Religious Censorship in Egypt: Attitudes within the Coptic Orthodox Church of Egypt

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December 10, 2008

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A. Introduction and Basics

I. Problem and General Thesis

This paper seeks to understand the general atmosphere of freedom of expression in Egypt, in particular understanding how it is perceived and practiced in the Coptic Orthodox Church. By this we mean both the church as an institution and the church as a community of believers. To undertake this task we need to take into consideration the significant value of ‘religion’ in Egyptian society. This paper is presented as part of a joint project that aims to shed light on the religious aspects of censorship in Egypt and the attitudes of the religious authorities. The goal of the project is to understand how freedom of expression is perceived within religious spheres. Under the umbrella of the Islamization process that has been ongoing in Egyptian society since the 1970s, special attention was increasingly given to productions that were perceived by some religious institutions as insulting or threatening to the true Islamic beliefs. Such attention meant that the Azhar started taking part in decisions to ban certain books or works of art that were deemed offensive to and/or against the true principles of Islam. On the other hand, an increasingly important role also started to be played by the Coptic Orthodox Church of Egypt that also called for censorship. This raised questions about the limits of freedom of expression in relation to the protection of the holiness of religions. In this framework, this joint project has attempted to study the attitude of major religious institutions in Egypt, motivated by their main interest in protecting their religious communities through censorship, namely, the Azhar Islamic Research Academy and the Coptic Orthodox Church of Egypt.

This paper sheds particular light on the attitude of the Coptic Orthodox Church toward censorship both inside and outside the ecclesiastic institution. Since the 1970s, the Coptic Orthodox Church of Egypt has risen to be the defender and the spokesman of the Coptic community. This is primarily the result of social, economic, and political changes in Egyptian society such as the Islamization movement as explained in the second chapter of this paper. Such unprecedented authority has increased calls for censorship among the Coptic Orthodox Church community.

The church has clearly voiced its reservations about the ideas or thoughts of certain Coptic figures. This has resulted in these thinkers having their books banned from the bookstores of Coptic Orthodox Churches, or in certain cases, their excommunication from the church. Outside the ecclesiastic community, the Coptic Orthodox Church has expressed its objection to certain publications or artworks by passing censorship requests to the state-run censorship authorities, or by expressing the anger of the Coptic community by issuing condemnations of certain works, or refraining from religious practices in some cases as a sign of protest. This has caused some state bodies to review works with the Coptic Orthodox Church before releasing works that present Christians' lives.

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This paper attempts to get closer to this phenomenon. It will first research censorship according to the Egyptian legal framework. Following this the paper will examine the increasing role of the Coptic Orthodox Church in society and its features, and in the third section the paper will present a number of censorship cases or requests of censorship, and the church’s motivations behind each case which will help to create a comprehensive picture of this phenomenon.

II. Methodology

The paper approaches the Coptic Orthodox Church’s attitude toward censorship by presenting cases that highlight the church’s point of view. It adopts a selective approach in presenting specific study cases. Hence, it can not be considered as a comprehensive study in this regard, yet it highlights the church’s motivations in different cases, and its mechanisms of doing so, and consequently helps to depict how religious censorship, often recommended by the church, is implemented.

A lack of available information has made writing this paper more difficult. There are hardly any pre-existing studies on this topic available. However, some literature does refer to the increasing role of the Coptic Orthodox Church in this regard. Furthermore, the Coptic Orthodox Church is remarkably cautious about giving away information to the public, particularly regarding its internal affairs. Hence, the main source of information used in presenting the selected examples is Arab-West Report. Arab-West Report is a large media database that includes more than 22,000 articles on religious affairs that are published in different Egyptian media publications and translated into English. Consequently, it is not a research study, but rather it highlights the topic of the paper and demonstrates how the issue is dealt with in different Egyptian media.

Interviews were also conducted to examine the accuracy of the collected data, and to get closer to how the church implements such censorship. Father Yu’anna from the Coptic Orthodox Bishopric of Mallawi was interviewed in this regard.

The academic library of the Faculty of Economics and Political Science at Cairo University and the Bibliotheca Alexandrina were both consulted. For further research on the topic, the library of the American University in Cairo could be searched. Also, cases could be further investigated through more interviews. In addition, some other cases could be studied in further research.

B: The Concept of ‘Censorship’

The term ‘censorship’ in its broadest sense refers to the action of suppressing and controlling some ideas or information by deleting them or preventing them from being circulated within a society because of their being objectionable or offensive according to the censor's point of view.²

² http://gilc.org/speech/osistudy/censorship/
Although the censor always has his/her own justifications to censor certain material, this issue raises concerns regarding the extent to which values of freedom of speech, expression and opinion are respected. It raises concerns about misusing authority to monopolize the kind of thoughts and information that exist within a society and to prevent others that might not be compatible with the censor's views or interests. Accordingly, censorship is highly objectionable in Western countries which place a high value on the freedom of speech and free expression of individual citizens. On the contrary, censorship practice is much more common in authoritarian regimes in their continuous pursuit to maintain their influence in society. It is, however, also the general atmosphere in such countries that promotes the continuation of censorship practices. In some cases, it is the public itself that calls for the censorship of material that they believe to be offensive or harmful to their beliefs, traditions, or culture as will become evident in the case of religious censorship in Egypt.

According to Wikipedia, there are different types of censorship, including moral, military, political, religious, economic, and self censorship. Censorship can include the suppression of speech or deletion of communicative material which may be considered objectionable, harmful or sensitive, as determined by a censor. Whether it is on TV, in music, books, or on the Internet, censorship is an inescapable part of human society in many countries.

Moral censorship is mainly concerned with ethical values. It targets acts which are considered beyond the acceptable code of ethics within a certain society. Military censorship seeks to maintain national security and hence is meant to result in the ultimate confidentiality of military information from the enemy, and in some cases from the public. Political censorship, which is quite questionable in democratic systems, relates to the lack of transparency regarding the existing political regime in order to maintain its stability. As for corporate censorship, it is business oriented as is about intervening to hinder negative information that might harm the business of corporate media outlets from being published. Self-censorship is practiced by an author or producer against his/her own work to avoid the sensitivity and thus angry responses of others.3

Regardless of its type, censorship is most often based on the act of monitoring certain material, and suppressing it from being circulated because the censor deems it questionable or unacceptable.

**B.1. Religious Censorship**

Wikipedia defines religious censorship as "a form of censorship where freedom of expression is controlled or limited using religious authority or on the basis of teachings of the religion …. It is the act of suppressing views that are contrary of those of an organized religion. It is usually performed on the grounds of blasphemy, heresy, sacrilege, impiety - the censored work being viewed as obscene, challenging a dogma, or violating a religious taboo."4

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This type of action is most often taken by a religious censor who, according to his point of view, determines whether the material is to be censored or not. Religious censorship is widely practiced in conservative cultures where religion is still a high priority in people's lives, and religious institutes still have some kind of - direct or indirect - authority. For instance, it is practiced in countries such as Afghanistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and other Middle Eastern countries. On the other side, it is less evident in Western countries where states separate religious institutions and the state and religion often does not exceed the private zone of an individual. Throughout history though the West has employed this form of censorship, especially during the medieval period and in later centuries when the church was a dominant power.

Religious censorship is a dialectical concept in conservative cultures. The majority of the public in conservative societies has a great deal of trust in their religious leadership and is sensitive toward any material that might offend their faith. However, this implies that religious leadership has the chance to monopolize religious thinking and the illustrations used in the teachings of the religion. This threatens not only freedom of expression and opinion, but also creative freedom, as well as all other views, religious and non-religious, which contradict or differ from the views of the religious leadership which could advocate censorship in such cases. This is clarified further in examples provided in this paper.

C. Introduction to censorship and freedom of expression in Egypt: a legal framework

This section will place religious censorship - which is being increasingly practiced in Egypt whether by the Azhar, the Islamic official religious institution, or the Coptic Orthodox Church of Egypt - in a legal context to examine if these religious institutions do try to give their censoring practices legal legitimacy. It is necessary to draw a broad picture of censorship and the situation of freedom of expression according to the Egyptian legislation, then focus on religious censorship from a legal point of view in an attempt to understand the broader legal context within which religious censorship exists.

C.1 Freedom of Expression and Censorship According to the Egyptian Legislation: An Overview

Broadly speaking, the Egyptian Constitution guarantees freedom of expression, freedom of the press and scientific research, freedom of creativity, freedom of belief and of practicing religious rights to all citizens regardless of their ethnicity, religion, color or sex. It also guarantees the right to respect all religions and beliefs of citizens regardless of their diversity or religious belief.5

According to article 46 of the Constitution, “the state shall guarantee the freedom of belief and the freedom of practicing religious rights." Article 47 states that “Freedom of opinion shall be guaranteed. Every individual shall have the right to express his opinion

5 For more information, review chapter III of the Egyptian Constitution.
and to publicize it verbally, audio visually, in writing, or by other means of expression within the limits of the law. Self criticism and constructive criticism shall guarantee the safety of the national structure". \(^6\) In addition, article 49 of the Constitution states that “the State shall guarantee for citizens the freedom of scientific research and liberty, artistic and cultural creativity and provide the necessary means for encouraging their realization”. \(^7\)

Most importantly is article 48 which states that “Freedom of the press, printing, publication and mass media shall be guaranteed. Censorship on newspapers shall be forbidden as well as notifying, suspending or canceling them through administrative methods. In a state of emergency or in time of war, limited censorship maybe imposed on the newspapers, publications and mass media in matters related to public safety or for purposes of national security in accordance with the law.” \(^8\)

Moreover, in 1982, Egypt approved and signed the UN Covenant on Civil and Political Rights CCPR. Articles (18) and (19) of the Covenant, which emphasize the freedom of opinion and expression, are thus as active as other legislations. \(^9\)

Despite such guaranteed freedoms by the Constitution, their practices - according to the Constitution itself - are subject to the rules of the law and within its limits. This means that the Constitution authorizes restrictions over such freedoms in accordance with laws. \(^10\) In addition, Egypt’s Emergency Law (Law No. 162 of 1958 as amended in 1967) has been in effect almost continuously since 1967. This law gives the president broad powers, including the powers of censorship, confiscation, and closure of newspapers on the ground of protecting “public safety” and “national security.” \(^11\) According to the independent, Cairo-based Egyptian Organization for Human Rights (EOHR), such an Emergency Law had yielded "another constitution for the country" and "led to wide transgressions on the part of the security apparatus." \(^12\)

Based on this, there are many restrictive laws and administrative decrees which deactivate the principles of freedom of expression and press, originally guaranteed by the Constitution. We can classify restrictions imposed on freedom of opinion, publishing, expression, and belief into three main categories as the following \(^13\):

**The Press and Publishing:** The main problem of this category is represented in the relationship between independent papers in general and opposition newspapers in

\(^7\) ibid  
\(^8\) ibid  
\(^12\) [http://www.hrw.org/reports/1994/WR94/Middle-02.htm](http://www.hrw.org/reports/1994/WR94/Middle-02.htm)  
particular from one side, and contradicting government policies to publications loyal to the state and independent and opposition newspapers. This reflects one of the most explicit examples of political and legal contradictions regarding freedom of opinion and expression.

**Composition and Publishing:** Here we have the problem regarding the content of the material composed, published or displayed and the existing laws particularly those related to military, sexual, doctrinal, literary, or political aspects whether presented in books, publications, cinema and theaters…. or others. Also, there is a continuous problem between the composer and the publisher regarding the financial and literary rights that are most often abused by many publishers inside and outside Egypt.

**Doctrinal matters:** This goes beyond the broad meaning of the freedom of belief or conversion and is related to doctrinal matters which were referred to by the Council of State as the “Islamic Affair” and the “Christian Affair”.

Censorship and restrictions over freedom of opinion, expression, belief, and publishing are implemented under the umbrella of legal texts and decrees either by official or non-official institutional structures. The official institutions of censorship extend to include the Ministry of Defense with its different security branches, the Ministry of Interior and some of its departments (The Artistic-Productions Investigation Department, Egypt’s State Security Investigation Department), the Ministry of Culture and some of its departments (The Department of Censorship over Artistic Productions), the Ministry of Information and some of its affiliated bodies, The Higher Council of the Press, and the Committee of Parties Affairs.\(^\text{14}\)

On the other side, there are the non-official institutions for religious censorship including the Azhar and the Coptic Orthodox Church. In fact, neither the current Egyptian Constitution of 1971 nor the penal code gives the official religious institutions - the Azhar and the Coptic Orthodox Church of Egypt – the right to confiscate thoughts or publications. However, due to the decay of state bodies and the weakness of its civil institutions on the one hand and the rise of fundamentalist Islamic movements that terrify the societal institutions and its intellectuals on the other hand it has become a fait accompli.\(^\text{15}\)

**C.2. Press censorship and censorship over publications and artistic productions in accordance with laws**

Although the restrictive laws of the press are not the subject of this paper, it is impossible to examine censorship without touching upon press censorship. Generally speaking, there are many laws restricting the freedom of the press and journalists. This ranges from limiting the right to issue a newspaper, to restricting the information flow, to delaying and censoring newspapers, etc. Focusing on censorship-related laws, the

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\(^{15}\) Ibid, p. 102,
Following laws were highlighted as restrictive in EOHR's Report about Press Freedom in Egypt 2006\textsuperscript{16}.

1. Law no. 96/1996 imposed, by means of the Higher Press Council, censorship and supervision over newspapers and journalistic institutions, regarding qualifications it was granted, like:

   a. Giving opinions in all projects related to press laws (article 70/1).
   b. Providing needs for producing newspapers (article 70/7).
   c. Allocating resources of paper to newspapers and determining the prices of newspapers and magazines, along with the determination of advertisement space in the imprint.
   d. Issuing the journalism oath.
   e. Follow-up and evaluation of what's published by newspapers and producing periodical reports regarding the commitment of newspapers to professional standards and the journalism oath.

Taking into consideration that the council is formed by appointment according to article 68 of law no. 96/1996, where it is headed by the president of the Shūra Council, the overwhelming governmental presence can be touched.

2. The Ministerial Council may, according to imprints law no. 20/1936, ban any publication, issued abroad, from being sold, and to ban publishing it and selling it inside the state, (article 10). Also, article 21 of the law granted the Minister of Interior the right to ban many newspapers published abroad from entering Egypt. Such articles are used as an excuse to ban many newspapers, claiming that they abuse religions or raise sexual desires, while the actual motive behind banning might be to maintain the influence of the current religious institutions and dominant views in society which result in imposing restrictions on the freedom of expression. This law also gave the Ministerial Council and the Minister of Interior the right to prevent the distribution of knowledge, which is among the fundamental human rights. It allows the Ministerial Council to confiscate information flowing inside the state, and across borders, either in written, printed, technical, or any other form.

3. Newspapers can be confiscated in case of breaching articles 4, 7, 11, 12, 13, 14, 17, 19 of imprints law no. 20/1936, or in case of committing a crime mentioned in chapter 14 of part two of the Penal Code related to Crimes and Misdemeanors regarding journalism, or other crimes which disturb governmental security.

Article 198 of the Penal Code stipulates the necessity of having a warrant for confiscation from the Prosecution Office. However it stipulates that the warrant shall be seen by the head of the Court in order to produce the decision of confiscation or release of the newspaper. The decision of the court of first instance regarding confiscation is final. The law makes the confiscation of newspapers possible and limits the right of citizens in

filing cases before the judiciary.

4. Emergency law no. 162/1958 restricts the freedom of expression. For instance article two of the law provides exceptional procedures against the freedom of press and expression, empowering authorities to censor newspapers, publications, periodicals, and all kinds of expression and to confiscate it and close it down. The confiscation authority is in the hands of the Ministry of Interior. Presidential decision no. 4/1982, clauses A and B, delegated the Minister of Interior executive powers.

5. A newspaper can be closed in two cases: 1) If it was not published in three successive months following the date of the decision establishing it, article 18 of the imprints law no. 20/1936, or in the case of irregularity of publication, so the minister with the proper authority could close it down, or 2) following the accusation and conviction of the editor-in-chief of a press crime, and the verdict ruled to publish the decision of the court in his newspaper during the month following the decision. Such a verdict is considered as the confirmation of a crime according to the last paragraph of article 198 of the penal code, allowing a fine of a minimum of 100 L.E. and closing the newspaper.

In addition, there are laws that prevent the right to collect information and to publish it, among which is law no. 121/1975 which bans using or publishing official documents, law no. 35/1960 regarding statistical accounts of population, law no. 313/1956 amended by law 14/1967, which bans the publication of any news regarding the armed forces, law no. 47/1978 regarding civil servants, Intelligence law no. 100/1971, and penal code no. 57/1937 and its amendments.

C.3. Censorship over artistic productions

Law number 430 of the year 1955 subjects all audio and audiovisual productions to censorship, for the purpose of safeguarding public morality, national security, public order and the high interest of the state. Such censorship practices are a specialization of the Ministry of Culture. This was manifested in decree number 27 of 1960, which authorized the Ministry of Culture to handle matters of censorship as stated in Law no. 430/1955.

According to decree 350 of 1970 issued by the Ministry of Culture, the public administration of censorship over artistic productions is generally specialized in the following:

- Censoring Arab, foreign, cultural, advertisement and tourist movies, glass advertisements, and posters for artistic productions, in addition to censoring incoming or outgoing personal movies.

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- Accompanying foreign media in shooting cultural and commercial movies.
- Carrying out decisions made by the Israeli Boycott Office in relation to actors, actress, movies, singers and musicians.
- Carrying out decisions made by the Censorship Council and the Complaints Committee.
- Censoring the lyrics of songs, CDs, incoming or outgoing CDs, tapes, and songs recorded in movies.
- Censoring texts of plays and sketches before being authorized, in addition to attending the first show to examine the influence of the performance and the text upon audience.
- Inspecting theatres and cinemas and drafting reports on those against censorship laws and other executed ministerial laws.
- Examining the situation of Arab and foreign actors, issuing necessary licenses for their traveling abroad and issuing permits for the actors’ agents.
- Examining submitted artistic-agency job requests in accordance with law number 57 of 1958 and its decrees of execution.
- Collecting due fees on artistic productions. 19

Ministerial decree 220 of 1976 clarified that the censorship of artistic productions is to promote their quality, assure the moral, religious, and spiritual values of society, enhance general knowledge, release the potential for artistic creativity, in addition to safeguarding public morality, public order, and protecting the youth from deviation. 20 Based on these goals, the decree banned licensing any theatrical productions, if they particularly included one of the following:

- Calls for atheism, or contempt of heavenly religions.
- Depiction of the prophet Muhammad in particular and all the prophets in general whether in explicit or symbolic forms, and to turn out such motifs to competent religious bodies.
- Inaccurate display of [religious] ceremonies in artwork.
- Presenting funerals and the dead in an unrespectable way.
- Presenting sin as a means that supports a good end, or in a way that evokes sympathy for the sinner.
- Presenting sin in a way that might encourage committing it, even if the sinner was punished at the end.
- Uncovering in a revealing way that embarrasses the viewers and contradicts the customs and traditions of society.
- Shooting sex, homosexuality, or any revealing words or gestures.
- Revealing dance.
- Presenting drugs and addiction as a common behavior or a praiseworthy one. Also, presenting gambling and lottery as accepted sources of income.

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• Using bad words, particularly those related to sexual life or marital betrayal.
• Artwork that disregards marriage as a holy partnership, or family values, or respect for parents.
• Presenting crime in an encouraging way by idealizing criminals as heroes.
• Presenting revenge crimes in a justified way.
• Shooting murder, beatings, torture, and cruelty.
• Presenting suicide as a way out of life troubles.
• Inaccurate or distorted display of historical events or national symbols.
• Presenting any foreign country or nation that enjoys good relations with Egypt improperly.
• Presenting other nations or races in a humiliating or ironic way.
• Introducing social problems in a way that provokes despair, sectarianism, class division, or threatens national unity. 

D. Religious Censorship in Egypt: a legal framework

Is religious censorship allowed according to Egyptian legislation? Are official religious institutions in Egypt - the Azhar and the Coptic Orthodox Church of Egypt - authorized to practice censorship? If yes, what are the laws which regulate such practices? What types of censorship are they authorized to carry out? Which productions are subject to this religious censorship? Is it confined to religious productions or does it extend to literature and artwork? This section raises such questions, attempts to find answers by analyzing and examining from a legal perspective how legal the censorship practiced by official religious institutions really is.

The current Egyptian Constitution guarantees the principle of equality among all citizens in front of the law without any discrimination due to sex, ethnicity, language, religion or belief. It guarantees freedom of belief and of practicing religious rights. The Egyptian legislator, however, also protects heavenly religious beliefs, by making violations punishable in Egypt’s Penal Code, punishing whoever disparages them. Article 98W of the Penal Code enforces respect for religions and beliefs. It states that “whoever misuses religions to circulate radical thoughts, incite sectarianism, contempt of heavenly religions and their related sects, or to harm the national unity and social coherence, is imposed a minimum sentence of 6 months or a maximum of 5 years and is fined at least 500 Egyptian pounds or up to 1000 L.E.” In addition, according to the Imprints Law no. 20 of the year 1936 as indicated earlier, the legislator authorized the Ministerial Council to ban the circulation of any erotic publications or other mass communication that disparages religions in a way that is believed to threaten the public safety.

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22 Fawzi, Samih, "Approaching Christianity in the Egyptian Media and Educational Curriculums,"
“Freedom of Opinion and Expression, and Religions" Cairo Center for Human Rights, P224
23 ibid
24 ibid, p.101
Such value of respect for religions and beliefs is reflected as well in Press law No. 96/1996. According to article 20, a journalist is prohibited to favor any calls for racism which imply contempt of religions, incite hatred of them, defame others’ faith or encourage contempt for any recognized sects in society. A journalist who dissents from this is imposed a maximum sentence of a year and is fined between 5000 Egyptian pounds and 10,000 L.E, or subjected to either of the punishments according to article 22 of the Press Law.25

Such constitutional texts, the Penal Code, and the Imprints Law were enacted to protect all recognized religions in general* without any distinction, and not to defame or disregard them and to ensure the freedom of practicing related ceremonies. However, when it came to religious censorship over productions, the legislator leaned toward Islam. This means that he allowed censorship over productions related to Islam and provided more leniency toward non-Islamic subjects. This was implied in Law no.103/1961, and its modifications, which regulate the role of the Azhar, and Law no. 102/1985 which regulates the printing of the Qur’ān and Ḥadīth.26 This indicates that Egyptian legislation allows the Azhar to play a limited role in religious censorship that is confined to Islamic religious productions.27

D.1. Legal Framework for Regulating the Role of the Azhar in Censorship

The main focus of this paper is the Coptic Orthodox Church but it is nevertheless important to understand the legislations which regulate the role of the Azhar in religious censorship to understand the limits of such censorship and to what extent the Azhar is entitled to take part in the censorship process.

