

Article

# The Politics of Christian Love: Shaping Everyday Social Interaction and Political Sensibilities among Coptic Egyptians

An Van Raemdonck 

Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 1081 HV Amsterdam, The Netherlands; a.van.raemdonck@vu.nl

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**Abstract:** Christian love has historically been subject of extensive theological study but has rarely been studied within anthropology. Contemporary Coptic society receives growing attention over the last two decades as a minority in Egyptian Muslim majority society. An important bulk of this scholarship involves a discussion of the community's sometimes self-defined and sometimes ascribed characterization as a persecuted minority. Particular attention has gone to how social and political dimensions of minority life lead to changes in Christian theological understandings. This paper builds on these insights and examines how Christian love is experienced, and shapes feelings of belonging, everyday morality and political sensibilities vis-à-vis Muslim majority society. It draws from ethnographic observations and meetings with Copts living in Egypt between 2014–2017. It focuses on three personal narratives that reveal the complex ways in which a theology of love affects social and political stances. An anthropological focus reveals the fluid boundaries between secular and religious expressions of Christian love. Love for God and for humans are seen as partaking in one divine love. Practicing this love, however, shapes very different responses and can lead to what has been described as Coptic 'passive victim behaviour', but also to political activity against the status-quo.

**Keywords:** Coptic Christians; anthropology of religion; Christian theology; Egypt; minorities; discrimination

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## 1. Introduction

The risks and uncertainties experienced by religious or ethnic minorities within diverse societies, and during processes of migration and displacement provoke changes in religious practices and theological imageries.

There is scarce attention, however, for transformations in theologies through its interaction with its wider social and political environment, in studies of minorities, migration, and religion. In this paper, I turn toward a discussion of Coptic experiences shaped by theological understandings of Christian love and a historically and theologically important sense of oppression or persecution. This is not meant to generalize or homogenize Coptic experiences and beliefs. It rather draws on historical and anthropological work highlighting this importance, in addition to my own ethnographic observations on how thoughts of oppression often take a central place in people's lives. I observed how feelings of powerlessness and marginalization were often accompanied and somewhat balanced by more positively-defined feelings of (Christian) love, endurance and resistance. Practicing this love can then lead to what has often been described as 'passive victim behaviour', but also to political activity against the status quo.

This paper can be situated within the larger, burgeoning field of anthropology of Christianity but like most of the work in contemporary Coptic studies, it does not fit in squarely. I

will explain this more. Coptic society has traditionally been studied as a separate Christian community with a distinct set of theological beliefs, cultural concerns and political history (e.g., [Elsässer 2014](#); [Guirguis 2012](#); [Ibrahim 2011, 2015](#); [Tadros 2013](#); [van Doorn-Harder and Denny 2017](#); [van Doorn-Harder and Vogt 1997](#)). Studies of modern Coptic society and the institution of the Coptic Orthodox Church have therefore developed over the last decades quite separately from broader developments in the anthropology of Christianity, which are more analytically directed towards comparative study. The richness of this work seems therefore to be overlooked by those who have been working toward an anthropology of global Christianity. At the same time, its focus on 'internal' community concerns and its place within Egyptian society have dominated over seeking to establish links to other Christian groups or a kind of shared Christianity. Notable exceptions are the work on the emergence of Charismatic trends among Copts and prevailing gender scripts and concepts of ideal femininity ([Armanios 2002](#); [Armanios and Amstutz 2013](#); [Du Roy 2017](#); [Ramzy 2016](#)).

Taking Christian love as a central concept, however, I am explicitly drawing on central Christian theology. At the same time, I am wary of the pitfalls of assuming a too idealist vision of a shared Christian culture among Christian communities across the globe ([Robbins 2014](#), p. S162). My discussion is, therefore, firmly embedded in the Egyptian context and aims most of all to build on recent anthropological scholarship of contemporary Coptic society. My particular anthropological approach to the subject also means that I do not aim to discuss the idea of Christian love in all its various historical and theological dimensions as it has been articulated for instance, in traditions of mysticism, or in diverse political engagements with Christian doctrine by civil rights movements, and in contexts of democratic politics or humanitarianism. My engagement with Coptic Christian love does involve discussions of central Christian theological understandings but in relation to articulations that have emerged through fieldwork.

