

Elizabeth Monier
University of Cambridge

Spatial Practices of ‘Retreat’ Among Egyptian Christians: Isolating or Empowering?

Abstract:

Literature on the modern history of Coptic Christians often suggests that Christians have undertaken a process of retreat or withdrawal from public life in Egypt. It points to the reduction of political space and media in the 1950s/1960s under president Gamal Abdul Nasser and the subsequent Islamisation of public spaces since the 1970s under president Anwar al-Sadat. This article examines some of the practices of retreat employed by Christians in Egypt and the impact this has on collective identity and perceptions of belonging to the nation in order to determine if spatial practices of retreat are isolating or, in fact, empowering vis-a-vis inclusion in the public space and articulations of Egyptian Christian identities. It concludes that spatial retreat should not be understood as a withdrawal from the imaginary of Egypt or from Egyptian territory. In fact, spatial retreats often proclaim and affirm a Christian presence. These spaces support lived experiences of Egyptian Christian identity. By doing so, they contribute to empowering engagement with Egyptian national identity and heritage.

Keywords: Egypt, Coptic Orthodox Church, Egyptian Christians, religious identity, national identity

Introduction

In the hegemonic narrative of Egyptian identity, the Egyptian social fabric [al-Nasīj al-Masrī] consists of two elements; Muslims and Christians¹. This narrative embeds a boundary along the Muslim-Christian divide at the same time as underlining national unity between them. This article discusses how this combination of unity and demarcation operates spatially and how Christians navigate between particularistic spaces and national public spaces. The article identifies the spatial equivalent of the dilemma noted by Riggins in his study of ethnic minority media². That is the dilemma of how best to manage the alternate pressures of isolation and assimilation. For a community that is in some way minoritised or marginalised within the nation-state framework, the spatial organisation of relations between communal life and national life can lead to pressure to assimilate with the dominant national community which may, subsequently, threaten communal heritage. It can also lead to the opposite, by encouraging a retreat into particularistic spaces that reduce engagement by the minoritised community and reduce knowledge of them in the public space³.

This article problematises any simplistic understanding of retreat as a voluntary disengagement from the national space. This might be assumed, especially in the literature that described religious minorities in the Middle East as beleaguered⁴. In the case of Egyptian Christians, there is a strong interweaving between territorial and faith-based narratives employed in the understanding of identity and heritage that shape the lived experience of Christian Egyptians⁵. The majority of Christians in Egypt are indigenous, estimated to comprise around 10% of the total Egyptian population⁶. 90% of these belong to the Coptic Orthodox Church.

The linguistic origin of the term “Copt” represents this entwining of territorial and faith-based identity. The word comes from *Aigypptos*, the ancient Greek name for Egypt, and simply means “Egyptian”. This led to the use of *Qibti* in Arabic, and of *Copt* in English. After the Arab Muslim conquest of Egypt in the seventh century the meaning of *Copt*

¹ Iskander, 2012b, p. 34.

² Riggins, 1992.

³ Author interview with Hany Labib, Egyptian journalist, Cairo, 2008.

⁴ Ibrahim, 2011.

⁵ See Iskander, 2012a.

⁶ Hasan, 2003, p. 18.

transformed to mean *Egyptian Christian*. Although this reduction in the size of the Egyptian Christian community and the decline of the Coptic language led to a loss of 'sacred space'⁷, the Egyptian church survived and maintained a spatial presence across Egyptian territory. Today, Egyptian Christians are a scattered minority⁸, which means that they do not trace their ancestral homeland to one single part of the modern Egyptian state's territory, but rather can be found across it⁹. The influence of Egypt's 'Coptic period' can still be noted in Egyptian art, language and other traditions. Territorial identity and religious identity are thereby combined in the Egyptian Christian identity; and this inseparability is manifested in the way both discursive and territorial spaces are negotiated by Christians in modern Egypt.

Despite this interconnectedness, Christians in Egypt are confronted with various manifestations of marginalisation and with a historiography that suggests a process of retreat from national to church spaces during the 20th century which has resulted in withdrawal and isolation. It should be noted that this retreat was not a specifically Christian process, but rather a result of the broader Egyptian social and political context. Furthermore, this article suggests that, while the increase in particularistic Christian spaces could indeed be read as a retreat, the impact of these spaces is at least partly empowering. Providing particularistic Christian spaces is a temporary solution. The retreat is not one way, but, rather, temporary, allowing Christians to "live out" the different aspects of their national and religious heritage before returning to the national urban spaces of Egypt.

As Lefebvre argued, urban spaces are not neutral, but are instead social constructs¹⁰. As social constructs, they are contested spaces formed through continual (re)negotiations. I contend that, without the support of temporary retreats to Egyptian Christian spaces, Christians would be disempowered in this process of negotiation of national spaces, and would become more susceptible to the forces of either assimilation or isolation. To examine this, the article discusses some of the forms of retreat undertaken by Christians in contemporary Egypt. As a result, it finds that 'retreat' should be understood not as a permanent disconnection or withdrawal, but rather as a temporary retreat that provides a haven where the aspects of identity and heritage that are

⁷ Swanson, 2000, p. 131.