Article 15 of Law 103/1962 states that “the Islamic Research Academy is the supreme authority for Islamic research and its task is to remove from Islamic research excesses and defects and the effects of political and sectarian fanaticism, to expand the spheres of knowledge about it at all levels and in all environments, and to express [its] opinion with regard to any sectarian problems or social problems related to faith it finds.”

The role of the Islamic Research Academy is further specified in Presidential Decree No. 250 of 1975 which states that the IRA is to follow up items that are published about Islam and shall issue recommendations to those who work in the field of Islamic culture.28

Law no. 102 of 1985 expanded on Law no. 103 of 1961, which regulates the printing of the holy Qur’ān and the prophetic Ḥadīth, making the Islamic Research Academy

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25 ibid, pp. 222-223,
* Recognized religions in Egypt are only heavenly religions; Islam, Christianity, and Judaism.
26 ibid, p.102
27 According to a phone call interview with Dr. Bayyūmī, a member of the Islamic Research Academy, January 17 2008, the Azhar censorship role is confined to Islamic publications. It does not include censorship over publications presenting other heavenly religions except when those publications are offensive or include contempt of such heavenly religions.
responsible for supervision the printing, publishing, distribution and circulation of the Holy Qur’ān and prophetic Hadīth in addition to their recording.29

Hence, it seems that the role of the Azhar is confined to censoring religious books, including copies of the holy Qur’ān, Hadīth and other books on religious issues and questions of Islamic history or prophetic memoir [the life of the prophet] to ensure their correctness. However, in 1994, the Council of State (Majlis al-Dawla) issued a ruling stating that the Azhar is the final arbiter in the assessment of Islamic values, whose opinion is binding for the Ministry of Culture concerning granting or refusing the license of audio and audiovisual productions about Islamic subjects. The Minister of Justice, Fāruq Seif al-Nasr, followed in July 2003 with a decree which gave 10 officers of the Azhar the authority of law enforcement, allowing them to bring distributors before court for distributing copies of the Holy Qur’ān and Hadīth books which were not authorized by the Azhar and containing contents that offend Islam and dissent from the rules of Law no. 102 of 1985.30

Since the issuance of this decree, shaykhs have increased their efforts to ban publications they believe to be offensive to Islam. The true explanation of Islam has become the monopoly of the Azhar, an institution under the authority of the state and thus Islam was nationalized for the sake of those who belong to the Azhar institution. The consequence is that whoever expresses beliefs outside the orbit of the Azhar is considered an infidel.31

In reviewing legal texts which regulate the role of the Azhar in censorship over freedom of expression, we find that there is no clear-cut text that guarantees practicing censorship over literature and artwork. As understood from the Azhar law, the main area of specialization of the Islamic Research Academy is to address religious matters, particularly the Holy Qur’ān, the Prophetic Sunnah, and other Islamic studies that directly deal with Islam and its main pillars or Islamic rules. However, through the 1994 Council of State ruling, the Azhar succeeded in obtaining a legal basis to censor that which was earlier practiced on dissident views of creators without any legal basis.32

In this regard, it is important to refer to a sentence issued by the Supreme Court - the highest judicial authority in Egypt – on December 5, 1982 which severely condemned a request submitted by the Islamic Research Academy to censor any book regardless of its kind or content. The court ruling stated according to the text of the Azhar Law no. 13 of 1961, the Azhar is not authorized to ban the disputed book, ‘Views on Religion.’ Article 17 of this law issued by presidential decree no. 250 of 1957, determined the responsibilities of the Islamic Research Academy as following up on what is published about Islam and to issue recommendations to those working in the field of Islamic culture. The Supreme Court concluded that the only body authorized to ban the

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29 Sulayman Abd al-Hafeez, Mohamed Hafez, “Freedom of Expression and Censorship over Productions”, Dar Al-Nahda Al-Arabia, 1993, pp. 102-103
31 ibid, p189
32 Freedom of Opinion and Belief; Restrictions and Dilemmas," Egyptian Organization for Human Rights, 1994, p.18
circulation of any publications that defame religions in a threatening way is the Ministerial Council as stated in the Imprints Law no. 20 of 1936. Consequently, it is very clear that official religious institutes have no legitimacy to censor freedom of publishing.33

According to this general framework, censorship practiced by religious institutions regardless of their extent or dimension contradicts and conflicts not only with articles 48 and 49 of the Constitution, but also with the Azhar law no.103 of the year 1961. In addition, such censorship goes against the Imprints Law no. 20 of 1936, which authorizes only the Ministerial Council to ban the circulation of any publications that disparage religions.34 The Coptic Orthodox Church has not received the exceptional status as the Azhar has through the Council of State verdict of 1994 and the ruling of the Minister of Justice of 2003, and is, consequently, not entitled to practice censorship over literature or artwork, yet both the Azhar and the Coptic Orthodox Church are to be reviewed in doctrinal-related work. This raises the question: what happens in reality?

D.2. Actual practice

The state no longer monopolizes the practice of censorship over artwork and literary works. Due to the general political conditions in Egypt and the form of relations between religious institutions and the state, a number of religious institutions in Egypt are increasingly practicing, with or without a legal basis, censorship over cultural and media productions.35

While the Islamic institutional stance on freedom of expression has received a lot of attention from intellectuals and the media, it is important to pay the same attention to the role played by the main official Christian religious institution; the Coptic Orthodox Church, which goes beyond censorship to have trials within and expulsion from the church.36 A number of Christian intellectuals and writers were subject to pressure from the church due to their stances and writings criticizing the church’s practices which, according to their view, did not fit the features of this era. This included, for instance, severe pressure to limit the distribution of certain books by Dr. Rafiq Habīb,'Al-Masīhīyah Al-Siyāsīyah'(Political Christianity) and 'Al-Masīhīyah wa al-Harb...Qissat al-Uṣūlīyah al-Suḥuyūnīyah al-Amrīkīyah wa al-Sirā‘ al-Sharq al-Islāmī' (Christianity and War: American Zionism’s- Fundamentalism and the Conflict against the Islamic East."

The Coptic Orthodox Church also made efforts to limit the distribution of books by Dr. 'Imād Nazīh including 'Mayyizāt al-Nahdah' [Privileges of the Development], "Nidā‘ al-Mahabbah' [Love Call] and 'La Yahillu Lak' [You Don't Have the Right To] and those of

33 ibid, p.16
34 ibid
36 "Freedom of Opinion and Belief; Restrictions and Dilemmas," Egyptian Organization for Human Rights, 1994, p. 31
Father Ibrāhīm ʿAbd-al-Sayyid for his bitter critical writings, particularly his books 'Al-Irāb Al-Kanāsī (The Ecclesiastic Terrorism) and 'Amwāl Al-Kanīsah..Man Yadfa' wa Man Yaqbad' [Church Money. Who Pays and Who Gets].

Despite the fact that the aforementioned examples seem very interesting case studies for this paper, very little information as to why and how distribution was hindered was available. Consequently, other cases were used for this paper. It is remarkable that the Coptic Orthodox Church follows the same path as the Azhar concerning audio and audio-visual productions. Just as the Azhar does with Islamic productions the church publicly declares its objection to the display of artwork that, according to the Coptic Orthodox Church, insults Christianity. This extends to include objections toward artworks that present some aspects of the social life of Egyptian Christians. Recently, this has led some official bodies to consult the Coptic Orthodox Church before displaying artwork that presents the lives of Christians.

The Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria and its role

This chapter presents the relationship between the church and the state and the patriarch as the Coptic Orthodox community leader. The Coptic Orthodox Church has developed since the 1970s as an alternative social and political entity for the Coptic community. Prior to the Coptic laymen who are now important it was primarily representatives of prominent Coptic families who played this role. These developments highlight a major change in the role of the church in its relationship with the state.

A. An Introduction to the Coptic Orthodox Church of Egypt

Christianity was introduced to Egypt early in the faith's history. The Coptic Orthodox Church developed following the teachings of Saint Mark who preached the Gospel in Egypt in the second half of the first century. The name “Copt” comes from the early Greek name for Egypt, “Aigyptos” which was Arabised as “Qibt” and then anglicized as “Coptic”. The Coptic Church has given the world St. Cyril, the philosopher Origen, and began the monastic tradition in Christianity. While the Coptic Orthodox Church has flourished and spread around the world, it maintains its own papal leadership separate from that of Rome and is often categorized as one of the Oriental Orthodox faiths.

Although fully integrated into the body of the modern Egyptian state, Copts have survived as a strong religious entity who pride themselves on their contribution to the Christian world. The Coptic Orthodox Church regards itself as a strong defender of the Christian faith. The Nicene Creed, adopted at the Council of Nicea in 325 AD, is recited in all churches throughout the world was authored by one of its favorite sons, Saint

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38 Fawzi, Samih, "Approaching Christianity in the Egyptian Media and Educational Curriculums," "Freedom of Opinion and Expression, and Religions" Cairo Center for Human Rights, p.225
* Saint Mark brought Christianity to Egypt during the reign of the Roman emperor Nero in the first century.
39 www.mideastinfo.com/Religion/copt.htm
Athanasius, the Pope of Alexandria for 46 years, from 327 A.D. to 373 A.D. Egypt thus enjoys a strong status in Christendom and this status is well deserved; after all, Egypt was the refuge that the Holy Family sought in its flight from Judea.\footnote{ibid}

An estimated ninety-five percent of Egypt's Christians are Coptic Orthodox. Other Orthodox churches including the Armenians, Greeks and others, have a few adherents in Egypt: the Greeks retain, from the time of the schism between Western and Oriental churches at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD, their own patriarch of Alexandria in rivalry with the Coptic Orthodox patriarch. There are larger communities of Catholics and Protestants, most of them descended from Orthodox Copts. \footnote{Pennington, J.D., The Copts in modern Egypt, Middle Eastern Studies, p159}

B. The Coptic Orthodox Church, the patriarch, and the state

Historically, the patriarch of the Coptic Orthodox Church has enjoyed a dual role as the spiritual and temporal leader of the community. This still exists today. As the leading Christian communal actor in Egypt, the church can use its resources to strengthen the claim of the patriarch to be the political representative of the community at the expense of lay rivals. The political role of the patriarch is defined as acting as the civil representative of the community and liaising between the community and the ruling authorities. \footnote{Fiona McCallum. Desert Roots and Global Branches: The Journey of the Coptic Orthodox Church, Bulletin of the Royal Institute for Interfaith Studies, vol. 7, number 2, autumn/winter 2005}

It is not an attempt to take over the state or gain political power but instead, as throughout the centuries, to ensure the best means of survival for the community. \footnote{McCallum, Fiona, ' The Political Role of the Patriarch in the Contemporary Middle East', Middle Eastern Studies, Vol.43. NO.6,923-940, November 2007, p 923

B.1. Coptic Orthodox Canon law and the powers of the patriarch

The Coptic rite has historically had a strong patriarchal authority, derived from a combination of canon law and tradition. In the Coptic Orthodox tradition, the canons assert the importance of the leadership of the church. Although the election rite has varied in the past, the present system, which was agreed in 1957, aims to ensure that the elected candidate will enjoy the support of both the clergy and community. An electoral committee chooses three candidates from a wider list who are then drawn by altar lot. A fourth lot with the name ‘Jesus Christ the Good Shepherd’ is added to prove to the faithful that the selected candidate has been divinely approved. Once elected, the Coptic Orthodox patriarch enjoys supreme authority over the community. A vacancy arises only with the death of a patriarch; he cannot be removed from office. The Holy Synod is the highest ecclesiastical body in the church and is responsible for all church affairs. The Holy Synod is presided over by Pope Shenouda III, Coptic Pope of Egypt, the patriarch of the Holy See of Saint Mark.

In theory, the patriarch governs the church in conjunction with the synod but due to the position attributed to the patriarch (who presides over church meetings) the authority of
the patriarch over the synod is substantial. He, nevertheless, has to take the opinions of his community into consideration. This was institutionalized in the late 19th century with the establishment of al-Majlis al-Milli (Community Council) which was strongly advocated for by the laity elite who wanted to gain control of the financial and administrative affairs of the church. However, patriarchs have always looked at the Majlis al-Milli as an organization which restricts their authority. Under governments since 1952, the activities of the council have been weakened in favor of the patriarch. Representatives are included in the electoral committee but members voted onto the council rarely differ from the church hierarchy, especially the patriarch. Although laity participation remains an important tradition in the Coptic Orthodox church, such activities cannot be described as effective constraints on patriarchal authority. In most instances, once the patriarch is elected, the government has little involvement in church affairs. However, the patriarch must obtain recognition from the president and in extreme circumstances this can be revoked, as occurred in 1981.44

In conclusion, the patriarch exercises substantial authority. As this is derived from canon law, the patriarch enjoys legitimacy to an extent which cannot be replaced by other leaders. The head of the church has the resources to provide both spiritual and civil leadership to the community.45 Consequently, the character and attitude of the patriarch deeply influence the role of the Coptic Orthodox Church within the Coptic community, and also in its relations with the state. The charismatic character of Pope Shenounda III and his influences upon the increasing role of the Coptic Orthodox Church as a social and political entity since 1970s are a reflection of the patriarch’s role.

B.2. The Coptic Orthodox Church and the state, a historical background

The unity of the early church was shattered by doctrinal controversies. The power of the Egyptian Church was challenged at the council of Chalcedon in 451 AD when their decision at the previous Second Council of Ephesus in 449 AD to depose the patriarchs of Antioch and Constantinople was repudiated and the Coptic Orthodox Patriarch Dioscoros in turn was deposed. The church in Egypt remained loyal to the deposed patriarch of Alexandria and refused to recognize any non-Chalcedonian patriarch imposed on them from Constantinople.46 The Egyptian Church’s support for their own doctrine brought it into sharp conflict with the Byzantium Empire which resulted in repeated persecutions. Due to this rift between Egypt and the Byzantium Empire, it is not surprising that the Egyptians Copts did not oppose the invading Arabs in 641 A.D.47

The Arab conquest effectively halted the ability of Oriental Christianity to seek political power because the new empire in Egypt was based on another religion – Islam. Yet the temporal role of the patriarch was ironically reinforced through centuries of Islamic rule

44 ibid, p. 927
45 ibid, p. 928
46 ibid, p. 928
because the patriarch was identified as the civil leader of his community and was held responsible for the conduct of the entire community. In general, the patriarch continued to enjoy authority over the internal affairs of the community on the condition that taxes were paid and that there was no interference in Islam – the state religion. This system allowed the Coptic Orthodox Church to retain control over all aspects of life of its community.48

Under the Ottoman Empire*, this practice of autonomy became institutionalized and known as the millet system. According to this system, the Greek Orthodox Patriarch in Constantinople was responsible for all religious, civil, legal, and educational and financial affairs in the Christian millet. Other heads of churches were also able to secure their position as the civil heads of their communities. The geographical distance from Constantinople to Egypt allowed the Coptic Orthodox to continue to exercise de facto control of their community with little external interference from the Greek Orthodox Church. Although nominally part of the Ottoman Empire, due to the geographical distance of Greece and Egypt, the rulers of Egypt tended to enjoy autonomous power to such an extent that the notion of a distinct Egyptian identity was able to remain. Consequently, it was natural that in time the figures of the Sultan and the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Constantinople would be replaced by the Egyptian ruler and the Coptic Orthodox Patriarch – the leader of the vast majority of Christians in Egypt.49

Generally speaking, the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were times of relative prosperity and progress for the Coptic community, who became remarkably active in political life, particularly during the era of British colonialism. However, this was not the same situation for the Coptic Orthodox Church during those times. The intellectual atmosphere in the church was stagnant and unproductive. In contrast to the Coptic laity, who were successful to a large extent because of the attention they paid to education, the church neglected the education of its clergy. Apart from one brief experiment it had no seminary until 1893 and theological teaching remained rudimentary for the next 60 years.

Another brake on progress was the clergy's lack of mobility. Bishops were, in theory, wed for life to the Episcopal post to which they were first consecrated. Parish priests (who may be married) were (and still are) often appointed for life and rarely transferred to other posts. The model Coptic priest was a person of saintly simplicity, if little learning: inevitably clergy often failed even to live up to this model, and many acquired the reputation of being acquisitive and quarrelsome. Upper class members of the community continued formally to accord the clergy the deep respect traditionally shown by Copts to their priests, but informally regarded them as their social inferiors.50

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48 McCallum, Fiona, 'The Political Role of the Patriarch in the Contemporary Middle East', Middle Eastern Studies, Vol.43. NO.6,923-940, November 2007, p 928
49 The author referred to the Ottoman Empire in whole with a major focus on Egypt and Lebanon.
49 McCallum, Fiona, 'The Political Role of the Patriarch in the Contemporary Middle East', Middle Eastern Studies, Vol.43. NO.6,923-940, November 2007, pp. 928-929
50 Pennington, J.D., The Copts in modern Egypt, Middle Eastern Studies, pp161-162
An example of the poor performance of the Coptic Orthodox Church during the first half of the twentieth century is the kidnapping of the Patriarch of the Coptic Orthodox Church Yusab II in 1954 by a group of Coptic reformers. Like other Coptic reformers, the members of al-Umma al-Qibtiya\(^{51}\) were impatient with the patriarch, a feeble old man allegedly dominated by a manservant who traded in the sale of ecclesiastical appointments. In July 1954, three months after al-Umma al-Qibtiya’s official dissolution, members of the movement kidnapped the patriarch and compelled him to sign a document of abdication. They subsequently released him, but the scandal of church mismanagement had gone too far and received too much publicity. The government intervened, and, after maneuverings in the Majlis al-Milli (the Community Council) and the Holy Synod (the council of bishops), Yusab II remained pope but was de facto deprived of his powers. Formally, this was done by government decree at the request of the Community Council and the Synod. From that moment until Yusab II’s death and the election of Pope Kyrillos VI as patriarch the church was ruled by a council of bishops.

Yusab II’s kidnapping and abdication are significant because they legitimized government intervention in patriarchal appointments, albeit with the support of the community at large. Yusab II died in 1956. His death was followed by unseemly disputes both over the succession, and the wider issue of church reform. The government intervened in this period, again justifiably in the eyes of most Copts, in favor of a new set of electoral rules that were promulgated by presidential decree. Following a three year dispute and according to the new electoral rules in 1959 a new Patriarch, Kyrillos VI, was elected.\(^{52}\) This takes us to the second half of the twentieth century which witnessed an increasing role for the church due to the prevailing social and political conditions in society on one hand, and reasons related to the church leadership and a new vision for the church on the other hand.

Nāsir’s era influenced the prospective role of the Coptic Orthodox Church and provided the basis for the absolute powers of the patriarch. Nāsir’s policies were, for the most part, helpful to the narrower interests of the church hierarchy. Successive patriarchs had resented the existence of the Community Council. Nāsir’s opinion of the Community Council was different from that of previous rulers; many members of the Community Council represented the ancien regime before the Egyptian coup d’etat of 1952 which Nāsir believed to be a harmful influence. In 1962 he agreed to its abolition, leaving the patriarch again as an absolute monarch. The government, having stripped the class which had led the Coptic community for almost a century of most of its wealth and influence, and having cooperated in the dissolution of the institution through which Coptic laymen expressed their views, fell back on the ancient practice of dealing with the patriarch as the representative of Coptic opinion.\(^{53}\)

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\(^{51}\) Ul-Umma al Qibtiya (The Coptic Nation), was established in 1952 by a law student, Ibrahim Hilal, as a response to the new Islamic aggressiveness exemplified by the Muslim Brothers. It sported its own flag and uniform, encouraged members to learn the Coptic language and demanded a radio station for the Copts.

\(^{52}\) ibid, p163

\(^{53}\) ibid, p. 165
In general, we can say that during Nāsir's regime, there was little confessional tension and little trouble between the church and the state. The relative confessional peace of the Nāsir period was due partly to the grip exercised by the regime and the fear which Nāsir increasingly inspired. But in part too, it was due to the character of Kyrillos VI. He was a reserved, impressive-looking man who had spent much of his life as a hermit in a deserted mill near Old Cairo. He avoided involvement in national politics, other than allowing his name to be used when the government needed formal support from religious leaders, such as over moves toward socialism or in the war of words with Israel, for example. He and Nāsir seem to have had a relationship which was distant, but founded on mutual respect.  

Politics apart, Kyrillos VI's patriarchate saw the fruition of the reform movement. The patriarch encouraged young reformers in the hierarchy, notably Samuel, a Princeton graduate who served as his secretary and who, in 1962, was made bishop for social and ecumenical affairs — and Shenouda, who would become the current patriarch. The church moved out of its historic isolation and began to normalize its relations with other Christian churches. From 1954 Copts attended meetings of the World Council of Churches, represented by Samuel, who threw himself energetically into the ecumenical movement. A dialogue with Rome began. Relations with the theoretically tributary Church of Ethiopia were normalized. Internally, the miniscule Cairo seminary was expanded during Kyrillos' patriarchate and in 1960 he decreed that all future priests must be graduates of it. A number of priests were sent overseas to study. In 1954, the Institute of Coptic Studies, a centre for post-graduate study in Coptic history, art and social studies, was established by the Community Council. At the beginning of the 1960s, the patriarch ordered all monks back to their monasteries.

Nāsir's death in 1970 and that of Kyrillos in early 1971 marked another sharp change in Copts' circumstances. In the summer and autumn of 1971 the election of a new patriarch was completed in accordance with the lengthy procedures that were laid down in 1957.

