

GENDER, RELIGION and SOCIETY

**A Study of Women and Convent Life
in Coptic Orthodox Egypt**

Report from a Minor Field Study

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Gender, Religion and Society.

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Abstract

This study deals with the interrelations between gender, religion and society in the context of contemporary Coptic Orthodox Egypt, with a focus on Coptic nuns and convent life. In the wake of religious revitalization in today's Egypt, Muslim as well as Coptic, monasticism has strengthened its position in the Coptic culture. New religious institutions have been established for women and an increasing number of women choose to live a monastic life. The study explores in what way women's choice to live a convent life is related to the situation of Coptic women in society. By discussing from the approach of female agency, constraints and possibilities for individual action and gender role patterns, answers are sought to the question why women opt for monasticism. The values and virtues in monasticism correspond to established values in society such as values of purity and virginity. Women who choose a monastic lifestyle fully embrace these values, and are hence enjoying a position that elevates their status as women within religion and within society. The women in convents experience their domain of agency as increased, due to their possibility to focus on their aims, which would have been restricted by ordinary family life.

Keywords: Egypt; Coptic Orthodox; monasticism, religion, gender, agency, power, freedom

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The picture on the front page shows St. Dimyanah surrounded by 40 virgins, who together with St. Dimyanah, died as martyrs in the early centuries. In the very same place where they died, in the north east of Egypt, there still is a nuns' convent named after her.

1. INTRODUCTION

There are many different ways of how to fulfil and live out those things in life that are a priority. In the field of religion, the practical actions and lifestyles differ. One of the more radical options is to "leave the world" and choose a monastic way of life where, as a nun or a monk, one may concentrate fully on one's faith.

As a result of having stayed in a Swedish nuns' convent, I became interested in monasticism and conditions for monastic life. Since Christian monastic life has its origin in Egypt, the region seemed apt to be a starting point for this study. In Egypt today, the Christian Coptic Orthodox religion is a minority embedded in a mainstream Muslim society. During the last decades, a renewal of Islam has flourished in Egypt. As a response to this, an equally strong renewal has revitalized Christian values and traditions, emphasizing the importance of monks and nuns as carriers of the Coptic culture. The synchronisation of the social and religious movements on both sides reflects the complexity of the politico-religious relations between Christians and Muslims. Is this revival to be understood as a reaction to the 'modern' values, which are spread and manifested throughout the secular Egyptian state?

This essay is based on a Minor Field Study, performed in November-December 2002, and sponsored by SIDA. Literature on theories and ethnographical history related to the field forms the basis for the study. The information from the field is collected through participant observation, conversations and interviews. I undertook my field study in Cairo with surroundings. Most of my time I spent in Beni Suef, a city 120 km south of the capital. There, I stayed in a convent of active nuns, which gave me the opportunity to follow the rhythm of their daily life.

Aim and disposition

This study is concerned with the interrelations between gender, religion and society in Coptic-Orthodox Egypt. I will discuss how Coptic women experience the monastic way of life, and how their choice of lifestyle is connected to the conditions under which women of today live. Cross-cultural studies have shown that women's position in religion is often a reflection of their position in society (King 1995: 14). I find it important, however, to see nuns in their own right, as a distinct category within the institutional hierarchies of the Coptic Church. I will focus on how the possibilities and capacities to live and to act are experienced by the nuns and by Coptic women in society. Motivations and specificities of the convent life will be investigated in relation to nuns' experiences of their former and present situations. I will also discuss how the monastic lifestyle is rooted in the Coptic Egyptian society, and how it leads to increasing numbers of applicants to the nuns' convents.

In the two following chapters, I will describe and discuss the theoretical perspectives involved. First, anthropological perspectives on the study of women and religion are discussed. Thereafter, I will outline the theoretical tools for this study, which mainly concern female agency. In chapter four, reflections of methodology will be described. The fifth chapter will give an ethnographic and historical background of the field providing an insight into the specific context of Egypt and the Coptic Orthodox culture. The sixth chapter presents ideologies and practices related to women and values in patriarchal societies with focus on the Mediterranean and Middle East region. The part that follows contains the practical experiences in the field in an attempt to discover the roles of Coptic women in the convents and in the society, their experiences of the monastic lifestyle including motivations, capabilities and aspects of freedom.

Scholars of gender and religion often emphasize a holistic picture, since gender concerns both women and men (King 1995:6). I agree on this point,

although in this study, the Coptic Orthodox religion is represented from women's perspectives. This is due to practical reasons since the convents are for women only, but I also think that it is important to carry out a study based mainly on women's voices to try to redress the balance from what has been written from men's perspective.

2. ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE STUDY OF WOMEN AND RELIGION

In anthropology, as in other disciplines, women's perspectives have not always been self-evident. However, during the 1960s and 1970s, when feminist theory developed and women's movements arose, their position within anthropology started to alter (Bowie 2000:94). With this growth of feminist awareness and increasing numbers of women scholars, women are now both subjects and agents in analysing of religious issues (King 1995:2). When studying different cultures from comparative perspectives, religion plays a big part. Throughout history, religion has been a matrix of cultures, in structuring gender as well as what it means to be human. King argues that in anthropology, the constructions of gender identities are central to understanding of the social order of a society (ibid.:4). The androcentric bias that has influenced studies of religion has its basis in the former overrepresentation of men within the academic world. Androcentrism means, as put by Lena Gemzöe, a "tendency to see the world exclusively from men's perspective and to assume that this perspective also is valid for women" (2000:1). I think that the lack of women's voices has to do with patriarchal society and culture in general, which implies that women are also coloured by a patriarchal conception of the world. Gender awareness has, however, differentiated and widened human perspectives. Earlier studies have also focused on structures and institutions when approaching cultures and religions. Women in many societies are not prominent in the institutional structures, why their voices have in many cases been absent (Bowie 2000:93). Ardener explains this

further by talking about dominant structures and muted groups. The expression of muted groups is used "to describe the relationship between all dominant and subordinate models of communication" (Ardener cited in Bowie 2000:96). In every society, there are some groups that exert control over the ways in which language is used and shaped, and what is considered as normal or acceptable behaviour. These groups are then represented in various areas within society, such as government, church and education. Ardener claims that "where society is defined by men, some features of women do not fit that definition" (1975:23). Women are thus still part of the structures but are limited in their way of changing the dominant models, since they have not been part in constructing them. This does not exclude that women may be dominant in certain areas (Bowie 2000). The dividing of groups needs to be seen not only in regard to gender, but also in a more complex reality, in terms of differences in ethnicity, class and generation. However, the factor of gender is encompassing these other factors (King 1995:14).

Applying this to contemporary Coptic Orthodox Egypt, we find women as part of the structures of the Coptic Orthodox Church, but not as part of the dominant groups. It does not take away their importance as social servers, as nuns or as deaconesses, but neither does it give them equal access to constructing or deciding in institutional matters. In the field of religion, women have rarely been part of the structures of authority. Hence, there has been a lack of female writers and tellers within religious institutions. However, Ardener stresses the importance of acknowledging that women do express themselves in other ways, and have done so throughout history. These expressions might not have been written down, but have been expressed in other forms, such as in rituals, art and through oral storytelling (Ardener 1975). King argues that women as religious actors are often represented in the roles of shamans, nuns, healers and mystics. She writes: "these figures are often seen and revered as women apart, as women who enjoy a high spiritual and moral authority rather than the institutional

authority accorded to men” (1995:16). These are hence women that, to an extent, abstain from established female social roles, and in this way gain increased authority. The concept of ”muted groups” have been directed by anthropologists to ”non-linguistic forms of expression”, and is an important indicator of not seeing a society as heterogeneous, but consisting of people with different interpretations and expressions (Bowie 2000:96). The Coptic women are thus expressing their actions within the church through, for example, social work. To summarise: the power of dominant groups has defined language as well as knowledge. Due to the male overrepresentation in these groups, a male picture of society has dominated in various cultures.

Ursula King stresses an understanding of religion as something grounded in personal experience. She sees a need to focus on women’s experiences of religion and their religious practices. In many cases, we might conceive of women’s practices as ’muted’, since they are not always articulated or written down. The study of practice in itself thus becomes crucial for understanding women’s relation to religion. Anne E. Carr urges that the start of women as tellers acknowledges that they have always been involved in everything human and religious. Their experiences might have been expressed in other forms, which have not been saved as written history (Carr in King 1995:13). In relation to Christianity, Carr stresses the fact that focusing on women’s experiences should not proclaim an exclusive feminist spirituality that is separate from prevailing religious structures. Instead, it should strive to recover the lost history. It must be seen in relation to men and the surrounding society (ibid.). In terms of the religion topical for this study, there have indeed existed female writers during Christian tradition. These women were often nuns, embedded in the androcentric hierarchy. Their texts were translated, and often censured, by male confessors or clerics (Börresen 1995). In the Coptic Orthodox context, there are few female spiritual writers. The nuns’ understanding of this, as we will see later, is to some extent grounded in the opinion that certain tasks or expressions are for women and others for men. A cross-

cultural study has shown that where resources within religious institutions are scarce, the persons of status and prestige are prioritised (Falk and Gross 1989). In Buddhist religious practice, the monks hold these status positions, which means that the nuns are not prioritized. According to oral and written tradition, Buddha himself was teaching no difference between men's and women's capabilities of spiritual liberty, whereby he installed orders for women. However, the lower profile of the nuns can be attributed to the institutional structures of the monastic orders. There is consequently a tension between the religious doctrine and the social practice (ibid.). What is the key for women to access high status positions within religious matters? Among Buddhist Vajrayana nuns, their right to educate has been an important factor (ibid.:191). In Egypt, we find that the nuns and deaconesses do teach, but they are not allowed to teach men over twelve years, which rests on biblical doctrines. Here, it is important to consider how we approach women's religious practices. How do they themselves understand these 'limitations'? What are their priorities in their practices? Their own understanding of the situation is crucial in order to get beyond a limited "Western" bias that makes judgements exclusively with reference to the male dominance in institutional hierarchies.

In anthropological studies of religion, it is argued that symbols play a big part in constructing gender identities (King 1995:11). The religious symbols are related to gender to the extent that they are experienced differently by men and women. What this means is that the values attached to symbols may not always have to do with gender, but they may still be interpreted by 'gendered' users. It might therefore be important to consider not only symbols in themselves, but how different people read them differently: what they mean to different people in different contexts (ibid.) A lot of research has been done on issues around female symbols. For example, which experiences of the sacred have found expression in female form? Cross-cultural studies have shown that representations of women often hold the contrast of being wise and being evil. The evil is then often

related to themes of women's body and sexuality (ibid.:16). Mary Douglas stresses the importance of the "body as a symbol system in which social meanings are encoded" (Douglas in Bowie 2000:45). The rules of purity are inevitably linked to the body as a source of symbols, where the dichotomy of purity and pollution can be seen as an underlying universal category (ibid.). Interpretations of what is purity and what is pollution vary. Concerning women's bodies and sexuality, the meaning and interpretation of symbols or values must be seen in relation to the wider social context. For example, in some patriarchal societies in the Middle East, women's virginity is related to purity, and does not only concern the woman herself, but often the whole family (ibid.:104). Among the Coptic people, virginity and motherhood are two important features attached to the role of women. These features, to which I will return in chapter six, are most clearly symbolised in Virgin Mary. The meaning of symbols must also be seen in relation to the evaluations attached to different stages of women's lives. This means for example the meaning of virginity before marriage and the meaning of motherhood after marriage (ibid.:105). The different stages of life are often expressed through rituals. A practice approach to rituals focuses on *what rituals do*, instead of a more traditional symbolic analysis concerned with *what rituals mean* (Bell 1997:82). Victor Turner stresses the effective role of symbols, especially in rituals, and argues that they can act in certain contexts to produce social transformation, such as help to change status in initiation rites (Turner in Ortner 1986:131). Practice theorists also tend to see "how ritual is a vehicle for the construction of relationships of authority and submission" (Bell 1997:82), and how this affects people's agency. Research into women's initiation rituals has emphasized that these often reproduce patterns of coercion and control over women (Bowie 2000:172). Still, they can improve particular situations for women. One example is female circumcision, which, where it is traditionally practiced, increases the status of girls in relation to her future husband and motherhood, and is crucial in gaining acceptance by the society (ibid.). At the same time, female circumcision may manifest

patterns of control over women in patriarchal structures (Gruenbaum 2001).

3. THEORETICAL POINTS OF DEPARTURE

This part deals with the theoretical tools used in this essay. An emphasis is put here on women's agency. The notion of agency is important in gender studies, along with the notion of experience. Laura Ahearn defines agency as referring to "the socio-culturally mediated capacity to act" (2001:112). This means that all personal action is brought about and affected by the social and cultural environment, both in terms of how actions are constructed and produced, and in terms of how actions are interpreted. Keeping in mind the previous discussion by Ardener about dominant structures and muted groups, I would argue that women are less visible in the dominant structures. However, this theory of 'voices of silence' suggests that women still have a space to act within overall male structures. Women are agents in their own right, but may have other ways of expressions that also constitute authority. The domain of agency or the space to act differs further depending on a person's position in society, within a work place, or in a family. This position is dependent on access to power, which is connected to gender, race and class (Sporre 1999:208-209). Ahearn stresses the importance of seeing what agency means for the people involved, how they themselves conceive of their own actions, and what importance they ascribe to these acts (2001:113).

Anthony Giddens argues for a constant interaction between agency and structure. Changes and effects can be brought about in patterns of relationships, hierarchies and institutions by using the power embodied in agency. This power is characterised by Giddens as "the freedom to act otherwise" (Giddens 1995:4). One might conclude that agency has to do with power over one's own way to live and to act. Ahearn defines this as "power in the sense of the ability to bring about effects and to (re)constitute the world" (2001:113). Bernhardsdotter has elaborated this matter further,

and in relation to Giddens's statement she finds "power as the freedom to non-conformity".

Applying this to the case with which this study is concerned, we will see that the nuns have radically diverged from a family situation, which is what the structures in a patriarchal society have in store for them. Their choice implies provocation and non-conformity on the one hand, and the fact that it is a respected religious alternative on the other. The nuns' choice must hence be related closely to their religious faith. This indicates that for scholars, it is not enough to approach this specific context as a straightforward feminist challenge to a male dominated society, but also to take the religious aim into account. Ahearn stresses here the importance of seeing how conceptions of agency differ from society to society, and to acknowledge that agency can be related to something more than persons and human action. Agency might also be ascribed to deities, signs or fate (Ahearn 2001:113). To summarise, we find that different discourses compose how agency is formed and expressed.

We can so far conclude that the choice of living in a convent is strongly related to religious motivations. The large numbers of nuns and monks in Egypt may be seen to reflect the important position of religion within the country as a whole, and within the Coptic culture. Talal Asad argues that in the Western World, "the religious perspective" is one among others, such as scientific, common sense or aesthetic perspectives (Asad 1993). In modern society, there is an indication of option implied by the notion of 'perspective', something that is not self-evident. In Western society, "scientific practices, techniques, knowledge, permeate and create the very fibres of social life in ways that religion no longer does. In that sense religion today *is* a perspective" (ibid.:126). In cultures such as the Coptic Orthodox, one might contrast this optional characteristic that we are used to through its way of viewing religion as the given ground from where to widen one's senses and opinions of the world. Asad argues that the religious perspective goes beyond other perspectives, not in a rational way, but not

in an irrational way either (ibid.). In religious rituals, the will of adopting a religious point of departure, instead of considering it as one perspective among others, is crucial for the ritual to make sense and be justified. Asad tries to understand rituals as the place where faith is played out, and not the place where people attain faith (ibid.:127). Following this line of thought, rituals have mostly to do with the spiritual world, but the conditions in the social life decide who has access to these experiences (ibid.).