Due to the crucial importance of place—Copts' location in Egypt and the Middle East—this study of experiences and expressions of Coptic love can also be understood in light of recent scholarship on everyday religion in Egypt, particularly Islam. Some recent work focusses less on institutional, clerical or historical-political perspectives seeing Copts as a separate distinct community but considers contemporary Coptic life more in relation to Muslim life, departing from lived experience. There has been growing attention for what both communities share in terms of beliefs and religious practices (e.g., [Heo 2013](#); [Mayeur-Jaouen 2009](#)) but also for what the study of 'everyday Coptic life' may entail and how this can enrich our understanding of Christian-Muslim dynamics in Egypt ([Du Roy 2019](#); [Kartveit 2018](#)). This approach is inspired by recent advances and scholarly debate on the notion of the everyday and its relevance for studying religion and society, particularly in Egypt. With the notion of 'everyday religion', Schielke and Debevec aim to give attention to the 'plural, complex and essentially unsystematic nature of religion as lived practice' ([Schielke and Debevec 2012](#), p. 3). While proposing this concept against the backdrop of the long-held distinction between the normative, doctrinal and formal religion on the one hand, and the lived, informal and popular articulations on the other, the explicit focus lies on foregrounding the phenomenological experience where these two dimensions of religion meet in the subject (see also [Schielke 2015a, 2015b](#)).

In my discussion of how Coptic love figures in the narratives of my three interlocutors, I equally situate myself on this level. I aim to show how the doctrinal and the lived dimensions combine in unique ways and therefore result in diverse positions. This means that my concern was not with detecting instances of contradiction between 'proper' understandings of Christian doctrine of love and my interlocutors' own understandings and enactments of love. Instead I was more intrigued by the diversity of ways in which Christian love is understood, and how these understandings immediately bear on inter-communal social interaction and on the shaping of political standpoints. My argument is firmly contextualized in the frame of Copts' being a minority in the Muslim-majority society of Egypt. I will argue that expressions of Christian love in this context are strongly given shape by the particular social and political environment. My main argument lies exactly in demonstrating the mutual dynamic between understandings of love on the one hand and the socio-political environment on the other.

It explores how a theological understanding of love (touching on experiences of transcendence and human-divine interaction) informs everyday social interaction and political sensibilities, and vice versa, how a particular socio-political environment contributes to shaping understandings of theological concepts such as love.

In the following section, I will first elaborate on the central role of a sense of persecution among Copts, and turn to anthropological approaches of studying Coptic theological beliefs in their interaction with the socio-political environment. This is the central premise on which I build when discussing my findings in the third section. There I build on the understanding that a theology of persecution goes hand in hand with a politics of faith, and as I will argue, also with a politics of love.

## 2. A Theology of Persecution and a Politics of Faith

When we define Copts as a separate community, based on either religion or ethnicity, it touches on sensitive questions with political consequences. While some self-define themselves consciously as Copts in order to stress their separateness, others prefer to avoid it and instead use Egyptian or Christian to describe themselves. Egyptian Copts are the largest Christian denomination in the Middle East and probably form between 5% and 15% of the Egyptian population<sup>1</sup>. They have often been characterized as a ‘beleaguered minority’ (Ibrahim 2011, pp. 1–10; Iskander 2012; Shenoda 2010). Representations of tensioned relations between the Christian minority and Muslim majority society often suggest or imply that the Coptic community is victim to ‘systematic persecution’ in Egypt (Ibrahim 2011, p. 1). Popular representations of Copts as a monolithic group of mainly victims runs the danger of obliterating Coptic political and civil society activity, and the diverse experiences and opinions present in Coptic society. When a persecution narrative is dominating, then Copts are perceived as victims and passive entities rather than actors and makers of their own history (Sedra 1999, 2009). A discourse of victimhood and persecution can be subsumed analytically under a larger ‘discourse of difference’. This frame stresses distinctiveness of Christian historical and cultural particularities. It foregrounds narratives of both historical and contemporary oppression that Copts suffer “under the Muslim yoke” (Sedra 1999, p. 222). This narrative considers Coptic history as one of subjugation and of having a second-rate status since Egypt became a Muslim-majority country. It centres on this basic inequality and injustice and regards other current social and political issues such as a lack of political representation and social segregation in that light.

The persecution discourse—or the broader ‘discourse of difference’—is opposed to a ‘discourse of sameness’ that stresses national unity. The latter is a nationalist narrative of unity that stresses that Copts form an inherent and inseparable part of the Egyptian nation. It emphasizes that Christians and Muslims have remained united as one people defending their homeland against foreign aggressors (Sedra 1999, p. 223). Sedra argued that while Coptic elites were once at the forefront of the difference and victimhood discourse, they have turned toward a discourse of unity which is non-confrontational to the national Egyptian political leadership (ibid., p. 227). Since the twentieth century, the state, traditional religious leadership and clergy and Coptic elites have been endorsing and promoting a nationalist narrative of unity. This discourse is characteristically symbolized by the image of an intertwined cross and crescent, an image that dates back from the 1919 revolution when Christians and Muslims protested together and brought about Egypt’s semi-independence in 1922, when the British unilaterally declared Egypt independent while keeping certain privileges (Ibrahim 2015, p. 2589).