⁸ Hourani, 1947.

⁹ Chitham, 1986.

¹⁰ See Lefebvre, 1991.

marginalised in public national spaces can be refreshed and empowered in a way that renews and supports engagement within everyday national spaces. The boundary between church space and national space is visible, but porous. This supports the conceptualisation of identity formation and operation as a process that is in flux and exists in multiple spaces; not experienced within and behind rigid borders but across and between boundaries¹¹. The article concludes that the act of navigating between these spaces is an aspect of Egyptian Christian identity formation and performance that shapes relations with the state and with the wider Egyptian society.

Christians and the National Space

In the usual arc of the narrative of Christian national engagement in the twentieth century, a surge of political activity is described in the first third of the century. In this shift, lay Christians of the Coptic Orthodox Church used growing socio-economic status to gain greater leadership within the Christian community and also to advocate for greater visibility of Coptic issues in national spaces. An example is the rise of Boutros Ghali from working as a teacher to become the first Coptic Christian prime minister in 1908¹². Prior to this, specifically Christian life was largely mediated through the church and interpreted within particularistic Coptic spaces. This increase in utilisation of the national sphere to discuss Coptic affairs led to contestation between political elites in public, such as the Coptic and Egyptian congresses of 1911. Two Coptic-led newspapers were founded in the late 19th century with the purpose of introducing Coptic affairs more visibly into the Egyptian political landscape. There was also contestation over control of Christian spaces, such as the dispute between the church leaders and the lay council (*al-Majlis al-Milli*) over control of Christian endowments and other financial matters.

However, by the middle of the 20th century this expansion receded again, leading to the trope of Christian retreat from Egyptian public, national spaces in favour of Christian particularistic spaces. As a result, there is a literature that points to a gap between Christians and the state; a sense of Christian self-isolation¹³. Some scholarship on Egyptian Christians seems to suggest that they must choose either the state or the

¹¹ Cf. Bhahba, 1994, pp. 3-4.

¹² Ghali, 2016.

¹³ Iskander, 2012a, p. 185.

church to represent them¹⁴. While it was lay Coptic participation in the national public sphere in the late 19th and early 20th centuries that enabled the lay Coptic elite to challenge the church, it was the narrowing of access to public platforms and the establishment of a renewed relationship between pope and president under Nasser after the Free Officer's Revolution of 1952 that enhanced a process of expanding church, controlled spaces and increase Christian reliance upon them¹⁵. Under Nasser and his revolution, political parties were banned, the media tightly controlled and parliament sat for no more than five of Nasser's eighteen years of rule¹⁶. Alternative spaces were formed to compensate for this narrowing of the public national sphere. Islamic spaces, such as mosques and welfare organisations, became an important space for social and political organisation among Muslims. Similarly, since the 1950s the church has increased its creation and command of Coptic spaces. *Revival began in monasteries under Kyrollos VI (1959-71). There was also the growth of a programme of Sunday Schools and social and cultural services, often based inside church compounds.* Under Pope Shenouda III (1971-2012), there was a centralization and expansion of church authority, as well as an enthusiastic adoption of media technologies. Through using education and Coptic media, the Coptic language was promoted and Coptic stories and traditions were printed in books and made into films. For most Coptic youth, serving the Church became increasingly important as both a spiritual and a social activity as it confirms one's place in these newly important Coptic spaces¹⁷. In this sense, Coptic spaces can be described as parallel spaces. This is not an attempt to seek isolation per se, but one negative result of such retreat has been the reduction among the general public of knowledge of the 'other' as social spaces become more particularistic based on religious affiliation¹⁸.

Constructions of Egyptian national identity and political culture during this critical period during the second half of the 20th century were thereby shaped during the formation of the modern nation-state, and acted as major factors in setting up boundaries around the meaning of Copticness, how it is expressed, by whom and how, and to what ends it can be mobilised in the national public space. The acknowledgement that

¹⁴ For example, al-Manawi, 2005; Hasan, 2003. Asa'ad, 1993.

¹⁵ Tadros, 2009.

¹⁶ Fahmy, 2021.

¹⁷ Shenouda, 2012.

¹⁸ Author interview with Egyptian journalist Hany Labib, 2008.

they, together, form the fabric of the Egyptian nation co-existed alongside a sense that the influence of the Christian element should remain within certain limits and that certain aspects should only be openly performed within segregated Christian spaces. This apparent disengagement and segregation was not entirely voluntary, and was reflective of a general national trend that squeezed the public sphere from all but elite voices, emerging partly out the failure of liberal parliamentary politics to establish a participatory democratic political culture under the pressure of disputes between the main power centres that were battling for Egypt's political soul. As early as the 1930s, the Wafd Party, which had been the main platform for the integration of Christians into Egyptian national life since 1919, had become weaker and more fragmented. It was also critiqued precisely because of the prominent role of Copts in the party.¹⁹ In line with such developments in Egyptian society and politics over the same period, the representation of individuals as blocs whose relations are mediated through approved figures supported by rigid hierarchies, is one of the significant factors in the construction of included/excluded voices in the narration of Coptic identity²⁰. The Church must, generally, still act within the discursive boundaries defined by its relationship with the state and in its position of representing a religious heritage that is neither that of the majority of Egyptian citizens nor that of the state²¹.

