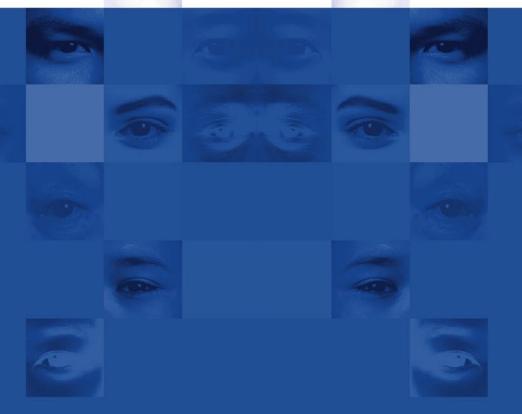# missio

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Human Rights

Cornelis Hulsman

The context of the brutal attack on a Coptic Orthodox church in Alexandria on January 1, 2011

Analysis based on
15 years of research
in Muslim-Christian
relations in Egypt

The Human Rights Office aims to promote awareness of the human rights situation in Africa, Asia and Oceania. In pursuit of this objective we are actively involved in human rights networking and foster exchanges between **missio**'s church partners in Africa, Asia and Oceania and church and political decision makers in the Federal Republic of Germany. This Human Rights series comprises country-by-country studies, thematic studies and the proceedings of specialist conferences.

This publication presents in six chapters excerpts from Arab-West Report articles that demonstrate the complexity of Muslim-Christian relations. A close look at the recent church bombing in Alexandria shows that neither the attack nor the violent Christian response can be seen without properly understanding the current sectarian atmosphere in Egypt. Church and government policy, probably unintentionally, have contributed to this atmosphere, as have the media and the emotional responses of people involved. In response to this monstrous attack, many Christians in popular areas have attacked Muslim and government targets. This response is the result of deep frustration. The reasons for such frustration must be understood. While some Muslims in these areas fought back, others made strong efforts to show their sympathy with their Christian friends for the brutal attack in Alexandria. The attack in Alexandria was preceded by unfounded and dangerous accusations in Egyptian media that Egyptian churches and monasteries were stockpiling weapons. The Egyptian media also highlighted certain statements by Metropolitan Bīshūy, presenting them out of context, thereby contributing to the tension rather than trying to understand the background of these unfortunate statements (understanding is not agreeing!). My lecture for Cairo University summarized 15 years of research on Muslim-Christian relations, including tensions. Most tensions are related to conversions and disagreements about church building. A great deal of media reporting leaves much to be desired. In fact, misreporting and false accusations add considerably to sectarian tension. We should recognize the diversity in Muslim interpretations of Islamic holy texts. Claims that Islam alone is to be blamed for all evil or that Muslims who disagree with Osama Bin Ladin's understanding of Islam do not understand the "real Islam" are plain wrong. They are also dangerous because such claims play into the hands of extremists who would love to see nothing more than deepening struggles between Muslims and non-Muslims.

Cornelis Hulsman (1955) is a Dutch sociologist. He studied development sociology with a focus on Islam and Christianity in the Middle East at Leiden University. He wrote his MA thesis about the causes that led to the Armenian genocide in 1915. Between 1984 and 1994 Hulsman occupied several leading functions in the Dutch emigration service. Meanwhile he and his wife Sawsan Gabra Ayoub Khalil, an Egyptian Coptic Orthodox engineer, continued to engage in Muslim-Christian dialogue and seek support for poverty-stricken Egyptians. In 1994 he gave up his function as director of the Stichting Dienstverlening Emigratie Nederland (Dutch emigration service foundation) and left with his family for Egypt in order to investigate Muslim-Christian tensions as reported in various western media. In 1997 they founded the Religious News Service from the Arab World, which later became Arab-West Report. In 2005, they founded the Center for Intercultural Dialogue and Translation. In 2008, after a procedure of over three years, they succeeded in obtaining Egyptian Ministry of Social Solidarity recognition for the Center for Arab-West Understanding they had helped to establish. Throughout the years Cornelis and Sawsan have investigated hundreds of news items and developed a huge database, to which dozens of students have contributed. In 2008, HRH Prince Hassan bin-Talaal launched their Electronic Network for Arab-West Understanding. In August 2010, they returned to the Netherlands for the education of their children. They remain, however, committed to efforts to reduce tensions between Muslims and Christians.

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Introduction

The brutal attack on a Coptic Orthodox Church in Alexandria on January 1, 2011, shows that strong efforts are needed to counter religiously motivated extremism. In order to do so, we need to understand why people want to join extremist groups in the first place.

Extremism and tensions between Muslims and Christians in Egypt also affect Muslim/non-Muslim relations in Europe. This is partly due to the very rapid distribution of images through the media but also because extremists have committed political murders (for example, Theo van Gogh), and carried out bomb attacks (for example, London and Madrid). They have also threatened to attack Egyptian migrant churches in Europe. Extremism has resulted in anger and fear but emotional responses are often not helpful in analyzing the facts.

Europe is increasingly multicultural with large numbers of migrants having entered from Muslim countries but this has also brought tensions from these countries into Europe. When Muslim extremists attack a Christian church, a first tendency of many Europeans is to blame Muslims in general, which in turn adds to the tensions instead of addressing them.

When investigating tensions it is important to focus on details. Very often people write texts that are in line with their ideological convictions, but we should always be ready to have our own ideological convictions challenged by proven, empirical facts. We have often seen that ideologically motivated people neglect empirical facts or present claims as facts while having no evidence for them. When ideologies are challenged by facts we are protected from our own interpretations becoming too radical.

I have worked for 15 years in Cairo with a team collecting and searching for empirical facts. This resulted in a very large electronic library, called Arab-West Report, containing over 26,000 media reviews and hundreds of reports, mostly about Muslim-Christian relations in Egypt but also covering other countries. In addition we looked at the impact of this on Arab-West relations.

Media reviews show the great variety of opinions existing in Egypt, many of these influenced by the ideologies of authors and the media they represent. We also looked at foreign media reporting about Muslim-Christian tensions in Egypt. We investigated many tensions that were reported in media and documented the facts and opinions found in the locations we visited, often showing discrepancies and shortcomings in reporting.

Due to ideological biases many facts get lost in reporting. We try to provide interpretations that include all uncovered facts, even if they do not fit our own previous theories.

Our archive shows that relations are much more complicated than is often reported. It is this background that is needed to understand mutual relations between Christians and Muslims.

This publication presents in six chapters excerpts from Arab-West Report articles that demonstrate the complexity of Muslim-Christian relations:

1) A close look at the recent church bombing in Alexandria shows that neither the attack nor the violent Christian response can be seen without properly understanding the current sectarian atmosphere in Egypt. Church and government policy, probably unintentionally, have contributed to this atmosphere, as have the media and the emotional responses of people involved.

2) In response to this monstrous attack, many Christians in popular areas have attacked Muslim and government targets. This response is the result of deep frustration. The reasons for such frustration must be understood.

3) While some Muslims in these areas fought back, others made strong efforts to show their sympathy with their Christian friends for the brutal attack in Alexandria.

4) The attack in Alexandria was preceded by unfounded and dangerous accusations in Egyptian media that Egyptian churches and monasteries were stockpiling weapons. The Egyptian media also highlighted certain statements by Metropolitan Bīshūy, presenting them out of context, thereby contributing to the tension rather than trying to understand the background of these unfortunate statements (understanding is not agreeing!).

5) My lecture for Cairo University summarized 15 years of research on Muslim-Christian relations, including tensions. Most tensions are related to conversions and disagreements about church building. A great deal of media reporting leaves much to be desired. In fact, misreporting and false accusations add considerably to sectarian tension.

6) We should recognize the diversity in Muslim interpretations of Islamic holy texts. Claims that Islam alone is to be blamed for all evil or that Muslims who disagree with Osama Bin Ladin's understanding of Islam do not understand the "real Islam" are plain wrong. They are also dangerous because such claims play into the hand of extremists who would love to see nothing more than deepening struggles between Muslims and non-Muslims.

Our electronic magazine Arab-West Report has systematically followed Egyptian Arab media on Muslim-Christian and Arab-West relations since 1997, reviewed around 26,000 media articles and provided dozens of analytical reports showing the reasons for tensions (which includes government, church, Muslim organizations, media and political activists). We have made substantial efforts with limited funding to make these findings as accessible as possible to scholars, students, media and other interested parties.

We should realize that there is a great deal of misinformation floating around. Furthermore, we should not spare any effort to understand and address these causes! This, in my opinion, should include:

– Building an institute with a reputation to effectively provide open criticism of the public statements of leaders, activists, scholar and journalists who contribute to tensions and misinformation.
– Addressing poverty, unemployment and insufficient education in Egypt.
– Creating greater transparency in governmental and religious institutions in Egypt, thereby helping to avoid the manipulation of information.
– Encouraging self-criticism in one's own circle. This involves stopping the cycle of simply blaming the other for various ills and instead looking at how the performance of one's own country, religious institute or society can better reduce the tensions we are now witnessing.

Do Western countries and Egypt have the political will to address these issues? This requires more than just a verbal commitment. It is obvious that Europe, Egypt and other Muslim countries will have to cooperate in addressing extremism and tensions in society. There is a lot that Europeans can learn from experiences in different Muslim countries. It also requires the funding of initiatives that counter the causes of continual clashes between people of different cultures and beliefs.

Government's denial of sectarian tension is wrong response to Alexandria attacks[*]

The Egyptian government, Muslims and Christians need to work together to address the growing sectarian tension in Egypt in order to prevent future attacks, such as the New Year's Day bombing of a Coptic Orthodox church in Alexandria, which left 23 dead and dozens wounded.

If you need further evidence that Muslim-Christian relations in Egypt are deteriorating, then look no further than last night's attack on the Coptic Orthodox Church of the Two Saints, Saint Mark and Pope Peter in Alexandria, which left 23[1] dead, dozens injured and an outbreak of Muslim/Christian rioters hurling stones, bottles, and sectarian slogans at one another.[2]

Anna Lindh Foundation President André Azoulay sent out an excellent press release today in which he rightly stated that the attackers aimed at creating a wedge between Muslims and Christians. This is true, and first reports indicate that they have succeeded in doing so.

Responsibility for the attack was claimed by Al-Qāʻidah, the same terrorist organization that attacked a church in Baghdad in October, leaving 68 worshippers dead. References were made following both attacks to the Egyptian women Wafāʼ Costantine and Kāmīliyā Shihātah – women who were married to priests, but who had indicated that they wished to convert to Islam. Muslims widely believe they were prevented from doing so because of church pressure.