The domains of agency for women and for men may here be different. In the definition of agency as I have outlined it above, freedom is found to be involved both in 'the power to act otherwise' and in 'reconstituting the world'. The freedom expressed through women's decisions of entering a convent ought to be perceived to differ from a similar decision made by men, due to the specificities it involves for women: the renouncing of family life in a patriarchal society. This decision may increase their individual space to act. But life in a convent also involves aspects other than the gendered aspects of freedom. Freedom does not have a self-evident meaning, but in relation to the convents I find it relevant to describe other perspectives related to a convent life. These are an existential sense of freedom, and a freedom found in the security of a communal and structured life.

Zygmunt Bauman has written about human security, certainty and freedom. He stresses that the human being is the only living creature that knows about her mortality and perishability. Knowing that her life is temporal, she can also imagine eternity – an existence without neither beginning nor end. While these two kinds of existences seem impossible to bring together (2000: 44), I would argue that the religious faith, experienced by the women in convents, indicates a melting pot for the two. Existential questions find answers in faith, which indicates a sense of freedom. Bauman writes further that in closed societies, among the human collective, the individual can be free and not a slave under her or his own needs and demands. One lives for the best of the collective. This utopia has in many cases been conquered by individualism, another "negative" form

of freedom, a freedom from restrictions set out by institutions, which limit the individual choice (Bauman 2000:88). However, the convents and monasteries operate within a religious self-given ground, which means giving up the individual will for the wellbeing of the collective and for God. It includes that the monastics live according to the same principles of ideals and rules as the first version of freedom Bauman talks of, which can hence be experienced as a sense of freedom. This kind of freedom for women will later be investigated.

4. METHOD

Before I started my fieldwork, I had read and been inspired by the phenomenological approach, which means a focus on the immediate lifeworld, where actions are played out and experiences are gained. The "lebenswelt" as described by Husserl, is "the world of immediate experience, of sociality, common sense and shared experience that exists for us independent of and prior to any reflection upon it" (Husserl elaborated by Jackson 1996:16). Using this approach, one should try to put aside rational analysis and conclusions until later, and fully take part in the daily on-goings. This is slightly difficult in reality, but keeping it in mind can help during research to concentrate on what is going on in the moment. To put focus on the lifeworld is also a way of reflecting *intersubjectivity*, where the interplay of subjects is the most important (Jackson 1998:6). A convent is a limited area to focus on, which makes the participation in daily social interplay very interesting. By taking part in daily life, one gets closer to understanding the meaning of what happens, and how the women in that particular convent act. Kaj Århem writes that from a critical perspective, cultural meaning is situationally constructed and personally experienced, but argues that through intersubjective expressions we can reach this meaning, and see how it is used and practised (Århem 1994:281). Århem writes further that "the anthropological knowledge is not separated from the anthropologist as person, it is created in the meeting between me and others, our world and theirs" (ibid.:282; my translation). He stresses the

necessity to see the informants as "persons in their own right" (ibid.:285; my translation). This includes more participation than observation, more listening than questioning and openness for sudden expressions, as well as for reflections (ibid.: 285).

Although this method is not easy to live up to, it is important to do so since the fieldwork is not simply a study, but an opportunity to get to know people and to get other perspectives of the world. As put by Århem: "anthropology gives knowledge about people, and thus, knowledge about ourselves" (ibid.:282; my translation). It is not possible to ignore one's own position, both as a researcher and a person, as this affects how questions are asked and responded to. That I am a white stranger from a rich country, a woman, and a student also affects the people I meet. These are facts that have to be taken into consideration in the study. I find Århem's method, what he calls "existential anthropology", a useful way of relating to the field. He argues that there are questions that are unbound by time and space, and that are central to all humans. These are the questions about life and death, good and evil, love, freedom etc (ibid.:283). Hence, by writing about women in convents and the specificities in this lifestyle, there still are many points of connection with our own lives. I find this to be an important part of my motivation to carry out this study.

During the fieldwork, I took part in the daily activities, and engaged in conversations during work. I also performed unstructured and structured interviews, individually, and in groups, sometimes with an interpreter, and sometimes without. The interviewees were twelve nuns who lived in the convent where I stayed. Throughout my fieldwork, I often felt that the best way to receive information was through conversations during normal daily activities. Here, it was easier for both parties to relax and talk about daily on-goings as well as personal experiences. Further, I visited all the head convents of contemplative nuns, in Cairo and in the north of Egypt. I made four structured interviews in total with contemplative nuns. I also visited a number of convents for deaconesses, and interviewed four women in these,

as well as one male deacon. I found it also necessary to meet people outside the convents, to get perspectives of the situations of Egyptian women, and their thoughts about convent life. Those I met were Coptic people, with different occupations, from different backgrounds, but all had connections to the Orthodox Church. I had discussions and interviews with eleven women on different occasions. I have also talked to six men, who provided me with valuable pieces of information during our discussions. Everyone who features in this essay through conversations and interviews belong to the Coptic people.

5. ETHNOGRAPHIC AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Egypt

Egypt is a country well known for its history, ever since the Pharaonic times. The population today is 65 million, of whom the majority are Muslims. The Coptic population, who claims to be true heirs of the country, the original sons and daughters of the Pharaohs from times prior to the Muslim invasion, is a minority. During a train journey from Beni Suef to Cairo, I had a conversation about the situation of the Copts with a Coptic man working as a judge and professor in the Faculty of Law. As we passed an ancient monument, which looked like a flat pyramid, he said with a strong sense of pride in his voice:

We are the old owners of this land.

There are different opinions of the number of the Coptic people – the government estimates number about 3,5 millions, but the Coptic Church claims the Coptic population to be at least 10 millions (Cannyuer 2000:110). There are today two different definitions of what is Egypt. The difficulties and conflicts between these two lie in the identity of the state of Egypt, where Muslims and Christians live together. Since the 1970s, there has been a conflict between two opposing forces within the country, one

towards an Islamic state and the other towards a modern secular state (Bibar 2001:15).

Having a history of occupation from Turks, French and British, the Revolution in 1919, played a leading role for Egyptian women and men. The rights of the women were established. Banoub and Asad write that "they (the women) removed the veil" (1998:50). During the 20th century however, the politics of gender equality have been varied. In 1952, after the revolution of President Nasser, women were granted the right to vote. While towards the end of the 1950s, feminist organisations were banned. However, in 1962 a Charter was established, which regarded men and women as equals and called for the free movement and advancement of women (Bibar 2001:15). From my conversations with informants, I have understood that Nasser was slightly more popular among the Copts, but only in comparison with the less favoured Sadat, who came to power in 1970. From then on, the identity conflict became obvious. Kandiyoti (Bibar 2001) has argued that this is a consequence of influence from the Gulf countries, where many Egyptian men went to work in the 70s. There was not only an import of money, but also of cultural and political tendencies, which contributed to the strength of Islamic groups in Egypt. Religious and ethnic identities became politicised, and there was an urge to re-establish traditional Islamic values in society (ibid.). Thus, in 1971, the state approved a constitution of equal rights for men and women, but the new entry of shariah, the Islamic law, acted as an obstacle. In fact, it meant a return to the distinction between the spheres of public/private for men and women (ibid.). During these years, the religious revitalization among Muslims and Christians affected the situations for the two groups in society. There were several violent conflicts between these two inheritor groups of the country, bringing suffering to both. For example, The Coptic Pope Shenouda was put in house arrest in a monastery (Cannyuer 2000:108). The different directions for the religious renewals within the two groups are obvious. Islamization includes a relation between religion

and the state and politics, while renewal for the Copts is exclusively religious, and hence stays within the Coptic Church, and refuses to mix with official politics (Martin; Doorn-Harder and Vogt 1997:17). This was also stated several times by my informants:

Here, the priests are not into politics. No, politics and religion are separated.¹

This seems to be a common understanding among the Coptic Christian people's self image in relation to their country.

Under the current president Mubarak, the identity conflict has continued. It is now also intertwined with the spread of 'western values'. Although the access to education to the public sphere for women is evident, the traditional gender roles are firmly established. It is also important to keep in mind, that there are great differences between city and countryside, between social classes and between families. Apart from general gender roles in society, the Coptic women and men, are also subject to the law of the Coptic Church concerning personal status. This law is sometimes different from the national law. For example, divorce is forbidden, unless in cases of adultery (Tadros 2002). These laws are not implemented in the legal system as such, but are used as moral laws. There are many informants who have expressed their experiences of being discriminated against because of Christian faith. Tensions and lack of equal rights are constantly described by the Copts as a consequence of Muslim dominance. This causes many Copts to see themselves as a suffering and enduring people. Considering these experiences and opinions, one might wonder why the Copts do not engage more actively in politics. When I asked about this, I was told stories about persecution, and about people having been put to prison for having questioned the situation of the Copts.

¹ I will hereafter give small presentations of people involved in this study, in the footnotes. The comment about the separation of religion and (official) politics, was stated from a man in Beni Suef. He worked as a librarian, and was about thirty years old.

The Copts

The name Copt comes from the Arabic *Qibt*, which is an abbreviation of the Greek name *Aigyptios* (Egyptian), which in turn is derived from *Hikuptah* - the name for House of the spirit of Ptah. This is the religious name for Memphis, which was the capital of Ancient Egypt (Cannyuer 2000:11). As Malaty writes, "from the Arab conquest and until today, this term refers to the Christian Egyptians to distinguish them from the native Muslims" (1993:8). The pride of origin is very visible among Coptic people, and seems to be important when considering different aspects of identity. Being a minority people seems to play a central role in their identity, as well as being the 'original peoples' of Egypt. But while the pride of origin is strong, the Christian religious aspect of identity is just as strong, visible for instance, in the reference to the travel of the Holy Family in Egypt.

The Copts live in all of Egypt. The biggest population, however, resides in Upper Egypt (the south). As they have always been in every domain an integral part of the nation, many Coptic intellectuals have refused to accept the status of a minority. They claim themselves to be "inseparable from the history and fabric of Egypt" (Cannyuer 2000:110). The occupations of the Copts are varied. Farming and peasantry characterise the Coptic inhabitants in the southern part, while in many other areas the Copts are involved in business and professional sectors, such as medicine and pharmacy amongst others. They also run 50 % of the travel agencies in Egypt. Furthermore, the poor people in Cairo who work as garbage collectors, are mainly Copts (ibid). It is important to mention that not all the Copts are Christian or orthodox. Although the majority of the Coptic Egyptians are orthodox, there are also numerous Catholics and Protestants within the group (Doorn-Harder and Voogt 1997:18). The Coptic Orthodox, however, seem to have a strong affinity between themselves, due to the firm tradition of the Coptic Orthodox Church, the Coptic language and the religious rituals and celebrations.

The Coptic Orthodox Church

Imagine an overcrowded church with a strong scent of incense and monotonous hymns sung loudly by the priest, and answered by the crowd. Everyone is standing. Seen from the back of the church, men are to the left and women are to the right, with their heads covered. The altar is in the front, surrounded by men dressed in white gowns, leading the prayers, crossing themselves and blessing the bread and the wine. As a foreigner from a secular country, it is an interesting experience to move in a world where the Church plays an important role, as a place of worship, of social work in society and as a place to meet your friends and future spouse. These reasons all seem to make the Church an important upholder of the Coptic Orthodox identity.

Structure

The foundation of the Coptic Church rests on the heritage of St. Mark the Evangelist. Conversion and spread of Christianity began in Egypt in the 40s AD (Malaty 1993:18). St Mark is considered as the first patriarch of the Coptic Church (although some question this), and the following popes, including the present, Pope Shenouda III, are all seen as successors of the Apostle. The Institution of the Church is therefore strictly hierarchical and patriarchal. The positions under the patriarch are held by bishops, priests, monks and deacons. These positions are only filled by men. The Holy Synod is the supreme authority of the Coptic Church, and consists of the patriarch, the metropolitans (bishops with special tasks), the bishops and abbots (van Doorn-Harder 1995:34). The women are engaged in the laity of the Church, and can also be ordained nuns and deaconesses. The priests and the deacons can marry, but the deaconesses have to be consecrated to the church only. This is a church strongly and intensely holding on to tradition, but ought not to be seen as static because of this. Malaty argues that although the Coptic Church is sometimes accused of exaggerated conservatism, it is in fact not stagnant, but faithful and eager to conserve the apostolic life (Malaty:22).

Faith

The first centuries of the Church's' history were stormy, containing some different opinions about the nature of Christ. This also resulted in diversion between the Egyptian and the Roman faith and other Eastern Churches. These early controversies have now been overcome, and there are ongoing dialogues with both the Catholic and other Orthodox churches. The Coptic Orthodox Church believes in Christ's unity of a dual nature of being both human and divine. It is said in St Basils' liturgy: "I believe verily that his divinity has never been separate from his humanity" (Cannyuer 2000:45).

During the first centuries, Christian religion flourished within the country. Monasticism developed in the 3rd century, and came to be an integral part of the nature of the Church, which claims to be "a church of asceticism". For the general churchgoer, this asceticism is part of the many rituals performed and used within the church, such as fasting. Further, sacraments, such as baptism and communion, are of fundamental importance. Although the liturgy, the bible study and the worship in the church form the basis, faith is also integrated into practical life (Malaty 1993:204). This is visible in many of the social projects that the Church undertakes in society. I will discuss faith and meaning of rituals more in depth later in the essay.

Language and liturgy

In the early days, Christian literature was written in the Coptic language. This language is rooted in the hieroglyphics, but has in its written form been influenced by the Greek alphabet (Cannyuer 2000:48). The Coptic was spoken and used until the invasion of the Muslims in the seventh century, when it slowly began to be replaced by the Arabic language. This was partly due to restrictions, but also as a result of integration with Arab culture (ibid.:68). The liturgies began to be translated into Arabic, but until this day the Coptic language is used in parts of the liturgies. As an important part of the culture, the language is still vivid, and is taught by bishops and priests in the churches. For example, in the city where I was

staying, there was a Coptic lesson every Friday evening for the general public.

The word 'liturgy' is Greek, and consists of "*liow*", which means "people", and "*ergia*", which means "work". It is used in the meaning of "common worship". Malaty claims that liturgy is the church's language through which it gives its message and through which it revitalizes itself (1993:206). The Coptic liturgies are specific with hymns originated from the Pharaonic times. The chants are long and repetitive, and seem to be a mix of tones of the Middle East and from ancient times. Cymbals are used during the masses, as well as incenses. It is said that the priests and bishops use incenses for the prayers of the community to melt into the divine. The masses last between two to four hours, and they are, for the most part, strictly liturgical.

Saints and martyrs

Centuries of occupations and persecutions against the Copts by Romans, Turks and Muslims have coloured their firm constancy to their Church and their faith. During the years, many men and women have suffered from these persecutions. As a consequence of not renouncing Christian faith, many people have died in martyrdom. Due to their faithfulness to Christianity, martyrs and other religious men and women, such as hermits have been canonized. These saints are central to the religion and are very adored and honoured. Every Church, monastery and convent is named after a saint. In everyday speech, people make constant reference to saints, as well as to God. As in other orthodox churches, there are many pictures and icons of saints. These are seen as intercessors in ones' life, and it is common that people get more attached to one or a number of saints. One young woman told me:

We pray to the saints to pray for us and to help us in our life. ²

² A girl, 19 years old, studying to become a teacher in Beni Suef. She explained how she in her life several times had been helped by the saints she had prayed to, for example at times of school tests and troubles at school.

For an outsider, praying sometimes seemed as worship, because of the constant kissing of pictures, kneeling and praying. The commercial business of producing posters, stickers, etc, perhaps contributes to this impression. An active nun explained this:

We don't worship the icons; we adore the persons in the icons, because they are persons of the family of the Lord who have been real human beings of flesh and blood like ourselves.³

Renewal

In Egypt, Islam and Christianity have experienced a marked revival in society the past forty years. For Muslims, it was due to events in the 1960s and 1970s, which led to the development of fundamentalist Islamic groups. The most visible manifestation of this was the 1970's "return to the veil" for Muslim women (Abdel Kader 1987:134). Martin argues that during the years of struggling for independence from the British, whom the country was still dependent on and controlled by, Christians and Muslims were both struggling for liberation. After liberation, a period of Nasser's more socialistic era, the availability of education increased, and people from the outside of the upper classes started studying. Some of the persons from upper classes on leading positions in the country moved at this point in time, and people from the middle class gained these positions. Also within the Coptic community, there followed a shift of front figures, beginning with the shift to Pope Kyrillos VI in the 1960s. A need for a renewal of the spirituality in the Coptic Church and faith was felt among people from the middle classes, and an interest for monasticism and the Desert Fathers was reawakened.