Spatial Demarcations: Christians in the Egyptian Landscape

The tendency to see Christian disengagement with the public sphere since the latter part of the 20th century as a permanent retreat is, perhaps, the result of the church actively defining Christian sites of identity and power vis-à-vis wider social and political spheres. The history of the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt could be framed as an ongoing process of carving out spaces. This church was formed through a challenge to the Hellenistic hegemony over the church in Egypt, undertaken through the formation of an Egyptianised Christian community that drew on claims to local indigeneity and authority. Around the 4th century AD, a movement developed among Egyptian priests and the monks of upper Egypt that sought to shift the weight of power away from Byzantium in order to promote local authority over

¹⁹ Carter, 1986, pp. 161-165.

²⁰ See Hasan, 2003; Iskander, 2012a.

²¹ Article 2 of the Egyptian Constitution of 2014 affirms that Islam is the official religion in Egypt and that Islamic law is the principal source of legislation.

Egyptian territory and religious identity.²² This would eventually lead to the schism between the Egyptian church and the rest of Christendom during the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD: a permanent retreat that led to theological isolation from the wider Christian world but also empowered the local mix of religious and territorial identity. This sense of separation from the wider Christian community was enhanced after the Arab conquest of Egypt in the 7th century, leading to a process through which Christian control of space in Egypt gradually receded²³, thereby bringing Egypt's Coptic Period to a close.²⁴

The idea of the miraculous survival of the church's presence in Egypt lends salience to maintaining physical and visible roots in the Egyptian landscape. According to Nelly Shafik Ramzy, a study of the development of early Coptic architecture shows that, as a result of insecurity, safekeeping was a determining factor in Coptic buildings' design and that the development and the distribution of these arrangements had followed certain patterns and characteristics"²⁵. This theme of retreat behind the walls of church spaces has echoes in the early history of the Church shrinking as Egyptian Christians gradually transformed into a minority within the territory of Egypt. Under Islamic law, Christians were also marked along the boundary of faith as '*dhimmis*', or protected non-Muslims residing in Islamic territories. Under this system there were separate rules for their personal status, affairs, taxation and church construction. This contributed to the re-imagining of the characteristics and landscapes of the national territory²⁶. In response, Christian spaces also adapted to these new formulations of the Egyptian landscape in which, for example, a church tower must not be higher than the minaret of any nearby mosque.

The construction of churches remains one of the most significant flashpoints for violence against Christians in modern Egypt. There are separate laws that govern the building of churches and mosques, with church construction facing significantly more restrictions, often leading to long delays both in building new churches and repairing existing ones. As a result, there are instances when repairs are carried out without permission or a building is used as a church without a licence. Even having a licence does not ensure that there will be no hostile reaction to

²² Tellyrides, 2009, p. 18; Atiya, 1968, pp. 56-58.

²³ Swanson, 2000.

²⁴ Mikhail, 2004.

²⁵ Ramzy, 2011, p. 257.

²⁶ Purcell, 1998, p. 433.

building a church. According to Tadros' account of the burning down of a church in al-Marinab in 2011, the church had a valid licence for use as a house of worship and had been issued with a permit to rebuild. However, some of the residents of al-Marinab organised a protest against the church's reconstruction and also claimed that the new steeple was three metres taller than stipulated by the permit. Local authorities "convened a 'reconciliation meeting' for the village elders, Muslim and Christian, who agreed that the church would shorten its steeple and install no cross, bell or microphone at the top"²⁷. Construction stopped but, nevertheless, a mob proceeded to set fire to the church and several other properties belonging to local Christians.

The building of churches is linked to spatial ownership and to altering the landscape, which are two reasons why it has been a major flashpoint for contention and violence. A key moment in Muslim-Christian relations in modern Egypt was the incident of Zawiya al-Hamra in 1981. This was the result of an ownership dispute over a piece of land in the Zawiya al-Hamra district of Cairo. When Christians began to plan the construction of a church, local Muslims sought to pre-empt this by building a mosque. The dispute led to an outbreak of violence leading to a large number of deaths and damage to Christian homes and property. Building churches continues to be seen as provocation and spatial encroachment, and is subject to inequalities in the implementation of law and to inadequate security. The problem is exacerbated because this insecurity is addressed by trying to entrench and guard the boundaries of Coptic spaces, whether through architectural design (for example, most churches and all monasteries are situated behind walls) or through armed guards situated at the entrances. However, there is little attempt to address the question of why building churches or using an existing building for worship purposes represents such a threat. The application of different laws concerning the construction of mosques versus the construction of churches seems to embed this spatial inequality.