The first Egyptian government statements have come from the governor of Alexandria, Ādil Labīb, claiming that the Alexandria attack "has nothing to do with sectarianism," simply blaming Al-Qāʻidah. President Husnī Mubārak later stated that foreign elements were responsible for this awful attack.

The president and governor are of course right in holding Al-Qāʻidah responsible, but the governor is wrong in stating the attack had nothing to do with sectarianism. How else could the governor explain the riots that followed this outrageous attack?

Al-Qāʻidah and other extremist groups can only function in areas where there is strong discontent. Only here they can only recruit people who are willing to die for their cause. Al-Qāʻidah's aim is to weaken governments in countries they are targeting. The Egyptian government does not have much credit in the eyes of many middle and lower class Egyptians. The attack, followed by Muslim-Christian rioting, further undermines the credibility of the government.

Attacks on worshippers in churches are a relatively new phenomenon in Egypt. Most previous attacks involving church buildings focused on the buildings themselves, not people. These attacks were not carried out during times of worship. The first attack on Christian worshippers was in al-Fikriyyah / Abū Qurqās in 1997, which left 8 Copts dead. The second time worshippers were targeted was in the same Saint Paul and Peter Church in Alexandria in 2006, leaving one person dead. Then nearly one year ago in Naj' Hammādī gunmen killed six Copts outside a church after Christmas Eve celebrations. The other such deliberate attack is this one in Alexandria, after New Year's celebrations.[3]

These attacks on random worshippers send a clear message: kill Christians!

Certainly, the great majority of Muslims oppose such atrocious attacks. But the fact remains that a number of Muslims are so vehemently anti-Christian that crimes such as these are justified in their eyes. Al-Qā'idah is able to recruit people to carry out such crimes only because sentiment such as this exists. Egyptian authorities would do well to research the ground for Egyptian Muslims to join Al-Qā'idah or any other extremist group.

I recently visited Naj' Hammādī, the scene of last year's Coptic Christmas Eve attack, as well as al-'Umrāniyyah (Cairo), the scene of recent clashes in November between Christians and Egyptian police over a community service center that Christians wanted to convert into a church. From my discussions it was obvious that both Christian and Muslim youth hold a strong general resentment of the government. "We are treated like shit," said a Muslim hairdresser who lives in a slum of Cairo where houses are built so close to each other that sunlight hardly reaches the streets. Both Muslim and Christian youth complain about a lack of employment, and if a job is found they feel underpaid. In an environment with so few opportunities for youth it is no wonder that some of them feel attracted to extremist groups.

However, it is not just social ills that play a role. There are anti-Christian sentiments in the country. Egyptians, both Muslims and Christians, often respond emotionally. But in their emotions they tend to make things worse. It is thus wrong for Christians to accuse Islam, or all Muslims, of being "anti-Christian," as this is not only untrue, but also unprofitable, since such stupid accusations tend to drive people apart instead of seeking solutions together.

The claims, made earlier this year by Muhammad Salīm al-'Awwa, that Christians store weapons in churches and monasteries has certainly contributed to such a sectarian climate. The claims are not true, but certainly add tension. For their part Christians deny the use of weapons, but this is not quite true either. Many people in Upper Egypt carry weapons, Christians included. In fact, eyewitnesses saw Christian youth throw self-made Molotov cocktails at Egyptian police in November 2010.

Bishop Bīshūy made, in a private meeting, a statement concerning the validity of certain Qur'anic verses in the early period of Islam. The statement was picked up by a journalist and hurled into the public domain, creating much havoc. Pope Shenouda then rightly blamed the responsible media for their vicious role in inflaming this debate. Shortly after this Bishop Bīshūy again stood in the center of a controversy with a statement he made that Muslims are guests in Egypt (thus insinuating a widespread Christian sentiment that Muslims do not really belong in Egypt). This only made things worse, as did the way Egyptian media dealt with this issue.

I have commented on both the remarks of Muhammad Salīm al-'Awwa and Bishop Bīshūy in AWR, 2010, Week 43, Article 32.

Christians are also to be blamed for the sectarian climate

In 2004, the church rejected the divorce request by Wafā' Costantine, the wife of a priest who initiated the procedure to convert to Islam through filing a police report. Since Islamic law does not permit Muslim women to be married to Christian men, many Christian women who want to obtain a divorce subsequently convert to Islam, since this automatically results in divorce. Christians falsely claimed she was kidnapped and the church put pressure on the government to meet with the woman. The government gave in. It took clergy four days to "convince" her to remain Christian. Wafā' Costantine made a statement in this regard before the prosecutor general, before disappearing into a monastery, never to be seen again in public.

From the outset there was an uproar from Muslims, including Salīm al-'Awwa, who repeatedly stated that unacceptable pressure was applied on an adult woman to remain Christian. Since the church would not let anyone meet with her, the indications are indeed strong that this was not a voluntary decision.

In the summer of 2010, Kāmīliyā Shihātah, also the wife of a priest, similarly wanted to convert to Islam in order to force a divorce. Here, too, the church used pressure on the government to convince her not to continue her conversion. However, the Shihātah case is slightly different from the Costantine issue in that a videotape supposedly exists in which Shihātah stated that she wishes to remain Christian. I have not seen this video (I was only told that it exists), but certainly a similar statement by Costantine does not exist.

Many secular people wonder why the debate regarding the conversions of one or two Egyptian women could cause such turmoil. But in a highly religious society like that in Egypt, conversions in either direction are unimaginably sensitive and almost always cause tensions when knowledge of them becomes public. Furthermore, conservative Muslims believe that one can convert to Islam, but one can

never leave Islam, and certainly not if this news is made public. Wafaʾ Costantine has also become a rallying point for Western-educated Egyptians (mostly Muslims, but also some Christians), because the information about her is ripe with indications that she was left no choice by church officials.

Additionally, Christians tend to rally in support of their church. They do so in staunchly supportive church positions, withdrawing into a virtual ghetto. The result is that contact with Muslims is greatly reduced. In such a climate it is easy to hurl general accusations at Muslims in general, thus adding to the polarization of Egyptian society. Christians are also better able to present their case to Western media. For example, such Western media outlets usually portray the image that the Egyptian government issues hardly any (if any at all) permits for Christian church buildings, a claim which is not true. Muslims recently responded with an email message showing that many new churches have recently been built. In summary, generalizations help to deepen polemics instead of seeking solutions to problems that do indeed exist.

The government is also to be blamed.

Sectarian tensions in Egypt focus primarily on church construction and conversions. It would be a great help if the government were to implement a clear law on church building that mandates transparency on all decisions made in the process. As the process currently stands, it seems that personal relations and internal security discussions play the primary role in determining whether a church will be built. A unified law for building houses of worship was proposed many years ago, but years of deliberations have made Christians sceptical about whether the government even wants to issue a unified law for building houses of worship.

It is also important for there to be transparency related to religious conversions. The government's decision to abolish meetings between converts to Islam and clergy came about as a result of anger because of the church's pressure in the Wafaʾ Costantine conversion case. While the church's pressure may have been wrong, the government's response only made it worse.

I have heard many stories of government officials blaming the Coptic Orthodox Church for having formed a "state within a state." This is true, but both government and state are responsible for that development. Over the years, Christian insecurity (whether social, financial or religious) has made Christians more reliant on the support of their church. This has strengthened church leaders who, in turn, have encouraged Christian dependence on the church. If the government wants to reverse that trend, then it should first of all provide Christians with security.

Government officials denying sectarian problems are like ostriches sticking their heads in the sand. There are clearly sectarian problems in Egypt that provide fertile soil for people who wish to carry out atrocious attacks such as the one in Alexandria and they need to be addressed! The government, along with Christians and Muslims, should not let extremists drive a wedge between them. The only way to prevent this from happening is through addressing the causes for frequently recurring sectarian tensions in Egypt.

Angry Christian responses following the January 1 attack*

von Jayson Casper**

Since the bombing there have been angry Christian demonstrations throughout Egypt, many of them violent. A representative video, with English subtitles, can be found on the Al-Miṣrī al-Yawm website. The following is a sampling of recent events. All statements are as reported in various Egyptian newspapers (on our website you can track the links to the various sources).

Immediately after the bombing local Christians swarmed to the scene and clashed with security forces. It is also reported that they stoned a nearby mosque.

On Monday, January 3, the demonstrations began in earnest. During the funeral of the deceased Christians chanted anti-government slogans. Demonstrations broke out at the papal cathedral in Cairo, in which 43 policemen were injured. Three of the most prominent Islamic leaders in the country had come to pay their condolences in the cathedral to Pope Shenouda, but their cars were assaulted while there. 90 people were injured during demonstrations in Shubrā, a section of Cairo with a large Christian population. Thousands of Christians joined with activists in a protest in downtown Cairo, smashing 20 cars. One headline read: "Angry Coptic demonstrations sweep Cairo and governorates." A popular protest chant was: "With our souls and our blood we will defend the cross."

On Tuesday the violence continued. In Giza protestors blocked the ring road around the city. In one location in Cairo demonstrations led to the injury of 20 Christians and 37 policemen. Throughout the country 125 policemen were injured.

There is substantial irony in the Christian community, understood to be beleaguered by security violence, now violently confronting the security apparatus. Elsewhere there are emerging signs of good. The sources above also describe significant outpourings of interreligious protest against the bombing. Thousands of Muslims and Christians demonstrated together in both Cairo and Alexandria. They carried signs uniting the cross and the crescent, lifting high their Bibles and Qur'āns.

Certain Muslim groups have responded creatively. Eight thousand Muslims have signed up for an initiative to 'go to the churches and die with them', proposing to create human shields around church locations. In the aforementioned neighborhood of Shubrā Muslims went to the churches and distributed sweets and flowers to entering churchgoers.

It must be understood that the majority of violent Christian protestors come from poorer and underdeveloped sections of urban Egypt. They tend to be young and their poverty and lack of education, shared by all Egyptians in their areas, contributes to their easy radicalization. In one particularly disconcerting scene Muslim counter-protestors chanted at Christians, "With our blood and our souls, we defend you Prophet Muhammad." Clashes erupted between Muslims and Christians in circumstances like these. Religion plays a role, but social, political and economic factors lay the groundwork.

Spontaneous Muslim responses following the attack

Some Muslims in popular areas engaged in fights with angry emotional Christians who, had also targeted some Muslim objects, but many other Muslims expressed sympathy for their Christian friends.