**B.2.1. The Coptic Orthodox Church and the state under Sādāt**

Sādāt's regime and the newly elected Patriarch Shenouda III highlight an ultimately distinctive phase in which circumstances and different factors, including the Islamization process of Egyptian society, in addition to the revival of some long standing Coptic grievances, have shaped a different confrontational role for the Coptic Orthodox Church, which has risen as an influential social and political entity for the Coptic community.

**The Khanka Incident**

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54 ibid, p. 165  
55 ibid, p. 166
Ironically, the first major confrontation between the new state and the church regime centered on a very long-standing grievance over government restrictions on church building. In 1972, the offices of a Christian society in Khanka, which was being used as an unofficial church due to the difficulties in gaining building permits, were set on fire. In response, Pope Shenouda sent 100 priests and monks to protest about this incident and conduct prayers on the site.\(^{56}\)

A parliamentary committee of inquiry under the Deputy Speaker, Dr. Jamāl al-Utaifi, was set up to investigate the Khanka incident. This committee made a detailed and, through common consent, balanced investigation of confessional problems. On the immediate issue of church building, the committee — having estimated that there were 1,442 Christian places of worship in Egypt, of which only 500 were licensed by the authorities — recommended a relaxation of existing legislation to encourage churches to build within the law. Their recommendation was not implemented.\(^{57}\)

**The revival of the Community Council**

Another of the committee's recommendations (reflecting perhaps the beginning of government concern over the hard-line stand taken by the clergy) was the revival of the Community Council. In 1973, under heavy pressure from the government, Pope Shenouda accepted the new council which, however, became a shadow of its predecessor. Its powers were, and are, minimal, very few Copts bother to vote, and the patriarch's nominees are invariably elected. The four or five years after Khanka were relatively free of confessional trouble. The patriarch seemed to be working quite closely with the government, and as a consequence the enthusiasm of the hard-liners who had welcomed his election began to diminish.\(^{58}\)

**The growing Islamization process**

In 1977 relations between the church and state entered a new and more difficult phase. Coptic anxieties began to reflect the increasing strength of the Islamic right in Egypt, and the particularly Islamic stamp Copts felt al-Sādāt had given his regime.\(^{59}\)

Consequently, the situation escalated when local Muslims attacked Christian property. Communal tensions flared up again in 1977 when the government attempted to introduce *Sharī'ah* law into the Egyptian legal system. Again, Pope Shenouda pursued a public approach by holding a Coptic conference and calling for a five day collective fast to highlight the problems facing the community. The government abandoned the bill but violence against Copts increased as many Muslims resented what they perceived as unnecessary Coptic interference in a specifically Muslim issue. Finally in 1980, amidst increased sectarian violence, the government amended the Constitution to acknowledge

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\(^{56}\) McCallum, Fiona, 'The Political Role of the Patriarch in the Contemporary Middle East', Middle Eastern Studies, Vol.43. NO.6,923-940, November 2007, P. 930

\(^{57}\) Pennington, J.D., The Copts in modern Egypt, Middle Eastern Studies, p. 171

\(^{58}\) ibid, p. 171

\(^{59}\) ibid, p. 171
Sharī'ah law as the principal source of legislation. The pope canceled the 1980 Easter celebrations and retired with the church hierarchy to a desert monastery.60

On April 25 at his first weekly meeting in the cathedral in Cairo after Easter, enormous crowds greeted the pope with chants of “Shenouda is our President” and “We will sacrifice ourselves for you”.61 Sādāt brought the crisis to a head on May 14 with a scathing public attack on the “Church leadership” (he did not refer to the patriarch by name although the implication was plain enough)62. Sādāt lamented the passing of Kyrillos and accused the pope of stirring up confessional strife and wanting to play the role of ecclesiastics in medieval Europe, or in other words, to become a mini-Vatican.63

The relationship between the state and the church had reached its lowest point in decades.

**Successive sectarian incidents and the escalating situation between Sādāt and Pope Shenouda III**

The period from 1977 to 1981 witnessed increasing sectarian violence accompanied with the rise of the fundamentalist Islamic right. Assuit and Minya, governates with the highest proportions of Christians, witnessed a number of sectarian incidents including Christian students being harassed in the universities by students belonging to Islamic groups. At Islamic groups' meetings in the universities, hostility toward the Copts became a major theme. Another incident included killing a priest and other Christians in Tawfiqiya village. In 1979, the ancient Qasriyat al-Rihan church, in Old Cairo, was burnt down, and it was believed among the majority of the Copts that Muslim extremists were behind the incident.64

In January 1980 an extreme Muslim fundamentalist group known as Hizb al Jihād attempted to plant bombs in two crowded churches in Alexandria. Although no member of the congregation was killed confessional tension increased sharply.65

In June 1981, there was more confessional violence, this time in the working class Cairo suburb of Zawya al-Hamra. Sādāt subsequently told the People's Assembly that the immediate causes were petty squabbles, first over a piece of land which a Copt claimed and which had been set aside for a Muslim place of prayer, and, five days later, between Christian and Muslim families in an apartment block “because dirty water fell from the balcony of the first onto the balcony of the second”.66 The casualties in the Zawya al-Hamra disturbances were extremely high: the government stated that there were 18 dead and 112 injured while other sources claimed more.67

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60 McCallum, Fiona, ‘The Political Role of the Patriarch in the Contemporary Middle East’, Middle Eastern Studies, Vol.43. NO.6,923-940, November 2007, p. 930
61 Ibid
62 Ibid
63 Pennington, J.D., The Copts in modern Egypt, Middle Eastern Studies, p. 174
64 Ibid, pp 172-173
65 Ibid
66 ibid
67 ibid
On September 5, Sādāt addressed the People's Assembly, saying that feelings had been fueled by extremists on both sides and such feelings had exploited the secular opposition. He bitterly attacked Muslim fundamentalists. On the Copts' side his fire was directed mainly at Pope Shenouda, whom he accused of wanting to be a political leader. Sādāt also said that Shenouda’s actions had generated reactions a hundred times greater from the Islamic groups and the Muslim Brothers. The presidential decree concerning his appointment as patriarch (sic) was revoked and a committee of five bishops was set up to discharge his duties. It consisted of the bishops Samuel, Gregorius — one of the church's leading theologians — and the bishops of Qalyubia, Gharbia and Beni Sueif. The decree went on to announce that the patriarch was to be confined to a monastery in Wadi al-Natrun.

Formal statements from the church dodged the question of the patriarch's position, but otherwise gave full support to Sādāt. On September 22, the Holy Synod issued a statement acknowledging the circumstances which had persuaded Sādāt to take “the decisions he announced for national unity”, urged submission to the temporal power, and expressed support for the committee of five bishops.

While these examples illustrate a break from the traditional co-operative political role of the church, this confrontational approach failed to resolve the underlying issues and served only to anger Sādāt. Perceiving Pope Shenouda as a threat to his authority, Sādāt publicly attacked the church hierarchy by accusing the patriarch of conspiring to establish a Coptic state in Upper Egypt and inciting sectarian strife. It was not until January 1985 that Sādāt's successor, Husni Mubārak, gave permission for the pope to return to his position.

**B.2.2. Under Mubārak's regime**

During the Mubārak era, church leadership has changed its method of dealing with the state. Contrary to the confrontational approach adopted by the church leadership during the Sādāt era, a conciliatory approach was adopted through which the church supports the government in exchange for autonomy over the Coptic community.

In interviews and prepared statements, Pope Shenouda urges the government to reach out to disaffected Copts but praises initiatives that are perceived as aiming to address Coptic grievances, especially church building. Each new permit for construction or repair work is mentioned in *al-Kirazah* (the church magazine) and accompanied by a message of appreciation to President Mubārak. Until recently, the church hierarchy did not support specific candidates or parties, instead merely advising that the community should participate in national life. Yet, the patriarch controversially gave his full support to

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68 ibid
69 ibid, p. 176
70 ibid, p. 177
71 McCallum, Fiona, 'The Political Role of the Patriarch in the Contemporary Middle East', Middle Eastern Studies, Vol.43. NO.6, 923-940, November 2007, p. 931
72 ibid, p.933
President Mubārak in the first presidential elections held in 2005. Pope Shenouda has frequently complimented the president, stating that he is attentive to Coptic concerns. “President Mubārak is an enemy of all sorts of extremism, bigotry and discrimination”.73 This strategy illustrates the political astuteness of the patriarch as he is aware that while conditions may not be perfect, the Mubārak regime has proved relatively tolerant of the Coptic community and such tolerance could not be guaranteed under other candidates.

On the issue of discrimination, Pope Shenouda has made only a few comments since 1985. His preferred method of dealing with contentious issues (conversions and church building) appears to be through private discussions with officials.74 One notable exception was the Wafaa Qustantin affair, the wife of a Coptic Orthodox priest who allegedly converted to Islam in December 2004. Rumors immediately spread in the Coptic community that she had been abducted and forced to convert which led to public demonstrations in front of the patriarchate in Cairo. Pope Shenouda expressed his anger by retreating to his monastery in Wadi Natrūn.75 This significant symbolic act resembles the method employed by Shenouda during the tense Sādāt years to solve the problems facing the Coptic community, including sectarian violence.76

Finally, Shenouda’s patriotism is often stressed. He rejects the idea that Copts are a minority, stressing that they are part of the Egyptian nation and warns against any outside interference regarding Coptic concerns. He is a firm supporter of the Palestinian cause, banning Coptic pilgrimages to Jerusalem until the city is under Arab control. Clearly, the reign of Pope Shenouda has witnessed a more assertive political approach than is normally associated with this position. Yet, the conciliatory approach has fared little better than the assertive strategy in the Sādāt era in meeting Coptic needs, especially regarding discrimination and security.

C. The rise of the Coptic Orthodox Church as a political and social entity since the 1970s

In lieu of the background presented regarding the relationship between the state and the church since the 1970s, we can categorize the factors that led to the rise of the role of the church into two main categories. The first contains reasons that are related to the church itself, including its leadership and their perceptions of the role of the church. The second category concerns the social and political conditions prevailing in society.

C.1. Reasons rising from within the church

According to Dr. Rafiq Habib, a prominent Coptic researcher, the church tends to associate itself with the state when it represents the Christian minority in society. It does so by asserting itself as an inherent part of this society integrating in the system of the

73  ibid
74  ibid
75  Cornelis Hulsman and Sawsan Gabra Ayoub Khalil, Escalations following the alleged conversion of a priest’s wife to Islam, in AWR, 2004, week 51, art. 13
76  ibid
state (it is remarkable how, throughout the course of history, this attitude has generally characterized the Coptic Orthodox Church in its relations with the state, even during the 1970s when there was an escalation of confrontations from the church’s side, yet it still maintained such an association). But at certain periods of time, the church could feel threatened for a number of reasons\(^7^7\):

1- The fear that the church could lose its ability to attract an audience.
2- The dwindling separation between the church and state that might encourage church members to play a role in public affairs outside the confines of the church.
3- The fear that the church could lose its publicity and that its role could be fundamentally diminished.
4- The fear that the church could lose its credibility or that its own constituents might turn against it when its publicity increases but the church’s ability to solve problems does not.

Dr. Habib believes that both the first and the fourth reasons explain the situation that the church has been in since the 1970s. Based on this, he places the general basis of the relationship between the church and the state into two contradicting approaches.

1- Associating the church with the state.
2- Distinguishing the church from the state.

According to him, we most often find the two tendencies together. However at certain times, one tendency dominates the other. Distinguishing the church from the State has been the prevailing tendency since the 1970s due to a number of factors that pushed the church toward asserting its distinction, including\(^7^8\): 

1- The Coptic adherence to religion and the church which mirrors Muslims' adherence to religion in the framework of the Islamization process.
2- The fear that the church might lose its publicity, and its significant role among the Coptic community.
3- The church’s attempt to satisfy its constituents and achieve their needs.
4- The existence of a critical crisis of identity in Egyptian society which has caused each religious community to assert its own identity in an exaggerated way.
5- The rise of arguments and religious solutions that address societal issues. This has led religious institutions to become involved in religious political arguments.

These elements together caused there to be a rise in a distinctive ecclesiastic discourse rather than an integrative one in the 1970s and 1980s. The church’s stance became dominated by a growing isolationist discourse, focused on issues that concern the Coptic community rather than society at large. However, the integrative discourse focusing on Copts as part of the Egyptian nation remained there without being very salient. This means that the church was attempting to distinguish itself and its role in society, yet at the

\(^7^7\) Al-Menyawie, Abd al-Latif, “The Copts: The Church or the State; Story of Pope Shenouda III”, Dar Al-Shabab, 1992, p. 159
\(^7^8\) ibid
same time, it maintained sufficient space to associate with the state. And when it practiced opposition or asserted its distinction, it did not resort to violent political action. When the church protested, it tried to keep its relationship with the state and move away from socially unacceptable attitudes, or any behavior that could cause condemnation of the church itself.79

According to Dr. Habīb, the public adherence to the church did not happen suddenly, but was a gradual process that accompanied the gradual rise of the neo-clergy.80 Up until the mid-1960s, the church’s ability to attract the Coptic public had not reached its peak. However, after the defeat of the Arab states in the 1967 war with Israel, the church’s ability to attract youth started to increase remarkably. At the same time, the neo-clergy came into positions that enabled them to influence the church. The defeat could be one reason behind people turning back toward the church, other reasons could be the rise of an effective clergy, and a crisis that faced the middle class in regards to their limited role and status. This "middle class" crisis was a general phenomenon that had influences upon both Muslims and Christians.81

The church started, according to Habīb, to attract more followers, especially after the second half of the 1960s when the influence of the neo-clergy grew. They managed to introduce religious concepts that addressed youth problems and touched upon different aspects of life. Following these developments, the church started to represent not only religious but also public affairs. The neo-clergy succeeded in renewing the thought of the church’s role in society which turned the church into an entity that could act as an alternative to Egyptian society, a place where Copts could achieve their dreams and needs, satisfying themselves psychologically and socially.82

Pope Shenouda is one of the architects of this spiritual renewal of the church and has been able to place the church at the centre of the community. Church attendance has increased massively to the extent that churches are full and extra services are held to accommodate the needs of the community. The ongoing monastic revival has energized the wider church. There has been a significant expansion in both the number of monasteries and monks. Monks are predominantly well educated, often university graduates aged between 25 and 40. This vocation has now become a model career for many Copts, especially the youth. The laity has also been incorporated into the organizational structure through work as deacons and church servants. Even Christians' leisure time is dominated by the church. Activities include prayer groups, visits to monasteries, and voluntary work restoring icons, churches and monasteries.

The church has concentrated greatly on the youth. It is no surprise that the Sunday school movement plays an important role in educating the children in their faith. Its leaders now occupy top positions in the church hierarchy. Similar to the Islamic revival, this Coptic

79 ibid
80 Neo-clergy is the clergy with roots in the Sunday school movement, a Coptic Orthodox reform movement.
81 ibid, p. 166-168
82 ibid
renewal is also visible. Christian homes and shops frequently display religious symbols, such as pictures depicting scenes from the Bible for example, and women often wear jewelry shaped in a cross. The revival has led to emphasizing a distinct Coptic identity. The study of the ancient Coptic language has been encouraged as a means to rediscover a distinct Coptic heritage. The Coptic renewal has allowed the church to provide a place for Copts where they can fully participate. By giving all Copts a role to play from their early teens onward, the church has provided them with a compensatory status system and a chance of upward mobility apart from Egyptian civil society. However, this appears to come at the cost of withdrawal from the wider Egyptian society.83

The provision of the aforementioned social services has become an important part of the Coptic Church’s ministry. These initiatives have allowed the church to fill a vacuum left by the state. The Coptic Orthodox Bishopric of Public, Ecumenical, and Social Services provides material assistance, educational classes, literacy programs, and job training. However, some critics, such as the late, influential monk Father Mattá al-Maskín, raised concerns that these social services will attract Copts to the church for material reasons instead of spiritual reasons. Finally, the pope has chosen to fill a leadership vacuum by acting as the political spokesman of the Coptic community.84

C.2. Pope Shenouda’s perception on the role of the church

As illustrated earlier, the character and vision of the patriarch plays an important role in shaping the role of the church within society and its relationship with the state. In this regard, we can not ignore the impact of the charismatic character of Pope Shenouda III. He represents a crucial turning point in the relationship between the patriarchs and the state. Previous patriarchs did not get involved in politics to a great extent. When they did express their opinions, they were usually confined to national causes. Coptic issues and problems were, until Pope Shenouda, handled by laymen. This, however, changed under Pope Shenouda III who envisions a wider role for the church as the main representative of the Coptic community.

According to Al-Minjawī, Pope Shenouda III represents the integrative ecclesiastic approach that considers Christianity as both a religion and a state, and that Christian thought encompasses different aspects of life. He believes that the church is a comprehensive entity committed to presenting solutions to all problems and to find answers to everything related to both religious and worldly affairs.85

C.3. Reasons related to the main social and political conditions in society

Dr. Rafiq Habib explained in his book ‘Prospective Egypt: between Westernization and Takfir,’ that in times of recession the Coptic community suffers alienation from society

83 ibid
84 McCallum, Fiona, 'The Political Role of the Patriarch in the Contemporary Middle East', Middle Eastern Studies, Vol.43. NO.6,923-940, November 2007, p 932-933
and ill-representation in a way that it feels itself isolated from the society. As a consequence the Coptic Orthodox Church flourishes as the protective leader of the Coptic community, and the opposite happens in times of economic welfare.\textsuperscript{86} The reasons highlighted help to us understand the general environment that encouraged the increased isolation in which the Coptic community mainly relies on the institution of the church for its social and political existence.

First, for Christians, the failure of Arab nationalism to deliver its promises was especially significant, as they had long depended on this route to attain equality. Instead, little progress toward full citizenship was made. Coupled with the failure to provide material benefits, Christian backing for the ideology they had long supported began to wane. The growth of political Islam as the main opposition to existing regimes heightened perceptions of vulnerability, including increased communal tension and the potential curtailment of rights under an Islamic regime. Desperately requiring strong leadership, Christian communities at times tend to have been weak and divided lay representatives who often lack legitimacy within the community. Thus, with few alternatives, Christians, like their Muslim compatriots, have also turned to their religious institutions to provide comfort during difficult periods. It is evident that many Christians expect the church to adopt a proactive role regarding their concerns. On a practical level, church organizations, like Islamist movements, have continued to provide social services for their communities, for example, schools, hospitals, employment aid, and charity.\textsuperscript{87}

Second, the lack of political representation has also offered an opportunity for church leaders to undertake a more overt political role by acting as the main representatives of their community. The increased role of Egyptian churches in politics does not have the same aims as Islamist movements. Rather than wishing to seize power or change the fundamental values of society, the core aim of this political activism is to articulate the rights and needs of the Christian communities.\textsuperscript{88}

Third, the inability of the Egyptian government to tackle socioeconomic problems, combined with the general feeling among Copts of alienation from political participation, are factors which can be seen as contributing toward the strength of the Coptic Orthodox Church as the leading communal institution. At present, there are no credible rivals to the role of the church as the state representative of the community.\textsuperscript{89}

Fourth, the Coptic laity influence declined after the 1952 Revolution partly as a consequence of nationalization measures. Few Copts are selected as parliamentary candidates and even fewer are successfully elected. Most Coptic deputies are appointed by the president and two Copts are usually included in the cabinet. Furthermore, many Copts perceive that neither these representatives nor government officials are willing to

\textsuperscript{86} Habīb, Rafiq, "Prospective Egypt: between Westernization and Takfir," Dar-al-Shrouq, 1996, pp.118-122
\textsuperscript{87} McCallum, Fiona, 'The Political Role of the Patriarch in the Contemporary Middle East', Middle Eastern Studies, Vol.43. NO.6,923-940, November 2007, p 925
\textsuperscript{88} ibid
\textsuperscript{89} ibid
prioritize Coptic concerns. These include equality, political participation, church building regulations, conversions, and violent attacks. Feelings of insecurity are heightened with each new incident of Christian–Muslim tension. ⁹⁰

All of these factors helped to bring into existence this new role of the church. And despite the fact that the church gave up its sharp confrontational approach with the state, the church still plays the same role that it has perceived for itself since the 1970s: a spiritual, social, and political entity that acts as the official representative of the Coptic community and uses a church discourse that is both integrative and distinctive.

A. The Coptic Orthodox Church attitude toward censorship

To protect its Orthodox belief, the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria does have the authority inside its own churches and bookstores to reject or ban writings which it believes to be in violation of its Orthodox principles. But when it comes to society at large it has much less authority in this regard. Yet, in some cases the church uses its influence as the leader and defender of the Coptic community to make an effort to ban some productions. Passing requests of bans to state censorship bodies does not necessarily lead to censorship, however it reflects the increasing role played by the Coptic Orthodox Church as a political and social entity of the Coptic community, and also reflects the significant value that religion enjoys in Egyptian society.

B. Censorship within the ecclesiastic community

Dr. Makari Arminious, researcher in Coptic heritage and history, said that in the recent past there was something called the "paper of blessing." It was a letter printed in a book to show how useful and good it was for the believers. It was a seal of approval from the Orthodox Church on the contents of the book. Such a paper does not exist anymore and it is now the right of any Copt to write a book. However, it became a tradition for some Christian writers to ask a bishop or a priest to review the book and write an introduction for it. ⁹¹ But if it is a guaranteed right for each and every Copt to write any book, why are some books banned by the church? How is such a prohibition implemented? Who takes the decision to ban a book? When does it extend to excommunication or expulsion from the church? This sections attempts to answer such questions.

B.1. The censorship mechanism within the Ecclesiastic spheres

The Egyptian Church does not follow the system of banning followed by the state. In contrast to the Azhar, the church does not resort to the state if it wants to prohibit a book, as it considers this an internal issue. It refers the book to the Holy Synod to examine it. If the examination shows that the contents of the book are against church teachings, the book is prohibited. Prohibition here has nothing to do with printing or distribution in different bookstores. It means that the author of the prohibited book is prevented from distributing it in church bookstores and the members of the church are discouraged from

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⁹⁰ ibid, pp. 925-926
reading it. Moreover, if the writer himself is a member of the church and writing against church teachings, he is to be excommunicated.  

