

The Invisible Life-worlds of a Coptic Christian

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This essay presents the life-story of a Coptic Christian between the PlayStation lounge, the coffeehouse and the prison. By taking this constellation as a point of departure, I broadly link such a portrait to overlooked contacts between Coptic Christian youth and the clerical hierarchy of the institution of the Coptic Orthodox Church. While attention is usually given to how Copts experience, negotiate and struggle against the various roles of the

Church and its tradition of *khidma* (service), I investigate Coptic youngsters' life-worlds when they wish or have to stay invisible from the Coptic Church's presumptions of representing its congregants.

Keywords: (In-)Visibility, Coffeehouse, Prison, Pope Shenouda III, Coptic Orthodox Church, Coptic Christians

Introduction

Mark is not a close friend; I do not remember if we have ever talked more than once or twice. Three spaces brought us together in addition to our neighborhood parish in the district of Shubra in northern Cairo: the PlayStation lounge, the coffeehouse and the prison. This essay presents a constellation of these three spaces in addition to the multiple meanings associated with one's Coptic faith and identity when moving between them. By taking the life story of Mark as a point of departure, I hope to broadly link such a portrait to absent contacts between Coptic Christians on one hand and the clerical hierarchy of the institution of the Coptic Orthodox Church on the other hand.

While attention is usually given to how Copts experience, negotiate and struggle against the spiritual, social and political roles of the Church, I investigate Coptic youngsters' life-worlds when they wish or have to stay invisible from the Coptic Church's assumptions and promises of representation and protection of its congregants (Shenoda 181-92; van Doorn-Harder 3-6; Heo 218-29). In this regard, I build on literature that reflects facets of cultural isolation. I do not start with relationships of power that isolate young Copts from having contacts with the

Church; rather, I present overlooked contacts of dissent and agency that capitalize on such marginalization. Instead of looking at methods of resisting or coping with isolation (Terhune 549-550), I take the everyday interactions of Mark and his friends as intimidating bundles of relationships that sometimes hide and escape, yet reflect failures of ruling structures.

The PlayStation Lounge: Escaping the Sunday Schools

The neighborhood of Shubra in northern Cairo has an exceptional number of Coptic Orthodox parishes. Coptic Christians living there are proud of this fact, claiming that this reflects a strong presence of their rituals and traditions in comparison to other neighborhoods in Cairo and to other Egyptian cities and villages outside the capital. The latter opinion is also popular among scholars and writers who are interested in the Coptic affairs, and who always take Shubra as an example for the visibility and the equality that Copts seek to acquire in a predominantly Islamized Egyptian state and society (Ramzy 76).

The exceptionality of Shubra also reflects the successfulness of the so-called Revival Movement of the Coptic Church clerical hierarchy that started around the middle of the twentieth century. During the long

papal period of Coptic Orthodox patriarch Shenouda III (1971-2012) in particular, there has been an increase and a centralization of the Coptic Orthodox Christian spaces including the parishes inside and outside Cairo. Through spiritual, educational, charitable and social-services and activities, Pope Shenouda III promised to fulfill all the needs and demands of his congregants. By bringing them closer to their neighborhood parishes, Pope Shenouda III and his clerical hierarchy assumed control of all the aspects of his congregants' lives. Even when they are not physically present with their bodies in the parishes, the plan has been to keep close relationships between the Coptic congregants and the clergymen (Hasan 123-31; Elsaesser 50-9; Guirguis 69-75).

In a predominantly Islamized Egyptian state and society, the Coptic Church has striven to protect its congregants, especially the younger generations, from culturally and socially mixing with Muslims. The parishes were turned into exclusive "gated-communities" with the assistance of not only Bishops and priests but also old laymen and laywomen. Such gated-communities feature a tradition called *khidma* (service), and the lay people who offer it are known as *khuddām*.

The *khidma*, where I first met Mark during the second half of the 1990s is called "Sunday Schools". During the weekly Sunday Schools' hours, Mark and his friends including myself were always late. We used to play at the PlayStation lounge, which was less than two hundred meters away from the neighborhood parish. Despite the large number of parishes in Shubra, Mark found his pleasure somewhere else beyond the gated communities. He chose to be visible not only to other Copts but also to Muslims, with whom he used to play E-soccer. The latter is called "Japanese" given the fact that the names of the players and the teams were in Japanese. But even then, Mark was able to interact and to identify most of the players' identities. He used to memorize such things even more than the hymns and the bible lessons at the Sunday Schools.