Prior to 2005, presidential permission was required to build or even repair a church. This was amended by Decree 291 of 2005 in an attempt to simplify and speed up the licensing process through the delegation of licensing to governors. However, reluctance to grant licences persisted. Such licences, if issued at all, still took a considerable time to obtain. In drafting this law, extra conditions were added to the process of approval for church construction, including a consideration of objections among

²⁷ Tadros, 2011.

the local Muslim population²⁸. Rather than easing the situation, the process became perhaps more contested, because it has normalised control over the way in which church spaces are (not) used. Riots in Udayasaat in January 2006, in Bamha in May 2007 and in Ain Shams in November 2008 all began with attacks on buildings which local residents believed were being used as unlicensed churches. The aftermath of the Arab Spring seemed to lead to a further deterioration, as in the al-Merinab incident described above. In the security vacuum after Mubarak's ouster, arson attacks on churches increased. In an apparent attempt to relieve the resulting tensions, in May 2011 the Prime Minister announced that a number of churches that had been closed without legal cause would be re-opened. However, when an attempt was made to open an extension for the Virgin Mary Church in Ain Shams, Cairo, which had been on the list, the move provoked local protests. As a result, this church was closed indefinitely²⁹.

Contestation over space continued post-uprising, both in terms of this clear spatial tension over church building and also over the public landscape in terms of controlling Christian (in)visibility in the national space³⁰. As Muslim Brotherhood members expanded their political power, Christians expressed increased concerns regarding their continued presence within Egypt³¹. Since Morsi's removal from power, church building continues to be a pivot of conflict and contestation over control of the Egyptian landscape. In an apparent attempt to confront this, the Egyptian Constitution of 2014 contained a commitment, in article 235, to issue a law that organised the construction and renovation of churches. While this commitment appeared to be a positive step, it still entrenched the notion that church construction requires a separate process to mosques. A law was issued in 2016 and one of the most notable immediate features of the law is contained in article 1, which stipulates that there must be a wall built around any church sitting on an area of land greater than 300 metres. This reflects the notion that visible Christian spaces need to be 'made safe', but also that Christian activity should only be conducted within such spaces and are, otherwise, regarded as suspicious and even 'illegal'³².

²⁸ Rowe, 2007, pp. 337-339.

²⁹ Iskander, 2012a, p. 20.

³⁰ See Monier, 2014.

³¹ Tadros, 2013, p. 229.

³² Ibrahim, 2020.

The passage of this law has so far failed to prevent disputes over church construction for a number of reasons. Chiefly, it has simply reinforced the notion that building churches is linked to security concerns, and that it is justifiable to codify and regulate the ways and locations in which Christians perform aspects of their religious identity. A report published by the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights records 15 episodes of sectarian tension and violence over a one-year period from 2017 to 2018. These were related to the regularisation of 15 churches that had already been functioning openly for several years. Of these 15 churches, 11 were then closed. The report indicates that a further 35 cases of tensions had been documented since the church building law was issued in 2016³³. This continuation of conflict implies that church building is not simply an issue of public planning and building codes, but has additional implications that the construction of a mosque does not. This contributes to the involuntary spatial marginalisation of Christians in Egypt that supports the isolating effect of retreat into church spaces and resists efforts to de-securitise this spatial border between church spaces and public spaces. Despite, or perhaps because of this contention over church spaces, there are also a variety of alternative Christian spaces. Including these in the examination of the spatial practices of Christians gives a more comprehensive answer to the question of whether the creation of such segregated spaces suggest a withdrawal or not.

Voluntary Retreats as Spaces of Empowerment

The preceding discussion points to some of the ways in which the modern period has witnessed challenges to participation and religious spaces for both Muslims and Christians acting as alternative spaces for socialisation. These were involuntary forms of retreat created out of political developments that sought to shrink public spaces in which resistance to the regime might be constructed. Additionally, it is clear that control over national territorial spaces is a continued source of contestation and boundary construction. The control of space can be used as a mechanism to disempower Christians and delineate permitted Christian spaces. However, in terms of understanding how Christians respond proactively to mobilise their spaces and choose to experience connections between religious and national identities, an examination of additional and voluntary spatial practices is also crucial. The physical building of the church is the central and most direct sphere in which Christians

³³ Ibrahim, 2018, p. 8.

experience their religious identity and express their faith-based belonging. They clearly demarcate local spaces and are usually encircled by a wall, making them controlled, segregated, and gated locations which are guarded both physically by police and socially through cultural and political norms.

