptic when I explain that I am married to a Copt.

The issue of identity, especially concerning the identity of an ethnographer, has been discussed and debated in terms of the insider-outsider dichotomy for the past twenty years in the anthropological literature (see Keesing 1992, Zivkovic 2000, Hahn 1990, Narayan 1993 and Williams 1996). However, I agree with Kirin Narayan’s (1993:675) assertion that all identities are multiple. Narayan (1993) explains,

... A person may have many strands of identification available, strands that may be tugged into the open or stuffed out of sight. A mixed background such as mine perhaps marks one as inauthentic for the label “native” or indigenous” anthropologist; perhaps those who are not clearly “native” or “non-native” should be termed “halfies” instead. Yet, two halves cannot adequately account for the complexity of an identity in which multiple countries, regions, religions, and classes may come together [1993:673].

She continues by arguing that “different aspects of identity become highlighted at different times” (1993:674).

Walter L. Williams (1996) agrees with Narayan’s conclusion that identities are fluid and that the circumstances of a situation determine the exact characteristics shown by an ethnographer. For example, Williams (1996) argues that his “being gay is only one potential issue involved in living in a fieldwork setting” (1996:70). Williams (1996:79) also suggests that a personal relationship

between an ethnographer and a member of the community can be beneficial. The “quasi-insider status” given to the ethnographer allows for greater access to the beliefs, practices and rituals of the community (Williams 1996:79). I definitely found that my marriage to a Copt benefited my work in the Coptic community in the GTA. The participants in mass and meetings at the churches assumed that I understood their beliefs and practices, but at the same time, also recognized why I might need to ask questions concerning the meaning of those beliefs and practices. As a “halfie”, I could ask naive questions that my husband, as a born and raised Copt, could not.

Also, some Copts found it easier to discuss their issues and concerns with me regarding the practices of the Coptic Church in the GTA because I seemed more “Canadian” than other Copts. When asked a direct question about my faith or beliefs, I never lied. I felt that if I expected informants to be truthful with me when answering my often personal questions, I should give them the same courtesy. Hopefully, it built up a sense of trust in interviews and everyday conversations with individuals and groups. For example, I was often asked what my feelings toward child baptism were or what the role of women in the Church should be. Although, my answers differ from those of the Coptic Church, I always gave an honest answer and I never felt that my honesty hindered my research.

Abu-Lughod (1991:142) does draw attention to one problem associated with being a “halfie”, which is the “Rushdie effect”. “Halfies” have to keep in mind that they are writing for multiple audiences; not only will academics be

reading the work, but members of the studied community will have access to the contents and analysis of the researcher (Abu-Lughod 1991:142). This situation can lead to a “struggle with multiple accountability” (Abu-Lughod 1991:142). I wrestled with a few issues about which I personally disagree with the Coptic Church, (see Chapter V for a specific example), but that being said, I have tried to walk a tight rope between the needs and wants of the people I interacted with on a daily basis in the Coptic community and my own desires and wishes as an ethnographer.

Literature Review

A group’s world view is the way in which they believe that the world works, the order of reality (Geertz 1973:89). A group’s ethos, on the other hand, is the manner in which they act and conduct themselves morally and aesthetically (Geertz 1973:89). Clifford Geertz (1973:90) argues that systems of sacred symbols perform a double duty in that they are the connective tissue that unites an individual or group’s world view and ethos and, by doing so, the worldview and ethos shape each other and reinforce a group’s beliefs and practices. Therefore, religion and its symbols are a “model of” the way the world works and a “model for” how one should act in the world (Geertz 1973:94). For example, Copts believe that the world is full of suffering and that examples of how to deal with suffering are needed, like the narrative of a saint or martyr’s life. However, saints and martyrs suffer only because the world is chaos and persecutes them. Sacred symbols “both express the world’s climate and shape it” (Geertz 1973:95). A

common worldview and ethos are not the only characteristics shared by the majority of the Coptic community in the GTA. Many Copts identify themselves as Egyptian and the Church still maintains a clear ethnic identity. Paul Bramadat (2005) argues that,

An ethnic group is any significant group of people, typically related through common filiation, or blood, whose members also usually feel a sense of attachment to a particular place, a history, and a culture (including a common language, food, and clothing). An ethnic group is therefore a kind of modern “tribe” in the sense that its members believe themselves to be related, and to owe a degree of loyalty to the main institutions, leaders, history, or symbols of the larger group [2005:8].

That being said, it would seem that political, economic, and I would add religious, factors can influence a sense of belonging to an ethnic group (Bramadat 2005:8).⁶ Ethnicity cannot be defined as a “primordial social fact”, but as “a construction of a particular time and place” (Bramadat 2005:8).⁷

Using the Buddhist Churches of Canada as a case study, Mark Mullins (1987:322-323) argues that ethnic churches in Canada must adopt adaptive strategies in order to survive the changes in the needs of their congregants as new generations are born. The initial purpose for the establishment of an ethnic church, such as the Coptic Orthodox Church, in Canada is to provide a sense of home in new surroundings. Therefore, “the services and activities are naturally

⁶ Bramadat (2005) argues that most people do not think about “the ways in which religious and ethnic identities influence, or even determine, one another” (2005:1). The Copts have had to study the relationship between their ethnic and religious identities because, as one Coptic informant explained it to me, an Egyptian identity is slowly becoming synonymous with an Arab identity, which some consider Muslim in nature. See Chapter III for a discussion of how the Copts in Egypt and the diaspora have used the Pharaohs as a source for constituting their Egyptianess.

⁷ See Appadurai (1996) for more information on the role of nation-states, migration, mass media and the imagination in the formation of an ethnic identity.

dominated by the language and clergy from the old country” (Mullins 1987:323). With the birth of the second generation, however, issues of language and cultural adaptation or assimilation occur (Mullins 1987:325). Mullins (1987:327) claims that by the third generation, intermarriage with non-group members can lead to a loss in membership as the younger generation can no longer relate to the Church or the Church will move towards becoming a “multiethnic” organization.

In an ethnographic study of the Coptic community in North America, Ghada Botros (2005:12-13) agrees with Mullins’ (1987 and 1988) life cycle model and states that the role of the Coptic Church in the diaspora is threefold: helper, comforter and competitor.

By “helper” I refer to the whole gamut of services provided to recent migrants helping them in finding jobs, housing and other mundane needs. The “comforter” role refers to making the locus of the church a site for the emotional rejuvenation of the migrant by becoming a piece of home away from home. However, it is the task of competing for the youth that dominates the discourse of the church leadership, members of the clergy and church volunteers. Competing for the youth and reaching out to them remains the major goal of the immigrant church [2005: 12-13].

Botros (2005), however, recognizes that the Coptic Church must perform all three roles at the same time since the Church faces the challenge of managing the needs of first, second and third generation Coptic Canadians.

James Clifford (1994:313-315) asserts that studies of diasporas must discuss the issue of gender. In the past, feminist analyses of women from Middle Eastern communities have portrayed them as naïve submissive followers who do not recognize their right to freedom. Saba Mahmood (2005:7) argues that freedom or the need for individual autonomy is a relatively new phenomenon to which

perhaps not all women ascribe. Conceivably, individualism does not fit into every woman's social or religious worldview. Similarly, Lila Abu-Lughod (2002:787) indicates that we have to accept the possibility of difference. "We may want justice for women, but can we accept that there might be different ideas about justice, and that different women might want, or choose, different futures from what we envision as best?" (Abu-Lughod 2002:787-788).

Objectives and Results

James Clifford (1994:319) argues that studies of diasporas should be rooted in "specific maps/histories." "Thus historicized, diaspora cannot become a master trope or 'figure' for modern, complex, or positional identities, crosscut and displaced by race, sex, gender, class, and culture" (Clifford 1994:319). The story of the Coptic Orthodox community in the GTA can be used as a counterhistory to that of the larger Canadian society and can also be situated among the "specific maps/histories" of many other immigrant minority communities in Canada.

The specific history of the Coptic community in the GTA must include an analysis of the adaptive strategies used by the Coptic Church in an attempt to initiate and maintain a relationship with the second generation of Coptic Canadians.⁸ As Mullins (1987 and 1988) has shown for the Buddhist churches, the issues of language and intermarriage have caused the Coptic Church in the GTA to review its practices and discuss its choices for accommodating both new

⁸ In this thesis, my definition of "second generation" is more liberal and inclusive than the definition other studies might use. Second generation Coptic Canadians are not only those individuals who were born in Canada, but also Copts who moved to Canada at a young age and spent their formative years in the Canadian education and social systems.

immigrants from Egypt and acculturated Canadian Copts. The strategies used by the Coptic Church include, but are not limited to, the conscious decision to try to separate the religious identity of the Coptic Church from an Egyptian or ethnic identity.

As noted previously, Botros (2005) highlights what she believes are the three roles of the Coptic Church in North America: “helper”, “comforter” and “competitor”. Due to the increasing rate of intermarriage in the Coptic Church and the growing interest of specific priests in mission work and evangelism, I argue that the Coptic Church in the GTA has adopted a fourth role: “messenger”. This new role has led to the establishment of a new Coptic church in the GTA. The motivation for the creation of this new church, however, is not approved by every member of the Coptic community.

My research shows that second generation Coptic Canadian women and female converts have adopted specific methods for dealing with the patriarchal system of the Coptic Church. Most studies that focus on the issues faced by Middle Eastern women concentrate solely on Muslim women. Another purpose of this thesis is to add the voices of Coptic women to the discipline of gender studies.

The Fieldwork

My initial introduction to the Coptic community occurred a little over eight years ago when I attended a Coptic wedding, which allowed me to witness, for the first time, the strict rites and beliefs of the Coptic Church. Since that day, I

have spent countless hours attending mass, vespers, weddings and meetings in Coptic churches throughout the GTA. I began my fieldwork on June 20, 2007 by attending a meeting for university graduates at one of the larger Coptic churches in the GTA. I completed my fieldwork on December 5, 2007 with an interview of a participant. During those five months, I spent anywhere from three to six days a week running between masses and meetings at four different churches. My Wednesdays were especially hectic because I had to be at three separate meetings, all of which were at opposite ends of the GTA.

The main sites at which I conducted my fieldwork included four Coptic churches and a university campus. The four churches are located in different parts of the GTA and their congregations range in size from two hundred families to two thousand families.⁹ At these four churches, I participated in a number of different types of meetings. Two of the churches I visited held weekly meetings for university graduates, which differed in size and focus. The first meeting included only five to twelve participants every week and dealt with traditional theological topics such as the nature of Christ. The second university graduate group had a steady attendance of one hundred to two hundred people depending on the week. The topics of discussion ranged from contemporary issues like abortion, evolution and the morning after pill to comparative theology concerning the differences between the Coptic Church, the Roman Catholic Church and the

⁹ Coptic churches do not keep track of their membership by counting individual participants, but give relative numbers in terms of families. In fact, the number of families given by different priests belonging to the same church can vary, which makes it difficult to determine the Coptic population in the GTA.

churches of the Protestant Reformation. Many of the individuals that participated in the smaller meetings at the first church also attended the larger meetings at the second church.

Twice a week for six weeks of the summer, I visited with the women who supervised and managed a summer camp for children aged five to fifteen. The same church that arranged the summer camp also held a weekly meeting for the elderly that took place right after a weekday morning mass. The mass and meeting were performed in Arabic, but different women took turns translating the topics presented by the priests or deacons. It is interesting to note that within this congregation, one of the smaller Coptic churches in the GTA, the priest must meet the needs of both the very young and the very old.

Every summer, the Coptic churches in Ontario organize the Ontario Coptic Youth Convention (OCYC). There are different conventions for different age groups at different sites throughout the province of Ontario. The first is for children aged eight to eleven, then twelve to fifteen, sixteen to eighteen and finally a convention for university students. I attended the high school youth convention, which took place at the University of Guelph and involved the participation of over four hundred Coptic teenagers.¹⁰ I also attended a weekend retreat for university graduates. During the 2007 fall semester, I joined a Coptic student association on one of the university campuses in the GTA. The members

¹⁰ The High School OCYC's theme was "C, My Identity". The Three C's being Christ, Church and Community. What was interesting to note was that all children in attendance were Egyptian in background.

held weekly meetings and tried their best to get priests to visit campus to lead vespers at least once a month.

I completed twenty-one interviews.¹¹ Eleven of these were with women and ten with men. Three of the men were priests and four of the twenty-one interviewees were not Egyptian, but converts or contemplating the possibility of conversion at the time of the interview. Language was rarely an issue because most Copts learn English in Egypt before they move to Canada. As I have already noted, a language barrier was only evident at the meeting for the elderly and someone was always kind enough to act as my translator.

Discussion of the Chapters

Chapter Two begins with an account of a Sunday mass and a description of the layout and architectural design of one of the Coptic churches in the GTA. The focus of the chapter is on the history of the Copts in the GTA. First, I discuss the three waves of Coptic immigration to Canada and the political, economic, social and religious circumstances in Egypt that led to the establishment of a Coptic diaspora. The Coptic community in the GTA was at the forefront of the organization of the Copts in North America and I give a brief overview of the activities of the first Coptic priest and the first church to be built in the Coptic architectural style in North America. The issues faced by new Coptic immigrants in Canada are presented in two personal narratives that demonstrate the struggles

¹¹ Pseudonyms will be used throughout this thesis to protect the identities of my informants. The names of public figures will be exempt from this rule.

involved in moving to a new country. Also, the adaptive strategies of the Coptic Church in the GTA are discussed.

The third chapter examines the relationship between the Coptic Orthodox community in the GTA and the Coptic community and hierarchy in Egypt. This examination includes a discussion of the strategies adopted by the Coptic Church in the GTA to establish a relationship with Canadian born Copts. One tactic I elaborate upon is the attempt to separate the Coptic, Orthodox or religious identity of the community from its Egyptian or ethnic identity. I also survey the Coptic Church's efforts to the construct authenticity, drawing upon their Pharaonic heritage, Apostolic foundation and the (re)telling of the history of the Councils that led to the isolation of the Coptic Orthodox community in Egypt.

Chapter Four focuses on the issue of intermarriage and conversion within the Coptic community in the GTA. I explore the community's attitude toward the institution of a new role for the Coptic Church in North America, that of "messenger", when the Pope blessed the establishment of a new Coptic church in the GTA. I outline the goals of this new church, which include missionization, evangelism and a place for non-Egyptians to learn about the religious identity of the Copts.

In Chapter Five, I discuss the issue of gender and the role of women in the Coptic Orthodox Church. Specifically, I focus attention on the coping methods and adaptation strategies of second generation Coptic Canadian women and female converts when dealing with the patriarchal structure of the Coptic Church.

I also examine the issues of agency and individualism and the need for a (re)interpretation of the desires and needs of women.

Chapter Six concludes my thesis by summarizing my main arguments and focusing attention on possible topics and themes for future research.

II

The Coptic Orthodox Church in Canada

A Coptic Orthodox Experience

On an ordinary Sunday – it could have been spring, summer, winter or fall – I made my way by car to one of the Coptic Orthodox Churches in a GTA surrounding neighbourhood. If you did not know what you were looking for, it would be very easy to drive right by the church's building if you just happened to blink at the right moment and miss the sign, which is not lit at night. The church is located inside an industrial building, which it owns. It leases out the extra space the church does not need to different companies, such as an auto repair shop and junk car collector. The leasing of building space is a source of income for the church, which the congregants hope to use when they purchase another plot of land on which to build a larger church in a more traditional Orthodox style.¹² The use and modification of an industrial building, or renting or purchasing a church initially used by another Christian denomination is a common practice among Copts in the GTA.¹³ Often, the members of a newly founded Coptic church are recent immigrants to Canada, who are attempting to adapt to a new economic, political, social and cultural environment, and may be struggling financially. Since the responsibility of purchasing a church building falls on the shoulders of

¹² The most visible and recognizable external feature of a Coptic Orthodox Church is its domed roof topped by an Orthodox cross on which the top three points each form three miniature crosses.

¹³ Aziz S. Atiya (1981:35) points out that the earliest members of the Coptic community often converted ancient temples into Christian churches, a practice echoed by Copts in the GTA today. In this sense, the Copts seem to be an adaptable community.

the lay community it is a practical solution to procure either a previously used church or a building that can be partially rented to other tenants to help finance the everyday operations of the church.

When I arrived at the church, there were only a few cars in the parking lot, but by the end of the Sunday mass, the parking lot would be full and the excess cars would be parked on the street alongside the church. I was early by Coptic standards. Most Copts do not attend the entire mass because it can often take up to three hours to complete, especially in the smaller churches that have only one priest to chant the liturgy and administer the Eucharist to the congregants. To take communion, a Copt must be present during the Gospel reading and sermon. The reading and sermon usually occur between thirty and forty-five minutes after the priest's offering of incense, which initiates the beginning of every mass.¹⁴

¹⁴ Offering incense is not as simple as it might seem. Every ritual of the Coptic Orthodox Church is set and the actions of the people, deacons and priests are prearranged. These prescribed actions and words have been written out in a book that is available, in Arabic, Coptic or English, in most Coptic churches. For example, for the offering of evening and morning incense it reads, "The priest uncovers his head, stands at the door of the sanctuary, and says:

Priest: Have mercy on us, O God, the Father, the Pantocrator. All-Holy Trinity, have mercy on us.

O Lord, God of the powers, be with us, for we have no helper in our tribulations and afflictions but You.

Then he says the Lord's Prayer.

Our Father, who art in heavens, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.

In Christ Jesus our Lord, for Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.

Amen.

People: In Christ Jesus our Lord.

After this, the priest prostrates himself before the sanctuary door, saying:

We worship You, O Christ, with Your good Father and the Holy Spirit, for You (have come) and saved us.

Then he prostrates before his fellow priests and the deacons, saying:

Bless me. Lo, the repentance. Forgive me.

Therefore, most Copts arrive thirty minutes late for mass, although the priests try to dissuade their congregants from this practice by telling them that the ritual of offering incense and the opening prayers are integral parts of the mass.

The entrance to the church is directly under a lit sign that displays the name of the church with a picture of one of the church's patron saints. Once I stepped through the front door, I found myself in a small vestibule. Straight ahead were double doors with windows through which I could see the sanctuary of the church. To my right was a set of stairs that led up to Sunday school classrooms and a doorway, which I later found out, led to a gym. To my left was a baby room that had a window overlooking the sanctuary and a baptismal pool for baptizing children and adult converts. Further along the hallway to my left was the Abuna's office and a large meeting room that contained a kitchen and a booth which sells an assortment of religious paraphernalia – Bibles, icons of innumerable saints and martyrs, wooden crosses to hang on the wall, crucifixes to dangle around your neck, cartoon DVDs for children depicting Bible stories, sermons on tape in both Arabic and English and countless other items. The booth sells cultural miscellanea, mostly concerning Egypt – DVDs about Pharaonic sites or Coptic monasteries and Arabic music CDs.

The priest greets his fellow priests, and stands before the sanctuary door with contrition while spreading forth his hands. The deacons stand behind him and to his right while he holds the cross in his hand.

Priest: Pray.

Deacon: Stand up for prayer.

The priest bows his head towards his fellow priests, and, while turning towards the west, he makes the sign of the cross over the people with his right hand, and says:

Peace be with all.

People: And with your spirit." Every action and every word said is predetermined and charted out for everyone involved.

I proceeded through the double doors into the sanctuary where I was met with a wall of incense. It was so thick that you could taste it, let alone take in the scent. I could understand why some converts that I had spoken to sometimes found it difficult to breathe when they attended mass. On the right hand side of the sanctuary, there were only women standing or sitting with their heads bowed in prayer. Some were wearing white headscarves as they listened to the chanting of the priest and deacons. There were men and women standing together on the left hand side of the church in groups, which looked like families. In Egypt, men and women are divided and sit on different sides of the church during services, but there is no religious reason for this separation. When asked, the abuna of the church, Abuna Paul, explained that the physical separation of men and women is a result of the influence of Islamic culture in Egypt. Egyptian Copts feel that the separation of men and women in church is a concession to the Muslim majority. The piety and respectability of Coptic women and the Coptic Orthodox Church as a whole cannot be questioned. When I have attended mass or youth group meetings at the larger Coptic churches in the GTA, men and women sit together on both the right and left hand sides of the church.