Nationalist rhetoric and imagery characterized the 1919 revolution and the following years of the struggle for independence. Those years form ‘the foundation for the collective social consciousness

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<sup>1</sup> It is unclear what the exact number of Copts is, as official state statistics are unreliable. Official numbers are contested by the Coptic Church and civil society. Additionally, the Central Agency for Publication Mobilization and Statistics (CAPMAS), responsible for organising censuses, declared themselves that the Agency’s count of Copts may not be correct (Al-Masry Al-Youm 2012). Not knowing the exact number of Copts has been subject of political debate and serves to fuel rumours and sectarian tension (Tadros 2013, pp. 30–35).

framing the understanding of Egyptian national unity today' (Iskander 2012, pp. 97–98). Because of the successful struggle, the lived inter-faith brotherhood of this period came to exemplify 'the true nature of Muslim-Christian relations in Egypt' (ibid., p. 98). In this view, harmonious brotherhood is the only authentic way of being Egyptian as evidenced by the success of their common struggle for national independence. The image of the intertwined cross and crescent and the slogan 'religion is for God and the nation is for all' (al-din lillah wa al-watan lil-gamia) became central in nationalist rhetoric and they remain so until today. In times of national political uproar and protests, such as the 2011 uprising, the sameness and unity discourse reappears as a crucial political tool that unites and mobilizes protesters.

The discourse of national unity and harmonious brotherhood is also supported by the Coptic Orthodox Church's promotion of the role of Christian love and tolerance toward the other. The Church traditionally advises kindness, patience, and understanding to promote a peaceful living together. It actively invites believers to be forgiving rather than to seek retaliation. Pope Shenouda II, for instance, stresses in his writings not to be provoked when anyone insults you, but to react lovingly and with understanding (Pope Shenouda 1997, p. 67). He writes: 'As love is the first commandment in Christianity, self-denial is the main path leading to love. You cannot love God and people as long as you are concerned only about yourself and your pleasures' (ibid., p. 76). To become a spiritual believer, one needs to move beyond experiences of personal harm, offense or other negative feelings. Only after the removal of self-interest, can one reach the spiritual state of becoming a loving believer, he argues. This spiritual call can easily be understood and framed as a call for passiveness in the face of injustice. I will come back to this at length in the discussion of my findings.

In sum, the discourse of sameness and national unity is currently the hegemonic discourse used by the Egyptian state, national media, church leadership, and large segments of the Coptic elite and this makes it difficult to address existing discrimination. It is the dominant discourse in media with which many Copts cannot identify or feel offended by for not being represented in the ways they wish. Media outlets like to report stories of harmonious cohabitation and conviviality, in which individuals enjoy inter-faith friendship to suggest that this experience forms inevitably part of 'each individual Egyptian's character and lived experience' (Iskander 2012, p. 99). New media, however, has provided an alternative space for debating discrimination. Especially since the emergence of new media and satellite channels in the early 2000's, language of difference and discrimination has become more visible and accepted in public debate (Guirguis 2008, 2012). Common examples of oppression and discrimination against Copts include the lack of legal implementation of constitutional protection and state bias against Copts in customary inter-communal reconciliation procedures (EIPR 2013), the difficulties to obtain permits to renovate or to construct new churches, and recurrent acts of violence against Coptic citizens and their properties and the failure by the state to protect (Tadros 2013). Since 2016, deadly violence against Christians in Egypt augmented since IS declared the Coptic community as one of its prime targets (Hellyer 2017). This recent development changed the face of sectarian violence in Egypt and increased the number of death toll drastically.

This paper is set against the background of Copts' characterization as a religious minority that shares, at least as a common cultural background and consciousness, a theology of persecution and martyrdom. I am particularly interested in the dynamic interaction and exchange between theology on the one hand and social life and political struggle on the other. Indeed, a historical sense of persecution as a crucial theological principle contributes to shaping social and political life, and vice versa, political and social struggle reshapes theology. Anthropologist Angie Heo demonstrated drastic shifts in narratives of Marian apparitions. In the Coptic liturgical tradition, apparition of the Virgin Mary occurred historically only 'to select individuals so as to intervene in moments of danger and distress' (Heo 2013, p. 1122). However, since the second half of the twentieth century, apparitions are also experienced by large groups of people and are witnessed by both Christians and Muslims together, often at the sites of church buildings (ibid., p. 1121). This led to the development of a new methodology by the Church to verify and confirm the apparitions, in which the Muslim view weighs more than

the Christian one. The Muslim seeing is considered less biased because it is not desiring to see an apparition and is, therefore, more objective than the Christian seeing.