Communities are built around a church, or a church might be constructed to serve a community. Therefore, they are normally located in inhabited locations. Indeed, the new church building law makes the construction of a new church dependent on the size of the Christian community immediately surrounding the church's location. However, this article discusses additional Christian spaces and their potential for empowering engagement in the national space, rather than only protection from it. Of particular interest are practices that take Christians outside of their local surroundings and urban spaces. These include monasteries and '*beyout*'³⁴. Through a discussion of the ways in which these spaces are utilised, the article will contribute to the debate regarding assimilation verses isolation to consider whether such separate bordered Christian spaces increase segregation, discourage engagement in the national space and harden social boundaries between Christians and Muslims in Egypt. Iskander's³⁵ surveys of Egyptian Christians pointed to the concern with balancing the preservation of Christian identity by providing particularistic spaces where this heritage can be 'lived' with less restriction, alongside the problem of increasing isolation and disconnection caused by looking inward. Similarly, interviews suggest there is an awareness that by separating the Christian aspect of identity and practice into separate spheres reduces public awareness of knowledge of the 'other'³⁶. How can Christians in Egypt achieve a balance between living the Christian aspect of their identity while also engaging in a public national space where Islam is the religion of the state and the majority, and their places of worship are a frequent flashpoint for conflict? This article suggests voluntary retreats to particularistic spaces that are seen a complementary to the public space and empowering of this engagement support the navigation of wider social and political relations.

³⁴ This term literally translates as 'houses', but are akin to resorts or guest houses.

³⁵ Iskander, 2012a.

³⁶ Author interview with Egyptian journalist Hany Labib, Cairo, 2008. Author interview with the editor of the Watani newspaper, Yousef Sidhom, Cairo, 2007.

Monasteries

The monastery has a unique role in Coptic religious and cultural life. It is an important spatial marker on the Egyptian landscape, in Christian Egyptian history and in the modern lived experience of Coptic life. As Martin suggests, “To outsiders, the monastery embodies an affirmative presence, while at the same time it reassures the Coptic community of its own vitality”³⁷. It is popularly believed that *Christian monasticism was born in Egypt*. Therefore, Egyptian monasteries mark out the heritage of Egyptian Christians as indigenous, with a long national history that pre-dates Islam and the Arab conquest, and also as an ancient Christian community that played a formative role in the early development and spread of Christianity. In all the major texts on Christianity in Egypt, the history of monasticism is described as a central practice³⁸. Monastic life and the desert fathers are, therefore, prominent figures in Coptic heritage³⁹. In the early days of the formation of the Coptic Church, the monks were influential in defining the boundary around the emerging Coptic Christian community⁴⁰. In these ways, they represent a source of power and leadership for Coptic Orthodox Christians; a source of strength and a sense of endurance. In the monastic way of life, both tangible and intangible Coptic heritage are combined. According to Gabra, “Most aspects of Coptic culture are represented in the monasteries of Egypt. They are the major source for the study of Coptic architecture and architectural sculpture”⁴¹.

In some regions of Egypt, for example in Wadi al-Natrun which is situated between Egypt’s two main cities of Cairo and Alexandria, clusters of monasteries mark the landscape with their architecture and define the character of the area through the monastic way of life. St Anthony is celebrated as the founder of monasticism, and is a popular figure for Egyptian Christians. al-Masry describes Anthony as “the star of the desert and the father of monks”⁴². He is one of the desert fathers, underlining the desert, and particularly the Egyptian desert, as a central space in Christian history and thought. Although the exact origins of the monastic

³⁷ Martin, 1997, p. 19.

³⁸ Meinardus, 2002; Malaty, 1993; al-Masry, 1978.

³⁹ Armanios, 2011, p. 6.

⁴⁰ Gruber, 1997, pp. 67-68.

⁴¹ Gabra, 2002, p. xx.

⁴² al-Masry, 1975, p. 80.

movement are contested,⁴³ the rise to prominence of monasticism is popularly dated from the beginning of Anthony's flight to the desert. In retreating to this desert space, St Anthony not only preserved Egyptian Christian heritage but developed it further, leading to its spread throughout Egypt and beyond⁴⁴. Finally, it is noteworthy that the movement established isolated *communities*; in other words, despite the spatial seclusion of the monasteries, they developed a communal way of life which influenced wider Christian identity⁴⁵. This combination of retreat and wider community organisation and influence can be found in the role of monasteries today and in the way they operate as spaces that connect Egyptian Christian communities.

By its nature, the monastery is a retreat from the urban space and normal daily life. As Henderson suggests, monasteries "are a reminder that the wilderness brings clarity of purpose and freedom from the distractions of the modern world"⁴⁶. They also play a role in Coptic spatial practices by providing both a physical and a symbolic cultural space. This is in line with Smith's understanding of religion and religious spaces as playing both a spiritual and a social role, in addition to acting as a repository of culture and identity for communities⁴⁷. It is also reflected in the way that churches, or other religious bodies, will act as a space of cultural preservation. In the diaspora, scholarship suggests that engaging in church spaces balances the challenge of assimilation and integration with the preservation of culture⁴⁸. Historically, too, religious spaces have acted as platforms for the preservation and mobilising of social movements, such as in the Balkans and Greece during the wars for independence from the Ottoman Empire⁴⁹. The monastery is a repository for communal heritage and consciousness. Monasteries house libraries of rare ancient manuscripts, relics, art, sculpture, and other artefacts representing tangible Christian heritage. The architecture of the monasteries themselves is also part of the lived experience of Egyptian Christianity and its history.

