

Discrepancies Between Coptic Statistics in the Egyptian Census and Estimates Provided by the Coptic Orthodox Church

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i. Why statistics are important

“Statistics lay the foundation for a democratic society and provide the information, or the evidence, needed for governments’ daily administration and policy analyses; policy-makers planning; businesses decisions; and citizens’ possibility to hold their government accountable.”¹

¹ Statistics Denmark, <http://www.dst.dk/HomeUK/Guide/IntConsult.aspx>. Statistics Denmark, in partnership with Statistics Sweden, Statistics Finland, Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, and the Czech Statistical Office from September 2008 to November 2010 has led the EU-Twinning project on "Institutional Capacity Building for the Central Agency of Public Mobilisation and Statistics

Because of the importance of statistics for just and harmonious relations between Muslims and Christians in Egypt, between 2007 and 2012 *Arab-West Report* has had many interns working on various aspects of Christian statistics and migration. Work is continuing. Thus feedback to the results presented here as well as additional information will be most appreciated: kshulsman@cidtegypt.com.

ii. Introduction

For decades there have been heated discussions about the number of Copts in Egypt, which is the consequence of significant differences between the official numbers provided by the Egyptian census and the varying estimates provided by different Coptic Orthodox Church clergy and a number of intellectuals, journalists, and activists.

According to the census, Christians in Egypt declined from 8.34 percent in 1927 to 5.87 percent in 1986 and an estimated 5.5 percent in 2000. This shift is evidence of a wider pattern of declining Christianity in all countries once belonging to the Ottoman Empire. Around the year 1900, 10 percent of the Middle Eastern population (from Egypt to the borders of Iran, including Turkey) was Christian. One century later this was at most 3 percent. Still, of all these countries, Christians in Egypt remain the largest group.²

For many decades Coptic sources rejected the numbers of the census, considering these to be a gross under-representation of a community which, in their view, numbers between 10 percent and 20 percent of the total Egyptian population.³ Until 2008 estimates of the Coptic Orthodox Church authorities were provided by bishops and priests. In 2008, the late Pope Shenouda (1971-2012), who was at the time the highly influential head of the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt, spoke out himself. In an interview with the Egyptian Christian TV station, CTV, in October 2008, he claimed a Christian population of 12 million equaling 15 percent of the Egyptian population.⁴

(CAPMAS); and Developing the Legal Framework for Statistics in Egypt". The objective was to support the preparation of statistical policy and legislation and build up the organizational capacity of CAPMAS to produce, publish, and disseminate high quality statistics. This report on Coptic Statistics was prepared in the period 2007-2011, but was not related to the twinning project. Yet, the description of the importance of statistics on the website of Danish Statistics also applies to Coptic statistics. Knowing proportions with greater precision will help to reduce tensions that are related to efforts to inflate and deflate the proportion of Christians in Egypt.

² Attachment A - Decline of Christianity in Countries Once Belonging to the Ottoman Empire. For more on this see John Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity: The Thousand-Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia – and How It Died*, (New York: Harper One, 2008) 168. The substantial difference between 1900 and 2000 is given here.

³ I mentioned this discrepancy in Cornelis Hulsman, "Christian Activists' Contributions to Christian Migration from Egypt," *MIDEO* 28 (2010): 569-592. Egyptian Christians in Egypt are not unique in this. Also Christians in other countries once belonging to the Ottoman Empire disagree with national authorities about their numbers.

⁴ 'Amr Bayyūmī & Rajab Ramadān, "Pope Shenouda: There are 12 million Christians in Egypt. The church knows the size of its population and we do not agree with the declared figure," *Misr al-Yom*, 26 Oct 2008, in: *Arab-West Report*, Week 44, Art. 40. 2008, <http://arabwestreport.info/node/21011>. This newspaper article reports about Pope Shenouda's statement on CTV.

A number of scholars responded to this discrepancy throughout the years by claiming that the precise number of Copts is impossible to indicate.⁵ Reference to estimates of the total number of Christians in Egypt in reports of the U.S. State Department on Egypt have differed over the years. In their first issuance in 2000 and continuing through 2010, the International Religious Freedom Reports released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor of the U.S. State Department contributed to this belief by systematically referring to various “estimates,” without explanation or any reference to the Egyptian census. In 2001 the report estimated Christians to be “approximately 10 percent of the population.” In their reports of 2002, 2003, and 2004 they wrote, “Approximately 8 to 10 percent of the population are Christians, the majority of whom belong to the Coptic Orthodox Church.” In their 2005 report, they changed this to 10 percent. Western media outlets also frequently report high estimates, often based on numbers presented to them by Coptic activists or leaders, thus adding to skepticism about the numbers provided by the Egyptian census.⁶ From 2008 onwards, the year Pope Shenouda claimed 15 percent Christians, they wrote that the estimate of the number of Christians ranges between 8 and 12 percent of the population. The percentage of Christians does not and cannot change so quickly and since these reports are used for political purposes, their numbers appear to be politically motivated. Their reporting, however, has profound influence on media reporting. ABC, Australia, mentioned in an e-mail, February 28, 2011, that they based their estimate of 10 percent on these U.S. State Department reports and the fact that most media use this percentage.

The large discrepancies have resulted in two major positions among scholars. Some scholars believe the official numbers systematically underestimate the actual number of Copts or Christians in Egypt, while others argue that the numbers provided by most clergy, activists, and the International Religious Freedom Reports overestimate them and contribute to the tendency for numerical inflation in various reports.⁷

Eric Denis links the debate about the number of Copts to debates on persecution of Christians in Muslim countries in the U.S. as well as Coptic resistance against the Islamization in Egyptian society. In this context, Copts demand larger political presentation and better positions for their elite.⁸

⁵ See for example E.J. Chitam, “The Coptic Community in Egypt: Spatial and Social Change,” (Working Paper, University of Durham, Centre for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, 1986), 24, <http://dro.dur.ac.uk/132/1/32CMEIS.pdf> and Christian Cannuyer, *Les Coptes*, (Brussels: 1990).

⁶ *The Daily Telegraph*, London, April 15, 1953, claimed the Copts to be 20 percent of the Egyptian population; *The New York Times*, September 9, 1981 and *The Gazette*, Montréal, May 16, 1983 estimated between 6 and 10 million Copts in a time that Egypt counted 38 million inhabitants, meaning an outlandish claim of 16 to 26 percent of the population.

⁷ Philippe Fargues and Christiaan van Nispen tot Sevenear, S.J. have argued in interviews conducted for this report that I have worked on since 2007 that numbers scholars often provide are inflated. Also Egyptian scholars, such as Prof. Dr. Ikram Lama'i, have expressed doubt about the inflated estimates. See: Muhammad Khayr, “The Conference of the Council of the Catholic Patriarchs of the East: the mass migration of Copts because of the state,” *Al-Dustūr in Arab-West Report*, Week 45, Art 54, (1 Nov 2006), <http://www.arabwestreport.info/year-2006/week-45/54-conference-council-catholic-patriarchs-east-mass-migration-copts-because-state>.

⁸ Eric Denis. "Cent ans de localisation de la population chrétienne égyptienne," *Astrolabe*, (2000): 130 and 133.

The debate is between estimates and census, between often politically-motivated guesses, and counting with a margin of error. Demographer Philippe Fargues rejects such comparisons stating,

Population numbers are obtained as a result of counting. Counting is a technical operation that requires registration of individuals. It is usually a comprehensive operation that records every individual in the population at a given date (census), or at a particular moment of his life (for example vital records and possibly church registers of infant baptisms, marriages, and deaths). A second best possibility is a survey by sample in which every individual has a non-zero known probability of being sampled. Counting may be reliable or not - according to access to individuals, exactness of the information collected and accuracy of data processing - and the resulting numbers may vary accordingly in quality, accuracy and reliability. Only state administrations possess the infrastructure needed to produce population numbers. However, the numbers they produce are not always disseminated or, if they are, they are not always trusted or accepted. Alternative numbers may oppose official ones. If these alternative numbers result themselves from a scientific approach (a statistical survey for example) or a verifiable database (list of members of a community for example) provided that the list is regularly updated for new entries/exits and suffers no omissions or double counting they can be validated or invalidated. Comparing official and alternative numbers is a scientific exercise. In other cases, however, alternative numbers are simply claimed the basis of one's faith, political convictions or advocacy agenda. There is no scientific way to give credit to such numbers.⁹

Establishing the number of Christians in Egypt is indeed a very sensitive issue because of the political weight of statistics: the greater the number is claimed to be, the more weight is given to the argument that Christians are underrepresented in positions of power, i.e. are being discriminated against; the smaller the numbers, the greater the likelihood that Christians embellished these numbers, allowing the opposition in the Egyptian government and Muslim constituency to diminish the Christian argument.

Numbers are not only sensitive in dialogue, but overstatements can also aggravate existing tensions. Downplaying is also hazardous to the shift towards a better relationship between Muslims and Christians. For the sake of dialogue and mutual understanding it is therefore important that Muslims and Christians know the facts about one another, including a good indication of the number and proportion of Christians in Egypt.

This research has therefore been conducted with the greatest caution. We have greatly benefited from the advice obtained from Philippe Fargues, as well as the work of several interns at *Arab-West Report* to collect data and meet with senior Coptic

⁹ Founding Director of the Center for Migration and Refugee Studies (CMRS) at the American University in Cairo, 2007 – 2008, Director of the Migration Policy Centre, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, European University Institute, Italy, since 2008; Philippe Fargues, e-mail to author, March 9, 2008.

Orthodox clergy. Final responsibility for the contents of this text, however, is mine alone.

This paper will:

- 1) Collect and analyze the official results provided by the Egyptian census over a century (1897-1996);
- 2) Refer to the arguments in favor of the census' reliability as well as the arguments against it;
- 3) Provide a collection of unofficial estimates of the number of Christians in Egypt;
- 4) Summarize the arguments provided by those who speak of declining Christianity in Egypt.

The paper will also refer to attachments:

- A) The 1897-1996 census results of the countries formally belonging to the Ottoman Empire, placing the decline of Christianity in Egypt within the context of decline of Christianity in the Middle East at large.
- B) Muslims and Christians in the census of 1996 according to governorate, city, and countryside.

A Terminological Remark

The number of Coptic Orthodox in Egypt nearly corresponds to the total number of Christians in Egypt. As a result, some scholars use the two terms synonymously. The name Copts comes from the Greek Aegyptos and means Egyptian. The name is used today for Coptic Christians in Egypt.

“Copts” is used by some scholars and Coptic Orthodox members to refer to Coptic Orthodox Church members only. This, however, inaccurately reflects all Christians in Egypt, since the Coptic Orthodox Church is estimated to represent 95 percent of all Christians in the country.¹⁰ The name “Copts” is at times also inclusive of Catholics and Protestants since they, too, call themselves Coptic. The name implies Egyptian ethnicity and most members of these churches have descended from Coptic Orthodox forefathers.¹¹ When comparing different estimates, we must take into account whether they include all Christian nationals of all denominations in Egypt or only the Coptic Orthodox Church. Additionally, some estimates include expatriate Christians living in Egypt.

1 Number of Copts according to the census

¹⁰ The estimate that 95 percent of all Christians in Egypt belong to the Coptic Orthodox Church is widely presented by Christians of all denominations in Egypt, yet it is an estimate and not based on any official figures. Also here counting might be difficult. Many Orthodox Copts attend Protestant and Catholic churches, yet on paper remain members of their own church. This is, for example, very visible in the Presbyterian Qasr al-Dubara Church in downtown Cairo. Many active church members here are on paper are still Coptic Orthodox, making counting very difficult. This phenomenon is stronger in Cairo and Alexandria and probably is less frequent in rural areas and small cities.

¹¹ Official names as “Coptic Catholic Church” and “Coptic Evangelical Church” are clear indications that Egyptian Catholic and Protestants consider themselves Coptic or Egyptian.

1.1 Historical overview of the census in Egypt

Between 1250-1517 A.D., Egypt was ruled by the Mamluks who did not carry out a general census of the population due to their decentralized revenue system resting on village committees charged with allocating the taxes for their inhabitants. Mamluk administration, remaining after Egypt had become a province of the Ottoman Empire, continued this practice. When the population of the Arab East was first recorded by the Ottomans between 1570 and 1590, the number of Christians was then slightly less than ten percent of the whole.¹² Scholar, Youssef Courbage and demographer, Philippe Fargues estimate that the percentage of Christians in Egypt had fallen to about eight percent in the same period. However, while under the Ottoman reign, the percentage of Christians in the Fertile Crescent tripled, while the percentage of Christians in relation to the entire Egyptian population appears to have remained steady at around eight percent until the middle of the 20th century.¹³

The first estimate of the overall population of Egypt was carried out by scholars of the French expedition. According to Edme-François Jomard, there were 2,500,000 Egyptians at the time of the expedition to Egypt (1798).¹⁴ On the basis of the poll tax, Christians and Jews numbered 215,000, which correspond to a percentage of 8.6 percent of non-Muslims. The French did not have the administrative infrastructure necessary to conduct a comprehensive census of individuals in order to produce a detailed account of the various religious communities. Even so, their picture of the denominational distribution provides an informed estimate.¹⁵

The second, third, and fourth estimates were carried out during the reign of Khedive Muhammad Ali in 1821, 1846, and 1848.¹⁶ The fifth and sixth estimates took place in 1873 and 1878. In 1882, the first year of the British occupation in Egypt, the newly founded Egyptian Statistics Office performed the first modern population census.

¹² Roughly equal to modern Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Palestinian areas, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt.

¹³ “The Copts had no special geographical characteristics - like the Muslims they were more rural than town-dwelling and the region where they were concentrated, Central Egypt, had no particular contacts with the West - nor were they any more advanced in the education of their children than the Muslims. From what we can suppose, they must have had the same death rate as Muslims. This explains why their percentage in relation to the whole population did not change” (Youssef Courbage and Philippe Fargues, *Christians and Jews under Islam*, (London-New York: 1998)).

¹⁴ Fargues points out that Jomard did not survey comprehensively the country, but only the province of Minya and then extrapolated on the basis on surface. It should thus not be called a “comprehensive survey” (E-mail to author, February 14, 2011). Please note that Minya was one of the provinces with among the highest percentages of Coptic Christians and therefore the figure may have been somewhat inflated in favor of Coptic Christians; Edme-François Jomard, *Description de l'Égypte*, ed. Charles Louis Fleury Panckoucke, t. IX, 138-139. According to Courbage and Fargues (no. 9, 216), Jomard underestimated the Egyptian population by almost 2 million. The first demographic census of Egypt in 1846 gave a figure of 4.476 million. Courbage and Fargues believe that he does not appear to have been very wrong on the proportional shares of the religious communities.

¹⁵ Correspondence with Dr. Philippe Fargues in 2008, who used the phrase “informed estimate”. See also ‘Adil Fakhri, “Christian population in Egypt throughout history,” *Waṭanī in Arab-West Report*, Week 4, Art 59, 28 Jan 2007, <http://www.arabwestreport.info/year-2007/week-4/59-christian-population-egypt-throughout-history>. Numbers Fargues and Fakhri provided differ slightly between 215,000 and 220,000. Fakhri also refers to an estimated number of 217,000 Christians in 1855. Most important for this study is that these estimates all present around the same proportion of Christians and Jews in Egypt.

¹⁶ *Al-Sukkān, Buhūth wa Dirāsāt*, Markaz al-Abhāth wa al-Dirāsāt al-Sukkaniyya, (Al-Gumhuriyya Misr al Arabiyya: Al-Gahāz al-Markaziyy li-lta`bi`at wa al-Iḥṣā` (CAPMAS)), Jul-Dec (2005): 8-9.

Subsequent censuses were conducted regularly every decade from 1907 to 1947, whereas two censuses were completed in 1960 and 1966. After that, the censuses returned to the regular time of every decade, with the last census having been carried out in 2006. The difference with previous censuses is that the publication of the 2006 census did not include the category of “religion”.

The variable “religion” has been registered in all censuses from 1897 to 1996. It was distributed by gender from 1907 to 1986, except for the census taken in the years 1897, 1907, and 1966. From 1897 to 1917, the distinction is made between different denominations: Protestants, Catholics, Orthodox (Melkite), and Coptic Orthodox. The maximum precision was given in 1907, where we find the following partition: Muslims, Orthodox Copts, Catholic Copts, Protestant Copts, total Copts, Catholic Christians, Protestant Christians, Orthodox Christians, Oriental Christians, total Christians, Jews, other religions.

1.2 The number of Christians in Egypt according to the census results of 1897-1986 and estimates until 2000

	Ducruet		Courbage & Fargues		Denis	
1897	731,235	7.3%			730,000	7.3%
1907	881,692	7.9%	913,592	8.14%	882,000	7.9%
1917	1,026,115	8%	1,026,107	8.07%	1,024,000	8.1%
1927	1,200,500	8%	1,181,910	8.34%	1,182,000	8.3%
1937	1,304,000	8%	1,304,000	8.19%	1,304,000	8.2%
1947	1,502,000	8%	1,501,635	7.92%	1,502,000	7.9%
1960	1,905,000	7.4%	1,905,182	7.33%	1,905,000	7.3%
1966	2,008,000 (out of a total population of 30,083,419)	6.6%	2,018,562	6.74%	2,018,000	6.7%
1976			2,285,620	6.24%	2,316,000	6.3%
1986			2,829,349	5.87%	2,864,000	6.0%
1996					3,344,000	5.7%

The table below presents the complete series of absolute numbers as well as the percentages of Christians in Egypt according to the 1897-1986 census results. These numbers and percentages were published by Ducruet and Courbage and Fargues (1997) as follows¹⁷:

¹⁷ J. Ducruet, "Statistiques Chrétiennes d’Egypte," *Travaux et Jours*, juillet-septembre (1967): 65-68; Ibid 197.