H. H. Pope Shenouda wrote in his January 6 Christmas letter to all Coptic Orthodox churches in the countries of emigration: "The painful circumstances that happened to us have brought compassion upon us from all sides, as well as extreme care and eagerness in protecting the churches, as well as care for our cause. Also, tribulation, by its nature, makes the soul closer to God. And we believe that God is the Protector and Helper, and that unless the Lord guards the city, the watchman stays awake in vain."

Many Christians have seen the responses from their Muslim friends. I would like to provide some texts from unsolicited emails I received following the attack:

Rev. Radi Atallah, Presbyterian Church Alexandria, wrote on January 3:
More than 40 leaders, Muslims and Christians, visited me and agreed that we are different, but one nation. Efforts will be made to assist around 200 very poor families from the attack area to help them. Muslims and Christians agreed to open monthly discussions about our problems in Alexandria society.

Afaf Badran, architect and environmental designer, wrote on January 7:
"I have just returned from the Holy Virgin Church, where my daughter and I volunteered to stand as a human shield at its gate and attend part of the ceremonies to give support to our Christian friends. This has been a call initiated by Muslim scholars. In this church we were only three volunteers. However, we saw that the security was tight and dully comforting. Inside we were first looked at cautiously as exotic attendees, but later greeted warmly and with appreciation."

Afaf Badran is a devout Muslima, wears a headscarf and is a member of the Egyptian Moral Rearmament Association (in Europe known under Initiatives of Change). I met with members of the Moral Rearmament Association in December after my visit to Nag al-Hamadi where gunmen killed 6 Coptic Christians on January 6, 2010, when they left church. I linked the Moral Rearmament Association to Coptic Orthodox Bishop Marcos and Bishop Kyrillos of Nag al-Hamadi.

Dr. Afaf wrote on January 4:
"We traveled to Nagi Hammadi in spite of all the odds and all the warnings about the unstable environment due to the late happenings and the approaching date of Eastern Christmas. I did not know whom we had to fear, but made the decision to go. I said to those who argued, courage is not demonstrated in times of peace but in times like these. We traveled by train 8 hours going and the same coming back in a 24 hour trip. We were a group of five Muslims and met Father Samuel and Bishop Kyrillos and other fathers and sisters in the monastery. We met the families of the seven martyrs including the family of the Muslim guard. It was not only heartily soothing but very useful in building friendships and trust and building will and determination for collaborative and synergic work."

We have had student interns of all religious convictions in our Cairo office. One veiled student intern, **Dina El-Bawab**, had been the only Muslim in a student delegation in the summer of 2010 visiting the monastery of Dimyana. Dina wrote on Coptic Christmas January 7, "I wish you a blessed Christmas and I am presenting my deep condolence for what happened." Remarkably I received the same day an email from Mother Theoliptie of the monastery of Dimyana who wrote "Dina El Bawab, the Muslim intern with Arab West Report emailed me today to greet us on our Christmas and forward her deep condolences for the recent massacre at the Saints Church. How nice of her to remember us during our feast and sorrow over the incident. May God keep her heart pure and bless her."

Dina El-Bawab wrote on January 11: "A lot of my family members, my Muslim friends and acquaintances also got deeply affected because of what happened. At my university the Student Association organized a black day where we all came in black. They collected donations for the victims in the hospital and their families. A good number of my Facebook friends made their profile picture the Cross with the Crescent. Also, upon Coptic Christmas many of my Christian friends and acquaintance displayed on Facebook their photos in the Church with their Muslim friends who shared with them the moment. May God protect us from the "sick-minded" people who kill innocents in the name of the All Peaceful (As-Salām, the ALL Peaceful, is one of the names of God in Islam) and make others pay for their absolute ignorance!!"

The responses of Rev. Atallah, Afaf Badran and Dina al-Bawab were personal and well meant. I hear other Christians have had similar experiences and this is heart-warming. Egypt is experiencing great tensions but there are also responses that are deeply moving!

Intolerant climate in Egypt and media manipulations in the months preceding the attack in Alexandria*

Egypt's media climate is poisoned. Polemic media debates started in September 2010 with an interview with Bishop Bīshūy, in which he claimed that Muslims are merely guests in Egypt. This was followed by some media picking up claims of Islamic thinker Dr. Salīm al-ᶜAwwā that Copts are stockpiling weapons in churches. And if this were not enough, statements Bishop Bīshūy had made in private wondering whether some verses in the Qur'an could have been inserted in response to Muslim-Christian polemics in the early days of Islam, were made public.

This resulted in weeks of tense discussions around the secretary of the Holy Synod, who is widely regarded as the second most powerful man in the Coptic Orthodox Church after Pope Shenouda III.

The polluted media discussions now can be seen as the prelude to the monstrous attack on January 1, 2011.

Muslims as guests in Egypt

On September 15, 2010, Al-Miṣrī al-Yawm published a highly interesting interview with Bishop Bīshūy, in which a range of interesting subjects were discussed. The phrase that suggested Muslims were guests in Egypt was both highlighted and taken out of context.

The newspaper asked the bishop about the whereabouts of Kāmīliyā Shihā, the wife of a priest who indicated she wanted to convert to Islam, but was handed by Egyptian security to the church, after which she disappeared from Egyptian media. The bishop denied Muslim claims that the church kidnapped her, "She was transferred to a secure place, because we were afraid some people would accuse her of apostasy for converting to Islam, or kill her."

Bishop Bīshūy is calling for a return of the religious advice sessions which were cancelled after the Wafāʾ Costantine incident in 2004.[1] The bishop blames much of the tensions in society on the cancellation of these religious advice sessions.

The bishop denies that Copts in Egypt have become more outspoken because they are drawing on the power of expatriate Copts and foreign countries. Moreover, he provides the court verdict following the killing of 20 Copts in al-Kushh

in 2000 as an example, since none of the Muslim perpetrators have thus far been convicted of murder.

This denial from the bishop was expected, but there are, indeed, other situations where the influence of Coptic expatriates has been visible. For example, the funding for the building of the church in Al-Ṭur in the Sinai has to a very large extent come from expatriate Copts.

Bishop Bīshūy denies that Orthodox believers often leave the church in order to obtain a divorce outside the church because of its strict rules against divorce. He refers to an agreement with other churches, but the bishop does not refer to conversions to Islam for reasons of obtaining a divorce. Al-Miṣrī al-Yawm could have asked for this, but has not done so.

The interview was clear and decent, but at one point it went wrong. I am placing here the section of the text with the statement for which the bishop has been much criticized:

Al-Miṣrī al-Yawm referred to Copts protesting Coptic Orthodox divorce regulations, "some voices emerged calling for freeing the church from the clergy's grip and putting them under the state's control. How do you view this invitation? [CH: secular minded Copts do not want the church to decide who can obtain a divorce and who not]

Bishop Bīshūy: What do you mean by freeing the church from the clergy's grip? Wasn't it enough that Copts were obliged to pay tributes after the Islamic conquest? What else? Do you [referring to Muslims in general] want to replace us in performing the prayers and church services? [CH: the question about the role of the clergy prompted an emotional response]

Al-Miṣrī al-Yawm: It simply means that the church should observe its religious duties away from anything else [Pope Shenouda and the Coptic Orthodox Church have often been accused of mixing religion and politics]?

Bishop Bīshūy: That's weird. Those who advocate such calls forget that we are the natives. We dealt gently with guests [Muslims] who landed on our soil and whom we considered as brothers, but now they want to govern our churches. I do not accept any insults against Islam, and as Christians we are ready to die for Christianity. But if somebody says that Muslims will take care of the church's congregation, I would reply: "Kill me or put me in jail if you want to reach that goal."

Al-Miṣrī al-Yawm: Nobody mentioned Muslim control. The debate was over "state oversight." Some secular Copts even support the idea.

Bishop Bīshūy: Former President Anwar al-Sādāt tried to apply that and failed. As for the secularists, they are merely a bunch of people rallying behind one person who was not elected in the Coptic Community Council.

The word "guests" was thus only mentioned in the sideline of the interview and referred to Muslims entering the country in the 7th century. That this word nevertheless became an issue of contention is related to claims that one often hears among Copts that they are the only native inhabitants of the country and that, by inference, current Muslims are guests. That is a claim which cannot be maintained since most Muslims in Egypt are descendants of Christians who converted to Islam. Of course there have been migrations throughout the centuries bringing people from other countries to Egypt, but this applies also to all other countries in the world. It is not healthy in any of these countries to base claims on the purity of race, but the bishop has not done this in this interview. Media blaming the bishop for calling Muslims "guests" thus have blown this whole thing out of proportion. Pope Shenouda later responded diplomatically that Egypt belongs to God and that all inhabitants, Muslim and Christian, are guests.

Weapons in Coptic Orthodox churches

The independent daily Al-Dustūr claimed on September 17, 2010, that Copts are storing weapons to fight Muslims. In a country where Copts make up perhaps 6 percent of the total population such a claim is extremely inflammatory.[5] The paper claimed that Dr. Muhammad Salīm al-ᶜAwwā,, a highly influential lawyer and intellectual with close links to the Muslim Brotherhood, had said, "Weapons that a Copt stores in a church would mean nothing other than that he is getting ready to use them against Muslims." Al-Dustūr also claimed that Bishop Bīshūy hinted at this when he allegedly said that Copts would be willing to martyr themselves if anyone ever tried to conquer the church.

Copts responded quickly, including Coptic priest Dioscorus Shehata, who refuted al-ᶜAwwā's allegations and accused him of "public incitement against churches and Christians." Father Abd al-Masīh Basīt observed in Al-Dustūr on September 20 that churches are packed with security guards, making it impossible for weapons to pass unnoticed. He also stressed that martyrdom, in Christian terms, should be understood figuratively and not literally.

The claims of churches possessing weapons have been heard in earlier moments of tension. German AWR intern Janina Chetty documented these accusations and discussed them with a Coptic Orthodox priest, Father Yu'annis.[6] Father Yu'annis lives in Upper Egypt, is allowed to carry a licensed weapon and is a good friend of ours, which helped to get a frank and open discussion. There are, indeed, Christians who carry weapons, but claims that weapons are stored in monasteries or churches are false and only intended to create more distrust between Muslims and Christians.

Following the commotion, Salīm al-ᶜAwwā said in **Al-Shuruq al-Jadid** on September 20 "I have not said that churches are filled with weapons. Those who accuse me of this have not checked the exact wording of my statement." He also added that relations between Muslims and Christians have been "kind" and "brotherly" for the last several centuries.

Did Al-Dustūr make up a quote of Muhammad Salīm al-ᶜAwwā? Or did Muhammad Salīm al-ᶜAwwā retract the claims published three days earlier? Why was the retraction not published in Al-Shurūq al-Jadid?