At the same time, the monastery is a space that combines the performance of social and spiritual practices, for example in providing a space for family get-togethers and youth retreats to mark occasions such as celebrations of saint's days, baptisms, and so on. As noted by McNally,

⁴³ See Farag, 2009.

⁴⁴ Gabra, 2002, p. xix.

⁴⁵ Gabra, 2002, p. 13.

⁴⁶ Henderson, 2005, p. 160.

⁴⁷ Smith, 1991, pp. 27-28.

⁴⁸ For example, see Safran, 1991; Brinkerhoff, 2016; Brennan, 2012.

⁴⁹ Roudometov, 1998, p. 17.

monasteries, like many churches, incorporate within their compounds an open outside space for social activities and accommodation for visitors and non-clerical staff⁵⁰. They act as sites for gathering Copts for activities and celebrating festivals. This is particularly so since the revival of the Coptic church through the 20th century that transformed the role of the monastery into an increasingly vital space in the life of Christians, leading to a significant growth in the number of Christians entering monastic orders⁵¹. This gives monks an important role in heritage production, preservation and dissemination. Additionally, the hierarchy within the Coptic Orthodox Church itself must hail from monastic orders.

Clearly, the monastic space is not cut off from the Christian community. Young Christian men⁵² can request permission to seek a retreat (*al-Khilwa*) at a monastery through their local priest. This is a common spiritual practice that provides time and space for spiritual contemplation and to participate in the communal life of the monastery. These retreats, though, are also temporary, and are not geared towards permanently disengaging Christians from their wider environment but, in fact, enforce an understanding of Christian identity as authentically Egyptian; as rooted in the Egyptian landscape as a whole, just like the monastic buildings themselves. Because the monastery is a physical retreat in a religion-centred space, it is easy to assume that visiting is an isolating practice in terms of the Copts' relations with their predominately Muslim society and co-citizens. However, due to its central historical role and the symbolic space that the monastery provides, visits to monasteries are often more about reinforcing roots in the landscape of Egypt and, therefore, reconnecting with a sense of national identity and heritage through interacting with the national, cosmological and sociological aspects of being a Copt (which originally meant, simply, 'Egyptian') all at the same time. This could explain why, according to Gruber, some Copts say that they could not exist if it were not for the example and the spaces offered by the monasteries⁵³ which "undergird Coptic identity"⁵⁴. For Martin, "The monastery's role is to draw universal attention to [...] the

⁵⁰ McNally, 1998, p. 83, p. 89.

⁵¹ Gruber, 1997, p. 62.

⁵² Women are not permitted to stay in a monastery for a retreat, but can undertake a similar retreat practice at convents. Convents are normally located within towns rather than in secluded locations in the desert. For more on Coptic Orthodox nuns, see van Doorn-Harder, 1995.

⁵³ Gruber, 1997, p. 81.

⁵⁴ Gruber, 1997, p. 67.

Coptic community that would otherwise be drowned in the multitude of mosques”⁵⁵.

Beyout

Monasteries are clearly rooted in Egyptian and Christian history. In modern Egypt, the majority of the monasteries are part of the Coptic Orthodox Church. Although there are a smaller number of Greek Orthodox and Catholic monasteries, Egyptians who belong to other denominations do not necessarily have access to such spaces. However, all denominations have embraced another form of demarcation of Christian space and retreat practice; a phenomenon known as *Beyt* (lit., 'house') or *Beyout* (lit., 'houses') which emerged in the 20th century. They are also sometimes referred to as *Beyt al-Mo'tamerat* ('house for conferences'). While literally meaning 'house' or 'home', it could perhaps be translated as 'guest house', 'centre', or 'resort', depending on the size and function of the particular *Beyt*. Each *Beyt* is owned by a church and provides a space for Christian families to holiday together or for church youth groups to go away together. They are also marketed as a destination for day trips, for family get togethers, for events such as weddings and for meetings and conferences. They are therefore multi-purpose, aiming to meet the different needs of Egyptian Christians. In an exception to normal social convention, young Christians, male and female, may also go together without their families, under the supervision of church leaders. *Beyts*, then, seem to act as an extension of a home environment. They do not carry the spiritual weight that the monastic spaces represent. Their function is largely social, and is employed by all denominations. As a result, they are more accessible. Common facilities include restaurants, gardens, swimming pools and guest accommodation. In common with monasteries, they are often found outside of towns and cities, and are normally gated spaces. However, there are also *Beyout* found in residential areas, where they visually resemble social or sporting clubs (*nadī*), which serves to 'normalise' the space. Still, the elements of retreat and seclusion, and the demarcation of space, are reproduced to a degree.

The *Beyt* is, perhaps, particularly important to Protestants, partly because they do not have the same monastic spaces and partly because they represent a minority within a minority⁵⁶. The largest Protestant

⁵⁵ Martin, 1997, p. 19.