I made my way further into the sanctuary and stood in front of one of the pews on the left hand side of the church from where I took in the surroundings. Icons have been placed on every available surface within the sanctuary and they

are all written in the traditional Coptic style.¹⁵ The individuals depicted on the icons are all tall and skinny with wide foreheads and narrow chins. Gold halos are placed on top of the heads of every man, woman, child and angel. The icons on the north and south sanctuary walls are life size and seem to be gold plated. It is difficult to take your eyes away from them. At the front of the sanctuary is a partition wall, called the iconostasis, which divides the room into two unequal parts. The wall has three openings in it. The centre opening is an entrance to the altar area, which only men, children and women who have completed menopause can enter. The opening on the left hand side is the entrance to the men's room, in which the priest gives out the Eucharist. The opening on the right hand side is where the women enter to receive communion.

Abuna Paul told me that the only icon allowed in the altar area is that of Jesus because the altar area is considered to be a part of heaven. On the other hand, the side of the iconostasis facing the people in the pews is covered with icons because the saints are beckoning and welcoming the people to join them in heaven.

By the time I arrived in the sanctuary, Abuna Paul had made his way into the altar area followed by a few of his deacons. The other deacons were standing in front of two sets of pews that face each other from either side of the opening to the altar area in the iconostasis. The pews, altar area and pulpit, from which the Abuna gives his sermons, is on a raised area about three steps higher than the rest

¹⁵ In the Coptic Orthodox tradition, icons are not drawn, but written. The Holy Spirit is believed to descend upon the artist who then writes the icon.

of the sanctuary. I had to take out the liturgy reader that was in a pocket on the back of the pew in front of me because the Abuna often switches between Arabic, English and Coptic, which can make it difficult to follow along. The language shifting can also be exacerbated by the switching of liturgies. There are three to choose from: Saints Basil, Gregory and Cyril. Luckily, an electronic number counter has been hung on the left hand side of the iconostasis letting the congregants know which page of the liturgy to follow in the reader. This language dance is not done in every Coptic church in the GTA, but in a small church like Abuna Paul's, there is only one priest trying to fulfill the needs of his community. He must walk a balancing act between those individuals looking for a taste of home in a new country and others who may not speak Arabic or think of Egypt as home. The larger Coptic churches in the GTA have more than one priest. One church in Mississauga has eight priests while another church in North York has five priests. Each priest can focus on the specific needs of a targeted group. More priests also means that a church can offer more than one mass on a given Sunday and often each mass is celebrated in a different language. For example, the three largest churches offer an English mass at 7:30 a.m. and an Arabic mass at 10:30 a.m. every Sunday morning.

During the liturgy, I noticed individuals walking over to a smaller altar on the left hand side of the sanctuary, just outside the men's communion room. Lying on top of the altar were what looked to be maroon cylindrical velvet pillows. As I watched, different members of the congregation took turns touching and kissing

the individual pillows. Later, after I enquired about the pillows, I learned that they are used to protect the relics that are encased within them. Relics are a part of a bone of a saint or something with which the saint came into contact, for example, a scarf or a sword. The Coptic Orthodox Church and many of its believers view relics as the physical embodiment of the saints' holiness, and many Copts touch the relics for *baraka*, or blessing. Parents also bring their children to touch and kiss the relics.

After the gospel reading and sermon, the liturgy progresses with the ritual of the fraction of the bread and blessing of the wine for communion. I am always struck by the orchestration of a Coptic mass. All of the men, women and many of the children present know when to sit in prayer, when to stand and when it is time to respond to the priest or deacons. The priest acts as a conductor who directs the actions of the deacons, men, women and children. It can be beautiful to watch. When the priest is ready to give communion, men go to the room on the left hand side while the women line up to enter the room on the right hand side. There is always a crush in the women's room because there are always more women taking communion than men. In some of the larger churches, the priests have given up using the communion rooms because they are over-crowded. Instead, the men and women line up in different aisles of the sanctuary and receive communion from two or three different priests. The deacons chant Coptic hymns as people wait. Children are carried to the priests by their parents to receive the Eucharist.

Children have free reign in the Coptic Orthodox churches in the GTA. Pope Shenouda III has decreed that all children of every age should attend and take part in mass, which means that the noise level during the mass can sometimes become disruptive. Nora Stene (1997a) noticed similar behaviour among Coptic children in churches in Egypt. Children were the only ones allowed to transgress the male – female divide (Stene 1997a:196). I have watched a young boy skate down an aisle of a Coptic church, during Christmas mass, wearing the type of running shoes that have wheels on the bottom soles. Another child that I observed tried to climb onto a table on which lit candles were placed in front of an icon of the Virgin Mary. Neither child was stopped until they had created a substantial disruption. One parent commented that she was afraid to discipline her children for their behaviour in the church because it might prevent them from attending mass and other church functions in the future. When I questioned one priest, Abuna Peter, about the activities of the children, his response was that the crying of a child during mass is the sound of a bright future for the church.

After the priest had completed the Sacrament of Communion he gave a second sermon, this time in Arabic. The first sermon, given after the Gospel reading, had been in English. Following the second sermon, the announcements were read out and the mass ended with Abuna Paul walking up the aisle of the church sprinkling holy water onto the congregants who had moved closer together to receive as much of the blessing as possible. The abuna then returned to the front of the sanctuary as a line formed along the aisle. Abuna Paul offers the left

over bread that was not used for communion to those waiting in line. The bread is considered a blessing and I was told to be careful to avoid dropping any crumbs.

Sunday school classes begin directly after the end of the mass. The children were quickly shuffled upstairs to their respective classrooms, while many of the parents made their way into the meeting room for coffee and tea. The church is not just a religious space, but a social space as well. Aparna Rayaprol (1997) argues that “immigrant religious institutions are not only places of worship but centres for various cultural and social activities that bind the participants into a close-knit community” (1997:63). Copts do not only come to church to pray, but to socialize with other members of their community who share similar life experiences. When they first arrive in Canada from Egypt, many Copts use the church community to learn about their options for social services, education, recertification and social and cultural (re)orientation.

This simple outline of a Coptic Orthodox mass at a church in the GTA could almost be mistaken for a mass performed in Egypt. The only hint that it is taking place in the diaspora is the use of English during the liturgy and sermon and the sitting arrangement of men and women. This overview also reveals many points of interest concerning the Coptic community in the GTA. First, I will focus on the chosen space for worship. From the outside, the building was indistinguishable from the other industrial buildings in the area. However, inside the sanctuary, the building was transformed into a religious space like any other Coptic church in Egypt or the diaspora. The second theme apparent in my

description is the relationship between the Coptic community and its saints and martyrs. Third, the issue of the use of multiple languages is significant. Fourth, it is important to note the number of priests needed to administer to the Copts living in the GTA and their roles as religious and social leaders. Related to this last point is the connection between the Coptic community in the GTA and the Church hierarchy in Egypt. The Copts are now a transnational community. Fifth, my description highlights the relationship between the Coptic Church and second generation Coptic Canadian children. Finally, my overview reveals the involvement of the Coptic Church and community in the political, economic, social and cultural systems of Canada and the association of non-Egyptians with the Coptic Orthodox Church.

The Introduction of Copts to Canada

Traditionally the Copts have always been attached to their homeland; emigration was something new to them, an adventure into the unknown. Our friends and relatives looked at us in surprise, mixed with pity. Most of the Church leaders were reluctant to bless such a movement, if they were not totally against it [Yanney 1989:65].

The emigration of Copts to North America from Egypt began after the July 23, 1952 Revolution – Egypt's Declaration of Independence from British Occupation. Before the 1952 Revolution, Copts and Muslims worked together to fight for their independence from British Imperial rule and individuals from both religious groups were members of the Wafd Party, formed in 1919, which was an organization fighting for independence (see Hasan 2003:36-42 and van Nispen tot Sevenaer 1997:25-26). This sense of unity was slowly eroded after the

establishment of Gamal Abdel Nasser's (1954-1970) socialist regime. Nasser shifted the focus of Egyptian nationalism from a shared Pharaonic identity, culture and heritage, which was Egyptian specific, towards a more pan-Arab platform, which alienated many Copts who felt that Nasser's brand of nationalism was very Islamic in nature and idealistic (Hasan 2003:98 and van Nispen tot Sevenaer 1997:27). Although Nasser employed an Arab identity within his nationalism, he was a supporter of a secular form of government and attacked all Muslim fundamentalist organizations.

Nasser's socialist program included agrarian reforms, which nationalized the land of many wealthy Copts and Muslims and redistributed hundreds of acres to peasants. This restructuring was not specifically aimed at disrupting the activities and lifeways of the Coptic community. However, it inadvertently affected the influence that the Coptic upper class had on Egypt's political and economic systems. The nationalization of Coptic schools, the opening of universities to all Egyptians who wished to pursue a post secondary education and the government's promise that all university graduates would be given a job in the public sphere after completing their degrees changed the academic, political, economic, social and cultural landscapes of Egypt (van Nispen tot Sevenaer 1997:27). Copts lost their prominence in the professional fields: medicine, pharmacy and engineering (van Nispen tot Sevenaer 1997:27).

The transformation of Egypt's political, economic, social and cultural systems, resulting from the 1952 Revolution and the policies of Nasser's regime,

led to the first of three semi-distinct waves of Coptic immigration to Canada. Before the 1952 Revolution, it was almost impossible for Egyptians to get exit visas. A few were able to leave to pursue educational opportunities. However, the chance for large scale emigration by any Egyptian community was not an option until the establishment of Nasser's government. The first wave of emigrants was composed of members of the Egyptian liberal elite, which included Copts, Catholics, Protestants and Muslims. The liberal elite had felt the brunt of the effects of the changes and reforms made by Nasser. Many of these émigrés had ties to the royal family, whom Nasser had de-throned, and besides loosing their land, they recognized and feared the possibility that Nasser's police state might become uncontrollable.

In Canada, as an Abuna explained to me, the first wave of immigrant Copts landed in Montreal.

Initially there were three waves of immigration to North America. The first was after the 1952 Revolution. Most Copts in this wave ended up in Montreal. The second wave was in 1961, when Nasser nationalized most of the land owned by Copts. Most Copts in this wave ended up in New York/New Jersey. The third wave was in 1967, after the Six Day War, when Copts spread out across North America [Abuna, 08/07/07].

Within fifteen years of the initial emigration of Copts from Egypt, Coptic communities had formed in Montreal and Toronto in Canada and Jersey City and Los Angeles in the United States. By the late 1960s, all four communities and Coptic families living in smaller cities throughout North America were requesting the presence of representatives of the Coptic Orthodox hierarchy in their new places of residence. Some were searching for spiritual guidance while others

simply wanted a church that would be a place that felt like home when everything else seemed new and sometimes confusing. The growing needs of the Coptic community in the GTA and the response of the Coptic Patriarchate in Egypt will be discussed further later in this chapter.

The second wave of Coptic emigrants to Canada from Egypt occurred in the 1970s and 1980s after the establishment of Anwar El Sadat's (1970-1981) government. Sadat initially befriended the Muslim extremist groups, which Nasser had ostracized and persecuted. "He enjoyed being known as 'the pious president' and sponsored a number of programmes suggesting the *Islamization* of the most secular state in the Arab world" (Watson 2000:95). This reconciliation between the government and Islamic extremism led to sectarian violence. Violence against the Coptic community was not, by any means, a daily occurrence or large in scale, but aggressive acts happened frequently enough and were horrific in terms of the number of victims harmed in a single act, that many Copts were frightened for their immediate safety and for the future of their children. For example, sixty Copts were killed on December 12, 1972 in al-Khanka (Meinardus 2002:28). In June 1981, a Coptic priest was murdered in Cairo in broad daylight and later in the month twenty Copts were left dead and one hundred more were injured when violence broke out over a proposal to build a mosque on church land (Watson 2000:98). A bombing in Shoubra in August of that same year took the lives of over a dozen Copts and injured close to fifty others (Watson 2000:98).

The bloodshed, however, was not as shocking as the news Copts around the world received the morning of Saturday, 5 September, 1981. Sadat had placed Pope Shenouda III under house arrest at the monastery of St. Bishoi. Sadat had also arrested eight bishops, twenty-four priests and a number of deacons and layman (Yanney 1989:67). Members of the Coptic hierarchy were not the only Egyptian citizens detained by the state. 1,536 individuals were picked up by the state police, many of whom were Muslim activists (Watson 2000:93,95). Recognizing that the Copts would need a leader, not just for political reasons, but also for the spiritual questions, Sadat created a “Papal Committee” of five bishops to lead the Coptic community. John H. Watson (2000:97 and 103) argues that the Copts in Egypt believed that the President had no right to interfere in divine affairs, but the majority of Coptic monks, priests, bishops and laypeople did not resist Sadat and supported the Papal Committee. The situation in the diaspora, particularly in the United States, was different. Radolph Yanney (1989), a Copt living in the United States, wrote,

Under Martial Law in Egypt, all mouths were silenced. The Copts in the diaspora, in Canada, Europe and Australia, looked to the US Copts for leadership. However, the clerical leadership collapsed with 22 priests acknowledging, after a meeting with the Papal Committee in Detroit, on November 18 and 19, their recognition and cooperation with the committee... Only three priests in the US refused to accept the authority of the Papal committee. As a result, they were excommunicated and defrocked in January 1982. One of them, however, Father Marcos El-Askeety, was murdered under obscure circumstances in 1983. It was the lay leadership and the two remaining priests that had to fight for the return of Pope Shenouda and for the rescinding of the decrees of Sadat” [1989:67].

Yanney's (1989) account of the events of 5 September, 1981 does not mention the arrest of Muslim extremists, only the members of the Coptic hierarchy.

On Tuesday 6 October, 1981, Sadat was assassinated by Muslim extremist members of the army. Hosni Mubarek (1981-present) became President of Egypt. However, Pope Shenouda was not released from house arrest until 6 January, 1985. The Coptic emigrants of the second wave were not solely searching for an escape from violence, since violence was not prevalent – although present. What was prevalent was unemployment and poverty. Even with a post secondary education, individuals could wait for up to five years for a promised government job appointed by the state and often the job was not in the field they had studied in university.

The third wave of Coptic emigrants to Canada, beginning in the 1990s, is the most recent in the fifty years of emigration out of Egypt. These Copts left Egypt for reasons similar to those in the second wave. When I ask informants why they chose to emigrate to Canada and leave their homeland in Egypt, the answer is always the same; they wanted their children to grow up with opportunities that they were not afforded in Egypt because of their Christian identity. In Egypt, Copts are faced with prejudice in the workplace, since the unofficial practice is that Christians are not allowed to attain high positions of authority in public and private corporations or the military. As a result, their access to economic and social resources is limited. Therefore, they choose to emigrate to Canada where they hope that their children will be able to practice their Christian faith without

experiencing barriers in everyday life.¹⁶ There is a steady stream of Copts emigrating to the GTA and when they arrive they are lucky to find an established community with several church options spread throughout the city area. This was not the case when the first Copts arrived in the 1960s and 1970s.

St. Mark's Coptic Orthodox Church and Abuna Marcos

Amid participants' encounters with geographical and religious upheaval, many consider the *pitham* ("seat", the place at which the *murti* or god is located) to be "home" – a place that, in a sense, grounds them and helps make sense of life's various ruptures. Although the process of "making home" is not typically easy or pain-free, it can offer a means to engage the generous stores of individual, communal, and divine adaptability and creativity of those who partake [Dempsey 2006:149].

Before 1964, the Copts residing in the GTA, and in the rest of North America, relied on sporadic visits of Coptic priests, monks and bishops sent from Egypt, for their religious needs. However, on August 9, 1964, Elias Wagdi was

¹⁶ As I have already discussed and acknowledged, violent attacks on Copts are infrequent, however, they are still a part of Coptic life in Egypt today. On May 31, 2008, as Pope Shenouda sat in a Coptic monastery on the outskirts of the GTA greeting and meeting with Canadian Copts, a monastery in Deir Abu Fana, Egypt was attacked.

The peaceful monastery was the target of an atrocious attack by a group of some 70 Arabs', as tribal communities that live in the desert are called, armed with automatic weapons, on Saturday 31 May. At 5:00pm the attack started at the farmlands surrounding the monastery buildings. The plants and fields were destroyed, and the monks and workers assaulted. The gas-fired irrigation pumps were broken and the gas used to torch the monastery buildings and cells. The attack converged on the central compound; three cells were burnt and the mushroom produce building destroyed, as well as a tractor owned by the monastery. The tractor is a major means of transport for the monks among the sand dunes.

The attackers set the Church of the Pope Kyrillos on fire, destroyed the altar, tore and torched the bibles and icons, and ruined the wire fence recently built to protect the monastery.

Father Bakhoum, 35, was shot in the shoulder and leg, Father Fini was injured in the arm, and the two cadets Brother Sawiris, 30, and Brother Michael, 25, were injured in their arms and legs. One of the attackers, Khalil Ibrahim Mohamed, 39, was killed.

When they finally left, the attackers abducted three monks, Fathers Youa'nnis, Maximous, and Andrawes, as well as Ibrahim Taqqi who is the brother of one of the monks and was incidentally visiting the monastery at the time [Khalil 2008].

Prior to the violence at Abu Fana monastery, four Coptic Christians were shot dead in broad daylight with machine guns inside the Cairo jewelry shop where they worked (BBC News 2008). The reason for the murders has yet to be determined.

ordained by Pope Kyrillos VI (1902-1971) as Abuna Marcos Marcos for the exclusive purpose of serving the Coptic community in North America (Marcos 1981:66 and Botros 2005:65). Abuna Marcos had moved to the United States in 1958 to study ethnomusicology (Botros 2005:67). From his arrival, he was involved with the activities of the Coptic community in New York. For example, he was one of the founding members of the “American Coptic Association” in 1961 (Botros 2005:64).

The home base for the Coptic Orthodox Church in North America was established in Toronto in November 1964 (Marcos 1981:66). The choice of Toronto as headquarters had no strategic objective. When Abuna Marcos applied for visas, the United States only granted him a visitor’s visa while Canada gave him his papers as a landed immigrant (Botros 2005:68). The Coptic Orthodox Church was registered with the province of Ontario in 1965, which required the Church to establish a set of bylaws. The bylaws were:

1. That the newly established church is “inseparable from the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt” headed by the Coptic Pope
2. That there will be a “board of deacons” serving as “helpers” to the priest comprised of a number of lay members from the community
3. That the priest is the head of the church
4. That the priest would open a bank account for the church, as the head of the board and that he might be one of the two signatories
5. That church membership is not based on financial contribution but is only based on baptism into the church (Botros 2005:74-75).

Ghada Botros noted that “the rules emphasized the supremacy of the priesthood and the Church hierarchy over the lay, but not of a specific priest” (2005:75).

Until the arrival of Abuna Raphael Nakhla in 1967, as the permanent priest for the Coptic community in Montreal, Abuna Marcos was known as “the flying priest” because in addition to the monthly masses he performed in Montreal and New York, he visited Copts in Halifax, Winnipeg, Edmonton, Vancouver, Los Angeles, Denver and any other North American city where Copts resided (Marcos 1981:66-67). After 1967, Abuna Marcos and Abuna Nakhla split North America in two with Marcos serving the communities in the West and Nakhla the East. In 1969, Abuna Bishoi Kamel became the first permanent Coptic priest in the United States (Marcos 1981:67). He ministered to St. Mark’s Coptic Orthodox Church in Los Angeles where the Coptic community had purchased an old Lutheran church (Yanney 1989:66). In Jersey City in 1970, the Copts bought an old Methodist church and the Coptic Patriarch in Egypt sent Abuna Gabriel Abdel-Sayed to serve the community at St. Mark’s Coptic Orthodox Church (Yanney 1989:66).

In 1976, Bill McClintock, a Protestant Canadian who had no prior relationship with the Copts in Egypt or the GTA, sold the Copts in Toronto an acre of land for one dollar (Marcos 1981:71). When Abuna Marcos had arrived in Toronto in 1964, there had been thirty six Coptic families living in the area (Marcos 1981:66). By the time that McClintock offered the land to the Copts in the GTA, the community had grown to five hundred families (Marcos 1981:71). On Sunday, 23 April, 1978, the first Divine Liturgy was celebrated in the first

architecturally authentic Coptic Orthodox Church in North America (Marcos 1981:71).