Ducruet and Denis have been rounding off percentages. Denis has also done so for absolute numbers. The difference in the figures for 2007 between Courbage and Fargues and Ducruet and Denis have not been explained.

When analyzing the data, we must consider that they included foreigners living in Egypt. In 1917, the Egyptian census counted 1,024,000 Christians, among whom 175,000 were foreigners, that is, 17% of all Christians. The Egyptian census counted in 1976 2,316,000 Christians among whom 21,370 foreigners, which amounts to less than 1% of all Christians in Egypt. It is obvious that the proportion of Copts grows until 1927 and then begins to decline indefinitely.

The slight difference between the data reported by Ducruet and Fargues is due to the method of calculating the total number of Christians starting from the variables provided by the census results. It is worth mentioning that in the 1927 census and 1937 census the variable “Christians” had been replaced by “Copts,” which in turn implies that it is not perfectly comparable with the other censuses.¹⁸

As for the results of the 1996 census, which AWR interns collected in 2007 from the Central Agency for Public Mobilization (CAPMAS), results for only 23 governorates are listed with no results provided for Giza, Ismā‘iliyya, New Valley (In Arabic: Al-Wadi al-Jadīd), and North Sinai. While the 1996 census puts the total number of the population at 59.3 million, the population of the 23 governorates for which we have data is 53.4 million. As a consequence, it is impossible to calculate the percentage of

Christians of the whole population in 1996. Nevertheless, it is possible to calculate the percentage of Christians and Muslims in the 23 available governorates.

Coptic (all rites)	3,288,900
Greek-Orthodox	4,400
Maronite	2,500
Melkite	4,700
Chaldean	500
Armenian/Apostolic	7,600
Syrian Orthodox	200
Latin	3,800
Protestant	20,900*
Syran Catholic	1,300
Armenian Catholic	600
Total	3,335,600
Percentage of the population	5.7

Due to the lack of complete official results following the 1986 census, some scholars provided updated estimates applying the percentage of 1986 to the population growth. Fargues updated to 1995 the 1986 percentage which gives a figure of 3,300,000 Christians, corresponding to 5.7 percent.¹⁹ He provided an updated estimation according to the different Christian denominations as follows:

¹⁸ According to 1927 census, male Copts are 479,056 and female Copts 467,337, so that the total number of Copts is 946,393. Males of other (non-Muslim) religions are 147,526 and females of other religions 154,685 making a total of 302,211. Ducruet and Fargues should have calculated the number of Jews and of members of other religions, and then calculated the number of Christians. The same kind of reasoning should have been applied to the 1937 census results.

¹⁹ P. Fargues, “I cristiani arabi dell’Oriente: una prospettiva demografica,” in *Comunita' Cristiane nell’Islam arabo*, ed. A. Pacini. (Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli: Torino 1996), 68.

* The number of Protestants seems to be much too low since their number was estimated by informed Protestant clergy to be around 150,000. This lower number is only possible if the Coptic Evangelicals (Presbyterian) have been included in the Copts of all rites.

Fargues further described the declining trend of the proportion of Christians in Egypt in a more recent study, according to which non-Muslims in Egypt in mid-2000 numbered 3.7 million, corresponding to 5.5 percent of a total population of 68.4 million.²⁰

1.3 Declining proportion of Christians throughout the centuries

On the basis of the census data and his own updated estimates, Fargues provides the following graph on the percentage of Christians in Egypt, from the arrival of Islam in Egypt, 638-641 AD to 1998.²¹

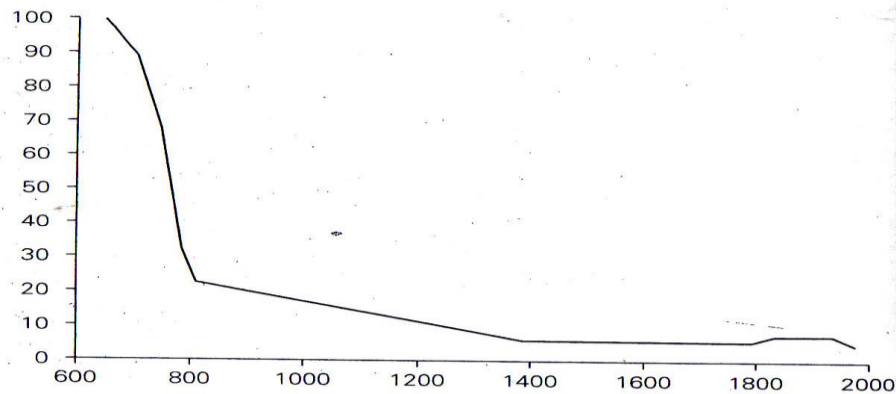


Figure 4.2: Percentage of Christians in Egypt, from the Hijra to date

Denis explains that Egypt was not fully Christian at the advent of Islam in Egypt. Greco-Pharaonic faith and various forms of syncretism existed along Orthodox Christianity.²² Imam Fādil Sulayman argued that large numbers of Arian Christians

²⁰ P. Fargues, "Demographic Islamization: Non Muslims in Muslim Countries," *SAIS Review*, XXI, No. 2 (Summer-Fall 2001): 106.

²¹ Courbage and Fargues, *Christians and Jews under Islam*, 90.

²² Denis, "Cent ans de localisation de la population chrétienne égyptienne," 131.

lived in the early years of Islam in Egypt who rapidly converted to Islam because Arians, like Muslims, do not believe in the divinity of Jesus Christ.²³ If we accept these arguments, then presenting a graph illustrating Christians at 100% before the advent of Islam is inaccurate. The decline of Orthodox Christianity therefore may have been less rapid as presented here.

Jenkins writes that in the first century of Islam conversion to the new faith was difficult since new Muslims had to be fitted into the Arab tribal system through a kind of fictitious adoption, which explains the relatively slow conversion to Islam in the first century of Muslims in Egypt. This changed, however, when the Abbasids came to power in 750.²⁴

The Abbasids not only eased conversions to Islam, but raised taxes substantially to finance their wars. That in turn led to Coptic revolts against heavy taxes in the 8th and 9th centuries that were brutally crushed, causing large numbers of Christians convert. This defeat led to the development of a Muslim majority in Egypt by the late 9th or 10th century.²⁵ Christianity in the Delta received its final blow during the crusades when Muslim rulers saw Christians as a potential fifth column.²⁶

Around 1800 there were virtually no Christians living in the Delta.²⁷ The Christian communities in Cairo and Alexandria were small. Major pockets in Middle Egypt, however, had remained isolated until 1800 and Christians there formed a substantial size of the population and, in several places, even constituted the majority.

Muhammad Ali (reigned over Egypt from 1805-1848) and his 19th century successors improved Upper Egypt's infrastructure; building roads, canals, and railroads. Once the improved infrastructure eased commuting between Upper Egypt and Cairo, many Christians left for the north. 19th century Egyptian rulers encouraged Upper Egyptians to migrate north to work in the cotton industry and help build the Suez Canal. Among these workers were many Christians who established churches in the Delta and the cities along the Suez Canal. In my travels through Egypt I often met with Christian families in the Delta who traced their ancestry to Upper Egypt. Older Christians around Assuit reminisced about areas now home to mixed Muslim-Christian populations that only a half-century ago were entirely Christian.

The strong Christian presence in an area which was isolated until the 19th century is not unique to Egypt. One also finds that Christians in other remote areas in the Islamic

²³ Fādil Sulayman wrote his master's thesis about Arians converting to Islam after the Islamic conquest of Egypt, 639-641, and discussed this with Prof. Harald Suermann during his lecture on early Christian documents about the arrival of Islam in Egypt. See Cornelis Hulsman, "Seventh century documents about the arrival of Islam in Egypt," *Arab-West Report*, Week 8, Art. 2, (19 Mar 2009), <http://www.arabwestreport.info/year-2009/week-8/2-seventh-century-documents-about-arrival-islam-egypt>. A problem is in estimating the proportion of Arians in Egypt in those days and thus the size of the conversions to Islam.

²⁴ Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity*, 110-114.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Denis, "Cent ans de localisation de la population chrétienne égyptienne," 136.

²⁷ This observation is based on visits to Coptic Orthodox churches in the Delta in the past 30 years. Practically all churches date to the 19th century, only few churches such as the churches in Dimyana and Musturod were older. Christian families in the Delta often could trace their roots to Upper Egypt. Known is that during the days of Muhammad Ali and his successors many Upper Egyptians, including Christians, were encouraged to work in the Delta.

world were able to maintain their communities. Mount Lebanon, Tur Abdin (south-eastern Turkey) and northern Iraq were also remote areas where Christian communities remained strong.²⁸

1.4 The territorial distribution of Christians in Egypt according to the census results

The census results allow us to look at the territorial distribution of Christians according to the different Egyptian governorates throughout a century. An overall analysis of the data over a period of one hundred years shows the following patterns:

- Although Christians are dispersed throughout Egypt, they have a greater tendency to reside in urban areas.

- No governorate is close to having a Christian majority.

Using 1960 data, Betts (1975)²⁹ found only 11 settlements of over 3,000 inhabitants which have a Christian majority, all of them located in Upper Egypt, between Minya and Luxor: Naqadah, Al-Rahmānīyyah, Al-Kushh, Al-Hammām, Al-‘Izbah, Balūt, Al-Muharraḡ, Dayr Al-Barshā, Al-Bayādīyya, Abū Qurqās, and Manahrah. The 1976 census data for Cairo shows that two small sub-districts in Rūd Al-Faraj and Shubrā have a population of 51 and 55 percent Christians, respectively. It would be interesting to see what the percentage would be in these areas today.³⁰

- The Christian presence has always been remarkably higher in Upper Egypt, especially in the governorates of Minya, Asyut, and Sūhāj, compared to Lower Egypt. Apart from Alexandria, the presence of Christians is low in the Delta. In 1960 the Delta, which composed 42 percent of the Egyptian population, was only 2 percent Christian. The census of 1986 showed a further decline with Christians constituting 1.5 percent of the Delta population, excluding Alexandria. In Port Said and Isma‘īliya, the number of Christians reduced from 25 percent and 27 percent, respectively on the eve of World War I to 4 and 3 percent, respectively in 1986.³¹

- The marked difference between Upper and Lower Egypt in the Christian territorial partition is one of the reasons which may explain why Christians often feel underestimated in the census results. Ducruet notes that in 1960 about 50 percent of all Egyptian Christians were concentrated in four governorates: Minya (306,286 Christians, corresponding to 19.6 percent of the total population of this governorate); Asyut (283,147 - 21.3 percent), Sūhāj

²⁸ Jenkins writes about “The Geography of Survival,” in *The Lost History of Christianity*, 236-240. He refers to local Christian elites remaining firmly in control for centuries in remoter areas of Upper Egypt and northern Iraq, p. 110-111.

²⁹ Quoted in Chitam, 46.

³⁰ El-Kushh has been the scene of much tension and violence between Muslims and Christians in 1998 and 2000. I have received oral reports of Christians leaving this area since 2000. Further research could study the link between violence and Coptic migration.

³¹ Christians in the Delta repeatedly tell stories explaining that their forefathers came from Upper Egypt but came to the Delta and the Suez Canal region for economic opportunities in the 19th and first half of the 20th century; for example cotton production around al-Zaqāzīḡ and building the Suez Canal for many Christians living in Ismailia. It was suggested practically no Christians lived in the Delta, with the exception of Alexandria, prior to Khedive Muhammad Ali. This substantial reduction of the proportion of Christians is largely due to the forced evacuation of many Greek Melkites, French, and Italian Catholics from Alexandria, and British Protestants from Port Said, by President Nasser. i.e. not entirely due to changes in the Egyptian population.

(239,946 - 15.2 percent), and Qinā (113,158 - 8.3 percent). Ducruet explains these four provinces represented only 22 percent of the total Egyptian population.³² Of the 962,545 Christians living outside these four provinces, 409,002 lived in Cairo (12.2 percent of the population), and 153,474 in Alexandria (10.7 percent of the population), with these two cities representing 18.7 percent of the Egyptian population. Analyzing the 1976 results, Chitam concludes that although 42 percent of the Egyptian population lives in the Delta, only 10 percent of Egypt's Christian population does, while 22 percent of Egypt's population lives in Upper Egypt compared to 51 percent of the Christians.

-Courbage and Fargues point out that the unhappy situation of the Christians under Nasser resulted in Copts abandoning the regions where they were the weakest to gather in Cairo, and in the towns of Minya, Asyut and Beni Suef, where larger communities offered a sense of security.³³ Nevertheless, a generation later the same provincial towns became centers of Islamic activism. "While the decline of Christian presence first showed in the 1960 census, the migration from the Nile Valley accelerated when Islamic movements expanded their networks. At the campuses of the universities of Asyut, Minya, Sūhāj and Cairo new Muslim preachers were most popular. The Tanzīm al-Jihād, which was founded in Alexandria in 1975, engaged in a series of attacks against the property of Copts in Central Egypt."³⁴

Although there has always been an important Christian presence in Cairo and Alexandria, modern rural-urban mass migration to Cairo and Alexandria, which involved both Christians and Muslims, has had the effect of reducing the proportion of Christians (although not their total number) in these cities.

Courbage and Fargues remark that "in Alexandria the confessional mosaic is now faded. Non-Muslim inhabitants in Alexandria passed from 26 percent in 1927 to 6 percent in 1986."³⁵ This trend is confirmed by the 1996 census, according to which Christians in Alexandria are 5.6 percent of the population.

Christians in the governorate of Cairo were 10.1 percent of the population in 1976, 9.3 percent in 1986 and 8.57 percent in 1996. The Coptic Orthodox Bishops Marqus of Shubrā al-Khaymah, northern Cairo, and Picenti of Helwan, south of Cairo, report a large influx of Christians from rural Egypt.³⁶

An in-depth analysis however, shows that the outskirts of greater Cairo, Giza, Helwan, and Qalyubia governorates have become the recipients of the migration from Middle and Lower Egypt. Cairo and its suburbs have already brought together 28

³² Ducruet, "Statistiques Chrétiennes d'Egypte," 66-67.

³³ Nationalizations which also affected Christian landowners and possibly a number of peasants living under their protection. A number of Christians told me that small Christian farmers have not equally benefited from the distribution of land of expropriated landowners. I have not been able to verify this; Courbage and Fargues, 179.

³⁴ Ibid 189-190.

³⁵ Ibid. This decline is to a large extent the result of Nasser's policy that expelled Greeks, Italians and French from Egypt. Many of them were living in Alexandria, prior to Nasser a very cosmopolitan city.

³⁶ Meetings with Bishop Picenti, July 21, 2007 and Bishop Marqus, August 1, 2007; see Maria Rezzonico, "Report on Church Response to Poverty," *Arab-West Report*, Week 35, Art. 2, (2007), <http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/18104>.

percent of the population of the Copts (21 percent of the Muslims). These two areas are the sole areas where the Christian percentage of the population has increased. This explains why Christians in Cairo are less aware of the effects of large scale migration to the cities than Christians in Upper Egypt.

2. Census' reliability

2.1 Arguments in favor of the census' reliability

The reliability of the Egyptian census is attested to by Ducruet, Chatim, Fargues, Martin, Denis and Delhayé.

Commenting on 1897-1966 censuses, Ducruet states that the proportions of Christians as part of the Egyptian population had been relatively steady. Ducruet states that the small increase in the number of Christians registered by the 1966 census (103,000) was related to the fact that at the same time 294,070 Egyptians were registered to live abroad.³⁷ Egyptian migration to countries outside Egypt was prior to the 1960s negligent but in the 1960s migration has picked up and has continued until today, generally believed is that over half of these emigrants were Christian.³⁸

Ducruet suggested that if in 1960 220,000 of the Egyptians living abroad were Christians, the percentage of 1960 would be reached. In other words he attributed the proportional decline in 1966 to emigration.

Ducruet argues that it would have been impossible to falsify eight censuses (1897-1966), which were conducted under different political contexts; the first censuses being controlled by the French, the following ones by the English, the last ones by experts with an American formation. Ducruet's arguments are further developed by Chitam, who reaches the conclusion that "there is no evidence of deliberate doctoring of statistics, and only limited scope for claims that some Christians for various reasons were not registered as such."³⁹

The reliability of the official statistics is defended by Fargues arguing that the Egyptian numbers are consistent both over the whole period of time and at each individual moment in time. If there had been any manipulation, this pattern would not have been constant. Furthermore,

Censuses are not the only source of religious statistics in Egypt. The registration of births, marriages, and deaths provides another source. The two operations are carried out by completely separate branches of public administration using quite different methods. They nevertheless provide results which are completely consistent with each other. For example, the birth rate of 30 per thousand, obtained by matching the 85,000 Christian births recorded every year throughout the 1980s to the 2,800,000 Christians counted

³⁷ Ducruet, 65-68.

³⁸ Of the Egyptians from 1993-1997 who requested a permanent residence status in Canada, U.S., Australia, and New Zealand almost 50 percent were Coptic, Puck de Wit, "Egypte is te klein voor mijn gedachten. De migratiemotieven van kopten." *Sharqiyyat* 14/1 (2002): 47-59.