Sometimes, Mark also used to escape the Sunday Schools, deciding to be visible at the cold-beverages kiosks and the cyber-cafes that are close to his neighborhood parish as well. For Mark, the hymns session and the Bible lessons were also boring and monotonous. He did not care much about the rewards he was promised by the *khuddām* who were in charge of the Sunday Schools *khidma*, if he would attend from the first minute. What was

more important for him was forming relationships with and winning over those who defeated him during the previous weeks at the PlayStation lounge.

Afraid to be seen by the khuddām, Mark and his friends used to carefully choose their way back to the parish without having anyone notice their delay. Sometimes, Mark used to totally ignore the khidma, and the excuses for his absence were plenty. What was more stimulating was to play, have fun and use his time in all the trivial ways characteristic of youth. Because he was aware that his desires and interests would be always absent from and dismissed by the Sunday Schools, Mark did his best to remain invisible before the parish and its khidma. Together with other Coptic schoolboys of his age, Mark and his fellows constructed the PlayStation lounge as a space of dissent, where they formed contacts isolated from how the Church wishes to teach and bring them up as good Coptic Christians.

The Coffeehouse: Invisible Activism

“The Coffeehouse is a world that stands apart, where you find the seated right next to the wanderer, where amusement and morality exist, [...] and where all people are found.” Those were the words our generation in Egypt used to hear from Samia

Al-Etrebi's show “*Ḥakāwī al-'ahāwī*” (Tales of the Coffeehouse), which was aired on the national TV more than twenty years ago (*Muqaddimat ḥakāwī al-'ahāwī*, 'Intro of Tales of the Coffeehouse'). During his childhood years, Mark memorized these words, and he realized the truth in them when he started joining the coffeehouse world with the beginning of the second decade of the twenty-first century.

In contrast, according to the hegemonic understanding of khidma, it is imagined that going to the Coffeehouse is considered as a major wrongdoing. The coffeehouse should be removed from Coptic Christians' everyday contacts, since they believed that what happen at such venues would cause them to stumble; that is, to commit sins. According to the fifth chapter of Matthew's Gospel, hence:

“If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away” (New Testament).

The “Resuscitation coffeehouse” was the one that Mark used to go to. Similar to the PlayStation lounge, it is located next to the neighborhood parish. “Resuscitation” was

not the real name, but rather an analogy that Mark and other clients of the coffeehouse gave to a space at which they spent a few hours every day. Rather than considering it to be a stumble, the young Coptic clients found good times and company that alleviated life's pressure, which often resulted in fainting spells and psychological issues. While playing dominos, chess, and backgammon; while smoking shisha, e-cigarettes and sometimes weed cigarettes; while exchanging insults and sexual jokes; while talking about God and whether he is happy or not with his presence at such a space; Copts at the coffeehouse would always take care not to be seen by one of the old khuddām or the priests at the neighborhood parish. With greater invisibility than during the PlayStation lounge days, the Coptic clients at Resuscitation are well aware that their contacts at the coffeehouse are incompatible with the ones they have acquired through the tradition of khidma since their childhood.

The stumbling life-worlds that Mark and other Copts have at the coffeehouse and at the PlayStation lounge as well are usually absent from academic and non-academic writings about Copts. This is because such experiences add nothing to the negotiations of what khidma is and of

how it should be practiced. They are experiences that exist in isolation from what widely dominated the so-called Coptic Studies during the previous few years. To begin, during and following the 2011 uprisings in Egypt, Coptic Christians went to the streets amid wider national demonstrations. Such visible street activism, which sometimes took the shape of organized social movements, was read as an attempt by which Copts wished to challenge their marginalization and discrimination in a predominantly Islamized Egyptian State and society. Equally important, the demonstrations were also read as a resistance to Coptic Orthodox Church "Revival Movement" and of how the relevant representation and imagination of the Coptic faith and identity should be. In doing so, the needs and demands of Coptic activists, which were not only confined to their religious identity but also entangled with other social and economic ones, were made visible in alternative manners (Lukasik 118-21; El-Gendi 48-51).

With the brutal crackdowns on public spaces and the retreat of all groups out of the streets following the 2013 coup, however, I have thought of other spaces in which I can study the Coptic Christians' lives not only after but also before the 2011 uprisings. At the coffeehouses, some

Copts might not necessarily want to negotiate how their Coptic faith and identity might be represented in a visible way as the case with the street demonstrations. In some contexts and situations in their lives, some Copts might feel too weak, not to say too sinful, to be visible before and to get into what Talal Asad would call the discursive negotiations and debates that "Coptic activists" had with the clerical hierarchy of the Coptic Orthodox Church together with the Egyptian State. The invisible presence at the coffeehouse, bars, cinemas, and PlayStation lounges might mean that sometimes Copts are unwilling to have contacts with their ruling political and religious forces. Sometimes, they might have different experiences less concerned with any activism connected to the visibility of the Coptic faith and identity in Egypt than with having their less popular and small, yet important, world.