Attached to Toronto's St. Mark's Coptic Church, was the Coptic Canadian Cultural Centre where Arabic, Coptic and French classes were offered (Marcos 1981:74). The Centre also published pamphlets and flyers about the Coptic Church (Marcos 1981:74). When I was doing fieldwork, youth and university graduates meetings and gatherings for the elderly were held on the main floor of the Centre while the second floor had been transformed into St. Mark's Coptic Museum. The museum contains artifacts such as Pharaonic beaded jewelry, Coptic and Greek manuscripts, textiles, icons, Nubian crucifixes and artwork in the Coptic folkloric tradition.¹⁷ The museum was inaugurated on November 27, 1996 (Marcos 1998:3) and its collection represents a broad range of the Copts' social and cultural history in Egypt and in Canada. One helper at the museum, pointed out a problem, however, noting that the older generation does not see a point in visiting the exhibits. Older Copts believe that the museum only contains objects that they grew up with and have already seen. As a result, the majority of visitors to the museum are children from Sunday school classes and interested non-Copts. The museum provides a good introduction for non-Copts to Coptic religious, social and cultural beliefs and practices.

¹⁷ In the Coptic Orthodox tradition, saints and martyrs must be depicted on icons as if they are at peace. Icons do not show any suffering or pain. In the Coptic folkloric tradition, on the other hand, anguish and torment are illustrated. For example, St. Mark's Coptic Museum has a picture painted by Marguerite Nakhla that portrays Judas hanging himself.

Two Stories of Emigration

The two personal narratives about emigration that follows illustrates numerous issues faced by newly formed diasporic communities. Nadya moved to Canada at the age of ten. I would consider her to be a second generation Coptic Canadian in the sense that she spent most of her formative years growing up in the GTA and did not make the decision to move her family to Canada. Her story exemplifies the role of the Coptic Church in the GTA as “comforter” (Botros 2005:97-106).

I moved here (the GTA) in 1996. St. XXX (church) was not yet built. It started being built in 1994. The year right before us when they actually opened it. There was a church right beside us where we went to mass. Right when we came, I think that’s when the big church opened.

That was a criteria for my mom. My dad was already living here for two years. She was like, “I’m not coming to Canada unless we live beside a Coptic Church”. That was a criteria. She said, “I’m not coming. If it’s by bus or by train, I don’t care, as long as it’s in the area”. We got lucky and it was only a ten-fifteen minute bus ride to the church. But it was very, very new. There was barely anything in there. There was only one priest at that time. People were there two years before us and they were saying that it was nothing. They met in the basement of a small church near our house. It was Unitarian or United?

It was just mass and Sunday school. Sunday school has only been around since Pope Shenouda. I remember going to Sunday school for sure. I was too young for youth group, but I’m sure that there was one.

My mom was terrified (of moving to Canada). My Dad was more concerned with his own thing. He was a doctor in Egypt so he spent a lot of time recertifying. My mom was really petrified. She did not know what was to become of us so she wanted a church nearby. Where am I going to raise my kids? The Church has a lot to do with the upbringing of kids in general, Coptic families. That was one of the main concerns so she was reassured. We got lucky because the building that we moved to was pure Copts. I don’t even know how it was planned. A lot of people when they move, their family moves to the same area and then their friends. We met a lot of Egyptians relatively quickly and she was reassured because they were Coptic. I remember that her (Mom’s) English was not that great. She wanted us to keep learning Arabic but she needed to practice English. So

that was the problem. It was an ongoing conundrum. We knew English from Egypt, but here we spoke English at school and Arabic at home so she was left behind. It impacted the rest of her years here. It's hard when she's trying to find work here. She can function, but it's definitely a disadvantage for her [Hamilton, 20/11/07].

First, Nadya's mother's refusal to move to Canada unless there was a Coptic Church in the area of relocation demonstrates her need for the church as a place that feels like home. It was a place where she could go and be surrounded by familiar beliefs, rituals, art and language. A Coptic Church in the neighbourhood also meant that her children would gain an understanding of their religious and cultural history and background. Language also plays an issue in the lives of many immigrants. Nadya's mother was isolated because her English skills were limited, which made finding work difficult. Lastly, Nadya's description of the Coptic Church that she and her family attended illustrates the growth of the Coptic community in the GTA. In 1996, St. XXX had one priest and barely had the essentials for a working Coptic Church. St. XXX now has four priests, two sanctuaries, a book store and an affiliated elementary school.

Hedi moved to Canada with her husband and two young daughters after she had completed her university education in Egypt. Her narrative provides a good illustration of the theme of the Coptic Church as "helper" (Botros 2005:92-96).

I came from an engineering background. For the first year I couldn't (work). It was difficult to find daycare and you had to pay \$600 each. So I found a program that helped new immigrants, newcomers to the country. I applied to many programs and I got one to study Autocad. I studied in George Brown. That program paid to me some money for the daycare. It was not a salary and I had to bring in receipts, but it was good. I stayed there from

January to September or October, something like that. It was good for me to improve my English because part of the study was English class.

I got a job in manufacturing. I stayed there for nine years. I didn't work there as an engineer, but the work that I was doing there was more engineering than I did in my own country. I was happy there. In 1994, I get a layoff. It was restructure. They move all the production to Tailand. They have Mexico and Brazil branches and they moved everything there. They laid off 430 people on the same day. I couldn't take it. In Egypt, some people stay at the same place from the beginning to when they retire. I am usually with Sunday school every week so my husband said, "Why you don't think about teaching?" Especially that summer, since I got laid off on the 31st of June and another lady who was also laid off by another company, so the two of us hold the summer camp. We had fun. We said, "We don't have work right now so why don't we work for the Lord". It was only one or two months. I don't remember.

So my husband told me, "Why don't you think about applying to teach?" I went to get supply job, but at the Board of Education a lady told me that to supply without certification, you will be at the bottom of the list and it will not put the food on your table. So try to get your certification. That will be better. So I went and applied to a new university and I get accepted the first time when other people applied four or five times and never got into the program. I finished my degree and got a Bachelor of Education within a year [Ajax, 7/11/07].

When I asked Hedi about her contact with the Coptic Church in the GTA, she said that one of the abuna's sent a van to pick up her family, and others living in her area, every Sunday to take them to mass. In addition,

Abuna found a job for my husband, first job for my husband. It was computer assembly in a store. He actually told him to go and apply and tell the owner that you are from Fr. xxx. He also, to send our kids to school, we needed some vaccine for them. He sent us to one of the doctors. One of the doctors from the congregation. And he give us this vaccine and we didn't even have OHIP. They (the church) used to bring people to the church from Human Resources Canada to tell us about new programs. [Ajax, 7/11/07].

The church definitely assisted Hedi and her family. They helped them get to church, find jobs, get needed medical attention and provided access to social services. Hedi's story highlights additional issues faced by immigrants in Canada.

Many of the Copts who emigrate to Canada must recertify to work in their fields of expertise. The problem, however, is that each field regulates its own recertification process and this process often changes from year to year and province to province. For example, in the early 1990s, many Coptic doctors that settled in Ontario were forced to re-do their entire medical degrees. At present (2008), there is a year long course offered by the province of Ontario that speeds up the recertification process. This program benefits the citizens of Ontario since there is a shortage of doctors in the province, and the Coptic doctors by cutting down the time that they must live off their savings. Hedi, her husband and her children had to support themselves for a much longer period while her husband completed the recertification process.

Money is an issue for all immigrants arriving in Canada. Hedi explained, “From Egypt, you have to bring a lot of money so you can’t go for any social help when you come here. Second, it is not our nature. It is so, so shame for Egyptians to go on welfare. I’d rather die. So we spent a lot of money until we got jobs” (7/11/07). Hedi is alluding to the financial requirements outlined by the Canadian government that must be met by all migrants to Canada. Before moving to Canada, immigrants must first prove that they have access to a specific amount of money by transferring it to a Canadian financial institution. The landing fees for immigrants are also quite high. Canada’s immigration policy is based upon a “points system” that was adopted in 1967 and has since been overhauled (Biles and Ibrahim 2005:159). “The new criteria in the *Immigration and Refugee*

Protection Act emphasize the importance of flexibility in the skills of applicants. Applicants with high levels of ‘human capital’ (education, language skills, networks) are considered the most likely to thrive in a constantly changing economy” (Biles and Ibrahim 2005:159). To meet all of the Canadian government’s requirements, Coptic immigrants must be well educated, with at least a postsecondary education which is usually in a professional field such as medicine, pharmacy or engineering. They are typically also English speaking before their arrival in Canada and have tried to network, making contact with family, friends and corporations in Canada in an attempt to look for work.

James Clifford (1994:312) argues that studies of diasporic communities must include an analysis of class differences. I did not observe any class animosities in the Coptic community in the GTA. One male Copt in his late thirties said,

What’s happening in Canada is that these middle class Egyptians are becoming upper class Canadians. The shock is not just social. They are unconsciously being elevated to an elite and in doing so, they don’t realize, they are starting to act like an elite. Generation after generation are becoming doctors. Is this system sustainable? [Toronto, 1/12/07].

A new wave of immigrants may work as receptionists or grocery store clerks at first, but as soon as they are able, they enroll in recertification programs. Fayek Ishak (1989), an immigrant Copt living in Canada, believes that adaptation only takes a little hard work. He writes:

After the laborious task of assimilation and settlement, it is quite difficult to think that the experience of the Diaspora in relation to the Copts living abroad is simply a matter of adaptation. It is also a long and rather painful process of breaking barriers. However, the darts which were directed at

one's self-esteem were broken against the persistence of hard work and the unabated struggle to prove oneself. Those who managed to move gradually up the ladder of managerial ascent regained quickly their self-esteem and led a comparatively healthy and prosperous life. Others came to understand that hard work, not necessarily strenuous, but a little more than what is required of the natives, is certainly the core of life in the Diaspora [Ishak 1989:34].

The pursuit of higher education is expected of Canadian Coptic children in the GTA. When I attended meetings for university graduate students, the majority of the participants were doctors, pharmacists, engineers or accountants.

An Ethnic Church in Canada

During my fieldwork, I spent some of my days at a summer camp run by Coptic women at one of the Coptic Orthodox churches in the GTA. On one of those days, I was sitting and speaking with a female volunteer who was overseeing a few little girls who were hand stitching purses. As we were chatting, a girl of about seven or eight years of age came up to me and asked if I was a visitor. I responded by asking her if I did not look Coptic, to which she replied that I did not; I looked Canadian. To this little girl, a Copt is Egyptian and she is not the only Copt who shares this view of Coptic identity. At a Coptic Convention for university graduates, I was asked to arrive early and help with registration. Unfortunately, the individual bringing the name tags was running behind schedule so it was not obvious that I was a participant in the conference. Instead, I was mistaken a number of times for an employee of the convention center and asked for directions to the washrooms. Again, being Coptic is usually assumed by Copts to be synonymous with being Egyptian.

The Coptic Orthodox Church in Canada is what Mark Mullins (1988) refers to as a “foreign-oriented minority church” (1988:217). As the bylaws of St. Mark’s Coptic Orthodox Church in Toronto, discussed above, emphasize, the leadership of the Coptic Church in Canada is located in Egypt from which it is inseparable. The Coptic Orthodox Church has its own Pope. Pope Shenouda III is the 117th Pope of Alexandria and Patriarch of the See of St. Mark. The Copts believe that the Apostle Mark was their first Patriarch and the founder of their Church.¹⁸ Each Pope is the head of a council, which is called the Holy Synod. The Holy Synod consists of “all the metropolitans, bishops, abbots, chorepiscopi, and patriarchal deputies as its members” (van Doorn-Harder 1995:34). Egypt is separated into numerous dioceses or bishoprics over which a bishop is given control of economic resources. The Pope is the bishop of the Cairene diocese, which is the head of the Coptic community in Canada because the Canadian Coptic community in Canada has not been given its own bishop.¹⁹ This situation can cause problems because major decisions must be taken up with the Pope and bishops in Egypt. However, close ties are maintained between the Coptic hierarchy in Egypt and the church in Canada through frequent visits of Egyptian bishops to the Coptic community in the GTA.

Mullins (1987:323 and 1988:218) argues that an ethnic church in Canada must develop adaptation strategies to survive, otherwise it will become obsolete

¹⁸ This would explain why the first Abuna sent to Canada was named Marcos and the first Coptic Church built in several different North American cities is named St. Mark’s.

¹⁹ The United States has two bishops, one for the southern states and a second for the Coptic monastery in Texas.

within the third stage of its life cycle. Mullins (1987:322 and 1988:218) disagrees with Durkheimian ideas of religion as an agent of ethnic and cultural preservation. Instead, ethnic churches should be viewed as adapting organizations (1987:322). In the first stage of an ethnic church's life cycle, the focus is on the needs of the first generation, which includes using their language and acquiring priests from the "old country" (Mullins 1987:323). This first stage is representative of the Coptic immigrant population in Canada during all three waves of immigration. However, the first stage is particularly relevant to the first wave of emigrants to Canada. For example, in the 1960s, 1970s and much of the 1980s, all of the early priests were sent from Egypt and Arabic and Coptic were used during every ritual and at almost every event.

According to Mullins (1987 and 1988), issues of cultural assimilation between the first and second generations is what lead to the second stage of an ethnic church's life cycle (Mullins 1987:325). Language becomes a problem (Mullins 1988:220-222). The second generation adopts English as their primary language, which requires the Church to locate bilingual leaders to perform English services, Sunday school materials and religious texts must be made available in English (Mullins 1987:325). Mullins' (1987 and 1988) analysis describes the Coptic Church in the GTA perfectly. In the 1980s, the issue of language was at the forefront of many debates in most Coptic churches in North America (see Stene 1997b:259-260). Ishak (1989) wrote, "Insistence on using Arabic in our liturgies and church services is undeniably short-sighted... Others

have given up the church altogether after irritation and distraction caused by the stubborn accommodation of the elderly generation of churchgoers” (Ishak 1989:33). Beth, a Canadian convert married to a Copt, recalls her interaction with the issue of language in a Coptic church in the GTA during the 1980s. She said,

But when we moved to Toronto we both became counselors for the youth I was asked by Father Marcos to get involved with the music because that’s my main field. My husband would translate the Coptic hymns and I would transpose them into a Western music base to make them more acceptable and enjoyable to the Western ear. A lot of his youth were leaving. He had many, many youth leaving the Church because they had Canadian friends and they couldn’t bring them in because there was no English. Minimal English. So he wanted to change it and he asked me to get involved. There was such a resistance and opposition to English, especially touching the Coptic hymns. They had a meeting, the whole Church had a meeting and Abuna had asked me to discuss my views and my need for English and it turned so hot with the attitude that Coptic is a sacred language and it shouldn’t be touched and the songs should not be touched. So finally Abuna said, stand down, they’re going to eat you alive. Don’t get involved [Toronto, 25/10/07].

Due to the Coptic community’s reaction to the issue of language, Beth said,

I decided to leave after that. I thought I don’t have English here. One of the women, one of the wives at the time of this meeting got up and said that if they want to have their Coptic church and their Coptic language they have the right to. But she was a spectator. She would sit up in the balcony and watch. She was only there for an hour at the most and then she would pick up her children and go. I wanted to worship God. I wanted to be involved. I had been promised before marriage by the priest who married us that there would be English and that there had to be because they were in Canada... We have to take care of ourselves. We have to meet our needs. Jesus says love others as we love ourselves. Before when I was in the Coptic Church wholly, I was not being fed. I was very thwarted and very frustrated. Trying to force myself to worship God in a different language by reading a book. On the other hand, for them, the older people, this is a way they need to worship God. Like they did in Egypt. They need both. They need the cultural Church or that aspect for the immigrants and they need the English speaking Church that has the flavor or what not for the youth that are born here to be able to worship God [Toronto, 25/10/07].

The debate over bilingualism in most Coptic churches in the GTA has since been resolved. As I have already discussed, in two of the churches where I did fieldwork, the Divine Liturgy was said twice, once in English followed by a reading in Arabic. The third church I visited held a bilingual mass while the fourth held one mass on Sunday solely in English. Sunday school classes are held in English and there has been a large increase in the amount of educational materials translated into English that discuss Coptic religious and cultural beliefs and rituals.

Beth's story is a good introduction to the issues that Mullins (1987 and 1988) attributes to the third stage of an ethnic church's life-cycle: increasing numbers of intermarriages between members of the church and ethnic community and non-members (Mullins 1987:326). The third generation of a community is more assimilated and adapted to the larger society than their parents and grandparents. Mullins (1987:327 and 1988:227) argues that if the mixed couples are accepted in the church, the church will become de-ethnicized or multi-ethnic and if the couples do not feel accepted, they will leave and go elsewhere. A decision must be made by the church about how to proceed. Sometimes it is a conscious choice while in other cases change just happens to accommodate new generations (Mullins 1987:327). Another issue brought up by Mullins (1988:224) is a concern for the type of leadership needed by bilingual churches. If priests are being sent from the old country, will they be able to handle the culture shock,

bilingualism and differing needs and expectations of them by multiple generations?

In the Coptic churches in the GTA, most churches are still somewhere between Mullin's (1987 and 1988) first and second stages. English has become a necessity, but at the same time, there are enough incoming immigrants from Egypt that Arabic is still used and required. Almost all Coptic priests in the GTA were born in Egypt, however, they lived in Canada or the United States for some time before being ordained. Nonetheless, there are some priests sent from Egypt who have never lived in North America, but they are sent to see to specific sub-groups of the community, such as the Sudanese Copts.²⁰

My interest in the Coptic Church in the GTA focuses specifically on the issue of intermarriage and converts. Intermarriage does seem to be a topic of concern for the community (see Marcos 1989:81 and Bingham-Kolenkow 1997:267). One response to intermarriage, by a Coptic priest, has been to form a new Coptic church in the GTA whose sole purpose is to missionize and minister to non-Copts. This new church and its goals will be discussed further in Chapter IV. However, at this point it is important to mention that there seems to be a conscious, or perhaps semi-conscious re-structuring of the Coptic churches in the GTA taking place. Specific churches are coping with more new immigrants, while

²⁰ During my fieldwork, a Canadian born and raised Coptic priest was ordained. He is very young and spends most of his time with youth and university groups. Most Copts that I interviewed said that it did not matter to them whether or not a priest was born in Canada or Egypt: if they fulfilled the needs of the community spiritually, culturally and socially, their place of birth had no bearing on their effectiveness.

others are catering to the needs of the youth and a new church is focusing on converts.

III

Egypt: Home or History?

*Out of Egypt I called my Son*²¹

As was previously discussed in Chapter II, the Coptic Orthodox Church in the GTA, and the rest of North America, is a “foreign-oriented church” (Mullins 1988:217), which means that the Canadian Coptic community relies on the Egyptian Pope and Holy Synod for leadership. Through the visitation of priests, bishops and the Pope from Egypt, the steady influx of new Coptic immigrants to the GTA and Canadian Copts returning to or visiting Egypt for the first time, Canadian Copts are in constant contact with other Egyptian Christians and Muslims and newsworthy events in Egypt. The Coptic community in the GTA provides a perfect example of what Arjun Appadurai (1996:33) calls “ethnoscapes.” Appadurai (1996:4-5) argues that through mass media and mass migration – mediation and motion – international, national, regional and local ideas are produced, reproduced and altered in different places throughout the world in distinctively local ways. Along with people and the media, technology, money, and ideas move across borders and affect the beliefs and practices of individuals and groups (Appadurai 1996:33-36).

William Safran (1999) argues that “the four major components of a diaspora are a distinct language, historical memory, a national religion, and the habitual status of a minority in larger societies” (1999:281). The Copts in the

²¹ Hosea 11:1.

GTA fulfill all of Safran's (1999) diaspora requirements. The use of Arabic separates them from the larger Canadian population, which also places them in a minority position. The Coptic Orthodox Church is also a national church with an extensive memory of its past experiences and pride in its religious and cultural beliefs, practices and rituals. Other traditional factors in determining whether or not a minority community is a diaspora include an emotional link to the homeland after several generations have lived in a hostland and the establishment of a "myth of return" (Safran 1999:255 and 263). The Copts in Canada clearly sustain ties to their homeland in Egypt through the transmission of their heritage and collective memories. For example, Egypt is always in the foreground, not the background, of the written materials distributed by the Coptic churches in Canada. One such monthly church newsletter contained a section entitled, *Out of Egypt I called my Son*, which included the statement, "The flight of the Holy Family to Egypt, seeking refuge, is an event of the utmost significance to *our dear country's* long history (May/June 2004, emphasis added).