Similarly, miracle narratives shared in Coptic communities also reflect evolving social and political conditions. Anthropologist Anthony Shenoda used the phrase ‘the politics of faith’ to refer to the dynamic relation between the realm of faith on the one hand and social experiences and practices on the other. (Shenoda 2012). Miracles, traditionally, may be experienced by saints as much as by pious Copts. Whereas most miracle narratives revolve around healing, some relate to social issues such as Muslim-Christian relations and the relation of the state to the Church. The Coptic tradition has a long history of miracle narration relating to social-political hardship and forms of persecution. This continues until the present day and includes narratives directly involving former president Mubarak, or more recently revolving around the Maspiro violent massacre, when twenty-eight Coptic protesters were killed by the Egyptian army in post-Uprising Egypt (Shenoda 2013). Contemporary Copts narrate miracles that stress social-political hardship and persecution and that raise scepticism ‘toward the Egyptian state and the Muslim Other’, through which they ultimately experience feelings of empowerment and reassurance of their capacity for survival (Shenoda 2012, p. 483). The scepticism directed toward the worldly and hard aspects of life—in a socio-political context of tense Muslim-Christian relations—reinforces belief in the divine and divine intervention. A theology of persecution and scepticism of the Other, in other words, goes hand in hand with a politics of faith.

This paper connects to these interests by looking at how Christian love figures in this configuration of persecution and faith. It looks into the role of love in narratives by Copts when trying to make sense of their society and attempting to create a meaningful personal trajectory. Just as faith, love is often bolstered by experiences of hardship and difficulty. A quintessential principle of Christianity, love is, needless to say, also a highly personal feeling. My aim here is to offer ethnographic findings on how Christian love as a theological concept is being lived and shaped in very concrete and particular ways. I had particular attention for how it figures in people’s personal lives and how it positions them socially and politically in a context of tense interfaith relations. I will show by analysing three personal narratives that love is equally able to shape feelings of (religious) community belonging, of everyday conviviality, and of feeding feelings of moral superiority. It can guide someone into political withdrawal, or on the other hand, inspire political activism against the status-quo. The paper argues that the trope of (Coptic) Christian love deserves further exploration, particularly as a site where political sensibilities can be shaped and moral imaginaries (of superiority, in this case) expressed. It demonstrates that love can play a role in the production of religious difference by serving as a means to create and maintain distance to the Other (the Muslim Other, in this case). My methods were ethnographic. The personal narratives I selected and present below are the result of long-term contacts and many informal talks about living in Egypt and being part of the Coptic community. We talked a great deal about social grievances, political comments, and personal trajectories, when love appeared as an important theme. The talks I draw from in this paper were generally held in Egyptian colloquial Arabic while occasionally shifting to English when the language use was not entirely clear to me and I asked for clarification.

### 3. Findings

#### 3.1. *The Uniqueness of Christian Love as a Strength to Cope with Discrimination*

I met Samir at a large Coptic civil society organisation, where I started working after my master’s graduation. It turned out that this organisation was also the biggest Egyptian, non-Western, NGO in the field of development. Hosting three stories of offices, and working in multiple cities as an important government partner, it was much larger than I had first imagined, and I was meant to draw in more funds from unexplored sources and foundations. He was my reliable mate and source of support during my six months job at the NGO and we kept in touch over the years. He kept me informed about his decision to leave his job. This was a very hard decision because the job offered

stability and this was not a proper time to leave a job voluntarily, in a tight and competitive Egyptian labour market. In the following years, many desperate new searches followed after each new job's involuntary ending. Many strenuous periods of despair and tests of faith passed, and he struggled to maintain his overall open and loving outlook in life. In one of our meetings at the historical site called 'Coptic Cairo' we sit down in the Mar Girgis church. He explains how love, for him, is the foremost defining feature of what it means to be Christian. He reminds me of the two love commandments as the crux of Christianity: 'Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love' (1 John 4:8) In the complete phrasing of the two love commandments that are mentioned in the book of Matthew, Jesus replied: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments' (Matt. 22: 37–40):<sup>2</sup>

The Christian commandment of love contains two parts: loving God, which comes first in order, and loving fellow humans, or 'your neighbour', in second order. For Samir, Christianity's love sets it apart from all other religions: 'In Judaism one is taught to love your brother, in Islam as well, one is said to love your brother, whether he is right or wrong. This is not the case with Christians, one is told to love anybody'. Christian love is unique, in Samir's understanding. Christianity equals a universalized love and, in this respect, differs from all other religions, implying that it is also of a superior type. Christianity's distinctiveness and uniqueness has been discussed by theologians through the notion of *agape*. Theologian Anders Nygren placed *agape* against *eros*. Whereas *agape* refers to a divine origin, *eros* refers to human love that is characterized by a 'reaching out from need and craving' (Grant 1996, p. 4). Nygren relies on Paul's understanding of *agape* by foregrounding its divine origin. Although it refers to human and neighbour-love, it is intrinsically God's love that works through humans. *Agape* is the human response to God's love, which is only possible through and because of faith. *Agape* is therefore only practiced toward other people, and cannot be felt toward God, as *agape* is derived and responding to love for God. It is a generosity from 'God to human beings and from those who experience that generosity on to other human beings' (ibid., pp. 5–8).