President Nasser was trying to secularise Egypt. He wanted a non-religious state, and did not support religious institutions, neither Muslim nor

³ Sister Agapie, in the convent of active nuns, one of the very first ones to start this special direction within the Coptic Church.

Christian (Cannyuer 2000:102). However, in the 1970s, when Sadat came to power, the Islamic movement spread and flourished, and shariah was enforced on a political level (ibid.:108). The spread of Islamic values started mainly in the universities. An islamization of teaching and of culture, and even of social structures, marginalized the Copts (Martin; van Doorn-Harder and Voogt 1997:16). This created a return to Christian communities and to religious values. The concrete changes were among others a stabilized position of the Coptic Church in Egypt and particularly that of the monasteries. There was also a need for translation of the Desert Fathers into Arabic, since they were hitherto only available for the higher educated who mastered Greek. In the 1980s, a centre for translation was established, as well as for printing newly written texts by many of the monks prominent in the movement for the renewal, such as Father Matta-Al-Meskeen, a very famous Coptic monk, who has written extensively about faith. This has brought about a change for many people in how to read the Bible. Al-Meskeen emphasizes spirituality, and that a reading of the scriptures has to be experienced, not investigated. In general, it is more common among the Copts to use the Bible frequently and to read it on literal terms (Rubenson; van Doorn-Harder and Voogt 1997). In the 1940s, the Sunday School Movement emerged within the Coptic Church, drawing from the Evangelical missionaries. This became an important way of keeping children and Coptic Orthodox youth attached to their original church, especially when the parallel Islamic vitalization flourished on many levels of society.

There were also changes for women in religion at this point in time. While deaconesses have existed since the first centuries after Christ, there were no institutes for them. Due to visible needs in society, in particular for women and children, and due to the need of action to respond to a growing interest among women, this was initiated in the end of the 1970s, and recognized by the Holy Synod in 1992 (van Doorn-Harder and Voogt 1995:83).

In both religions, Martin writes, there is at this point in time, a "rejection of a Westernized modernity", and an urge to "return to the authenticity of one's own sources", which for the two groups have taken different directions, as mentioned before (van Doorn Harder and Vogt 1995:17). The causes of the Coptic renewal can be seen both as a resistance to Western values, and as an expression of their relation to Muslims when being a minority people. This seems to have strengthened a strong sense of keeping one's historical identity and origin as described earlier. I would argue that the parallel renewals have affected and influenced one another. They have developed in mutual resistance to each other, which has, in the case of the group with which I am concerned, led to a strengthening of the Coptic and Christian values and traditions.

Monasticism

Monasticism developed in the third century. One of its founders is St Anthony, who lived as a hermit in the desert. After having lived more than thirty years in solitude, he was joined by a number of disciples who had been inspired by his radical move, and by his search for a deeper God-relation. This could be considered as the birth of the first monastic movement. These men called themselves monks, after the Greek word "*monachos*", which means celibate (Cannyuer 2000:34). This was the introduction to the anchorite style, which implies living as hermits, under the spiritual guidance of an elder. In the fourth century, a Christian monk called Pachomius started the cenobitic direction of monasticism. Cenobitic comes from the Greek words "*koinos bios*", which means "common life" (ibid.:38). This meant living in celibacy and asceticism, but together with others, sharing the same rules. These included times for prayer alternated with work, and time for solitude, which in turn alternated with communion (ibid.).

In the early centuries, women did not call themselves nuns, but came to live in special "houses for virgins", close to the cities. The need for monastic

communities for women became clear when it was discovered that some women dressed themselves in the same black dresses as the monks, and pretended to be men, wishing to live according to monastic ideals. The first female saint, St Marina, tells this story.⁴ The "houses for virgins" started in the same time as Pachomius's cenobitic direction, as Pachomius's sister Mary wanted a life in seclusion (Cannyuer 2000:39)

Monasticism has always been an integral part of the Coptic-Orthodox Church, since all the patriarchs and bishops are chosen from among the monks (Doorn-Harder and Voogt 1997:19). However, there was a long time when the monasteries for men and women were not as acknowledged as they are today, due to different difficulties, beginning with the Islamic invasion. Through the period of renewal in the 1960s and 1970s, the students have re-established the position of monasticism in the Coptic culture, with great help of the former Pope Kyrillos VI, assisted by several young monks, among them Father Matta-Al-Meskeen, whom I have mentioned earlier. There developed a new interest for the Desert Fathers and the monastic lifestyle, which in the 1960s was strongly supported by the present Pope Shenouda (ibid.). The number of monks and nuns has increased immensely, and the wish to live a life in convent or monastery seems today very widespread among young people to the degree where the number of applicants outnumber the places available. The monasteries are also important as 'spiritual factories': they contain a lot of research, writings and studies. "It is from this source", Tsetis writes, "that the churches receive spiritual fathers and mothers"(Tsetis 1983:10). Further, with reference to the importance of saints and martyrs of the Coptic-Orthodox faith in mind, Tsetis stresses the necessity of having monks and nuns as living examples for the Church. They are exemplary because of their life of sacrifice and self-denial (ibid.:53).

⁴ During conversations with Marian - a young deaconess who works and lives in Cairo - I received information about the history of female monasticism. This was otherwise difficult, and books on the topic existed mainly in Arabic.

Convents and monasteries

Today, there are about 500 contemplative nuns, and about 1200 monks.⁵ While the monasteries of the monks are isolated in the deserts, the women's convents are located close to the cities. The first convent for nuns was St Mary's in Cairo, established in 1102. Before, celibate women had lived in "Houses for Virgins", but the convent was now recognised by The Holy Synod. Today, there are six contemplative convents for women, all of which have different branches. Five of these convents are in Cairo, built in places of historical importance, where The Holy Family rested. One is located in the northeast of Egypt, where the saint and martyr St Dimyanah lived in her House for Virgins. There are currently twelve monasteries for monks, which are scattered on historical monastic sites all over Egypt. For example, St Anthony's monastery in the desert west of the Red Sea, is still located in the original buildings (van Doorn-Harder 1995).

For women there are three directions within convent life. Besides the contemplatives, there is also a group of active nuns: The Daughters of St. Mary - in Arabic Banat Maryam. A few women and a former bishop, Athanasius, who worked in the diocese of Beni Suef with surroundings, founded this community in the 1960s. These nuns live a communal life in convents, but work socially in society. They have not been officially recognized by the Holy Synod, and are thus still not totally accepted as nuns within the Coptic Church. However, Banat Maryam acted as an indicator of a need to integrate women into the church system. Hereafter, the institute for consecrated women, who live in convents but work as deaconesses, was established (van Doorn-Harder 1997:83). Deaconesses are thus women who live in convents, but carry out social work outside of the walls in manner similar to The Daughters of St. Mary. There is no statistics of how many women live this kind of life, but the estimated number is about 600-700 for the deaconesses, which means 20-25

⁵ This number is found in a recently released book within the Coptic Church.

convents, scattered all over Egypt, while there are about 100 active nuns.⁶ The lives of the active nuns and deaconesses differ substantially from the contemplative nuns. While the latter are mainly inside their convents, and dedicated to a life in worship, the active nuns and deaconesses are dedicated to a life of service alongside worship. One can distinguish the contemplatives from the deaconesses by their clothes. The contemplatives wear black gowns, symbolising their death to the world (Doorn-Harder 1997:36), while the deaconesses and active nuns wear grey dresses. Furthermore, the contemplatives call themselves "ummina", which means "mother" in Coptic, while the active nuns and the deaconesses call themselves "tasoni", which means "sister". The status of the contemplatives is seen as somewhat higher than that of active nuns and deaconesses.

Nuns and monks

There is also a substantial difference between the contemplative nuns and the monks. Firstly, there is the location. Monks live in the desert, while nuns are in the cities, or nearby. There seem to be many reasons for this. One is that society prohibits nuns' convents in the desert, since it is considered too dangerous for women to live in the desert.⁷ The convents in Cairo are also located close to where the patriarch's residence used to be. This meant that nuns were under his protection at the same time as they would cook and clean for the patriarch (van Doorn-Harder 1995:42). Secondly, there is a difference regarding the social contacts with the outer world. Apart from the different locations of the convents and the monasteries, there is also a difference in their way of life and contact with the public. Contemplative nuns seldom leave their convents. They stay more in solitude, and are not as free to move as monks, because they are

⁶ Information gathered from one deaconess and from sister Agapie of the active nuns.

⁷ Another of the active nuns explains one reason for convents not being in the desert. She expresses her sadness on this matter, since her first aim and wish has been a life in solitude and worship. She did not find that the convents in the cities responded this request, and decided therefore to work socially.

women. Furthermore, they do not allow visitors to stay over night⁸, while monks are freer to move and to socialize (ibid.). Thirdly, solitude is a big part of monastic life, and there are differences in living arrangements and practices concerning solitude between the convents and the monasteries. The monk's cells usually contain a small kitchen, so that the solitude can last for several days. The nuns need to order or get out in order to get food. If a monk wants further solitude, there is always the desert that surrounds most monasteries, while nuns are not able to walk in the desert, nor outside the convents is the city. Lately, however, women have been allowed to have branches of their convents further away from cities (van Doorn-Harder 1995:49). One example is outside Alexandria, where the biggest nuns' convent, Deir Abu Safein, has a branch, with a garden for cultivation. There have also been changes in the St Dimyanah convent so that the nuns now are allowed to eat in their cells. Fourthly, the monastic rules may differ for nuns and monks. There is not one general rule for Coptic monastic life, but a number of different traditional monastic models that I have mentioned before. The nuns follow mostly the Pachomian way, which entails common meals and prayers, and an organized time schedule, which also includes work. The monks may also follow this, but many monasteries are living the "idiorythmic" way of life. It means that in one monastery there are some cenobitic monks, some hermits and some monks who work as priests outside of the monastery, in other churches (van Doorn-Harder 1995).

6. IDEOLOGIES AND PRACTICES IN RELATION TO WOMEN IN PATRIARCHAL SOCIETIES

In this part, I will describe different practices and values attached to women's roles and to life in convent. This will serve as an understanding for the local Coptic Egyptian use of certain symbolic phenomena such as purity, virginity, chastity and celibacy. I will briefly outline some social

⁸ The deaconess Marian in Cairo, and a contemplative nun from the north.

and religious connotations to these specific values, partly with relevance to Egypt, but also in a cross-cultural perspective.

Purity valued in virginity

Mary Douglas has elaborated concepts and understandings of purity and impurity, which, she argues, have a long history. As mentioned earlier, many of the ideas on purity have their basis in the human body. Douglas argues that "there are beliefs that each sex is a danger to the other through contact with sexual fluids" (1966:3). By avoiding sexual contacts with others one is more likely to maintain one's own purity. In many cultures, life in purity is related to notions of sexual avoidance. Cross-cultural studies have shown that where a value is placed on virginity, adolescent celibacy is required, at least for girls (Schlegel 2001:88). The focus in this discussion on girls and women refers to how "women's bodies are more apt than men's bodies for making conceptual statements because of the biological specificity of the female experience of virginity, sexual intercourse, fertility, childbearing and menopause" (Bowie 2000:107). Adolescent girls are in certain societies socialized to remain chaste. Adults that choose celibacy may also be socialized to do so if their cultures in general value a celibate life as one more pure than a sexually active one (Schlegel 2001:88). Schlegel argues further that societies that prescribe celibacy for adolescents often base their justification of the value of virginity on the value on purity.

This raises the question of why purity is highly valued in some cultures but not in others. Schlegel hints at reasons on a more practical basis, concerned with marriage transactions. Following this line of thought, a girl remaining pure prevents her from getting pregnant with a man that might not be appreciated as a future family member. This is in many cases relevant in cultures where marriage generally is an arrangement between two families. A man cannot claim a bride if he is not accepted by the family, unless he has made the girl pregnant. In arrangements of bridewealth, on the one hand, the bride has to maintain purity to be

attractive, while, on the other hand, in arrangements of dowries, the groom must be worthy to receive the 'pure' bride. Parental control, particularly over girls' behaviour, has thus a great impact. In cultures where goods are not given along with the daughters, the premarital pregnancy, and hence virginity, does not seem to be such a big issue (ibid.:89-90). Many societies that used to practice bridewealth and dowry have today become accustomed to young people being able and wanting to find partners themselves. In Egypt, the situation differs between countryside and urban sites, and between Coptic and Muslims. Among many urban Coptic people today, the decisions are first made by the young couple, and then given consent by the parents. It is common that the expenses for a house or a flat are shared, although in many cases, the man often takes care of the housing situation. This does not mean that the girls are not protected in various ways from meetings with men. The value of virginity related to purity is also still considerable. Schlegel mentions that in most Western countries, the value on virginity has earlier been as strong as, for example, in the Middle East. The shift in value has to do with changes in family relations and access to abortion and contraception. In Western countries, this has led to virginity becoming a personal issue, rather than a public one (ibid.:95).

The value on virginity in various cultures is grounded, I would argue, in the complexity of cultural principles. Bowie argues that women's lives are conceptually divided into three stages: that of the virgin, the mother, and the crone. These stages are connected to sexuality: virginity to potentiality, motherhood to fertility and menopause to de-sexualization (Bowie 2000:105). Religious values can be seen as connected to these three stages, where Christianity, in one aspect, keep Virgin Mary and Jesus as symbols for virginity as a divine state. The theme is found in various religious or mythological stories (ibid.). For example, in ancient Egyptian religion, the two gods, Osiris and Isis, had the child Horus without sexual intercourse. Focusing on Christianity, motherhood is highly valued but in less esteem than virginity, because of the value placed upon refraining from sexual activity. Still, women are within Christianity, as well as in Islamic

societies, highly valued as mothers. The Coptic faith encourages women to bear and nurse children, which helps to build “the city of God” (van Doorn-Harder 1995: 192). The third stage is a blessed state, although not divine, since sexual activity has occurred (ibid.:106). In Egypt, there are also values of purity connected to Islam, since the Prophet Mohammed proclaims purity. The Quran promotes the value of virginity, as it proclaims the payment of bridewealth (Sobo and Bell 2001:94).

Honour and shame

All along the Mediterranean, the notion of honour is strongly connected to purity and virginity (Verdon 1988). This honour, as we have seen earlier, concerns the honour of the whole family. Concepts of honour and shame have been greatly debated in anthropology, since anthropologists elaborated the model in the 1960s. The honour and shame model is applied on primarily Catholic countries in southern Europe and around the Mediterranean (Gemzöe 2000:4). I find it to be relevant also for Egypt and other non-Catholic countries in the region. Lena Gemzöe has summed up elaborations by Dubisch ⁹, who argues that the essence of the honour and shame code is that a family’s reputation in a community depends on the behaviour of all its members. The maintaining of the reputation is, however, different for women and men. Men care for material interests in the public sphere, and protect the chastity of daughters, sisters and wives. Women are supposed to dress modestly and occupy themselves with activities within the domestic area, and thus ”preserve honour by cultivating their sense of shame” (Gemzöe 2000:5). Women ought to be protected and secluded, since their sexuality is the strongest threat to a man’s honour. Gemzöe concludes: “the code of honour and shame implicates a certain view on the nature of women and men” (ibid.), meaning that women are seen as weaker and more prone to sin. This view is reinforced by both Christianity and Islam. Anthropologists have argued

⁹ Read further in *'In a different place : pilgrimage, gender and politics at a Greek island shrine, Princeton modern Greek studies'*, 1995 by Jill Dubisch. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

that the ideological foundation of this view on women and men is “the image of woman as Eve”, the first female that caused mankind’s fall to sin (ibid.).