Steven Vertovec (2002) argues that the adoption of the designation and description of "diasporic community" by the community itself, may result because "diaspora has arguably been a notion associated with suffering, loss and victimization" (2002:5). Communities can use the term as "a new tool in cultural politics" (Vertovec 2002:5). This perspective could explain why the Church hierarchy in Egypt chooses not to use the word diaspora when discussing the Copts living in Europe, North America and Australia (Stene 1997b:258). Instead,

“the community in the West is called ‘the church in the lands of emigration’” (Stene 1997b:258; see Watson 2000:85-86). Since Pope Shenouda’s house arrest in 1981, he has tried to maintain a non-political position in Egyptian society by focusing on the spiritual needs of his community. In his younger years, as a monk and as a new Pope, he was not afraid to confront what he felt was the Muslim majority’s ill treatment of Christians in Egypt. Nowadays, he supports forms of passive resistance – specifically prayer – as a means to help the Copts in Egypt. The conscious decision to avoid describing the Copts living abroad as a diaspora is meant to reinforce the idea of a united Egypt where Christians and Muslims cohabitate peacefully, rather than a place from which Copts have been forced to flee.

The level of attachment to or fondness for Egypt held by members of the Coptic diaspora, differs from individual to individual. There are varying degrees of diasporic tendencies within a single minority community (Safran 1999:258). “The division is not static; it depends on the varying degrees of adjustment and the experiences of the individuals in question’ (Safran 1999:258). Therefore, diaspora studies must focus on specific communities and their actions within a new hostland not only because there are different responses to economic and political situations in different ethnic and religious communities, but also because reactions will vary within a particular community. For example, reminders of the Coptic Church’s Egyptian past are found on every wall in Coptic churches in the GTA. These reminders include the style of the icons depicting saints and martyrs,

the bookstore that sells books about the Copts' Egyptian past, and the messages, written in Arabic, posted on the bulletin boards positioned throughout the basement. Rayaprol (1997) emphasizes that nostalgia is a "critical building material" (1997:63) of a new cultural space in a diaspora, but that the reproduction created from nostalgia "cannot be conceptualized merely as a mechanistic replication, but as a generative process involving innovation and creativity" (1997:62). However, the question arises: is Egypt "home" for Coptic Canadians?

Ilan A. Magat (1999) explains,

I perceive home to be a folk concept, one that is a prevalent part of human discourse, and that can help us identify the sense of order people try to impose on experience as they shape their own behaviour. It is a simple, yet powerful idea. Simple, and indeed intimate, because almost everyone has some understanding, experience, or perception of the term. . . It can be a structure, a feeling, a metaphor, and a symbol. . . It can stand for anything – from a trailer, to a land of origin, to the universe. . . Being a complex construct, the meaning of Home varies from person to person and, for the same person, over the course of a life (1999:120).

Through a comparative analysis of the definition of "home" used by Israeli immigrants to Canada as opposed to definitions used by immigrants from Japan, Magat (1999:122 and 129) demonstrates the difference between the "Big Home" and the "Little Home". The Israeli informants defined home as the "Big Home", which is "more than a place of residence or where one raises a family, but also indicates a point of ultimate return" (Magat 1999:122). Eight of the ten informants refused to accept Canada as their new home (Magat 1999:122). Israel and only Israel could and would be home. Their identity is territorialized (Magat

1999:128). The Japanese informants, on the other hand, defined home as the “Little Home”, a “physical structure, family, neighbourhood or city” (Magat 1999:129). This definition allowed the Japanese to have two distinct ideas of home; one that maintained their Japanese identity while they took part in and accepted their life in Canada.

When I questioned Samira, a second generation Copt, who was born in Canada and has only visited Egypt once in her life, at the age of one, about the role of Egypt in the Canadian Coptic community, she replied: “People put Egypt as a hierarchy, like make it our Mecca. Egypt is still home, which I can understand. The Pope is based there” (28/11/07). When I asked her what identity she would use to describe the Copts in Canada, she answered, “Just not an Arabic identity, basically. A lot of people will stress that we are not Arabs. We are Egyptians, we are Copts, we are indigenous Egyptians. We are definitely Canadian. There is nothing wrong with being Canadian, but we are not Arabs” (28/11/07).

The view of “home” suggested by the majority of the Copts I came into contact with during my fieldwork parallels that of the Japanese immigrants to Canada rather than that of the Israeli immigrants in Magat’s study. Coptic Canadians are proud of their Egyptian past, identify themselves as Egyptian and are concerned about the Copts who remain behind. They send money and clothes for the poor in Egypt when it is asked of them and get excited when the Pope visits the GTA. The question that needs to be asked, however, is do Canadian

Copts want to return to Egypt? My fieldwork would indicate that the answer for a large majority is “no.” As Mary, one twenty-two year old emigrant who has been in Canada for twelve years said,

Never, ever would I move back there. Put that on the record. I have never gone back. It’s really sad. I’ve been wanting to go because my mother’s entire family is there and my father has one sister and she lives here. The more you stay, it becomes easier and easier not to go back. My mom has gone back. It was two years ago and it was for two or three months [Hamilton, 20/11/07].

When I asked Robert, a second generation Canadian Copt if he would move to Egypt, he replied that he did not even want to go back to visit members of his family still living there: “That is what the internet and telephones are for”.

Over seven months of fieldwork, I found that responses like those of Robert and Mary were typical of the feelings of the majority of second generation Copts. Egypt was a place that they felt connected to through their Church and its history, however, they were Canadian. On the other hand, when I met Ashraf, he surprised me by saying that he felt that he was missing a part of the Coptic identity by having been born in Canada (16/7/07). He thought that Copts who grow up outside of Egypt are less spiritual than those who live through their formative years there. For example, he believes that his cousins, who immigrated to Canada from Egypt later in life, are much more spiritual than his cousins who came as children to Canada. I asked Ashraf to define what he meant by “spiritual” and he responded by saying that “spiritual” people go to church and take part in church activities. Ashraf feels that he has missed out on two thousand years of history. Other Copts, in earshot of my conversation with Ashraf, came over to

comment. One girl asked Ashraf how many times he had visited Egypt. When he answered that he had only been to Egypt twice, she told him that he needed to go back again, and more often, and that he would realize he had not missed out on anything but suffering.

Ashraf's is an extreme point of view, with which many second generation and first generation Canadian Copts would disagree. Anna, a middle aged Coptic woman who moved to Canada twenty-five years ago, says that there is always a period of adjustment required for new immigrants, but in the end, Canada is a better place to live than Egypt. On a visit to Egypt, just before I started my fieldwork in the GTA, my husband and I were repeatedly asked by both Copts and Muslims how he had been able to immigrate and if we could help them to leave Egypt.

Religious, ethnic and cultural identities are always defined and then redefined in the Coptic community in the GTA. In an article on the introduction of Copts to Canada, Abuna Marcos (1981) writes,

It is important to note that Coptic Christianity and Coptic culture are tightly interwoven to the extent that a person can hardly differentiate one from the other... Therefore, when we speak, here below, about the Coptic Church we mean to include within its framework the Coptic culture [1981:65].

For Abuna Marcos, the Church has its own culture, which is different from Egyptian culture. This distinction was also made by Abuna Peter, who stated that it is important for the Church and its servants to emphasize to Coptic children that they are Christian, not Egyptian because often a child will ask an adult why they do something and response is, "That's the way we do it in Egypt" or "That's the

Egyptian way.” The children, however, respond that they are not Egyptian, but Canadian. Abuna Peter stressed that the Church’s job is to give children a Christian faith. The family’s job, on the other hand, is to give children a sense of their Egyptian heritage. However, is this possible? During an interview, I asked Samira whether Coptic identity can be separated from the Egyptian identity. Her response was,

You can separate the Egyptian identity from the Coptic identity recently because they have become so different. The Egyptian identity is now becoming an Arabic identity. But before it’s such a big part of our whole culture, all the Church Fathers. You can for theological purposes, but nobody ever separates the theology from the culture [Hamilton, 28/11/07].

The Pharaohs

Abuna Marcos and Abuna Peter argue that Coptic culture can and must be separated from the culture of Egypt. In other words, one identity is religious in nature, Coptic or Orthodox, while the other is ethnic, Egyptian. Both priests would and do claim that religious identity is much more important than ethnic identity and that the focus of the Coptic Orthodox Church in Canada should be the Orthodox doctrine and rituals. However, Copts in both Canada and Egypt have adopted the Pharaonic identity as an indicator of their true Egyptianess.

In his article on the Haitian diaspora’s adoption of Pentecostalism in Guadeloupe, Paul Brodwin (2003:97) claims that there can be multiple translations of an original – text, religion, ritual or cultural performance – and each translation must say something new and relevant. “The goal is a translation that echoes the original but in an admittedly different language, although one that

ideally will complement that of the original” (Brodwin 2003:97). The Coptic community in Egypt and the diaspora have created a translation of Egypt’s Pharaonic past, which is meant to support their authentic Egyptian identity. Aziz S. Atiya (1981) writes,

When the Arabs came in the seventh century, Egypt became known as “*Dar al-Qibt*,” home of the Copts, who were Christian Egyptians to distinguish them from the native Muslims. Ethnically, the Copts were neither Semitic nor Hamitic, but may be described as the descendents of a Mediterranean race that entered the Nile valley in the unrecorded times. As such they are the successors of the ancient Egyptians, sometimes even defined as the “modern sons of the Pharaohs” [1981:13].

As was briefly highlighted in Chapter II, the Pharaonic identity was used by both the Muslims and Christians in Egypt, in the days leading up to the 1952 Revolution, to unite all Egyptians under a single Pharaonic heritage that could be translated into a national identity. However, when Nasser’s regime began to embrace an Arab form of nationalism, with what could be considered Islamic roots, the shared Pharaonic heritage of all Egyptians was forgotten. Instead, Copts, like Atiya (1981), have adopted the Pharaonic identity to affirm their status as Egyptian citizens and as such, to support their right to live in Egypt as Christians. Of course, there is no way to confirm, or deny, the truth of these claims, but that is not the point.²² The Pharaohs’ ethnic and religious identity is

²² On the topic of Pharaonic identity, one informant said, “I think that they certainly affiliate with that, but serious scholarship would show that they are a hybrid of people. They’re not the pure Egyptian pharaonic that they think they are. Certainly, there are very large Greek and Lebanese affiliations” (1/12/07).

used by the Copts to construct a sense of authenticity.²³ They are the true and authentic Egyptians.

The construction of authenticity is a common practice among religious groups. For example, in a study of Yehi Ohr, a New Age/Jewish healing group, Celia Rothenberg (2006:163) observes numerous “authenticating strategies” used by members of the group to support the Jewish origin of its healing practices. Such strategies included identifying themselves as Jewish, using Hebrew during rituals and the presence of rabbis at meetings (Rothenberg 2006:174-175). Most of the rabbis involved did not believe that Yehi Ohr was Jewish in origin, however, that fact did not seem important to the leader of the group or his fellow participants (Rothenberg 2006:172-173). The need for a sense of Jewish authenticity is strictly felt by the group’s members. It would seem that if the “authentic Jewish” religious identity was not attributed to the healing practices, healing would not occur.

Ellen Badone (1991) also notes the use of authenticating strategies associated with New Age rituals in Brittany. The family that she describes, the

²³ In *Coptologia*, a journal edited by a Coptic layman about issues affecting the Coptic community in Egypt and the diaspora, Boulos Ayad Ayad (1989) wrote an article that compared the feelings and actions of contemporary Copts to those of the ancient Egyptians or Pharaohs. For example, Ayad (1989) wrote,

There is no doubt that the culture of the ancient Egyptians continues through the modern Egyptians, especially the Copts of Egypt and those immigrants who have carried the culture wherever they go. The reader will find a part of such culture carried by the modern Copts in the USA and other countries... The ancient Egyptian was very concerned with his moral conduct, his reputation and behavior. A Copt today has maintained a high standard of morality. As with the ancient Egyptians, the modern Copts are concerned with instructing their children and giving them the best possible education (1989:99-100).

Floc'hs, believe that they live on a piece of land that is imbued with energy that past inhabitants recognized and harnessed (Badone 1991:521). Using *radiesthesie*, which is “both a method of diagnosing illness and a divinatory technique for discovering things hidden beneath the earth” (Badone 1991:518), the Floc'hs believe that there is a buried Christian chapel and underground tunnels and vaults from the Celtic era below their backyard (Badone 1991:521-522). Where this unseen energy is at its strongest, the Floc'hs have erected a *menhir*, or standing stone, which they feel has certain healing powers (Badone 1991:522). The exact specifics of the Floc'hs' beliefs are not important at this point in my analysis. What is significant is their focus on the importance of the history of their property as proof of its authenticity as a place of healing. In Badone's Breton example, as in my own fieldwork among the Canadian Copts, it is through reference to the past and to a historical legacy that authenticity is constructed and validated: “(Hayden) White argues that historical discourse is a powerful medium of identity formation. The interpretation of history contributes directly to issues of self-representation and portrayal” (Botros 2006:180).

Another example of a diaspora religious community that draws upon its heritage and ties to a homeland in the construction of its identity is the Jewish community in Copenhagen. All Jews in Copenhagen – and in Denmark for that matter – belong to a single administrative body: The Det Mosaike Troessamfund (or the MT) (Buckser 2003:103-104). The members of this organization are fragmented and conflicts have arisen between the liberal and orthodox Jews

(Buckser 2003:105). Although the liberals make up the majority of the organization's membership, the ritual practices of the community follow orthodox guidelines. Andrew Buckser (2003:111) argues that the under-representation of the liberal viewpoint within the MT has to do with the liberal's own image of the "authentic" Jew as someone with a beard and dressed in black, Jewish interaction with the larger Danish community and the diaspora's relationship with the state of Israel also play a part in marginalizing the liberal majority. For example, in the twentieth century, Danish culture has promoted an avoidance of all religious observance, which Danish liberal Jews have emulated (Buckser 2003:111). Also, the state of Israel only recognizes orthodox rituals and institutions, which gives the orthodox Jews in Denmark an important advantage in social control (Buckser 2003:110). If the liberals tried to create their own institutions, would they risk not being recognized as authentic Jewish organizations by the state of Israel? As a result, the Danish orthodox Jews have access to the main sites of control.

The Councils

Rothenberg (2006), Badone (1991) and Buckser (2003) demonstrate that religious groups employ numerous authenticating strategies including, but not limited to, the use of the past and specific rituals that are considered religious in origin, but can be altered to suit the needs of the participants. Copts in Canada and Egypt have not only adopted a Pharaonic identity and heritage to support their authentic Egyptianess, but have also (re)established a sense of group identity based upon the events of four Ecumenical Councils that took place between the

fourth and fifth centuries.²⁴ The history of the Ecumenical Councils was reviewed and discussed at three different meetings that I attended over the course of my fieldwork. The first time that I learned about the Councils was at a meeting of an inter-faith group on a university campus in the GTA. The inter-faith group had invited members of the Coptic Orthodox Christian Association (COCA), a Coptic student association, to be the special speakers at a meeting, to outline the history, beliefs and practices of the Coptic Orthodox Church. The events of and participants in the Councils were a key focus of COCA's presentation to the non-Coptic attendants. The second time that I heard the Councils described was at a catechism class for potential Coptic converts. A priest began by explaining that St. Mark, the Apostle was the founder and first Patriarch of the Coptic Orthodox Church, the Church of Alexandria, which means that the Coptic Church is an apostolic church. The priest's lecture ended with an analysis of the events of the Council of Chalcedon in 451 A.D. The same narrative outline of the Councils was offered by another priest at a university graduates' meeting as a part of a series of lectures entitled, "Differences in Religious Belief." What is impressive is that the presentation of historical details as well as the interpretive conclusions about the

²⁴ In her article, "Religious Identity as an Historical Narrative: Coptic Orthodox Immigrant Churches and the Representation of History", Ghada Botros (2006) outlines the considerations and issues of two competing theories about the use and role of the past in collective memory. First, using the work of Maurice Halbwachs (1992), Pierre Nora (1989), White (1978) and Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983), Botros (2006:177-178) argues that the needs of the present shapes the remembrance of the past. On the other hand, using Edward Shils (1981, 1975), Mircea Eliade (1965) and Emile Durkheim (1995), Botros (2006:178-179) reasons that the past shapes the present. In the end, Botros (2006) wants to have it both ways and claims, "This paper attempts to steer between these two theoretical approaches, I argue that while the object of the commemoration has to be anchored in the past, it is the needs of the present that motivate its selection" (2006:179). "The object of the commemoration" with which she is concerned is the Councils.

Councils were the same at every meeting. The following outline is based upon the summary given by the priest at the meeting for converts.²⁵

After St. Mark founded the Church of Alexandria, a Catechetical School was established in Alexandria before 200 A.D., which was attended by the greatest Christian thinkers of the era. During this time, Copts and other Christians were persecuted by the Roman Empire. In 313 A.D., however, the circumstances of the Christians changed when Emperor Constantine instituted the Edict of Milan, which ended the persecution of Christians. Constantine's mother was a Christian and his adoption of the religion is apparent in his request that all soldiers put crosses on their armour when they entered battle. Christianity became a state religion.

In 325 A.D., the First Ecumenical Council took place in Nicea. The main focus of the council was to discuss the heresy of Arius. Arius believed that the Father created the Son, which means that they could not be of one essence. The Copts disagreed. The Coptic Pope of the time, Pope Alexander brought a young deacon by the name of Athanasius. Three hundred and eighteen of the three hundred and twenty bishops present at the council excommunicated Arius and Athanasius wrote the Nicene Creed, which was meant to be one statement for all Christians to follow.

The Second Ecumenical Council took place in Constantinople in the year 381 A.D. Members of the five Sees were all present: (1) Alexandria, (2) Antioch,

²⁵ For a more detailed review of the events of the Councils, see Atiya (1981, 1968), Botros (2006), Hasan (2003) and Meinardus (1999).

(3) Jerusalem, (4) Rome and (5) Constantinople, which had been added in 325 A.D. During the meeting for the converts, the Abuna explained that politics had started to play a role in the church at this point in history because outsiders had removed the Patriarch of Constantinople because he claimed the Holy Spirit was not God. According to the Abuna, it was determined at the Council in Constantinople that the Nicene Creed could not be modified or altered starting from that day. The Abuna went on to say that politics continued to be a problem because others complained that bishops from Alexandria were always leading the discussions. Instead, they decided that Rome and Constantinople should come first in the hierarchy.

The next theological problem facing the Councils dealt with the nature of God. Abuna added that when you start philosophizing religion, heresies are easily developed. Nestorianism was the main problem at this point in time. Nestor believed that no one could contain God, which meant that the Son was born man and then God descended upon him. The Coptic Pope, Pope Cyril I disagreed with Nestor and regarded him as a heretic. The debate over the nature of God continued during the Third Ecumenical Council in Ephesus where Pope Cyril I proposed a monophysite argument that stated the single nature of God the Logos (word, wisdom, knowledge) incarnate. In other words, the Coptic delegation argued that the divine and human natures of Jesus Christ were one without division within his human body, while others at the Council countered with the argument for the dual nature of Jesus Christ.

This disagreement led to the “Great Schism” at the final Ecumenical Council in 451 A.D., the Council of Chalcedon, which according to the Abuna, led to many heresies. Abuna said that the bishops at the council were told to agree with the Pope of Rome regardless of their actual beliefs. Many were paid off. The Coptic leader, the Pope of Alexandria was physically assaulted, but still showed up at the proceedings where he was called a heretic by bishops from the other Sees. The Council said that they would meet again in five days, but the meeting actually took place after three days, effectively disenfranchising marginalized factions. At this meeting, the Tome of Leo was adopted. During all of these events, the Pope of Alexandria was kept under house arrest. After the Chalcedonian Council, the Coptic Church was regarded as heretical, beginning a fifteen hundred year period of isolation from the larger Christian community outside Egypt.

When discussing the consequences and effects of the Chalcedonian Council, Coptic priests and members of COCA argued that the outcome was the result of language difficulties, which lead to miscommunication and misunderstandings. In reality, COCA members claim, everyone believes the same thing. The second explanation offered for the events of the Council is based upon the perceived political clashes between the Egyptian delegation and those of other Christian communities. The School of Alexandria was quite powerful and had been an authoritative voice at the preceding councils. Copts argue that the jealousy and power hunger of other Christian factions led to the exile of the

Coptic Orthodox Church. They stress that they are not heretics. Significantly, Stene (1997b:257-258) also argues that the present day Coptic Church draws upon its history at the Ecumenical Councils to demonstrate its early role in international affairs, which the Church would like to continue today.