³⁹ Ducruet, 65-68.

in the census of 1986, would only be 11 per thousand if the number of Christians were 8,000,000. With such a low birth rate their percentage of the whole population would have undergone a very sharp fall, instead of showing just a slight drop, which clearly contradicts the numbers claimed. So we might as well admit the plausibility of the published statistics.⁴⁰

According to Maurice Martin, studies seem to establish beyond any doubt a diminution of proportion of the Copts, from about 7 percent in the 1960s, to about 6 percent in the 1980s. "But since the Egyptian population has more than doubled in size during the same period, it follows that its Christian population has also roughly doubled during the same period, so that it offered a much faster and more varied field of internal action."⁴¹

Also, Eric Denis studied the Egyptian census and compared this with the registration of births, marriages, and deaths on a random sample of census units and he found them to be consistent.⁴²

Researcher Gregoire Delhaye studied the work carried by Denis and writes that he "shows that census data are consistent over the 11 censuses in the proportion of Copts up to the *shiyakhah* and *qarya* level, the smallest geographical units of the census. So if there was cheating, as some Copts say, it must have been systematically carried out for a 100 years at all levels of the census taking apparatus which is almost impossible."⁴³

Delhaye does not exclude the possibility of errors in the Egyptian census "but mistakes are made in all censuses in all countries but they usually cancel each other out. When census fraud is committed it is detectable, you will see substantial drops or rises in the variables being tampered with. This is not the case for the Egyptian census. The trends are consistent. Furthermore, Egypt has a good census methodology in comparison to other developing countries. A lot of their staff was actually trained abroad, including the Insee, the French census institution."⁴⁴

Delhaye found data regarding the religious affiliation of employees of the census bureau that were collected following the Coptic Congress of Asyut in 1911. "19 out of the 46 employees of the census bureau were Copts. I doubt they would have let fraud take place. So if this early count is deemed correct and the evolution is consistent, meaning no fraud can be detected, then the current numbers can't be wrong."⁴⁵

Eric Denis is highly critical of the estimates provided by many Coptic authors and says that those who argue for higher numbers simply "disregard the census or completely reject this in favor of mythical constructions made up to fit the issue on stake".⁴⁶

⁴⁰ Courbage and Fargues.

⁴¹ Martin quoted in "The Renewal in Context: 1960-1990," in N. Van Doorn-Harder, K. Vogt, editors, *Between Desert and City: The Coptic Orthodox Church Today*, (Oslo: Novus forlag, 1997), 15.

⁴² Denis, "Cent ans de localisation de la population chrétienne égyptienne".

⁴³ Gregoire Delhaye, e-mail to author, September 25, 2007.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Denis, "Cent ans de localisation de la population chrétienne égyptienne".

2.2 Arguments against census' reliability

Skepticism of the Egyptian census is well expressed by professor of communications, Edward M. Wakin:

Estimates are tossed back and forth the way a rug is bought in Cairo bazaars, with many Copts overestimating their numbers at five, six, seven millions and insisting that one in five or one in four Egyptians is a Copt. The government, in turn, underestimates their number, which Copts regard as an attempt to undermine their claims by miscounting. The fewer Copts there are counted the more justification for government indifference toward them [...]. There is no doubt that the head counting in Egypt is an erratic operation hampered by all the problems of underdeveloped countries with a tradition of suspicion, especially by the minority, toward the census taker.⁴⁷

Wakin added, "The Challenge of Survival for six million Copts," on the cover page of the reprint of his book, *A Lonely Minority: The Modern Story of Egypt's Copts*, contradicting the numbers he offers. In his foreword written in 2000 he wrote: "Today, they number at least six million."⁴⁸ In this year, Egypt counted 67 million inhabitants and thus, according to Wakin in 2000, Copts would have made up around 9 percent of the population. In 1963, however, he stated that Copts number one out of six in a population of 24 million, which is 16 percent of the population.⁴⁹ These proportions are not only conflicting, but claiming 24 million inhabitants of Egypt while the census had provided a figure close to 26 million also shows inaccuracy. Wakin expressed a widespread Egyptian sentiment distrusting government figures in general, yet he does not present the methodology for how he obtained his large estimate, making his figures unconvincing.

The arguments Wakin uses, such as great variances in estimates, combined with the fear expressed by Copts that the acceptance of smaller numbers would lead to greater government indifference to them and doubts about the neutrality of any government figure, have been continuously repeated, in particular by Coptic Christians, throughout the years. Wakin voiced the opinions of Copts in his years. In later years Copts referred to Wakin to support their claims.⁵⁰ Fargues disagrees with Wakin, in suggesting that "suspicion towards censuses is often explained by other reasons, such as escaping tax collection, which are not statistically linked with religion."⁵¹

⁴⁷ Edward Wakin, *A Lonely Minority: The Modern Story of Egypt's Copts*, 2 ed., (New York: William Morrow, 2000 (1963')), 24. His son, Daniel Wakin, a reporter for the New York Times, wrote that *A Lonely Minority: The Modern Story of Egypt's Copts* was arguably Edward's most important book. "The Copts, the largest Christian community in the Arab world, were a sensitive subject in Gamal Abdul Nasser's Egypt, and Mr. Wakin said he had to smuggle his notes out of the country hidden in his luggage," Daniel Wakin wrote. "Even 40 years later, Egyptian Copts would contact Mr. Wakin in appreciation of the book."; URL: http://www.fordham.edu/campus_resources/enewsroom/archives/archive_1732.asp.

⁴⁸ Wakin, vii.

⁴⁹ Wakin, 24.

⁵⁰ Copts frequently refer to Wakin in arguments about the census since he used their arguments. But Wakin did not study the Egyptian census results, he simply dismissed them without any study.

⁵¹ Email correspondence with author, March 9, 2008.

Didier Rance follows Wakin in dismissing the census results without studying them. In 1976 the census provided a number of 2,300,000 Christians, corresponding to 6 percent of the Egyptian population. Rance states that this figure made Sadat's ministers laugh, believing this to be much too low.⁵²

Also Laurent and Annie Chabry do not trust the 1976 census, stating that "the reality is certainly closer to 7 or 8 million," without explaining how they reached that number.⁵³

We find similar reasoning in Christian Cannuyer who wrote "Le recensement de 1986 les compte pour 8 % des Égyptiens (soit quelque 3.300.000), ce qui est mieux que les 6,3% du recensement de 1976, mais reste une noqtah, une 'pleasanterie': les manipulations plus ou moins systématiques des fonctionnaires musulmans et la rétention d'informations de la part des Coptes rendent en effet ce chiffre peu crédible. L'Église, sur base de ses registres de baptême, annonce 11 millions de fidèles, mais l'estimation semble cette fois forcée. On avance, à titre d'hypothèse médiane, le nombre de 7 à 8 millions de Coptes."⁵⁴

Cannuyer, like many other authors, was probably confused about the large discrepancies in the numbers provided and neither wanted to accept the figure of the census nor that of his Coptic sources and thus claimed, without any research, that the truth should fall somewhere halfway. An additional problem is that he did not check the baptism registers, neither how they were used to compute a total number of Christians in Egypt. Courbage and Fargues call Cannuyer's claim unsubstantiated.⁵⁵ They add that Cannuyer refers to incorrect information. The real figure of the 1986 census is 2,829,349 Christians of all rites, while Cannuyer provides a figure of 3,300,000, only Copts.⁵⁶

An argument often used to criticize the reliability of the census is the figure allegedly provided by President Jimmy Carter welcoming Pope Shenouda to the U.S. in 1977. The U.S. President addressed the Pope as the representative of 7 million Egyptian Christians, an estimate that was about 5 million higher than the official statistics in

⁵² Didier Rance, *Chrétiens du Moyen-Orient, témoins de la croix*, (Paris: Bibliothèque Aide à l'Église en détresse, 1991), 211-212, reported in J.P. Valognes, *Vie et mort des Chrétiens d'Orient. Des origines à nos jours*, (Paris: Fayard, 1994).

⁵³ Laurent Chabry and Annie Chabry. *Politique et minorités au Proche-Orient*, (Maisonneuve & Larose: 1984), quoted in Courbage and Fargues, 180. Their estimate may have been based on Coptic Orthodox Church sources who, at that time, claimed a membership of eight million. See Hamied Ansari, "Sectarian Conflict in Egypt and the Political Expedience of Religion," *Middle East Journal* 38 (1984): 397-418.

⁵⁴ C. Cannuyer, *Les Coptes*, (Brussels: 1990), 173. Courbage and Fargues (180-181) respond that for the figure of 7 to 8 million Copts no evidence is provided. The reference to the baptism registers is more often heard in arguments with Copts. Fargues later wrote the author that no study based on any actual processing of these baptism registers can be found in the literature. Email correspondence, March 9, 2008.

⁵⁵ Ibid 180-181.

⁵⁶ "Copts" seems here to refer to Coptic Orthodox, but his statement is not precise.

Cairo.⁵⁷ Fargues rejects claims based on Carter's alleged statement since the U.S. government is not able to count in Egypt.⁵⁸

A common claim against census reliability is that Muslim civil servants would register entire Christian families as Muslims, distorting statistics concerning Copts.⁵⁹

Others claim that people with names that do not reflect a religious identity have been regularly counted as Muslims.⁶⁰ A problem with these statements is that when one asks Copts, one either gets generalizations or one or two examples that are said to form a pattern. I have never found any research showing that such irregularities would explain the huge discrepancies between the Egyptian census and claims made by Christians.

Bishop Marqus of Shubrā al-Khaymah argued the inaccuracy of the census on the basis of his personal experience. When he asked the military for permission to travel to Israel (a normal procedure for someone who has completed his military service), he found that he was registered as a Muslim. The same thing, he said, happened to many other Christians, who found they were registered as Muslims on their identity card.⁶¹

Between 2004 and 2007, *Watani* editor-in-chief, Yūsuf Sīdhum, wrote about complaints of Coptic Christians who found themselves registered as Muslims. This occurred in the period when Egypt was changing the old paper ID cards to the new computerized ID cards and birth certificates. "The erroneous registering of Christians as Muslims was very uncommon when ID documents were issued manually," Sīdhum wrote. The errors in these years were said to be due to "Muslim" being the default religion on the computer.⁶² *Watani* campaigned between 2004 and 2007 to correct

⁵⁷ J.P. Peroncel-Hugoz, quoted in Sélim Naguib, *Les Coptes dans l'Égypte d'aujourd'hui*, (Bruxelles : Solidarité-Orient, 1996), 57. This argument was also provided by Bishop Picenti in an interview on July 21, 2007. I was not able to get this figure confirmed by the Carter Center, January 2009.

⁵⁸ Cornelis Hulsman. "Interview with Dr. Philippe Fargues about Coptic Statistics," *Arab-West Report*, Week 52, Art. 17, (2008), <http://arabwestreport.info/node/21469>. A senior diplomat from the US Embassy in Cairo confirmed this on April 30, 2012. Figures in official US documents, he said, including the CIA yearbooks, State Department and USCIRF reports are all estimates.

⁵⁹ See Naguib, "Les Coptes dans l'Égypte d'Aujourd'Hui," 58.

⁶⁰ J.D. Pennington. "The Copts in Modern Egypt," *Middle Eastern Studies*, 158-179.

⁶¹ Meeting Bishop Marqus, August 1, 2007, reported in: Rezzonico, "Report on Church Response to Poverty," <http://arabwestreport.info/node/18104>.

⁶² *Arab-West Report*, Week 17, Art. 22, (2005), <http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/6296>. Sīdhum repeated his arguments often with new names of Christians with the wrong registration of their religion in their ID. *Arab-West Report*, Week 20, Art. 23, (2004), <http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/6655>; *Arab-West Report*, Week 35, Art. 24, (2004), <http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/7659>; *Arab-West Report*, Week 17, Art. 22, (2005), <http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/6296>; *Arab-West Report*, Week 20, Art. 23, (2005), <http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/7082>; *Arab-West Report*, Week 24, Art. 39, (2005), <http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/7476>; *Arab-West Report*, Week 28, Art. 51, (2005), <http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/10179>; AWR, Week 34, Art. 30, (2005), <http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/10518>; AWR, Week 14, Art. 43, (2006), <http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/12553>; AWR, Week 15, Art. 38, (2006), <http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/12830>; AWR, Week 6, Art. 66, (2006), <http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/9026>; AWR, Week 9, Art. 37, (2007), <http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/16420>; AWR, Week 18, Art. 16, (2007), <http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/17036>.

mistakes made. It is obvious from several reports in *Watani* that this campaign had been successful.⁶³ Sīdhum:

The prompt, decent, courteous manner in which the head of the Civil Register Authority's main office in Abbasiya, Cairo, deals with the problem cases printed in *Watani* proves that there is no ill will against any of the victims. The errors, which nevertheless cause their victims immeasurable anguish, indignity, and frustration, are nothing but 'computer errors' which can—and should—be easily corrected.⁶⁴

In 2007 we had a Danish intern in our office who was engaged to a Coptic fiancée from his country. They used the time of his internship to correct the religious affiliation on her identity card, a long bureaucratic procedure. There are dozens of such stories known, some are published but many others are not. The total number of these errors unrelated to the census is hard to estimate but it is certain that such errors have contributed to Coptic distrust of government numbers. We have seen no more complaints in *Watani* since 2007, indicating these discussions ended, but the memory of these mistakes lingers on.

Many Christians, including Bishop Marqus, believe identity cards are used to produce the number of Christians in the census. Fargues disagrees: "Census numbers are actually obtained through the processing of the census questionnaire itself, not of identity documents."⁶⁵

Also, Coptic author Dr. Amin Makram Ebeid does not trust the Egyptian census. As with many other Copts his argument is based on personal experiences,

When the censor came to the home of my grandfather (over fifty years ago) and took our names, status, ages and other information from us and then proceeded to ask us about our religion and answered for us by declaring "Muslims, of course". The reason for this is that it is taken as a matter of fact that Arab speaking people must be Muslims. This is not done with evil intent. It is simply the way people understand nationality in our part of the Arab world. Obviously we did not shy away from correcting this error. This is why, due to the reservations I just expressed, the least I would expect in any publication on demographics of the Copts in Egypt would be to acknowledge the fact that such a study cannot be more than an estimate with a huge margin of error!⁶⁶

Bishop Marqus said that many Christians, when asked about the number of family members for the census, do not provide an exact answer, saying for instance that they have only one child when in reality they have more. This could be related to a general

⁶³ *Arab-West Report*, Week 24, Art. 39, (2005); Week 34, Art. 30, (2005); Week 11, Art. 33, (2006), <http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/12369>.

⁶⁴ Yūsuf Sīdhum, "Problems on Hold; the Victim List Grows," *Watani International*, 26 Mar 2006 and *Arab-West Report*, Week 13, Art 26, (2006), <http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/11404>.

⁶⁵ Philippe Fargues, e-mail to author, March 9, 2008. Fargues agrees such inaccuracies exist but these inaccuracies cannot explain the big discrepancies between census numbers and church estimates.

⁶⁶ Dr. Amin Makram Ebeid, e-mail to author, February 8, 2011.

fear of anything related to the authorities among the lower classes.⁶⁷ Fargues responded that “one, however, cannot understand why this fear should be more frequent among Copts than among Muslims.”⁶⁸

It would be wrong to presume that it is only Christians who distrust government numbers. The distrust among government numbers in general, not only the census, is widespread among Muslims as well. An Egyptian Muslim migrant from Banī Walims, 180 km south of Cairo, now living in Cairo told AWR interns Elizabeth Edwards and Mette Toft Nielsen that “the census information is unreliable as the papers are handed over to local officials who often do not even go to households to gather information, they just fill it out themselves.” The same person said that some 30 years ago local teachers who were responsible for administering the census in Banī Walims inflated the figures so that the town would seem large enough for the government to provide electricity (as the town did not have any electricity).⁶⁹

Opposition to government figures is at times not only based on the observation of errors in taking the census, but can also be politically motivated. Dr. Ebeid wrote:

I appreciate your desire to spread the advantages of modern investigating techniques. But even if they are true, which I doubt, don't you have another study to do? Could you please find a way to correct your statistics and in the meanwhile put a hold on your 6 percent crusade? The world of academia will certainly survive your temporary silence on the matter. This is important for liberal and secular Muslims as well as for the Christians who would like to modernize their country. The fact is that without a significant Christian minority it would be very hard for all liberals (Muslims and Christians alike) to hope for a modern secular democracy in Egypt. I am saying this knowing that you would not like to see Egypt become a Wahabi state. Sometimes holding one's information is the wiser, kinder and more effective way to help a higher cause. All of us have a lot of information that we keep for ourselves because they can harm innocent people. If Egypt manages to become a secular country and if its principles are accepted by the majority of its people; then you could proclaim that there are only 2 percent Copts in Egypt without harming its people, but today a 6 percent crusade can indeed be harmful!⁷⁰

I have repeatedly heard the political argument that accepting lower numbers would be harmful to the political ambitions of the Copts. Fargues does not believe political or ideological arguments should dictate what numbers are correct: “Given the present circumstances in Egypt and hopes for democracy we need facts. Democracy after all must not rest on wrong illusions.”⁷¹

The political argument is difficult because it would indeed provide Islamists with the argument that the Coptic share in national income is larger than that of their numerical

⁶⁷ Meeting Bishop Marqus, August 1, 2007, reported in: Rezzonico, “Report on Church Response to Poverty,” <http://arabwestreport.info/node/18104>.

⁶⁸ Bishop Marqus, e-mail to author, March 9, 2008.

⁶⁹ Elizabeth Edwards, “Coptic Orthodox Statistics and Migration in Maghāghah,” *Arab-West Report*, 29 Aug 2011.

⁷⁰ Dr. Amin Makram Ebeid, e-mail to author, February 8, 2011.

⁷¹ Fargues, e-mail to author, February 14, 2011.

representation. I do not believe that to be a fair argument. We do not examine Western democratic societies to determine which population group has a larger share in the national income than other population groups. But rather than arguing about population numbers, I would argue that laws in society should be equal to all citizens, regardless of their religious conviction. I agree with Amin Makram Ebeid that it would be better for all Egyptians if Egypt would respect pluralism, that there would be a separation between religion and state, and that the country would be truly democratic, but I also agree with Fargues that arguments should be based on facts and not on wrong illusions. It is obvious that mistakes do exist but they do not explain the huge difference between the census' results and the church estimations.