Critics have suggested that anthropologists using the honour and shame concept when analyzing these societies are limited in that they mainly define women in terms of their sexual and procreative roles (ibid.). I believe that this criticism is legitimate, and that it implies a specific view on the natural characteristics of women and men. I therefore think it is important to be aware of these consequences when using the concepts of honour and shame, and furthermore, I believe that it is possible to deconstruct honour and shame, partly through using women’s perspectives on the issue. During my research, I found the practices of protection to be explained by the danger exposed to the women going out alone. When discussing reasons for protection, women found their vulnerability to be more emphasized than the view of women as temptresses. Still, a general opinion among the Copts seems to view women as sources of temptation. The famous Coptic monk Father Matta-Al-Meskeen has stated that women are a point of attraction, and thus a serious form of temptation (van Doorn-Harder 1995:193). Furthermore, I found that Egyptian women talk about honour in other terms, such as proper behaviour. Life for women in Egyptian society is surrounded by normative restrictions, pointing out how women should behave. Women are thus aware of these norms very early, and are obliged to be responsible for their behaviour and reputation to fit into the standard norm of a “nice girl”. Van Doorn Harder writes, ”in Egypt, girls have to be extremely honourable and constantly attentive to guard their virginity and honour” (1995:82). For both Christian and Muslim women, the strategies of protection and the confinement to the vicinity of the household are similar. The religious ideals are interwoven in the ideal behaviour. For example, it is important to be properly dressed. For Muslims it often involves covering the whole body except face and hands. The Coptic women are, for the most, dressed ‘western’-like, but always with knees and elbows covered (ibid.:193). For the Coptic girls and

women, attending church is crucial, as is the attempt to behave saintly in thought and in behaviour (ibid.:83). Children are taught the qualities of the saints in Sunday Schools, from an early age. Women's responsibility of self-control becomes very important for keeping a reputation of being a "nice girl". Her behaviour increases the possibilities of finding a good and suitable husband (ibid.:82). However, many women, although they do agree with the principles, experience these ideals and practices as a limitation to their freedom.

The use of protection is part of the good behaviour on behalf of oneself and of the family. Honour and shame is therefore important to keep in mind as related to ideals of purity and chastity, and therefore related to women's situation. A study of a cult of saints among Catholics in Northern Spain has shown that the emphasis on female saints as role models due to their pure life as virgins has produced a sense of unworthiness among adult women who are sexually active. Although they are not living promiscuously in Western terms, a sense of impurity has been forced on them by the church and the ministers (Gemzöe: 9). Deprivation theories have drawn on this theme and suggested that women seek religious participation to make up for feelings of shame and guilt, caused by the 'Eve-image'.

Susan Sered argues strongly against these theorists. She suggests that deprivation theorists explain that people, mostly women, behave religiously from social and psychological reasons, rather than from religious ones. Along the same line one finds Gemzöe, who means that humans, and, in this case, women, "should be seen as religious actors in their own right" (ibid.: 24). I agree with this opinion, and urge that although social and psychological circumstances are important, it should not take away from women the possibility to be religious for religion itself. I do think, however, that the emphasis on Coptic female saints holding the virtue of chastity makes impact on women's ideals. The question is what are the mechanisms that enable the ideal of female virginity to have such a great impact. The meaning of purity out of virginity, must, as stressed by Bowie, be seen in relation to a larger social whole (2000:104).

Female circumcision

One practice regarding women's purity is expressed in female circumcision, or female genital mutilation (FGM). Non-Muslims often presume that FGM is based on Islamic beliefs, since it is found in predominantly Muslim countries. In Egypt, however, female circumcision is practised among Christians as well as Muslims. The "Pharaonic circumcision" entails the removal of clitoris, labia minora and all or part of the labia majora (Gruenbaum 2001:3), and has been practised in pre-Islamic Egypt, and consequently also by the Coptic people. Gruenbaum, who has conducted research on FGM among Muslims in Sudan, argues that one must differentiate between praxis and theology. There are divided opinions in the matter, but most scholars of Islamic faith deny that FGM is expected of Muslims, and refer to the fact that there is no mention of it in the Quran. Many even consider FGM to go against the scripture, since the Quran views the body as God's creation, and thus holy, and not allowed to be altered. At the same time, some Islamic interpreters and believers claim that the Prophet Mohammed has stated that circumcision is one of five things to be done to achieve purity (ibid.:63). Coptic nuns and active laypeople I have met who fight female circumcision in Egypt agree that FGM is a social practice with no religious connotation neither in the Quran, nor the Bible.

The meaning of FGM varies between different cultural contexts. The Arabic word for female circumcision used in Sudan is "Tahur". This is usually translated as "purification" (ibid.:4). As discussed above, the notion of honour is rooted in the ideals of purity and virginity. The preserving of a girl in purity, involves here a reducing of the female sexual desire through FGM (ibid.:78). There are also meanings of FGM, found in Egypt, that come out of the belief that the clitoris and the extern genitalia is 'male', and hence must be cut away to define female identity. This is usually done as rituals of passing one stage to another of a woman's life (Bowie 2000:105). It is very interesting to find that women and men speak very differently

about female circumcision. Boddy has conducted research in Sudan, and found that men talked about the practice in terms of preventing promiscuity. Women, on the other hand, emphasised a clean and pure body as a prerequisite for marriage and child bearing (Gruenbaum 2001:79).¹⁰ There is a discrepancy imbedded in the view on purity, valued on virginity. In many cultures, purity can, through FGM, be seen as constructed. This contradicts the Judeo-Christian opinion held widely in the West, meaning that purity is based on individual behaviour and responsibility (ibid.:79-80). The Copts practice female circumcision at the same time as the Coptic Christian tradition strongly emphasises purity as a virtue, attained by personal moral behaviour intertwined with religious faith. The discrepancy between praxis and theology and between tradition and religion, or rather religious texts seems obvious, also within Christianity. The use of FGM is fought against, but is still a tradition used in patriarchal societies.

Controlled sexuality

The Coptic people's values and practices have thus various regional and cultural influences. The virtue of purity is complex, and is found in moral behaviour such as chastity. But how does chastity function for laypeople in general? The obvious patterns are found in that a girl and a boy cannot be a couple and are not allowed to meet as such, until after engagement or marriage. In the early Christian Church, the laypeople's sexual conduct was subject to the canonical law for marriage (Sobo and Bell 2001:14). Within the Coptic Church, the view on marriage is similar, and divorce is forbidden. Chastity can be seen as a subject to the canonical law, but must also be seen in the context of Egypt and the Middle East, where the values of purity and honour are also strong outside of the Coptic Church. Egypt is in many aspects a patriarchal society, and the man is considered to be the head of the Coptic household, even though the Church emphasizes respect, interdependency and spiritual equality in marriage (ibid.:191). For the

¹⁰ Read further in *Wombs and Alien Spirits: Women, Men and the Zar Cult in Northern Sudan*, 1989 by Janice Boddy. Madison : University of Wisconsin Press.

women who for any reason choose not to enter into a traditional family life with its gendered domains, convent life is an alternative.

The Egyptian monastic life implies a long tradition of a celibate culture. In the early centuries when Christianity was established in the areas around the Mediterranean, many ideals within it offered better alternatives for women than practices that were common in the Roman Empire (Verdon 1988). One of these ideals was the existence of a choice not to marry, through the alternative of a life in celibacy. This was available to anyone, irrespective of sex or wealth (ibid.). During times when women were under the authority of their fathers or husbands, the alternative of celibacy contained a "freedom to be individuals in their own right" (Drury 1995:45). Riddled with Christian connotations, celibacy is still a lifestyle vital in various cultures and religions. For women in patriarchal societies, this choice may involve aspects of freedom, as described above in relation to different conceptions of what 'freedom' can mean. Michel Verdon has carried out research on the topic, and argues that "in circumstances where reproduction is not controlled and women do not have equal access to labour-opportunities, to wealth and means of production, women remain above all child-bearers and child-carers" (1988: 502-503). In these societies, the celibate lifestyle thus offers an alternative and a freedom for women, from "subordination to reproduction" (ibid.). Cross-cultural studies have shown that celibacy tends to be a means of resistance against social and political structures (Sobo and Bell 2001:22). Celibacy as resistance can be adopted collectively and individually. Sobó and Bell have found examples concerned with improving people's rights in unjust situations, particularly women's rights. The theme is recognized from various cultures and times. Another example is the Greek drama *Lysistrata*, where women refuse their men sexual contacts if they do not stop the ongoing war. Resistance is also used individually. As discussed earlier, adolescents may opt for celibacy in order to subvert parental control. In cultures where celibacy and virginity are held in high esteem, the parents may find themselves caught between wanting their daughters having a traditional

family life, and accepting the celibate decision which still is honourable and religious (ibid.:23).

In these cultures, where virginity is highly valued, life in celibacy may also involve change in women's status within religion and within society in general. Shirley Ardener has investigated this matter in Western Catholic societies, and found that female virgins are often adhered to as a category of a "third sex". Women that remain virgins their whole life are often attributed special powers, as seen by the Catholic Church. Examples of this include Joan of Arc and Elizabeth I of England. It happens that women in convents are allowed to perform certain tasks that lay women are prohibited from (Ardener 1978).¹¹ Mary Douglas argues that a nun is a source of redemption, who "through her virginity crushes evil underfoot" (1966). Furthermore, as argued by Sobo and Bell, for both women and men, a "nonparticipation in sexual relations can be managed and even manipulated as a channel for cultural creativity and innovation, self-creation, social climbing and communication" (Sobo and Bell, 2001:9).

One example is Esther Shebi, who is a Catholic nun, belonging to a Nigerian sisterhood. She describes the situation of being a woman living in celibacy in a highly patriarchal society. She finds the sisterhood to be an example for women and men by showing the possibility for a woman to find fulfilment outside marriage and child bearing. Women in society have, through contact with the sisterhood, found ground for female potential and worth which is not related to a family life (Shebi 1997). The sisterhood works for liberation and increased knowledge for women's rights in Nigerian society. Shebi explains that men's attitudes towards this development vary. Some feel threatened when their wives start to acknowledge certain injustices, while others are positive to the enhancement of women's skills and rights. For Shebi, her life in celibacy involves increased possibilities compared to the women she describes. However, her lifestyle is not as highly valued in Nigeria as it is in Egypt,

¹¹ Read further in *Defining Females: the Nature of Women in Society*, 1978 by Shirley Ardener. London: Croom Helm.

since the Nigerian society questions the credibility of celibacy (ibid.). It seems as though the value of virginity does not seem as strong in the Nigerian society as in Egypt, since it is not mentioned at all by Shebi.

In various cultures, celibacy is a criterion for achieving a sacred spiritual status. Sobo and Bell mention the shamans among Mazatec in Mexico, who are understood to possess certain charismatic qualities that equip them to cross boundaries between spiritual worlds and different social worlds (2001:11). This can be compared to Coptic monks' and nuns' spiritual status that relates to the assumption that they are closer to God, which affects laypeople's respect for their spiritual advice. But how can we then understand the meaning of a life in celibacy? What does it involve? Focusing on the nuns and monks in Christian tradition, Foucault has elaborated on what distinguishes chastity from celibacy. The chastity for laypeople is for the nuns and monks a lifelong vow, which is a voluntary choice of celibacy. It involves, as Foucault puts it: "expelling for good everything impure or conducive to impurity" (Foucault 1985.) It means that the monks and nuns live in childlike purity, they are "perpetual virgins" (ibid.). Foucault suggests that monks and nuns go one step further than chaste laypeople, since they also cut off the mind's desires. He suggests the monastic celibacy to contain a technique of self-analysis and diagnosing thoughts in different ways – "its origins, its qualities, its potential for temptation and all the dark forces that can lurk behind the mask it may assume" (ibid.)¹² Among the Coptic people, the ideal of a celibate lifestyle is revered. From the nuns' point of view, their life in celibacy is a natural part of their life in the convent. Sexual conduct is only referred to in relation to marriage, and as we will see, most of the women I met have never wanted to marry for various reasons. The technique of self-analysis as elaborated by Foucault is probably exercised differently by different individuals, as well as being different for men and women. As I have discussed earlier, I believe that a degree of self-control is practised in

¹² Read further in Foucault's *The battle for Chastity*, 1985, in *Western Sexuality: Practice and Precept in Past and Present Times*, ed. Philippe Ariès and André Bejin. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

relation to behaviour among the Egyptian women I have researched. But what Foucault suggests, is a deeper self-analysis that goes beyond behaviour, and judges the very thought itself. I find the latter aspect relevant for this study, since I find that many nuns view life in a 'black and white' manner, as a battle between good and evil. It is then possible to understand that many women in convents live secluded from the world spatially, but also seclude worldly thoughts. The idealistic qualities held by the saints seem to find full legitimacy only in a celibate lifestyle, through the pure state of being 'perpetual virgins', as put by Foucault.

7. COPTIC WOMEN IN RELATION TO CONVENTS

In this part, I deal with the information gathered during the field study. As I have already discussed, there are different kinds of nuns. There are the contemplatives, who live in seclusion in worship, and those working in society by serving with worship. This second category can be divided in two groups. One is the Daughters of St. Mary, an institute of 'active nuns', working in society but living in convents. These are the ones that I stayed with, and most of the observations refer to this group. The other group is the institute of women consecrated to the Coptic Church as deaconesses. Deaconesses have existed since the early days, but it was not until the 1970s that they were allowed to live in convents. Before, they lived where they worked. Thus, the contemplative nuns differ from the other orders.

Women's roles in the world

Here, I will describe the roles for Coptic women in society. What are their experiences, expectations, and the specific gender roles? In what follows, I will discuss these topics according to how they are felt and described by the people I have met. I will make the distinction between the world and the convent very clear, since the women I have interviewed make this distinction themselves. Women in the convents speak about the society as "outside in the world", or "in cosmos". I should also point out that there

are, furthermore, some differences between Coptic and Muslim women, because of religious reasons. I will here focus on the Coptic women.

At home and at work

Coptic women in the Egyptian society live under different circumstances and situations whether they are from the countryside or from the city, from upper or lower class, from a liberal or conservative family. In urban areas, women are more active in pharmacy, medicine and education. In rural areas, farming and household work are the occupation of many women. The variety in life situations is obvious after my discussions with informants, but there are still a number of patterns that seem to be shared by women in general. Many women are under authority of men. Due to general structures in Egyptian society, men are heads of the households. Women are most commonly seen as somewhat weaker, and are thus in need of protection (van Doorn-Harder 1995:192). The role of the Egyptian woman as a wife and a mother is very strong in the Islamic society, but also within the Coptic culture (ibid.). Due to tradition, gender roles are still quite fixed, although changes have occurred, which often seems to be related to education. Banoub and Asad, who have written on Coptic women, write: “the educated woman becomes more independent of her family”(Banoub & Asad 1998:51). For example, today there are women teaching in the Theological seminar in Cairo. I also think changes in women's roles are caused by women's global progress in general. However, in the recent United Nation's conference on women's rights, several countries opposed a paragraph in the Women's Convention that states that the human rights of women should go beyond culture and tradition. One of these countries was Egypt. Considering the country as a whole, the old dichotomy of 'private and public' still seems to be a dominant structure in Egyptian society. This does not mean that women do not work in the public sphere. Women do work outside of their homes today, but in most cases they are still responsible for running the household (Rodenbeck 2000:99).