⁵⁶ Private correspondence between author and an Egyptian Protestant pastor, March 2021.

congregation in Egypt, established by American Presbyterian missionaries in 1854, is the Presbyterian Synod of the Nile of the Evangelical Church of Egypt. According to the World Council of Churches, the Church has a membership of 250.000⁵⁷. Despite its 'minority within a minority' status, the denomination operates a network of schools, youth centres, hospitals and orphanages. The Coptic Evangelical Organization for Social Services, which focuses on issues such as poverty and illiteracy, is one of the largest and most successful non-governmental organisations in Egypt⁵⁸. The Protestant churches of Egypt are also at the forefront of the *Beyt* movement, of which one of the most important and oldest is *Beyt Al-Salam*. This is located in al-Agami, which is a residential area on the north coast, popular among Alexandrians as a holiday and day trip destination. The idea to found this *Beyt* emerged in 1954 in order to support camps, meetings and conferences for young people to come together from all over Egypt⁵⁹. Over the years it grew, and now receives around 50.000 visitors annually.

Another important Protestant *Beyt* is *Beyt al-Wadi*. This is situated in Wadi al-Natrun, which is interesting in terms of staking a claim to the ancient monastic landscape in this location. This centre is linked to *Kasr al-Dobara*, which is a very visible Egyptian Evangelical church. It is located just off Tahrir Square in downtown Cairo, and became an important symbolic space for the protesters during the Egyptian uprising of 2011⁶⁰. In 1997, the construction of sport facilities began at the Wadi al-Natrun. The construction of accommodation began in 2000, enabling the convening of conferences and camps since 2002. It now offers vast facilities, including a training centre, two accommodation blocks, 20 cabins, five conference halls, two smaller rooms for workshops, restaurants, facilities for playing tennis, football, handball, basketball and a skatepark, cafes, a clinic and a covered stadium with capacity for 8.000 people⁶¹.

⁵⁷ *Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Egypt Synod of the Nile*, The World Council of Churches Online: <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/member-churches/evangelical-presbyterian-church-of-egypt-synod-of-the-nile> [accessed 21 June 2019].

⁵⁸ Author interview with CEOSS, Cairo, December 1999.

⁵⁹ <https://beitelsalam.org/%d9%85%d9%86-%d9%86%d8%ad%d9%86/>.

⁶⁰ In the special circumstances of the protests, boundaries became more flexible and the church, called Tahrir Church by some, opened its doors to act as a field hospital treating demonstrators. See Murashko, A., 12 February, 2012. Tahrir Church Pastor: 'Future of Egypt is the Truth'. *Christian Post*. Online: <https://www.christianpost.com/news/tahrir-church-pastor-future-of-egypt-is-the-truth.html>

⁶¹ <https://www.facebook.com/kdecwadi/>.

Despite the appearance of a social or sporting club and the vast recreational facilities offered, the explicit purpose of these *Beyout* for Protestants, however, is spiritual⁶² and the centres are considered to be sacred (moqaddas)⁶³, Christian spaces. They are also geared to equipping visitors with a missionary outlook, which very much requires an engagement with wider society and spaces outside the specialised, reserved (mokhassas)⁶⁴ space of the *Beyt*. The *Beyt* is where Christians go to learn and develop their engagement with society. The stated vision of Beyt al-Wadi is "that the earth (Egypt and the Arab world) is filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea (Habakkuk 2:14)."⁶⁵ It is, therefore, openly outward-looking, geared towards equipping Christians with the knowledge and confidence not only to preserve their faith against the pressures of assimilation, but also to share it. In the case of the *Beyout*, and particularly the Protestant centres, the purpose of this retreat to a particularistic space is not seclusion from the national social space, but rather an enhanced engagement with it.

The facilities provided at these centres, for all denominations, demonstrate that social gathering is central in terms of empowering Christians to preserve their faith and identity. As noted with regard to the churches and monasteries, the social and religious aspects are combined in these spaces. Social activities such as sports and meetings provide Christians with opportunities to build communal solidarity. People from various parts of Egypt connect and network, despite social and economic disparities. Communal activities aim to bridge such gaps and expand a sense of solidarity that carries into everyday life outside of these reserved spaces⁶⁶. This element is reproduced in the different *Beyout* belonging to different denominations. The element of enjoying a short vacation is common, as well. However, there are also subtly different visions and practices in the way the space of the *Beyt* is used, particularly in terms of the intended outcome of visits to the *Beyout*. Protestants are geared towards an evangelistic culture of their faith identity, and the aspect of equipping Christians to share their faith outside the community and to be open to political participation is, to them, of greater significance⁶⁷. The

⁶² Private correspondence between author and an Egyptian Protestant pastor, March 2021.

⁶³ <https://beitelsalam.org/%d9%85%d9%86-%d9%86%d8%ad%d9%86/>.