Samir equally qualifies it as an unconditional and unidirectional love for all our fellow humans. This love needs to be open, free and unidirectional, without any expectations from those fellow humans. 'Love is Christianity. One who wants to understand love, will understand Christianity. One who wants to know how to love, will need to be Christian (man `ayiz ya`arif yihibb, lazim yikun masihy)'. According to Samir, one should not ask what will be returned to them by their acts of love and charity, because he should know that God is aware and that he will respond positively by positive returns or rewards: 'If I expect something back, and wonder what I will take, then it's not love. The Christian will love, and profit comes from God. The main goal is God, I do this for God, not for the human. If I do something for someone, I do it for God, to have a pleasure from God, to have a profit from God, because God asked me to do it. So I don't care about what others will say, I only care for God.' The hierarchical order in the two love commandments is very important to Samir. Loving your neighbour is a direct consequence of loving God. I love my neighbour only through my love of God and the consequences of neighbour-love can only be experienced through love of God.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The Christian love commandments—especially the one concerning loving fellow humans or 'your neighbour'—have been mostly theorized under the term of *agape*. This is the term in which it is mentioned in the Greek New Testament. The Latin term, *caritas*, led to the English term *charity*. *Agape* has been understood as referring to a universalized love and kindness, forgiveness, and charity. It has been contrasted to *philia* (understood as love in friendship), but especially to *eros*. Whereas *agape* refers to a selfless love, *eros* continues to involve 'a desire for possession', both in Greek and early Christian thought (Cullity 2013, p. 1).

<sup>3</sup> Theologian Timothy Jackson defines *agape* as 'a participation in the very life of God, and, as such, the foundation of all virtues for those made in the Image of God' (Jackson 2009, p. 14). This reasoning resonates with historical prominent figures, such as Thomas Aquinas, who 'developed the idea that unconditional love of the other (*caritas*) is a cardinal virtue that binds the other virtues together into a "perfect unity"' (Flescher 2013, p. 2). Or, Martin Luther King, Jr. who placed *agape* at the core of Christian ethics (ibid., p. 3). Contemporary theologians like Colin Grant still rely on Anders Nygren's seminal work for an appreciation of the distinctiveness of *agape* as Christian love. Its distinct understanding is based in belief and divine-human interaction and is therefore opposed to the field of modern secular ethics, which, he argues, cannot capture,

This centring of love for others does not involve a sense of submission or weakness, Christian religion is not considered a weak religion, and Christians are not weak, argues Samir: 'Christians are not weak, even we do not use guns to kill others. We can move a mountain, this church [al kanisa al mu'alaqa, where we were sitting] has moved Mukattam mountain. ( . . . ) Christians do not take up guns, you will not find that'. He argues for the disentanglement of the religious from the political, saying that any type of political action can impossibly be understood as acts of Christian love. In his opinion, the political is self-evidently corrupted because there is always some sort of motive of profit involved. It even seems nonsensical for him that I question him by bringing the topic of Christians' use of violence in political struggles into a discussion on love.

He does make a connection between the political and the religious when it touches on his own personal life. He had left the NGO where we first met in search for better opportunities and for many years, he had been looking for job opportunities that better fit his competencies and skills. He found a few jobs with other Christian organisations in Egypt and had tried to start up a few small NGOs himself. Only one of them successfully survived a first year but was still struggling to receive funds to continue its activities. He attributes many of these failures to discrimination: 'I have applied for many jobs, and why did I get refused . . . ? Because I am Christian. If they ask me this question [are you Christian], then I already know the result'. In order to deal with such setbacks and disappointments in everyday life that can be attributed to discrimination and social injustices, he stays faithful to practicing love and looking for guidance in faith and spirituality. Remaining a loving Christian means for him that he contains his frustrations and other negative feelings within himself. He does not want to direct them outwards toward society. He asks me:

'Did you find that martyrs of attacks are hating others? Being angry and sad is permitted, yes, but they don't hate the people. Anger and sadness are permitted but hate is not permitted. The first emotions are internal, within me, but the hate is directed toward others, so that is wrong. To deal with the first, I come to the church and pray for God. Believe me, many times I've had many hard times, then I go the monastery, there I can talk to God, it is quiet. If I have internal emotions, this is the solution. I come to pray and talk to God. I can tell him, I am angry with you. ( . . . ) When I come back, I am a different man; it's like going to a psychologist. I become calmer thanks to prayer and the atmosphere. You will find that many people enjoy going to monasteries for this reason. These are hard emotions and it can give you the wish to die but you have to think with God.'

Samir's understanding of Christian love guides him in expressing proper social behaviour in everyday interaction. In his search for comfort and support in God's love, his goal is not to externalize bad and negative emotions such as hatred because these would affect others. His own words are reminiscent of Pope Shenouda's advice to remain tolerant and kind, even when faced with hardship. For him, one needs to deal privately with 'hard negative feelings', through prayer and visits to monasteries, and should not externalize and express them, and direct them to the sources of our bad feelings. Practicing love here demands from us to maintain good, positive, behaviour toward anyone and expressing 'hard feelings' only to God directly through prayer and meditation.