Women are more bound to the home than men. It is, however, more common nowadays to allow women to study in other cities. When talking about the situation in other countries (Western), some women believe that women there are free to do what ever they want, and can decide for themselves. One woman mentioned travelling, a freedom, which the Egyptian society does not allow.¹³

In a discussion about women's roles, and about their lives before marriage, one of my interviewees said:

It depends on the house, and on the father. It is different in every household.¹⁴

In general, however, a woman must first obey her father or her parents, and when married, her husband. Both girls and boys usually stay with their parents until they marry. But there is a great difference between what girls and boys are allowed to do. The most obvious difference is the prohibition for many girls to leave the house, and not being allowed to go out by themselves, unescorted. This is apparent when out in the city at night, as there is a marked overrepresentation of men. It seems obvious that, in the city, girls are more restricted. For the boys it is different, they are not as surrounded by rules. Boys are under the authority of their parents, but are freer to move and to make their own decisions. Two young sisters expressed their frustration on this topic:

If we go anywhere, it is with our family. It is a boring life.¹⁵

¹³ In discussion with a 23-year-old woman living in the northeast of Egypt, and recently happily married to a deacon. She would have loved to travel but could never have done it by herself, but sees her chance now since she is married, to travel abroad together with her husband.

¹⁴ A newly married man from Beni Suef. His wife comes from Cairo, and her parents had allowed her to, for example, travel before she got married. According to tradition, the husband has paid for the couple's new flat and furniture. This man was therefore working night and day to be able to pay the debts. However, in many cases, the couple nowadays divides the costs.

¹⁵ The girl, from the statement above, explains the situation together with her three years older sister. They have lived in Beni Suef all their lives, and when not in school, they are in the house, and are not allowed to go out themselves, not even with friends. They feel that this restriction applies only to girls.

One interesting development is that young women, since they are not allowed to go out by themselves, have started to use the Internet extensively to chat with friends in their neighbourhood or in other parts of the city. The internet thus becomes a way of opening a space in “the outside” for women in urban areas, which to an extent improves their conditions, particularly their sense of freedom. Women in rural areas might be freer to walk by themselves outside but might also be limited to their household tasks, such as washing in the river, or looking after children together with other women.

During conversations with young women and men from an upper class part of Cairo about girls' and women's roles, it was explained to me that they obey the rules of their parents.¹⁶ The rules that apply to girls and but not to boys are justified by reasons of protection. This protection was understood by the informants as coming out of concern, for their safety and for the maintenance of reputation. I find it relevant, however, to pose the question if ‘protection’ is based on concern, or whether the ‘protection’ in fact is rhetoric for justifying control over women. I find there are two different parts of this ‘protection discourse’. The overall view of women seems to consist of a view of women as victims, weak, and unable to take care of themselves. But what is the ground for this view? Female informants find women weaker due to biological reasons. Other reasons have been difficult to locate, but van Doorn Harder suggests that “Eve’s sin is used as an unspoken argument to subdue women in general” (1995:12). The standard norm of a nice girl can thus be seen as a demand to overcome the ‘Eve-image’. Hence, women are seen as irrational compared to men and more prone to give in to temptation, and are in themselves a source of temptation.

¹⁶ I met a group of five young women and men from Heliopolis, an upper middle class area in Cairo. They all had good jobs, four of them worked in telephone companies. These people were very open minded, and the women had travelled a lot within their work. They were in the ages of 24 to 30 years. All of them lived at home, except one newly married couple.

A girl cannot meet a boy alone, but in a group it is acceptable. The concept of girlfriend and boyfriend does not exist in the same way in the Egyptian society. The group is thus central for spending time with others. As Rodenbeck puts it: "the norms of Egyptian society all centre on the high value given to social cohesion and continuity, and hence to social conformity" (2000:95). This applies to Copts as well as to Muslims. Rodenbeck writes further that in Egyptian society, authoritarian ways of reaching social conformity are often not seen negatively, but rather the opposite (ibid.). Male authorities in different fields, government, workplace, church or family, are very visibly admired. I should point out that there are female authorities, but they are less obvious in comparison to the male. Further, a woman and a man do not meet together alone until after they are engaged to marry. One woman described that the only place where it was allowed to meet her present husband was in church. I found this to be common among many of the young Coptic people. The church thus serves a very important purpose – as the only respectable place besides school, university or workplace for social gathering with friends and with the opposite sex. Most of the Coptic youth that are active in church do a lot of *servicing*, which means social work, for example in handicap centres or in old people's houses. The Church constitutes a reliable place for women and men to meet, due to its status as authoritarian institution of Christian values. I have been told that many families are protective of girls, so that they will not meet Muslims. According to shariah (Islamic law), a Christian must convert to Islam in case of marrying a Muslim, but there is also a gendered modification to this rule. The modern practice is that a Muslim man can marry a non-Muslim woman, but not the other way around. The children of a Muslim father will be born Muslims.

The Church as a meeting place hence ensures that you meet others of the same faith. As mentioned before, the Sunday school is very important for Coptic children as well as for many of the youths. Children start when they are four years old, and continue until university level (van Doorn-Harder 1995:79). Many of the youths then study to become Sunday school

teachers. In Sunday school one learns about the Bible and stories of saints. The saints are men, women and children (ibid.). This may then play a part in women's decisions to become nuns, not least considering what the female figures represent. They are ideals of purity and, most often, virgins. The female role models are historical figures. There are not many contemporary role models (ibid.). Sunday school also teaches Christian values and ethics, concerning how to be a good young woman or man, and how to be respected, including proper dress code (ibid.). I believe that the reinforcement of Christian values and virtues has considerable effect on the perception of 'honourable' behaviour. In the same way, Christian values might carry with them hard and shameful consequences for those who fail to live up to idealistic behaviour. In summary, Sunday schools are in one aspect, there to give children a platform for developing their Coptic identity (ibid.).

Tradition and family

The special conditions for girls, and the conditions concerning meeting with opposite sex, are explained partly as tradition. I find this to be based on ideals on purity, as well as the importance of the sacrament of marriage, which states one's promise to one man or woman only. But the special conditions are also as a cause of living in a Muslim society, where it is shameful to meet a person of the opposite sex on your own if you are not married to him or her. The family is very important in Egypt, for both Christians and Muslims. It is important to get married and to have children. But it is also a status symbol, more valued than in Western society today. There is a general understanding about marriage in the Egyptian society. One informant mentions that "traditionally seen, marriage is the protection of girls", meaning that a girl is otherwise threatened by unknown fate.¹⁷ This 'unknown fate' involves for example pregnancy out of marriage,

¹⁷ Conversation with Dahlia, a young woman in Beni Suef, an English teacher at a secondary girl's school.

which would bring shame on a whole family. For the woman, marriage also means leaving her parents' home. It is not common that women live by themselves before they get married. There are, of course, exceptions, women who live unmarried, who have careers etc. But this life does not seem totally accepted by the majority of society. If a woman is not married by the age of thirty, she is seen as somewhat strange, or even abnormal.

As I have mentioned earlier, Coptic couples can only divorce under very special circumstances (Tadros 2002). Banoub and Asad mean: "the sacramental nature of Coptic marriage means that marriage is a mystery, it is not a contract but an organic union" (1998:38). As opposed to Western representations of arranged marriages as forced marriages, informants have explained that the man still has to ask the woman if she is willing to marry. If she says yes, the marriage then has to be established by the consent of her parents. One informant explained that for "the Egyptian nature", it is important to have good family communication. To have children is also important for the sake of furthering the family name. One female informant described how women that do not want to have children are not accepted. Among Muslims, this can lead to divorce, whereas among Christians, divorce is forbidden. Further, you cannot legally adopt children in Egypt.

Again, the situation in the city is very different from that in the countryside. I joined groups from organizations who work with development programmes in poor villages.¹⁸ The women in these villages had in general married between the ages of 14 to 16. It was common for these women to have between three and ten children, but most often, families had six to eight children. While men worked in the field, women were occupied in their houses, cooking, cleaning, and taking care of the children. The men worked in the fields. There are still many traditional rituals in the Egyptian society, which are not only limited to the countryside. The rate of female

circumcision in Egypt is very high, higher in the villages but also relatively high in cities. In the diocese of Beni Suef, the estimated rate was said to be as high as 97%. It indicates that the values of purity for women are still important, to the extent that surgical alterations are justified. Further, the rate of illiteracy among Egyptian women is estimated to be as high as 50 % (Banoub & Assad 1998:50). Education is a key for village women to gain opportunities for work outside and within the villages but, for many of the village women, the housework demands too much time. Some of them borrow money from organizations, such as aid organisations sponsored by the Coptic Church, to be able to buy for example sewing machines or cattle in order to earn money.¹⁹ The situation for women is somewhat more traditional in the southern parts of the country. In Upper Egypt, families are particularly strict. The options for women in these areas are very limited.

Girls in villages have for the most two choices: To accept an early marriage, or to leave the house and go to a monastery.²⁰

Some informants played down the difference between urban and rural areas, and argued the conditions were basically the same. When it comes to men, no one mentioned that these choices are as definite for them as they seem to be for women. The domain of agency for Coptic Egyptian women has thus to do partly with how decisions are made, but also with the possibility to choose. And in circumstances when women are afforded a choice there seems to be fewer alternatives.

¹⁸ One such organization is called Care for Girls Committee, and is led by an active nun. They specialize in women's and girl's situations, and are proclaiming their rights, education and the abolishing of female circumcision

¹⁹ Another organization, working with health development programmes is called COST – Coptic Organization for Services and Training. It is connected to and sponsored by the Coptic Orthodox Church. In Beni Suef, the branch for health development is started and led by an active nun, Tasoni Yohana, who also is a doctor, famous for campaigning against female circumcision.

²⁰ Interview with Tasoni Agapie, responsible for the Care for Girls Committee.

Gender equality

When discussing gender (and sex) equality within the Coptic Orthodox religion, some women have expressed that they find inner and spiritual equality very important. However, there are differences between the sexes, when it comes to what tasks are suitable for either sex. One of my informants gave an example:

Women are not equal to men, due to biological reasons – the women can't be priests, she may be moody due to menstruation and childbirth, and could not fulfil a job as a priest.²¹

Another woman, a female doctor, told me that she changed her career from a veterinarian to doctor of blood analysis since it was very difficult to find a job as a vet. She thought that this was because she was a woman and not seen as 'naturally' suitable for the job.²²

In discussions with priests and others, the argument was very clear. In Christianity, equality is a central theme, at the same time as the tasks of women and men are different, not open to change. Priesthood is one example. It was explained to me that when women claimed their political rights in society, many changes have also come about in religion, but not in the religious Coptic Egypt. Here, they follow the Bible, which is eternal, and not adjustable to changes over time. For example, the divided seating in the church is maintained. One priest commented that Copts do not renew tradition, but aim to maintain culture.²³

²¹ Stated by a woman from Beni Suef, nearly thirty, who I met several times, and who is eager to defend women's rights, but she finds the divided tasks within the Coptic Church natural. She has herself served and been very active in a special church, and has also worked in nun's projects.

²² In conversation with a woman from Malawi, in Upper Egypt. She stated that Coptic women could only choose between convent and marriage, whether they are from a city or a village. It might be relevant to consider the fact that she was from the southern parts, where life is generally described as more conservative and traditional, especially for women, which might be an important part in shaping her understanding of gender relations in general.

²³ A priest, former teacher but has since a year shifted his profession into priesthood. He works in a church in the outskirts of Beni Suef.

According to these discussions, I find that the line between religion and politics is made very clear. This standpoint comes out of a specific interpretation of the Bible. I do not think that the line between religion and politics can be made that definite in practice, but it is important for the Coptic informants to state the authority of the Bible, which I find intertwined with their sense of their own cultural identity. The explanation of many issues as simply being tradition also seems to involve an unwillingness to change. Tradition is connected with many values, such as preserving the Coptic culture and its values. For women, tradition thus involves values that they must maintain to be accepted. Alongside “tradition”, the differences between what men and women can do are in some cases explained with reference to biological differences. When such explanations are, for example, used to justify certain institutional rules, this comes to preserve the tasks for men and women. Many women are active in the social work of the church, which is often described as equally important an activity as priesthood. Also, social work demands leading forces within itself. The main objective is to serve, and that applies for the priesthood as well as the social work of the laity. The priest is seen as a servant for his congregation and enjoys authority as a servant of the people. There is a strong gender division within the Church, but it claims not to imply inequality. Drid Williams, who has conducted research among Catholic Carmelite sisters in England, writes about the perception of equality among them. To them, equality does not mean, “being the same as”. Instead, equality lies in the complementation of sexes and gender roles. This implies that the essential character of either sex has a biological foundation (Williams 1975). I find this point of view similar to many of the Coptic informant’s explanations.

Many women in Egyptian society have received education, and are now professionals. Changes in the area of education and labour has meant changes in roles for women, and that today, in some cases, women provide for the family on equal footing with men. However, these women are often

from relatively privileged social and economical backgrounds. In many cases, traditional and divided gender roles still seem strong. Still, a will to change is strong in. For example, several female informants state that men should help women bring up children. Still, van Doorn Harder writes, there is a middle class ideal in Egypt, which means that the husbands should earn enough money so that the woman can be at home with the children (1995:192). Class issues are thus important also when it comes to gender relations. Paradoxically, it can come to mean that the wealthier are able to maintain traditional gender relations – while in poorer conditions, transgression might occur due to practical needs. Kishor (Kabeer 2002) has investigated the domains where women take part in decision making. In Egypt, these domains mainly concern household budget, food cooked, visits, children's education, children's health. The possibilities, or willingness, to change roles among women seem to depend on availability of education, family tradition, location, as well as religion.

Differences in views become clear in an overall evaluation of my interview results. Some interviewees strongly questioned the roles and expectations on women's behaviour, while for others, especially within the domains of the church, the patterns seemed very self-evident and unquestionable. The differences between views of women in society and the ones active within the Church can thus be noted. It is important to point out that one cannot simply suggest that all women who subscribe to traditional patterns are oppressed, or rather, that they experience themselves as oppressed. Women are socialized into gender patterns, therefore many women seem to consider gender division as natural. According to a recently published West African study, "both women and men recognized the existence of women's heavier workloads /combination of work and household/ and men's dominance in decision-making, but neither considered these inequalities *unjust*" (ibid.)

Why choosing a monastic life?

Most of the Coptic women "in the world" have some form of a relation to convents. Some might go to a convent a couple of times a year, to visit or to pray. For example, it is common that women go to nuns or monks for spiritual advice. Furthermore, some women have worked together with nuns or deaconesses in social projects. Because tradition and history of convents, monasteries, nuns, monks, saints and martyrs is central to the Coptic religion, nuns and monks are highly honoured and respected. Asking women in society if they had ever thought of becoming a nun, several women told me that they at times gave it serious consideration. Some had even tried as novices. Some women told me that they thought all Coptic girls go through times of thinking that they would like to be a nun and live fully in faith. It is said to be common that in a certain early stage of life one loves God so much and wants to live for him. This is said to change in the late teens, when most women abandon the idea and instead want to get married. Perhaps this change has to do with an awakened interest for the opposite sex, rather than less love for God?

Motivations

But the women who do not give up the idea, how do they maintain the commitment and the longing for the monastic life? When asking about this, the almost constant answer I received was obviously that of religious motivation. The contemplatives, the active nuns and the deaconesses wanted to "be totally for the Lord", to "serve Jesus" and "to love everybody". In general, I found that the nuns and deaconesses I met had wished this since childhood. Some had met nuns as children, and this made a very strong impression on them. Many of the nuns I talked to said that they had known all their life they did not want to get married and live an ordinary family life.

I did not want to devote myself to a small group such as a family. I want to serve God and love everybody, a family would make me devoted to them more than others.²⁴

Out of the answers I got from the active nuns and the deaconesses, the motivation of serving others and live for God only is the highest outspoken priority. They say that the Christian love message is the core of their choice to devotion. Some of them state that in the world there are too many troubles that lead one's attention away from God. In the convent, they have rules to arrange their lives by, and to direct their attention to God. The difference between living as a contemplative or as a socially working nun or deaconess is, among others, the contact with the world outside. The contemplatives are more concerned with the solitude, and distance from the world. The aim and motivation to serve God is the same for both groups, although contemplatives do it mainly by worshipping through prayers and work inside the convent, while the other group serve God through working with people practically and socially outside, in the world. In summary, the devotion to God takes two different forms here: firstly, worship in seclusion, which does not in fact mean a total seclusion from the outer world, since the rest of the world are a part of the daily prayers. Secondly, putting the Christian love message into practical action, working with and for people in society.