The Prison: The Coptic Rubble

In 2018, I travelled to Beirut as part of my doctoral studies. When I came back for my last fieldtrip in Cairo during the summer of the same year, I realized that Mark no longer goes to the coffeehouse. He was arrested among other members of a gang that specialized in stealing cars from one of the fancy neighborhoods in Cairo. During my quick visit to Mark in prison, he

was broken and consistently crying to the extent that I could not hear him well.

Under a tight censorship by police guards, Mark told me that he was frequently tortured and verbally abused, even after he admitted his crime. Traumatized and unable to speak properly, he also told me about the deteriorating conditions of the water and the food offered to him and to other prisoners Muslims and Copts alike. Perhaps Mark stole owing to some financial needs, or other circumstances that I do not know about. But reasons and excuses aside, I wonder what brought him to prison despite the claimed political, social, and economic representations of the institutional Church. The latter is supposed to provide the spiritual and material needs of its people during the different stages of their life. It claims and promises that it provides through its *khidma* tradition the social and political coverage for its congregation. Consequently, I take Mark's crime and imprisonment as acts of dissent that crystallize failures of the Coptic Church "Revival Movement".

The "Revival Movement" of Pope Shenouda III has indeed promised to protect the Coptic minority Egypt. Its main aim was to help Copts in being successful and perfect citizens. The 'Movement', moreover,

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has placed a responsibility on the shoulders of the Coptic congregation to proudly and visibly talk about Coptic identity and faith. According to scripture, Copts are required to openly share the visibility of a certain contact with the divine that would replace them in a superior spiritual and moral position with respect to their Muslim counterparts. We read in the fifth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew: "Let your light so shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven" (New Testament). Inside prisons, nonetheless, the Coptic Christian identity and its expected good visibility might be diminished and "hidden" behind the blue uniform of the prisoners.

Some Copts have recently started to organize a khidma for the prisoners. Usually led by a priest from the neighborhood parish closest to the prison, a group of lay Copts brings food, money, and the word of God to convicts. It is a khidma that aims at rehabilitating the deviants and re-integrating them in the Coptic community before and after getting out of jail. But would this khidma restore the dignity and the honor of Mark, if it would reach him from the beginning? Would it help him to take revenge of those who beaten him up and sexually assaulted him?

After all, the contacts of khidma inside prisons happen with the permission and

authorization of the Egyptian State security service. Especially with the current close alliance between the Coptic Orthodox Church under the leadership of Pope Tawadros II and the institutions of the ruling regime, it suits the former to remain silent before the physical and verbal violations committed against imprisoned Copts. Consequently, I have thought that Copts like Mark are in a deep need of more politicized versions of khidma that are able to question the consistent violence of the State. Meanings of the good successful Copts should be more broadened to integrate the rubble, those who are abused and discriminated on a daily basis not only inside but also outside the Egyptian prisons. The theological and social foundations of both Christian and Islamic religious traditions have to be more intimidating and to counter the current political and economic policies that significantly marginalize and impoverish many Egyptians.

Conclusion

Khidma is a significant theological and sociopolitical language that embraces a comprehensive network of material and spiritual services in the lives of the Coptic Christian minority in Egypt. Especially since the second half of the twentieth century, Pope Shenouda III and his "Revival

Movement" attempted to shape the Coptic identity and faith by controlling everyday interactions through and because of khidma.

In this paper, I tried to explore various spaces at which Copts wish or are forced to stay away from the discursive negotiations that construct meanings of khidma and, hence, of their Coptic identity and faith. The relationships that Mark and his friends have formed at the PlayStation lounge, the coffeehouse, and the prison are intimidating ones that are absent from khidma. Such absence highlights the incompleteness and the failures of the politic of Pope Shenouda III and his project. Whether it is because of their unlawful and inappropriate actions or because of their failure in being successful and perfect citizens, I emphasized how some young Copts might sometimes be unwilling or unable to visibly form contacts with and to combat their marginalization by political, social, and religious forces. Especially with the brutal crackdowns on public spaces and the retreat of all groups out of the streets following the 2013 coup, I have thought of other spaces in which I can study Coptic Christians' contacts that are usually dismissed by and isolated from visible modes of activism.

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