The Coptic Church in the GTA also uses their apostolic roots as a means to prove their authenticity as a Christian church. First, Copts emphasize that their church was founded by St. Mark. Therefore, their beliefs, practices and rituals are directly descended from the teachings of an Apostle. On more than one occasion, I have been told that the rituals of the Coptic Church have not been altered in two thousand years, which means that compared to other denominations, it is a more authentic representation of the character of the early Christian churches. When a Coptic layperson asks a priest for advice on a how to deal with or react to different situations in her life, the priest almost always responds with the suggestion that the individual turn to the teachings and life experiences of the Prophets, Apostles, saints and martyrs. The Coptic Church's relationship with the Fathers of Christianity serves to prove its authenticity.

The reading of the *Agpeya* at the beginning of every meeting for university graduates is a good example of the Coptic community's (re)established or continued relationship with the Apostolic church. The *Agpeya* is a prayer book that contains the seven canonical prayers, each read at a different hour of the day with specific corresponding Psalms and Gospel readings.

The "Agpeya" or the seven canonical prayers started as early as the Apostolic age during the earliest days of Christianity. The believers

received the spiritual practice from the head of the Alexandrine Church: St. Mark the Apostle, who was also the founder of the Church of Egypt [Unknown 2000:XIX].

The Lord's Prayer, the Prayer of Thanksgiving and Psalm 50 are read at every hour.²⁶ During the meetings, the reading of the *Agpeya* usually takes twenty to thirty minutes and is always accompanied by the singing of hymns. At one church, the hymns are always sung in English whereas at the other church, with the smaller number of people in attendance, most hymns are sung in Arabic.

One would think that the events of a fifteen hundred year old council would be easily forgotten. However, Botros (2006) underscores the use of the Pharaonic heritage, Councils and apostolic legacy as a means to prove the authenticity of the Coptic Church's beliefs and practices.²⁷

²⁶ The Prayer of Thanksgiving:

Let us give thanks to the Beneficent and Merciful God, the Father of our Lord, God and Saviour, Jesus Christ. For He has covered us, supported us, preserved us, accepted us unto Him, had compassion on us, sustained us, and brought us unto this hour. Let us then ask Him, the Almighty Lord our God, to keep us in all peace this holy day and all the days of our life. O Master, Lord, God Almighty, Father of our Lord, God and Saviour Jesus Christ; we thank You upon every condition, for any condition, and in whatever condition. For You have covered us, supported us, preserved us, accepted us unto You, had compassion on us, sustained us and brought us to this hour. Therefore, we pray and entreat Your goodness, O Lover-of-mankind. Grant us to complete this holy day, and all the days of our life in all peace with Your fear. All envy, all temptation, all the workings of satan, the intrigue of wicked people, the rising up of enemies, hidden and manifest, take away from us, and all Your people, and from this, Your holy place. But as for those things, which are good and useful, do grant unto us. For You are the One who gave us the authority to trample on serpents and scorpions and every power of the enemy. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.

Through the grace, compassion, and love of mankind, of Your only Begotten Son, our Lord, God and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Through whom glory, honour, dominion, and worship are due unto You, with Him, and the Holy Spirit, the Life-giver, who is of one essence with You, both now and forever, and unto the age of all ages. Amen [Unknown 2000:2-3].

²⁷ The monastic contribution of the Coptic Orthodox Church is also stressed by the priests. See Gruber (2003) for a recent ethnographic study of monastery life in Egypt. Copts in the GTA do not have the same relationship with the monastic community that Copts in Egypt do since Copts in Egypt can easily visit the monasteries in Cairo or make a pilgrimage to the three monasteries in Wadi Natroun, which are open to the public. Copts in the GTA do, however, make pilgrimages to

The valorization of the history of the Church responds to the need to reach out to the second-generation Copts in these communities and to make the Church known to the outside societies. The historical narrative of the Coptic Church celebrates its contributions to early Christianity; defends its stance in the Chalcedon Council in 451 CE; highlights ecumenical unity; and celebrates a legacy of triumph and survival during the Arab conquest [2006:194].

Saints and Martyrs

The Coptic Calendar, which is a solar calendar based on a similar one used during the Pharaonic period, “begins with 284 A.D., the year of (Emperor) Diocletion’s accession to the throne of Rome” (Hasan 2003:25). This stage of Coptic history is known as the Era of Martyrs, which indicates the amount of persecution and the growing number of experiences of martyrdom faced by the Coptic community, and other Christian communities, at that time. After the Council of Chalcedon, the Copts were persecuted by the Byzantine Empire and the discrimination of Copts continued after the Arab Invasion (639-642) of Egypt.

The constant persecution of the Copts coupled with their isolation from the larger Christian community, allowed them to generate their own martyrs and saints. The Coptic Synaxarium is a book that includes a long list of stories about the martyrs who refused to give up their faith and beliefs in times of struggle and persecution.²⁸ References to the lives of the martyrs, and saints, are intended to

the Coptic monastery in Texas. During my fieldwork, one church organized a youth group trip that made a trip to the monastery. In 2008, a Coptic church in the GTA purchased a monastery and property in the Oakville area. It will be a few years until renovations and decisions on how the property will be used are completed.

²⁸ The Synaxarium is one of the Coptic texts that has been translated into English. In fact, one of the women that I interviewed was kind enough to email to me a copy of it. It does not only include narratives about martyrs, but recounts the miraculous events in many of the lives of venerated saints.

teach young Coptic children, and Coptic adults, how to react in what could potentially be a threatening world. The lives of martyrs and saints are examples of how to deal with the problem of suffering. As Clifford Geertz (1973:98) asserts religion does not explain how to avoid suffering, but how to bear it (Geertz 1973:104). “The effort is not to deny the undeniable – that there are unexplainable events, that life hurts or that rain falls upon the just – but to deny that there are inexplicable events, that life is unendurable, and that justice is a mirage” (Geertz 1973:108). The lives of the martyrs and saints provide a “model of” the persecution faced by the Copts and a “model for” the way a Copt should react to difficult situations (Geertz 1973:94). “They both express the world’s climate and shape it” (Geertz 1973:95). The past and present suffering of the Copts is not just, however, they believe that something better waits for them after death if they keep their faith just as the saints and martyrs did.

Conclusion

Mullins (1987 and 1988) argues that ethnic churches in Canada will have to adopt strategies of adaptation if they hope to survive past the third generation. The Coptic Orthodox Church in the GTA has recognized that Egypt cannot be the focus of the teachings of the Church in Canada and instead has made a conscious effort to separate religious identity from ethnic identity. This shift could help the Church when dealing with new members of non-Egyptian descent who join through intermarriage, which the previous chapter suggests has been a cause for

concern among the Coptic community. The issue of converts will be discussed further in Chapter IV.

A specific narrative of the past has been adopted by the Coptic Church in the GTA, which highlights the Church's initial role in the international debates concerning Christian theology and argues that the Coptic fall from grace was instigated by political motivations rather than theological disagreements.

IV

Converts

The Coptic Mission in Africa

Although the Coptic Orthodox Church in the GTA seeks to de-couple ethnic from religious identity, the Church is in constant contact with Copts in Egypt and often, the result of this contact is the reinforcement of an Egyptian identity.²⁹ At youth conventions, visiting bishops frequently use the experiences of monks and hermits living in the Egyptian deserts as illustrations of how Coptic Canadian teenagers should live their lives. The trek of the Holy Family through Egypt is seen as a blessing on the Coptic Church and celebrated by the churches in the GTA. Most Copts in the GTA still have family living in Egypt, whom they visit, email and speak with by telephone on a regular basis.

These interactions can sometimes make it challenging for non-Egyptians to view the Coptic Church as anything but ethnocentric and difficult to relate to. One strategy used by the Coptic Church in both the GTA and in Egypt to overcome this predicament is to shift focus onto the Church's impact on Christian monasticism in Europe. In the fourth century, the Coptic monk, St. Pachomius developed a system of monasticism based on the cenobitic (communal) lifestyle of monks. St. Pachomius frowned on the practice of self-mortification and instead

²⁹ In Chapter Three, I discussed the strategy of separating religious characteristics from ethnic qualities by the Coptic Orthodox Church in the GTA. Often, the Coptic Church's places emphasis on its religious identity and attributes rather than its ethnic identity. The problem, however, is that the Coptic hierarchy is still located in Egypt. Egypt will always be at the centre of the Coptic community in the GTA.

believed that each monk should have a vocation and work for their daily bread while “participating in the devotional duties of monastic life” (Atiya 1981:23). He also institutionalized an organized hierarchical system of monasticism to prevent corruption (Atiya 1981:24).

Three or four monasteries within reach of each other were united in a clan or a stake with a president elected from among their abbots and all of the monks in the clan met periodically to discuss local problems. All clans were organized under a superior-general who summoned the whole brotherhood to a general council twice a year... for making annual reports as well as for the announcements of new abbots and the transfer of office among the old ones [Atiya 1981:24].

This system was adopted by monasteries in France, Belgium, Germany, Switzerland and Italy (Gregorios 1989:53). Monks from the above countries went to live in the deserts of Egypt with the Coptic fathers and Coptic monks traveled as far as England and Ireland where they established churches and monasteries (Atiya 1981:24; Gregorios 1989:53).

By highlighting this period in its history, the Coptic Church promotes its missionizing past. The adoption of the Coptic monastic system by Europeans demonstrates the universality of the Coptic beliefs, practices and rites. The Coptic Church, however, has primarily focused its attention and resources on doing mission work in the continent of Africa.³⁰ Churches and hospitals have been established to provide both spiritual and physical aid. Some of the Coptic churches in the GTA have organized mission trips to countries in Africa.

³⁰ Some of the African countries in which the Coptic Church has established mission churches are Kenya, Zambia, Congo, Tanzania, Nigeria and the Ivory Coast. For more information, visit <http://www.copticmission.org/homepage>.

Monique, a member of the larger meeting for university graduates, gave a presentation about her visit to Kenya. She spoke of visiting the Coptic Hospital in Nairobi and the seriousness of HIV/AIDS epidemic. Monique, however, is one of the few Copts in the GTA that I have met who has gone on one of these trips to Africa. Mission work is not necessarily frowned upon in the Coptic community, but it is also not widely promoted. This attitude is presumably a result of the Coptic Church's attempt at survival in Egypt where it is illegal for Christians to proselytize about their faith. Therefore, the Church's reinforcement of a missionizing identity through (re)telling of stories of early monastic missionaries is used to persuade both the Coptic community and non-Copts of the Church's missionizing abilities. One Abuna also mentioned that young Copts in the GTA are highly focused on their education and careers and are therefore, unwilling to donate their time to missionary work.

The public support for missionary work in the GTA churches varies from church to church and depends on individual priests. One priest, in particular, attempts to highlight different missionary activities in Africa and the Coptic communities in North America, Europe and Australia. During my fieldwork, he organized the larger university graduates meeting and asked different individuals to discuss their experiences with mission work.

At one meeting, a visiting Abuna, Abuna Joseph, gave a lecture on his work in West Africa. Interestingly, Abuna Joseph described the difference between the roles of a Coptic priest in Canada compared to the duties of a priest

in Africa. A Canadian priest tries to solve the problems that parishioners cannot or do not try to solve themselves whereas a priest in Africa brings Christ to the people.

Abuna Joseph is not interested in making large numbers of converts. He emphasizes, “I go for quality, not quantity.” If an individual asks to convert, Abuna starts with one-on-one talks to test the person’s resolve. Initially, Abuna turned his living room into a church and built a baptistry in his backyard. A church complex has now been constructed in the Ivory Coast and the pictures that Abuna presented showed that there is barbed wire on the gate and a protective wall surrounding the church because the country is at war. The church also has two baptistries; one for children and a second one with stairs for adults. This is not the case in Coptic churches in the GTA, which usually only have a baptistry that will fit a child.

In West Africa, explained Abuna Joseph, the liturgy is said in French and because the culture is different, compromises must be made. The faith, however, cannot be compromised and the liturgy cannot change. Abuna said, “You have to get to know the people and their customs, not to adopt them, but to respect them. Some things cannot be adopted because they are against the beliefs of Christianity” (4/7/07). Culturally, their music is different and they dance in church. “You would get kicked out of the church for that in Egypt and Canada (4/7/07).” Also, Abuna explained that West Africans do not understand Coptic music, therefore, the music had to be adapted. The words of the liturgy are

translated so that the liturgy does not change, but the style of the music has been altered to suit the traditions of the African people.

An audience member at the meeting asked Abuna Joseph, “What general concept is the easiest concept for them (Africans) to grasp? Abuna answered that he does not try to teach theology. Instead, he teaches them “Christianity 101” and “Orthodoxy 101.” First, he talks about the Trinity and redemption, concepts that all Christians should share. Second, he gives an overview of the history of the Coptic Church, outlining for example, when the schisms occurred. Third, he explains the differences between Orthodoxy and Catholicism because many of the countries that he works in are former French colonies that have had prior contact with the Roman Catholic Church. Finally, Abuna Joseph discusses the particulars of Orthodoxy: canon law, sacraments, liturgies and prayers. These teachings will be given over the course of seven separate lessons. Abuna Joseph ended his talk by saying, “If you want adventure, come to Africa.”

The Coptic Mission in the GTA

I witnessed Abuna Joseph’s educational approach at an introductory meeting for non-Copts at a Coptic Church in the GTA. This meeting was one of a planned series for individuals interested in conversion. However, the priest in charge of the series opened a new Coptic church, which will be discussed later in this chapter, and the series was never completed because none of the other priests in the community picked up this cause. Also, none of the other three Coptic churches, at which I attended various meetings and masses, offered lessons for

non-Copts, unless the non-Copt was contemplating marriage to a Copt. If this was the case, an individual abuna would meet one-on-one with either the non-Copt or the couple to determine if the individual was serious about the baptism process.

Abuna Joseph began by explaining the basic doctrines or “Mysteries” of the Coptic Orthodox Church. First, he explained that the Trinity is like a triangle. The Father does not equal the Son, the Son does not equal the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit does not equal the Father. However, all are God, but not equal to God. The Trinity means one God with different attributes. Second, incarnation: the belief that the Son of God, Word of God, that God himself took human form. Third, redemption: man sinned when he ate the fruit of the tree of knowledge. All mankind has sinned because Adam ate this fruit. As punishment, humans must die, but because God is merciful he did not want humans to die. The sacrifice had to be human because humans must die and the sacrifice had to be infinite. Therefore, because God is infinite, he must die. Hence, the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Fourth, eternal life: after the separation of the soul and body, the body dies while the soul goes to one of two places, either Paradise or Hades. Paradise and Hades, however, are just waiting places until the resurrection of the dead when the Son of Man comes again. Fifth, the resurrection of the dead: those in Paradise will go to Heaven while those in Hades will go to Hell or to what is described in the book of Revelation. Abuna Joseph ended the discussion of the “Mysteries” by emphatically stating that anyone who does not believe the above is not a Christian or considered to be a Christian by the body of Christians around the world. The

next topic for discussion was St. Mark and the Councils, which brought the meeting to an end.³¹

Abuna Joseph proves that the methods of introduction and conversion that he uses in Africa can be adopted by the Coptic churches in the GTA. However, I do not believe that the question is one of methods, but of desire. Is the Coptic community in the GTA willing to begin a process of becoming less ethnocentric? Are Copts interested in building a large scale program with the intent of sharing their religious beliefs and practices with the larger Canadian society or with non-Egyptians?

The majority of Copts in the GTA would answer no to both of the above questions. However, Abuna Peter believes that mission work in the GTA and North America is his calling. During my fieldwork, Abuna Peter used the meetings for university graduates as a place to remind Copts that the Coptic Church was at its core a missionizing church. At the end of many of the meetings, he would point to the empty chairs in the room and remind those in attendance of his outreach agenda. He said, “Keep bringing friends, no matter what their background” (1/8/07). COCA was the only other Coptic group that organized public events that introduced Coptic beliefs and practices to a general public. My own introduction to the group happened by chance when I passed their booth during the Clubs Week in the University Student Centre. At other Coptic churches, I often got the sense that the Abunas were wary of my presence and not

³¹ See p. 58 for a description of the Councils.

sure of how to interact with me. One informant tried to explain the priests' reactions as a reflection of their lack of interaction with non-Egyptian Copts. Most Copts, however, have always been respectful of me and often become curious when I explain that my research project is focused on the Coptic community in the GTA. Every Copt with whom I spoke was always willing to respond to my questions and if she felt that she could not provide me with answers, she pointed me in the direction of someone who could.

In November, 2007, Abuna Peter met with Pope Shenouda and was granted the blessing of the Church hierarchy to proceed with his proposal to establish a new Coptic Church in the GTA. The purpose of this church, however, is different from those of the other Coptic churches in the GTA and the rest of North America. Botros (2005:12-13) argues that the Coptic Church in North America has only three roles: "helper", "comforter" and "competitor". Abuna Peter, on the other hand, wants the Coptic Church to adopt the new role of "messenger". He emphasizes the possibilities and spiritual opportunities that the Coptic Church can provide for non-Egyptians and views the future of the Coptic Church in the GTA as one that includes non-Egyptians. With the blessing of the Pope, Abuna Peter has created a new Coptic Church for Egyptians and non-Egyptians alike. He wants to spread the message and religious identity of the Copts to a larger Canadian community.

At a meeting for university graduates, Abuna Peter broke the news that he would be leaving that church to start a Coptic church with a new, but relatable

objective. His news was met with mixed emotions and responses. The topic for discussion, chosen by Abuna Peter, was missionization and evangelism.

Abuna Peter: Why do mission? Why evangelise? Why disturb the peace when we've already decided that God loves everyone? Is this the correct way to think? We can't settle this question tonight, but the truth is, people need faith. How do people enter a predominantly ethnocentric community? For example, when a non-Egyptian walks into a Coptic church and gets "the look". You don't belong here. The church has changed from a spiritual place to a place of community. This situation is found in other groups as well, the Korean and Chinese communities for example. There is a need now for a missionary community. What is the difference between a missionary community and an ethnocentric community? They will only complement each other and never contradict. This was always the Church's vision. This is my passion. The Church has something to offer to western society through a mission of love, care and acceptance. Not by making people sit through shows. I am starting a new "Church of Mission". Everything involves missionization at the core. This will lead to a change in the demographics of the congregation and require change, which will not be accepted by the majority of the community. There is no precedent in North America for such a church. Both models will work together. The Pope granted his permission to start h new church and told me to stay in Toronto.

1st Audience Member: The new church allows St. XXX Church to not have to change. Resistance may come from the older population, but we're the future. By nature our Church is missionary, but because of generations of historical and political problems we've become exclusive. I wish, Abuna, that you could do your work here at St. XXX. Resistance isn't a good enough excuse to start a new church.

2nd Audience Member: How will our hearts change into a missionizing heart if you leave?

3rd AM: Jesus was a radical. God usually puts us into uncomfortable situations rather than comfortable ones.

4th AM: Abuna, I want you to stay at St. XXX and do your work from here because I do not want to have to choose to leave.

AP: Priests are not made of stone. We're flesh and blood and thrive off of relationships. Therefore, it's tough to leave, but I believe that I have a clear calling from God and passion.

5th AM: Aren't you worried about the negative effects of your leaving on us and the next generations?

AP: I've definitely thought about that. If you have not seen Christ in this time, I've definitely failed my mission. I will still be around. One of the Fathers will be put in charge of this meeting.

6th AM: By leaving, aren't you creating a division? St. XXX equals conservative, therefore I'll leave and go with the liberal.

AP: We won't be liberal in anyway and St. XXX is a normal everyday Coptic Church. Looking at the future of the Coptic Church in North America, no one is against the idea, but just want things left as they are. We could wait, but how many souls will be lost?

7th AM: Are you worried about maintaining what you've begun?

A.P.: I'll be sad if I hear of attendance dropping at meetings.

8th A.M.: Shouldn't we just educate the congregation that the Church should be open to all.

AP: My leaving says nothing about St. XXX. At the (university graduates) convention, only St. XXX had non-Egyptians in attendance. Some people have just disappeared, for example, through intermarriage.

9th AM: Can this new church be accepted by all the other churches if it is attended by non-Egyptians?

AP: Egyptians are accepted at this church. Call it a "Ministry of Integration" rather than one of separation.

10th AM: Look at it as a transition, rather than a separation...

AP: An ethnocentric community can never become a missionizing community.

11th AM: The Church is hard to come into. We've lost the missionizing gene.