I compared the above with motivations for a monastic life among monks assembled by a researcher in the Coptic Orthodox context (Meinardus 1992). The first and main reason he mentions is choosing monasticism in protest against worldliness in the outside world, which was obvious also among the women I interviewed. The second reason is a wish to identify with the church. This seemed visible among the nuns, but more in terms of identifying with biblical role models: St Mary for the contemplatives and

²⁴ A sister in her fifties, who has only been a nun for seven years. She is originally from Cairo, and has all her life served in Church, as well as worked as a translator for a business company. After many years,

Mary and Martha for those who carried out social work, but also other female and male saints, which I will return to later. The third reason given by monks, is the aim to live as an example. This is an explicit reason for both monks and nuns: to follow Jesus and walk in his footsteps. As a fourth reason, Meinardus states ambitions - to reach higher leadership in the Church. Here we can see a difference between male and female motivations, since women cannot reach these positions outside (of their own) the convent. Apart from these four main reasons, Meinardus also mentions religious experiences, senses of guilt, and economic and adjustment problems. The latter reasons were not mentioned by the nuns I have met, but other people have talked about the monasteries or convents as secure places. They mean that, for example, in case of financial troubles, or problems with housing, the convents are secure places for fulfilling these needs. From another perspective, Michel Verdon (1988) writes about the history of monasticism within the Christian medieval Church. Drawing on economic theories from Goody²⁵, Verdon outlines the values concerning marriage and monogamy that the Christian Church has established. The Christian Church prohibited concubinage, polygamy, divorce and adoption, but insisted that marriage, or a life in chastity, were the preferable options. The monogamous marriage and the positive value ascribed to chastity also implied fewer heirs, particularly for celibate, childless persons. Virginity was, and still is, a highly appreciated value within the Church, especially for women, whereby women were encouraged to lead a life in chastity. Eventual finances of a celibate person were often offered to the Church. Goody suggests that the Church's encouragement towards celibacy for women can be seen as a strategy of financial control of women's dowries. Goody finds the strategy as a way of proclaiming the Church's male institutional power over women. Verdon criticizes Goody's approach, and argues that women have not only lived according to men's and the

she decided to be a nun, describing how it took long time to convince her parents. In the latest years, she has lived in the convent of active nuns and worked as headmistress for a school.

²⁵ Read further in *The development of family and marriage in Europe* by Jack Goody, 1983, Cambridge University Press.

Church's decisions. Verdon sees women as agents in their own right. He points out that women who chose to live in chastity were consciously choosing their lifestyle, and directed their economic support willingly. This occurred because Christianity attracted a great number of women and the church offered them a choice an alternative to marriage. Thus, Verdon states that many women preferred to donate their money to the church, instead of having it taken by male relatives or husbands. He also states that life in chastity entailed the possibility for another way of life.

While I cannot apply the economic arguments directly onto the Coptic Church, as they differ in important ways, I still find some useful points in Goody's and Verdon's reasoning. One is Verdon's argument against determinism, and emphasis on women's agency within structure, without, for that matter, ignoring the existence of patriarchal structures. Generally, the image I have received through my informants is that entering a convent is hardly something one is forced to, rather, it is a personal undertaking. Instead of talking about a strictly economic strategy as suggested by Goody, I would argue for seeing the strengthening of monastic culture and values as another form of 'strategy' through the renewal. It is important for the Church to have nuns and monks as living examples. With the process of renewal, the teachings of values seem to have become more important elements in for instance Sunday schools. This might then have attracted more novices. The motivations of the female novices seems to me be closely connected to these values, which are symbolized by the very way in which nuns live. Since the 1970s, the nuns have gained a position of a much higher visibility for the laypeople. Women can nowadays find inspiration for a monastic life also in youth clubs and in church programs for university students (van Doorn-Harder 1995:79). The orthodox monastic lifestyle has thus been more visible to the rest of the society. Before the renewal, women were mostly inspired by the monastic lifestyle of the Catholics (ibid.:80). Then one can conclude that the Church benefits from favouring university graduates among the applicants to the convents,

but the people that the Church claims to serve might also benefit from this fact.

Life stories

The life stories of the women I talked to, show that many of them had troubles convincing their parents of their choice to live entirely for their religion. It is compulsory for the convent that receives novices to get parents' agreement to the woman's decision of a convent life. Although nuns are highly respected in Egypt, many women speak of how their parents wanted them to get married, have families, and to renew the branch of the family. It is common that the father of confession recommends young girls, who have this wish, to enter a convent. His authority may also convince the parents.

One young woman among the active nuns (I have interviewed) had only been in the convent for six weeks. She was from a small village, in the middle of Egypt and was a newly educated lawyer. It was not possible for her to get a job as a lawyer close to the village, yet she was not allowed to live by herself in Cairo where the jobs were. Her family wanted her to stay in the village and get married. She, on the other hand, had been interested in a monastic life, and had before coming to the convent of active nuns, lived among contemplatives. However, her parents were not happy to let her enter a convent, they wanted her to get married and have a family:

My father wanted me to get married. There came men to propose many times, but I refused. My father was very angry because of this. Through the will of God I came here and my parents have been silent since.

Another active nun, about forty years old, from a city in the north of the country told me that when she was young, she spent all her free time in church serving. She had a fervent interest in Christian life and monasticism, and had many discussions with her father of confession. She had been brought up in a very religious environment and had known since she was a

child that she wanted to live as a nun. Still she faced traditional customs before her enter to a convent.

You know our culture – men come to ask about a nice lady. They came to my family when I was very young, before twenty. I refused.

When she was somewhat older than twenty years of age, her father of confession recommended her to go to a convent of active nuns. She was now responsible for children's kindergarten run by the convent.

One contemplative mother in the convent of St Dimyanah in the northeast of the country had contact with the convent since she was about the age of twelve, and had ever since wished to enter. She went to university to study science, and was told by her father of confession to first finish her education and then work for a time to see if her will of a monastic life would not subside. He wanted her to first live an ordinary life, to make sure that she would realize what it was she would give up. She got a good job with a high salary, but still had a strong wish to enter the convent. Her decision was firm, and after some years she took the vows. She was still at this point in time, at the age of about thirty-five, very happy with her choice.

One of the novices in the convent of active nuns came from a village in the south of Egypt. Her mother had seen in her personality and behaviour that she would one day live a monastic life. This novice had no education and was illiterate. She had stayed at home most of her life, and had not been allowed to visit other convents before entering this one. She could not leave the house, since the mother, who was sick, thought she would die if this happened. When the mother passed away, her father wanted her to help him build a new house. Afterwards, she was allowed to come to the convent. In the convent, she was receiving education in her days off from

work. She declared that she did not enjoy any contact with her life 'in the world'.

These women show a firmness in their decisions, illustrated by them not obeying their parents wish for an ordinary family life. By demonstrating their own will, and rejecting an ordinary family life of their own, women are exercising, as Bernhardsdotter puts it, "power as the freedom to non-conformity". As we have seen, the cohesion of groups and the value of the family are very important in Egyptian society. Even if monasticism is a respected alternative, it might be difficult for parents to accept their daughter's decisions. The choice involves a conflict when resisting parental wish of a family life for their daughters. At the same time, monasticism proclaims virtues that are strong in the Egyptian society and within the Coptic religion. The religious motivations are in all cases the most outspoken and obvious. Then there may be other contributing reasons to the decision of life in a convent. Also financial problems and lack of education may influence the decisions, as the convents have the resources to reassure economic security and availability to education. While none of the nuns I have interviewed have explicitly given other reasons than religion as motivation for choosing a convent life, I still think these "other" reasons should be taken into account, with reference to people 'in the world' who have emphasised a wider range of motivations. I do not intend to diminish the religious vocation, but find it important to also mention that life situations are difficult for many women, and may play a contributing role to the vocation. For women with difficult backgrounds, the domain of agency will obviously expand with the possibility to obtain education and economic security. Women who do not accept having to get married, may choose to resist and instead opt for celibacy. Still, since religious vocation plays a crucial part in entering a convent, entering a convent may not be a realistic alternative for many women who seek an alternative to their life.

Escape from ordinary life?

It is strictly forbidden to use nunnery or monasticism as an escape from something else in life. This is why there are very high demands placed upon the women who wish to enter. Tests are obligatory to make sure that the women are capable to handle a monastic life. One mother in the biggest contemplative convent in Cairo, Deir Abu Safein, told me that in her convent, "out of 50, 1 gets in". One sister in a convent of deaconesses stated:

Girls must be successful in everything to come here, in education, in life, in family. Otherwise it is often some kind of escape. This is to be able to handle this life! ²⁶

This was made clear to me in almost every convent I visited, be it contemplative, active, or for deaconesses. In the contemplative convents, it is suggested that the women have a university education. There are, however, exceptions. For the deaconesses requirements differ depending on what knowledge and skills are needed in their work. In many areas the Church need well educated women in order to do a good job within the speciality of each convent. For the sisters of the active convents, higher education is not demanded, although it may be needed in some cases.

The life in convent is not an easy life, and it puts the individual under a lot of pressure. Therefore, leaders of convents stress the importance of not using it as a refuge, but as the wish of being for God only:

It is a special kind of life, for a special kind of people, who can devote themselves and their whole life to God. ²⁷

To make sure that the women that want to enter are suitable, they have "to check themselves" during the time they live as novices. When women express their will of entering, the convent has to investigate if God really

²⁶ A deaconess – Tasoni Irini - living in a convent outside Fayoum, in the middle if Egypt.

²⁷ Stated by Mr Assad, who has performed a lot of research on education, family, women etc within the Coptic Orthodox communities.

wants this life for the applicant. The leaders of the convent also have to study the woman's family and other relational circumstances to ensure that she is not using it as an escape. The following falls under consideration. Firstly, the novice's love for God. Secondly, she has to have something to offer, not merely come for own benefit. Thirdly, she must be capable of working with others, which is very important in a closed community.²⁸

Two of the contemplatives I talked to describe that the spiritual life of the person who wants to be a nun must be very strong and be combined with success in life. To handle the life in a convent is very demanding, it is understood and symbolized as "the position of war – a spiritual war", which is why people must have a very strong faith. The life in a convent is referred to as very difficult, and a battle between doing good and not doing good, or as one nun expresses it: "To pray or to be lazy". One contemplative explained it further:

Here you are always working with your eternal life, through praying and being silent. It is a difficult life.²⁹

What, then, is faith, and can it be described in general terms at all? Faith is individually experienced and the meaning of it contains different things for every person. Tambiah's anthropological approach to religion gives a general hint about his perception of religious faith, as the "special awareness of the transcendent, and the acts of symbolic communication that attempts to realize that awareness and live by its promptings" (1991:6). In relation to the field, one can also refer to the Bible, where it is stated that "faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1). What is important in my discussion with informants is their general reliance on the "evidence of things not seen". In the notion of

²⁸ One mother superior of a deaconesses' convent in Cairo, Sister Phoebe, explains the routines of their convent, which here will serve as a model for all the three kinds.

²⁹ This mother, lives in a convent in Cairo, and has stayed in the convent for twelve years. She entered straight after graduating university as a biologist. She compares the life in convent with studies where one works very hard to achieve an exam – like a big 'cadeaux'. But in the convent, the work with eternity is constant.

evidence lies the notion of what is true, and I find that a personal conviction of an unquestionable truth is what many of these women experience. It is also what the convent search for in their applicants.

The main reason for choosing this way of life is thus religious conviction, but as we have discussed before, for every person there may be additional, contributing reasons. This is well known by the convents, a fact, which is clear in their many ways of reassuring that the religious purpose is the central one. Other reasons may be very personal, but if there are any, they are probably not something one would like to mention, due to the demand of success in every aspect of life, as mentioned before. To live a monastic life is thus an alternative for women, who have other aims than living as wives and mothers. As we have seen, women's options are in many cases limited to two: going to a convent or getting married. In the convents religious conviction is central and excludes some women from choosing a convent life, ensured by the demands of the convent.

Women's roles in the convents

When entering a convent one decides to leave the world, and things that go with it. It does not mean that you cannot see your biological family anymore. Most nuns and deaconesses do see their relatives, although not often. The convent, and the sisters or mothers within it, is the new family. The head responsible for the convents is the mother superior. She serves under both the patriarch and the male head of the convent: a bishop, or a priest, who may also serve as the father of confession.

A structured life

For all convents, for nuns and deaconesses, the vows establish the commitment to the monastic life, to the serving and devotion to God. In comparison to other kinds of vows, such as marriage or commitment to a work, these vows imply asceticism, and generally involve every aspect of life. The three main vows are obedience, chastity and poverty. Banat Maryam – the convent of active nuns - have seven vows. Besides the three

I have just mentioned, these are community life, work, service and silence.

There are different stages that one goes through when entering the convent. Women start as novices in civil clothes. Then after about a year, if the novice expresses a wish to stay on, she reaches a second stage, which is, for active nuns and deaconesses, visible by a beige dress. This is a preparation for the final stage, but implies that you have made a choice of staying, while you are still free to go. One is also given a new name. In the third stage, after the vows are taken, the habit is changed into a grey dress. For the contemplatives the second stage is symbolized by the grey dress, which you wear for about three years, in constant evaluation and self-examining by the woman herself, and by the mother of the convent. This is a stage where it is established whether the woman's intentions are genuine, and whether she is suitable. After this, the vows are taken, and the nun is given a black dress and a new name, whereby a funeral ceremony is held, symbolizing the death of that person to the world. Through the consecration women are considered "dead to the world", and are perceived instead as "angels on earth" (van Doorn-Harder 1995:200). This initiation rite is similar in all the orders. Seeing the convent as a small preparation for the Kingdom, the two existences of temporality and eternity, as described by Bauman, are experienced as almost united.

The vows and the rules of each convent constitute the frame according to which the nuns order their lives. The mother superior of the deaconesses' house mentioned was the first woman to work for the institutionalisation of a convent life for deaconesses³⁰. She explained the meaning of the vows as follows. What obedience means, first of all, is that by taking this vow, *you are giving up your own will* for God. It means a commitment to the convent's system, and obedience to its rules for the purpose of serving God, and, in the case of deaconesses, serving God through serving other people. It does not mean that women are forced to do things they absolutely

³⁰ See footnote 28

do not want. If any problems arise, the rule is that the purpose of what is best for God, for others and for what is good must go before the individual. This is what is embedded in giving up your own will, and hence agreed to by the individual through the vows. The harmony of the convent is important. Sister Phoebe explained: “it is a way of learning constantly, by doing things that you did not choose yourself”. Secondly, chastity means willingly giving up bodily desires. It implies devotion, not only spiritually, but also by giving your whole body to God. During the second stage, the mothers of the convent are especially attentive to whether or not the new women are able to manage this. Chastity involves celibacy and solitude, in sexual and physical terms, but also in an interior sense. This means chastity in not having close relations with friends, relatives and family. The third vow, poverty, implies giving up material things for others, and an aim to not be dependent on or attached to anything in the worldly life. This is expressed partly through clothes, in the fact that nuns and deaconesses look the same and are not concerned with appearance. For example, in the convent where I stayed, there was not one single mirror to be found, (until I got one to keep in my pocket from one of the nuns). The argument here is that when you are working on how to achieve perfection on the inside, you do not need anything else from the outside. This vow also involves poverty in terms of time. Due to the strict rules of the convents, no time is put aside for individual convenience (Williams 1975:120). Both chastity and poverty involves solitude by limiting the attachment to people. The deaconess mentioned explained the difficulty:

It is an issue of struggle – you get attached to people, but not to an extent that it harms you and others. If you get attached more to one person, every one will see your fault step, because we live so close here.³¹

The vows are thus central for the practical life in the convent, since the women obey the will of God, and also the will of the mother of the

³¹ See footnote 28

convent, or the father of confession. The vows involve values of self-sacrifice and self-denial, in not following the demands of the world, and not of one's personal desires.