According to Hani Labīb, a Coptic Catholic researcher, it is the decision of the Holy Synod of the Coptic Orthodox Church and not the pope that settles any issue touching upon matters of creed. Labīb explained that the church resorts to the Holy Synod and not to the prosecution when it comes to prohibiting books because the decision of the Synod is powerful, as it is internal. Also, its decisions have to do with prohibition, not banning and with excommunication and not takfīr. He pointed out that freedom of thought inside the church is different from that in society. Inside the church, freedom of thought is restricted only if it is against the Orthodox Creed.

Father Yohanna of the Bishopric of Mallawi explained in an interview the process of prohibiting some books which conflict with the Orthodox belief. Father Yohanna asserted that only in a few cases the issue is taken up to the Holy Synod so that they can take a decision when the person insists on his/her stance. He mentioned that the process starts first by drawing the person’s attention to the fact that his thoughts, whether represented in a book or expressed in a lecture in the church—etc, contradict with the true Orthodox principles. The person is then given the chance to meet with priests or fathers from the church who illustrate how far he strayed from the right belief and how his thoughts contradict the Coptic Orthodox creed. If the person insists on his thoughts, the issue is then transferred to the Holy Synod which meets and discusses the case and then reaches a final decision on the matter and whether to prohibit the production or to excommunicate the person from the church. As Father Yohanna explained, those persons who come up with different thoughts are most often affected by other Christian beliefs/denominations, or by Western thought. Hence, they no more belong to the Coptic Orthodox creed but to the other denomination by which they are affected.

B.2. Banned books in the Coptic Orthodox Church

In recent decades, the Orthodox Church has banned several books by different writers from church bookstores. To a significant number of intellectuals such banning happens because of differences in thought with the church leadership which, according to their views, threatens freedom of creativity’, opinion and thinking.

According to Arif al-Dabis, the church used to embrace all kind of discussions and dialogues, but it has changed its policy. Some priests even fear to discuss certain religious issues inside the church in case it is against the opinion of those in charge and results in penalties. In accordance with this atmosphere, several books by different writers have been banned.

92 ibid
93 ibid
94 An interview with Father Yohanna of the Bishopric of Malawi, Al Minya Governate, January 2008
95 Arab-West Report, 2006-24-2, Al-Maydān, June 8, 2006
Jamāl Aṣad ʿAbd al-Malāk says that the main reason for the banning of books is that they contain theological visions that do not match the personal views of those who are in charge of the Orthodox Church. Jamāl Aṣad finds it astonishing that some of these books are popular among other denominations and even in Europe*. He adds that if the church continues with this method, it will intellectually freeze itself. He also thinks that thoughts are not pieces of property that can be monopolized or constrained.96

Dr. Jirjis Kāmil Yūsuf, a researcher in the church’s affairs, analyzes the phenomenon by saying that the Egyptian Orthodox Church bans books by some of its own clergy, like Bishop Gregorious and Father Mattá al-Miskīn. Moreover, it bans the writings of some unpopular priests as Father Taklā and Father Daniel al-Barāmousī (According to Cornelis Hulsman, the editor-in-chief of Arab West Report, Father Daniel is no longer an Orthodox monk but has for many years been a Protestant pastor serving in his own church). In addition to that, the church bans all the books of other Christian denominations (Again according to Cornelis Hulsman, not all books. For example many Orthodox priests use the Arabic translation of the Bible explanation of the English nonconformist and pietist clergyman Matthew Henri [1662-1714]. It is, however, true that the Matthew Henri Bible explanation was not written for a particular denomination). Though Pope Shenouda has written certain things criticizing their beliefs, other denominations still allow the Orthodox books into their churches, according to Dr. Kāmil.97

To get closer to this phenomenon, this paper focuses on one of the most controversial efforts to ban books in the Coptic Orthodox Church, which is the banning of the books of Father Mattá al-Miskīn. In addition, it will shed light on some other cases of censorship that are related to the case of Father Mattá al-Miskīn.

B.3. The controversies around Father Mattá al-Miskīn's books

There is no doubt that religious books usually attract great attention. These books are closely supervised and they are often banned due to the high status and sacredness of religion among the people of Egypt. Among the most famous books to be banned by the Orthodox Church in Egypt are those written by Father Mattá al-Miskīn.98

But the questions are who is Father Mattá al-Miskīn? Why were his books banned? What is the background of his disputable theological views with Pope Shenouda III? And how does the monastery of Macarius perceive this dispute?

B.3.1. Who is Father Mattá al-Miskīn?

Father Mattá al-Miskīn, born Yusuf Iskandar, (20 September 1919 – 8 June 2006) was an Egyptian Coptic Orthodox monk and also the spiritual father of 130 monks in the

* This refers in particular to the books of Father Mattá al-Miskīn.
96 ibid
97 ibid
Father Mattá was once the confessional father and spiritual guide of Pope Shenouda III (during the 1950s). Father Mattá was also the spiritual guide of the late Alexandrian priest Father Bīšůy Kamāl and the Coptic historian Iris Habīb al-Misrī Alongside two others (Bishop Samuel and Bishop (now Pope) Shenouda, Father Mattá was a candidate for the papal seat in 1956, following the repose of Pope Yūsab II of Alexandria, but he did not reach the final stage of three candidates.100

While Father Mattá al-Miskēn is considered by many as a prominent Copt, he was allegedly suspended from his position in the Coptic Church twice, first by Pope Yūsab II in 1955, and then again by Pope Kyrillos VI for nine years from 1960 to 1969 for administrative/political reasons (e.g. his book about 'The Church and the State', in which he called for total separation of the two101. However, Father Basilius, one of the late Father Mattá al-Miskēn disciples, asserts the fact that Father Mattá al-Miskēn was not dismissed. Taken from an interview organized by Arab-West Report in 2007, Father Basilius mentions the following102:

Q: According to Pope Shenouda’s website, Father Mattá was dismissed in 1955 and withdrew to the Syrian Monastery and then returned to the Monastery of St. Samuel.

A: That is not true. In the autobiography of Father Mattá you can find the true and exact

* The Monastery of Macarius (or Abū Maqar), which dates from the 4th century, is one of the oldest and largest monasteries in Wadi Al-Natrūn and also one of the few closed to visitors, as the monks there prefer their solitude. It is quite an active place, however, and in addition to its fields it has a printing press producing books in several languages. Books that are banned for sale in Coptic churches


www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2001/015/2.38.html,


100 ibid

101 Ibid. Father Basilius adds that the stories about suspension are not true and lack any documented evidence, nor is there any official references to these except for many years later when these alleged suspensions were used by some members of the Coptic church hierarchy, including a rather recent reference on Pope Shenouda's website, in an effect to discredit Father Mattá.

facts about the life of Father Mattá in all its stages. He was not dismissed. He left the Syrian Monastery of his own free will to return to his original monastery.

Q: Pope Shenouda’s website says that Pope Kyrillos VI [1902-1971; Pope 1959-1971] suspended Father Mattá from 1960 till 1969, because he did not want to settle in one of the established monasteries under the authority of a traditional abbot.

A: This is not true. Pope Kyrillos did not suspend him. The reason is that popes in general do not want anyone else to become a focal point for a large number of other monks. Father Mattá was asked by the pope to disperse his followers, 12 at the time, to different monasteries. He did not refuse and told them to obey the pope’s command. They refused because they wanted to remain with their spiritual guide, Father Mattá. After they left together with Father Mattá, the bishop of the Suriyân Monastery published a paid advertisement in the daily Al-Ahrâm on October 17, 1960, that he and his followers were suspended. This statement came without any trial or any canonical procedures. This suspension was void and was ignored, that is very important, later by Pope Kyrillos IV. In 1967 Pope Kyrillos sent a letter to Father Mattá addressing him with his clerical title “al-qummus” [“Hygoumenos” Mattá]. When Pope Kyrillos addressed Father Mattá with his clerical title, it means that he was ignoring what was published by the bishop in al-Ahrâm.”

B.3.2. The relationship between Pope Shenouda III and Father Mattá al-Miskîn, a background

For many years before Father Mattá’s departure there were many reports about disagreements between him and Pope Shenouda III. Father Mattá and Pope Shenouda share some common history. Both participated in the Sunday School movement and Mattá was Shenouda's confessor in the 1950s. Pope Shenouda acknowledges his debt to his teacher, Father Mattá al-Miskîn, whom he calls 'my spiritual father monk' in the introduction to his book Intilâq Al-Rûh [The Release of the Spirit].

The dispute between Fr. Mattá and Pope Shenouda stretches back all the way to the seeds of the Coptic Church’s revival with the Sunday School movement in the 1930s. This was a reform movement started by lay members [not clergy] and centering around various Sunday schools and enhancing the theological education of the flock. Many of the students of these schools then joined the clergy and the monasteries and completely remade the church.

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104 ibid
Father Mattá was originally a pharmacist and took up monastic orders in 1948 - against the advice of his friends. Monasteries at this time had shrunk and monks were poorly educated. Fr. Mattá represented a new kind of monk, one who had a college education and he gathered around him a nucleus of reform-minded monks, known as the academic monks—of these was Fr. Antonious (born Nazīr Jayyid), who later took the name Shenouda when he became bishop and later pope.  

For the first half of the 1950s, Fr. Mattá and his circle of monks were in Dayr Al Suryan. There, at Al-Suryan, he finished his first book, ‘Orthodox Prayer Life’, first published in 1952 and again in 1968 with corrections and additions. ‘Orthodox Prayer Life’ was later translated into French (1977), Italian (1998), and in English (2002).  

Fr. Mattá finally left Suryan in 1956 for the remote Wadi Rayyan together with his circle of followers. Following calls by the then Pope Kyrillos VI for wandering monks to return to the main monasteries, Fr. Antonious broke with Fr. Mattá’s circle and returned to Suryan in 1957.  

Five years later, Antonious took the name Shenouda and was consecrated as a "general" bishop, a new ecclesiastical position that tied a bishop to an issue, rather than a geographic location and an actual flock. Bishop Shenouda focused on education and under his tenure the seeds planted in earlier periods flowered as more and more educated youth flocked to the clergy in the 1960s and 1970s.  

Fr. Mattá, meanwhile, was finally convinced by the pope to come out of his desert isolation by being given the task of rebuilding the Monastery of Macarius in 1969. The once proud complex at this time had only six aged monks living in rude mud brick cells at the foot of the ancient keep. Today with its productive fields and over a hundred monks it is held up as a model of monastic reform.  

Bishop Shenouda continued his rise through church ranks and in 1971 was chosen as pope [The RNSAW, 2002, week 46A, art. 18 mentions Father Timotheus from the Monastery of Macarius as candidate. The monastery informed us that Father Mattá was a candidate but was removed from the list by those who opposed him].  

During the tense period which of the early 1980s, relations between the state represented in al-Sādāt and the church represented in Pope Shenouda in 1981 deteriorated, and he was exiled by a presidential decree to a monastery in Wadi al-Natrūn. At that time, the most public comment in support of the pope’s exile, however, came from Fr. Mattá in an interview with Time magazine in 1981 where he said "Shenouda III’s appointment was  

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105 ibid
106 http://www.stmacariusmonastery.org/f_matta_E_06.htm
107 Arab-West Report, 2002-50-26, Cairo Times, December 12-18, 2002
108 ibid
109 ibid
110 ibid
the beginning of the time of trouble." He described the church as going from "bad to worse" under Pope Shenouda with fears of new sectarian clashes every day. He described al-Sādāt’s actions as "from God." During this period as well, al-Sādāt also had two meetings with Father Mattá al-Miskīn, in what looked like an attempt to build up Father Mattá as a rival to Shenouda.112

Taken from his interview with the team of *Arab-West Report* in 2007, Father Basilius al-Maqari, comments on al-Sādāt's relationship with Father Mattá al-Miskīn113:

**Q: What happened when President al-Sādāt was killed?**

A: Father Mattá did not gather the monks when President al-Sādāt died, but he spoke personally with us about this. Father Mattá met President al-Sādāt twice in order to make peace between the pope and President al-Sādāt. Each meeting was about two hours long. The first meeting was in 1980, when the church canceled the Easter celebrations, which made President al-Sādāt furious because of the tensions this caused. Father Mattá tried to mediate between the pope and al-Sādāt and to convince the pope and the bishops not to cancel the celebrations of the 1980 Easter. Father Mattá was sent by the Holy Synod and the Community Council to mediate between the two parties. He failed, because al-Sādāt was very angry due to the cancellation of the celebrations.114

The second time was in 1981; al-Sādāt called Father Mattá into his presence before the arrests of politicians and clerics in Egypt. It was very secret. Al-Sādāt told Mattá about the planned arrests, a project which Father Mattá opposed. He was against pressure and violence.

Al-Sādāt was going to arrest and to judge Pope Shenouda, but Father Mattá strongly opposed him. The president has no authority to remove a pope [The president can withdraw his signature and recognition of the state]. Such a removal is against the canon law of the church, because a pope stays in his position till his death. Al-Sādāt signed the decree – that is all that the president can do.

**Q: So Father Mattá al-Maskīn was involved in politics through his meetings with al-Sādāt?**

A: It was not political involvement. He was called by al-Sādāt; Father Mattá did not know why he was called. Father Mattá was defending the church.

**Q: What did al-Sādāt want to achieve in the second meeting?**

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111 ibid
112 Pennington, J.D., The Copts in modern Egypt, Middle Eastern Studies, p.174
113 *Arab-West Report*, Art.3, Week 11, 2007,
114 Father Basilius added in reviewing this paper “and the bad reception he received during his visit to the US by some Copts living in the US.”
A: He wanted to make Father Mattá Pope, but of course Father Mattá refused totally. This was a critical situation.

**Q: When was the decision made to form a committee of bishops as church leaders?**

A: Father Mattá heard that al-Sādāt was planning to form a committee composed of some men from the national State Security office and bishops opposed to the pope. Father Mattá opposed this and urged al-Sādāt to form a body with bishops who were the most loyal to the pope. He sent their names to President al-Sādāt in a private letter. I myself delivered the letter. Father Mattá told al-Sādāt not to arrest the pope but to let him stay in his monastery. After the meeting Father Mattá told Bishop Athanasius the news about al-Sādāt’s plans so that the pope was able to go to the monastery of his own choice, because it would have been very bad indeed for the position of the pope if he had been forced by security to go to his monastery.

Father Mattá writes in his autobiography that this day was considered, as the second black day in his life, when the pope was dismissed and sent to his monastery. The first black day was when Pope Yūsab [Pope 1946-1956] was removed from his position in 1956.

After being re-assigned the patriarchal position, Pope Shenouda's policy was more co-operative toward the state, however, it was less conciliatory toward his opponents within the church itself. The remaining bishops in the ruling committee were relieved of their positions and sidelined. Fr. Mattá’s writings were declared heretical and banned - a charge that is to this day disputed by his followers and many experts on Coptic Orthodox theology.115

**B.3.3. Pope Shenouda and Father Mattá al-Miskîn's Different Perceptions**

The difference between these two men, two charismatic figures intimately involved in the rebirth of the Coptic Church over the last half century - is more than just a personal squabble or a matter of minor points of doctrine, but rather a struggle for the role of the church in Coptic society.116

"This conflict is in a way a battle for the hearts and minds of the Copts, because Father Mattá in my opinion represents a profound movement of traditional monastic spirituality, whereas Pope Shenouda represents the necessity of having some identity for the Coptic population in Egypt," Rev. John H. Watson, an Anglican scholar and author of ‘Among the Copts’. "Which are two contrasting views of what the Coptic Orthodox Church ought to be."117

On one hand there is the pope’s approach which has aimed at building up and

115 ibid
116 Arab-West Report, 2002-50-26, Cairo Times, December 12-18, 2002
117 ibid
strengthening the institutions of the church and making it the leader of the Coptic community, while Fr. Mattá sees the role of the church more in spiritual areas. Fr. Basilius explains that the monastery of Macarius believes that, interfering in politics and the workings of society leads to no good. He sees the role of the church more as to "influence society with sermons and good examples." He cites the example of the 4th century Pope Theophilos who incited Christian mobs in Alexandria against pagans and burned down the library in the Serapeum (as well as mobbing a few scholars). "It is like the Islamic groups who want a religious state," he said about too much church influence in politics. "Do we return to the Middle Ages when the pope was interfering in politics and choosing emperors?"118

Fr. Basilius explains that the chief goal of the clergy should be ministering to the needs of the flock, and not getting involved in other activities, such as church building, which are primarily for status. "They should not be involved in the financial and social activities in a manner that they ignore their religious duties," he said.119

Beside the different perceptions of the role of the church, there is another basic theological difference which centers on the role of the Holy Spirit.

Father Mattá says the Holy Spirit dwells in the followers of Jesus Christ, “Hereby know that we dwell in him, and he in us, because he hath given us of his Spirit,” (1 John 4:13). Pope Shenouda says that the Holy Spirit does not literally dwell in us but is a kind of gift or energy the Holy Spirit sends. Pope Shenouda says in his critique of Father Mattá that believers receive in the Holy Communion only the human nature of Christ, we do not partake in the divine nature of Christ during the Holy Communion. Father Mattá, however, says that we partake in the Holy Communion in Christ’s human and divine nature that are not to be separated for even a very short moment in time in order to die with his human nature and rise with him again so as to give us the gift of resurrection.120

Father Basilius extends further the distinctive perceptions of both Pope Shenouda III and Father Mattá al-Miskín, in his interview with Arab-West Report in 2007, on this issue121:

Q: Concerning the differences between Pope Shenouda and Mattá al-Maskín: Bishop Bishúy stated that there are theological differences. If it were so, they should be discussed in the Holy Synod, but this never happened. Is it correct that theological differences were never formulated in any text or book by Pope Shenouda or a bishop? Did they not always refuse to spell them out? That means nothing other than that the argument of theological differences is used to hide other reasons.

A: It is about spreading rumors to defame the figure of Father Mattá. They say that

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118 ibid
119 Ibid. Father Basilius added in reviewing this paper that it is the duty of the laymen to be involved in financial, social, political and other activities.
120 Koehler, Katrin, “Interview with Father Basilius about Father Mattá al-Maskín”, Arab-West Report, Art. 3, Week 11, 2007. Father Basilius added in reviewing this paper that Father Mattá’s formulation of is in line with Coptic Orthodox liturgical texts.
121 ibid
someone is a heretic so that the people hate this person. It is an excuse for missing arguments. Only recently has Pope Shenouda had the courage to publicly explain these differences. He has been attacking the teachings of Father Mattá since he was consecrated as a bishop in 1962.

Q: Are there theological differences?

A: In my opinion it appears theological, but it is not so. I think the differences are rooted in psychological motives. If I want to attack someone in Egypt, then I have to denounce him in the eyes of his followers as being a false teacher. Only since 2000 has Pope Shenouda begun explaining the theological differences to the wider public. He previously spoke about such differences in small limited circles. Pope Shenouda’s comments only recently have been printed in small books, one of them 'Bid’ hadīthah’ [Modern Innovations] published in 2004 and 2007 by the Anba Rues Printing Shop, St. Mark Cathedral, the Papal Residence.

Pope Shenouda also delivered lectures attended by a lot of young people every Thursday in the Institute of Coptic Studies to attack the writings of Father Mattá in his absence.

Father Mattá did not want to respond to these accusations at all. It is very dangerous because the pope is considered the head of the Copts and the Coptic Church. Opposing the pope would cause a great division. In Egypt the simple people do not understand it and would take it personally (not objectively). Taking issues personally instead of discussing factual differences is a big social disease in our country.

B.3.4. Famous books by Father Mattá al-Miskîn

Father Mattá's different perceptions were reflected in his different writings which caused them to be harshly criticized by the leadership of the Coptic Orthodox Church. Fr. Mattá's books were ordered to be burnt in the Cathedral at Abbasyia as a sign of the church rejection of the books. However, according to Fr. Yohanna from the Bishopric of Mallawi, not all of Father Mattá’s books are banned, rather two or three books only due to their contradiction with the true Orthodox creed. 122

Fr. Mattá was a meticulous researcher and prolific writer. He wrote extensive Bible studies, as well as his well known and widely-read ‘The Orthodox Life of Prayer’, ‘The Church and the State,’ ‘The Virgin Mary’s Fast’, ‘The Philosophy of Death of Egypt’s martyrs’, ‘Women...their Rights and Duties,’ ‘Social and Religious Life in the Church’, ‘Christianity in the Family,’ ‘Repentance and Monasticism in the age of St Maqar.’

Maqalāt bayn al-Siyāsah wa al-Dīn’ [Articles about Politics and Religion], written by Father Mattá, and published by the Monastery of Anbá Maqqâr, first in Arabic and later in a translation under the title ‘The Church and the State’ is one of the most famous books to be banned by the church. Pope Shenouda disagrees with several of the

122 Interview with Father Yohanna, January 26, 2008. Father Basilius emphasized that there are no books by Father Mattá that contradict the true Orthodox creed.
theological concepts and opinions of Father Mattá al-Miskín which have been published in many of his writings.

However, according to journalist Mamdūh ʿIzzat, ‘Maqalāt bayn al-Siyāsah wa al-Dīn’ has been banned, even though it does not tackle theological issues. Mamdūh ʿIzzat quoted from Father Mattá the core message, of his book:

“The success of the Church, if truly preaching the Kingdom of God and repentance, which is its work, will appear here in the fraternal work between the heirs through the Spirit of Christ. But if it preaches social service then it will not get anywhere.

If serving the poor is void of this spiritual preaching, of this concept, then all it needs as a work to be fulfilled is a quantity of money, distributed in lists among a number of names, that have been previously examined or investigated by another servant or employee based on a few direct questions to the family.

The poor man receives charity somewhat grudgingly from the social servant's hands, as he feels it comes from people's undesired possessions. The aid thus augments the grumbles from his poverty as well as his envy of the rich and his bitterness toward these servants who are agents. The servant cannot but equally exchange this bitterness, the social service ending with an act of repeated provocation of the poor reminding him of his continued poverty and the wealth of others! On the other hand the Christian servant knows by name those who are outcasts, having written them in his heart due to continually mentioning their names in prayer before God, as brothers of Christ, with the image of Christ within them."¹²³

This book, Mamdūh ʿIzzat writes, has led to disputes between Father Mattá and the pope.