Al-Miṣrī-Yawm on October 2 called on both sides, Muslims and Christans, to establish a dialogue that would help restore national unity. Al-Dustūr questioned on October 2 why Al-Miṣrī al-Yawm should lecture al-ᶜAwwā on what and when to speak. Why would they speak for aal-ᶜAwwā? He is certainly able to speak for himself and why would al-ᶜAwwā need Al-Dustūr to speak for him after he himself had denied the quote attributed to Al-Dustūr?

There was thus not only the inflammatory claim that churches stored weapons but also a conflict between different Egyptian media reporting on the same issue.

Media reporting a privately made statement of Bishop Bīshūy

The church leader does not believe that the Qur'an is the literal word of God, as Muslims believe. For the bishop the Qur'anic text is human. Some verses are positive about Christians, while others are negative. The bishop thus questioned "as to whether some verses of the Qur'an were inserted after the death of the prophet."

One of the verses the bishop believed to have been inserted is Sura 5:17, "Verily they are disbelievers and infidels who say 'The Messiah, son of Mary, is God.'"

Coptic Orthodox teaching does explicitly state that the Messiah is God. It is thus not surprising that the bishop does not agree with this Qur'anic verse. In explaining this, he did not use any offensive language. His question on whether some Qur'anic texts were inserted would have been perfectly acceptable in any Western country – but not Egypt.

In Germany, the limit of freedom of speech is set by law, which allows any thought, including religious ones, to be criticized. But Germany is, unlike Egypt, not a religious country. In Egypt, religious leaders and journalists make efforts to influence public opinion to such an extent that limitations are imposed that one cannot find in Egyptian law. The efforts result in many people playing on popular sentiments, often initiated and fueled by media.

The Islamic Research Institute at the Azhar responded with an angry statement on September 25. Pope Shenouda's response in a TV interview on September 26 was that this text was not intended to be public.

Bishop Bīshūy wrote in his text that several Qur'anic verses may have been added after the Prophet Muhammad's death in polemic confrontations with Christianity. In order to understand why the statement became such a media row we need to be aware of the Egyptian context of polemics, sensitivities of religious texts and research on the early sources of Islam, as well as conversions of Christians to Islam.

Polemics stifling the public debate

The social climate in Egypt is characterized by much polemics between Muslims and Christians, as documented in our polemics report.[7] The report provides examples showing that the engagement in polemics is not limited to adherents of any one religion in particular. Religious polemics are a rather new phenomenon, which hardly existed prior to the 1970s.

Polemics show a lack of respect for people with different beliefs and tend to divide populations. They trigger responses that in turn can also be polemic and at times even violent. Polemicists do not hesitate to take statements out of context, twisting and manipulating words in order to achieve their goal. Sometimes claims are made that are outright lies. Polemicists generally avoid discussions on content. They are not interested in understanding "the other." Rather, their purpose is to attack the other side through words.

In the West a distinction is made between belief and believer. That distinction in Egypt is blurred. A statement showing disbelief in something is easily explained by polemicists as an attack on faith and thus a community of faith. Indeed, sometimes claims are made that are hidden or overt calls to violence, such as the false claims that Christians store weapons in churches.

The problem in such a poisoned climate is that statements that had no polemic intention can also be used by polemicists to serve their own polemic intentions of attacking the other.

It is not uncommon for some leading Muslims and Christians to make efforts to defend what they see as their own faith, while people belonging to the other faith explain this as an attack on their own faith. Some Muslims and Christians do this publicly, as is obvious from the examples in our polemics report, while others do this in closed meetings.

Holy texts seen in the eyes of believers and non-believers

Muslims and Christians generally have a very different understanding of what makes their own texts holy. The great majority of Muslims believes the Qur'anic text to be a literal revelation of God. The great majority of Christians believes the Bible to be written by humans who were inspired by God.

Non-Muslims look at the Qur'an as a text written by humans and thus try to analyze the text accordingly. Muslims generally reject such approaches. In turn, Western Christians are much more acquainted with approaches that see the Bible as an effort of human endeavour. For Arab Christians this is different. They generally belief in the infallibility of the Biblical text and thus do not believe that human errors entered the holy text.

Western scholarship has resulted in critical textual analysis of both the Qur'an and the Bible that is very selectively used in discussions between Muslims and Christians. Muslims often use Western critical analysis to criticize the text of the Bible, while they reject similar critical approaches to analyze the text of the Qur'an. The purpose is often to convince their audience that the Qur'an is superior to the Bible. Many Christians, in particular those of a more fundamentalist conviction, do so as well with the Qur'an.

Christological debates

The main difference between the Qur'an and the Bible is the view on the nature of Jesus Christ. Muslims believe that he was a prophet, while Christians see him as the son of God. The resurrection of Jesus, the core of the New Testament, is explicitly denied in the Qur'an.

The discussion about the nature of Jesus Christ was already raging centuries before the writing of the Qur'an. Arius (AD 256–336), a Christian presbyter from Alexandria, taught that Jesus was a human inspired by God. His views were vehemently opposed by Athanasius from Alexandria (AD c. 293–373), pope of Alexandria from 328 until his death. The debates divided the church and resulted in several church councils. During the Council of Nicea in AD 325 Arianism was denounced as a heresy. It was not a victory that would last. Debates about the nature of Jesus continued to rage, resulting in several church councils and ultimately the fateful Council of Chalcedon in AD 451, in which the churches of Alexandria and Antioch rejected the formulation of the churches of Rome and Constantinople (later called Byzantium, the capital of the Byzantine Empire). Since Egypt was ruled by the Byzantines, the Egyptian church became oppressed.

When Islam arrived, the Christian church was deeply divided. Early Muslims were no neutral observers of this division. They took the side of the Arians. Naturally, this resulted in early discussions about the nature of Jesus Christ between Christian leaders and Muslim rulers.

Bishop Bīshūy believes these debates may well have sharpened the formulations of Muslims against orthodox Christian teaching and this may have even resulted in the addition of some verses in the Qur'an.

For this argument it is important to know the earliest sources of Islam. The prophet Muhammad is generally believed to have lived from AD 570/571 to 632. However, the oldest existing Qur'anic manuscripts date to around the year 690 – 700 AD. There are no Muslim texts surviving from the first sixty years after the death of their prophet. Yet, there are Christian texts about early Muslims which report about Christological differences with their new rulers. There is no indication these early Christians knew about the Qur'an. Much research on this subject was carried out by Dr. Harold Suermann.[8]

What happened in these first sixty years? Muslims believe the Qur'an contains texts revealed to Muhammad and later compiled by his followers. This is a belief, not evidence.

Western scholars found in an ancient mosque in Yemen some parchments that show Qur'anic texts that were washed away and rewritten with a new Qur'anic text. Parchment was expensive in these days and thus reusing parchments for texts was very common. The differences between the two texts are minor but exist. That of course undermines the widespread Muslim belief that the text we find in the oldest surviving Qur'ans has not been changed since the days of Muhammad. But the differences in the text are too small for a conclusion that the Qur'anic text was substantially changed.[9]

The claim that early Muslims inserted new texts in the Qur'an, because it was convenient, is a theory that helps to explain the contrast between Qur'anic verses that are positive about Christians and Qur'anic verses that are outright negative about Christians. But it is also a theory for which evidence is lacking.

Christian and Muslim conversions

Another factor that influenced the heated debate around Bishop Bīshūy is the sensitivity about conversions from one religion to the other. Conversions in Egypt are primarily a one-way track. It is estimated that yearly thousands of Christians convert to Islam, while perhaps tens of Muslims per year become Christians. There are no public records of such conversions and thus numbers given are always estimates. There are closed records of the Egyptian security, but they will certainly not be willing to go public.

Coptic Christians have been resisting conversions of members of their community to Islam. They generally believe that no believing Christian can denounce his or her faith and thus conversions cannot be voluntary. As recently as the 1960s and 1970s it was not common for Christians to go public with a conversion of a Christian to Islam. In the 1980s and later years this was turned around. Christians started claiming that Christian youth, in particular girls, were forced to convert to Islam. I have carried out research showing that the use of physical force to make Christian girls convert to Islam is hard to prove and often certainly not true. Yet the conversions of Christians to Islam have resulted in Christian resentment.

The church tried to seek answers in apologetics. This was not done publicly, but books or pamphlets were either written or translated from other languages into Arabic and distributed to youth to help them with arguments if Muslims spoke to them about their faith. Some clergy are deeply involved in apologetics, while others fear the response from Muslims if this were to become known.

For a few years now Bishop Bīshūy has been organizing yearly meetings for Coptic Orthodox clergy in Fayyūm oasis. He has often tackled subjects that were believed to reflect a very conservative stance, stances that were, at times, publicly opposed by other Christians in the church.

The bishop has also been repeatedly targeted in Egyptian media, since his name has been mentioned in the discussions and speculations about the succession of the old and ailing Pope Shenouda III, who is 87 years old. Christians who do not want Bishop Bīshūy to become a candidate for succession criticized him publicly for what they believe to be a harsh approach towards people whom he disagrees with. It would be worthwhile to see if those who criticized Bishop Bīshūy in the past were the ones who did so again when the media debate started about a few lines from a leaked out private comment.

Bīshūys's statements not surprising

The context I just presented shows that the statements of Bishop Bīshūy should be no surprise. However, in a very volatile climate in a very religious society with frequently recurring accusations between Muslims and Christians, highlighting such statements was bound to create a new media debate. Egyptian journalists are generally well aware of the consequences of highlighting such statements and thus it is very well possible that this was done deliberately, either for the sick joy of being the initiator of such a nationwide debate or to create trouble for the bishop.

AWR earlier documented how journalists often play a role in inflaming tensions, highlighting certain statements and playing down or neglecting the importance of context.[10]

The current climate in Egypt creates an atmosphere in which each religious leader should carefully consider each word he says about opposing beliefs. Of course that consequently limits the freedom of religious leaders to speak their mind, which is obviously difficult for a Christian religious leader who wants to provide his flock with arguments in discussions with Muslims.

The media debate following Bishop bīshūys's remarks on Qur'anic verses

The consequence of Bishop Bīshūy's words becoming public was that it sparked outrage among Muslim leaders. Pope Shenouda, who is greatly respected among Coptic Christians, was forced to distance himself from Bishop Bīshūy's statements in order to avoid a greater backlash for the Christian community.