Drid Williams (1975) has, in her research among Catholic Carmelite sisters in England, made some observations that I find applicable to Orthodox convent life as well. She argues that in order to understand the meanings of the vows, one has to understand the hierarchy involved in the nun's view of the world. The word hierarchy is Greek and consists of "*hieros*", which means 'holy', and "*archo*", meaning 'come first' (ibid.:107). Hierarchy is thus understood in a religious ranking. Williams suggests that all religious orders live in submission to a cosmology and to a structure which involves relation to nature, to time, to questions of life and death, and, most prominently, to God (ibid.). In this way of thinking, religion becomes the given ground for the whole view of one's life, as I argued earlier with reference to Asad. The nun's reference point is not the individual, but the whole, which goes in line with the overall Christian view of the world. In explaining obedience, Williams discusses this in terms of involving the gift of self. One must develop "the capacity to willingly submit to the judgement of another person" (ibid.:120), which includes acknowledging and accepting the fact that others have the same aims, intentions and purity of heart, as one-self. Obedience is connected to self-denial, and Williams finds that it can only be achieved through the greater love that the nuns serve. It means that it is achieved in the context of the convent, where the ideals are the same for the people involved (ibid.).

I would like to add to Williams that while the ideals are definitely understood as general principles, they are experienced differently for every person. According to this understanding, I find that the Coptic nun's obedience does not take away their capacity to act, although it is common to ascribe the reason for choice of actions to God. God is referred to as constantly showing the way of how to act, and all the women in the convents experience it. And I would argue that there lies a feeling of

security in trusting that others live by the same promptings. Although nuns perform actions and make decisions, self-denial implies that the will of one's own should not take the place of what is best for the whole. To give an example, the convent in which I stayed applied the same rules for every woman. Independent of what social background or education women had, one should have a time in every workplace, both inside and outside of the convent, in the social projects, etc, to find out which kind of work and workplace fitted a person best. When having decided what work was most suitable, the convent and the leading nun had to agree. In case of a disagreement, the novice had to obey, with the argument that it was not up to her, but for God to decide. The priority of the leading nun to know God's decision seemed unquestionable, and totally reliable.

Williams compares the convent to other closed institutions, such as a prison. She argues that obedience is a criterion for both, but in the prison obedience is compelled and based on a fear of punishment. In the convent obedience is voluntary, and based on love. One can be compelled to obey and to follow rules, but to compel someone to love would not be as simple (Williams 1975:121). The lives of the nuns cannot be taken out of their own context of the convent, since their formal life is based on the inner and spiritual life. The structure and organization of each convent promotes this.

In the notion of self-denial and self-sacrifice, we find altruism or unselfishness. Relating to celibate cultures, Qirko has investigated the altruism involved in the self-sacrifice through non-reproduction more closely (Qirko in Sobo and Bell 2001:22). He argues that institutionalized celibacy may induce "manipulated altruism" for preserving the good for the community. In various celibate cultures, for example in Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism and Christianity, recognition terms are used. One uses kinship terms, such as 'brother' or 'sister', and one also finds relations through similar appearances: uniform clothing, hairstyle and no individual decoration (ibid.) Qirko argues that when living in celibacy, one has left the biological family or kin, and live with non-relatives. The recognition terms in the institution reinforces the altruistic behaviour, which he means is

natural among kin, and are obvious through the language and other ways in which people inside the convent refer to each other and the world outside. In Christianity, the kinship terms also include “abstract entities”, such as “Holy Father” or “Mother Church” (ibid.:77). The use of kinship terms and other symbols of kinship are thus characteristic for the Christian monastic life, according to Qirko. I believe that Qirko’s theory has a number of valid points, although I think that he focuses too strongly on biology, meaning that altruistic behaviour only seems natural when one is biologically related. Celibacy may be a specific lifestyle in the sense that a biological family of one’s own is out of the question. However, I think that these women understand celibacy as a gift of oneself to God, which involves the full attention and love to all people, i.e. it is not seen as a loss, but as a gain. The use of kinship terms in convents can thus also be seen as overcoming that biological relations are the closest, and hence most likely to be associated with altruism. The kinship terms are used in the convents as symbolizing a “small preparation for the Kingdom”³², where one lives in a family of sisters, although not biologically related but through the same faith. What Qirko hints at, however, is the argument that kinship recognition practices used by the institutions reinforce altruistic behaviour. I believe that these practices make the celibate life easier to handle, also when considering the strong Egyptian sense of family. However, I think that something is missing in his theory. The use of kin recognition terms are not only grounded in manipulative reasons, but also symbolize cores in the convent life, which build on that altruism exists in itself, through faith. The practices can still be criticized, but the adherence to central themes in Christianity is the only way to see it according to the nuns. The social organisation in the convent can be seen as a life-style parallel to that of a family. There are sisters, a mother superior and a father of confession.

There is a father and a mother! The father is the bishop and father of confession,

³² One of the active nuns

and the mother is staying all the time with her children and is responsible for them. It is natural in every family.³³

Tsetis explains that the virtues in monasticism, obedience, humility and chastity are found also in general family life, and are mostly expressed in motherhood (1983: 10). It is thus not only the kinship terms that are used in the convents, but also the gender role pattern attached to these are a reflection of society.

The rules that organize the day differ somewhat between convents. There are also several special periods, such as those before Christmas or before Eastern, when fasting and praying change the ordinary schedules. In the active nuns convent the days normally followed this schedule:

4.45 individual prayers, and communal prayers in the chapel

6.00 a priest or the bishop came to give a mass

7.30 breakfast

Then the women who worked outside left to come back in the evening or the afternoon, and the others went to work inside

13.30 prayer

14.00 lunch, in silence with reading from stories of saints

15-17 silence in the whole convent

17-19 work

19.00 prayer in the chapel

20.00 dinner

Then silence until next morning.

For the contemplatives, the most obvious difference in the time-schedule, was getting up at 3 or 4 o'clock, providing more time for prayers, and an earlier dinner in the evening.

The fixed and set life does not mean that the convent is a cold and quiet place. Although there is time for being silent, there is also time for chats

³³ A mother, Souteria, from a convent for active nuns.

and laughs. I cannot talk for the contemplatives, but I experienced the life in the convent of active nuns as if the women there were relaxed. Activities inside the convent, such as food making and cleaning, were dealt with quite happily during a lot of laughs and talking. The structured and organized days were described by many women as helping them to organize their life, and as strengthening the relation with God. During work one usually prays, and during silence one goes to the cell and reads or prays. A nun described the structured life:

The rules in the convent help me to arrange my life – the limited times for work, the silence during the day helps me to receive from God.³⁴

The ordering of life in the convent is thus crucial both for the individual relation with God, and for the communal life when living very closely to each other. The need for structures in order to focus on the inner life is obvious when compared to the lack of it in the world:

When we were in the world, we could forget about our spiritual life, but here I have a system to control me, to control my life.³⁵

The strict schedule of each day, and the spatial limitations within the closed environment of the convent are the basis for comprehending the meaning and practice of the vows, the rituals and any actions in the convent (Williams 1975:115). What the sisters described above is a different notion of time and space from what we are used to in a 'secular' society. I find this very contrasting to our society, which may signify differences in viewing life. We have rules and times to order our lives, but my experience is that a total reliance on them makes us feel subordinate to something that we do not like. Further, I find that spatially we are in a constant need of change of environment and social connections to enjoy satisfaction. Flexibility and

³⁴ A young sister, 27 years, from the north of the country, who has only been in the convent for six months, but already feels that she is going to stay her whole life.

variety are today highly appreciated values in our society. The life in the convent contradicts these characteristics. Here, I find Williams discussion about two 'maps' among the Carmelites relevant also to my study. She describes one map used to locate oneself in "ordinary geographical space-time", and another one, which consists of "an interior 'territory' of a spiritual and psychological nature in which she is located at the same time" (Williams 1975:114). By using this picture, we may understand the characteristics of a convent life a bit better. Malm has written about specificities in monasticism and asceticism. He suggests that in the consciously selected limitations, such as spatial limitations, our creativity and inner sense are delivered (1999:102). In the same way, I think it is possible to see celibacy and virginity as a consciously selected limitation. As suggested by Shirley Ardener earlier, the nuns renounce the female physical creativity that is delivered in motherhood. Instead, this creativity is put in the relation with God, and in the daily life of the nuns. Many laypeople see nuns as holding special powers and trust their advice, since nuns and monks are seen as closer to God. Simply summed up, the convent life is limited in time and space, through the focus, on several levels, on the inside instead of the outside.

Identification

The women in convents have biblical role models, and the life of the convent is described as "a small preparation for the Kingdom". Inside, women live as in a family, although everyone is from different backgrounds, and even different cultures. I found this further explained by Tsetis, who states that the life in convent and monasteries may be seen in similarity with the Kingdom, since it wants to refuse the patterns of the world today, and urge for an inner transformation and "a liberation from conformism" (Tsetis 1983:51).

³⁵ A sister from Upper Egypt, responsible for a girl's student's hostel, containing more than 100 girls. She has been in the convent for actives' about fifteen years, and has during this time been to England for performing university studies.

The adoration of saints is practised in the convents as well as in the homes of laypeople. For most Coptic people, the saints serve as role models through the way they have lived their life, and through the qualities of their character. It is common to have a special relation to one or a few saints, to have the picture of them on the wall or in a wallet. Each convent and monastery has a specific patron saint. However, for all nuns and deaconesses, Virgin Mary remains the central figure and the general point of identification. She is often described as a mother to all sisters. In the convent, there are plenty of pictures and icons of her. Her purity and virginity are revered qualities, which is reflected in the whole Coptic culture. It is said that the contemplatives perhaps identify with Virgin Mary most singularly, while the other orders also have role models in Mary, who stood by the foot of Jesus' cross, and Martha, who worked for Jesus. They are the examples to follow for the active nuns and deaconesses. Following Jesus, these women work with the poor and oppressed, and claim to identify with them through the monastic lifestyle of poverty. The nun's and deaconesses' purity, i.e. virginity, represents being someone "who has overcome the barrier of sex" as van Doorn-Harder puts it (1995:194).

Is sex a barrier only for women, and, if so, why? In the case of the Coptic nuns, I refer to Biblical explanations. Drawing back in history, there has been an androcentric perspective in theology, as there has been in many other areas. Kari Elisabeth Børresen has explored the typology of gender models in early Christianity, which put the man in a position of God-likeness through the biblical story of the creation. Adam prefigures Christ, whose divinity and humanity is compound in his manhood. Eve prefigures Mary, who also symbolizes the whole church. Børresen writes that this typology is fundamental in Orthodox Christology. The barrier of sex, according to this, is based on the fact that women are not as God-like in themselves as men. Børresen draws on the medieval Church Mothers who accepted the androcentric theology. They strove to live up to ideals of Godlikeness, through "ascetic defeminization, overcoming their sub-male

femaleness by virginity or widowhood” (1995). In the context of identification on women in Egyptian convents, I have already mentioned the first female saint who pretended to be a man, although admittedly due to the non-existence of female monasteries.

By living in virginity one renounces the capacity to give birth to children, and thus renounces what is physically exclusively feminine. But does the nun’s life in celibacy and virginity and the covering of their bodies take away their womanhood? Does the monk’s celibacy take away the fact that they are men? I have not found that the women in the convents identify with men, or would like to be more man-like. I find the identification with Mary, the more important. To conclude along with Børresens reasoning above, I think it is important to consider that virgins play a big part in the Bible and are important for the nun’s way of viewing the world. Following the reasoning of the Bible, humankind was led into sin and death by Eve, but was liberated through the virgin Mary. Disobedience from Eve was thus balanced by the obedience of Virgin Mary (Malm 1999:65). Virgin Mary is seen as the “New Eve”, and nuns are considered to be ‘wise virgins’, due to their similarity with Mary and contrast to Eve. Van Doorn-Harder means that “it is a nun’s vocation to overcome the “old Eve” (1995:11). In this manner, nuns may be perceived as a “third sex”, suggested by Shirley Ardener earlier, and belong to a divine state (Ardener 1978). This is compared to the majority of women that follow Eve and become mothers through sexual contact with men. This worldview assigns female virgins a prominent place. We can here see the identification with Mary, concerning the vow of obedience, but also with the qualities of faith and humility. The Copts consider Mary a perpetual virgin, and interpret the brothers of Jesus to be Joseph’s children by a previous marriage (Van Doorn-Harder 1995:144). This makes us understand how highly appreciated is the value of virginity.

Social hierarchy

To enter a community of a convent involves a long kind of initiation, and imply many rites to go with it. It also implies a very evident social hierarchy manifested by varying dress code and, in some cases, by allotment of tasks and role in decision making. There is great respect for the elder sisters and mother. For example, in the convent I visited, the line to receive the Holy Communion was always formed according to the same order, the grey habits first, then the beige habits, then finally the novices. On entering, one was assigned evident place and a role in the general order of things.

The father of confession, in the case of the convent in which I stayed was the bishop of the diocese, is the one who is ultimately responsible for the sisters' spiritual life. His duty is also to give his opinion and consent to every decision concerning novices and sisters. The special role for the father of confession is that he has the allowance from God to forgive sins. It is only priests and bishops that have this permission, which makes them very important for the nuns' spiritual life. It means also that the mother superior often is dependent on his decision in her decision making. The mother superior may have a different role in some convents, but in most cases, she is the one, whom the sisters or mothers come to when experiencing troubles with praying or need of practical advice. The mother superior is the one who has the responsibility for all the sisters and mothers and all the work and projects of the convent. The power of mother superior can vary from different convents. In the contemplative orders she might enjoy a high degree of authority. Van Doorn Harder writes that if this would turn into despotism, the result would be oppression for the rest of the nuns (1995: 199).

A main task for the institute for deaconesses is their teaching about the Gospel. The deaconesses teach children and women. They are, as mentioned before, with reference to statements by Paul in the Bible allowed to teach boys up to twelve years, at which point men take over.

I often wondered about the scarce information about women and convents. Why did not women write and publish spiritual thoughts and experiences? One male deacon told me that women do not have the right to talk in public on behalf of the Church. Women have further no right to write and publish their own experiences. There are exceptions, for example a former mother superior of Abu Safein, the biggest contemplative convent. She was called Mother Irini and has written spiritual texts. When asking a contemplative, I was told:

We might be allowed /to publish/ but women are different from men in Egypt. We have not thought of doing this that is why no one has done it. No one has thought of writing like this.³⁶

Another of the active nuns told me that no one has cared to write about them, and they themselves had not thought they were able. The domain of writing and reaching a greater public was not considered as their task. Ardener's discussion about 'muted groups' can be applied to this perception. Their experiences were not written down due to the dominant structures in society, due to that "women are different from men in Egypt". This difference seems constantly reinforced by the male structures, in constant adherence to references in the Bible. I understood that Mother Irini, who had produced spiritual texts, was an exception who was highly admired, also among men. Further, women have been mentioned by men, or monks, in older literature but I do not think they were ever described as persons in their own right.

Women in convents have different roles and status within them, but it is most important for the nuns to view themselves as sisters of a family. The social hierarchy is though obvious within the convent, and also in the perspective of the Church as an institution. The notion of hierarchy is viable, in religious ranking and terms, but also in individual and personal

³⁶ A highly educated sister, from the faculty of science, who's life story was referred to before.

terms. The patriarch, the bishops and the priests are all honoured, admired and kissed on the hand. It was common to have the portrait of Pope Shenouda hanging on the wall next to president Mubarak. Nuns also enjoy admiration from laity. By lay women, the nuns are seen as having a high status and are admired for their way of life. Van Doorn-Harder argues that “the nuns represent the ‘New Eve’ and thus surpass in status Coptic laywomen who are married” (1995:204). Many of the nuns and deaconesses may through their work enjoy leading positions in society. In the convent of active nuns, many of those who work outside attain leading positions, such as headmistresses of schools, leaders of development organizations and founders of social projects. The choice to live in celibacy is also admired due to its sacrifice of the family and the love of God. Within the Church though, the tradition is strong, and so is the interpretation of the Christian faith stating that women’s voices should not rise above men’s.