### 3.2. *Christian Love as an Inspiration for Political Activity*

Practicing Christian love as described above means to find strength to cope with everyday difficulties in an intimate, personal way through the power of one's faith. It means that these difficulties are not voiced to others, neither translated into social and political grievances that publicly address forms of exclusion and discrimination. Much unlike Samir, Michael, is a leftist revolutionary activist

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explain or absorb the full meaning of agape. To understand the meaning and impact of the concept and the experience of agape, we need to maintain a theocentrism, as opposed to an 'Enlightenment anthropocentrism' on which modern ethics is based (Grant 1996, p. 15).

and Coptic rights activists who was involved in Maspiro Youth Union (MYU) since its inception<sup>4</sup>. At the same time, he volunteers as a *khadim* in a large church in Cairo and dreams of spreading Coptic culture across the world. He aspires to go to South America to help build up the Coptic church there.

Sitting in one of downtown Cairo's coffee shops, he explains that he differentiates between his Christian faith on the one hand and his particular belonging to the Coptic church and community on the other. He calls his faith rather 'rational' whereas his bond to the Coptic church is characterized by love because, he says 'it represents identity, culture and civilization to which I belong, especially in a society that attempts to convince me that my civilization is Arabic'. He continues: 'I feel more love for my Coptic church because it is my identity and culture that I am not Arabic. The Coptic church is my comfort zone where I practice my culture and it is a liturgy place among my big family in Egypt.' Michael differentiates between his Christian and Coptic identity. He says he identifies more with Coptic culture than with general Christian principles. The marginalisation of Coptic culture and civilization in mainstream Egyptian, Arab society provides an inherent political dimension that he is drawn to: 'This leads to a stronger holding on to Coptic culture and civilization that is not recognized or practiced except within the church'. His understanding and experience of the principle of Christian love is equally coloured and seen through an inherent political lens:

'My love affects how I deal with difference, it determines my acceptance of difference, and my respect for all people. ( . . . ) Love in Christianity means to serve and to wish the best for the other. We walk [in life] as ambassadors of Christ (nas'a kasufara lil-masih) and this involves [being of] service and offering good (taqdim al-kheyr) to others.'

The commandments of unconditional love for God, and for neighbour-love, regardless of how different that neighbour may be, resonates strongly with his words. It entails an implicit acceptance and respect of all human diversity. For Michael, being involved in politics and working for the interest of society at large flow out of being a loving Christian. Love, he says, 'can be the motivation behind your political activities; you make it a part of your spiritual service. You want to make the situation of the people better, out of love for them'. Michael is politically animated not only through a strong sense of belonging to a marginalized community but also through finding inspiration in Christian love. However, his personal position of situated political awareness does not lead to forms of identitarian or communitarian politics. On the contrary, he strongly argues for what he calls a 'secular social public debate that enables coexistence among different groups and factions (tawa'if mukhtalifa) while we do not determine or fix the difference between what is Muslim and what is Christian'. In his view, society needs space that transcends religious division and sectarian difference. He discourages a focus on difference between the two communities. A stronger focus on delineating differences will sharpen religious or communal boundaries and enhance ongoing sectarianism. He rejects a continued refinement in the definition of what is Muslim and what is Christian. A better form of politically organizing coexistence of different groups would be to embrace what he names a secular space that recognizes a plurality of difference and different factions in society instead of sharpening Muslim and Christian difference.

The context of existing sectarian violence and sectarianism strongly shapes his understanding of how Christian love manifests. The expression on his face turned stern and serious when I asked whether social sectarian violence affects him personally. A few days earlier, one of the biggest attacks against Copts in recent history had happened. An explosion in the Mar Girgis church in Tanta had led to 29 deaths while another explosion on the same day in Alexandria caused 19 deadly victims. The church in Cairo in which he serves as *khadim* had been a victim to deadly violence six months

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<sup>4</sup> The origins of Maspiro Youth Union (MYU) lie in the activist group called 'The Theban Legion' (al-katiba al-taybiyya), founded in 2004 to denounce and protest violence against Copts and named after a magazine. In the aftermath of the 2011 uprising, its members gathered in protest at the national television building in Cairo, which is called Maspiro, and there its leaders founded MYU (Du Roy 2015).

earlier. Living in a society where this violence occurs, weighs him down. Knowing that he co-inhabits a society with some people who were able to commit such crimes, makes him feel very disappointed and gives him a sense of defeat and distress. 'In these moments', he says, 'my understanding of love may change from unconditional love to 'I want to change your morals and belief to the better''. Ongoing violence visually pains him and motivates him stronger to search for opportunities to leave Egypt and help to expand the global Coptic church.