12th AM: We have to stop being selfish and think of the people that the Church will help. The Pope and bishops support the idea.

13th AM: It's a calling from God, which the Pope recognizes. We should too.

14th AM: Seventy percent of the problems I faced in the Coptic Church were due to the fact that I did not feel Egyptian enough. I tried to align my Canadian upbringing with the Church.

AP: We need to do something today because in ten to fifteen years, souls and people will be lost.

15th AM: We're scared of losing something that's just starting. We're different than the generation a head of us.

16th AM: Every community will have problems, be it ethnic or racial. I feel like we're being abandoned. If you've identified the problem, it should be worked on here.

17th AM: Can't you provide us with a transition period?

18th AM: We can't always live under Abuna's umbrella. It is a living, breathing organism that we need to keep nourishing to keep alive.³²

³² This university graduates meeting took place on November 21, 2007. Unfortunately, I had to miss some of the meeting to complete an interview with one of the other priests at the church. However, I believe that what is presented above gives a complete sense of the different feelings and viewpoints experienced by members of the group. By the end of the meeting, over one hundred and fifty people were seated in the room.

Abuna Peter's new Coptic church has since had the inaugural celebration of its first liturgy, which was attended by many of the Coptic priests in the GTA and a few bishops sent from Egypt. Emotions ran high during Abuna Peter's last meeting with the university graduates, but as one member of the group pointed out, many of the people who were making negative comments about the new church were just scared about losing Abuna Peter. Abuna Peter has focused all of his attention on the activities of the children and youth in St. XXX church while the other priests have concentrated on other groups and issues. With his leaving, a gap in leadership was and remains a possibility. However, some of the members of the university graduates' meeting have begun attending mass at Abuna Peter's new church.

It is difficult for many Copts to understand Abuna Peter's vision for the Coptic Church in the GTA because the immediate issues at hand seem more pressing than the long term possibilities for the community. During the meeting, one man even questioned Abuna Peter's motivation. He said that he believed that Abuna was mistaking his own desires with those of God's. Other community members, view Abuna Peter's new church as a step in the right direction since it will improve the chances for survival of the Coptic Church in Canada. The existence of the new church also helps the Coptic Church adapt to intermarriage between Egyptians and non-Egyptians in the Coptic community in the GTA. Abuna Peter's plan includes the conscious separation of the Egyptian identity of

the Church from the Coptic or religious identity, which was one of the adaptive strategies discussed in Chapter Three.

The celebration of the first mass at Abuna Peter's new church occurred on December 15, 2007. The new Coptic congregation is housed at a Lutheran church in the GTA. Evening meetings are held at the Lutheran church, however, Sunday morning mass is observed in the gym of a Catholic elementary school. The new congregation is currently searching for a church building of their own. Options range from smaller used churches to larger industrial buildings, with land for future expansion. The construction of the Coptic Village and its new cathedral opened up the possibility for Abuna Peter's new community of Copts to move into the building of St. Mark's Coptic Orthodox Church. However, the Coptic community decided against this option for two reasons. First, for many Copts in the GTA and North America, St. Mark's Coptic Orthodox Church is considered a symbol of their survival and ability to flourish in a new country because it was the first church constructed in the Coptic architectural style in North America. Second, some felt that it would be difficult to create something new in a church so saturated in history. At present, no final decisions or purchases have been made.

The backgrounds of congregants at the new church include, but are not limited to, Japanese, Chinese, Iranian, German, Trinidadian and Jamaican. The majority of congregants, however, are Egyptian. There are also more intermarried couples attending this church than some of the others in the GTA. The mass is celebrated in English and begins with the raising of incense at 8:45 am. This

starting time is appreciated by many attendees because at most of the other Coptic churches in the GTA English mass begins at 7 a.m., which occasions many complaints. The language issue is not as prevalent in the Coptic community as it was in the past. Most Copts, even those of the older generation, now recognize the need for English. If English masses were not adopted, a number of the younger generation would lose interest in church activities. Abuna Peter has also been taking the time to explain each element of the Eucharist. For example, during one mass, he discussed the symbolism behind the “Fraction” or the breaking of the communion bread. The bread is broken into thirteen pieces to symbolize the twelve disciples and Jesus Christ who partook in the first communion.

Members of the new church are also expected to take part in one of the many clubs, committees or groups. The committees include: audio visual, book store, community service, crafts, deacons, engineering, evangelism, greeters, ladies ministry, translation, young adults, youth group, Sunday school and many others. Almost every one can find a committee that meets their interests. The creation of committees also helps keep the organization of church activities centralized.

The Beliefs, Practices and Strategies of Coptic Converts

Robert W. Hefner (1993) writes,

The most necessary feature of religious conversion, it turns out, is not a deeply systematic reorganization of personal meanings but an adjustment in self-identification through the at least nominal acceptance of religious actions or beliefs deemed more fitting, useful, or true. In other words, at the very least – an analytic minimum – conversion implies the acceptance of a

new locus of self-definition, a new, though not necessarily exclusive, reference point for one's identity [1993:17].

In her study of the Karo Batak of Indonesia, Rita Smith Kipp (1995) argues that “the missionaries of the Dutch Missionary Society looked at conversion as a public commitment rather than as a suddenly transforming emotional experience, a tradition that GBKP (Karo Batak Protestant Church) members perpetuate in their own conversion narratives” (1995:878). Individual agency and the history and structure of a group must both be analyzed to determine a comprehensive understanding of why individuals convert and the changes that occur after conversion (Kipp 1995:872).

The Coptic Orthodox Church views conversion in terms similar to those expressed by the Dutch Missionary Society. Conversion is a public commitment. The majority of converts are Christian to begin with and have been introduced to the Coptic Church through their potential spouses. The sacraments of baptism and marriage publicly change the convert's self-definition.

Not all converts are initiated into the Coptic Church through the act of marriage. Some have come into contact with the beliefs and practices of the Coptic Church through friends or simply by accident. For example, during an interview, Angela responded to my question about her introduction to the Coptic community with the following anecdote:

I was introduced to the Church through girlfriends. I hooked up with a friend from high school. We bumped into each other and he was like, “Come bike riding with me and my friends.” And we met at a Coptic Church. We biked all the way from Mississauga to the Beaches and I was one of the only girls riding a bike and when we got there I met a bunch of

girls and became friends with them and they said that I should come to this Thursday meeting. So I went and I really, really liked it. When I first started going I loved reading the *Agpeya* and I felt a real reverence for God there. I would take notes and I was so eager and it could be that I was in a different place then, spiritually I was in a better place. It was just feeding me [2/1/07].

Angela's introduction to the Coptic Church came by accident. However, one significant aspect of her statement is the mention of the *Agpeya*. It would seem that the authenticating strategies of the Coptic Church have worked in the case of Angela who feels "reverence for God" when she prays from a book of prayers that was established during the Apostolic Age.

Another convert, Marcus, also seems to have been drawn to the Coptic Church because of its ongoing relationship with its past.

The amazing thing about the church is that within the Orthodox churches you can find people with the same spiritual zeal as in the Bible. Whenever people lost hope in the Bible, they always looked to the Prophets. I believe that in every religion if you want to find out about the religion. What spiritual power it has. The authority given to it by God, by their God you should look at the people who are the most fanatics of that. You could find out about their lives, how they live because they are living by this. So this is very amazing. We have Abuna Matery who is an exorcist. You can watch exorcisms on the internet. Not everyone would want to see that. He also heals people. We have Abuna Fanous of whom it is said that he flies. He's a hermit. People see him in California when he's supposed to be in Egypt. For instance, the Protestants, have no example of that, like the people in the Bible. When I was very young, I would read the Bible and I couldn't match it with the people in the Bible. The people dress up in a jacket and tie. Show me a Moses, someone who is carrying on the tradition of the Bible. Show me a John the Baptist [14/11/07].

Marcus feels that the Coptic saints, martyrs and miracles make the Coptic Church more authentic than other Christian denominations because Copts are presented with a visions of the original Christian Church when the apostles were alive.

Angela, like Marcus, has adopted certain aspects of the Coptic worldview. However, as Kipp (1993) notes, this adoption process takes time and during that time converts will try to reconcile their new worldview with the way that they live their lives and how they remember their past. For example, when Angela described the veneration of the saints, she used an example from her past experience with another Christian denomination. She said, “I’m starting to understand that the reverence for their saints is just kind of like using them as examples. So if I was to rationalize it, it’s sort of like following Billy Graham” (2/1/07).

Not all of the converts are happy with the present Coptic worldview. Elizabeth believes that the Coptic Church still focuses too much on its Egyptian heritage and ethnic identity.

I have heard so many sermons in the past about your mother Church in Egypt, you are Egyptian, you are a part of Egypt, don’t forget Egypt. They promote Egypt with so much pride. What is Egypt? I still have the same attitude about Canada. What is Canada? We’re supposed to be Christians. Culture shouldn’t play that heavy a part, but unfortunately it does for the Egyptian people, but I think that it’s for protection as well, a cocoon. But they should not do that. When you live in a country like Canada you should be able to become Canadian and not be ashamed of it. There’s a lot of history in Egypt and I respect that history [25/10/07].

However, she does praise the efforts of Abuna Peter.

There is a lot of pride in their heritage and they cling to it. That’s fine if you need it for your strength. I pray that God will choose others like Father Peter who has the courage and the strength to reach out and have the lack of prejudice to embrace other nationalities and cultures. I know that he’s in a dangerous position because a lot of people are still ethnic in the hierarchy and give him a hard time [25/10/07].

A difference between the experience and opinions of Elizabeth and those of Angela and Marcus is due, in part, to their differing motivations for conversion. Elizabeth converted in order to marry her husband while Angela and Marcus are not dating, engaged to or planning to marry anyone in the Coptic community. Their conversions occurred because they adopted a new world view and ethos based upon the Coptic model. Elizabeth, on the other hand, has respect for the Coptic Church, but still retains parts of the Protestant worldview with which she grew up. Elizabeth has also adopted a strategy to deal with what she feels is the ethnocentric nature of the Coptic Church. She attends another non-Coptic church in the GTA that she feels is more multicultural. She explained that at this church, “You don’t have the prejudices of an ethnic Church” (25/10/07). At the same time, she is still involved with different committees at Abuna Peter’s new Coptic church.

Conclusions

Ultimately, it appears that the authenticating strategies adopted by the Coptic Church in the GTA have been appealing to some non-Egyptians. These converts have been able to focus on the religious identity of the Coptic Church rather than on its ethnic identity. The Pope’s blessing and subsequent establishment of a new Coptic church in the GTA, with the goal of missionization and evangelism, has also allowed the Coptic Church to accept a fourth role, the role of “messenger”.

V

Women and the Coptic Church in the GTA

A Coptic Wedding – Sort of

On a warm, but drizzly, fall afternoon, I attended a wedding at one of the Coptic Orthodox churches in the GTA. Coptic weddings, like any Coptic event, meeting or function are always running late and this wedding was no exception. On more than one occasion, when I have commented on the tardiness of start times for youth and university graduate meetings, I have been asked if I know what EST really stands for. When I say, “No,” I am told that EST denotes “Egyptian Standard Time.” I have arrived forty-five minutes late for meetings, on more than a few occasions, only to find two or three people milling about outside the church because the Abuna has not yet arrived. If a meeting begins at 8 p.m. with a scheduled end time of 10 p.m., it is not uncommon for individuals and groups of people to walk into meetings at 9:45 p.m.

Therefore, as expected, the bride, groom, bridesmaids and groomsmen were all behind schedule, but when they did finally arrive at the church they quickly formed into a line in the church’s entryway situated between the sanctuary and the Coptic Cultural Centre. The Coptic Orthodox wedding rite is different from what the average Christian Canadian ceremony or the image of weddings in North American films. Usually, in the movies, the groom is shown waiting eagerly or anxiously at the front of the church, flanked by his groomsmen and a priest or minister. In the Coptic tradition, the deacons, priests and wedding

party, along with the parents of the bride and groom, all enter the sanctuary together. Consequently, when the doors at the western end of the sanctuary opened, the wedding guests rose as the deacons walked in chanting to the accompaniment of cymbals and a triangle. They were followed by the priests, one of whom was carrying the incense receptor.³³ After the priests came the bridesmaids and groomsmen, the mother-of-the-bride and father-of-the-groom, the groom with his mother and finally, the bride, in her white dress, escorted by her father.

The bride and groom sit on two chairs placed just to the right of the altar in the front of the nave, or altar area. They say absolutely nothing during the ceremony, except when the entire congregation is called upon to speak. The priests and deacons do all of the talking, chanting and singing. The choice of language spoken during the ceremony is made by the bride and groom. Most Coptic wedding ceremonies that I have attended in the GTA are performed in English, but priests can also perform the ceremony in Arabic. This afternoon's Coptic wedding ceremony was in English.³⁴

³³ The number of priests participating in a wedding ceremony tends to be representative of the social status attributed by the community to the families of the bride and groom. High social standing means more priests. However, a greater number of priests often leads to an increase in the time it takes to chant the ceremony.

³⁴ Many of the Coptic Orthodox churches in the GTA have an electronic template for the wedding ceremony that they give or email to the bride and groom. The bride and groom then have copies of the ceremony's dialogue and explanations of the rites printed and handed out to guests before the wedding ceremony begins. The ceremony is ritualized to such an extent that the only thing that changes from one Coptic wedding to the next is the insertion of the bride and groom's names where the words bride and groom appear in the text. For example, the bride always sits at the right hand of the groom following the instructions of Psalm 45:9, "Daughters of kings are among your honored women; at your right hand is the royal bride in gold of Ophir" (New International Version).

During the ceremony, a cape is wrapped around the groom's shoulders and a priest puts the wedding rings on the fingers of the bride and groom. The bride and groom also wear crowns symbolizing that they are the king and queen for the day. When the priest hands the groom and bride to one another, he gives an Admonition, first to the groom and then to the bride. He says to the groom,

My blessed son, supported by the grace of the Holy Spirit; take unto yourself your wife, at this blessed hour, in good will, purity of heart and in sincerity. Strive to do all that is good for her. Be affectionate to her. Make haste to do all that pleases her heart. Take care of her as her parents did. You have been crowned by this heavenly marriage and this spiritual Mystery of Matrimony, and the grace of God has dwelt upon both of you. Remember that if you fulfill these commandments, the Lord will guide you in all that you do, increase your livelihood, grant you blessed children that will ratify you a long and peaceful life, and reward you on earth and in heaven.

The Deacons then chant and the priest turns his attention to the bride and says,

My blessed daughter, the happy bride, you have heard what was said to your husband; take it to yourself too. Honour and respect him, *be steadfast in submitting to him, even more than what was commanded of him*. Today, as you start to be with him alone and as he becomes responsible for you after your parents, you ought to receive him with joy and gladness. Do not frown at his face or ignore any of his rights upon you, and fear God in all your dealings with him. *For God hath commanded you to submit and be obedient to him*, as you were to your parents. Deal with him as our mother Sarah, who *obeyed* Abraham, and in love called him 'Master', and both were blessed by the promises. God also looked upon her obedience, blessed her, gave her Isaac in her old age, and made her offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand on the seashore.

So, if you listen to what we have instructed you, and follow all these commandments, the Lord will guide your life, increase your livelihood, confer blessings upon your house, and grant you blessed children that will gratify you [*emphasis added*].

When the priest read out the line, "For God hath commanded you to submit and be obedient to him, as you were to your parents," the bride's side of the family let

out a collective chuckle. This is an unusual response to the Coptic wedding ceremony. However, the bride's family was not a typical Coptic family. In fact, they were not Coptic at all. They were from a Canadian-German Protestant background, which had for some time stopped using words like submit, Master and obey in regards to a husband-wife relationship.

After the ceremony, one of the bride's aunts asked the bride why she allowed the words "submit" and "Master" to be said at her wedding. In actuality, the bride had tried her best to not have them used, but the head priest had informed her that the ceremony could not be changed for anyone as it was an unalterable ritual. The priest then went into a long explanation and definition of the word "submit." Fortunately, I know this for a fact because I was that bride. I even went as far as to request that "the Admonition" be read in Arabic so that my family would not be able to understand it, but this appeal was to no avail.

As is painfully obvious from the retelling of the events of my wedding day, I am what could be described as a feminist - - with all of the connotations, implications and suggestions, good and bad, implied by the use of that word. Ellen Badone (1995) writes that fieldwork involves the process of "suspending disbelief", which she argues can become more difficult when your informants' beliefs, practices and careers seem "too close to home" (1995:13). However, what happens when you do fieldwork in your "home" and you are literally married to your fieldwork? In other words, once my intended project is completed, I am still a member of the Coptic Orthodox community through marriage and will still be

taking part in masses and church meetings. The question then becomes, can I look past my own biases and undertake an analysis of the beliefs, practices and actions of Canadian Coptic women in the GTA, in general and second generation women and female converts in particular? Perhaps, the more central question is what should be the goal of a feminist examination of the Coptic community in the GTA? Therefore, two different issues must be addressed: my own positionality as an ethnographer within the Coptic community and the role of feminism in an ethnographic study of a Canadian community with Middle Eastern roots.

Me, Myself and the Copts

It would be very easy for me to construct an argument that created a boundary between myself and the women who participate in the rituals, practices and meetings of the Coptic churches in the GTA. In other words, I could create a detailed and highly structured portrait of an Other, which would probably involve some form of rebuke that would adhere to Anne Bancroft's (1987) line of reasoning in her analysis of the role of women in Buddhism. Bancroft (1987) wrote,

Yet, why are women content to be looked upon as religiously inferior beings? This question applies to all religions. Men ordain each other in hierarchical formation. Why are women prepared to wait, perhaps indefinitely, for men's grudging approval which will place their feet on the ladder too? Why do women not take the whole issue into their own hands and ordain each other, or start a church which has no need of ordination? These are random questions, yet they apply to much of Buddhism as well as

to other religions and might be carefully considered by the reader?
[Bancroft 1987:103].³⁵

Bancroft's (1987) assertion is based upon a condemnation of the actions, or lack thereof, of an Other. Bancroft feels this Other behaves unnaturally because the actions of the Buddhist women contradict what Bancroft herself would do if she were in their position. She does a good job of separating what she believes to be her own Self from that of the Other.

Of course, such a representation would have to assume that a self versus Other dichotomy could accurately or truthfully exist in a realistic description of any community, in general and the Coptic community in the GTA, in particular. Can an ethnographer's identity simply be bracketed off from that of the individuals in the community that she is studying? In any fieldwork attempt, an ethnographer must find a way to relate to the observed community and its members or she will not be trusted, which will lead to difficulties in obtaining information. Does the process of fieldwork allow an ethnographer to create a self through opposition to those she studies, specifically the women she interacts with?

After multiple visits, over the course of twenty years, to her fieldwork site on Mafia Island in Tanzania, Pat Caplan (Bowie 2000:99-101) came to the realization that her own life experiences outside of Mafia Island affected how she viewed the women she was studying. On her first visit to the village, she was

³⁵ The above statement was Bancroft's (1987) concluding paragraph to her chapter, "Women in Buddhism". The numerous problems with and drawbacks of Bancroft's (1987) statement will be discussed and elaborated upon further in the following sections of this chapter.

focused only on her career, which helped her to identify more with the men than the women (Bowie 2000:99). The village women were “constantly pregnant or lactating, illiterate, and subject to rules of sexual segregation”, which caused Caplan to view them as Other (Bowie 2000:99). It was not until after she had married and had children that she could identify with the women of the village and recognize the importance and power of their roles in the community (Bowie 2000:100). Caplan concluded, “I have become aware that being an ethnographer means studying the self as well as the other. In this way, the self becomes ‘othered,’ an object of study, while at the same time, the other, because of familiarity, and a different approach to fieldwork, becomes part of the self” (Bowie 2000:101). I wonder if or how Bancroft (1987) was able to relate to the Buddhist women she studies.

Whereas Caplan was working in a village on the other side of the world from her home, I spent seven months doing fieldwork in a community of which I was considered a member through marriage before I began my project. As I have discussed earlier, this status makes me somewhat of a “halfie” (Abu-Lughod 1991:137). Lila Abu-Lughod (1991) poses the question, “What happens when the ‘other’ that the anthropologist is studying is simultaneously constructed as, at least partially, a self?” (1991:140). The Other that I am studying is also a part of my sense of self. I have to deal with my Coptic, Mennonite and feminist/female identities, which can sometimes be in conflict with one another. My Mennonite (and feminist) background often rears its head when I am discussing certain topics

with Copts. For example, I can understand the belief in miracles such as the apparition of the Virgin Mary appearing above a Church in Zeitoun, Egypt or requests made for the intercession of numerous saints and martyrs on a Copt's behalf. However, no matter what explanation a priest, layman or laywoman gives, I cannot accept that women are barred from serving as priests, deacons, bishops or even the Pope in the Coptic Church.³⁶ However, many Coptic women disagree with my certainties and as an ethnographer, my task is to discover why, or why not, they take this stance.