Following the fall of President Mubarak Amin Makram Ebeid wrote, "I hope that the youth revolution will prove itself to be an authentic revolution and be infinitely more transparent in preparing an equitable census. But this will require a real education of the censurers who should learn to accept the fact that that being an Arab speaking citizen does not mean being a Muslim!"⁷²

3. Non-official estimates of the number of Copts

3.1 From 1700s to now

The oldest available estimate of the number of Copts by a European traveler dates to the 17th century. Vansleb gives a number of 10,000 to 15,000 Copts, but this number does not correspond to the estimates provided in the following century. Consequently, it has been suggested that his numbers could have been a mistake and should have actually read 100,000 to 150,000. Amba Isidorus, a Coptic author writing around 1700, suggested that Copts number around 150,000.⁷³

At the time of the French expedition to Egypt (1798-1801) Egypt consisted of 2,500,000 inhabitants with the total number of Christians and Jews estimated at 215,000 (corresponding to 8.6 percent).⁷⁴ In 1799, Amédée Ryme stated that Egyptians were no more than 2 to 3 million, with Copts scarcely numbering 200,000 and declining daily.⁷⁵ This would correspond to 7 to 10 percent of the population. This estimate, Martin points out, already corresponds to our modern percentage, around 8 percent in the 1960s.⁷⁶

Clot Bey estimated the Copts in 1840 to be about 150,000 out of a total of 3 million inhabitants.⁷⁷ This is the same figure reported by E.W. Lane in 1835.⁷⁸ Lane also

⁷² Ebeid, e-mail to author, February 18, 2011.

⁷³ Martin, 68.

⁷⁴ Jomard, *Description de l'Égypte*, 138-139. For more details on Jomard's estimate, see Courbage and Fargues, 216, who believe he underestimated the Egyptian population by almost 2 million.

⁷⁵ Amédée Ryme, *L'Égypte moderne: Période de la domination française*, (Firmin Didot: 1848), 26-27.

⁷⁶ M. Martin, "Statistiques Chrétiennes d'Égypte, Note Historique," *Travaux et Jours*, (juillet-septembre 1967): 74.

⁷⁷ Clot Bey, *Aperçu general sur l'Égypte*, (Brussels: 1840), t. I, 167.

⁷⁸ E.W. Lane, *Manners and Customs of the modern Egyptians*, (J.M. Dent & Company, 1908), 33: Martin, quotes a French translation of Lane "Les Coptes font moins que la quatorzième de l'Égypte, leur nombre ne dépassant pas 150,000 personnes environ" (p. 69) and comments that if the total

reports Copts in Cairo to be about 10,000 of 240,000 inhabitants. Also Jacques Tagher, a Lebanese Christian author who is often referred to by Coptic emigrants in the West, states that “At beginning of the 19th century there were about one hundred and fifty thousand Copts among a population of three million.”⁷⁹

The *Algemeene Nederlandsche Encyclopedie* of 1865 states Egypt consists of 4.5 million inhabitants, of whom 150,000 Coptic Christians, which would equal 3.3 percent. The same Encyclopedia mentions 10,000 Coptic Christians in Cairo.⁸⁰ The numbers provided suggest their source might have been Lane.

Butcher argues that Lane’s figure of 150,000 was too low given that in 1855 the Coptic Orthodox patriarchate estimated the number of Copts to be just over 217,000, out of a total population of approximately five million.⁸¹ According to Martin, these estimates are still too low, making Christians amount to less than 5 percent of the population. Martin states that both Butcher's and Lane's numbers have been calculated on the basis of *jizyah*, which was abolished in Egypt in 1855. Testoin (1894) estimated Christians to be between 700,000 and 800,000.⁸² This figure corresponds, Martin says, to the figure of the first census conducted in 1897.

According to “La Mission Catholique en Egypt,” (1929) Orthodox Copts numbered 912,000 (280,000 in Cairo and in the Delta, 182,000 in Minya. and 450,000 in the remainder of Upper Egypt). These numbers, Martin remarks, are consistent with the census of 1927, which lists 1,200,000 Christians in Egypt. In 1946, the “Annuaire Catholique d’Égypte” provided the following numbers: 1,100,000 Coptic Orthodox and 227,000 Catholics of all rites. Adding to these two numbers is that of Orthodox not belonging to the Coptic Orthodox Church (Greeks, Syrian, and Armenian) and Protestant Christians in the “Annuaire Catholique d’Égypte.” Martin says that these numbers are close to the results of the census of 1947, with Christians numbering 1,502,000. On the basis of this data, Martin's conclusion is that the numbers concerning the percentage of Copts have remained more or less consistent for a period of 200 years, from 1750-1950.

The following numbers were also reported. According to Wakin, Egyptian Copts averaged one in six Egyptians, namely 4 million out a total population of 24 million, which corresponds to 16.7 percent.⁸³ In 1982, the periodical *Pro Mundi Vita* reported

Egyptian population was around 4,000,000 in 1835, Copts would have had to be more or less double the number of 150,000 in order to correspond with the proportion given by the scholars in the French expedition. In the English edition I used, Lane estimates the Egyptian population to be “less than two millions,” which would make Copts correspond to 7.5 percent of the population.

⁷⁹ Jacques Tagher, *Christians in Muslim Egypt: An Historical Study of the Relations between Copts and Muslims from 640 to 1922*, (Oros Verlag, 1998), 172. I received this book as a gift from a German Coptic activist in 2011. The book is a translation from Tagher’s *Aqbāt wa Muslimūn mundhu al-fath al-‘arabī hattā ‘ām* (1922).

⁸⁰ *Algemeene Nederlandsche Encyclopedie*, (Plantenga en Sythoff, 1865), Vol. 4, 328-333.

⁸¹ Edith L. Butcher, Vol. 2 of “The story of the Church of Egypt,” (London: 1897), 393. The figures provided by the patriarchate were not a “calculation” but an informed estimate. This estimate would make the Copts 4.34 percent of the population.

⁸² Testoin Edouard, *L’Égypte ou le Pays des Coptes: Diffusion de la langue française en Orient*, (Alfred Cartier Tours, 1894), 152.

⁸³ Wakin, 4. The Egyptian population in 1960 was, according to the Egyptian census, 25,984,000, closer to 26 million than to 24 million. Wakin provides no sources for his numbers.

that Christians in Egypt numbered 1,954,000 (18.6 percent) in 1900, 6,193,628 (18.6 percent) in 1970, and 7,513,840 (17.8 percent) in 1980.⁸⁴

The handbook of member churches of the World Council of Churches, however, provides a percentage of six percent in 1985, which is not far from the census figure of those days.⁸⁵ A large volume about churches in the Middle East published by the Middle East Council of Churches states that in 1990, Christians did not constitute more than 5.8 percent of Egypt's population.⁸⁶ Yet, J.P. Valognes estimates Christians to be about 10 percent of the 57 million inhabitants of Egypt, a number often used in various media reporting.⁸⁷ Peroncel-Hugoz, a journalist of *Le Monde*, however, was among the few journalists who was more cautious and estimated the Copts in Egypt to be 5 million or around 8.3 percent of the population.⁸⁸

Anton Wessels states in 1996, "Although the official government numbers quote a low number, the Copts themselves speak of five or six million (or even more). One out of three Christians in the Middle East is Coptic. In light of the fact that they are currently believed to make up approximately 10-12 percent of the population, their number would actually be four or five million."⁸⁹ El Hassan Bin Talal provides in 1995 an estimate of about six million Christians in Egypt (12.5 percent), with Copts believed to number over five million.⁹⁰

Jenkins writes that Copts constitute "perhaps 10 percent of the Egyptian people."⁹¹ Valognes, Wessels, and Jenkins are widely acclaimed scholars. Their writing shows confusion about the wide discrepancies in figures provided. Fargues commented on the aforementioned estimates: "It is noticeable that none of the above numbers seem to be supported by solid empirical evidence."⁹²

Of course not all the sources mentioned here should be given the same credit. Travelers, usually, made use of local church estimates. The estimates provided by scholars of the French expedition seem to be quite accurate. Clot Bey, Lane and the Coptic Patriarchate (in 1855) gave estimates which were too low. This is probably the result of their methods of estimating which was based on payments on the *jizyah* tax, which was abolished in 1855. Later estimates of Testoin and the Catholic mission in Egypt are higher and closer to the numbers provided in the first census.

⁸⁴ Georges C. Anawati, "Les Chrétiens d'Égypte," *Pro Mundi Vita, Dossier d'Afrique*, 21 (Bruxelles, 1982): 9, quoted in S. Naguib, "Les Coptes dans l'Égypte d'aujourd'hui," 58.

⁸⁵ *Handbook Member Churches World Council of Churches*, ed. A. J. van der Bent, (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1985).

⁸⁶ Habib Badr (chief editor), *Christianity; A History in the Middle East*, (Middle East Council of Churches: 2005), 41.

⁸⁷ Valognes, *Vie et mort des Chrétiens d'Orient. Des origines à nos jours*.

⁸⁸ Naguib, "Les Coptes dans l'Égypte d'aujourd'hui," 58.

⁸⁹ Anton Wessels, *Arabs and Christians? Christians in the Middle East*, (Pharaos, 1996), 138.

⁹⁰ EL Hassan Bin Talal, *Christianity in the Arab World*, (London: Continuum Intl Pub Group, 1995), 94-95. The Prince argues for the continued presence of Christians in the Middle East. He may have had a political agenda in overstating numbers. The Prince has an excellent research staff and they must have seen the arguments of Fargues and other authors who believe the number of Christians cannot be far off the numbers provided by the Egyptian census. The Prince is much appreciated by many Christian church leaders and intellectuals in the Arab World but he would have lost credit among some of them if he would have given more credit to the Egyptian census. But these are political and not academic considerations.

⁹¹ Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity*, 34 and 128. Jenkins provides no source for his claim.

⁹² Philippe Fargues, e-mail to author, March 9, 2008.

Wakin seems to be the first author who seriously inflated the estimated number of Coptic Christians. Later authors often based their higher claims on Wakin, who has published a figure with no empirical evidence.

3.2 Estimates provided by Coptic sources

Until 2008 the Coptic Orthodox Church never provided an official number of its members. Previous estimates were given by various clergy and laymen but these never presented the official figure of the church. Since the 1960s there have been discussions within the church about the need to improve their own statistics.

In 1963, Edward Wakin cited four million Copts on a population of 24 million based on Coptic sources, using this number to argue that Copts are seriously discriminated against. Wakin, however, does not present a methodology as to how he obtained his large estimate. His arguments, using large numbers as a major indication that Copts are discriminated against, suggests that political motives may have influenced his arguments. Copts appreciated his book, most probably precisely for those political motives.⁹³ Martin disagreed with Wakin's figures, saying it is impossible to compute a total number of Christians according to the parish registers, which are said to be imprecise.⁹⁴

Wakin writes that during the Nasser period, there were rumors of a private internal census within the Coptic Orthodox Church, an activity he said faced governmental opposition.⁹⁵ Martin found the rumors Wakin mentioned difficult to substantiate.⁹⁶

Amany el-Khateeb writes in her thesis for the American University in Cairo in 1987 that "Coptic officials" declared that they are more than 20 percent of the total population. Government officials told her that the church "likes to increase the number of Copts in order to show how powerful their weight is according to their percentage to the whole population." Church leaders responded with arguments about the inaccuracy of the census.⁹⁷ She must have been confused by the large differences and the arguments given by both parties as she concludes: "The great great difference between both estimates makes us reject them both and try to consider more moderate estimates that calculate the Copts at 12 percent of the total population."⁹⁸

⁹³ http://www.fordham.edu/campus_resources/enewsroom/archives/archive_1732.asp.

⁹⁴ Martin, 7.

⁹⁵ Wakin, 25.

⁹⁶ Martin, 7.

⁹⁷ Amany el-Khateeb, "The Coptic Community in Egypt" (unpublished thesis presented to the Department of Economics, Political Science and Mass Communication, American University in Cairo, Egypt, 1987). I obtained a copy of her thesis through Prof. Nicholas Hopkins. Amany el-Khateeb refers for the "Coptic officials" to the letter of the US Coptic Orthodox Church to President Reagan and Congress in 1983 in which 10 million Christians are claimed but Amany el-Khateeb also has met with Egyptian Coptic clergy and government officials but does not name them. Hamied Ansari writes that the Coptic Orthodox Church claimed in 1976 eight million members out of a population of 36.6 million. Hamied Ansari, "Sectarian Conflict in Egypt and the Political Expedience of Religion," *Middle East Journal* 38 (1984): 397- 418.

⁹⁸ El-Khateeb refers to prominent Coptic intellectual Milad Hanna, "Mawkif al-aqbat alla el sahaa al-siyassiya," in *Al-masala al-ta'ifiya fi misr*, Khalid Mohi el-Din (ed), (Beirut: Dar al-Talia, 1980), 206. Amany el-Khateeb cannot be accused of a bias in favor of the church. Her name obviously shows her

In Christian Evangelical and Pentecostal circles references are often made to “Operation World; a day-to-day guide to praying for the world” by Patrick Johnstone, and the *World Christian Encyclopedia*. Johnstone claimed in 1986 that 17.2% of the population is Christian, “though officially only 6%.” Johnstone writes that he looked at census figures and figures presented by the churches to which these Christians are affiliated, accepting the larger percentage.⁹⁹

The 1982 *World Christian Encyclopedia*, edited by David Barrett, reported that professing Christians in Egypt in 1970 were reported to be 6.6 percent while “crypto-Christians” make up another 12 percent, so that the total proportion of Christians is actually 18.6 percent, of which 94 percent are Coptic Orthodox.¹⁰⁰

“Crypto-Christians,” as Barrett calls them, are members of the church that did not admit to being Christians in the census out of a fear of Egyptian government officials. However, no one else reported a fear of large numbers of Christians for government functionaries who were responsible for census taking. There are, however, people who have accused government functionaries of being very imprecise in census taking.¹⁰¹

All Egyptians carry an identity card mentioning their religion. It is not very likely that a Christian born from Christian parents would not be registered as Christian since access to Christian education in public schools and marriage of Christian women with Christian men depends on having one’s Christian identity mentioned on one’s identity card. It is therefore unlikely that there are many Christians who would not want to be registered as Christian. It is, therefore, equally unlikely that Christians with Christian identity cards would tell census officials that they are Muslim.

There are, however, Christians that exist who could be potentially be referred to as “crypto-Christians”; they are Muslims who have become Christian, but who remain quiet in their faith for safety reasons. Their numbers are, per definition, hard to estimate, but several Egyptian priests and Protestant pastors believed their number to be in the hundreds.¹⁰²

It is likely that Barrett created the large number of “crypto-Christians” in an effort to explain the difference between census figures and church estimates. The encyclopedia was compiled by five contributors, among them Bishop Samuel, one of the most

Muslim identity. Her paper shows a sincere effort to provide a fair picture of Copts in Egypt. The conflicting arguments about the figures made her choose a middle way.

⁹⁹ Patrick Johnstone, *Operation World: A day to day guide to praying for the world*, (Send the Light Books of Operation Mobilization and WEC International, 1986), 26 & 164, 4th ed. I have corresponded in the 1980s with Johnstone about statistics of Christians in Egypt and presented him with comments of Dr. Milad Hanna, a leading Christian intellectual in Egypt, who doubted the figures of the Coptic Orthodox Church but Johnstone only wanted to consider the figures presented to him by Egyptian church leaders.

¹⁰⁰ David B. Barrett ed., entry “Egypt,” in “World Christian Encyclopedia,” (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).

¹⁰¹ For example Bishop Marqus of Shubrā al-Khaymah

¹⁰² These were priests and pastors who had baptized Muslims and who knew others who had done the same. If priests and pastors who knew such crypto-Christians estimated their number in de hundreds then there is certainly no justification for higher estimates.

important Coptic Orthodox bishops at that time, implying that “if the Coptic Orthodox Church had a complete membership list, he would certainly have (had) access to it.”¹⁰³

Presenting a claim of 12 percent crypto-Christians without revealing the methodology for this estimate suggests not only Barrett uncritically accepting an estimate from a Coptic Orthodox Church official, but also that political interests played a role in inflating this proportion. These interests stem from a desire to see the Church larger than it really is to create the illusion of disproportional representation of Coptic Christians in Egypt. Another reason for Barrett’s exaggeration might be his wish to see an evangelical “harvest” of Muslim believers in Jesus.¹⁰⁴ Furthermore, apart from this claim in the encyclopedia, no one else argued for large numbers of crypto-Christians.¹⁰⁵

It is also unclear where Barrett’s figure of 6.6 percent of “professing Christians” has originated. According to the Egyptian census of 1966, the proportion of Christians was 6.74 percent. It is equally unclear how Barrett is able to count the difference between “professing” Christians and non-professing Christians. It appears that according to Barrett’s definition, all Christians who were registered as Christian, that is born from parents who were registered as Christian, are “professing.”

Chitam substantiates the argument that the numbers provided by the *World Christian Encyclopedia* are not reliable. He shows that some numbers are identical: the four dioceses of Abū Tīj, Monufia, Dakahlia, and Faiyum have 35 congregations in total consisting of 70,000 adults and 120,000 members, which is an indication that these numbers were not based on actual counting. Chitam also made an analytic comparison between the 1976 census data and the *World Christian Encyclopedia* data, which shows that the administrative boundaries between political governorates and religious dioceses do not overlap. Any comparison between census data and numbers provided by church representatives must consider that some adjustments should be made.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ Chitam, 34.