### 3.3. *Interfaith Civil Society Activism, Love, and Moral Superiority*

Christian love can inspire political withdrawal or rather motivate to be politically involved and search for political models that are promoting pluralism and diversity, as illustrated by Michael's narrative. It can also inspire civil society activity to promote Muslim-Christian conviviality. During a five-month fieldwork stay in the south of Egypt in spring and summer of 2014, I was introduced by a friend to a small local organisation that aims to promote Muslim-Christian understanding. The group was founded in the wake of the 2011 uprising and gathered local Christian and Muslim entrepreneurs and clergy. It organized interfaith activities throughout the year and particularly around Christian or Muslim feasts. I joined their two-weekly meetings and brainstormed with them about possible new activities and opportunities for outreach. They were eager to draw more interest from the local community and especially from youth. One of its members was Beshoy and, toward the end of my stay, we sat down for a long talk. In an earlier phone call conversation, he described the situation in Egypt as one of repression (al-gaw muntahid, al-waqi` idthihad), lamenting that all small personal issues have become sectarianized and that everything had become a matter of the community. We meet in the small retail shop where he works. Pictures of the recently selected pope Theodoros II decorate the office rooms in the back room of the shop. Beshoy points at them and immediately praises the selection of the new pope as a positive evolution. The new pope was very different, he says, 'he had always been open minded since his days as a bishop, he wanted peace and love (mahaba) and aimed at connection (tawasul) between the two communities, unlike Shenouda', who in his opinion, was more extreme (ta`assub).

We talk about Egyptian and Coptic history, passing by the episode in which Islam becomes the majority religion. His earlier tone of interfaith understanding, historical unity and coexistence and searching for connection between communities abruptly changes. He argues that since 'Amr ibn al-'As, a well-known historical military leader who led the conquest of Egypt, 'Islamic history was built on two pillars: violence and sex'. He continues to offer an account of the islamization of Egypt that I hadn't immediately expected hearing, focusing on the imposition of taxes on Christians and how Christian women were considered *sabaya* (slaves who can be used by Muslims). His perspective on Islamic history provided me with the passage to a better understanding of what motivates him in his work with the civil society organisation for Muslim-Christian understanding. His commitment with the group is guided by a desire to 'confront the Muslim world with the light of Christ':

'The light of Christ includes Christian principles of love. In Sunday school, we teach the kids to love Muslims even when they treat you badly. We teach them to love your neighbour and your enemy. Do good to those who hate you (ahsennu illy mubghidikum). Other principles are: bless those who curse you (baraku-le 3aneekum) and pray for those who persecute you (sallu le-agl alladheena yasya'un ilaykum)'.<sup>5</sup>

Beshoy praises and celebrates the uniqueness of Christian love by contrasting it to Islam, as did Samir. He contrasts the Christian command to love your neighbour and your enemy with the advise to 'love your brother, whether he oppresses or is oppressed (unsur akhaka zaliman aw mazluman)'.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> He refers to Matthew 5:44: 'But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you'.

This is one of prophet Muhammad's sayings (*hadiths*) included in the canonized compilation of Bukhari, although Beshoy referred to it as Quranic. He wants to suggest that Muslim love is limited to faith members and that loyalty to the religious community is more important than serving the broader goal of justice. Christianity, in his view, does not make that mistake and instead promotes universal love for all. Christian love then proves to be more encompassing and more powerful. This makes it stronger and more attractive to anybody.

Through his volunteering with the association for Muslim-Christian understanding, he aims to advance a more widespread knowledge and understanding of Christian principles, as he sees them. The light and love of Christ are crucial factors to a better life in a society that knows many troubles, he is convinced. But he thinks that the official leadership of the Coptic Orthodox Church is not doing a good job:

'The church has light, she has a role to play in the society. But she closes down on herself and does not take up that role. But this time requires that we go out and show the light of Christ. I am presenting the light of Christ to enlighten the world we live in, not because I want to receive anything from it. In Islam, they do not know this concept of *al-`ata*, of giving without expecting anything in return. The mentality of the church is not good, all they do is praying and then they leave'.

His own enthusiasm and ambition to spread knowledge about Christianity is unmatched by official Coptic religious leaders and institutions. The church disappoints him for not being more socially active and forward coming. They are 'too concerned with internal fights and quarrels', according to him. He finds the church too withdrawn and its members too passive and complains that most people are only interested in praying and not in actively engaging with wider society. Beshoy proposes to reach out into Muslim society, in order to show the light and the love of Christ<sup>6</sup>. One type of planned activities with the civil society organisation was to organize mixed religious services. This is one way in which 'the light of Christ is shown to all'. In this manner, one ventures out instead of withdrawing into one's own community. Another good example of church practice that he admires is the work that the church of *Qasr al-dubara* at Tahrir square did during the 2011 Uprising. The church had shown an open attitude by opening up a field hospital on its premises during the 18 days of the revolution that led to the deposal of ex-president Hosni Mubarak. For Beshoy, the ability of Christians to open up to society is very important and rewarding. He lowers his voice and tells me that he is not sure if he should continue saying what he wishes to say. He tells me he knows about masses of people turning to Christianity, among whom he knows many personally. He said to have met with *shaykhs* (Muslim clergy) who had become Christian in their hearts but were not able to make it publicly known. He argues that especially after the deposal of ex-president Muhammad Morsi, massive amounts of Muslims left Islam and converted as they had witnessed the failure of Morsi's government and the Muslim Brotherhood. Beshoy described the events that led to Morsi's deposal from power as 'a miracle that had saved Egypt and its Christians'. In his view, the power of this miracle had convinced many Egyptians of the overwhelming power and moral superiority of Christianity.