In an article discussing the needs of Muslim women in general and Afghani women in particular, Abu-Lughod (2002) questions the American government's exploitation of Afghani women's inferior social status as a means to generate support for the war in Afghanistan. She asserts that there is a need for the recognition of and "acceptance of the possibility of difference" in relation to the desires of women around the world (2002:787). In other words, liberated Afghani women may not want the same things as their so-called liberators do. Abu-Lughod (2002) writes,

Again, when I talk about accepting difference, I am not implying that we should resign ourselves to being cultural relativists who respect whatever goes on elsewhere as "just their culture." I have already discussed the dangers of "cultural" explanations; "their" cultures are just as much part of history and an interconnected world as ours are. What I am advocating is the hard work involved in recognizing and respecting differences-precisely as products of different histories, as expressions of different circumstances, and as manifestations of differently structured desires. We may want justice for women, but can we accept that there might be different ideas about justice and that different women might want, or choose, different futures

³⁶ Bishops and the Pope must be celibate men and are selected from the assembly of monks.

from what we envision as best? We must consider that they might be called to personhood, so to speak, in a different language [Abu-Lughod 2002:787-788].³⁷

With respect to my research on Coptic women in the GTA, it would be easy to sum up the lack of female participation within the Church hierarchy as simply a product of the Coptic Church's Middle Eastern roots since the media and general Canadian populace often view Egypt as a patriarchal country that treats women as second class citizens (more on that stereotype in a moment). However, such an essentialized conclusion would be over simplified and neglect two millennia of cultural and religious negotiations between Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, Turks, Ethiopians, Sudanese, Muslims, Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox Christians and Oriental Eastern Orthodox Christians, which often led to violent conflicts. Add to the lengthy history of survival in the Middle East, a newly formed Coptic Orthodox immigrant community – only fifty years young – living abroad for the first time in the Church's two thousand year history and the result is a complex relationship that requires the bridging of multiple continents, countries, languages, laws and socio-cultural and religious expectations.

Since the 1980s, the feminist tradition has portrayed Middle Eastern women as self-assured individuals who are confident in their female identities. This portrayal was and remains a counter project to studies in the 1970s, which focused on the supposed oppression that women faced under patriarchal political,

³⁷ Relatedly, Saba Mahmood (2005) begins her book, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, with the question, "How should issues of historical and cultural specificity inform both the analytics and the politics of any feminist project?" (2005:1).

economic, social and religious regimes (Thorbjornsrud 1997:167).³⁸ Berit Thorbjornsrud (1997) argues that “the danger is that one simply tips the balance over from a negative stereotyping to a positive stereotyping” (1997:167). In reality, Coptic women are not of a single mind, body and spirit. I learned about their diverse aspirations, values and approaches to religion when I attended a summer camp at one of the Coptic churches, meetings of the Coptic Orthodox Christian Association (COCA), a student association or club at one of the universities in the GTA, and numerous university graduate student meetings held by two of the larger churches. Through my participation at these meetings and at the camp, a list of issues that affected Coptic women became apparent. This list included, but is certainly not limited to marriage, divorce, education and employment opportunities and the exclusion of women from positions of power in the Church hierarchy.

A few of the Coptic churches in the GTA now operate summer camps for children. Most of the camps only run for one to two weeks of the summer, but one church decided to attempt a six week summer program for the first time during my fieldwork. My participation at the camp allowed me time to discuss many issues with the female volunteers. The involvement of the women running the

³⁸ Saba Mahmood’s article, “Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival” (2001) and her book *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (2005) are two excellent examples of the most recent literature on women’s involvement in religious movements in Egypt. Mahmood (2001) questions the representation of Muslim women who wear the *hijab* as submissive followers who have little control over their own lives or voice in their tradition. In a related vein, Abu-Lughod (1998:12-13) argues that new technologies, education and modes of thinking may offer new freedoms, but they also always include new forms of control.

camp made me begin to think about the role of the Coptic Church in the formation of female Coptic identity. What aspects of the Church's beliefs and practices do Coptic women identify with and use in their everyday lives? Alternatively, what features and characteristics, if any, do women disagree with or completely ignore?

Through my description of two separate COCA meetings, I will show how second generation Canadian Coptic women are active agents, engaging in both resistance and communication. The first meeting that I will describe was a typical weekly COCA meeting with some fifteen participants - - myself, thirteen Copts and one non-Copt. The uniqueness of this particular meeting was in fact due to the gender of the special speaker. For the first time in the history of the organization's six years of existence, a woman was presenting. Her topic was, *The Role of Women in the Coptic Orthodox Church*. The second meeting was atypical in the sense that COCA's presidents had been asked by an interfaith group on their university campus to give a talk introducing the Coptic Orthodox Church. At the meeting, there were roughly thirty-five Coptic students and fifteen non-Copts. The events that transpired at this second meeting provide useful insight into the ways in which Copts deal with outside influences and pressures.

In addition to exploring a method for overcoming my own biases in terms of feminist approaches and problematizing the feminist rationale more generally, the purpose of this chapter is to ascertain how second generation Coptic women and female converts negotiate a compromise between the larger Canadian society that suggests they should want and need to play a greater role in their Church's

hierarchy and the pull of tradition that supposedly has not been altered over the course of two millennia.

Saba Mahmood's Feminist (Re)Vision

Rita M. Gross' (1993) book, *Buddhism after Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis and Reconstruction*, is a perfect example of feminist methodologies. Gross writes,

Since this book includes both discussions of Buddhist history and reconstructions of Buddhist values and institutions, this appendix includes considerations of feminism both as academic method, i.e. the women studies perspective, and as social vision, i.e. the perspective of feminist philosophy... The women studies perspective is less radical, claiming only that scholars must include women in their data base if they wish to claim that they are discussing humanity (rather than human males). Feminist philosophy in its many varieties proposes reconstructions of current religions and societies to render them more just and equitable to women, and thereby, also to men [1993:291].

Gross is focusing on the study of the role of women in Buddhism. However, she could easily be discussing feminist analyses of Muslim, Christian or Hindu women. The issue raised by Gross' division of labour within the feminist movement is the potential opportunity for the political agenda's infiltration of the theoretical or analytical aspects of the academic endeavor (see Mahmood 2005: 10). Marilyn Strathern (1987:289) argues that feminism and anthropology essentially have different goals.

Feminist inquiry suggests that it is possible to discover the self by becoming conscious of oppression from the Other. Thus one may seek to regain a common past which is also one's own. Anthropological inquiry suggests that the self can be consciously used as a vehicle for representing an Other (1987:289).

Feminist inquiries can often seem harsh and antagonistic. Of course, as Abu-Lughod (1991:140) points out and I have already mentioned, the binary opposition between self and Other assumes that such a division is both possible and practical.

Bypassing this argument and returning to the double duty of feminist thought, it must be recognized that feminism's dual nature can become destructive to a project's original goal of locating the needs and wants of women if the needs and wants of the researcher are not first recognized and acknowledged. Bancroft's (1987) analysis of the role of women in Buddhism is a perfect example of a researcher's political agenda interfering with an attempt at theoretical analysis. Bancroft neglected to take into account the needs and desires of the Buddhist women about whom she was writing.

In *Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival*, Saba Mahmood (2001) argues for the (re)defining of the word agency, which would alter and expand the types of analyses written about the participation of women in religious groups and movements. Mahmood (2001) believes that certain virtues, like humility, modesty and shyness have lost their value in western societies and this situation has created difficulties for feminist studies of contemporary non-western societies because most feminists consider such traits to be signs of passivity that undermine the independence of the individual (Mahmood 2001: 222). Of course, such a viewpoint is theoretically problematic because individual autonomy and free will

are relatively new concepts (Mahmood 2001: 207). In feminist theory, agency has become synonymous with resistance to relationships of domination (Mahmood 2001: 203). Mahmood (2001) points out that agency can also be understood as the “capacity to realize one’s own interests against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles” (2001: 206). Mahmood (2001) redefines agency:

(a) more in terms of capacities and skills required to undertake particular kinds of acts (of which resistance to a particular set of relations of domination is one kind of act); and (b) as ineluctably bound up with the historically and culturally specific disciplines through which a subject is formed [2001: 210].

Such a definition respects the character, position and responsibilities of all women taking part in religious practices.³⁹

Coptic women in Egypt are expected to dress in the same modest styles as their female Muslim neighbours and coworkers. Also, by acting with modesty, humility and shyness they do not call attention to themselves or their Christian faith. However, the Copts believe that qualities such as meekness and patience are virtues that should be followed by all Christians and that this “alternative” frame of mind should be taught to Coptic children in Canada as well as Egypt. By using the word “alternative” to describe the traits of meekness, humility and shyness, I

³⁹That being said, an investigation of the role of Coptic women in Egyptian society would have to include information on their acts of resistance. Simply by refusing to wear hijabs in the public domain, Coptic women are walking billboards for the resistance of Egyptian Christians to Islam. Coptic men also take part in activities of resistance – attending mass, tattooing a blue cross on their right wrist or taking part in public demonstrations against the injustices and inequalities faced by Copts in their workplaces and everyday lives – but the lack of fabric placed over a woman’s head makes her the target of Islamic rhetoric from her coworkers and jeers from Muslims in the streets. However, Coptic women in Canada do not face the same problems as their counterparts in Egypt. They face new and different difficulties.

do not mean to belittle these qualities. I merely intend to distinguish them from the more typical assertively individualistic characteristics that are stressed in today's Canadian society.

During my fieldwork, I attended a meeting for university graduates at one of the Coptic Orthodox churches in the GTA at which the topic of discussion was "Meekness". After the opening prayers and hymns, the speaker, whom I shall call Shaml, began the meeting with the question, "Can you be meek in western society where it is a dog-eat-dog world?" Shaml then asked the meeting's participants to turn to a few scriptures in their Bibles. First, the members opened their Bibles to Matthew 11:29, which reads, "gentle and lowly of heart." Second, "meekness in wisdom" (James 3:13), which means that good works should be done in a meek manner. The third verse was from the Beattitudes (Matthew 5:3-12), which Shaml referred to as the New Testament's Commandments. "Blessed are the meek, For they shall inherit the earth" (Matthew 5:5). Finally, 1 Peter 3:4 was read aloud, which discusses the actions of women, which should be gentle and quiet. Shaml said that "gentle and quiet" is just another way to say meek.

After outlining the examples of meekness given in the Bible, the speaker asked the audience, "What is gentleness and meekness?" The responses included, "Someone who is calm, good-natured and cheerful!" "They are composed, things don't stress them out and they don't get angry." "They are calm on the outside and the inside." "Attacks no one even when he is attacked, which is how martyrs are described." And, "This is what is asked of Christians. If you are slapped you

are not to slap back.” Shaml responded to the answers by saying that all of the above were qualities of meekness.

He then reinforced the members’ suggestions by telling a story. A young man went to church and sat a little sloppily, which caught the attention of the priest. The priest stopped performing the mass and rebuked the young man for his appearance and behaviour. Shaml pointed out that the priest’s lack of gentleness kept the man from attending church for the next ten years. Instead, Shaml encourages the members to use friendship evangelism, which involves preaching through gentleness and action. The way you live becomes the example by which others can judge your religion and faith. Shaml continued, “You don’t hit people over the head with the Bible. A soft answer turns away wrath. We are to be Christ-like – patient and long suffering. Being meek, you should be shy – focused on yourself and God. Meek people are easy to get along with and tend to be protected by others. The first sin of the world was pride.”

A member of the audience then asked, “Should people take job promotions?” Other audience members replied, “Meekness doesn’t mean you should shy away from new challenges. You should ask God for help.” “Sometimes there is an association between meekness and weakness, but that is wrong.” “If they take the job, he can show more people how to be meek and a good Christian.” “Meek people are not shy. They will speak when they need to.” And Shaml ended the conversation by saying, “Some people say they can’t be

meek because they are a Type A personality, but priests always counter with the example of Saint Moses the Black.”⁴⁰

Shaml ended the meeting with a question posed by Pope Shenouda: “Would you tell a family member that his or her choice of marriage partner is wrong for him? It is a rational question asking for the application of theology.” A group member answered, “I would approach them with gentleness and kindness. It would be important to listen to them and to learn what they believe in.” The Correspondingly, a member of the group added that you must speak up and say that divorce is wrong under any circumstance.

In Egypt and Canada, the model of meekness, gentleness and humility can be considered a survival tactic adopted by the Coptic community. Specifically, the injunctions that “a soft answer turns away wrath. We are to be Christ-like – patient and long suffering,” provide a “model for” survival in the face of persecution (Geertz 1973:94). Christ’s trials and tribulations have become the perfect metaphor for the pain and persecution that the Copts have endured in Egypt since the fifth century and the new hardships that the religious group has experienced with the establishment of a world-wide diasporic community. In both situations, Copts have developed and promoted a passive resistant response to attacks from the outside world. In Geertz’s (1973) terms, the values of meekness and humility are central to the “ethos” of the Coptic community (1973:89). These

⁴⁰ Life lessons in the Coptic Orthodox churches in the GTA are rarely based upon experiences of living contemporary persons. In fact, most examples given by priests, bishops, monks, nuns and even Coptic laity of how to live a proper and good Christian life are based upon the life experiences of individuals living in north Africa, mainly in Egypt, prior to the sixth century.

values are evident in the narratives about Christ and the Coptic martyrs, key Coptic religious symbols. In life there is always suffering and adversity, therefore, Christ's life, and the lives of countless martyrs, are seen as a "model for" how to live a good Christian life. Christ's life is also a "model of" the way life will always be – difficult. In this sense, religious symbols like Christ and the Coptic martyrs link the world view and the ethos in such a way that they mutually confirm one another. There is a circular reinforcing movement between ethos and worldview.

Women and the Church Hierarchy

Following the Orthodox tradition, women cannot become members of the priesthood, which means that they cannot administer any of the Seven Sacraments. However, women do participate in six of the seven sacraments, the seventh being the taking of the priestly orders, which as we have already stated is not an option for women due to their sex and gender. In an ethnographic study of Coptic nuns in Egypt, Pieterella van Doorn-Harder (1995:11) outlines the three chief arguments made by the Coptic Orthodox Church for the exclusion of women from official positions of authority. Van Doorn-Harder (1995) writes,

First, I will discuss the Pauline argument. St. Paul said that women should keep silence in the churches (1 Cor. 14:34-36). Paul also stated that it is forbidden for a woman to teach men or have authority over a man (1 Tim. 2:12). About this topic, Matta al-Meskin, the present spiritual father of the Monastery of St. Macarius and one of the leading Coptic authorities on monastic and spiritual life, explains that 'the Apostle Paul here forbids women to teach men not because they are forbidden to teach or because they do not have the gift, for they share in all gifts, but because for women to teach men in the church would put them in a position of leadership and give them authority over men which the apostle sees as not permissible.'

Father Matta al-Meskin argues that the fact that women are not allowed to teach in church is the source of the ban on women entering any degree of ordination.

Father Matta al-Meskin then links the Pauline argument with Eve's original sin by quoting St. Paul that 'Adam was created first,' and that 'it was not Adam who was deceived; it was the woman who, yielding to deception, fell into sin.' According to Matta al-Meskin, it was Eve 'who offered sin to her husband,' and so 'it is fitting and right that she should be offered counsel, then reconciliation and forgiveness (in the sacrifice of the eucharist) by men.'

According to church belief, the third factor that prevents women from attaining ecclesiastical positions is their monthly menses. In the Coptic Church, a menstruating woman is not allowed to take communion, and it is forbidden for a woman who has not reached menopause to enter the altar. The basis for these restrictions is according to the Copts, found in the Old Testament codes of purity (Lev. 15:19-25) [1995:11-12].⁴¹

There is a fourth argument used to justify the patriarchal hierarchy and system of the Coptic Orthodox Church. This argument is, in fact, the one with which I am most familiar with because it is the rationale used by every Coptic priest in the GTA that I have asked to explain the subordinate role women play in

⁴¹ The issue of women's ritual uncleanness is still a topic of discussion and debated by women in the Coptic community in the GTA. During my fieldwork, Pope Shenouda visited the GTA. Hundreds of Copts took buses, cars and vans to a newly purchased Coptic Orthodox monastery close to Orangeville, ON. The sanctuary used by the monastery was too small to fit all of the people who had come to see the Pope and I was unable to watch the events of the gathering. Most of the proceedings took place in Arabic. After this initial assembly, fireworks were displayed outside and the majority of people left for home. However, the Pope had saved time to meet with members of the newly formed Coptic Orthodox Church in the GTA whose goal was mission work or to attract non-Egyptians and Egyptians alike to the community. The gathering ended with a Question and Answer section where the first question posed to the Pope was, "Are women allowed to take Holy Communion when they have their period?" The Pope's answer was, "They are not permitted. I think a woman's period is only for four days. For men it is the same. When we take Holy Communion, the Lord God wants us to be clean in spirit and body. If a man is not clean in spirit and body he is not allowed to take Holy Communion."

In an interview with a Coptic woman, Miriam, who is in her early twenties, the subject of communion and menstruation came up. She said, "I have bigger issues that I'm not OK with, like the don't take communion when you're on your period. People do follow it and I did for a little while. I know that in the Old Testament it was for survival, women shouldn't go near the altar because of bacteria" (26/11/07). In the end, Miriam still takes communion when she is menstruating. Another woman told me that when she asked a priest about the rule and explained her misgivings, he replied that what he did not know would not hurt him.

GTA. She learned Arabic and Coptic and moved to Egypt where she became a contemplative nun. When I interviewed a young Coptic woman named Samira, she recounted her experience with Coptic deaconesses in California.

The deaconesses? Those were in California and they started in California. There were deaconesses in the old Church and I'm starting to think that, again, I'm not an authority on the Church, women had more of a role in the Coptic Church than they do now. I think that that was just cultural influences. Specifically, the Arab Invasion or something like that has stifled the woman's role. The deaconesses are put into their own style of *tonya*, that kind of look like the Michelin man. I know that's inappropriate and mean, but it's true. They wear a headdressy thing that I think looks like a *hijab*. They sit in the same rows as everyone else and sing during the mass and help out in communion. That's all that I saw them distinctly do. But anyone can help out with communion you do not need to be ordained and I say that while making quotation marks in the air, to help out with communion. They say that they give them special hymn classes and they try to include them more, so I guess if they're doing that that's fine, but don't call them deaconesses because they are not. They have nothing similar to male deacons. I'm sorry, that's my criticism on it. And people made a huge deal of it, like are they are ordaining girls. And this is something that shouldn't even be debated. It's so small [Hamilton, 28/11/07].

Samira's lack of respect for the deaconesses is a commonly expressed opinion within the Coptic community in the GTA. Whereas priests, bishops and monks come from Egypt to Canada to speak at church meetings or youth conferences, nuns and deaconesses do not. Other than the story about the single Canadian convert becoming a nun in Egypt, I have not heard of any Coptic women from the GTA joining one of the female communities. Nuns and the convent life are rarely, if ever, discussed in the GTA Coptic churches. Becoming a nun does not seem to be considered a viable life choice for Canadian Coptic women.

The final position that a woman can fill in a Coptic Orthodox Church is that of a servant or volunteer. Servants are Sunday school teachers, leaders of

youth groups, chaperones at youth conventions, and can fulfill any other role dealing with women, children and the elderly. Servants can be male or female and are most often, young and unmarried, depending on the specific function or activities in question. At the summer Coptic Youth Convention for adolescents between the ages of sixteen and nineteen, almost all of the servants were unmarried and between the ages of twenty-two and thirty-five. Only one or two parents attended the conference as chaperones, which may have led to some of the rude outbursts and actions by the teenagers in attendance.

The summer camp at which I spent two days a week, over its six week course, was run by a married woman, Anna, in her fifties whose fellow volunteers were all middle aged women with husbands and children of their own. Anna and at least three of the other female servants are elementary or high school teachers. Two girls in university came to help one day a week with their mother. There were no male volunteers at the camp. The children who attended the camp were between the ages of four and fifteen and the activities they participated in were divided by age group. Activities included lessons in Coptic and Arabic, hymns, Bible study and memorization, arts and crafts, gym games and mass.