¹⁰⁴ Barrett has a special interest in the meteoric growth of the Pentecostal Movement and Charismatic Renewal in the 20th century, J.A.B. Jongeneel, *Philosophy, Science, and Theology of Mission in the 19th and 20th Centuries: a Missiological Encyclopedia*, (Frankfurt am Main, 1995), 280. Jongeneel knows from Barrett that he believes there is a trend that estimates Christian figures too low. He therefore does not trust Egyptian government statistics, interview March 10, 2011. I believe there is also a trend to overestimate Christian figures. Claiming millions of crypto-Christians without providing convincing arguments that such large numbers exist falls in the category of overestimating. Others in Evangelical and Pentecostal circles tend to do the same.

¹⁰⁵ If this proportion were as large as the authors claim then it should be noticeable. I first came to Egypt in 1976 and have been studying Muslim-Christian relations in Egypt since 1984. I have never heard any of the hundreds of clergy and scholars I have interviewed throughout the years speaking about large numbers of crypto-Christians in Egypt. I have traveled extensively around the country and never met any crypto-Christian who was not born Muslim or hear anyone refer to crypto-Christians. I have worked with scholars like Prof. Dr. Otto Meinardus and Dr. Christiaan van Nispen and none of these scholars ever suggested that crypto-Christians could exist in such large numbers. With this experience and the authors not presenting a methodology it appears that the crypto-Christians were only brought in to inflate the proportion of Christians in Egypt. This may have been for political reasons, to support Coptic demands for greater representation in the country.

¹⁰⁶ Chitam, 34-35.

Some Coptic activists are so outspoken in their opposition to the government census that unverifiable claims are often made. ‘Imād Basālī argues for example that “official statistics on the number of Copts in Egypt are never revealed,” while he need only to go to the CAPMAS to photocopy their books with census results until 1996.¹⁰⁷ He also states that official numbers indicate that Copts constitute between 7 and 10 percent of Egypt’s population, when they were listed around 5.7 percent in 1996. He also writes that the Coptic Orthodox Church claims that there are an estimated 10 million Copts in Egypt (of an estimated 80 million inhabitants in 2006 or 12.5 percent).¹⁰⁸

Much of the opposition to the census, such as that of many Coptic political activists, is politically or ideologically motivated stemming from the fear that accepting census numbers could potentially harm the political ambitions of Copts in society. This is also true for the efforts of Nabīl Lūqā Bibāwī, a pro-government Coptic member of the Shūrā Council until the Egyptian revolution of January/February 2011. In 2001 he referred to the numbers of the census, but added to those numbers the number of Egyptian migrants abroad, presuming 75 percent of them to be Copts, and then added this to the percentage of Egyptian Christians.

Year	Total number of Egyptians (inside Egypt)	Muslims	Christians	Emigrants	Percentage of Christians in book Bibāwī	Percentage, according to census (Table A)
1947	18,966,767	17,397,946	1,501,635	--	7.9	7.92
1966	29,846,809	27,833,306	2,017,536	--	7.2	6.74
1976	36,626,204	34,334,328	2,285,630	1,425,000	9.15	6.24
1986	48,254,238	45,370,000	2,870,000	2,250,000	9.43	5.87

According to Nabīl Lūqā Bibāwī, the total percentage of Christians increases, including mixed marriages and their offspring abroad. Ahmad Fathī Surūr, then head of Parliament, and Dr. Muṣṭafā al-Fiqī, then head of the Foreign Affairs Committee in the Parliament, wrote introductions to this book, showing that he sought support of powerful government officials for his book.¹⁰⁹ With this Bibāwī makes the argument that Copts living abroad are very much attached to Egypt and should be counted in statistics as well. Of course this is a political argument, similar to many others that cite inflated numbers.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ Only the figures of 2006 were not revealed, see elsewhere in this paper.

¹⁰⁸ ‘Imād Basālī. “Copts in Egypt: 30 percent in Asyout, 25 percent in al-Minyā,” *Al-Maydān*, 22 Jun 2006 and *Arab-West Report*, Week 26, Art. 56, (2006), <http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/13673>.

¹⁰⁹ Nabīl Lūqā Bibāwī, *Mashākil al-Aqbāt fi Miṣr wa-Hulūluhā*, (Dar al-Kutub al-Masriya, 2001). Both officials were in function until the Egyptian Revolution of January/February 2011.

¹¹⁰ See <http://www.arabwestreport.info/books/mashakil-al-aqbat-fi-misr-wa-hululuha> for a list of references to his book.

In 2006 a new census was organized, including a section for religion.¹¹¹ The taking of the census was followed by discussions about this section for religion. In an interview in *Egypt Today*, the head of the CAPMAS, General Abū Bakr al Jindī, stated about the 2006 census that “the question about religion in the application was an optional one because according to international standards and specifications, we cannot make it an obligatory question. Thus the information is [incomplete] and the data [gathered] won’t be meaningful.”¹¹²

Rumors spread in 2007 about the Coptic Orthodox Church preparing statistics on the number of Copts in Egypt. While clergymen at the time denied the news, they also asserted that the officially declared number of Copts in previous censuses was inaccurate. Coptic families in Shubrā and Misr al-Jadīdah said some individuals, apparently from the church, passed by Coptic houses and distributed applications to conduct a church census, arguing that Copts lack confidence in the declared results of the government statistics. Counselor, Dr. Najīb Jibrā’īl, president of the Egyptian Union for Human Rights Organizations, said the aim of this counting was to accurately count the number of Copts in every diocese for goals related to the church’s administration.¹¹³

When the results of the 2006 census were published in May 2008, we saw a remarkable change in comparison to previous years. In previous years census data on religious percentages was published, but in the publication of the 2006 census no data are provided about religious affiliations. CAPMAS did not publish the manual with questions and instructions for census takers and is not prepared to make these public. *Arab-West Report* staff member Diana Ghali met with CAPMAS Vice President Ahmad Kamal, who told her explicitly that “religion questions are an optional question so the government won’t do research on that, and this kind of information won’t be available.” He also stated that the documentation on the 1996 census was not fully published.¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ °Abd al-Rahmān Ismā’īl. “Copts count raises issues,” *Al-Misrī al-Yawm*, in *Arab-West Report*, Week 14, Art. 40, (6 Apr 2007), <http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/16826>.

¹¹² N. El-Sayed. “Counting Egyptians,” *Egypt Today*, May 2007. The parenthesis comes from the *Egypt Today* article. CAPMAS officials repeated these arguments in various media in the following years. See for example: Hibah Bayyumi, “Abu Bakr: The number of Copts is imprecise because the cell of religion is optional,” Ākhir Sā’ah in *Arab-West Report*, Week 17, Art 14, (25 Apr 2007), <http://www.arabwestreport.info/year-2007/week-17/14-ab363-bakr-number-copts-imprecise-because-cell-religion-optional-pp-32-33>; Khalid al-Kaylani, “Christians number five million in Egypt and not 12 as Pope Shenouda states,” *Ṣawt al-Ummah* in *Arab-West Report*, Week 48, Art 34, (24 Nov 2008), <http://www.arabwestreport.info/year-2008/week-48/34-christians-number-five-million-egypt-and-not-12-pope-shenouda-states>.

¹¹³ °Abd al-Rahmān Ismā’īl. “Copts count raises issues,” <http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/16826>; °Antar °Abd al-Laṭīf, Shīrīn Rabī°, “Rumors spread about the Coptic Orthodox Church’s intention to conduct a census,” *Ṣawt al-Ummah*, (21 Apr 2007), in *Arab-West Report*, Week 18, Art. 22, (2007), <http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/17043>. Najīb Jibrā’īl confirmed this had been carried out in an interview with interns of AWR, summer 2007.

¹¹⁴ Diana Ghali, e-mail to author, February 21, 2011. “In 2007 I tried to verify this statement in CAPMAS, asking if it was possible to see the manual of instructions and form of the last census, but I was unable to obtain any information.” On May 19, 2012, Dr. Brian Grim of the Pew Research Center’s Forum on Religion & Public Life, sent me this link to their translation of the questionnaire: https://international.ipums.org/international/resources/enum_materials_pdf/enum_form_e_g2006.pdf

Ahmad Kamal's statement was consistent with the statement made a few years earlier by the head of the CAPMAS. Still, I cannot imagine that the government is including questions in the census form and then not incorporating this in their analysis somehow. Fargues adds: "That the question on religion in the census form is optional "does not imply that the estimation is biased. [...] Answering or not the question may be independent from the respondent's religious belonging."¹¹⁵

Egyptian authorities have shown in the past that they prefer to avoid heated public discussions and thus it is possible that they removed it from their publication in order to avoid such a controversy. This is similar to their practice in recording conversions to Islam, which is also recorded but not made public.¹¹⁶ Additionally, CAPMAS personnel are mostly Western-trained, but the organization is controlled by Egyptian security officers, who show great distrust in questions that are politically sensitive. This might explain the change in procedure in keeping politically sensitive figures from the public eye.

The president of the CAPMAS repeated in 2011 that there are no hidden figures and that all information is public.¹¹⁷ It was thus remarkable that Dr. Brian Grim, senior researcher and director of Cross-National Data of the PEW Research Center's Forum on Religion and Public Life, informed me that they have a sample of the religious data of Egypt's 2006 census.¹¹⁸

The lack of publicly-available data creates a vacuum of information where anyone can make any claim, including government officials. In May 2007, in an emotional response to a report of the International Labor Organization claiming that Christians were discriminated in Egypt, the Egyptian Minister of Labor and Emigration, Mrs. °Ā'ishah °Abd al-Hādī, claimed that "Copts own more than one-third of the national wealth in Egypt, despite representing only 10 percent of the population."¹¹⁹ She did not refer to any sources, but used numbers often heard in the popular discourse. That this statement was emotional and not rational is obvious from the claim often heard in Muslim circles that Coptic businessmen control a large portion of Egyptian economy, while there is no verifiable evidence for the claimed large percentage. Popular claims like these have been voiced earlier.¹²⁰

¹¹⁵ Ahmad Kamal, e-mail to author, February 14, 2011.

¹¹⁶ I have seen these records myself at the Dar al-Iftah at the Azhar in Cairo. Azhar officials told me that registration books that are full are presented to the Ministry of Interior.

¹¹⁷ Fatmah Sayīd Ahmad, "2,869 churches, 108,395 mosques, says CAPMAS President," *Rose al-Yūsuf* in *Arab-West Report*, Week 36, Art 70, (4-10 September 2011), <http://www.arabwestreport.info/year-2011/week-36/70-2869-churches-108395-mosques-says-capmas-president>.

¹¹⁸ Dr. Brian J. Grim, e-mail to author, May 15, 2012.

¹¹⁹ Tāmir Shukrī, "The ILO: Egypt discriminates against Copts," (press review *Al-Dustūr*, *Al-Uṣbū'* and *Rose al-Yūsuf*), in *Arab-West Report*, Week 22, Art. 30, (2007), <http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/17372>.

¹²⁰ See for example Sulaymān Shafīq, who argues that Copts represent according to 1955 statistics 22.5 percent of the national wealth, make nearly 10 percent of the total population, but with a political representation of a paltry 1 percent, in: *Watani*, October 9, 2005, *Arab-West Report*, Week 41, Art. 31, (2005), <http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/8157>. The expression the Egyptian media used was "Tharwa qawmiya," which is translated to national wealth. Professional translator Hanny Hamdi commented in an e-mail from March 2, 2011 on the Arabic expression that the media used that "Egyptian reporting is notoriously imprecise. They probably meant GDP". It is unclear where these "1955 statistics" originated. The Egyptian census was taken in 1947 and 1960, then presenting Christians as 7.92 and 7.33 percent of population. The problem with many authors in Egyptian media is

According to Dr. Jibrāʿīl, the result of the earlier mentioned church-led research is that Christians in Egypt are 14,000,000 to 15,000,000 of a total population of 76,000,000. This estimate corresponds to a percentage of 18.4 to 19.7 percent. When we asked Dr. Jibrāʿīl if it would be possible to have access to this data, he answered that the church is hesitant to make the research public for fear of the state's reaction.¹²¹

The Coptic Orthodox bishops we met in the summer 2007—Bishop Picenti, Bishop Marqus, Bishop Daniel, Bishop Martyros, and Bishop Silwanos, mentioned nothing of a church census.¹²² It seemed instead that even the bishops were unsure of the precise number of Copts. Every bishop provided his own percentage according to his own criteria, as is clear from the following examples.

Bishop Picenti bases his own estimation on the statement allegedly made by President Jimmy Carter during Pope Shenouda's visit to the United States in 1977. "I know that you are the leader of 6,000,000-7,000,000 Christians" (these are the words of Bishop Picenti: the figure commonly referred to is 7,000,000). Based on this assumption, the Bishop's reasoning is the following: having the Egyptian population doubled from that moment, it means that Christians today are between 10 and 15 million. If we consider that, according to the last census, the Egyptian population runs at 76,000,000, the estimation provided by Bishop Picenti corresponds to between 13 and 20 percent.¹²³

Bishop Marqus believed in 2007 that Christians in Egypt are roughly between 12 and 15 million people. He based his estimate on the percentage of Christians in the districts in which his diocese is situated, which, according to him, is between 15 and 18 percent. Bishop Marqus said that his approximation also includes the estimated 2,000,000 Egyptian Christians abroad. Fargues critiqued the Bishop's statement, as he did not provide any indication as to how that number had been obtained.¹²⁴ Although the bishops Maria Rezzonico interviewed in 2007 did not claim to have a precise estimate of Copts in Egypt, they stated they knew the numbers of their own diocese's members.

that they "remember" something and present it to their readers as if they have had access to the sources they refer to. This article seems to be an example of such a method of work.

¹²¹ Dr. Najīb Jibrāʿīl, Interview, July 22, 2007.

¹²² Rezzonico, "Report on Church Response to Poverty," <http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/18104>.

¹²³ Interview, July 21, 2007 in: Rezzonico, "Report on Church Response to Poverty,"

<http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/18104>. Fargues rejects the claims based on Carter. Cornelis Hulsman. "Interview with Dr. Philippe Fargues about Coptic Statistics, *Arab-West Report*, Week 52, Art. 17, (2008), <http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/21469>. I tried to trace the alleged quote of Carter to an independent source that Copts might have use of but this I could not find. Bishop Picenti's reference seems to be based on 'oral tradition' that perhaps was influenced by the Coptic Orthodox Church congregation in the US sending an open letter to President Reagan and Congress concerning the continued monastic arrest of Pope Shenouda. In this letter they claimed that Pope Shenouda is the leader of ten million Christians in Egypt, which at that time, corresponded to 22 percent of the population, Amany el-Khateeb, *The Coptic Community in Egypt*, 1987, p. 246. It is possible that the memory to this large claim was later linked to President Carter.

¹²⁴ One cannot obtain that number based on the number of Egyptian passport holders living abroad. If the figure includes the descendents of Egyptian migrants it implies that Egyptian migration is very old, which does not correspond to what we know. See section 4.1 below. Dr. Fargues, e-mail to author, February 14, 2011.

Arguments for higher estimates are often linked to issues which higher percentages help substantiate. For example, Yūsuf Sīdhum, Editor-in-chief of *Watani*, argued that Copts have been marginalized, especially in the last thirty years. He claimed that “Copts make about 15 percent of the 75 million inhabitants of Egypt,” and added: “There are very few Copts in chief executive positions in the civil service and fewer in the high ranks of the military. This inequality is also happening in political and educational institutions as well.”¹²⁵

Logically, if one believes that Copts represent 15 percent of the population, then they should occupy roughly 15 percent of civil service positions as well. This argument is damaged, however, if the Coptic percentage of population is substantially lower. While discrimination also occurs at a lower percentage figure, a lower percentage would reduce the discrepancy between the numbers of Copts in high government positions in comparison to the number of Christians in Egypt.¹²⁶

The discussions about the Coptic Orthodox Church preparing statistics on the number of Copts in Egypt culminated in October 2008 when Pope Shenouda stated in an interview that Christians in Egypt number 12 million people, equaling 15 percent of population.¹²⁷ The Pope’s statement, however, did not end the variation of estimates given by different clergy and others.¹²⁸

The Pope’s statement about the total number of Copts in 2008 did not come as a surprise. Bishops had told me throughout the years that Pope Shenouda had asked them for the number of Christians in their diocese. Bishop Bishuy, Secretary of the Holy Synod, said in 2002 that some bishops were more accurate than others in providing numbers. Bishop Bishuy then estimated Copts in Egypt to be 10 percent.¹²⁹

It is noteworthy that until 2008 Pope Shenouda always declined to answer questions about the statistics of Coptic Christians in Egypt.¹³⁰ One can only guess why Pope

¹²⁵ Elhamy Khalil, “Youssef Sidhom Speaks about Egyptian Issues and Coptic Concerns,” *Watani International*, 11 Feb 2007 and *Arab-West Report*, Week 6, Art. 25, (2007), <http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/15916>. In December 2011 Sidhom speaks, however, about an estimated ten percent. Cornelis Hulsman, “Christian leader: No fear for Islamist landslide in Egypt,” *Arab-West Report*, Week 1, Art. 22, (1 Jan 2012), <http://www.arabwestreport.info/year-2012/week-1/22-christian-leader-no-fear-islamist-landslide-egypt>.

¹²⁶ Elhamy Khalil writes in the same article “There are very few electoral districts in Egypt where the Copts are a majority. Hence there are very few Coptic legislators or city councilmen in government.” This is correct. It would be good if research would be carried out in reasons for under-representation in certain areas but for such studies accurate numbers should be used.

¹²⁷ *Misr al-Yom*, 27 Oct 2008, *Arab-WestReport*, Week 44, Art. 40, (2008), <http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/21011>.

¹²⁸ Kirche in Not published an overview of Christian persecution worldwide in 2011, claiming Christians in Egypt to make up 12 percent of the population. Since they added to these claims an interview with Coptic Orthodox Bishop Damian, it appears their source has been this Coptic Orthodox Bishop in Germany. Berthold Pelster (ed), *Christen in großer Bedrängnis; Diskriminierung unter Unterdrückung Dokumentation* (München: Kirche in Not, 2011).