⁶⁴ <https://beitelsalam.org/%d9%85%d9%86-%d9%86%d8%ad%d9%86/>.

⁶⁵ <https://kdec.net/kdecold/about-the-church/about-the-church.html/>.

⁶⁶ Private correspondence between author and an Egyptian Protestant pastor, March 2021.

⁶⁷ See Hanna, 2018.

Coptic Orthodox *Beyout* are geared more towards maintaining the heritage of the ancient church and to supporting its continued survival, a prominent theme for an ancient Christian community that saw its size, prominence, territory and power all contract. At the same time, the element of socialisation and training is also important, particularly in support of the *Khidma* ('service') structure, which is the order whereby young people become involved in the life of the church and community by, for example, teaching in Sunday schools. This contributes to the vision of empowering Christian engagement in everyday life through loyalty and commitment to the Orthodox creed and the inherently Egyptian character of this heritage. For the Orthodox community, the *Beyout's* social purpose is perhaps more prominent, since spiritual blessings are sought in other locations.⁶⁸

Conclusion

Both Christians and Muslims generally reject explicit, institutionalised forms of boundaries between citizens in the public sphere. The narrative of national unity is at the core of modern Egyptian identity, and repeated rejections of mechanisms such as a parliamentary quota for Christians stem from this discomfort with explicitly dividing the Egyptian nation. At the same time, discrimination persists at various levels leading to a 'demoralisation' among Christians⁶⁹. Christians must navigate the reality of being a numerical religious minority in a country that had transformed into a majority Muslim state by around the 9th century⁷⁰, one which continues to uphold Islam as the religion of the state and Islamic law as the principal source of legislation. This historical and political context of Egypt contributed to spatial practices whereby Christians use gated, often secluded sites in which to "live" their Christian identity in ways that would be problematic or resisted in the public space. However, using only church spaces to conduct Christian life leads to claims of retreat in the negative sense of disengagement. Reduction in awareness of the other is another result that tends to raise levels of suspicion. Church spaces in particular have regularly become targets of mob violence, leading only to a further increase in the securitisation of church spaces and to a fear of disconnect or threat to Egyptian national unity and stability. There are clear aspects of minoritisation at play in the way Christian places of

⁶⁸ Author Interview with Coptic Orthodox Church lay member 'M', April 2021.

⁶⁹ Ibrahim, 2020, p. 84.

⁷⁰ Mikhail, 2004.

worship are controlled by the state, and permitting this embeds the need for them to be guarded. This is part of an involuntary marginalisation that has affected different segments of the Egyptian population. The impact on Christians has been an increased reliance on Christian spaces, not only to practice religious rituals, but also to preserve heritage and to socialise the community into this heritage.

There is a dilemma here that requires a balance between retreating to particularistic spaces that reduce engagement with the wider society and integrating into national society through a process of assimilation that threatens heritage with erosion. Christians have adopted different spatial practise to address this, which have been necessary to circumvent the tension concerning church construction and expand the socialisation and training aspects that allow Christians to engage in suitable ways with wider society. For the Coptic Orthodox, monasteries and other pilgrimage sites associated with saints and martyrs are central to the spiritual aspect of their identity. Orthodox and Protestants have both developed the *Beyout* concept. Visits to both these kinds of spaces can be considered a voluntary retreat; a temporary time-out, or perhaps a 'time-in'. The goal is not to harden spatial boundaries between the Christian and non-Christian, but to empower Christians to affirm their belonging in, and engagement with, wider society. Many of the spaces are territorially isolated, but they promote an active community life that contributes to forming links between Christians throughout Egypt and in Egypt, thereby building solidarity.

Christians in the Middle East are often confronted with the perennial question about whether there is a secure future for them in the Middle East, and there has been a marked rise in the sense of insecurity of Christians in Egypt since the Arab revolts⁷¹. The spatial practices of voluntary retreat described above signal the desire to preserve the community in the territorial and discursive space of the Egyptian nation, because belonging to the nation is a core element of Coptic identity. To maintain this interpretation, engagement in the public space is critical, because "public spaces can also become endowed with national meaning, not only through the intentions of their architects but also through the interpretations of their everyday users"⁷². Retreat, then, is a practice of survival and revival, and it is temporary. It is a spatial retreat, but not a discursive one, which means that it does not signal a retirement from belonging in Egyptian society or the nation. This kind of retreat should

⁷¹ Tadros, 2017.

⁷² Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008, p. 544.

not be understood as defeat or as seeking isolation. This is not a full answer to the question of the continued presence of Christians in the Middle East, which is being addressed in different ways. Belonging and citizenship are two common narratives⁷³, and the historical and territorial aspects of these narratives illustrate the centrality of spatial rootedness. This article contends that the practice of voluntary temporary retreat, whether to a monastery or a *Beyt*, contributes to this rootedness, and provides churches with expanded opportunities to support socialisation within the community and to equip Christians with increased assurance with which to integrate in society while maintaining their Christian heritage.

⁷³ See Monier, 2020.

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