Most media publicly blamed Bishop Bīshūy for what these authors considered to be irresponsible words and expressed their worries about the possible deepening of the current sectarian breach between Muslims and Christians in Egypt. Such blames seem to be part of the "game" of ever blaming the other. The bishop could have been more cautious, but media are certainly also to be blamed.

According to Al-cArabiyyah on September 25, Bishop Bīshūy made an attempt to clarify his controversial remarks, saying "My question as to whether some verses of the Qur'an were inserted after the death of the prophet is not a criticism nor an accusation. It is merely a question about a certain verse that I believe contradicts the Christian faith, I don't understand how that can be turned into an attack on Islam."

The attempts of the bishop to diffuse the criticism did not help. Grand Imam Ahmad al-Tayyib released a "Statement to the Nation" of the Islamic Research Academy of the Azhar on September 25, 2010, in which he said, "This kind of behavior is irresponsible and threatens national unity at a time when it is vital to protect it."

Grand Imam Ahmad al-Tayyib is known to be very much in favor of dialogue between Muslims and Christians. The Islamic Research Academy is mixed. Here one finds both moderates and ultra-conservatives. They must have felt compelled to respond, possibly also because the Azhar is seen by many Muslims as weak and too much under the control of the government. Now they had a chance to show that they are indeed the guardians of Islam. I doubt whether the Grand Imam was happy with the outcome. He probably had no other choice.

On September 26, one day after the Azhar criticism, Pope Shenouda stated on state-run television that he was "sorry if the Muslim brothers' feelings were hurt by Bishop Bīshūy's statements." Nevertheless, the Pope occupied a defensive position of the Church (and implicitly of Bishop Bīshūy), identifying the media as a significant source of current sectarian tension.

I agree with this assessment of the pope.

Al-Miṣrī al-Yawm reported on October 2 on its front page that a demonstration outside Cairo's Al-Fatḥ mosque after Friday prayers called for the removal of Bishop Bīshūy because of his remarks about the Qur'an.

The pope's current negative attitude towards the press was reiterated later in an article in Al-Yawm Al-Sabic on October 5. The source stated that Pope Shenouda would ban all journalists from attending forthcoming ecclesial conferences, citing the media commotion around the bishop as a reason for the decision.

Al-Miṣrī al-Yawm reported on October 9 that participants of a rally after Friday prayers in Alexandria's Al-Qā'id Ibrāhīm mosque asked for the trial of Bishop Bīshūy.

Making unrealistic demands and organizing demonstrations only add fuel to tensions. Organizers may either be genuinely concerned or may also be motivated by already existing anti-Christian sentiments and using the debate to further inflame anti-Christian sentiments.

Conclusion

The Egyptian social climate is not healthy. Media are not the only culprits, but they certainly have played a very substantial role in stirring up the tensions we have seen in so much reporting.

When Former Dutch Prime Minister Andreas van Agt, Dr. Muná Zakī, and I visited Pope Shenouda in 2006, Dr. Zakī, an Egyptian Christian, asked him how Christians should respond to claims that Muslims, at times, make about Christian faith. The pope said to avoid mutual accusations and debates, since they bring nothing but tensions. In this context he recommended Dr. Zakī respond to Muslims who try to initiate a debate with the Qur'anic verse "To you be your religion, and to me my religion." (Sura 109:6)

This is wise but much such wisdom is unfortunately lacking.

Fifteen years of reporting about Muslim-Christian relations in Egypt*

For years we have been advocating the need for a better understanding between the Arab world and the West, between Muslims and Christians. Relations between the West and the Arab-Muslim world have been troubled for decades by continuous misreporting about one another, reporting out of context and a lack of self-criticism on both sides. It is like creating a big smokescreen, through which we are no longer able to clearly see what really happened in moments of tension. The consequence of this has been the frequent misinterpretation of tensions. Misinterpretations have resulted in feelings of being unjustly treated and thus this smokescreen has exacerbated tensions and conflicts instead of working towards understanding. My wife and I wanted to reduce this smoke screen by providing more accuracy in reporting, by distinguishing fact from interpretation, and by supplying greater context in order to contribute to a better mutual understanding between peoples of different convictions. Understanding, in turn, is more likely to result in mutual respect and cooperation.

Accuracy in reporting for mutual understanding and dialogue

My family and I came to Egypt in 1994 and spent most of our time working on building an institute for better understanding between the Arab world and the West, and between Muslims and Christians.

In the first years in Egypt I could not imagine that people, Muslim or Christian, would manipulate stories and at times lie and exaggerate or deny events just to suit their own interests. This includes both Christians and Muslims. There are real issues Christians are facing, such as in building houses of worship, conversions, discrimination. But when people are emotional they tend to exaggerate, to use big words, to add spice to a story. Others deny stories or play them down as much as possible. Factors such as honor and shame play a role. Protection of the honor of one's own group thus becomes more important than honesty in reporting about an event. In this I see not much difference between Muslims and Christians. Fifteen years in Egypt have made me a sceptic of whatever stories are being told. Today I listen to stories, question them, and if time permits, seek additional information, querying people from many different backgrounds so as to understand a particular story.

Investigative reporting hardly done but badly needed

We discovered Western media and organizations had no complete overview of facts and opinions reported in Egyptian Arab media. We therefore established and built our electronic newsletter since 1997, initially a review of Egyptian Arabic media only, but later also publishing investigative reports on issues covered by the media. We saw this investigative reporting as greatly needed, since it was rarely done by others and it helped so much to understand factors playing a role in conflict and to dispel myths that were also reported. We were struggling with very limited finance, as our work, in the early years was self-funded, apart from a few subscribers we had.

It took years before Western organizations really started seeing the importance of our work. A major recognition came with an invitation from the German Catholic organization missio asking me to lecture in September 2001 about the topic 'Are Christians persecuted?' Please notice the question mark. Persecution is, in the Cambridge Advanced Learners Dictionary, "to treat someone unfairly or cruelly over a long period of time because of their race, religion or political beliefs." Unfairly includes legal inequalities and violation of widely accepted norms of behavior, and in many texts state persecution is also described as being systematic and organized against specific groups based on their race, religion or political beliefs.

Missio wanted speakers to address this question for the respective countries they had come from. Are Christians indeed persecuted? The idea of Christians being persecuted, so strongly promoted by [then, in 2001] a small number of Coptic activists both in and outside Egypt and a number of Christian organizations in the West supporting them, needed to be questioned. I made clear in my 2001 lecture that using the word 'persecution' for Christians in Egypt in general is unjust and unfair. Now this does not mean all is good and fine in Egypt but the black-and-white themes in stories told certainly do not hold.

For fifteen years I have checked and documented reported stories of tensions between Muslims and Christians and have come to the conclusion that I hardly see differences between Muslims and Christians belonging to the same social level in Egypt, who in most cases are facing similar problems and both respond in similar ways to these problems. Let me give you a few examples of stories that have deeply influenced me.
1) In 1995 I was asked to investigate stories of Christian girls being kidnapped by Muslims for conversion to Islam. Frequently claims were made that Muslims had used physical force to convert Christian girls to Islam. As the evidence later suggested, the complaints should have been on the young age of the girls involved, making them particularly vulnerable in the light of social problems they were facing and not on physical force used, for which no evidence could be found.

I sympathized with the pain Christian families were facing over losing their daughters. A conversion in Egypt is not like a conversion in Europe, where a family may not like it, but it won't result in total separation between the convert and his or her family.

Understanding the concept of honor and shame is of major importance, since this concept influences the way both religious communities interpret their religious texts and conduct their affairs.

In a religious country such as Egypt no family, Muslim or Christian, likes to see their son or daughter convert to any other religion. The consequence is that if a young man or woman converts to another religion the family sees this as shame. There is a strong belief that the stain of shame always needs to be removed and one way is for a family to kill the family member that converted. That has happened both among Muslims and Christians. Although the numbers are not big, these cases do exist. Other families, however, would not go so far and would cut all ties with the convert and would blame the other religious group for having forced or enticed the person to convert. In other words the conversion was said to be not out of his or her free will, never because the convert was convinced by the other religion. In this Muslim and Christian families do not act differently! If a Muslim converts to Christianity the claim is often heard that this was because he or she was offered emigration to a Western country. The problem is that those ulterior motives do exist, both with Muslim and Christians converting to another religion. It is certainly possible, but not always the case, that conversions take place for such material benefits.

A priest in Upper Egypt who had dealt with a conversion of a Christian girl to Islam formulated this as follows: Some Muslims fish in Christian families with social problems, offer these families help and with this also preach about Islam. Once a conversion has taken place the convert is told that he or she can never turn back, because that would be considered apostasy. And here we have another complicating issue: missionary work of both Muslims and Christians is often a mix between preaching and offering material assistance and thus the reasons for conversions often reflect such a mix. I am not in a position to assess the extent of either Muslim or Christian missionary activity, but conversions practically always result in tensions and misreporting and therefore play a major role in how believers of one religion view the believers of another religion. I wish Muslim and Christian believers were more aware of the damage conversions and attempted conversions often cause, especially in their efforts to publicize the results.

Of course the Egyptian police has the obligation to protect converts from the possible wrath of their families or co-religionists, but the restrictions on meeting go much too far. That has only become worse after the Egyptian security decided to cancel sessions for priests to meet with potential converts after the Wafaa Costantine issue in 2004.

Costantine, the wife of a priest, clearly indicated she wanted to convert to Islam in order to obtain a divorce from her husband. Pope Shenouda rejected this and forced Egyptian security to bring her to a house belonging to the church, where several clergy spoke for several days with her before she decided not to continue the conversion process. To many the length needed to convince Costantine not to convert to Islam showed much pressure from the side of the church. Security responded to this incident by no longer allowing clergy to meet with potential converts. That, in turn, however, creates more stories about forced conversions, since involved family members and the wider public are unable to verify whether a conversion that took place was indeed voluntary, not involving any form of pressure. If Egyptians really want to end stories about forced conversions then transparency in the process of conversion is badly needed.

2) Researching the al-Kosheh incidents in 1998, investigating a local murder, showed that poor handling of the conflict by all parties, but in particular local government and security authorities, paved the way for the terrible killing of twenty-one Christians in 2000.

I saw how emotional responses affect accurate reporting. The heavy-handedness the police often use when interrogating lower class and less educated people, of whatever faith, often causes them to make exaggerated or imprecise statements both about what they experienced and about the events they or their kin were involved in or subjected to. The situation thus becomes more confused, giving people with special interests, and sensationalists, raw material to selectively exploit for their own purposes.