The camp was in its first year of operation and there were still many problems that needed to be worked out. The first of these problems was that there were insufficient numbers of volunteers, which meant that the children had a lot of free time. It soon became clear that the children engaged in gender specific types of free time activities. The boys were sent to the gym where they played

either basketball or soccer while the girls hand stitched purses and wallets. One day, Anna was cutting long strips of white fabric. When I asked her what they were for, she said that the girls would be making and decorating head scarves, which they could wear when they take communion.⁴² They could also use the material to make handkerchiefs that are used to cover the mouth after the Body of Christ (bread) is taken during the eucharist. Anna had decided that the free time activities should be church related, but nonetheless the boys were in the gym playing basketball.

An important question with many answers is why would Coptic women want to become nuns, consecrated women, deaconesses and servants? S.S. Hasan (2003) believes that,

On the whole, the bishops tend to relate to their *mukarasat* the way a headmaster relates to girls in a boarding school. It is not just that they are always assigned the conventional female tasks – the supervision of nurseries, orphanages, old age homes, sewing workshop, and the like – but even within this restricted sphere of social work they have very little autonomy and very little space for growth and feeling of self-worth [2003: 255].

My response to Hasan's analysis is to repeat my first question. If becoming a consecrated virgin does not fulfill a woman's spiritual goals, why does she remain in the position? Could she not return to her family and try to find a husband or an occupation outside the Church hierarchy? I prefer Thorbjornsrud's (1997) assessment of the situation of Coptic women in Egypt. He argues that for Coptic

⁴² When taking communion in the Coptic Orthodox Church, women must cover their heads. This rule is based upon 1 Cor. 11:2-16. "But every woman who prays prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head, for that is one and the same as if her head were shaved" (1 Cor. 11:6). Most Coptic women in the GTA, only wear a headscarf if they are planning on taking communion. If they are only attending the mass they leave their heads uncovered.

women in Egypt acting as a servant in the Church is an “alternative path for self realization” (1997:187). The role of servant in the Church helps to fill a void when most women have little to do at work and the traditional responsibility of becoming a wife is growing more difficult to secure due to economic impediments (Thorbjornsrud 1997:179&185). Some women choose volunteering in the Church over marriage because the role of wife would grant them less authority (Thorbjornsrud 1997:186).

Second generation Canadian Coptic women living in the GTA are well educated and usually work in professional fields such as engineering, pharmacy and medicine. They are expected to follow the traditional rules of the Coptic community – remain chaste, get married and have children – but many go away to university and live on their own, which is a rare occurrence in Egypt. They have more options outside the Church and marriage for the basis of their identity formation. That being said, marriage is still an important part of the expected Coptic lifestyle in the GTA.

During my fieldwork, I attended a fall weekend retreat for Coptic university graduates, which at times felt like a “meet and greet your potential mate” event. At one point, a man asked me if I was married before he even asked what my name was. The special speaker for the weekend, an Abuna from the United States, even joked about the reason for coming to the convention. He said, “What if we could read God’s mind? For example, marriage, which may be on some peoples’ minds this weekend. We don’t need to point fingers. It will be

evident by the end of the weekend.” Coptic women in the GTA do not need to look for ways to shape their identities outside of a typical laywoman’s way of life, which is why very few, if any become nuns, consecrated women or deaconesses. Becoming a servant, on the other hand, allows them to come into contact with the opposite sex in a safe environment and hopefully meet a potential husband. It is also a way to meet people with a similar background and perhaps shared interests.

COCA and the Role of Women

It was somewhat misleading to state that COCA has only had one female speaker before the fall term of 2007. The co-presidents of COCA for the fall/winter term of 2007-2008 were both women and they led the weekly meetings on more than one occasion. However, the female speaker, whom I will call Hanna, was the first female non-COCA member to address the club and coincidentally, she was a priest’s wife.

As Hanna was setting up her notes for her presentation, Samira started actively and aggressively questioning of the Coptic patriarchal hierarchy. Her first question was: Why do we always quote the Church Fathers and not the Church Mothers? Why are all the icons male? Why can’t women go into the altar area? A second female member, Nadya, interjected at this point and reminded everyone that it is nice to highlight women’s contributions over the years too and to focus on the good aspects. “To focus on what women can do.”

Hanna began by stating that God created men and women as equals, they both received the same commandments. She continued that there is no distinction

between men and women in spiritual growth, but there is a difference in roles. She used the example of the relationship between Christ and God to reflect on the relationship between mother and father or wife and husband. Christ was submissive to the will of God even though Christ is equal to God. Each has a different role with different responsibilities, which does not mean they are unequal. Hanna then went on to say that the relationship between a Mother and Father is similar in that one has authority while the other is to be submissive.⁴³ She asked and answered, “What is authority without love? Tyranny. What is submission without love? Slavery. If there is love in submission it is not slavery. Hannah then related different Biblical verses, which supported her argument. Women are to dress modestly and remain silent in Church where they are not permitted to teach (1 Tim 2:8-15). Wives are supposed to be examples to their husbands while remaining submissive if they do not obey God’s word (1 Peter 3:1-6).

After some time, Samira became restless and interrupted Hanna by exclaiming that the text had been written by a celibate traveler and that, “We must look at the background of the writer”. She also added that God did not design men to be better priests than women. Quietly, I supported her because I was actually quite shocked by what Hanna had said. Again, I find it difficult to “suspend

⁴³ The division of labour between a husband and wife in a Coptic household is based upon the Pauline Epistle (Ephesians 5:22-6:3), which reads, “For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the Church; and He is the Saviour of the body. Therefore, as the Church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing” (Ephesians 5:23-24). The Pauline Epistle is read aloud by a priest during the Coptic wedding ceremony.

disbelief” (Badone 1995) especially when other Copts seem to have the same difficulty.

Before the meeting, Nadya explained that the reasons why women could not be priests had been discussed in prior COCA meetings. She said, “We always focus on what women cannot do, our limitations, but we are also rich in abilities available to us. We need to look at the richness”. A week or so after the meeting, I interviewed another female member of COCA who apologized for the direction that the meeting had taken. She said, “The topic was not intended to be that. The topic was supposed to be key women figures in the Bible, their stories and their contribution. It wasn’t supposed to be, ‘What is the Role of Women in the Coptic Church’”. At the COCA meeting, Hanna presented the traditional position of the Coptic Church on the role of women. Women, specifically married women, are not seen as individuals, but as members of a cohesive team with different members fulfilling different functions. Insert a sport, body or machine analogy here. This type of co-adaptive relationship between men and women works in Egypt because it is similar to gender relationships in Islam. The problem, however, is that many Canadians view this type of relationship as unequal and try to enforce the belief that women can and should be allowed to do whatever men can do. Samira is a good example of this new type of Coptic woman.

The second COCA meeting, which involved the interfaith group, provides an interesting contrast to the first meeting in light of the Copts’ response to the issue of the role of women in the Coptic Church. The two presidents of COCA, a

male and a female that year, began with a brief outline of the history of the Coptic Church. The historical outline was then followed by an account of the Coptic hierarchy, which focused on the patriarchate or the Coptic Pope. After highlighting aspects of the lives of historical saints and a brief overview of the Coptic liturgy, the presentation concluded with a discussion of the present situation of Copts in Egypt. When the lecture was completed, the floor was opened to the audience for questions. Not surprisingly, many of the questions were related to the issue of Christian-Muslim dynamics in Egypt. However, the questions shifted in focus and scope when a non-Coptic man asked the female president of COCA if she felt that the Coptic Church's hierarchy was an unfair establishment since it does not allow for women to be placed in positions of power. The female president replied in the negative, stating that she does not think that the establishment is unfair because men and women have been given different roles. Other non-Copts then countered that "different roles" is just another way of saying "unequal roles".

The argument continued along these lines for fifteen minutes until everyone decided to agree to disagree, but what I now find interesting, in retrospect, is that all of the Coptic women reiterated the traditional Coptic view of the role of women in the Church. None of them spoke up or publicly agreed with the non-Coptic speaker's view of inequality even though I know that that some of the women share the same opinion.

Second generation Canadian Coptic Orthodox women are an active group within the Coptic community. They are mothers, Sunday School teachers, doctors, pharmacists, engineers and student association presidents. They are active in many religious spheres and they are negotiating a compromise between their Church's traditional position on women, which values the characteristics of modesty, meekness and patience while, on the other hand, vocalizing a new sense of individual self under specific circumstances. In private, Coptic women push for a space for dialogue between the lay community and the Church hierarchy and its position on the role of women. However, in the public domain, many Coptic women choose to support their Church and to pick their battles. Anna said to me,

I'm probably biased in saying this, but I've kinda let go of the issue because I feel like it's not ever going to go anywhere. A lot of girls, I guess are trying to fight for it to go somewhere. A lot more than in Egypt I think, just because over there it's not that women don't have roles but I think that they're at the point where I am. Where it's ok, this is how it is, men will be men. The Church, formed by a bunch of men. That's how it will be. Just let it go. Just focus on more important things. I think there's definitely more dialogue now then there was before [26/11/07].

Second generation Coptic women and female converts have what Paul Bramadat (2000:23) calls a "selectively penetrable membrane" in the sense that they pick and choose what part of the Coptic faith is important to follow and what can be, not forgotten, but deemed less important to keeping the faith. For example, some women take communion when they are menstruating, despite the Church's prohibition. In one interview, a young woman said,

They're rigid in certain aspects. I feel like telling me not to brush my teeth before communion because I'll put stuff into my mouth that will mix with the Body and then I'll swallow it and it will give me impurities. That's not

something that is necessary. Like come on. Or don't chew gum and spit it out after communion. It's not about that. The idiosyncracies are getting in the way of the actual religion. And it has bothered me for so many years. And I kind of don't follow things at my own liberty, like the don't brush your teeth thing. If you swallow the toothpaste you are not fasting. That to me, I just don't understand [26/11/07].

Ultimately, what is important to keep in mind is that the submissive role of women prescribed by the Coptic Church does not prevent non-Egyptian Canadian women from converting to Coptic Orthodoxy. Nor does it fuel an exodus of second generation female Canadian Copts from the Coptic Church. Even Samira, a staunch feminist, says, "I love being Coptic and it's a big part of my life." If she were to marry a non-Copt, she would expect him to convert to Coptic Orthodoxy.

Marriage and Divorce in the Coptic Community and Church in the GTA

As Samira's comment has just shown, some second generation Coptic Canadian women are open to the idea of marrying non-Copts. Others, on the other hand, are not so sure. Nadya said, "You have to marry a nice Coptic boy. Yes, he has to be Coptic. It's sort of understood." On a drive back from a youth convention, Matthew told me about a former girlfriend who was not Christian, let alone Coptic. When he discussed the relationship with his Father of Confession, the priest asked if he was ready to walk a long and difficult path. Matthew continued by saying that priests try to dissuade Copts from marrying non-Copts.

In an ethnographic article outlining personal narratives of first and second generation immigrant Hindu women in Canada, Anne Mackenzie Pearson (2004:84) calls attention to the desire of many first generation Hindu mothers for their daughters to marry a Hindu man. "The easiest way to ensure the retention of

Hindu identity for the second generation is to marry another Hindu” (Pearson 2004:84). Many first generation immigrant Coptic mothers in the GTA would agree with their Hindu counterparts. Although, willingness to convert to Coptic Orthodoxy is becoming more acceptable in potential spouses, this acceptance is not shared by all Copts.

I have also been questioned about my own Coptic identity on a number of occasions and I have learned that it is best to be honest when I am answering personal questions. Usually, I am asked if I still consider myself to be Mennonite, to which I most often answer, “Yes”. This answer, unfortunately, did not sit well with one of the Coptic men I met. He felt that it would confuse my (hypothetical) children if they had to learn about both Mennonites and Copts and that it would cause me pain to watch my children grow up with a different religious perspective than my own. This man then asked me, “What about the Bible verse that says a household cannot have two religions?”⁴⁴ Although both Mennonites and Copts are Christian communities that follow the teachings of the Bible, he felt that they were the equivalent of two different religions.

Dating and marriage are hot topics among young Coptic women in the GTA. Nadya argues,

⁴⁴ The man was referring to 2 Corinthians 6:14-16, where St. Paul says, “Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever?” (2 Cor. 6:14-15). I also found this specific verse written on a pamphlet concerning marriage in the Coptic Orthodox Church that was handed out by members of COCA in the university student centre. It also said that “**oil does not mix with water** and consequently, can’t unite” under the section entitled, “Inter-religious Marriage.”

There are a lot of issues that are not addressed. I think right now, we feel that we don't see a lot of support for families, family issues. There should be more information and resources to learn more about marriage and stuff. There is a recurring issue about marriage. You marry someone without really knowing them - just that they are someone from the Church. Dating is wrong. The Church says so in high school [Hamilton, 20/11/07].

She further elaborates on the relationship between culture and religion,

I think they do that on purpose. It's easier. I mean if you're raising your children to believe something that you want them to believe. If you say religion says do it, it obviously makes things easier for the parents. It's very much intertwined. Especially for things like dating. If you talk to Coptic Catholics, dating is not as much an issue for them as it is to Coptic Orthodox people. I feel like it's just something we take from our culture and mix it in with our religion just to make it fly [Hamilton, 20/11/07].

Coptic teenagers are not supposed to date, but there does seem to be a double standard when it comes to the sexes as one Coptic male pointed out. He said, "When I was growing up and I dated, my parents just turned their heads, but if my sister had tried to date, no way!"

Divorce is not openly discussed in the Coptic community in the GTA except to say that it is not acceptable under any circumstances except those outlined in the Bible. A priest did admit, however, that divorce does occur in the Coptic community. One Coptic woman, Shareen, who attended all of the university graduate meetings at one the GTA churches confided in me that she is legally divorced from her husband in the eyes of the Canadian justice system. However, the Coptic Church still believes that she is still married to her husband in the eyes of the Lord and has refused to grant her a divorce. Shareen says that her husband was abusive and tried to kill her on more than one occasion, but

abuse is not considered grounds for a divorce in the Coptic Church. Shareen was told by multiple priests and bishops that the abuse was her cross to bear.

On the topic of spousal and child abuse, Sam, a Coptic man, said,

Is it acceptable for men to hit women no, but is it a reason for divorce, no. And I was raised here...My father beat me and I didn't think of it as abuse. My mother treated me badly a few times and I thought of that as abuse. You expect your father to abuse you. Just like you expect the police to arrest you, I think that it's a positive trait that parents discipline their children...It's such a silly thing to destroy a family over, just a slap [Toronto, 1/12/07].

The Coptic Orthodox Church will grant a divorce under two specific circumstances: First, if a spouse has committed adultery, but only if the adulterous act occurred more than once, and secondly, if a spouse converts to a new religion. Shareen said that the Church refused to grant her a divorce because they are a) waiting for her husband to change and realize how wrong his actions were, b) commit adultery or c) convert to another religion. Shareen is upset at the Church hierarchy for assuming that she would just take her husband back if he decided that his abusive behaviour had been wrong. She asked how she was expected to trust him again. Shareen has since left the Coptic Orthodox community.

Conclusion

Second generation Canadian Coptic women and female converts navigate an array of situations that require compromises on a daily basis. Second generation women seek to meet their parents' ideals of creating a traditional nuclear family while working at demanding professional jobs at which the Coptic Church teaches them to follow models of meekness, gentleness and humility.

These women have a filtering system through which they either accept or ignore the information given to them and use specific information in specific situations.

I still have difficulties “suspending disbelief” when I attend mass, a COCA meeting or a graduate students’ meeting because every bone in my body is willing me to scream out that women could make capable priests. That being said, I realize that second generation Coptic Canadian women act within their obtainable limits while negotiating between acts of resistance and understanding. In the end, the issue of supposed gender inequality has never forced a Coptic woman to choose to leave the Church. Even Samira has shown that her faith in the beliefs and practices of the Coptic Orthodox Church is stronger than her feelings on inequality. Also, non-Coptic women are still undergoing the conversion process by being baptised. In the words of Elizabeth, a female Coptic convert, “there will be more women in Heaven wearing crowns than men because of everything women endure on earth.”

VI

Conclusion

In this thesis, I argue that the Coptic Orthodox Church in the GTA must adopt strategies for adaptation to survive as a diaspora in Canada. Initially, when Copts began to emigrate out of Egypt, the community in the GTA sought the attention of the Coptic hierarchy because they wanted to establish a place where they could go for help and comfort. The Church was important because it provided a place that felt like home. Therefore, Abuna Marcos celebrated the liturgy in Arabic and Coptic at the first authentically Coptic-styled church built in North America. The chanting, icons, crucifixes, relics and priests sustained a relationship between the Copts living in the GTA and the Coptic hierarchy and community in Egypt. Through recounting two personal narratives, I highlight the issues faced by new immigrants in Canada. At present, the Coptic community in the GTA remains in constant contact with family and friends in Egypt through email, telephone calls, visits and new immigrants arriving from Egypt.

My research supports Mullins' (1987 and 1988) argument that the introduction of second and third generation members to immigrant churches will lead to conflict over issues concerning language and intermarriage. The issue of language has been dealt with in most Coptic churches in the GTA. The larger churches offer both an English mass and an Arabic mass while the smaller churches try their best to meet the needs of their English and Arabic speaking constituencies. Sunday school materials have also been translated into English.

The Coptic Church in the GTA has focused its attention on the youth of the Church. There are annual Coptic conventions for children and young adults from the ages of five to thirty. One strategy adopted by the Coptic Church in the GTA, in an attempt to relate to the children of the second generation, is a conscious decision to separate the community's Coptic, Orthodox or religious identity from the Egyptian or ethnic identity shared by many of the community's members.

To attract the attention of the second generation, non-Copts and new Copts baptised for the purpose of marriage, the Coptic Orthodox Church in the GTA has constructed a sense of authenticity based upon its Pharaonic heritage, the history of the Councils and the apostolic foundation of the Coptic Church. Until recently, the Coptic Church did mission work only in Africa. However, during my fieldwork, a new Coptic Church was established in the GTA with a new set of objectives. Botros (2005) argues that the Coptic Church fulfills three roles in the lives of diaspora Copts: helper, comforter and competitor. The new Coptic church has a new role; that of messenger. It is the first missionizing Coptic church in North America and from the responses given at the meeting for university graduates, at which Abuna Peter announced his plans, the feelings toward this new role for the Coptic Church in the GTA are mixed.

The role of women in the Coptic Orthodox Church is one area in which the Coptic hierarchy will not adapt. The type of changes that women like myself would view as adaptation are seen by the hierarchy as a heresy against the Bible, Jesus Christ and God. Second generation Coptic Canadian women and female

converts may not agree with the role that they are given by the Coptic Church. However, many have decided to choose their battles and feel that fighting for a change in the position of women in the Church hierarchy is not worth the effort, since there are more important issues. As Mahmood (2001) points out, the desires of women in differing social contexts are not homogenous. Moreover, the concept of individualism is not universal. Therefore, any analysis of gender must look at the needs and desires of the female members of the community themselves rather than the position the ethnographer feels the women should adopt. It is important to note that the subordinate role of women in the Church has not led to an exodus of second generation Coptic Canadian women. Even those with feminist ideals remain in the Church because they believe and have faith in the Coptic tradition.

Future Research

There is a great deal of research remaining to be done among the Coptic community in the GTA. First, the new Coptic church established by Abuna Peter has only been in existence for approximately six months. Future research into methods of missionization and evangelism and their outcomes would be fruitful. Another key question for further research is: will the future demographics of the Church change? At present, the majority of members are still of an Egyptian ethnic background. Will non-Egyptians ever out number Egyptians? Will the objective of missionization be adopted by other Coptic churches in the GTA or will they continue with the roles of helper, comforter and competitor? Additionally, it will be interesting to see whether the Coptic churches in the GTA

will establish a method for Coptic Canadian women to become nuns or deaconesses without requiring a move to Egypt. Another issue of concern is will Coptic Canadians be given their own bishop? How would this development change the dynamic of the community's relationship with the Coptic hierarchy in Egypt? Finally, how will the relationship between the Coptic community in the GTA and that in Egypt be sustained and maintained? All of these questions provide an exciting basis for future research on the relationship between religion and identity in the Canadian Coptic context.

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