¹²⁹ Cornelis Hulsman, “Interview with Metropolitan Bishūy, Secretary of the Holy Synod of the Coptic Orthodox Church,” *RNSAW* in *Arab-West Report*, Week 47, Art. 16, (14 Nov 2002), <http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/9839>.

¹³⁰ I have been a correspondent in Egypt between 1994 and 2010 and remember Pope Shenouda in the late nineties once asked during a presentation at the Cairo book fair about the number of Copts. Pope Shenouda then made very clear he did not want to respond to that question despite the fact that many different and conflicting estimates had been provided by lower clergy.

Shenouda made his statement about the number of Copts in 2008 while he refused to make public statements on numbers in previous years. It appears that he was confident that the numbers bishops had presented to him were accurate. Nevertheless, decades of Coptic arguments for higher proportions of Copts likely amounted to pressure on the Pope to make a statement on the total number of Copts. For proponents of higher proportions, the Pope's statement was extremely important because of the tremendous authority he has within his own church community. Following the statement of the Pope, most clergy fell in line and from that moment presented similar figures, since Coptic Orthodox Church hierarchy will not easily dispute a statement of the Pope. Grounds for dispute were also obviated by the fact that only the Pope had access to the figures provided by all bishops and these figures were not made public. While most Copts would accept the Pope's figure, they did not convince Philippe Fargues since the church provided no information about its methodology, nor how it would make sure that double counts are avoided.¹³¹

Bishop Bishuy, the influential secretary of the Holy Synod of the Coptic Orthodox Church, also had access to figures provided by all bishops. Remarkably enough, he stated a few months later that no one knows the real number of Copts in Egypt and the figures that are mentioned are mere guesses.¹³²

In response to Fargues, Bishop Marqus said that the Coptic Orthodox Church took strides to improve its registration system before Pope Shenouda made his statement on the number of Coptic Christians in Egypt. The bishop explains that most Coptic Orthodox churches in Egypt use a standard form that registers family information: name of husband and wife (if married), address, education, and the health status of all who are known to the church. The church also registers baptisms, marriages, and deaths. Each individual parish has the obligation to collect this data. Each diocese then collects the data of individual churches. The Coptic Orthodox Patriarchate then collects the data from all dioceses, which totals 12 million Coptic Orthodox Christians in Egypt and 2 million church members registered in dioceses abroad. Most dioceses register their members electronically, regularly updating the data on the basis both of the church registers (baptisms, marriages, etc.) and regular visits to the families.¹³³

In the summer of 2011, intern Christopher D. Marshall spent one month in the Bishopric of Shubrā al-Khaymah, a suburb of Cairo, to gather information about Coptic Orthodox migration. He was well received, but was not given any insight into the method of data collection in the bishopric.¹³⁴

¹³¹ Cornelis Hulsman, "Interview with Dr. Philippe Fargues about Coptic Statistics," *Arab-West Report*, Week 52, Art. 17, (2008), <http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/21469>.

¹³² Muhammad al-Bāz, "Your hordes Bishop Bishuy," *Al-Fajr in Arab-West Report*, Week 7, Art 33, (16 Feb 2009), <http://www.arabwestreport.info/year-2009/week-7/33-your-hordes-bishop-b299sh363y>.

¹³³ Response of Bishop Marqus to questions about the church methods of counting on February 18, 2011. The Copts living outside Egypt are not only the ones who emigrated but include non-Egyptian spouses in mixed marriages as well as the offspring of these migrants and their spouses. The two million is, according to the bishop, based on church registers that are presented to the Coptic Patriarchate. The Bishop agrees to scholars checking the registration system in his diocese, telephone call with the bishop on February 19, 2011.

¹³⁴ Christopher D. Marshall, "Coptic Orthodox Migration and Statistics: Shubrā al-Khaymah," *Arab-West Report*, (20 Sept 2011). <http://www.arabwestreport.info/coptic-orthodox-migration-and-statistics-shubra-al-khayma>.

The debate about the quality of the church counting methods is not unfounded. In August 2004, Father Yu'annis of Ishnin al-Nasara in Upper Egypt provided an example of multiple-counting. He then told a group of German visitors how proud he was that Christians from his village who had migrated to Cairo still felt a strong belonging to their village. As such he would count villagers living in Cairo as belonging to the church in Ishnin al-Nasara. He explained he was also doing so because they contributed to the church finances in his village.¹³⁵ Father Yu'annis provided more details in 2011 about the irregularity and inconsistencies in counting to intern Elizabeth Edwards.¹³⁶

Bishop Marqus admitted in 2011 that the church is aware of the risks of multiple counting and is trying to avoid this, but it nevertheless may still happen.¹³⁷

Bishop Marqus said in 2007 that baptism registers do not provide accurate information because there are children who are baptized outside their diocese (in a monastery or in the parents' diocese of origin). Furthermore, not all the churches register the number of baptisms: certificates are written, but they are not recorded in a table and counted. Also, Bishop Picenti stated in 2007 that the church does not use baptism and marriage registers to provide numbers because they are incomplete.¹³⁸

There is no indication how these registers improved before Pope Shenouda made his statement in 2008. Priests I interviewed in different dioceses in 2007 said that calculations are generally made by counting the number of families, so that the total number is given by using the average number of family members. The result is that those who use this system of counting provide rough estimates.

Bishop Marqus stated in 2011 that the registration process has been greatly improved, but Fargues remains skeptical as long as the registration by the church –a voluntary act- cannot be statistically evaluated for omission and double counting.¹³⁹

I found Fargues' skepticism confirmed when Bishop Paphnotius of Samallüt and Bishop Aghathon of Maghāghah said in October 2011 that they had never been able to provide Pope Shenouda with accurate figures from their dioceses until that moment. He explained that they were working on obtaining an accurate count in order to know the number of potential Christian voters for the coming Parliamentary elections.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁵ In August 2004 I led a group of German Christians on the route of the Holy Family. The priest made the statement, which was very explicit, during our visit to his village. I discussed this with Bishop Marqus in a telephone call on February 19, 2011. The bishop agrees that such behavior may create duplications which need to be ironed out in further improvements of their registration system.

¹³⁶ Elizabeth Edwards, "Coptic Orthodox Statistics and Migration in Maghāgha," *Arab-West Report*, 29 Aug 2011.

¹³⁷ Telephone call with the bishop on February 19, 2011. The bishop admits that there still might be duplications of Coptic migrants to Cairo, still registered in their Upper Egyptian diocese but also registered in a diocese in they live after migration. The bishop remains convinced that the number of duplications are limited but the fact is that the proportions of these duplications are unknown.

¹³⁸ Interviews July 21 and August 1, 2007, in: Rezzonico, "Report on Church Response to Poverty," <http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/18104>.

¹³⁹ Bishop Marqus, e-mail to author, February 19, 2011.

¹⁴⁰ Meetings with Bishop Paphnotius and Bishop Agathon in October 2011.

Dr. Tharwat Basīlī, a leading member of the Coptic Orthodox Community Council, stated in January 2012 in the Coptic Weekly *Watani* that the census “proofs [sic]” that the number of Copts in Egypt is 18.5 million and that he challenges anyone who would want to prove it is wrong.¹⁴¹ Since no evidence was provided to substantiate his claim and there is good reason to believe that claims of high numbers are politically motivated one should be skeptical about such a claim.

Pope Shenouda was keenly aware of the political importance of the proportion of Christians in Egypt. In 2003, for example, he complained about the small proportion of Copts in top government positions and in Parliament.¹⁴² Pope Shenouda has made efforts to obtain the most accurate figures possible about the number of Coptic Orthodox Christians in Egypt, but local registration processes differed from diocese to diocese with substantial risks of double-counting. Thus, inaccurate counting methods, coupled with likely political biases, necessitate that one approaches figures presented by Coptic Orthodox Church leaders cautiously and requests verifiable information about their counting methods.

3.3. Coptic population figures in English print media

Discussions showing discrepancies between CAPMAS population figures and estimates published in English print media started to appear after 1956. This coincided with the rise in influence of the Sunday School movement, a reform movement that greatly contributed to an increased Coptic self-consciousness, religiously, but also politically. Pope Shenouda was the first Sunday School movement leader who became head of the Coptic Orthodox Church.¹⁴³

Articles in newspapers such as the *New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Toronto Star* illustrate the varying tendencies of journalists in their presentation of figures. In comparison to the CAPMAS figures, many use exaggerated percentages to

¹⁴¹ 'Amr Al-Misrī, “AWR Daily Overview, January 15, 2012: Accurate Figure – Census of Copts is 18.565.484 million,” *Al-Ahram in Arab-West Report*, Week 3, Art 4, (15 Jan 2012), <http://www.arabwestreport.info/year-2012/week-3/4-awr-daily-overview-january-15-2012-accurate-figure-census-copts-18565484-million>.

¹⁴² Makram Muhammad Ahmed, Muná al-Mallakh, and Najwan 'Abd al-Latif, et. al. “The interview of the week in the Anba Bishoy Monastery,” *Al-Muṣawwar in Arab-West Report*, Week 41, Art 21, (10 Oct 2003), <http://www.arabwestreport.info/year-2003/week-41/21-interview-week-monastery-saint-bishuy>. See for his political awareness also Cornelis Hulsmán, “Pope Shenouda, the Arab World’s most influential Christian leader has passed away,” *Arab-West Report*, Week 12, Art. 2, (17 Mar 2012), <http://www.arabwestreport.info/year-2012/week-12/2-pope-shenouda-arab-worlds-most-influential-christian-leader-has-passed-away>.

¹⁴³ Wolfram Reiss, “Erneuerung in der Koptisch-Orthodoxe Kirche Die Geschichte der koptisch-orthodoxen Sonntagsschulbewegung und die Aufnahme ihrer Reformansätze in den Erneuerungsbewegungen der Koptisch-Orthodoxen Kirche der Gegenwart,” *Studien zur Orientalischen Kirchengeschichte*, 5 (LIT Verlag Hamburg 1996): 351; Cornelis Hulsmán, “Renewal in the Coptic Orthodox Church,” (notes of the Ph.D. thesis of Revd. Dr. Wolfram Reiss), *Religious News Service from the Arab World*, Week 46, Art 23 (Nov 22, 2002), <http://www.arabwestreport.info/year-2002/week-46/23-renewal-coptic-orthodox-church-notes-phd-thesis-revd-dr-wolfram-reiss>; Hulsmán, “Pope Shenouda, the Arab World’s most influential Christian leader has passed away,” <http://www.arabwestreport.info/year-2012/week-12/2-pope-shenouda-arab-worlds-most-influential-christian-leader-has-passed-away>.

support the content of their article, which was usually an agenda pushing for Coptic rights or to highlight persecution.¹⁴⁴

Arab-West Report would like to see similar studies carried out in media in different languages.

3.4. The possible role of Egyptian security

Accurate statistics of the number of Christians is available in Egypt. The Ministry of Interior has been working on providing each Egyptian with a computerized personal identity card which marks someone's religious identity: Muslim, Christian, or Jewish. This process was completed around three to four years ago and thus the Ministry of Interior is certainly able to provide accurate figures, but nevertheless chooses not to do so.

Senior Egyptian Christian journalist, Louis Greiss explained in December 2011 that Egyptian security tends to avoid transparency and "leaks" information through higher and lower ranking officers to Egyptians that seems to be at times contradictory. Greiss explained this as an effort "to create confusion." Greiss made his comments in relation to the article of Muhammad al-Bāz, Deputy Editor-in-chief of *al-Fajr* newspaper, claiming he obtained information from a Civil Registry Department official citing birth certificates and National ID cards that would show the number of Copts to be 20 million.¹⁴⁵

Muhammad al-Bāz provided a name and mobile telephone number of this official who seems to be permanently unavailable. Greiss states that he has strong evidence that Muhammad al-Bāz's superior, Editor-in-Chief, 'Adil Hamūdah, is well-connected to security. Was providing this inflated figure a deliberate attempt to create confusion?¹⁴⁶

In 2007, Rā'id al-Sharqāwī, a retired Egyptian coast guard intelligence officer, provided former AWR intern Maria Rezzonico figures on the number of Copts in Egypt by governorate. In December of 2011, Rā'id was interviewed once more to compile the most recent numbers he could find. In comparing these numbers, large discrepancies were immediately apparent and thus Rā'id was asked to explain this variation.¹⁴⁷

Previously, I mentioned that the CAPMAS is controlled by Egyptian security officers, who attempt to keep politically sensitive figures from their agency from the public

¹⁴⁴ Jenna Ferrecchia, "Coptic Population Figures in English Print Media," *Arab-West Report*, (11 Mar 2012), <http://arabwestreport.info/coptic-population-figures-english-print-media>.

¹⁴⁵ Muhammad al-Bāz, "Copts are 20 million, says civil registry official," *Al-Fajr* 20-24 Oct 2011 in *Arab-West Report*, Week 43, Art. 12, (2011), <http://www.arabwestreport.info/year-2011/week-43/12-copts-are-20-million-says-civil-registry-official>. See for a critique Cornelis Hulsman, "Lack of transparency causes debate on Coptic population statistics," Week 44, Art. 29, (1 Nov 2011), <http://www.arabwestreport.info/year-2011/week-44/29-lack-transparency-causes-debate-coptic-population-statistics>.

¹⁴⁶ Interview Louis Greiss at the home of Dr. Amin Makram Ebeid, Dec 2011.

¹⁴⁷ Jenna Ferrecchia, "Interview with Rā'id al-Sharqāwī: Coptic population figures and the 2011-2012," *Arab-West Report*, Week 12, Art. 65, (22 Mar 2012), <http://www.arabwestreport.info/year-2012/week-12/65-interview-raid-al-sharqawi-coptic-population-figures-and-2011-2012-elections>.

eye. Also, between 1897 and 1996 Coptic population figures were also only published on the governorate-level. Data of lower administrative units were not published. Yet, these would make verification much easier. Publication on the lowest administrative levels also could avoid discussions about the actual number of Christians in a village when church building is discussed.¹⁴⁸

The Ministry of Interior collects data about conversions in Egypt and informs leading clergy in Egypt about the number of conversions to Islam.¹⁴⁹ Is information provided to different church leaders similar?

How did Tharwat Basīlī obtain his information? Through a security source he trusted?

The only response possible is to ask for transparency, which would make it possible to verify data provided.

4 Causes of declining Christianity in Egypt

In the previous paragraphs I analyzed the debate about Christian statistics in Egypt. I will devote this last section to the arguments provided by those who state that Christianity in Egypt is declining.

Fargues argues that the proportion of the Christian population is decreasing as well as becoming more urbanized. The decline of Christians throughout the 20th century in Egypt, as well as in the Fertile Crescent countries, far from being the result of any statistical plot, is the result, he explains, of the free play of demographic forces. He outlines four different factors explaining this phenomenon: conversion to Islam; intermarriage between a Muslim man and a Christian wife, which automatically gives birth to a Muslim second generation; differences in birth and/or death rates between Muslim and non-Muslim segments of the population; and replacement of non-Muslims by Muslims through migration.¹⁵⁰

Dr. Kamāl Farīd Ishāq, professor of Coptic language at the Institute for Coptic Studies, made a similar analysis. He argued that the number of Copts is dangerously decreasing in Egypt due to reasons like conversion, birth control, and emigration.¹⁵¹

We will briefly consider these factors.

4.1. Conversions to Islam and Muslim-Christian intermarriage

¹⁴⁸ See the example of the discussions in the village of Mārīnāb where Christians who wanted to obtain a larger church building claimed higher numbers of Christians in the village than Muslims who opposed the building of a larger church. See Lamīs Yahyá, “What Happened in Mārīnāb Village?” *Arab-West Report*, (12 Oct 2011), <http://www.arabwestreport.info/what-happened-marinab-village>.

¹⁴⁹ Interview Coptic Catholic Bishop Yohanna Qulta, December 2011.

¹⁵⁰ Fargues, “Demographic Islamization: Non Muslims in Muslim Countries”.

¹⁵¹ Statements made in °Amr Bayyūmī, “Coptic thinker foretells the Christians’ ‘extinction’ in Egypt in the coming century,” *al-Misrī al-Yawm*, in *Arab-West Report*, Week 19, Art. 51, (May 12, 2007), <http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/17100>. We met with Kamal Farid Ishaq who confirmed to us his pessimism, summer 2007.

I am bringing the first two categories of Fargues into one category since conversions to Islam are often related to intermarriage between a Muslim man and a Christian wife, which automatically gives birth to a Muslim second generation.

Conversion to Islam seems to be increasing in numbers as are the emotional responses. Conversions are registered at specially-assigned mosques and at the registration office where one needs to change the religious identity on one's identity card. These numbers are presented to Egyptian security officials and are not made public. It is not known whether other government officials are aware of these numbers.¹⁵² It would be hard to publish numbers since there is, in general, little trust in government numbers and thus publication would most likely result in emotional debates with people claiming higher or lower numbers.

The consequence of this lack of verifiable numbers is widely varying estimates. *The World Christian Encyclopedia* estimates in 1982 that 5800 to 7000 Christians yearly convert to Islam. Maurice Martin, Christiaan Van Nispen tot Sevenaer, and Fadel Sidarouss spoke in 1990 of approximately 15,000 conversions per year, whereas de Moor and Fargues report in 1998-2001 that marriages and divorces are thought to account for most of the 12,000 to 15,000 conversions to Islam said to take place annually.¹⁵³

In 2007, Bishop Picenti claimed an estimated 5,000-10,000 conversions to Islam per year.¹⁵⁴ Muhammad Shamrūkh, referring to Egyptian security sources, alleged an estimated 5,000 conversions to Islam per year.¹⁵⁵ Coptic human rights activist Mamdūh Nakhlah and Jamāl As'ad, secular-oriented Christian and former Member of Parliament, believe Shamrūkh's figure is likely accurate. Yet, Father 'Abd al-Massīh Basīt, Priest of the Virgin Mary Church at Musturud and lecturer of apologetics at the Coptic Orthodox seminary, believes this number to be exaggerated without providing

¹⁵² Cornelis Hulsmann. "Forced conversion or not?," Report presented to the New York Council of Churches on June 28, 1999, *RNSAW*, in *Arab-West Report*, Week 26, Art. 37, 1999. URL: <http://arabwestreport.info/node/2126>.