B.3.5. Pope Shenouda's Response to Father Mattá's books

The result of the dispute with Fr. Mattá al-Miskín was the publication of eight booklets written by Pope Shenouda III as published in Kirazah Magazine dated June 23, 2006.¹²⁴ Pope Shenouda taught others about the issue in the theological seminary of Cairo and also in the seminary of Alexandria. When asked why he did not suspend him, the pope responded, “We don’t fight a person but we fight a certain thought”.¹²⁵

On the other hand, Metropolitan Bishūy, the mouthpiece of the Coptic Orthodox Church said that Father Mattá’s teachings are discussed in the seminaries, yes, but not in the presence and with the participation of Fr. Mattá but in his absence.¹²⁶ So, it can be said

¹²³ quotation from Father Matta's “The Church and the State,” monastery of Macarius, 2009, pp 18, 19
¹²⁴ http://www.bookrags.com/wiki/Pope_Shenouda_III_of_Alexandria#Theological_disputes
¹²⁶ Arab West Report, 2002- 47-17
that it became some sort of defaming him either in the lecture rooms of the seminaries or inside the Coptic Churches during delivery of his sermons. Sometimes they subject him to indignity by accusing him or his views of heresy, plainly and before the attendants while no legal condemnation [of a church body] was held against him127.

B.3.6. The Monastery of Macarius's view on banning the books of Father Mattá al-Miskīn

Taken from an interview, organized by Arab-West Report in 2002, with two monks from the monastery of Macarius - Father Yohanna and Father Basilius al-Maqari - on Father Mattá al-Miskīn, the answers below reflect basically their views regarding banning the books of Father Mattá al-Miskīn, the reasons behind seizing the distribution of his books, and where exactly his books can be found.128

Q: Pope Shenouda has been forbidding church bookstores from selling books by Father Mattá and the Monastery of Macarius. What do you think of this?

Father Basilius: I can give you a report that the books of Father Mattá are being reprinted many, many, many times, every two years, some of them every three years, every one year. Some of them now are in the ninth reprint. The books are not being sold through the churches but through every other means. [Underlining A el-G]

Q: How are they then distributed?

Father Basilius: We have a bookshop in Shubra in Cairo and other one in Alexandria. Those who are fond of Father Mattá’s books go there, priests and laymen go and take all of their needs for themselves and for their groups, even abroad.

Q: But could this change perhaps?

Father Basilius: God can tell. Not us. Our duty is to publish, to print and to distribute and everyone who knows our place comes to us and takes the books. People distribute them personally, between the people who ask for them. The people have no obstacles or problem to obtain the books. They can find the means, any means, all the means to obtain the books from anywhere.

Q: How many are there and what are the subjects these books cover?

Father Basilius: Father Mattá deals with all aspects of Christian life for people and for the church. He deals with the social, the spiritual, and family life, and traditional subjects. He published throughout the decades many text books and commentaries on the Gospels and the Epistles of St. Paul.

127 ibid
Q: Are any of his books translated into English?

Father Basilius: Yes, there are many books translated into English. They are in the form of booklets and published by the monastery. Some of them were collected and published in the USA. A new book is forthcoming.

Q: In what languages books have been translated?

Father Yohanna: There are translations into English, French, German, and Italian.

Q: Are the books distributed in the Coptic community in the US?

Father Yohanna: Not a large quantity.

Q: Or is it not allowed?

I noticed in the Coptic Orthodox church in Amsterdam that Father Arsanius would not allow the books of Father Mattá to be sold in his church bookstore and for that reason practically no Copts in Holland have the books of Father Mattá. Father Basilius: Not in Holland only, in all the stores of the Coptic churches abroad. Copts get them individually from Cairo.

Q: What books are available to Copts about their religion if they cannot get hold of these books? Are there alternatives?

Father Yohanna: Pope Shenouda has written many books.

Q: So there any books that he writes on the same subject?

Father Basilius: Not on the same subjects. His Holiness wrote many books. When a bishop asks "what can we read if you forbid us to read Father Mattá" he says to them, "read the books by Pope Shenouda."

Q: But they are on different subjects?

Father Basilius: Some of them are on the subjects Father Mattá deals with, some of them are not.

Q: What are the differences in the writings of Pope Shenouda and Father Mattá?

Father Basilius: Pope Shenouda has his own style and Father Mattá has his own style.

Q: Content wise?
Father Basilius: I think that Father Mattá has a wider scope when writing, he gives a practical interpretation and deep meaning for every aspect of the spiritual and social life.

Father Yohanna: Many people said after reading the books of Father Mattá they cannot taste reading other books. His writing is something that grabs your interest, it is so deep, and so effective.

Q: I will interrupt you for a question regarding Pope Shenouda and the books of Father Mattá. You said a lot of bishops, priests and people are reading his books. But what about the common people? I think he wrote the books for the common people. What chance do they have to read his books? Most of them will be very traditional. That means they are respecting Pope Shenouda as the highest authority in the church. Do they think that Father Mattá’s books are no good? So they have a problem don’t they?

Father Yohanna: Yes, they have a problem. That is why the readers of the books of Father Mattá are limited. Only those who want to understand the spiritual life much more deeply accept and choose the books of Father Mattá.

Q: Isn’t distribution to the common people limited because his books are intellectual?

Father Basilius: They are not intellectual, his books have deep meaning, not intellectual. He is a gifted writer and has some thorough ideas and deep thoughts in his books. He is logic, not illogic but he is not intellectually writing. For this reason when people find his books they take them immediately.

Father Yohanna: Especially the Sunday school teachers.

Father Basilius: Because they find in them the sources and text books for their lessons.

Father Basilius: The office of the Marcos bookshop in Shubra was first hidden inside a flat. But now we have a new office that is wide and off the street. And there is a large sign on the building giving notice to the people to visit this office. They come and take all what they wish from the books of Father Mattá. But we distribute also in this bookstore the writings of Pope Shenouda, and most of the other authors like the books of the late Bishop Gregorious and others. We have the books of most of the Christians Orthodox publishing houses.

Q: Because this is the bookstore owned by the monastery of Macarius?

Father Basilius: Yes.

Q: So there is no interference because it belongs to the monastery?

Father Basilius: We have no intention to ban any book by anyone.
Q: How long has the bookshop been in Shubra? How many years?

Father Basilius: in this new flat for only six months.

Q: We would like to visit it.

Father Yohanna: You are welcome.

Q: Excuse me, what is the exact nature of the dispute between Father Mattá and Pope Shenouda?

Father Yohanna: I can say that the definition of this dispute is different from one to another to whom you ask. If you ask me I say there is no true dispute. But when you ask other party, you have another definition.

Q: Yes, but is that related to 1981, when at that time…

Father Yohanna: No, not 1981. Pope Shenouda said that Father Mattá was in a bad position at that time and he was on the side of Sādāt. But for us and for Father Mattá, as we heard everything from the mouth of Father Mattá, he has been doing all his best for the peace of the church and for the safety of of Pope Shenouda himself. Sādāt was insisting that he will put Pope Shenouda in prison and will make a legal case against him.

Father Basilius: But Father Mattá did all his efforts with Sādāt to stop the imprisonment of Pope Shenouda. He told Anwar al-Sādāt "don’t apply this decision of jailing some ones on Pope Shenouda, he can stay in his monastery with all honor and respect." Sādāt was going to make a committee of bishops who were against Pope Shenouda. But Father Mattá told Sādāt the committee should be from the bishops who are the friends of Pope Shenouda in order not to have a bad effect on Pope Shenouda. Father Mattá was doing all his best with Sādāt to appease his anger against Pope Shenouda. Unfortunately Pope Shenouda thought that Father Mattá did the opposite, trying to cause him hurting, or urging Anwar al-Sadat to put Pope Shenouda in the monastery. But as you know, Sādāt put many other clergy, Muslims and Christians, in prison. Father Mattá failed to turn him away from his decision to arrest political and religious figures.

Q: What is the difference about teachings and about religions?

Father Basilius: H.H. Pope Shenouda said that the teachings of Father Mattá are not in accordance with orthodox doctrine or orthodox tradition.

Q: Is there a specific aspect in Father Mattá’s teaching that…

Father Basilius: It is better to ask the authorities who accuse him. But what we heard that they accuse Father Mattá that he says that the Holy Spirit dwells in the faithful by His person. Some people say that Pope Shenouda says that this is a false teaching, because it
is not the Holy Spirit, but only a power from the Holy Spirit who dwells in the faithful, this is an example only.

According to Father Basilius in this interview, Father Mattá al-Miskín's books are not to be found in the Coptic Church bookstores both inside and outside Egypt. This, however, contradicts with what Father Yohanna from the Bishopric of Mallawi said regarding only two or three books being banned as referred to earlier.

Despite the various justifications behind the banning of Fr. Mattá's books which some argue is due to theological reasons, for others it reflects a non-democratic atmosphere inside the ecclesiastic community where alternative thought is banned, and for others it is basically due to the personal dispute with Pope Shenouda III. This practice of banning works reflects an attitude in the church that raises fears among some laymen and intellectuals regarding freedom of thought and creation within the church sphere. This is particularly the case as it was not just limited to the banning of Fr. Mattá's books, but also to books that are affected by his ideas.

C. Other cases of banned works in relation to Father Mattá al-Miskín

The controversial case of Fr. Mattá al-Miskín's books did not stop at banning his books inside the church bookstores but also involved banning books written by other writers which were found to be influenced by his thoughts. In brief, we can refer here to a number of cases where banning or excommunication happened due to the adoption of theological principles that the Coptic Orthodox Church believes are against the true creed.

C.1. Excommunicating Dr. George Habīb Bibāwī:

Dr. George Habīb Bibāwī is a well-known Coptic researcher who was twice excommunicated from the Coptic Orthodox Church, first in the mid eighties and secondly, following much debate about his thoughts, through a unanimous decree issued in 2007 by the Holy Synod. Dr. George Habīb Bibāwī was a student of Father Mattá al-Miskín and was once a lecturer at the Coptic Orthodox Seminary. He was once very close to Pope Shenouda until they started to disagree in the late 1970s. He was suspended from teaching in 1980 as a result of a lecture he delivered in the Evangelical Theology Seminary in Cairo which Pope Shenouda and Bishop Bīshūy considered an attack against the teachings of the Orthodox Church.129 Bibāwī criticized Pope Shenouda in the early 1980s for mixing his religious leadership with politics. Bibāwī found a position at the Middle East Council of Churches but Pope Shenouda did not like this and he told the Council to fire Bibāwī who then left Egypt for and went to the UK where he taught at Nottingham and Cambridge Universities before moving to the United States and settling there as the dean of the Christian Orthodox Studies. Dr. Bibāwī has conducted many Coptic studies in which he disagrees with Pope Shenouda.130

However, there is another group of people who believe that the main reason Dr. Bibāwī was suspended was his refusal to attack Father Mattá al-Miskin's writings. Father Basilius al-Maqari perceives Bibāwī's case as the following “Dr. George Habīb Bibāwī, a doctor in theology from Cambridge University, was teaching from the sixties to the eighties of the last century at the Coptic Orthodox Theological Seminary in Anba Rues, and was asked to refute the writings of Fr. Mattá and to denounce him as a heretic from an academic theological point of view. But after reading the available writings, he stated that they are pure Orthodox. The church authorities rejected his findings and after 1985, he himself was banished from the church in a tragic manner.”

Dr. Bibāwī expressed the same view in an interview with Ākhīr Sā'ah magazine, when he indicated that his disagreement with Shenouda and Bishop Bīshīy began when he refused to attack Father Mattá al-Miskin.

In 2007, George Bibawi compiled a controversial study which accused Pope Shenouda of being a heretic and of violating the Christian doctrine. From the summary of the study printed in Rose al-Yūsuf, Bibāwī appeared to be trying to defend Father Mattá al-Miskín. In response to his study, the Committee of Dioceses issued a release responding to Dr. Bibāwī's paper which described it as mere slander. It further declared that Bibāwī did not belong to the Coptic Orthodox Church since he joined the Russian Orthodox Church, after he was first excommunicated by his own church. He was said to have joined the Evangelical Church in 1989.

On February 22, 2007, the Holy Synod of Orthodox Christians, headed by Pope Shenouda, decided unanimously to excommunicate Dr. George Habīb Bibāwī for a second time. The head and members of the Holy Synod considered Bibāwī's ideas to have strayed from the instructions of the church, and decided to prevent Bibāwī and all those who follow his ideas from practicing their religious rituals in the church. The Community Council further mentioned that Bibāwī used to teach at the seminary, Ta'štā branch. He published some of his ideas in 1983 in al-Hudā, a protestant periodical. Consequently, Pope Shenouda issued a decision to prevent him from teaching at the Coptic Orthodox clerical schools. He was said to publish false teachings in his book ‘al-Qiddis Athanasius fi Muwajahat al -Ta’īm al-Dīnī Ghayr al-Mastīhī’ [Saint Athanasius Facing the non-Orthodox Catechism]. Following this, Bibāwī joined the Russian Orthodox Church before joining the Evangelical Church on February 28, 1989, to entirely detach himself from the Coptic Orthodox Church, as it was printed in al-Kirāzah of July 23, 1989.

Much of the Coptic Orthodox Church’s anger over Bibāwī’s ideas stemmed from his perspective on human fellowship with God. Bibāwī refers to the biblical text “you may participate in the divine nature.” [2 Peter: 1:4]. Bibāwī is alleged to have changed the “in” in the holy text to a “with,” which was interpreted as making human beings gods.

134 ibid
This idea is considered to be the core of the heresy of “deifying man” which Bibāwī's opponents alleged he called for.\(^\text{135}\)

His controversial theological idea of “deifying man” was reflected in his book “al-Qiddis Athanasius al-Rasūlī fī Muwājahat al-Turāth al-Dīnī Ghayr al-Urthūdhuṣkhī [Saint Athanasius Versus the Religious Non Orthodox Tradition] which was rejected by the Committee of Diocesan affairs.

The book, which is approximately 200 pages long, was published in 1985 by the family of Saint Kyrillos ʿAmūd al-Dīn in the clerical school. The Committee of Diocesan Affairs rejected the book for containing deviated ideas. The committee further recommended that the Holy Synod Committee for Faith, Teaching and Legislation refute the “heretical” ideas of the book, especially those concerning the deification of Man, a decision approved of by some monks of Abū Maqār Monastery.\(^\text{136}\)

Furthermore, Bibāwī rejects the transformation of bread and wine into the body and the blood of Jesus Christ. Bibāwī advocates Martin Luther’s perspective on this issue. In 1983 he published an article in al-Huda Protestant publication entitled, ‘The Lord’s Supper and the Patriarchs,’ in which he advocates Luther’s theory in this response.\(^\text{137}\)

Furthermore, Bibāwī does not believe in priesthood. He argues that Christ was the only priest on Earth and in Heaven. He further considers the cross to only be a symbol of love rather than one of love and justice. This perspective cancels out the concept of punishment and paves the way for the “heresy” of the total salvation that denies the importance of faith and repentance.\(^\text{138}\)

Jesus’ body, born from the Virgin Mary, is free from sin, unlike all human beings. On the other hand, the church is always referred to as the body of Christ in which all Christians are members. Bibāwī confuses the two “bodies” and considers us, humans, free from sin as we are part of the body of Jesus which was originally free of sin, thus confusing the symbolic body of Christ with the physical being of Jesus Christ.\(^\text{139}\)

C.2. Banning a book by Father Anthony Coniaris

Another case of a work being banned in relation to Father Mattā al-Miskīn is the banning of a book entitled “al-Urthūduṣkhīyyah al-Sharqīyyah, Tāriq al-Hayāh (Oriental Orthodoxy, the Way of Life) authored by the Chalcedonian Greek Orthodox Father Anthony Coniaris, as published in Rose al-Yūsuf magazine.\(^\text{140}\)

\(^{135}\) Arab West Report, 2007 - 8 - 73, Watani February 25, 2007
\(^{137}\) Arab West Report, 2007 - 8 - 73, Watani February 25, 2007
\(^{138}\) ibid
\(^{139}\) ibid
\(^{140}\) Arab West Report, 2007- 28-42, Rose al-Yūsuf, July 12, 2007
Father Anthony M. Coniaris is a priest of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America. He has served the church for over 50 years mostly at St. Mary's Greek Orthodox Church in Minneapolis. He is a prolific Orthodox writer and also President of the Light and Life Publishing house.141

According to Rose al-Yūsuf, the justification for confiscating the book as put forth by the Holy Synod was that the book deifies humans, an ideology that is believed to be related to Father Mattá al-Miskīn. The article, however, seemed confused since the book had been translated under the supervision of Bishop Athanasius of Bani Mazar and al-Banasa, who also served for sometime as the secretary of the pope.142

C.3. “The Nature of Adam's Sin”, a controversial article leading to investigation

“The Nature of Adam's Sin” was an article written by Father Basilius al-Maqari. It was one in a series of published articles - published in the Sunday School Magazine - that presented the Biblical history of the creation of the first man and his fall.

The article explains the root of the teaching on what is called in Western Theology “Original Sin”.143 The article alluded to the fact that people care more about the world than spiritual life. This teaching goes back to St. Augustine of the fifth century in his book 'Original Sin' in which he refers to a Latin translation of the Gospel from the passage of Romans 5:12 that death passed upon all men in whom (Adam) all have sinned. The interpretation is that all men who came after Adam are guilty of Adam's sin. Basilius says that the reading in the Latin translation is different from the original Greek text which does not say that “in Adam all have sinned” but because of death all have sinned and because all have sinned all have died. Accordingly all men are not guilty of Adam's sin but their sins are their own choice.

The article, as it was presented in the Egyptian newspapers, Al-Sharq al-Awsat and Sawt al-Ummah, led to a crisis in the Egyptian Coptic Church because Father Basilius, as it was claimed, reflected in his article some of Father Mattá al-Miskīn's ideas. Al-Sharq al-Awsat newspaper mistakenly attributed a phrase to Father Basilius as if it is his own view while Father Basilius referred to it as the product of Catholic Theology.

The article in Al-Sharq al-Awsat about Father Basilius' article in the Sunday School Magazine resulted in the investigation of Akram Rifa'at Habīb, the director of the Sunday School Magazine and Monk Basilius al-Maqari who according to Al-Sharq al-Awsat was to be investigated by Pope Shenouda III himself.144

Father Basilius responded to RNSAW commenting on his article saying “I did not explain the views of Fr. Mattá and neither opposed those of Pope Shenouda. The article

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141 http://orthodoxwiki.org/Anthony_M._Coniaris
142 ibid
143 Al-Maqari, Basilius, “The Original Sin or The Ancestral Sin (the Origin of the teaching of Western Theology), Sunday School Magazine, September 2002.
is an effort to show the contrast between Western theological views (mainly Roman Catholic) on Original Sin in comparison to that of the Oriental Orthodox Churches (including the Coptic Orthodox Church). This theological issue is commonly and universally studied as a section in dogmatic theology in all theological schools at all Christian churches. Sawt al-Ummah's article is not accurate in interpreting the issue as a combat between the two great figures of the Coptic Church. It was harmful and not edifying. The whole item is politically oriented. The theological explanation of the two views about the issue of the Original Sin is not accurate. Father Basilius, however, did not comment on what was mentioned about the cases of the investigations Years later he stated he was never investigated.

Although this case does not represent censorship from the church side, it reflects an attitude in handling matters that it suspects to be against the Coptic Orthodox creed.

D. The church's attitude to censorship outside the ecclesiastic community

D.1. Al-Naba' crisis

This crisis exploded in 2001, when Al-Naba', an independent Egyptian weekly, published a story and pictures about the sexual activities of a defrocked monk, Adil Sädallah Ghobrial. The article presented the story as the activities of a monk in his monastery which was not true. This triggered widespread anger among Copts and caused unprecedented protests by thousands of young Copts. According to one paper Al-Naba' published a number of shameful, dishonorable, profane pictures of naked people that are against decency and general ethics. The article in Al-Naba' was considered humiliating not only to Copts but to all Egyptians and it was perceived as a threat to Egyptian national unity. The case was transferred to the Supreme Council for the Press who filed a lawsuit to ban Al-Naba' and the issue was then passed to the Egyptian courts. This importance of this case stems from a number of different aspects. It reflects the high value that 'religion' enjoys in Egyptian society, and how religious matters and affairs are sensitively being dealt with. Also, it gives an insight into how the Coptic Orthodox Church handles such cases, and to what extent it can play a role as the defender of the Coptic community, following a public request for censorship.

D.1.1. The incident

Mamdūh Mahran, the chief editor of the independent weekly newspaper Al-Naba' triggered a wave of condemnation and outrage in Egyptian society on June 17, 2001, when he published photographs of Adil Ghobrial, a defrocked monk, purportedly taken

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146 An Interview by Cornelis Hulsman, AWR, November 2008.
from videotapes made by the monk himself that showed him having sex with women. The first three pages of the paper were splashed with pornographic photos, and the language in the headlines was sexually explicit. Mahran clarified that he obtained the pictures from a videotape that was on sale Assuit for 100 LE. Mamdūh Mahran, the board chairman of Al-Naba’ and the author of the article published provocative headlines claiming the former monk “had sex with more than 5,000 women” inside the monastery which he “turned into a brothel.”

Adil Ghobrial, who assumed the clerical name Barsoum El-Muharraqi was defrocked and had been excommunicated for his deviant behavior five years earlier in 1996. However, it was very irritating to the readers that the articles published in Al-Naba’ failed to mention this, and also claimed that such sexual activities occurred in Dayr Al-Muharraq monastery, a claim that was hotly denied by the Coptic Orthodox Church. Dayr Al-Muharraq monastery is revered by Copts who believe that the Holy Family stayed there for six months during the flight to Egypt.

Al-Naba’/s circulation rocketed until a court order confiscated all copies. A similar story appeared the following day in a daily paper, Ākhir Khabar, a sister publication to Al-Naba’, which was also banned.

D.1.2. Coptic community uproar

The Al-Naba’ crisis provoked sectarian discord and has caused violent reactions among Copts. Al-Naba’ crisis began a new phenomenon that had not existed before; Coptic demonstrations. The significance of such expressed anger is that it reflects the element of the public request for censorship in Egyptian society where religion is highly valued and plays an important role in people’s life.