Negative and often polemic media reporting in the following months paved the road for a very poisonous local climate. A protestant pastor from the area told me in December 1999 that the outpour of international media attention about al-Kosheh had made Christians in al-Kosheh behave as if no one could touch them. They were building a church without a permit and were stating that if Muslims caused any problems then Bill Clinton, US president at the time, would interfere on their behalf. The pastor found among Christians a lot of provocative behavior and feared that this was bound to result in conflict. In the same period an Egyptian publication published an article claiming that Christians and Muslims in al-Kosheh lived in peace and harmony. How wrong they were. The poisoned climate made it possible, around the turn of the millennium, for a conflict between a Christian trader and a Muslim client to result in a fight that ended on the third day with local Muslims killing twenty-one Christians, while the local police were extremely slow in moving in to stop the killings. It appears that the police responded so slowly out of anger towards local Christians for having criticized them so much for their handling of the first incident in

1998. With this the police in al-Kosheh became co-responsible for the terrible tragedy that took place.

The escalation seen in the al-Kosheh story follows a pattern. The state was much too slow in responding to local problems and, when it did so, local police used excessively harsh interrogation methods. Both slow responses and harsh methods in an effort to end a conflict make it possible for problems to escalate. The local bishop had been much too emotional in his responses, did not check claims from his own people, but took them almost at face value, and presented this to Coptic activists and the media. Also in other local conflicts that I have studied in the past 15 years a number of clergy have tried to use activists and media to support their own position (but many did not!).

3) I continuously see Egyptians, including Egyptians living abroad, stressing the religious factors and playing down other aspects, legal, culture, society, etc. Through highlighting religion in conflicts one makes conflict highly emotional and inflammatory. With religion one can manipulate emotions and this makes conflicts so much harder to solve than if they had followed a more rational approach.

I also see one party continuously blaming the other. In most conflicts there is not one party that is responsible but many parties play a role. This includes the government, laws, application of the law, slow responses to tensions, rough interrogation methods, lack of transparency, etc. This also includes the Christian community: translating anger in exaggerating claims, etc. Many Muslims on the other hand tend to deny issues that are of concern to Christians. This does not help either and only tends to increase Christian frustration that issues they are concerned with are not taken seriously. A major problem is that people involved in conflicts are often only focused on their own local interests and do not care much about the consequences of religiously loaded conflicts on a national level. The media often plays a negative role through highlighting emotional angry statements, providing insufficient context, widespread partisan reporting, etc.

The tensions around the monastery of Abu Fana are another example of several parties adding to tensions. They were reported by some local clergy, Coptic activists and many Western media as Muslims attacking Christians. Egyptian media followed mostly the government line that this was a conflict over land; but it was more. It was a conflict involving a monastery and thus from the beginning there was a religious component. Local Muslims brought in a sectarian element by kidnapping three monks. Many Christians responded emotionally, presenting this as a sectarian conflict only, dismissing the land conflicts that initiated this conflict.

Here too we see a conflict with a history of several years which local government institutions have not taken seriously; for years there had been no land registration by government institutions for newly acquired desert land.

Many other stories showed me that much reporting gets colored. Journalists often make insufficient efforts to really check the stories, because they find this too time-consuming. I would advise you to read hundreds of reports we have written. Compare this with the media reporting about those issues in those days and it will certainly make you a great sceptic about what the media often report.

I believe the media can both greatly contribute to better intercultural understanding and can do great harm to the mutual understanding between peoples of different cultures.

When I interviewed Dr. Amin Makram Ebeid, an Egyptian scholar and friend of ours, a few months ago about Arab-West and Muslim-Christian relations, he responded that the first, second and third methods we need to work on is education. I fully support him in that statement!

That is why we developed our electronic magazine Arab-West Report. This provides a systematic review of Egyptian Arabic media which shows that one finds many different opinions in Arab media; opinions we like and others we find horrible. But this would be no different if one were to systematically follow Western media reporting. We also do our own investigative work whenever possible. That is not always possible for lack of sufficient qualified staff and funding, but where we have done so we have always found many more shades of grey in the stories reported than the media presented.

Fifteen years of work in Egypt have created a huge archive, which has attracted hundreds of students from all over the world to be interns in our office. Scholarships have made it possible for several Egyptian students to participate. This experience made all students more critical of reporting about Muslim-Christian issues in Egypt. We also provided information to lots of journalists, Egyptian and non-Egyptian, and it has changed them. We have provided information to academics from all over the world. Where earlier stories were widely believed to be true, they no longer are.

But discrediting hundreds of persecution stories does not mean that all stories should be discredited. Stories not only need to be verified, but also need to be placed in their proper social-economic context and thus, in particular, give more depth to reported tensions and conflicts. One often sees that locations where tensions are reported have experienced previous problems. It is important to have quick access to background information about the people and organizations involved. That would reduce so much shallowness in the

reporting we see now. It could help to bring about discussions cutting to the heart of an issue, to reduce tensions that have resulted from mis-information and partisan reporting. Being able to provide rapid context to situations will most certainly reduce tensions. Arab-West Report has tried for several years now to develop an extensive search on its data to link current tensions to a history and quality background reports for not only users, journalists and students but also for scholars to understand the proper context of a particular issue. For this we developed a subject index that was developed from the content of Arab-West Report. We standardized names of people and organizations, listing references to books, Qur'an, Bible, glossary, etc. These are all intended to help users gain a quick understanding of the context of any new issue developing. Our ideas to develop such a website have proven to be very, very hard. Of course there are big university libraries and technical people who could help us develop this, but such assistance is very costly and thus we have, continued to develop this with our very limited means. The dream, however, that we will one day have a good functioning system remains alive. Such quick access to relevant context information is so crucial to reduce tensions!

I earlier stated that I hardly see any differences between Egyptians adhering to different religions. That is certainly true for cultural aspects such as honor and shame and the ability to twist and distort stories if it suits their own interests, which includes honor. But there are also major differences between Muslims and Christians which are the result of population differences: around 94 percent of all Egyptians are Muslim and around six percent are Christian. Discrimination against people of other faiths unfortunately exists. That applies to both Muslims and Christians, but Christians feel this much more, because their number is so much smaller. Discrimination is particularly rampant among lesser educated Egyptians. There is also legal discrimination. Difficulties in obtaining church-building permits and the conversions I spoke about earlier are legally one-way traffic. Procedures exist to convert to Islam, but there is no such procedure for a Muslim to leave Islam. In reality, would many Muslims leave their faith if this were possible? I very much doubt it! Should someone's religion be registered by government authorities? Is it the task of the government to be the protector of religion? Should this not be a matter of faith and thus the responsibility of religious institutions to teach their own believers faith and virtue and then leave it up to their own believers whether they adhere to this or not? Force often results in resistance and conflicts, as we have seen in a number of reported cases.

Religious freedom and equality is one thing, but much more pressing are the many social problems and lack of law enforcement that affect all Egyptians. We should look at improving human rights for all Egyptians, not just a certain class of Egyptians. We should fight for the equality of all before the law. We should fight misuse of any religion to manipulate large numbers of believers. Mixing religion with politics can result in a serious misuse of religion. Censorship should be replaced by criticism. Develop a critical mind! Students should become greater sceptics and leaders of change in their own society: Egyptians in their society and European students in their societies.

Fifteen years in Egypt have been both good and difficult. It was good for the numerous friendships we have made during the years. Egyptians are a friendly people! It has also been difficult. Support for our work has come only very slowly and we still struggle to find sufficient finance that is needed to find additional qualified Egyptian staff. I am glad that after years of struggling we have finally obtained Egyptian NGO status, but I wish that could have come much faster. The fifteen years in Egypt have left a deep mark on me. I will continue to fight against misreporting about Arab-West and Muslim-Christian relations from the Netherlands and I will work on strengthening the academic network in Europe and strengthening the database for our work in Egypt. This work in Egypt has become a lifelong task. I want to continue working with all of you. Let's keep in touch.

Do not blame or excuse Islam but recognize diversity in Muslim interpretations of Islamic holy texts

There are two extreme points of view, both ideologically motivated, in explaining major terror attacks that are doing great injustice to the complexity we see.

1) Claims that there are moderate Muslims but there is no moderate Islam.
2) Attributing evil to external factors and thus blaming those external factors instead of blaming the committers of evil.

In the first category we find Dutch MP Geert Wilders and others with similar political views. In their view 'Islam' is something static. They refer to Islamic texts either not realizing or not wanting to realize that in any religion explanations of texts never have remained static. Neither have the followers of Islam agreed on interpretations of holy texts. In other words, texts may be static but interpretations are certainly not and this explains the great variety of thought in Islam, just as we see in any other religion. This claim also implies a total neglect of moderate Muslim believers who reject extremist theology and who are also under attack for their views.

This claim is not just factually wrong but it is also dangerous. If this is formulated by non-Muslims this is tantamount to surrendering to al-Qāʿidah and the like, because they would like us to believe that only their interpretation of Islam is correct and that Muslims not adhering to these views do not know the 'true' Islam. 'True' Islam, in their understanding, is of course only their understanding of Islam, brushing away the great majority of Muslims who have a different understanding of Islam. Furthermore, it is dangerous because it angers Muslims who do not want to be linked to extremist interpretations of Islam and turn them against their false accusers. Claims that there is no moderate Islam have the propensity to turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy, creating anger and deepening divisions instead of reducing them.

The second category of people tries to explain all religiously motivated evil ideology away. External factors are blamed, such as Western violence in the Islamic world or extremists from other countries. Officials from Arab countries often do this. So do a number of Arab intellectuals, religious leaders and journalists. These external factors do exist. Read for example Robert Fisk's "The Great War for Civilization: The Conquest of the Middle East."[11] Fisk correctly shows Western moral double standards in dealing with the Islamic world. Muslim world media focus great attention on such double standards, while Western media practically pay no attention to this at all. Fisk does not explain evil religious ideologies away, but he helps us understand the frustration we see so often in Arab responses. A bit more self-criticism in both the Arab world and the West would serve all parties best.

Poverty, overpopulation, lack of education and unemployment are often blamed for the growth of extremism. While it is true that these factors provide extremists with the fertile ground to play in, we should not dismiss the potential for evil arising out of extremist religious interpretations.

In Egypt, the media often vent their anger about statements of Coptic activists in the West. These activists not only contribute to anti-Islamic sentiments in Europe, but also create Arabic websites that have deeply influenced the opinions of Coptic youth in Egypt. Their statements are often exaggerated and at times inflammatory. They have contributed to the anger of Copts, leading those in Egypt to become more assertive and conduct demonstrations. This has backlashed in a number of Muslims blaming Copts for their assertiveness, some even stating that Copts need to be taught a lesson. On the other hand, no one should be surprised by growing anti-Muslim feelings among Copts in the West.[12] Attacks as in Alexandria do their job in driving people apart.