¹⁵³ Christiaan Van Nispen tot Sevenaer and Fadel Sidarouss, "Les nouveaux courants de la communauté copte orthodoxe," *Proche Orient Chrétien*, Vol. XL, (1990): 254 (reported by Valognes). Maurice Martin, Christiaan Van Nispen tot Sevenaer, and Fadel Sidarouss are three Jesuit priests who knew each other well with decades of experience in Egypt and a wide network of contacts. Since their estimates come from one network these are not three independent estimates. Fargues makes use of this network. I have worked for many years with Christiaan van Nispen tot Sevenaer. He and his Jesuit colleagues based their estimate on talks with high level clergy, government officials and Egyptian scholars, but never from any published documentation. It is noteworthy that Catholic clergy estimated the number of conversions to Islam to be higher than Orthodox clergy, including the bishops Picenti and Marqus, who told me that their estimates were too high; Ed de Moor, "Egypte" *Het Christelijk Oosten* 50 (Instituut voor Oosters Christendom, 1998): Issue 1-2: 137-147; Fargues, "Demographic Islamization: Non Muslims in Muslim Countries," 114.

¹⁵⁴ Meeting with Bishop Picenti, July 21, 2007 in: Rezzonico, "Report on Church Response to Poverty," <http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/18104>.

¹⁵⁵ Muhammad Shamrūkh, "Five thousand Christians convert to Islam," *Al-Dustūr*, (7 Apr 2007) and *Arab-West Report*, Week 14, Art. 9, (2007), <http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/16795>. Security officials said that most Christian families have at least one person who left his/her family and converts to Islam. The percentage of Christians who convert to Islam is relatively high among middle and lower classes in Cairo, Alexandria, Minyā, and Fayūm. Love relationships are considered to be the main reason behind this increase.

an argument for higher or lower numbers.¹⁵⁶ Sara Aguzzoni notes there is a great deal of secrecy regarding the number of conversions that take place every year in Egypt.¹⁵⁷ This secrecy is in turn related to government fear for releasing sensitive figures that could result in emotional debates.¹⁵⁸ The consequence of this secrecy is widespread ignorance.¹⁵⁹

Writing about conversions was for many years considered taboo for most media because of the sensitivities involved. Recently, the highly disputed conversion of Wafā' Costantine to Islam and the church's rejection to accept her conversion shifted public opinion and newspapers in Egypt have begun reporting more and more about cases of conversion from Christianity to Islam.¹⁶⁰

Orthodox priests estimated in 1999 that about 60 percent of people who have converted to Islam are aged 17 or 18, 80 to 90 percent of the converts are younger than 25 years old, and 80 percent of those converts are girls. Many, if not most of these conversions, are the consequence of marrying Muslim men. In poorer economic classes, many such marriages are the consequence of escaping problems within the Christian family or trying to marry with partners who are economically better off.¹⁶¹

A Christian woman who marries a Muslim does not need to convert, yet many do. Conversion to Islam almost always results in a total break in contact between the Christian family and the converted family member. A marriage to a Muslim, even without conversion, is seen as a shame for the Christian family and community. Hence relations are broken definitively and experienced as a great drama for the concerned Christian family and community.¹⁶² Christian responses tend to be very emotional, often accusing Muslims of kidnapping Christian youth. The word "kidnap"

¹⁵⁶ Hānī al-ʿAsar, "'Christians who convert to Islam have economic or social problems,' Christian researchers and lawmen say," *Al-Dustūr*, (7 Apr 2007) in *Arab-West Report*, Week 14, Art. 10, (2007), <http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/16796>.

¹⁵⁷ Sara Aguzzoni. "Media reports of Christians converting to Islam," *Arab-West Report Papers*, No. 6, (2008), <http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/27517>.

¹⁵⁸ See for example the comments on the CAPMAS in section 3.2.

¹⁵⁹ Aguzzoni, "Media reports of Christians converting to Islam," <http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/27517>.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Cornelis Hulsman, "Forced conversion or not?"

¹⁶² As a consequence Hulsman's report to the New York Council of Churches was criticized by American Coptic activists on the Coptic Digest website without providing a rebuttal to Hulsman's arguments. This made Dr. Rudolph Yanney, founder and editor-in-chief of Coptic Church Review, check Hulsman's data, resulting in largely the same conclusions. See Rudolph Yanney, "Reflections on conversion in Egypt," *RNSAW*, in *Arab-West Report*, Week 1, Art. 4, (2001), <http://arabwestreport.info/node/4251>. For more discussions on whether or not converted Christian girls were kidnapped, see Cornelis Hulsman, "Open letter to former US Congressman Pastor Ed McNeely for writing President Bush a letter with wrong claims about Christian girls being kidnapped by Muslims," *Arab-West Report*, Week 30, Art. 34, (2003), <http://arabwestreport.info/node/11472>. In 2003 and 2004 AWR staff researched year long media claims that Ingy Edwar had been kidnapped, finding social problems but no physical force, Cornelis Hulsman, Usāmah W. al-Ahwānī, Sawsan Gabra (also spelled as Jabrah) and Nirmīn Fawzī, Was converted girl kidnapped? In: AWR, 2004, week 28, art. 21, <http://arabwestreport.info/node/16317> See also Janique Blattmann, "Conversions of Christians to Islam," with includes a critique on claims of kidnapping made by Christian Solidarity International, in: *Arab-West Report*, Week 53, Art. 8, 2005, <http://arabwestreport.info/node/4251>; Nājī Bihmān, "Analyzing the alleged forced conversion to Islam of Heidi Hakim Manqarius Salib in The Theban Legion," in AWR, 2005, week 53, art. 9, <http://arabwestreport.info/node/12410> AWR contains many more articles about conversions.

has become commonly used as a synonym of “conversion” and some would argue it is even more common than conversion. Aguzzoni believes conversions have the potential to cause considerable friction between the different religious communities.¹⁶³

According to Islamic law, children resulting from marriages of Muslim men with non-Muslim women must be raised as a Muslim, and Muslim women may not marry non-Muslim men. The state enforces this law through obliging children from Muslim fathers to follow Muslim religious classes at schools and obliging children from Christian fathers to follow Christian religious classes. The religion of the father is thus the determining factor. A Christian man who wants to marry a Muslim woman thus, according to Muslim law, should first convert to Islam. These rules explain why both the Coptic Orthodox Church and Coptic political activists strongly oppose marriage with Muslims and conversions to Islam. Not only is conversion a step that includes denying basic Christian teaching (most notably Jesus to be the son of God), but also since this is almost always one-way traffic, reducing the number of Christians in Egypt.¹⁶⁴

Divorce is another major reason behind conversions and the resulting tension. The Coptic Orthodox Church is very conservative in issues of marriage and divorce, which is coupled with a lack of separation between religion and the state. Hence, one can only marry within one’s own denomination (causing conversions for the sake of marriage), which is then validated by the state. This intertwining of religion and state becomes a problem when couples want a divorce. Since Pope Shenouda became pope in 1971, the Coptic Orthodox Church has restricted divorce, making this possible only if adultery is proven or if one party converts to another religion. The Church has rejected the remarriage of Christians after an unauthorized divorce. Priests who nevertheless did so were defrocked, creating conflict between the church and civil authorities.¹⁶⁵ Difficulties in obtaining divorce have caused thousands of Copts seeking divorce and possibly remarriage to opt for conversion to Islam. The Church resists this, as can be seen in highly publicized cases, with no will to change its divorce policy.¹⁶⁶

Divorces have consequences for children and lead to discussions about child custody. The People’s Assembly (Parliament) decided in 2005 that children would remain with

¹⁶³ Sara Aguzzoni, “Media reports of Christians converting to Islam,” *Arab-West Report Papers*, No. 6, (2008), <http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/27517>.

¹⁶⁴ For more on the Coptic argument against mixed marriages see Majdī Khalīl, “The mixed marriage between Muslims and Christians,” *Al-Risālah*, December 2000 and *RNSAW*, Week 2, Art. 12, (2001), <http://arabwestreport.info/node/4275>.

¹⁶⁵ Mājdah Maurice, “The happy minority and the sectarian discourse,” *Ṣawt al-Ummah*, February 14, 2005, *Arab-West Report*, Week 7, Art. 34, (2005), <http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/5569>.

¹⁶⁶ Most well-known is the case of Wafā’ Costantine, the wife of a priest who wanted a divorce in 2004 which was rejected by the church. False claims of Muslims kidnapping her were made. Egyptian police found her and brought her back to the church. After a four-day session Wafā’ Costantine, who had previously made a written statement that she wanted to convert to Islam, stated she wanted to remain Christian. Sawsan Gabra Ayoub Khalīl and Cornelis Hulsman, “Escalations following the alleged conversion of a priest’s wife to Islam,” *Arab-West Report*, Week 51, Art. 13, (2004), <http://arabwestreport.info/node/5994>. After her statement she disappeared in a monastery, never to be seen again. Until today Islamists raise the issue of Costantine, claiming the church forced her to remain Christian. The church certainly weakened its own position by not allowing any journalist to meet with her.

the mother until they reach the age of 15, after which they may be asked to choose whether to continue staying with their mother, or switch to their father.¹⁶⁷

A well-known case is that of Midhat Ramsīs, a Copt who converted to Islam following marital problems and a wish to remarry. His wife remained Christian as did their two minor sons, Mario and Andrew. After he had converted and remarried, he demanded the custody over their two children. According to the Egyptian custody law, the children would have to be referred to their mother, but Ramsīs argued that since he had become a Muslim the children should be given to him. This case came into the limelight when *Rose al-Yūsuf* published an article entitled, “Church rejects court ruling switching custody of children from Christian mother to Muslim father” on March 29, 2006.¹⁶⁸ Many articles concerning the legal debate and ruling followed.¹⁶⁹

Conversion as a subject is often very emotional, due both to the number of conversions and the fact that these are, in practically all cases, a final break with the Christian family and community. It often results in tensions, allegations, claims, and rumors that erupt following an alleged conversion case; they stir up feeling in religious communities and result in conflict and tension.¹⁷⁰

Conversions are not only highly emotional, but the numbers are very serious. If we accept the number of Christians to be around 4.8 million (6 percent of 80 million inhabitants) with a yearly population growth of 2.274 percent then Christians would increase with around 109,000 births per year.¹⁷¹ If we presume 50 percent to be girls, then the conversion of Christian girls would be around ten percent of the natural increase of Christian women, employing the most conservative estimate of Muhammad Shamrūkh. If we, however, accept a higher estimate of 10,000 to 12,000 conversions, mostly girls, then the conversion of Christian girls could be around twenty percent of the natural increase of Christian women.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁷ cAbīr al-Damarānī, “Parliament settles haggles, entrusts children to the custody of divorced mothers,” *Al-Ahrām*, March 3, 2005, in *Arab-West Report*, Week 10, Art. 22 (2005), <http://arabwestreport.info/node/5677>. According to Article 20 in Law No. 25 of 1929 (amended by Law No. 100 of 1985) a mother was entitled to the custody of her children until the son reached the age of 10 and the daughter the age of 12. At that age, the judge could rule that the daughter stays with her mother until she marries. The new Law 4 (2005) strengthened the position of mothers. This change made no difference for Mario and Andrew since they were minors according to the old law. The discussion was about whether Art. 2 of the Constitution, citing Sharia as the source of law, could overrule this law.

¹⁶⁸ Aḥmad Pasha, “Church rejects court ruling switching custody of children from Christian mother to Muslim father,” *Rose al-Yūsuf*, March 29, 2006 and *Arab-West Report*, Week 14, Art. 35 (2006), <http://arabwestreport.info/node/12545>.

¹⁶⁹ See for the discussion on this case in Egyptian media: Aguzzoni, “Media reports of Christians converting to Islam,” <http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/27517>. More discussions followed after Aguzzoni completed her paper. Also these discussions can be found in the media archive of Arab-West Report, www.arabwestreport.info

¹⁷⁰ Aguzzoni, “Media reports of Christians converting to Islam,” <http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/27517>.

¹⁷¹ According to the 2006 census, the Egyptian population increased from 59,312,914 in 1996 to 72,798,031 in 2006, which is a 22.74 percent increase. It is estimated to reach 138 million within the next fifty years. Thus it is feared that if such population explosion takes place in the coming years, then all agrarian land within the Nile valley will diminish between 2070-2100.

¹⁷² I also mentioned this problem in Cornelis Hulsman, “Christian Activists’ Contributions to Christian Migration from Egypt,” 569-592. However, I then used slightly different figures, estimating the

4.2. Differences in birth and/or death rates between Muslim and non-Muslim segments of the population

Maurice Martin explains part of the declining proportion of Coptic Christians in Egypt to suspected differences in birth and/or death rates between Muslim and non-Muslim segments of the population. The argument follows that Copts have a lower birthrate due to a higher social status, on average.¹⁷³ The birth rate among Copts began to fall earlier than that of the Muslims and before modern contraception existed. When contraceptive devices became available, the different birthrates between Christians and Muslims were maintained but did not increase.¹⁷⁴

The editorial committee of *Christianity: A History in the Middle East*, explains that prosperity and growth “became a disadvantage for the Christians. The spread of education among Christians led to the decrease in fertility and birth rate.”¹⁷⁵

4.3. Coptic emigration

Coptic emigration is a relatively new phenomenon, which has begun to take place over the last three decades of the 20th century. The early emigrants of the 1950s and 1960s have been followed by large numbers since the 1970s. Before this period, Coptic Christians, like their Muslim compatriots, had a tendency to remain in their country of birth.

The consequence of this relatively recent emigration is the establishment of new Coptic Orthodox Church communities outside Egypt.¹⁷⁶ Bishop Bishuy states that when Pope Shenouda became patriarch in 1971, there were only two Coptic Orthodox churches in the U.S. and two churches in Canada. In the first year of his pontificate, he began to establish new churches in the countries of emigration. In 2005, there were 54 churches in the U.S. and many other churches awaiting the arrival of priests to serve them. There are also churches in the Caribbean and in Honolulu, Hawaii. Canada now has 13 churches. In Australia there were only two churches (one in Sydney and one in Melbourne). Now there are ten churches in Sydney alone and six in Melbourne.¹⁷⁷

In Europe, there used to be only one rented church in London. In 2007 there were 35 churches: ten in England, seven in Germany, four in France, three in Austria, three in

conversion of Christians to Islam close to 9 percent of their natural growth. We are dealing with estimates, but such estimates show that conversions to Islam have substantial impact on the growth of the Christian community in Egypt.

¹⁷³ M. Martin, “The Renewal in Context: 1960-1990,” in N. Van Doorn-Harder, K. Vogt (editors), *Between Desert and City: The Coptic Orthodox Church Today*, (Novus forlag: Oslo 1997), 15.

It is important to point out that this is believed: there are no statistics on which such a conclusion could be based on.

¹⁷⁴ Courbage and Fargues, 179.

¹⁷⁵ Habib Badr, *Christianity: A History in the Middle East*, 41.

¹⁷⁶ N. Stene, “Into the Lands of Immigration,” in *Between Desert and City: The Coptic Orthodox Church Today*, 254-264.

¹⁷⁷ Metropolitan Bishoy, “Revival of the Egyptian Church,” in H. Badr (chief editor), *Christianity: A History in the Middle East*, (Middle East Council of Churches: Beirut, 2005), 791-792. The number of churches continues to increase. Dr. Michael Burslem from Guelph, Canada, mentioned in correspondence that the Coptic Orthodox Church founded in 2009 St Philopater's Church in Guelph.

Italy, three in Switzerland, one in Greece, two in The Netherlands, one in Denmark, and one in Sweden.¹⁷⁸ In 2007 the Coptic Orthodox Church came to have 154 churches in various Western countries, instead of only seven. This is in addition to the churches established in Africa, the Arab countries, and Jerusalem.

4.3.1 Coptic emigration in the framework of Egyptian emigration

Emigration from Egypt by Coptic Christians needs to be analyzed in the context of general Egyptian emigration patterns. According to Ralph R. Sell, labor emigration in modern times began with Egypt's sponsorship of school teachers to Iraq in the 1930s, which spread to additional Arab countries after the 1952 Revolution.¹⁷⁹

N. Stene speaks of two periods of emigration: the first one (1952-1970, the Nasser era), during which a limited number of young Egyptians were encouraged to study abroad and school teachers were sent to work in neighboring Arab states. Migration was politically controlled, mainly through exit visa requirements. The result was that a number of well-to-do families established in the West, including some Coptic families. The presence of these individuals with financial resources was important in establishing Coptic Orthodox Churches in the West, which happened later.

The second emigration period referred by Stene began in the early 1970s. Along with Sadat's "open door" policies came an easing of emigration restrictions. One result of this was a growth in the number of Coptic communities worldwide.

Since the mid-1980s, oil revenues tended to decrease, and as a consequence, the demand for Egyptian emigrants began to drop. H. Nassar speaks of three phases in the period 1989-2000: a downward trend between 1989 and 1991, an upward trend between 1992 and 1997, partly due to the return of normality in the Middle East after the end of the Gulf War (1990-1991), and a new downtrend in the period 1998-2000. In 2002 Egypt ranked as one of the top labor-exporting countries in the region.¹⁸⁰

4.3.2 Estimates of Coptic emigration

Reliable sources for numbers of Coptic Christians abroad are not available. Estimating the number of Coptic Egyptians cannot be precise in most western receiving countries, since secular countries do not count people according to religion. Estimates are widely different, suggesting that some community representatives have inflated their own numbers. The estimates given below should therefore be treated with utmost caution.