Agency in the convent life

In the beginning of this section, I would like to state that the commonly used term for the nuns working socially is the word ‘active’. This is to distinguish them from the institute of deaconesses and from the contemplatives. They work in the same way as deaconesses, but belong to another branch. This is not to say that the contemplative nuns in some way are passive they simply do not work outside of their convent. Their life is concerned with work such as handicraft and food making within the convent. They also pray on more occasions than the others, and prayers are also forms of activity.

Capacity to act

Does a life in convent mean that one’s capacity to act increases? And how can this be possible, since the main thing with a convent life is to give up your own will? Recalling Ahearn’s arguments of the importance of seeing what agency means for the people involved could provide a clue for a

better understanding. Firstly, the decision to leave the world and enter a monastic way of life is in itself, as argued before, a demonstration of the women using power in the sense of bringing about visible effects. This power involves for Giddens's "the freedom to act otherwise" and Bernhardsdotter describes this power as "the freedom to non-conformity". This is obviously different for different women, some may have had no difficulties with choosing a monastic life, and some may have struggled with discontent from the surroundings. The main reason of a convent life is to devote oneself to God, and by taking the vows, giving up one's own will. This does not take away one's capacity to act, but may ascribe reasons for one's actions to God. The capacity to act, and the freedom, which is involved in the power to act, is perceived as being increased by many of the nuns. I find that one's domain of agency must be seen in relation to what aims one has in life. Some women might experience limitations where others do not. For the women in convents, the aim to serve God could not have been fulfilled otherwise. It is connected with the roles Coptic Egyptian women have in society, and the expected behaviour attached to this. One of the active nuns stated that commitment is a central part of life. Once you are committed fully to something, you are happy and enjoy freedom.

When you are married, you should be committed to a family life, even if you are a religious woman and want to work in church, everybody would criticize you if you go out and leave your husband and children. You have to be committed to what you have chosen.³⁷

Working for other people, or *servicing*, which is a keyword among active nuns and deaconesses, is the central notion in life. To be able to do this, many women felt that they would be restricted by a family life, since the role for women as mothers and wives is a matter of commitment. In daily

³⁷ Sister Agapie

family life within the household, it demands more for women than for men. Another of the active nuns stated:

I have more freedom here. If I marry, I have to be only for my family – husband and children only. Everyday go to work, come back to the house, prepare everything. Now, I am for everybody.³⁸

It is a widely held opinion that being a woman and living a life devoted to helping others is not possible to combine with a family. Another active nun told me that she enjoyed complete freedom in the convent, being able to do the things she likes, and also being prevented from doing things of lesser value to her. She thinks further that, if she would like to work for others, to serve, her husband would not have agreed. It is also a question of responsibility to the family. She would have felt very guilty to leave them and go to work. This means that the domain of agency, or the field of activity, is experienced as greater than if having married. The social relations within a family would have limited this space. Or rather, women's domain of agency would then have concerned other issues.

I find that the freedom that these women experience is concerned with the way of living in celibacy, and hence virginity. Drawing on feminist theories, I refer to Simone de Beauvoir. Elaborated by Malm, her standpoint is that the body is an obstacle to the freedom of women. Giving birth to children is constantly seen as a problem, which limits the space for women's possibilities to develop themselves. She means further that developing one's inner life as a woman implies a renunciation of the female body (Malm 1999: 57).³⁹ I find it applicable to the nuns' description of how a family life would have restricted their space to act within the patriarchal structures of society. Although de Beauvoir does not refer directly to a monastic lifestyle, I find that freedom in the Coptic convents is experienced in a similar way. Again, the women in convents are women with special aims, with a will to live for God and to serve others

³⁸ Sister from the north of the country, who's life story was referred to before.

³⁹ Read further in *Det Andra Könet* by Simone de Beauvoir, 1995, Stockholm: Norstedts Förlag.

and they lead a life, which is not for everybody, even though this will can be found among other women and men as well. The combination of this and family life thus seems more difficult for women, depending of course on backgrounds, location and economical conditions. The longing for devotion has given the choice of a monastic life priority for women in convents. They chose this instead of getting married and trying to change their role from within the marriage, which might be difficult due to traditional gender roles and the structures of society. What I describe as agency, the nuns describe as sense of freedom and commitment. They mean that the life in convent brings them greater possibility to do what they want. Still, none of them have been married. Their opinions may refer to what conditions were vivid in their upbringing and the surroundings.

Rituals and agency

Here, I will focus on the most common rituals in the convents, and give an explanation on how women use these rituals in their daily life as well as how rituals reinforce one's position within the social domain. The central and most performed ritual in convents is praying, both communal and in solitude. This is common for both contemplatives and the other orders. Communal prayers are taken from either a prayer book, the Akbeillah, or from psalms in the Bible. These are recited or sung. There are special prayers for each of the special occasions during the year. While praying, "adoration" is common, which means kneeling to the floor when the word 'holy' is mentioned in the prayers. Praying also involves kissing and touching icons and pictures of saints that decorate the walls of the chapels. The mass and the Holy Communion are, for the most, celebrated every day. In the Coptic Orthodox mass the Holy Communion is central, and most of the duration of the mass is concerned with praying and blessing of the bread and the wine, and confirmation of one's belief. Non-Orthodox Christians are not allowed to partake in the Holy Communion but can receive a blessing. Another central ritual is fasting, which is observed

during about one third of the year (not in one stretch). In the convent of the active nuns, the fasting is observed every Wednesday and Friday. In certain times, for example before Easter, some of the nuns have only one meal a day. Due to the work, it is not possible to abstain from food completely, but this is different among the contemplatives. For many of them, their father of confession decides their meals individually.

Praying and fasting is very important for the women in convent and it is explained that this kind of asceticism derives from the Holy Fathers and from the Bible. To keep this discipline is seen to strengthen the body and the spirit. Praying and fasting are understood as "weapons to keep the evil away". By using the body, it is believed, the fasting and praying deepens the inward search. In the same way we find that celibacy in itself is also a way of using the body for the same purpose, to strengthen the body and spirit in strive for purity. The Orthodox Church sees itself as a continuation of Christ, and has thus regulated these practices. It is not only nuns and monks that fast, it is also common among lay people. One active nun explained the importance of rituals, and how she used them in her life:

I take the power from God through the prayers, through the Holy Communion, through my reading, through my silent time and through fasting. If I don't pray, I don't have any power, any energy.⁴⁰

The special life of vows, rules and rituals in the convent, is crucial for the life of serving, and the power and capacity to act is explained as dependent and connected to the relation with God. Through rituals, for example, the Holy Communion, the relation with God is stated, and the faith is played out and strengthened. The whole sense of being able to function and fulfil the aim to serve can be seen here as intertwined with their trust in God, and the power from God gives thus power to serve and to act.

⁴⁰ See footnote 38.

Rituals like the mass and the Holy Communion shows the human's ability and willingness to belong to God. It also shows and establishes certain roles performed by those involved. The priests, bishops or monks are the only ones allowed to perform the mass, and to bless and administer the Holy Communion. The rituals for initiation and the different stages of the life in convent, visibly symbolized by the different colours of habit, are also reconstructing the social hierarchy. One's domain of agency is thus related to where one is situated within the hierarchy, and whether one is a woman or a man. This seems evident in some rituals, and also in other areas such as places of work. The hierarchy in itself seems self-evident, since every woman has their special place and their special work. It is also known that the oldest ones have been novices once.

Nuns and the surroundings

In this part, I will discuss the diaconal work, *the service*, among the active nuns and deaconesses. I do not mention the contemplatives, due to their seclusion, although they find themselves connected with surroundings, through their prayers for lay people outside of the convents. However, I find that the active nun's and deaconesses' agency consists to a great extent of their possibility to perform social work in society. Their devotion to service makes them very visible in society, and their projects are of great importance, especially for women and children. The diaconal work is directed at everybody, though, without making gender differences, and includes also the mentally and physically handicapped, old people etc. There are many special projects for girls and women, since their needs are often referred to as involving special problems, and their issues might not have been taken into consideration before. The actives serve Muslims as well as Christian. When it comes to teaching, women are, as previously mentioned, not allowed to school boys older than twelve years of age. The active nuns are an exception though; they are permitted to talk on public occasions. Perhaps this may be a reason why they are not fully accepted as

nuns by the Church, since they cross a boundary by doing this. Today there are many nuns and deaconesses working to end the practice of female circumcision and, by educating girls and women in villages, prevent early marriages and early childbirth. Religious organizations, some led by nuns, spread information about the non-religious origin of female circumcision, and have developed various ways of educating women, girls and men, about the dangers caused by FGM. One means of education is role-play, since in various areas of the country illiteracy is widespread, especially among women and girls. Many projects are concerned with women's rights, and informative projects on health care and nutrition are important factors in these, in combination with spiritual service. I attended lectures for young village women on health care, nutrition, and social matters. The lectures in literacy often function in a way of combining these issues, by reading about women's situations and learning to write about these topics. This gives ground for discussions and openness on issues otherwise closed for discussion. In the Egyptian society, women in many areas are exposed to great difficulties if they do not follow traditional expectations. For example, in case of pregnancy before marriage, due to shame and dishonour there, threats from family and relatives are a possible consequence. For girls and women with problems like this, the nunneries offer sanctuaries in special homes attached to the convents. Women are safe within the walls of the convent, and can stay there until they are able to return to society. For safety reasons, they are moved from their home area, and the return to society may then take place in a different area of the country. In many deaconesses' projects, special homes for girls with difficult social backgrounds, as well as special homes for unmarried mothers are common. The backgrounds of these women and girls vary, from urban areas or countryside, many are orphans, and some have fled from problems within families. I think that the expanding work directed towards women has created a positive picture of the nuns among the receivers in society. This might be a factor that has led to an increased interest of the nun's way of life, strengthened by the fact that they are

women committed to work and are independent of marriage and family life. Their example may motivate young women and girls to engage in similar work, for example to fight FGM. However, there are also those who are critical of the nuns. One woman who used to work in a project led by nuns described how the nuns use the rules of nunneries to order people on the outside in an authoritarian way. She meant that one must separate the rules of the convent from the rules of the world.

The Daughters of St. Mary claim that through social work they serve both Muslims and Christians. It is explained that through their lifestyle they gain respect from both religions. One active nun told me that they do not intend to convert any Muslim, but to instead show their religious faith through their work. It means that faith is constantly played out in the lifeworld, since this motivates the women to perform service.

Freedom

In the concluding paragraph of this chapter, I want to summarise what aspects of freedom that are experienced in the convent life. The freedom for women in convents involves a freedom from society, and from the restrictions involved in obeying parents, husbands or brothers. They feel free to be individuals in their own right. Freedom also involves security in the communal life among sisters, as well as in the organizational structure of the convent. This facilitates the responsibility for the spiritual life, knowing that there is a system set for this matter specifically. There is spiritual assistance, guides, in the vicinity. I think that this freedom involves an outspoken *dependency* to God and to other people.

It is interesting to contrast the kinds of freedom that nuns experience with aspects of freedom we are used to in a secularized society. In our secularized society, we often characterize freedom as "freedom from" restrictions set out by the institutions of society (Bauman 2000:88). The freedom of the individual to manage one's own business is very important. Here *independency* is a criterion for the sense of freedom, which is adhered to in most modernized and secularized societies. In the Egyptian-Coptic

context, their view on many social institutions, such as the family, the Church and the convents are contradicting this independency. The nun's way of life, on the one hand, challenges independence as a criterion for freedom, due to their dependency on God and the spiritual guides. On the other hand, they are independent in choosing a monastic lifestyle and renouncing family life.

8. CONCLUSION

This study has concerned women's experiences of a life in convent and of life in the Egyptian society. I wanted to find the relations between the increasing number of women in Coptic Orthodox convents and the situation of Coptic women in Egyptian society. This has also involved an investigation into how the ideals of monasticism are spread in the Coptic-Egyptian society. By focusing on women's domain of agency, the gender role pattern is revealed, which is crucial for understanding the opportunities for women in the patriarchal Egyptian society. Sobo and Bell argue that the status of celibate women is related to the range of roles and options that are available to women outside the religious sphere (2001:21). As we have seen, Egyptian women's capacities to make their own decisions have increased because of their possibility to study and have a professional occupation. This makes it nowadays easier to choose one's own way of life, but the choice is still dependent on one's social and economical background. However, the study shows that many women only have two alternatives to choose between – to get married or to enter a convent. Alternatives like living by oneself or outside of marriage are not accepted. We have seen that nuns' backgrounds are various, and cannot be separated from their choice of lifestyle. However, the main motivation for the nuns and deaconesses is religious. The women I met have all described their faith as the most important thing in life. It seems likely that the Coptic Orthodox renewal's deliberate targeting of youth and women through the establishment of new institutes for deaconesses, has brought about an increased fascination and interest in the virtues of monasticism. These

virtues correspond to values respected in the Egyptian society, such as purity and virginity. These are not only Christian values, but also Islamic, cultural and social values of the Middle East. I think further that nuns' and deaconesses' increased activities among women and girls affects the view on nuns and monasticism positively, among both women and men.

By choosing a life in celibacy, women are adopting a lifestyle alternative to that of a traditional family. Seeing nuns as a distinct category within the patriarchal structures of the Church, they experience an increase in their opportunities. In the convents, nuns can enjoy privileged positions, regardless of backgrounds or education. The domain of agency for women in convents involves other things than for married women in society. Nuns may concentrate fully on their work and on their inner life, which they claim would not have been possible 'in the world', due to women's commitment to the family. In a way, the nuns overcome the 'protection' and confinement of women to the household. For nuns, protection is shown in other ways. It can be seen in the convents' location in the city to protect them from dangers of the desert. The use of 'protection' can be seen as a controlling instrument, mainly used by men, based on the idea of the different natures of women and men, where women are seen as the weaker.

The idea that the status of celibate women depends on the religious status for celibate men in patriarchal societies is applicable also in the Coptic context (Sobo and Bell 2001:21). The status of the Coptic nuns is hence related to the status of monks in Egypt, which, among the Coptic people, is very high while they also receive respect from many Muslims. Thus, nuns have increased status within Coptic Egypt from many women in society. Still, nuns depend on men for important things in their daily life, such as confession and the Holy Communion. When it comes to decisions outside the convents, the Church's institutional authorities are run by men. However, nuns enjoy spiritual authority, and are able to give advice to lay people. Some Coptic Orthodox people claim that the trends of the raise of women's rights in society are not applicable to tasks within the Church.

This does not affect the spiritual equality, but I think that, for example, nuns and deaconesses would gain increased influence if they could teach everybody, including teenage boys and men. It is interesting to consider religious practices in relation to developments in society. How, in this case, the interpretation of the Bible justifies women's and men's domains of agency. This seems to depend on whether to interpret the Bible literally or to read it in a contemporary context: to separate God's word from human, mostly male, interpretations of God's word. When viewing religion as self-given, the questioning of Biblical statements seems irrelevant, and a blasphemy. Maybe this interpretation of religion upholds the patriarchal structures and causes the identity conflict within the country, between a secularized modern state and a religious state. Yet, even if women are not part of the highest domain of decision-making, they are still important role models for other women. Do nuns and deaconesses, through their lifestyle, inspire women to expand their domains of agency 'in the world'? Or do they contribute to the use of protection and to maintain strongly established values in Egypt? This study has shown the dual case of women's increased agency when living in convent, while they embrace the values that uphold limitations for women in society. I hope that continued development of women's rights within society and religion will find ways to overcome these limitations.

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