Egyptian government officials denying sectarian tensions, relating violent acts to "isolated criminal acts" and ignoring the poisoned religious climate between Muslims and Christians does not help either. Certainly officials fear that if they were to admit the existence of sectarian tensions they would open a Pandora's Box of troubles. The current policy of denial, however, only creates frustration among people who feel their grievances are neglected or denied.

External facts do exist and they contribute to pushing people into extremist circles, but this should never be a justification for the atrocious acts committed in the name of Islam or whatever other belief or ideology. Only blaming external facts reflects a colonial attitude, it presumes extremists are not capable to think and thus cannot be held responsible, since only external factors count.

The given fact that Muslim interpretations of holy texts are so widely different makes me argue against black and white schemes. Such simplistic schemes are easier to understand for many people but reality is much more complicated than is usually reported.

Simple uninformed black and white schemes make the life of moderate Muslims very difficult.

"I do not have to tell you what a unpleasant context to be a Muslim living in Europe nowadays. It is even more exhausting to be a Muslim scholar of Islamic Studies who has to deal with all the misinformed statements spreading in the media about Islam and Muslims," the late liberal Muslim scholar Dr. Nasr Abu Zayd wrote to me in 2001.[13]

Outrageous claims about Islam and Muslims were made. No believer of what-ever religion likes to be put into a corner with more radical members of the religion he adheres to. Yet this continuously happens and tends to push believers into the camp of radicals who like to claim to be the true defenders of their religion. Thus distortions create anger and could well turn claims of Muslim bashers into a dangerous self-fulfilling prophecy.

Generalizations are dangerous, especially if they come from scholars with academic reputations. The Dutch scholar of Islam, Dr. Hans Jansen, wrote an excellent study on the historical Muhammad and showed how the text of the hadith was formed in the 9th and 10th century AD and is thus not a very reliable source for the life of the prophet Muhammad.[14] Many Muslims do not like such a conclusion, but honest scholarship does not need to be pleasant for believers. If believers disagree they should challenge this with scholarship not ideology.

But Jansen wrongly claimed that all Muslims believe that the Qur'anic verse "Let there be no compulsion in religion" (Sūrah 2: 256) is abrogated and is thus no longer valid for modern Muslim – non-Muslim relations. Jansen concludes that Muslim dialogue partners referring to this verse are thus, per definition, dishonest. Jansen's claim is important because Muslim scholars so often refer to this verse to explain that forcing one's beliefs on people is in violation of Islamic teaching. When I checked Jansen's claims with Muslim scholars I discovered that no easy answer can be given. There are indeed Muslims who believe that the verse is abro-gated and thus no longer valid for believers today, while there are also prominent Muslim scholars who believe this verse is not abrogated and thus authoritative for Muslim believers today. Jansen's generalization only bolstered Islamophobic con-victions. A scholar of his stature should have shown the diversity of beliefs.[15]

Dutch MP Geert Wilders quoted several Qur'anic verses in his film *Fitna*, providing very distorted explanations of the Qur'an that most Muslims would reject. I have checked the use of the Qur'anic verses Wilders quoted in a survey of ten years of Egyptian Arab media, seeing how Muslim authors used these verses in arguments for Muslim readers. None of the articles I found included inter-pretations that came close to those Wilders wanted to make us believe represent Muslim beliefs.[16]

We asked Imām Fadel Soliman and Azhar scholar Dr. Hassan Wagieh to provide us with the proper explanations of the verses that Wilders claims call for violence. Both Imām Fadel Soliman and Hassan Wagieh showed how Wilders took verses out of context and gave them his own Islamophobic interpretation, far from the common Muslim interpretations of these verses.[17]

Generalizations, misquotations, misinterpretations and offensive language provoke people. While scholars can respond in writing, there are scores of people who feel offended and helpless in countering what they believe to be unjust pres-entations of their religion or religious group. It is this group, often in combina-tion with fiery preachers, which contributes to violent demonstrations or worse. Lower-class and uneducated people in all societies are more easily provoked. But the percentage of such people is much higher in Egypt than Europe. Wagieh calls these provocations "wrongful, irresponsible, sick and destructive for all parties. It is a lose-lose game."[18] Disinformation must be uncovered. Experts on Islam from Islamic institutions and from western secular institutions may disagree and argue, provided arguments are made in mutual respect; by avoiding offensive language much can be discussed. But when arguments become polemic and hateful they serve hate-mongers and no longer contribute to the open and free discussion that is needed to foster the search for truth.

It seems, however, that the warnings of Wagieh not to let us be provoked but to continue responding with reason were lost on Dr. Muhammad Salīm al-'Awā, a prominent and highly influential Muslim scholar. At one time he was contributing positively to Muslim-Christian dialogue, able to disregard anti-Muslim statements of some Christian bishops and pastors as not representative for all Christians. But when two top Christian leaders, Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Shenouda III, the influential head of Egypt's largest church, in his view contributed to sentiments against Islam, he sadly turned against dialogue with Christians, even those who do not agree with the statements of these leaders.[19]

Salīm al-'Awā's statements became more and more radical. In September 2010 he falsely claimed that Christians stock weapons in churches and monasteries, creating additional tensions in the lead-up to the terrible attack on January 1. I strongly disagree with Salīm al-'Awā, but Christians should ask themselves how it came to be that several major Muslim advocates for dialogue now, regretfully, have become opponents of dialogue with Christians.

Christians should make efforts to gain Muslim friends and find Muslim advocates for the cause of equality between Muslims and Christians in Egypt, but polemics contribute to Christians in Egypt losing friends, which does not bode well for people who make up roughly six percent of the Egyptian population.[20] Unfortunately, many Coptic and Western activists have contributed to a common Egyptian Christian belief that 'Islam' is the problem, rather than Muslims who possess an extremist ideology. As such, when many common Egyptian Christians make friends with Muslims, they subconsciously hold them at arm's length, as they fear and reject what they understand to be Muslims' religion.

Therefore, when these Christians discuss terrorism, they excuse their Muslim friends from guilt, but not their religion. They fail to realize that the Muslim is offended by this line of thinking. This realization, once it comes, leads either to arguments which then threaten the friendship, or else avoidance and withdrawal, which can preserve the relationship but relegate it to superficial status, while important and healthy dialogue is put on the shelf. Over time both possibilities lead to increasing distance between Muslims and Christians.

Muslims have much work to do to confront extremist ideologies within their own camp. Many have begun to do so following the attacks in Alexandria. Yet Christians must also work towards an engaged dialogue with Muslims to prevent themselves from being drawn into the polemics of Islam-as-terrorism thinking. What is clear is that the black-and-white characterizations described in this text serve only to poison the interreligious climate in Egypt. May good scholarship and close personal relations contribute to provide an antidote to this malady.

Conclusion

Tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims in Egypt and other countries can flow over to Europe and undo the progress of integration over the past decades. This is particularly dangerous because Europe now counts millions of migrants and their offspring from Muslim countries who have entered Europe in the past fifty years. Migrants from these countries may be either Muslim or Christian and thus tensions in their home countries can reflect on relations between different communities in Europe as well. We need to address this, but it can only be done if we do not see an attack like that in Alexandria as something that is far away, but make efforts to understand the many factors playing a role.

Tensions and socio-economic problems in the Middle East encourage emigration. As a greater number of these emigrants come from religious and ethnic minorities than their home percentages might reflect, this in turn makes Muslim countries more homogeneous. I very much doubt that reduced pluralism in Muslim countries is beneficial to Europe or to these countries themselves. Pluralism contributes to the exchange of ideas, whereas a lack of pluralism contributes to stagnation at all levels of society.

The percentage of Christians has been declining over the past 100 years in all Middle Eastern countries. Emigration continues. I do not want to see the church disappear from the Middle East, but if we want to stop the current downward spiral, we need to work towards addressing the needs of the poor and underprivileged – regardless of their religion – and the reduction of violence.

Copts in the Netherlands and Egypt called me following the Alexandria attack asking what to do. I understand people feel frustrated and want to vent their anger in demonstrations and angry interviews with media. This does not help. We need to address the causes of all this violence.

It has always been my aim to contribute to an increase of understanding, not for the sake of academic knowledge but for the sake of finding ways to address the terrible downward spiral in mutual relations and trust we see today. That is why Arab-West Report was established and this is why we formulated a strategic report in November 2010, explaining how we believe we can contribute to the reduction of tensions. This report can be found on our website www.cidtegypt.com.

We cannot possibly do this alone and we seek cooperation with institutions, scholars, students, media and all others of good will who like us believe this downward spiral in relations must be countered.

Postscript

The Egyptian revolt resulted in strong signals of Muslim-Christian unity*

I visited Egypt with a Christian delegation between January 21 and February 4. It was remarkable to see banners throughout Egypt with texts about Muslim-Christian unity. No one, however, knew whether these were just words or not, but in the days following the revolt, which began on January 25, remarkable unity between Muslims and Christians was demonstrated.

Minister of Interior Habib al-Adly decided to withdraw the police from the streets of Egypt after President Mubarak sacked the cabinet, including this minister, on January 29. The withdrawal of the police from the streets weakened the defence of prisons. These were attacked, freeing thousands of criminals and political activists (many of them Islamists), which rapidly increased chaos in the streets. Poor youth from slum areas, some encouraged by Islamists, and criminals formed gangs, stealing and looting. Others used the chaos to take revenge, in particular on the police, but also on individual citizens. This made citizens throughout the country spontaneously create neighborhood watches that forged strong bonds between Muslims and Christians living together in apartment blocks and neighborhoods.

Patriarch Cardinal Antonius Naguib, head of the Coptic Catholic Church in Egypt, told our delegation on February 2 that this was the greatest unity of Muslims and Christians since Egyptian leader Saad Zaghloul united Muslims and Christians in resisting British occupation of the country in 1919. Coptic Orthodox Bishop Marcos was equally positive and told us that no single church in Egypt had been attacked despite the withdrawal of police guards from churches. Also all individual Christians the delegation who met before returning to the Netherlands on February 4 were enthusiastic about the cooperation with Muslims experienced.

Tahrir Square had been the scene of many Muslim prayers during the uprising but Sunday, February 6 witnessed Christian Egyptians publically conducting a prayer service at Tahrir Square, surrounded by Muslims supporting them[21].