A further complication is that local priests often count their congregation in "families," declining to give exact number of individuals. In 1993, Father Mina of St.

¹⁷⁸ In 2010 the number in The Netherlands had grown to five. The Coptic Orthodox Church continues opening new churches abroad

¹⁷⁹ Ralph R. Sell, "Gone for good?: Egyptian migration processes in the Arab world," (American University in Cairo Press: Cairo, 1987), 27.

¹⁸⁰ H. Nassar, "Egypt: the Demographic and Economic Dimension of Migration," P. Fargues (ed), "Mediterranean Migration 2005 report" 100. Dr. Burslem added, "nearly all the pharmacists in Guelph are Copts (and barbers Italian)," (e-mail to author, February 19, 2011).

George's Coptic Church in Brooklyn estimated that one million Copts live outside of Egypt.¹⁸¹

The Coptic Encyclopedia (1991) provides a compilation of numbers for North America, Europe and Australia amounting to approximately 200,000-300,000.¹⁸² The entry in the Coptic Encyclopedia was written by several authors and introduced by Pope Shenouda. This thus appears to be the most realistic estimate in 1991. Yet, Pope Shenouda asks for caution. "It is difficult to give absolute numbers of Copts abroad, owing to the lack of accurate registration."¹⁸³

According to Martin, there are no numbers concerning emigration that have been verified and shown to be correct, but members of the community speak of 400,000 Copts abroad.¹⁸⁴

Christiaan van Nispen tot Sevenaer (1997) speaks of 200,000-300,000 Copts living abroad today.¹⁸⁵ In the same year the same author speaks about 400,000 Copts abroad, which he had obtained from different Coptic oral sources.¹⁸⁶ This illustrates the unreliability of these estimates.

The largest Coptic communities are found in North America and Australia. While most Western European countries have Coptic communities, the largest one is the London congregation that numbers 5,000 to 7,000 individuals, according to local priests.¹⁸⁷

The West has not been the sole destination of Coptic emigration. There are Coptic communities in most countries throughout the Middle East, from Iraq to Libya. There are also Coptic Orthodox Churches in Brazil and in the Caribbean. Furthermore, Africa is considered a "mission field," and communities of local converts to the Coptic Orthodox Church have been established in several African countries.

The reasons for Coptic migration are close to those which apply to Egyptian emigration in general. Ralph R. Sell lists the following: demographic transition with rapid population growth, legitimizing inter-Arab movement during the Nasser period, and individualism and removal of state restraints during the *infatih* (open door) period during the years of Sadat (1970-1981).¹⁸⁸ For the Coptic community the additional factor of being non-Muslim in a predominately Muslim society has played a role. Many have felt that their own and their children's future is uncertain. With the

¹⁸¹ E. Norden, "America's Oldest (and Newest) Christians," *The American Spectator*, (June 1993) 24-28.

¹⁸² "Migration, Coptic," in A.S. Atiya, *The Coptic Encyclopedia*, (New York, Toronto: MacMillan, 1991), Vol. 5, 1620-1624.

¹⁸³ Pope Shenouda in "Migration, Coptic" in A.S. Atiya (ed), *The Coptic Encyclopedia*, 1620-1624.

¹⁸⁴ Martin, "The Renewal in Context: 1960-1990," 15.

¹⁸⁵ Christiaan Van Nispen tot Sevenaer, "Changes in Relations between Copts and Muslims," in *Between desert and City: The Coptic Orthodox Church Today*, 31.

¹⁸⁶ Christiaan van Nispen tot Sevenaer S.J., *Egitto: Cristiani e Musulmani*, Estratto della relazione presentata al Convegno "Per una riflessione islamo-cristiana sulla situazione attuale e il futuro dei cristiani di oriente nelle loro società arabe", organizzato dalla Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli, Torino, 6-8 maggio 1997 (file).

¹⁸⁷ Maria Rezzonico, August 2007.

¹⁸⁸ Sell, "Gone for good?" 27.

Egyptian population identifying more strongly with Islam, many Copts have felt marginalized and have therefore decided to emigrate.¹⁸⁹

The requirement for getting a visa into Western countries has favored “the resourceful and the educated, those with proficiency in foreign languages and those who already have relatives abroad. The result has been the establishment of communities whose members are engaged in professional jobs, including medicine, trade, and commerce.”¹⁹⁰

Dutch researcher Puck de Wit notes that in the period 1993-1997 around 76 percent of all Egyptian requests for permanent emigration to the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand was made by Copts. Of the Egyptians who requested in the same period a permanent residence status in one of these countries almost 50 percent was Copt. The proportion of Copts migrating to the West is thus substantially larger than that of Egyptian Muslims. But in comparison with Armenians and Syrian-Orthodox Coptic migration is proportionally less. The migration percentage of these last two groups is over 50 percent of their community in the Middle East.¹⁹¹

Also, the number of Copts migrating can be used and thus manipulated by political activists. Najīb Jabrāʿīl, a Coptic human rights lawyer, states that Copts are migrating outside Egypt involuntarily due to Salafist threats and lack of protection from the Egyptian regime for them. He said that his organization has monitored the migration of more than 100,000 Copts to the United States, Canada, Australia, and Europe between March 19 and September 25, 2011.¹⁹²

Threats and insecurity have definitely increased after the Revolution of January 25, 2011, but the numbers Najīb Jabrāʿīl presented are not based on counting, neither was the insecurity placed in context.¹⁹³ Yūsuf Sīdhum of *Watani* responded, “Najīb Jubrāʿīl is not telling the truth. Many foreign media outlets have called me about this. I wonder—how is it possible that people accept such a text that does not mention its sources? Sīdhum made his own investigations and found Najīb Jabrāʿīl’s number highly inflated.”¹⁹⁴

Prince Hassan bin-Talal shows great concern about the ongoing emigration of Christians from the Arab World, believing this is a great loss for the region. He attributed this migration to political upheavals such as in Turkey and Lebanon and the widespread feeling that Christianity is Western-centric as conducive to Western incentives: “It appears to me that Western embassies, when looking at the queue of

¹⁸⁹ N. Stene, “Into the Lands of Immigration,” in *Between desert and City: The Coptic Orthodox Church Today*, 254-264.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Puck de Wit, “Egypte is te klein voor mijn gedachten.” De migratiemotieven van kopten, *Sharqiyat* 14/1 (2002): 47-59.

¹⁹² Dr. Najīb Jabrāʿīl, “EUHRO: Message of warning for military council and Egypt's government,” *Arab-West Report*, Week 39, Art. 41, (Sept 25 2011), <http://www.arabwestreport.info/year-2011/week-39/41-euhro-message-warning-military-council-and-egypts-government>.

¹⁹³ Cornelis Hulsman, “Harms of Misreporting on Egypt’s Christians,” (text of a presentation given in the European Parliament on May 9, 2012) in *Arab-West Report Papers*, May 8, 2012, <http://arabwestreport.info/harms-misreporting-egypts-christians>.

¹⁹⁴ Hulsman, “Christian leader: No fear for Islamist landslide in Egypt,” <http://www.arabwestreport.info/year-2012/week-1/22-christian-leader-no-fear-islamist-landslide-egypt>.

applicants for visas, tend to favor Christian applicants simply because they feel that there is a cultural affinity there.”¹⁹⁵

Conclusion

A long term analysis of the census results show that Christians in Egypt are increasing in absolute number and since the 1950s have shown a steady decrease in percentage from 8.34 percent in 1927 to an estimated 5.5 percent in 2000 and possibly even lower in 2011. The Coptic presence in Upper Egypt, traditionally the part of Egypt where proportionally most Christians live, sees an ongoing decline in the percentage of Christians, while the percentage of all Egyptian Christians living in greater Cairo has swelled to around 30 percent of all Christians in Egypt.

The reliability of the official statistics is disputed. They are defended by scholars who argue that the Egyptian census numbers have been consistent both over the whole period of time and at each individual moment in time. If there had been any manipulation, they argue, this pattern would not have been constant. The registration of births, marriages, and deaths provide another source of religious statistics in Egypt. The census and population registration are carried out by completely separate branches of public administration using quite different methods. They nevertheless provide results which are consistent with each other.

It is interesting that the World Council of Churches and the Middle East Council of Churches provide figures that are close to those of the census. It appears they are giving more credibility to the census figures than those provided by most Copts themselves.

Christian pro-government politician Nabīl Lūqā Bibāwī accepted the Egyptian census figures, but underlines the importance of Coptic emigrants.¹⁹⁶ Just as with Muslim Egyptians living abroad, they feel strongly attached to the country and thus, in his view, their numbers abroad should weigh in discussions in Egypt.

Authors and spokesmen who disagreed with the government census provided estimates ranging between 10 and 26 percent. Since at least the 1950s some very large estimates of Christians in Egypt have been circulating which all seem to be based on selected Coptic sources. The largest were provided by *The Daily Telegraph*, 1953, 20 percent; *Wakin*, 1963, 16.7 - 25 percent; *The New York Times*, 1981 and *The Gazette*, Montréal, 1983, 16 to 26 percent; *Pro Mundi Vita*, 1982, 17.8 percent; *The World Christian Encyclopedia*, 1982, 18.6 percent; Coptic human rights lawyer *Najīb Jibrā’īl*, 18.4 to 19.7 percent; Coptic Orthodox Bishop Picenti, between 13 and 20 percent. Interestingly, these discrepancies between government census and church estimates appear at a moment that the Coptic Sunday School movement makes its presence felt within the Coptic community.

¹⁹⁵ The prince believes that the feeling that Christianity is Western-centric is mistaken. It betrays the oriental origins of Christianity; C. Hulsman, “Interview with HRH Prince Hasan ibn Talal,” *Arab-West Report*, Week 52, Art. 5, (2007), <http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/20711>. The text of the transcript of this interview was approved by Prince Hassan’s office before placement in AWR. Based on this interview articles appeared in *Christianity Today*, *Katholiek Nieuwsblad* and *Reformatorsch Dagblad*, *Arab-West Report*, Week 52, Art. 6-9, (2007).

¹⁹⁶ He was known to be pro-government during the reign of President Hosni Mubārak.

None of the authors providing high estimates did so on the basis of research, but rather on the basis of a general distrust of numbers provided by authorities in a police state. Errors in registration of religion on Egyptian identity cards, personal experiences with census taking, difficulties in obtaining complete and detailed census results from the CAPMAS, and the head of CAPMAS stating in 2007 that the census data were incomplete concerning numbers of Christians contributed to this general distrust.

The examples of errors in census-taking are convincing and thus there is a margin of error, but it is unclear how large this margin of error in the census results could be. Even a difference of only 1 percent amounts to hundreds of thousands of people. There is no research providing support for claims that the Egyptian census has miscounted over hundreds of thousands of people.

Claims of higher proportions of Christians were often linked to a political bias in favor of higher proportions, which in turn creates doubts of the claims made.

Such arguments are not specific to Egypt. Jongeneel noted that in different countries governmental statistical tables differ considerably from those made by churches.¹⁹⁷ Observations of inaccuracies in taking the census lead many to believe that the proportion thus must be higher than 5.5 percent. Jongeneel suggests considering the census figure as the certain minimum of the proportion of Copts in Egypt. Still, mistakes in the Egyptian census, which undoubtedly occur, cannot account for the large discrepancies between the Egyptian census and numbers provided by Coptic Orthodox Church clergy, including H.H. Pope Shenouda. Jongeneel, therefore, estimates that the proportion may not be very much higher.¹⁹⁸

The substantial differences between the census results and estimates provided by Coptic Orthodox leaders and church members, are difficult to study since the CAPMAS published no data of the smallest administrative units and the church thus far did not allow verification of the quality of its data collection. This, as well as expressions of fear that lower figures would be harmful for the Christian community in Egypt, provide a strong indication that numbers provided by Coptic sources could have been inflated for political reasons. These include the question about larger political representation of Copts in Egypt and church building, or else the discussion about the extent of Coptic marginalization in society.

Since Coptic opposition to the census figures is so strong, others expressed doubts about the Egyptian census because they depended on Coptic Orthodox Church sources for their research and feared consequences for their work if they would openly question estimates provided by church sources. The safest way was then to refer to large discrepancies between different numbers, not distinguishing between census and estimates.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁷ Jongeneel, *Philosophy, science, and theology of mission in the 19th and 20th centuries: a missiological encyclopedia*, 283.

¹⁹⁸ Jongeneel, Interview, March 10, 2011.

¹⁹⁹ One such scholar was Prof. Dr. Otto Meinardus who told me this personally. See also my obituary in *Watani*, September 25, 2005 and *Arab-West Report*, Week 39, Art. 39, (2005),

Bishop Marqus argues in favor of higher figures, asserting that the Coptic Orthodox Church has made many efforts to improve its own membership registration to substantiate these numbers. Western scholars and students are invited to check the method of registration in his diocese, but a first effort of Christopher Marshall to grasp an understanding of how the church computes its numbers failed in the summer of 2011. The Bishop admits there might be duplications due to internal migration within Egypt and thus the possibility that someone is registered in both his old diocese and his new diocese. Philippe Fargues remains skeptical of church figures as long as the registration by the church cannot be statistically evaluated for omission and double counting. Independent research into the membership registration of the Coptic Orthodox Church could end many of the discussions that have been mentioned in this paper.

In turn, the Egyptian government has not been helpful in ending the discussion on population figures either through publishing available data and making these available to independent researchers.

Presenting underestimations for whatever reason has consequences. Christians argue that underestimations weaken their claim to be represented in high government positions or to obtain permits for building new churches.

Exaggerated numbers are equally serious. It makes Christian activists in and outside Egypt believe they are numerically stronger than they really are, which bolsters their belief that confrontational activities such as demonstrations, resisting government policies such as in divorce issues, aids their political objectives. They do not grasp or underestimate the resistance this creates among Muslims who do not at all agree with their usage of inflated numbers. When resistance is realized it is often attributed to the claim that these Muslims are anti-Christian, rather than recognizing that they have valid non-religious arguments. Debates on issues where numbers are important add to tensions instead of seeking solutions for various issues in a more amicable way.

Inflated figures make the numbers of Christians converting to Islam and emigration less serious than they actually are. Inflated numbers result in discussions on exaggerations instead of dealing with real issues of concern for Christians.

It becomes painful when Islamists use these arguments against inflated estimates of Christians, highlighting comparisons between numbers and wealth, thus claiming that Coptic Christians' concerns are illegitimate.²⁰⁰

<http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/8025>. Meinardus was a good personal friend of mine and told me he knew this also of other scholars.

²⁰⁰ <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=21268>; Yusrā Zahrān and Fādī Habashī, "Copts own half of Egypt's wealth...where is the discrimination?" *Sawt al-Umma*, January 17, 2005, in *Arab-West Report*, Week 3, Art. 22, (2005), <http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/5425>. Here, prominent journalist Adel Hammouda claims that Copts are 10 percent of population while they, according to him, own 50 percent of Egypt's wealth. There are very rich Copts but also millions of poor. There is no basis for such claims but it shows how claiming certain numbers can be used for political purposes. See also Mājdah Maurice, "The happy minority and the sectarian discourse," *Ṣawt al-Ummah*, February 14, 2005 in *Arab-West Report*, Week 7, Art. 34, (2005), <http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/5569>. The author, a Coptic Christian, is upset with the way some Muslim authors have used these numbers. She

Regardless of the differences between the census and numbers presented by Copts, it is obvious that the results found in this research underline reports about declining proportions of Christians in the Middle East in general and Egypt in particular.²⁰¹ It is obvious that factors such as emigration, conversions to Islam, and differences in birthrates between Muslims and Christians, in this order, play a major role in the proportional decline we see in Egypt.

I have been interested in Christian statistics since I first came to Egypt in 1976. I have discussed this over the years with many Egyptian clergy and laymen, including people like Coptic scholar and politician Dr. Mīlād Hannā with whom I discussed Coptic statistics in the 1980s. I am very pleased that thanks to interns in our office it was possible to systematically work on Christian statistics. I personally believe that the inflation of numbers hurts the Christian community most because it makes many common Christians believe they are numerically stronger than they really are. It also makes Christians underestimate or become blind to the effects of migration on their community in Egypt. There is good evidence that discrimination is rampant in many parts of society, but this also can be shown with numbers that reflect reality more than Christian numbers tend to do now. Anyone who disagrees with the conclusions of this report is encouraged to provide alternative data.

makes the argument correctly that poverty, corruption, and deterioration in living standards do not differentiate between Muslims and Copts.

²⁰¹ See for example William Dalrymple, *From the Holy Mountain; a Journey Among the Christians in the Middle East*, (Henry Holt & Co. 1998); a lecture with the same title in *Arab-West Report*, Week 48, Art. 3, (2006); William Dalrymple, “Disappearing Christianity in the Middle East;” (Transcript of a lecture at the American University in Cairo) in *Arab-West Report*, Week 48, Art. (2006). Apart from Dalrymple, numerous other media have reported on Christian decline in the Middle East such as Olivia Ward, “Declining Christian population a fact of life in Arab societies,” *The Star*, June 11, 2007; Viviane Salāmāh, “The latest crowds of Christmas; is it the Christians' massive emigration from the Arab world?,” *Al-Dustūr*, January 11, 2008 in *Arab-West Report*, Week 2, Art. 8 (2008); and Kristen Chick, “Briefing: Why Christians are declining in Mideast,” *Christian Science Monitor*, January 29, 2010.