Beshoy subscribes to Christ's teaching of 'loving sinners more than the righteous' and follows his invitation to 'call sinners, not the righteous' (Matthew 9:13) (Liu 2007, p. 689). Religious studies scholar Qingping Liu critically discusses the meanings of the second love commandment and the reasons why Christians have historically been devoting a great deal of attention to loving non-Christians, given that they are being considered as sinners. Beshoy's plea for social engagement is indeed led by a desire to expose them to Christ's love and teachings. All efforts that enable newcomers to know and feel this

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<sup>6</sup> Beshoy leans towards the Charismatic trend among Copts and supports a form of passive missionizing by manifesting the power of Christianity. He does not seem to value current church activities such as hosting youth movements, and other social, charity and development projects because of their limited outreach. The state of Egypt does not allow any open Christian missionary activities.

greater love 'is still for the sake of the divine love for God after all' (ibid., p. 689), or in Beshoy's words, it is not meant to receive anything from the world we live in.

#### 4. Conclusions

Religious difference and cultural particularity often play an important role in Copts' self-understanding. The occupation of a historically marginal social place in society has been a crucial factor in shaping Coptic faith, and I aimed to show, also in shaping Coptic experiences and understandings of Christian love. A sense of community and belonging is partly shaped by a theology and experiences of historical oppression. A popular tendency perceives Copts as rather passive subjects, as not being self-assertive and defending or claiming their rights. This paper aimed to offer more nuanced understandings of how these dynamics play out on a personal level by highlighting three personal narratives. The personal narratives were selected because they reveal personal dimensions of living Christian love as well as reflect different dimensions of the same social political environment. Samir's views on Christian love's uniqueness reveal a sense of pride. While practicing love, he refrains from expressing his experiences of discrimination and from generalizing his anger and frustration toward the entirety of Muslim-majority society. He prefers to process negative experiences privately in personal spiritual reclusion and is convinced that one should unconditionally keep loving fellow citizens and community members, as Pope Shenouda also advises to do. This also means that experiences of social discrimination are not expressed in terms of violation of personal rights. This plays out radically differently for Michael, who on the contrary, finds inspiration and support in the principle of Christian love to address social inequalities and to participate in political movements that aim to redress social injustices. His political activity inspired by Christian love results in a self-defined secular politics. All three narratives show how love reproduces and shapes religious difference, either in explicit or more nuanced ways. Being a loving Christian means, for many, to occupy a higher, or superior, moral ground. Departing from this sentiment, the commandment to love your neighbour and enemy, for Beshoy, leads to a socially active engagement with Muslim-majority society in a desire to expose them to what he sees as the greater and higher Christian love.

Christian love has been mostly discussed by theologians and philosophers of religion. Studies of how Christian love, kindness, forgiveness have been actually lived, experienced and interpreted seem virtually absent. This is equally so for the political consequences and dimensions of individuals' practicing Christian love. In the different context of black Christian America and the ongoing violence against black citizens, it has been remarked that often families of victims of police and other violence maintain a rhetoric of love, forgiveness, and kindness. Scholar of multimedia journalism, Stacey Patton, argues in a Washington Post article that 'Black families are expected to grieve as a public spectacle, to offer comfort, redemption, and a pathway to a new day'. Since '[h]istorically, black churches have nurtured the politics of forgiveness so that black people can anticipate divine justice and liberation in the next life' (Patton 2015). Patton points out how a theology of black Christian love is connected to a history of oppression and prospects of liberation in the after-life. It intersects with historical oppression on the basis of race and ethnicity. Consequently, practicing Christian love becomes very ambiguous and can be perceived both in terms of resistance to, withdrawal or acquiescence with politically oppressive circumstances. A similar ambiguity can be observed in the Coptic context. The commandments of love can easily be perceived as self-negating and self-sacrificing, especially when expressed as forgiveness. The complex and multiple meanings that result from this account are the result of a focus on the phenomenological level of everyday religion. Rather than pointing at contrasts between the normative and the lived, I aimed to look closer at how both dimensions combine within the subject. Hopefully, love can inspire more explorations of its spiritual, social, and political entanglements.

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