On the Sunday night, the day Al-Naba’ was published, thousands demonstrated inside and outside the Coptic Cathedral in Abbasiya, hurling stones at shops in the vicinity and clashing with police. The protests continued for four days inside the church, with the protesters barred by police from coming out. A heavy police presence outside the cathedral was visible.

Brandishing large wooden crosses and pictures of Mary and Jesus, the crowds chanted “With our blood and soul we sacrifice ourselves for the cross” and “we are not afraid, we

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are the sons of saints”. In addition, about 1,000 people staged protests at Dayr Al-Muharraq monastery.  155

The closure of *Al-Naba’* and Mahran’s trial topped the list of demands raised by the angry youths who protested for four days at the cathedral 156. According to Milad Hannā, a renowned Coptic intellectual and the author of several books on the Copts, what happened was an individual and exceptional case and not a general phenomenon. “Copts should not be so angry” he said.  157

Samīr Marqus, an expert on Coptic affairs, the Coptic reaction was “an unusual and novel phenomenon, which will impact, for a while, sensitive Muslim-Christian relations.” According to Marqus, such protests were the first to be staged by Copts in modern history. “Throughout history, the church has been the Copts’ safe haven at times of tension and pressure. This time the unexpected stab targeted and defamed the church itself. This is the message that hurt Copts, even the laymen among them”, he argued.  158

**D.1.3. The Coptic Orthodox Church response to the *Al-Naba’* crisis**

In response to the angry Copts, Pope Shenouda III urged Copts to stay calm and refrain from protests. Pope Shenouda said “There is no justification for dealing with the situation in an agitated way”.  159

On the other hand, Pope Shenouda insisted that he would not address Copts at his weekly meeting unless the court ruled to close *Al-Naba’*.  160 It took him two weeks to return to his weekly lectures, the time it took the Administrative Court to look into the lawsuit started by the Supreme Press Council to withdraw the license of *Al-Naba’* paper.  161

Pope Shenouda's decision reflects the approach that the church adopts with the state when the Coptic community faces challenges or problems. The church expresses its rejection in a way that keeps the channels for dialogue open. It does not follow the confrontational approach, which it once adopted during Sādāt's regime and which did not help but worsened the situation, as explained in Chapter two.

The church sharply criticized the lengthy article saying that it fanned sectarian discord. “The subject touches and hurts Christian morals, provokes sectarian discord and has

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155 “Unprecedented Show of Coptic Anger”, Al-Ahram Weekly On-line, 21-27 June 2001, Issue No. 539
http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2001/539/eg6.htm
157 ibid
158 ibid
caused violent reactions among Copts”, said a separate statement from the Coptic Orthodox Church, which was read out on state-run television.\textsuperscript{162}

Pope Shenouda's statement which was read out in a church in Cairo by his official spokesman called on Egypt's Coptic community to preserve the peace and stop rallies against the newspaper.\textsuperscript{163}

Bishop Yu'annis, Pope Shenouda's spokesman, told a mass of Copts on a Monday morning at Saint Mark's Cathedral in Abasiya district in Cairo: There is no reason to deal with the issue impulsively, especially after the state adopted immediate positive measures to appease the situation, realize social peace and maintain national unity.\textsuperscript{164}

The paper's publication was stopped and other security and judicial procedures were taken to prevent the recurrence of such practices. The bishop described the publication as a sensational yellow press paper that has been used to publishing scandals and exaggerate matters to cause chaos and instigate public opinion.\textsuperscript{165}

Pope Shenouda was quoted as saying that the state had taken swift measures to "calm the situation, guarantee social peace and preserve national unity."\textsuperscript{166} Only after the decision to close the newspaper and revoking its license on July 4, 2001, did Pope Shenouda resume his weekly meetings with Coptic youth at the Coptic Cathedral in Abbasiya, where he began his address by thanking the court for the wise decision and President Husni Mubārak for the way he dealt with the crisis.\textsuperscript{167}

The pope rejected a reconciliation request from \textit{Al-Naba}'s editor-in-chief. In the meantime, \textit{Al-Kirazah} magazine, which is edited by Pope Shenouda, expressed satisfaction at the way the nation had handled the crisis in an article titled 'Finally things have calmed down!' The magazine published a picture of president Husni Mubārak and the pope with comments praising and confirming Mubārak's stance, and the way the security forces handled the crisis.\textsuperscript{168}

On the other hand, a decision by Pope Shenouda to limit visits to monasteries throughout Egypt raised a few eyebrows. “It is the wrong time to announce this decision”, said one Copt who preferred to remain anonymous. “Now some people might say that what was published in \textit{Al-Naba}' about Dayr Al-Muharraq may have been correct, and that is why the pope decided to regulate the visits”, he added.\textsuperscript{169}

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{162} ibid
\bibitem{163} ibid
\bibitem{165} ibid
\bibitem{169} ibid
\end{thebibliography}
D.1.4. Consequences of the uproar

a) *al-Naba'*s Editor-in-Chief

Twenty four hours after the improper photographs were published in *Al-Naba'* and *Ākhir Khabar*, Hishām Badawī, Higher State Security General Lawyer, decided to refer Mahran to the Emergency State Security Court.\(^{170}\)

The charges included two separate crimes, one for each newspaper. The one for *Al-Naba'* accused Mahran of:

1. Publishing material to harm public security and interests...in the paper's issue of June 17...a story on the conduct of a former monk, in a way that threatens Christianity and the Egyptian Church's administration, thus stirring up the public and damaging society's traditions, values, and national unity.
2. Urging (the public) to disrespect Christian clergymen.
3. Distributing and selling copies of the June 17 issue, including improper sentences and photographs.
4. Publishing material that may affect justice.
5. Publishing material to degrade Christian clergymen.\(^{171}\)

The Egyptian Journalists Syndicate Council decided to strip Mamdūh Mahran and his son Háitim Mahran, a journalist, of the syndicate's membership. Prosecutor General Māhir Abd al-Wahid decided to ban Mamdūh Mahran from traveling abroad. Counselor ʿAlī Abd al-Shakūr, judge of the South Cairo Court, decided to hold a summary trial for the editors-in-chief of *Al-Naba'* and *Ākhir Khabar* newspapers for violating public decency and publishing pictures about the sexual adventures of a disgraced Coptic monk.\(^{172}\)

The attorney office demanded that Mahran be punished according to the Penal Law and Press Law. Mamdūh Mahran testified before Muhammad Al-Faisal of the Higher State Security Attorney's Office that he was the first and only person responsible for what was published in the two papers.\(^{173}\)

The 57-year old Mahran astonishingly said that he had no regrets. He claimed that his true intention was to “protect the church and deliver a message to Pope Shenouda that there were corrupt elements that he needed to get rid of”. He said that he did not seek confirmation from the church about Adil Ghobrial's status beforehand “because I never seek permission from anybody before publishing what I want to publish”.\(^{174}\)

\(^{171}\) ibid
b) The publication of the paper

Led by professor Mustafā Kamāl Hilmī, (speaker of the Shūrā Council), the Supreme Council of the Press decided to file a lawsuit to ban Al-Naba' newspaper. The council condemned the publication of improper photographs that threaten society's values and higher interests. The council stressed that the paper flagrantly violated the morals and values of Egyptian society and the journalists' code of ethics and in so doing tampered with national unity.

The court decided to confiscate the paper's editions in which the story was published, Ahmad Fathi Surūr, People's Assembly Speaker said. The Supreme Council for the Press condemned the publication of obscene photographs of the monks by Al-Naba' newspaper breaking the norms and values of society and its national unity.

On May 29, 2002, the High Administrative Court gave its ruling that the newspaper should be allowed to be published again. The court stated that after looking at the case papers and the law, it had not found anything that called for cancellation of their license to publish the newspaper. The court added that it condemned what the newspaper had published by exposing the private life of an Egyptian citizen. However, the court must abide by the rules of the Constitution, and it could not do anything other than apply the law. According to the law, the journalist responsible for the crisis was taken to the criminal court and sentenced to two years in prison with labor. Hence, it took the paper approximately one year - from June 2001 till May 2002 - to re-appear.

Before the court issued its ruling Pope Shenouda said that he did not know what the reaction of Copts would be if the court allowed the newspaper to be published again. He said that he would not comment no matter what the ruling was. A source in the Coptic Orthodox Church said that some Copts were angry, but no one was willing to comment on the ruling of the court.

c) Official state response

Following the crisis, Mubārak met with Pope Shenouda in Alexandria, a clear sign to the Coptic community that their protests and anger were of great concern to the government. The closure of Al-Naba' and Mahran's trial topped the list of demands raised by the angry youths who held protests over four days at the cathedral.

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175 Arab West Report, 2001-25-9, Al-Ahrām, June 21, 2001
178 Arab-West Report, 2002-23-21, Al-Ushūr, June 10, 2002
179 ibid
High ranking church sources revealed part of what took place during the meeting between President Mubārak and Pope Shenouda; saying that they talked about Coptic problems and concerns. The pope also declared to members of the Community council that among his proposals for solving these problems was the formation of a committee of the wise men of the state whose task would be to study Coptic positions and determine the causes of problems, which could be the reason for the pope concealing the details of his meeting with the president.181

The bishops who attended the pope's meeting with some of the state's representatives, like the member of parliament Dr. Mustafā Al-Fiqi and Ambassador Majid Abd al-Fattah, the president's secretary, demanded solutions for the Coptic problems in Egypt. Among the problems mentioned were the freedom to establish churches without restriction and granting them (Copts) a larger share of the state's posts.182

Egyptian President Husni Mubārak declared in a meeting with the National Democratic Party's (NDP) parliamentary delegation of the Shūrā Council that we have to stick to our values, specially religious ones as well as our social traditions. President Mubārak affirmed that when talking about religious values, he means the values of all religions.183

President Mubārak said that the Al-Naba' issue had been decisively dealt with, and added that he refused to use the Emergency Law in any press-related issue, stressing that the press syndicate took the initiative and took necessary measures to deter the people responsible. Mubārak referred to the issue being dealt with by the Egyptian court stressing that the judiciary in Egypt was independent and that no one had the right to interfere with it.184

The People’s Assembly Speaker, Ahmad Fathi Surūr, assured that the government and court performed their duty by confiscating the paper's edition in which the issue was published and this decision should be respected, he said.185

Surūr reaffirmed that the parliament protects public morals and national unity as well as press freedom that is restricted out of respect for public order and society's values. He indicated that the government took as such action to protect ethics and national unity.186

It is worth noting that Egyptian society is religious. Religion has a high significance for people. Consequently, religious affairs are dealt with sensitively. Cases such as Al-Naba' crisis, are more or less perceived as an insult to religions, thus decisive action was taken by the state. The significance of this incident is that it reflects an important element; people's request for censorship. Al-Naba' not only triggered the anger of the Coptic

182 Arab West Report, 2001-28-25, Al-Usbūr, July 16, 2001
184 ibid
186 ibid
Orthodox Church but also the Coptic community. The thousands of angry Copts who demonstrated at Abbasia Cathedral - as indicated earlier – were primarily calling for the closure of the paper. Most of the time, such cases are not considered as a threat to freedom of expression, since they are perceived by the public as offensive and insulting.

B.2. Television and film

As explained earlier, the Coptic Orthodox Church increasingly started to imitate the role of the Azhar regarding monitoring television and Cinema productions (whether Arabic or foreign) that display Coptic or Christian affairs. It pressures the state censorship authority to ban them if found to be against what it believes to be the true belief. In certain cases, The Coptic Orthodox Church expressed its rejection of certain movies whether they were intended for cinema or television considering them to be insulting or contradictory to the true belief. However, even though the Coptic Orthodox Church has expressed its disapproval it does not always lead to the actual practice of censorship; however, it does reflect the attitude of the Coptic Orthodox Church. Bahib al Sima is one such controversial Egyptian movie that aroused fears among both the Coptic clergy and Coptic community. It is quite interesting that such a tone of rejection expressed by a number of Coptic Orthodox Church clergymen had repercussions among the Coptic community.

B.2.1. Bahib al-Sima

Bahib al-Sima (I Love Cinema) released in 2004, is a controversial movie that aroused the fury of many even before it was shown. For the first time in Egypt, the film explicitly depicted an Egyptian Christian family within a social framework.187 It does not include any theological or dogmatic issues.188 Critics of the film said that the film included scenes which portray Christians as "morally depraved".189 The fact that it is related to religion, made some suggest that the film first be shown to the church for its opinion, although it has no doctrinal or dogmatic content. According to some sources, the movie focused mainly on the negative aspects of the Coptic family, neglecting the positive sides.

The Egyptian Church was silent on the issue. Leaflets were distributed in some areas asking Christians to boycott the film. Some priests accused the film of being disrespectful toward religion. Sawt Al-Ummah newspaper received e-mails asking Christians not to watch the film because it insults their religion. The main problem with the film was that Christians had wanted to see an ideal Christian family depicted in the film. However, the film did not do this. It was clear that the storm against the film was Christian in the first place, and most attacks came from Christian Egyptians whose lives had been portrayed in this film for the first time and with unprecedented courage.190 In response, Lawyer Najib Jibrail filed a case on behalf of a group of angry clerics. Gabriel and his team of priests

190 ibid
and lawyers filed a case against the film in the emergency court, on the grounds that Bahib al-Sima poses a great risk to the Egyptian community because of its allegedly demeaning portrayal of Copts, ridiculing of Christian doctrines, and portrayals of religious extremism.\footnote{Al Rashidi, Yassmine, Al-Ahram Weekly Online, 12 - 18 August 2004, Issue No. 703, http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2004/703/eg7.htm}

The film triggered a debate on the church's role in supervising artistic material. Clergymen demanded that the church be consulted on works that are in any way related to religion.\footnote{Arab West Report, 2004-25-40} Clergymen do not see the church's role in supervising artistic work as an encroachment on creativity. Father Marqus 'Aziz Khalīl asked in al-Maydān for similar rights for Christian clergy as for Muslim scholars when it concerns a Muslim subject “Is it the right of any Muslim to write about an Islamic issue of which he is totally ignorant, especially if he uses Qur’ānic verses? Is it right to say that soliciting the Azhar's opinion stifles these artists' creativity?” He added, “We are not asking for the church to become a censorship authority, but in order not to offend the audience and the nation, there are some matters that must be discussed, especially matters related to the church. Since when are Copts as strict as portrayed by the film? The film does not portray the true Coptic family, so what is the aim of producing it?” Khalīl wonders.\footnote{ibid}

On the other side, Monk Basilius, one of Father Mattā Al-Miskīn's close disciples, was stunned by the clergy's storm in a teacup debate about the movie Bahib al-Sima. According to him, the movie is a secular work that cannot be judged by the church. Father Basilius wonders who encouraged Coptic youth to demonstrate at the Coptic cathedral confirming that such demonstrations are a new phenomenon that was initiated by Al-Naba' crisis.\footnote{Arab West Report, 2004 – 35 – 24, Al-Hayah, August 25, 2004}

Father Basilius believes that the movie is a social one, hence, it should be judged from a social point of view and not a religious one. He believes that the movie manipulated the lack of Copts that are presented on film in various social fields. It depicts only the negative aspects of the Coptic family, neglecting the positive sides. Such a random approach to depicting issues does not yield social reform; it leads to national fractions.

Dr. Jabir Asfūr told al-Ahrām al-‘Arabī that the Censorship Authority is a civil institution working within the civil sector of the state. The works presented to the authorities are screened from an artistic point of view, he said. That is why the opinion of the Azhar or the church is not requested. The final decision is made by the staff at the Censorship Authority. Asfūr explained that every other opinion is merely consultation, and is not imposed by law.\footnote{ibid} The Censorship Authority, on the other hand, screened the film before a committee of intellectuals, half of whom were Christian. All the committee members expressed their enthusiasm for the movie.\footnote{ibid}
Dr. Madkūr Thabit, head of Censorship Authority, asserted that Bahīb al-Sima was not screened before church priests. Some people indeed suggested that the film be screened before religious figures but this was only a suggestion and nothing more. Nevertheless, rumors spread that the Censorship Authority took a decision to involve the church which was totally incorrect; he told *al-Qāhirah* paper on June 22, 2004.

Despite the storm the film caused among significant number of clergymen, the film was released and shown on Egyptian T.V.

**Conclusion**

According to the legal framework provided earlier, Christian religious institutions have no right to ban or confiscate any productions, literature, or artwork. In addition, the Ministerial Council is the body entitled with confiscating any material that could be perceived as defaming religion. But, religious institutions are to be consulted when productions present doctrinal issues or narrate stories about prophets. However, the actual practice shows increasing consideration is given to recommendations made by religious institutes regarding productions involving religion. This could be understood in the light of poor state-run bodies, the general political, and social atmosphere prevailing in society, and the rise of religious movements/institutions such as the Coptic Orthodox Church and the Islamization of the state, which in return increased the value of religion in Egyptian society.

The Coptic Orthodox Church practices censorship within its ecclesiastic spheres in order to protect the true Orthodox belief. Such practice was highlighted through Fr. Mattā al-Miskīn's books and other related cases which provide an insight into how freedom of expression is perceived in the Coptic Orthodox Church. Some Coptic laymen and human right activists perceive this practice as threatening to freedom of thought and creativity.

On one hand, the church has the absolute right to oppose ideas or thoughts as contradictory to the true Orthodox creed. But on the other hand, it cannot ban new theological studies that might be considered as valuable to a wide sector of the public as in the case of Fr. Mattā al-Miskīn's theological books. Some Copts argue that the church monopolizes the interpretation of the Orthodox creed, and does not allow different theological views. This, in some cases, reaches the extent of excommunicating the authors of such books.

Another important type of censorship that is practiced by the Coptic Orthodox Church is preventing the flow of information. The Coptic Orthodox Church is very cautious regarding the information it makes available to the public. There is hardly any transparency regarding the management of internal affairs and problems in the church, which makes it very hard to objectively examine the attitude of the Coptic Orthodox Church. This is worrying, as it threatens to harm the Coptic Orthodox Church itself by having untrue, incorrect, or fabricated information published in newspapers on some Coptic issues without knowing exactly the context within which such troubles appeared or the true background of such claimed allegations that are published in newspapers.
Within the outer realm of society at large, the church has less authority than that practiced within its own sphere. It does not have the authority to ban or confiscate any productions, however it can express its objections. That was precisely what happened in the *Al-Naba’* crisis when Pope Shenouda III refused to give his weekly religious lectures and the church informed the censorship authorities of its objections. This also happens in cases where the church finds it necessary to ban a work which is what happened with *Al-Naba’* newspaper. The Coptic Orthodox Church also issued a declaration rejected the Da Vinci Code film, case which was not discussed in this paper, and expressed its opposition to the film to the censorship authorities. In return, Fārūq Husnī, the minister of culture asked the Censorship Authority to ban the movie because it goes against the values of Egyptian society and insults religions. However, in other cases like the Bahib al-Cima case, the church remained silent in spite of the anger expressed by some clergymen. Hence, it can be said that outside the ecclesiastic realm, the church plays more the role of the observer, and intervenes by expressing its protest when necessary.

Because of its status as the main representative of the Coptic community, the protests of the Coptic Orthodox Church are taken into account by state authorities. This could be read from the way the state treats Coptic protests where contact is immediately made with Coptic Orthodox Church authorities. The manner in which church recommendations and demands are considered can be seen from the way the state handled the *Al-Naba’* crisis. This again reflects the significant role and position played by the Coptic Orthodox Church where the state consults the church in Coptic-related problems in order to receive some sort of direction in the way it handles such crises.

One of the implicit effects of the wide anger expressed by the Coptic community in cases like the *Al-Naba’* crisis, or Bahib al-Sima, is that it has become a practice to consult Coptic Church authorities before releasing works that tackle Coptic affairs, in order to get implicit permission from the church side. Christian responses toward the above mentioned issues have resulted in a growing self-censorship when it comes to tackling Coptic affairs, criticizing or differing from the Coptic Orthodox Church.

**Appendix**

**Comments added by Dr. Amin Makrām Ubayd**

Reviewing the paper by Abrar al-Ghannam on “Religious censorship in Egypt.”

Dr. Amin Makrām Ubayd

To start with, I need to note that this paper was given a rather restrictive title because the study, when reviewed, was found to have gone beyond censorship since it included a very

interesting analysis of Coptic-Muslim and Coptic-Governmental interactions. It therefore seems to me that the paper would benefit from a more inclusive title. Nonetheless I could not find a better one.

As I see it, my assignment will have to be selective if only because of the length of the paper. But it is important to note that this paper may be divided into two major parts:
1- The first part deals with background remarks.
2- The second part deals specifically with the Coptic Orthodox Church.

I will insert remarks or suggestions directed to the author in red. On the other hand comments on the findings of Ms al-Ghannam will be inserted in blue.

**My first suggestion is that it seems to me that the author should have made this divisions of her study in two parts (1 & 2) much clearer.**

**In Part I.**

The first paragraphs of the paper (section A) include introductory remarks and the methodology.

Let me now go straight to (section B) by commenting on the passage entitled 'The Concept of Censorship.'

Ms al-Ghannam noted that censorship refers to the act of controlling or suppressing ideas. Accordingly censorship is highly objectionable in the West as opposed to what is observed in countries under authoritarian regimes.

Ms al Ghamnam then added that in some cases it is the public itself that calls for censorship of material deemed harmful. This is important because when religious teaching is concerned, the faithful would like to be informed on the orthodoxy of the material at hand. Thus in the Catholic Church when a believer buys a religious book from a bookshop, he can easily find out whether the book teaches the orthodox doctrine or not; by looking at the beginning (or end) of the book for a so called “Imprimatur” (which refers to a license by a bishop or his delegate to publish the book. For more reassurance the church also adds a “Nihil Obstat” (Latin for “nothing hinder it”) (from bring printed). The buyer thus knows ahead of time whether what he is about to read conforms to the teaching of his church. This form of censorship may thus be regarded as directions offered to the faithful since nothing can prevent him/her from buying a book without ab Imprimatur or Nihil Obstat, unless the country is ruled by this or that particular Church (The Vatican is possibly the only such state today).

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198 Orthodoxy here refers here to true teaching in reference to standards admitted by the Church to which the faithful belongs (such as the Eastern Orthodox Church, the Lutheran Church, the Catholic Church etc….)

The next reflection on censorship is whether this form of suppression of ideas may or may not be implemented. This is important, because censorship without teeth is impotent. And this seems to be the case in Western countries where the church has no power to apply its desire to censor material on bookstores. The most it can do is to withhold an “Imprimatur” and exercise its pastoral prerogative over the faithful. Even the Vatican has no such power, even if it declares a book heretic. This is so since such a book may or may not be purchased in the Vatican Bookshop, but it could easily be purchased simply by crossing a street into Rome where no such restriction is implemented.

In other words it seems that if censorship is to be effective it will need to be actuated in countries where the sacred and the secular are fused. In such instances the state will act as the secular arm of the church, mosque or synagogue. Thus all that the church can do is to downgrade censorship into a guide for the faithful. And I think this is generally also all the power that the Coptic Church has. But, as shown by Ms al-Ghannam, the Coptic Church may- (as it had done)- utilize the secular arm of the state to suppress the distribution of books deemed dangerous to faith or morals such as was the case with Dan Brown’s Da Vinci Code.

On the other hand in Islamic countries like Egypt, the Muslim religious authorities have greater ability to suppress publications or respond to their allegations since, more often than not, the separation of the secular from the sacred is either absent or poorly delineated.

Ms al-Ghannam added to her analysis of censorship a contrast between the state suppression of potentially valuable ideas such as found in political censorship. This contrast- as she noted- with self imposed, or state controlled censorship, of material deemed a threat to moral values and or ethics. She also noted that the security of a nation will –very appropriately- impose military censorship especially in times of war.

In the next section of her study on censorship Ms al-Ghannam brought out the damage inherent in censorship which “threatens not only freedom of expression and opinion, but also freedom of creation and thinking, as well as other views, religious and non religious”. The author was right to point out the effect of censorship on the variety of religious views, since such an intellectual paralysis may prevent the regular reader from recognizing the valid views and beliefs of the “other” which could have been a source of trans religious enrichment. As for the rest of her statement, the history of science has demonstrated that scientific development and inventiveness requires absolute freedom to be actuated. The same could be said about the development of art in its various forms.

200 Although such books could be found in the Vatican Library.
201 This book may be classified as a very successful suspense story. On the other hand it was blasphemous from a religious standpoint. The response in the West was not censorship but counter-books that exposed the fallacies of the original book. And this was more beneficial in the search for accuracy than censorship.
202 Such prohibiting the sale of specific material in the country. Alternatively, translation from European languages into Arabic of books felt to be critical to Islam have been published with a long introduction that defends “the facts” as seen by Muslim authorities.
Part I ends with paragraphs marked C and stretching from C1 to C3.

In these sections; Ms El Ghannam certainly worked hard to document what specific laws protects the freedom of expression as opposed to the existing loophole that may limit such a freedom.

The following examples will suffice:-

C1- This segment include the following assertions:-
   i)-According to article 46 of the Egyptian constitution; the state guaranties the freedom of belief as well as the freedom to practice religion.
   ii)-Article 47 guaranties freedom of opinion
   iii)-Article 48 guaranties freedom of the press and prohibits censorship.

But the Constitution also recognizes that it is limited by the rules of existing Egyptian laws. Moreover Egypt’ Emergency laws (No 162 of 1958 amended in 1967) gives broad powers to the president. These include: censorship, confiscation and closure of newspapers.

The author of this paper was right in devoting many paragraphs (enclosed in eight pages) on the limitations suffered by the press or other agencies.
As an illustration Ms al-Ghannam noted that article 21 (of law No 20/1936) gives “the Minister of Interior the right to prevent the distribution of knowledge which is among the fundamental human rights”

Ms al-Ghannam then proceeded to offer instances of possible use or abuse of existing laws and regulations in limiting the freedom of expression. This is important in a study of censorship since only the state has the power of enforce it, by using the resources and power of the state such as in the confiscation of national and foreign newspapers and publications.

A. According to decree 350 of 1970 by the Minister of Culture, shooting cultural and commercial movies need to be supervised by the ministry. {This was not explicitly noted by the author of this paper}. If this is true then the ministry may find itself changing - by its decrees - a cultural production into state propaganda..
B. Ministerial decree No 220 did issue reasonable censorship on cultural or artistic productions that present drug addiction as praiseworthy, or gambling as an accepted source of income, or else idealizing criminals as heroes.
C. On the other hand the same decree can be used to muzzle freedom of expression such as could follow discussion of other religions, or of atheism. Similarly prohibiting “the introduction of social problems in a way that provokes despair” may deprive the reader of means to understand the social problem much better and find means to instill hope out of the horrible state of despair.

203 Which constitutes 10% of the entire study.
Before developing the main theme of her paper, the author felt it appropriate to study the dominant role of the Egyptian State on the religious institutions (as shown in section D)

I will use a few illustrations of the many examples introduced by Ms. al-Ghannam.

6. Thus the Egyptian legislation protects “heavenly religious beliefs” by making violation punishable under Egypt’s Penal Code. Depending on the contents of the publication under question, this could contradict the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights in which article 18 states that: Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscious and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief…There was no mention of heavenly religions. Also the declaration implicitly –but clearly- recognized the freedom to believe in no particular religion. It is of note that Egypt was one of the signatories of this historical declaration.

7. In a clear example of lack of separation of the sacred from the secular, the Egyptian government declared in a legal framework (Article 15 of law 103/1962) that the Islamic Research Academy (IRA) is the supreme authority for Islamic research. This was reinforced in a Presidential decree (No 250 of 1975) which states the IRA is to follow up on what is published about Islam and shall issue recommendations to those who work in the field of Islamic culture.

8. Further examples of the lack of the separation of the sacred from the secular, which the author mentioned without the above comment; In 1994, the Council of State (Majlis el Dawla) issued a ruling stating that the Azhar is the final arbiter in the assessment of Islamic values whose opinion is binding for the Ministry of Culture concerning granting or refusing the license for audio and audio-visual productions about Islamic subjects. Another example offered by Ms. al Ghannam, notes that:- The Minister of Justice, Faruq Sayf al Nasr, issued a decree in July 2003 which gave 10 officers of the Azhar the authority of law enforcement, allowing them to bring distributors before the court for distributing copies of the Holy Qur’ān and the Hadith books that were not authorized by the Azhar and containing material offending Islam and dissenting from the rules of law No. 102 of 1985. Ms al-Ghannam then remarked – very appropriately- that “the true explanation of Islam has become the monopoly of the Azhar, an institution under the authority of the state, and thus Islam nationalized for the sake of those who belong to the Azhar institution. The consequence is that whoever expresses beliefs outside the orbit of the Azhar is considered an infidel”.

9. Ms. al-Ghannam was correct in uncovering the legally binding opinion of the Supreme Court (the highest judicial authority in Egypt) on the assumed role of the Azhar. She also noted that the conclusion of the court was that “the only body authorized to ban the circulation of any publications that defame religion in a threatening way is the Ministerial Council (i.e. not the Azhar) as stated in the imprints law no.20 of 1936. Consequently it is very clear that the official religious institutes have no legitimacy to censor freedom of publishing. But the author of
this paper could have concluded that the censorship prerogative has simply been moved from a religious institution (the Azhar) to a secular one (the Ministerial Council). On the other hand she could have also remarked that it seems that the Azhar has been deprived –by the Supreme Court -of its role as a religious guide in Islamic affairs in order to benefit the government.

10. The author then tackled the power that the church has in enforcing church censorship. Thus, noted Ms al-Ghannam, “the Coptic Church goes beyond censorship to trial within the church and expulsion from the church”. I am not sure what the author means by the term beyond censorship, since her own definition of censorship is the “act of controlling or suppressing ideas”. This means that for censorship to be effective it needs to be enforceable. And enforceability can be obtained by various means. These may include confiscation of printed matter or audio visual productions, or expropriation of a printing press, or imprisonment, or else the use of more violent means such as the one suffered by the Islamic scholar Abū Zayd who had to flee the country. The reason why the church deals with censorship may or may not be appropriate. For instance to censor Galileo was certainly not appropriate. On the other hand excommunication may be appropriate in doctrinal matters since individual churches often vary in the understanding of dogmas. Thus it would make no sense for a Coptic Orthodox communicant to teach a doctrine that is accepted by the Anglican Church but rejected by the Coptic Church, when the honest course, to be taken, would have been for such teachers to require admission to the Anglican Church. Thus the Coptic Church would be within its right to submit such teachers to an ecclesiastic trial. Then if found guilty of teaching heretical material, the tribunal may ask such individuals to abstain from teaching what the church -to which he belongs-believes to be an erroneous doctrine, or else to leave this particular church. On the other hand I personally believe that it would be very damaging to the spiritual or intellectual health of the church if a teacher was censored –by that church-for a political reason or in order to suppress ideas, since I believe it would be fair to espouse the view (championed by Vatican II and Pope Jean Paul II) that “the way in which truth is sought must be in keeping with man’s dignity and his social nature – that is by searching freely with the help of instruction or education ...through communication and dialogue” 204 This means that the search for truth, even if it leads to false doctrine, is more acceptable than to espouse a correct dogma without believing its premises

It seems to me that this last segment should have been included in Part II of the paper.

- The author then noted that the church follows the same path as the Azhar in expressing its objection to art display that disparages Christianity. But this is not censorship if the objection is appropriate. This is why it would be hard to establish general guidelines, since each case should be judged according to its merits.

204 John Paul II, Pope : Crossing the Threshold of Hope, quoting from (Dignitatis Humanae of Vatican II) Random House, NY, 1994
In Part II.

The author has now arrived at the intended subject of her study which deals with religious censorship in Egypt.

The Introductory remarks on the Coptic Church are good, and the author has done her homework well.

But some historical errors under B 2 need to be brought up:-

6- The author states that “the Church in Egypt remained loyal to the deposed Patriarch of Alexandria and refused to recognize any Non–Chalcedonian patriarch”. The fact is that the Egyptian Church refused to acknowledge any Chalcedonian patriarch205.

7- The author mentioned that “the Egyptian Copts did not oppose the invading Arabs in 641”. This is partially true- on account of the harsh Byzantine treatment of the Egyptian Christians. But there were instances of resistance. Moreover the Copts expressed a severe distaste to abandon their religion for another of which they knew nothing – since they could not even speak the language of the conquerors. They also did not like the promise of ongoing subjugation 206. Thus when the Mukawkis tried to reason with the Christians to keep their religion and pay the Jizyah and be subject to Muslim domination, the response of the Christians was one of indignation. They answered the Mukawkis with an anguished question:- “Will we be slaves forever?” to which Mukawkis answered “yes but your properties and lives will be protected”. Mukawkis also argued with the Christians that armed resistance would be futile207. The Egyptian Jews -on the other hand- had little to lose by exchanging a harsh master from another creed with one also of a different religion but who promised to be more liberal and, unlike the Egyptian Christians, offered help and guidance to the conquerors.208

8- The author has to be congratulated for the rest of paragraph B2 (to which I made the above comments). She also wrote a good informative summary on the state of the church under Presidents Nāsir, Sādāt and Mubārak.

9- At this point, the story of the introduction of the Shari‘ah Law (see B 2.1.) into the Egyptian legal system is worth commenting upon. Thus it is understandable that Muslims may resent the Coptic resistance to the Islamization of the legal system. And yet no Muslim would like to be judged under Christian Canonic

205 In 451 AD, the Coptic Church refused to accept the doctrine pronounced by the Ecumenical Council in Chalcedon and it therefore became Non-Chalcedonian
206 An agreement subject to annual re-assessment by the conquerors (quoting Ibn Abdel Hakam p.68 in Tagher’ Coptes et Musulmans. Le Caire, 1952)
208 Ibid pp 39-50
Laws. Moreover this would be contrary to the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights which states in Article 7 that “All are entitled without any discrimination to EQUAL protection of the law”. It is obvious that a legal system that applies the religious law of one specific creed, will serve the segment of the population that belongs to this creed better than the segments of the population that do not espouse this religion. Sometimes this legal discrimination could be carried at the expense of the other groups of the same population such as in case of mixed marriages. This why it is surprising, as noted by the author that “Muslim resented what they perceived as unnecessary Coptic interference in a specific Muslim issue.” Obviously this ceases to be a specifically Muslim issue when the Sharī’ah is applied on non-Muslims. Nonetheless the “government amended the constitution in 1980 to acknowledge the Sharī’ah law as being the PRINCIPLE source of legislation” as a result “the Pope cancelled the 1980 Easter celebration and retired with the church hierarchy to a desert monastery”.

10- The next segments of the paper address the research of Rafiq Habīb.(see C) Unfortunately the author did not indicate the source of her information (was it a chapter in Abd al-Latif al-Minawī’s book) 03 the date of the study (1992?). This needs to be done. This segment of the study is interesting because it tackles the subject of the relationship between the church and state which; according to Rafiq Habīb, has fluctuated between separation and association. From a Christian standpoint the two should be separate in order to obey Christ specific order to “render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Mt:22 , 22) This last verse clearly indicates that Christians should serve both Caesar and God without confusing the two. Thus from a spiritual perspective, the church is expected to guide its flock to serve God the best it can. But there is no specific Christian political message209, save that which calls for virtue which is “the habitual and firm disposition to do good”. In other words the political directives in Christianity are not legislations but the acquisition of human virtues which should become stable dispositions of the intellect and the will that govern our acts210. More specifically this means that a Christian working in the world is expected to exercise 1- Prudence by which practical reason is used to discern the true good and chose the right means for achieving it.2- Justice which is the constant will to give God and neighbors their due. 3- Fortitude which ensures firmness in difficulties and constancy in the pursuit of the good. 4- Temperance which moderates the attraction of the pleasures. All these virtues grow through education, deliberate acts and perseverance in struggle.211 With the perfection of such general principles a Christian is now ready to acquire the secular know how that will serve his people best.

11- The next segment deals with Dr Habīb remarks on the Neo-Clergy which is the clergy that has roots in the Sunday School movement. He noted-as reported by Ms al-Ghannam- that this clergy has attracted more followers after the Arab defeat by

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209 Such as found in Judaism and Islam.
210 Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) 1833 Libraria Editrice Vaticana
211 -CCC No.1835-to -1839
Israel in 1967. The movement associated with the Neo-Clergy became most noticeable in the second half of the 1960s and consisted in a revival of faith. It soon became an entity that acted as an alternative to Egyptian society at large. The movement was associated with a heightened social identity and awareness. Unfortunately – as aptly noted by Ms al-Ghannam- this movement came “at the cost of withdrawal from the wider Egyptian society”. The result is the observed self imposed ghetto mentality that has afflicted Coptic society possibly as a reaction to the rising Islamization of society. On the other hand it may be possible to get out of this cultural ghetto by utilizing what the church has included in its social program what may get her out of this intellectual and social ghetto, namely:- Education and training.

This has been made possible because –as noted by Ms. al-Ghannam-; “the church filled the vacuum left by the state.” And as it turned out “The Coptic Orthodox Bishopric of public, ecumenical and social services provides material assistance, educational classes, literacy programs and job training” There should also be richly funded grants which should correct the possible state discrimination in offering them. This policy- if understood correctly and carried out wisely-, may have a long lasting effect since it may very well allow Copts to get out of their ghettos into the wider Egyptian society through the door of excellence. For what is needed are Copts that are made indispensable by their excellence, and this means Copts that have become the best carpenters and the best engineers, as well as the best farmers and the best scientists. What is needed also are Copts who are first class writers and great film makers. Copts must also be trained to be efficient local politicians in order to share with their Muslim brethren the highest governmental positions. Copts should work tirelessly to become first class politicians and magistrates. We may then be allowed to dream of a time when state security positions will be offered to the best candidate rather then the one who prays in one kind of house of worship rather than in another. All this should also benefit the church since it will allow churchmen to do what their vocation calls them to do, namely shepherding their flock to salvation, and relinquishing their political role. One major obstacle could defeat such a great scheme, it is called despair. But who, but the church, is better equipped to lead souls out of despair?

In the next segments Ms al-Ghannam, quoting Dr Rafiq Habīb- addressed the causes that led the church to become the sole representative of the Coptic people. We need to applaud her effort and move to the Coptic Orthodox Church Attitude Toward Censorship.

In dealing with the subject of church censorship, the author of this paper noted two different situations:-

1. To protect its Orthodox belief, the Coptic Orthodox Church has the authority inside its own churches and bookstores to reject or ban writings which it believes to be in violation of its Orthodox principles.
2. In some cases the church has used its influence to request specific bans from the state censorship bodies. This does not necessarily lead to censorship.
As far as situation No 1 is concerned, please refer to my comments on the second page of my review. What needs to retained in this particular situation is that a church’s bookshops are not expected to distribute controversial works or unorthodox doctrines. Church bookshops are meant to provide material that enhances faith, explains a doctrine or else elaborate philosophically on a difficult dogma of which parishioners wish to be informed about. Controversial studies are always available in other general-religious or secular-bookshops. The same philosophy would apply to any church or mosque as could be easily ascertained. Thus I would not go to a mosque’s bookshop in order to buy apologetic books on Christianity or to purchase a material that invites the reader to join the Buddhist faith!

As for situation no.2; this is very different since it represents effective censorship outside the church bookshops. And this form of censorship –which results in suppressing information - is the best way to close in an entire people, to inhibit research and the spirit that searches for truth.

This freedom to access information is an important principle to protect. That is why freedom of expression is protected by the Universal declaration of human rights (article 19, 1948) as well as the Bill of rights and the French declaration of the rights of man (1789).

Nonetheless if a religious work comes out with obvious lies,–which the average reader cannot detect- then the church (or the mosque or the synagogue) needs to be informed in order to respond to such false information. This has traditionally been done either by censorship or else by issuing a response from the church and in cases where the church does have power; by attaching a warning to the work. This would depend on the specific relationship between church and state and on the material under investigation, as well as on an honest encounter between the church representative and the censor.

How damaging the suppression of information could be depends on what is suppressed. Thus in countries considered champions of human rights like the U.S & France; censorship has recently been introduced to protect the public from “lies”. Thus French law does not permit the denial of the holocaust. Moreover George Bush has signed into law (in October 16, 2004) the global anti-Semitic act which prohibits the publication of views that accuse the Jewish community of controlling the government, the finance and the media.

What is interesting is that censorship, even when enforced – which is the only form of censorship worthy of this appellation- has rarely been effective. Moreover one may argue that the above mentioned U.S and French directives may have a negative effect which would be fed by all sorts of conspiratorial theories.

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212 Not too different from the cigarette package warning, but with adding referrals that respond to the controversial work.

213 See the internet under “Censorship” Saturday Jan.3,09
Also by looking at history; one may reflect, for instance, at the Galileo episode in which censorship managed only to discredit the church. Moreover even its enforcement was a temporary one because the censored material was eventually published in Europe outside church control.

Another example is that of Moliere whose comedy “Tartuffe” was temporarily subjected to censorship. Today this would simply be called ridiculous!!\footnote{This has to do with one of Moliere’s most popular comedy which depicts Tartuffe as a sanctimonious and hypocritical character who has used false piety to get him material and sensuous benefits. The name Tartuffe has since been used to designate such persons.}

After this long parenthesis it is time to proceed with this interesting paper. Ms al-Ghannam noted that “\textit{in contrast with the Azhar, the church does not resort to the state if it wants to prohibit a book}” \textbf{(B-1)}. All it may do is to prevent its distribution in church bookstores. It can also excommunicate the writer.

This form of church censorship may be justifiable (since the writer may have knowingly excommunicated him/herself when he/she expressed a doctrine which is not that of the church, since he cannot rely for his salvation on a church that teaches fallacies).

On the other hand censorship may have been unjustifiable if done as a result of narrow dogmatism in areas that have space for discussion. Similarly the call for censorship may be inappropriate if called for on account of political motives.

The remarks of \textit{Jamal As’ad-} that the author brought up- shows how judgment can be impaired when the basic premises of religious or secular censorship are not appreciated. Thus Mr. As’ad is astonished that books -written by Copts- and “\textit{popular among other denominations and even in Europe.}” are banned because of the “\textit{personal views of those in charge of the Orthodox Church}”\footnote{Mr. Asa’d must have meant the “Church hierarchy”}.

This remark, from a politician, seems to lack logic. On the other hand; is it possible that Mr. As’a’d had in mind the writings of Fr. Mattá al-Miskin when he wrote these words?

This will take us to the major subject that must have been on the author's mind when she wrote this paper, namely: The controversy that accompanied Father Mattá’s writings and the attempt to suppress his views. \textbf{(B.3.1.)}

The author offered her reader a brief summary of \textbf{Fr. Mattá al-Miskin}'s (Mathew the poor) life. He was born Yūsuf Iskandar on September 20, 1919. He was a monk in the monastery of Saint Macarius the Great where he became the spiritual father of 130 monks. He is a renowned Orthodox theologian and author of a multitude of books on Biblical exegesis and other spiritual and church related subjects. He was the spiritual guide of the then Bishop Shenouda (in the 1950s)
Fr. Mattá – we are told by Ms al-Ghannam- was allegedly suspended\textsuperscript{216} by Pope Yūsab II and then by Pope Kyrillos VI, for political reasons such as for his book about the church and state in which he called for the total separation of the two. This presumed suspension was denied by Fr Basilius.

It seems that much of the critical information about Fr. Mattá originated from Pope Shenouda’s website. But the allegation of dismissal and other accusations were denied by Fr. Basilius (who was a disciple of the late Fr. Mattá).

The author of this paper then recounted the disagreements between Pope Shenouda and Fr. Mattá. Ms al-Ghannam did a good job of uncovering the background of the dispute from the time when the then Fr. Antonius Jayyid\textsuperscript{217} joined Fr Mattá and his reform-minded monks at Dayr al Suryan monastery (where Fr Mattá became his confessor). All the way to his quarrel with President Sādāt who banished the pope to a monastery in Wadi al Natrūn.

The relationship between the Pope and Fr. Mattá worsened when President Sādāt wanted to remove the pope in order to make Fr Mattá the new pope. And yet there is convincing evidence that Fr. Mattá took up the defense of the pope –when he met the president- and protected the church during the difficulties that occupied Sādāt’s last year as president\textsuperscript{218}.

Before addressing the next segments of this paper, but after reading it in total; It would help to realize that Fr Mattá’s views conformed to the Gospel's message and Christian teachings. This is obvious in the examples cited by Ms al-Ghannam.

3- (A)-Fr. Mattá and the Macarius monastery espouse the theology that clearly separates the spiritual (which the church needs to strengthen) from the secular. This is in total conformity with the Gospel's message which calls on Christians to “render to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s”. (see the comments of the previous segments). Ms al-Ghannam then added the comment of Father Basilius\textsuperscript{219} on the damage that could be incurred to both church and state, should the church interfere in political matters. He illustrated this belief by citing “the example of the 4th century Pope Theophilus who incited Christian mobs in Alexandria against pagans and who seems to have shared in the responsibility of burning down the Serapeum library and for mobbing scholars.”\textsuperscript{220} Fr Basilius

\textsuperscript{216} See Hulsman, Cornelis “Reviving an ancient faith: Two strong willed reformers bring Coptic Orthodoxy back to life” In Christianity Today 3 Dec.2001
\textsuperscript{217} Who later became Pope Shenouda.
\textsuperscript{218} 1981 was the year of the conflict and the year when President Sadat was assassinated in October 1981.
\textsuperscript{219} Father Basilius is a monk at the monastery of Saint Macarius and his remarks- in this paragraph- reflect the views of both the monastery and Fr. Matta.
\textsuperscript{220} A specific example of Church interference in non-spiritual matters was that of the lynching and brutal murder of Hypatia- the famous Alexandrian female professor of Mathematics and philosophy- whose death was associated with the demise of the Alexandrian Museum which she headed. This occurred during the patriarchate of Pope “Cyrus the Great” who was the nephew and immediate successor of Pope Theophilus. (See Patrick’s Traditional Egyptian Christianity p.33, Fisher Park Press, Minnesota 1996).
condemned the fusion of the secular and the spiritual and noted that this would be a return to the Middle Ages when the church made and unmade emperors. This would also be akin to the Islamist groups that seek to found a religious state.

4. On theological matters, Ms al-Ghannam brought out many serious points. These are so basic to Christian understanding that it would help to present them with prudence. This is why I would like to point out that whenever I quote Pope Shenouda III in a theological controversy with Fr Mattá, I am quoting him with reservation meaning that such or such a view has been attributed to His Holiness. This will be the case even if I do not mention this kind of reservation every time.

1. According to the research carried out by Ms al-Ghannam, it seems that Pope Shenouda holds the view that the Holy Spirit does not literally dwell in Christians. In this way (what is present in Christians) is a kind of gift or energy that is sent from the Holy Spirit. This is obviously contrary to the teaching of the New Testament (where quotes abound. See for instance 1-John 4:13 and 1 Corinthians 6:19) and as far as I know this is contrary to Orthodox and Catholic teaching. But this failure to believe in the real presence of the Holy Spirit, in men and women, seems to be the view espoused by His Holiness who criticized Fr Mattá for not adhering to it.

2. Pope Shenouda (allegedly) said in his critique of Fr. Mattá that believers receive in Holy Communion only the Human nature of Christ but do not partake in His Divine Nature. Yet the view –held by Fr. Mattá- of the real presence of the Divinity of Christ in the Eucharist has been that of the Universal Church, at least until the Reformation.

Most importantly, the very strange thing (which has been brought up by Ms. al-Ghannam) is that such serious theological differences were never discussed by the Holy Synod. What is known –according to this study- is that Pope Shenouda, quoting Father Basilius, has attacked the teaching of Fr. Mattá ever since 1962 (which is also the date of Pope Shenouda’s consecration as bishop). Fr Mattá- to his credit- declined to respond to the pope’s accusation since this could have caused a serious rift in the church.

And yet the pope is said to have continued to criticize Fr. Mattá and even called on the banning of his books. Nonetheless the ban was not complete since it only affected the sale in church bookshops, but not their sale at the St Macarius monastery or “other bookshops”. This is fortunate because Fr. Mattá books have a depth that is greatly appreciated by its readers. Thus, as noted by Fr. Yohanna -(as reported by Ms. al-Ghannam)-:“only those who want to understand spiritual life much more deeply accept and chose the books of Fr. Mattá”.

It is therefore beneficial that the ban on Fr. Mattá by the pope has not been universal. Thus- as noted by Fr. Basilius- in St Macarius monastery’s bookshop; the books issued from most of the Christian Orthodox publishing houses are made available.

221 CCC.1373-1381
One of the reasons for this ongoing conflict seems to have followed a misunderstanding in which Pope Shenouda thought that Father Mattá tried to hurt him by urging President Sadat to put him in a monastery. To the pope’s apparent discredit; this appears to be contrary to what Fr. Mattá tried to achieve in his encounters with the president.

The next topic brought about by the author of this paper has to do with the Excommunication of the well known Coptic researcher; Dr. George Habib Biwāwi who was a student of Fr. Mattá. (C.1.)

(A)-Mr. Biwāwi was suspended from teaching at the Coptic Orthodox Seminary because he was accused of having delivered lectures- in the Evangelical Seminary- that were considered to be attacks against the teaching of the Orthodox Church. He is on record – according to Ms al-Ghannam- as having criticized Pope Shenouda in the early 1980s for mixing his religious leadership with politics. As a result of the pope’s displeasure (who asked the Middle East Council of Churches to fire him) Biwāwi had no employment opportunity left in Egypt and thus had to leave the country in order to gain employment first in Nottingham (UK) then in the US.

An opinion on George Biwāwi was offered by Fr. Basilius al Makari who gave the following testimony:-

“Dr George Biwāwi, a Doctor in Theology from Cambridge University .....was asked to refute the writings of Fr. Mattá and denounce him as heretic from an academic theological point of view ...his writing however were (judged) pure Orthodox”. But then Biwāwi accused the pope of being a heretic (to the Coptic Orthodox doctrines). Nonetheless, Biwāwi himself eventually joined the Evangelical Church (which hold doctrines not accepted by the Orthodox Church). It is therefore hard to know how right or wrong Biwāwi’s accusations of the pope were.

(B)-Having looked at some controversies raised by George Biwāwi (on mixing the sacred and the secular), Ms al-Ghannam then tackled a very difficult theological point. This has to do with the principle of participation of Christians in the Divine Nature of Jesus Christ. Biwāwi seems to be at odds in his understanding of the scriptural passage (taken from 2-Peter:1, 4) which reads:- “You may participate in the Divine nature (of Christ)” The author then noted that “Biwāwi is accused of having changed the “in” in the holy text which was interpreted as making human beings gods. This idea was considered by Biwāwi’s opponents to be the core of heresy, (namely) that of deifying man”

But there is another translation of the Bible which reads: “His (Jesus) divine power ....by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partaker of the divine nature.”222. The article on this passage found in the Orthodox Study Bible comments on the meaning of partaking in the divine nature as a deification. But this -according to the Orthodox doctrine- does not mean that we become like God in His nature. That would not only be heresy, it would be impossible for we are human and always will be human.

222  2 Peter: 1, 3 from the Orthodox Study Bible St Athanasius Orthodox Academy, 1993
Deification means that we are to become more like God through His grace. In (the Genesis account of) creation; humans were made in the image and likeness of God according to human nature. Through sin this image was marred and we fell. When the Son of God assumed our humanity in the womb of the Blessed Virgin the process of being renewed in God’s image and likeness was begun. (Thus) because the fullness of God has inhabited human flesh; being joined to Christ means that it is again possible to experience deification (which is) the fulfillment of our human destiny. That is through union with Christ (through faith in the sacraments of Baptism and by the Eucharist) we become by grace what God is by nature- We become children of God (John 1:12). His Deity (Christ) interpenetrates our humanity. Historically, deification has often been illustrated by the sword and fire example. A sword thrust in fire takes on a red glow but never becomes fire. But the energy of fire interpenetrates the sword. (Thus) through the Holy Eucharist we partake of the grace of God, His Righteousness, His love, and His strength. In this way we humans are being deified.

The Roman Catholic understanding of 2 Peter 1:4 is even stronger in its understanding of deification. Thus the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) in entry no.460 states that “the Word became flesh to make us partaker of the divine nature” (1 Peter 1:4) ...so man by entering into communion with the Word –and thus receiving divine sonship-might become son of God. The only begotten Son of God, wanting to make us sharer in His divinity, assumed our nature so that He (who) made man, might make men gods” [That is by interpenetration of the Divine in the human nature].

In other words we have the two major Apostolic Churches espousing the concept of the deification of man. The debate on this understanding-and its possible re-definition- may-it seems- remain within the realm of Orthodoxy.

Quite different are Bibawi’s rejection of the priesthood and of transubstantiation which put him clearly outside both Orthodox and Catholic Churches. It can be said that by holding such views and teaching them; Bibawi excommunicated himself from the church to which he initially belonged.

Bibawi also holds strange views regarding the Mystical Body of Christ. He believes that since all Christians are members of this Body; all must be free from sin since they belong to the Body of Jesus. He seems to have forgotten that the body of Christ may suffer from spiritual diseases (sin) which may be mortal to the member(s) thus afflicted.

Another form of censorship that is about to be addressed has to do with defamation, sensationalism or characters assassination rather than suppression of philosophical ideas or doctrinal views. The example offered by al-Naba' weekly magazine was explored by the author of this paper. (D)

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223 See p561 in the Orthodox Study Bible.
The incident took place in 2001 when Mamdūh Mahran the chief editor of the weekly *al-Naba'* published photographs of Adil Ghabrial\(^{224}\), a defrocked monk, purportedly taken from a video tape made by the said individual which showed him having sex with a number of women. *Al-Naba'* failed to mention that the monk in question has been defrocked 5 years earlier. Even worse the author of the pornographic article inserted a provocative headline that claimed that the ex-monk “had sex with more than 5,000 women” inside the monastery “which he turned into a brothel”. What was galling to the church authorities and regular citizens was that the monastery in question was non other than Dayr al-Muharraq which is especially revered by the Copts because of the belief that the Holy Family stayed on the site of the monastery for six months during their flight to Egypt.

The response to this incident included:

Angry- sometimes violent- demonstrations of outraged crowds of Copts\(^{225}\).
The church reacted by asking the Copts to stay calm and refrain from protests.
The pope reacted by refusing to address the Copts in his weekly meetings unless the ruling of the court was to close *al-Naba'*.
State officials' reaction resulted in the confiscation of all copies of the offending *al-Naba'* and of *Ākhir Khabar* (its sister paper).
The closure of *al-Naba'*
The trial of Mahran by the Emergency State Security Law. The (?State) attorney demanded that Mahran be punished according to the (non-specified) Penal Law and the Press law (see below for outcome)
The Egyptian Journalists Syndicate Council decided to strip Mamdūh Mahran and his son Hatim Mahran of their syndicate membership.
A lawsuit was started by the Supreme Council to withdraw *al-Naba's* license
But in May 29, 2002, the High Administrative court gave its ruling that the newspaper should be allowed to publish (again) in order to abide by the rules of the Constitution.
Still, on the same date; the journalist responsible for the crisis was taken to the Criminal Court and sentenced to two years in prison with labor.

Ms al-Ghannam added that the 57 years old Mahran astonishingly said that he had no regrets claiming that he wished to expose corruption in the church and inform the pope of it. When asked why he did not seek confirmation from the church (on the status of the defrocked monk) his answer was that he never seeks permission from anybody for publishing what he want to publish.

*Obviously confirmation of the veracity of information does not in any way infringe on freedom of expression. It is indeed clear that protection of the circulation of information implies their veracity.\(^{226}\)*

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\(^{224}\) This monk was excommunicated 5 years earlier (i.e. in 1996) for deviancy.

\(^{225}\) An unusual and novel phenomenon according to Samir Marqus an expert on Coptic affairs who also added that a protest (of such magnitude) was the first to be staged by the Copts in modern history.

\(^{226}\) A man screaming in a theatre FIRE! When none occurred, is subject to prosecution not protection!
What is still a matter of debate is whether censoring the media in order to protect and respect the moral values held by a given society—would undermine freedom of speech and creativity. What is observable is that pornography has never led to great literary works nor does it offer society respect for family values. It is also an observable phenomenon that pornography is more often than not associated with crimes and drug use. Obviously pornography offers an extreme example in arguing for the permission of censorship. This is why an Aristotelian middle ground should be made available in order to provide the best avenue in the applicability of censorship when traditional morality calls for protective suppression of publications.

The same reasoning may be applied in order to have restrictive laws that protect national unity. This may limit freedom of expression but it will also limit the sectarian rift and violence. That is why nations that are considered bastions of freedom of expression, like France and the US, have nonetheless, issued censorship laws that prohibit anti-Semitism or racial incitement to violence.

The next subject tackled by the author has to do with the Television and Film industries. The example chosen by the author of this paper was that of movie production called Bahib al Sima (I love the Cinema). (B.2.)

I only watched passages of the movie on TV. But I watched enough to agree with Father Basilius who was reportedly stunned by the clergy’s storm in a tea cup about the movie. He, appropriately, believes that the movie should be analyzed from a social standpoint not from a religious one. Nonetheless, Fr. Basilius echoes many Coptic commentators who complained that the movie depicted only the negative aspects of Coptic families and neglected the positive side.

It seems to me that the film in question would have created less or no appreciable anger if the Copts were shown as characters in many more movies, in which there were Coptic characters filling the roles of the good and the bad, the dumb and the brilliant as well as the ugly and the beautiful. But when the Copts have very rarely been shown as holding roles in theatrical or cinematographic productions, it is understandable for Copts to be at least disappointed when they find themselves, at long last, depicted in central roles, only to discover that they are shown as morally lax individuals with strange religious practices or beliefs.

But there is also the question of respect for the other, which is somehow dormant in Egyptian movies. Thus when Jews are given a role, in a movie, we can expect them to fill the roles of swindlers or shady characters. This phenomenon is also noticeable—though less marked—when Europeans are given a role in a production. But the Copts are simply generally ignored. This is sad since people who work in the fields of artistic production;

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With rare exceptions such as in the role of Shafika the Copt, or Hassan Morcos and Cohen, or else in secondary roles.

The “other” may be as near to me as my brother or as distant as my enemy. In the context of this study I mean the one who does not share my religion.
tend in general to be more tolerant and more welcoming to the proverbial “other” and are usually more liberal in their philosophies.

At this point it may help to add a commentary on the subject of sensitivity toward the “other’s” feeling. In the West this often goes to extremes. This was noted by Amin Maalūf in his French masterpiece “Les identites meurtrieres”. On page 141-2 Maalūf remarked that in the US when a police serial is shown on TV, nine out of ten times the rapist or murderer is a blond with blue eyes. Nonetheless if the delinquent is black and the policeman who pursues him is white the producer will make sure that the chief of police be black. This is sometimes irritating because it feels rather artificial and we are sure to know how the drama will unfold.229 But, notes Amin Maalūf, this form of “fabrication” allows the citizens who form part of minorities to see themselves on TV in a positive image that does not exclude them from the mainstream of the nation.

This preferential treatment is not what Copts aspire to. But it would be reasonable to expect a happy (Aristotelian) medium from the leaders of the artistic Egyptian media. For instance it would be both simple and very productive for the directors of movies to ask church representatives about a specific belief that is portrayed in a movie production in order to avoid shocking the Coptic viewers with a blasphemous scene or even with an inaccurate portrayal of a religious belief230. This is important because to portray a religious event with gross errors; reveals a total lack of concern for the feelings of the “other”.

In conclusion

The author of this paper has offered a very good conclusion which should help the reader better understand what censorship means for the church and what are its limitations. She has done an excellent job describing the State/Church relation. I did not comment upon her very good reviews of books censored by the church in order to keep my comments reasonably short. (And yet 20 pages is plenty!!). This is why I encourage the reader to review Ms al-Ghannam's paper and note that I did not comment on the excellent segments of her study.

I would like nonetheless to offer the following additional comments:-

The author has offered many examples of partial censorship (which is the only form of censorship available to the church). She has also exposed what could be seen as valid reasons for banning-from its bookshops- books believed to teach un-Orthodox doctrines, as opposed to works which appear to have been censored for political reasons.

It is clear that in the 21st century church censorship cannot be complete since other means of getting information is often made available in other bookshops or on the net.

229 This was not the case in the older movies when the White cowboy was always the good guy and the Indians were the evil ones who needed to be punished. On the other hand it is rewarding to realize how the Americans progressed in the right direction, all the way to the election of an African American as President.

230 Which carries an implicit message such as “I will not spend energy on your strange beliefs”.

7
An attempt by the reviewer has been made to compare how church censorship compares to other forms of censorship.

The author then commented-in her conclusion-on the “absolute right” of the church to oppose ideas that contradict the true Orthodox doctrine. On the other hand she used the example of Fr. Mattá al-Miskīnī to call for greater freedom in publishing theological works. And this is a very appropriate distinction that I hope the reader will appreciate.

Ms al-Ghannam’s call is also very appropriate, since the church, guided by the Holy Spirit, has a duty to present its interpretation of its doctrine-as understood at the dawn of the 21st century- in a manner that does not erode the core teachings of Orthodoxy. But this would depend on the recognition by the church authority of theological doctrines in which there is room for theological debate.

I am obviously not in a position to offer examples of areas where there is room for such debate, since theologians of high repute have got themselves into hot water for attempting such debates. This is why it seems to me that it is high time for the Coptic Orthodox Church to call for a council—similar to Vatican II—that would assess the doctrines of the church in the light of modernity.

This suggestion of calling for a council of Orthodox bishops and theologians is a very Christian one, since it offers the best way to call in the Holy Spirit to guide the church—in troubled times—in the twenty first century.

Another point brought to the fore by this paper has to do with the separation of the church from the state that Fr. Mattá forcibly called for.

This is a very central principle in Christian doctrine; but in order to have a replacement of the church in the secular world, the church can do three things:-

1- Call on its flock to “go in to the world” (as politicians, writers, physicians etc) with the will to be equipped with excellence and become in this way the salt and light of the world. This does not in any way mean that Christians need to have an ostentatious religiosity (which is unfortunately the case in Egypt these days). As I write these lines I am thinking of the Watani article231 in which a self confessed atheist- wrote an article on the need of God in Africa—. He noted the following in Mallawi:- “you do not encounter missionaries in the lobbies of expensive hotels discussing development strategy documents, as you would with big NGOs. But instead I noticed that a handful of the most impressive African members of the Pump Aid team were, privately strong Christians. “Privately” because the charity is entirely secular and I never heard any of its team so much as mention religion while working in the villages. The author of this article-Matthew Parris- then noted that he discovered the Christian reference by sheer accident such as the attendance-at dawn- of one of his co-workers, to a church service that lasted two and a half hours. More on this role has been commented upon higher up in this report.

2- The other thing that the church can do is to establish an independent Community Council in which the members will not be or become “yes men”. This is important

231 Watani International Jan.4th,09 p.4 I truly believe Africa needs God by Matthew Parris.
because the church is too Holy to be involved in secular agitations and disputes and should thus remain above the fret!

This does not mean in any way that the church should remain silent in the face of injustices, or that it should become impassive toward suffering and poverty. The church has a major role to play in society. It started with Jesus doing good, healing the sick, giving sight to the blind, and feeding the multitudes and He continued to show his concern for justice when He asked the servant of the high Priest: why he struck Him? And this defense of self and other did not cease after Jesus ascension, when St Paul appealed to Caesar for his protection from Jewish persecution.

3- The third thing that may be initiated by the church would be to encourage the laity’s education especially in the fields of philosophy, logic, theology and history. This is vital for the church survival and growth as a leader in the Christian world. It would also be vital for the Alexandrian Church to fill in its ecumenical role. There was, in fact, a time when Alexandria led the world in both theology and philosophy. Unfortunately, after the Chalcedonian crisis which started in 451 AD. Alexandria lost its ecumenical leadership in the Christian world and was contented to restrict itself to a regional statue as a National Coptic church. It thus became isolated from the rest of the Christian world and from the world of ideas that enriched the Mediterranean nations232. The ascent of Justinian (527-565 AD) did not help not only because he persecuted the Copts so much233, but also because this ambitious Emperor felt it was his “Christian” duty to close the “School of Athens” as well as the schools of rhetoric. As a result of this policy Greek philosophy after eleven centuries of history came to an end in the Byzantine world to which Egypt belonged234. And yet Justinian should have known better if he only cared to look at his predecessors and find out that among them; Emperor Julian (361-363 AD-known as the “Apostate” and enemy of the Church) decided- in order “to downgrade the Christians and place them at a disadvantage in controversy, -(to) excluded them from the schools of logic and rhetoric”. This is applicable in this study, because the same deprivation that placed the Christians “at a disadvantage” as a result of Julian the Apostate’s policies, can be self inflicted by inappropriate censorship by the church. Copts involved in theological pursuits should be limited only by the core teachings of the church as these transpired from the ecumenical councils such as that of Nicea (325) in which the leading theologian was none other than the Alexandrian St Athanasius the great defender of Orthodoxy. And yet there is a pressing need for the laity to join its ordained brothers in their theological exploration and philosophical pursuits and present them to the church. This should not only be permissible, but it should be encouraged by the church, since Christianity should be seen as a dynamic creed in constant pursuit of Truth that is constantly unfolding under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Failing this may be seen as a neglect of the promise of Christ.(John: 14,26) and an invitation to become a fossilized regional church.


233 Which is the best way to create a chauvinistic form fanaticism.

More comments could be added to this very rich subject which Ms al-Ghannam has studied and presented in a manner that encourages a dynamic exchange of views.

As regards the theological dispute between Pope Shenouda and Fr. Mattá al-Miskīn, the reader is encouraged to read the rich response of Fr. Basilius to Drs Hulsman's incisive questions. The analysis and teachings of Fr Basilius are very clear and reflect a high level of scholarship which I am certainly not in a position to comment upon.

It remains for me to congratulate Ms al-Ghannam on her work. The subject is not an easy one to tackle and yet – with the few exceptions that I have mentioned- she did a marvelous job. I also appreciated her capacity to develop an insight into a subject that would be difficult to develop by many Copts born in the faith.