The experiences show that good neighborly relations provide more security then police protection which often has not been able to prevent attacks on Christian houses of worship, as was seen in Alexandria on January 1, 2011.

A spokesman of the attacked church in Alexandria told us on February 7 that lack of police protection since January 29 had not resulted in new attacks on their church.

Despite the great unity of Muslims and Christians a Christian family in the village of Sharona near Maghagha was murdered on January 30, since they had one year earlier killed a young Muslim and their own daughter after they had found them sleeping together.[22] On February 4 an empty church in Rafah was attacked creating physical damage. But the damage occurred is tiny in comparison to the great damage thugs and looters caused during this period of lawlessness. It was obvious that their fury primarily targeted both police and symbols of wealth such as shops and cars.

It is also obvious that this is a period in which many rumors float. Many examples could be given. Stories should thus continuously be checked with people as close as possible to the events mentioned. No story should be published before checking things in Egypt, since false claims will only lead to more unrest, which no Egyptian is in need of.

Christian leaders of Egypt are asking churches in the west pray for peace and security for all Egyptians. Peace and security are basic prerequisites to rebuild the country after billions of Euros of damage occurred since January 25.

Selected publications

Selected publications based on the Arab-West Report archive that are relevant to an understanding of contemporary Muslim-Christian relations in Egypt:

– Cornelis Hulsman, Government's Denial of Sectarian Tension is Wrong Response to Alexandria Attacks, in: AWR, 2011, week 1, art. 1, http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/27405
– Jayson Casper, 'Umrāniyyah through the Eyes of the Church, in: AWR, 2010, week 52, art. 82, http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/27403
– Cornelis Hulsman, Intolerant Climate in Egypt and Media Manipulations Result in Row Around Bishop Bīshūy, in: AWR, 2010, week 43, art. 32, http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/26586
– Cornelis Hulsman, Reporting about Muslim-Christian relations in Egypt: Some remarks following 15 years working in Egypt, in: AWR, 2010, week 17, art. 17, http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/25679
– Cornelis Hulsman, Christian activists' contributions to Christian migration from the Arab world, MIDEO 28, 2010. Earlier responses to this text were given by Rev. Menes 'Abd al-Nūr (Presbyterian), Bishop Marqus (Orthodox) and Bishop Qultah (Catholic) in: AWR, 2008, week 52, art. 7, 8, and 9, http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/21456, node/21454, node/21451
– Vanessa Panaligan, Georgetown Graduate student Vanessa Panaligan reflects on summer research in Egypt, in: AWR, 2010, week 36, art. 2, http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/26032
– Jayson Casper, Social Reconciliation: Pre- and Post-conflict in the Egyptian Setting, in: AWR Papers 26, January 2010, http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/27537
– Ayman Labīb, Faith-Based Conflict Resolution for the Muslim-Christian Conflict in Egypt, in: AWR Papers 24, February 2010, http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/27536
– Jayson Casper, Social Harmony and Christian Community Participation: Evaluation of a Survey Distributed to Priests of Beba and al-Fashn, in: AWR Papers 25, February 2010, http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/27534
– Marwān al-Ashāl, Report on Reconciliation in the Egyptian Legal System: Including a Historical and Political Survey, in: AWR Papers 24, February 2010, http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/27535
– Rochelle Curtis, Reconciliation Sessions in the Egyptian Newspapers, 1998 to present: Analysis and Observations, in: AWR Papers 22, February 2010, http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/27533
– Jayson Casper, 'Izbet Bushrā: Recording the Sources and Suggesting Reconciliation following a Conflict over Church Building, in: AWR Papers 21, February 2010, http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/27532
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– Jonas Rye Nielsen and Sandy Neubert, Human rights organizations in Egypt, in: AWR Papers 20, May 2009, http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/27531
– Sandra Heijden and Salmá Īhāb 'Īsá, The Contested Sources in Islam; Eildert Mulder in Egypt, in: AWR 2009, Week 52, art. 2, http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/24703
– Thomas Milo and Eildert Mulder, The Contested Sources of Islam: a Preface, in: AWR, 2009, Week 52, art. 3, http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/24704
– Asgar Toft Johannsen, Marianne Nabīl Mahrūs and Maria Graversen, Land ownership disputes in Egypt: A Case Study of the Tensions around Abū Fānā in May, 2008, in: AWR Papers 15, August 2009, http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/27526
– Samīr Marqus, Religious Tensions: Exceeding safety levels, in: AWR Papers 10, December 2008, http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/27521
– Hasan Muhammad Wajīh, Towards a Negotiating Strategy to Manage the Implications of Islamophobic Discourse & to Deal with the Related Cross-Cultural Communication Barriers, in: AWR Papers 9, December 2008, http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/27520
– Bāhir Dukhān, Why are the Arabs angry? Arab-West relations: Politics in quicksand, in: AWR Papers 8, September 2008, http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/27519
– Magnus Bredstrup and Mads Holm, Why are the Arabs Angry with the West? The Great War for Civilization, in: AWR Papers 7, September 2008, http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/27518
– Harald Suermann, Seventh century documents about the arrival of Islam in Egypt, in: AWR, 2009, week 8, art. 2, http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/21801
– Janina Chetty, Coptic activist and media reporting in the aftermath of the Abū Fānā Monastery attack, in: AWR Papers 13, February 2009, http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/27524
– Abrār al-Ghannām, Religious Censorship in Egypt: Attitudes within the Coptic Orthodox Church of Egypt, in: AWR Papers 12, January 2009, http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/27523
– Magnus Bredstrup, The Religious Censorship of the Azhar, in: AWR Papers 11, January 2009, http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/27522
– Janina Chetty, Accusations that Christian clergymen use weapons, in: AWR, 2009, week 2, art. 2, http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/21561
– Cornelis Hulsman, Interview with Dr. Philippe Fargues about Coptic statistics, in: AWR, 2008, week 52, art. 17, http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/21469.
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– Bāhir Dukhān, Dr. Salīm al-'Awā speaking about dialogue with the West, in: AWR, 2008, week 49, art. 3, http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/21298
– Sara Aguzzoni, Media reports of Christians converting to Islam, in: AWR Papers 6, August 2008, http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/27517
– Cornelis Hulsman with Michael Burslem, A review of Hugh Goddard's 'Muslim Perceptions of Christianity,' published by Grey Seal Books, London, 1996, in: AWR, 2008, week 18, art. 3, http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/19790
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– Cornelis Hulsman, Disappointed in Christian organizations reporting on Muslim-Christian relations in Egypt, in: AWR, 2008, week 16, art. 12, http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/19553
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– Hasan Muhammad Wajīh, Uncovering and refuting Wilders' Fitna propaganda model, in: AWR, 2008, week 2, art. 5, http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/18118
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– Maria Rezzonico, Report on church response to poverty in Egypt, in: AWR, 2007, week 35, art. 2, http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/18104
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– Cornelis Hulsman, Different Middle Eastern Christian responses to living in a Muslim envi-ronment, in: AWR, 2006, week 49, art. 3, http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/15339
– Cornelis Hulsman, Apostolic Nuncio to Egypt, Archbishop Fitzgerald, responds to polarization following the Regensburg lecture of H.H. Pope Benedict XVI, in: Rose al-Yūsuf, October 28, 2006 and AWR, 2006, week 32, art. 2, http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/13923
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– Cornelis Hulsman, Reviewing Yustina Saleh's Law, the Rule of Law, and Religious Minorities in Egypt (art. 2 Egyptian Constitution), Reviewed with Prof. Dr. Mike Fowler and Prof. Dr. Wolfram Reiss in: AWR, 2005, week 51, art. 49, http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/8655
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– Cornelis Hulsman, The Refugee Savior: How Egyptian Christians still make room for the Holy Family, in: Christianity Today, December 2001 and AWR, 2001, week 51, art. 12, http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/5261
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Notes

1 The first reports that came out put the number at 21 victims. This later increased to 23.
2 According to some reports angry Christians had attacked a nearby mosque. Fights also took place between Christians and police.
3 Violence in the Upper Egyptian village of al-Koshh in 2000 left 21 Christians dead, but this was mob related and did not target random worshippers.
4 Cornelis Hulsman with Sawsan Gabra, "Escalations following the alleged conversion of a priest's wife to Islam," in AWR 2004, Week 51, Article 13.
5 Cornelis Hulsman, Interview with Dr. Philippe Fargues about Coptic statistics in AWR, 2008, week 52, art. 17. In this interview Fargues argues against the 12% figure Pope Shenouda, head of the Coptic Orthodox Church, had provided.
6 Janina Chetty, Accusations that Christian clergymen use weapons, in: AWR, 2009, week 2, art. 2.
7 Cornelis Hulsman with Elizabeth Yell, Polemics Discussion Paper, AWR, 2006, week 17, art. 56.
8 Harald Suermann, Seventh century documents about the arrival of Islam in Egypt, in: AWR 2009, week 8, art. 2.
9 Sandra Heijden and Salmá Īhāb ᶜĪsá, The Contested Sources in Islam; Eildert Mulder in Egypt, in: AWR 2009, Week 52, art. 2 and Thomas Milo and Eildert Mulder, The Contested Sources of Islam; a Preface, in: AWR 2009, Week 52, art. 3.
10 Jayson Casper, Journalism Workshop, Hosted by CAWU, in: AWR, 2010, week 2, art. 11.
11 For a review of Fisk see AWR 2008, week 52.
12 For more information about the role of Coptic activists see Cornelis Hulsman, "Christian activists' contributions to Christian migration from the Arab world," MIDEO 28, 2010. Earlier responses to this text were given by Rev. Menes Abdel Nūr (Presbyterian), Bishop Marqus (Orthodox) and Bishop Qultah (Catholic) in AWR, 2008, week 52, art. 7, 8 and 9.
13 RNSAW, 2001, week 41, art 3.
14 Hans Jansen, Mohammed; Eine Biografie, C. H. Beck Verlag, München 2008
15 See a discussion about these arguments in various articles in Arab-West Report, 2008, week 49, art. 5 (Cornelis Hulsman), art. 6 (Imām Fadel Soliman), art. 7 (Hassan Wagieh) and 8 (Cornelis Hulsman).
16 AWR, 2008, week 2, art. 4.
17 Hassan Wagieh, Uncovering and refuting Wilders' Fitna propaganda model, in AWR, 2008, week 2, art. 5 and Imām Fadel Soliman, "Fitna is greater than killing;" Exposing Wilders' manipulation of the Qur'ān in AWR, 2008, week 2, art. 7.
18 Hassan Wagieh, About the Islamophobic (Wilder's) disinformation trap in AWR, 2008, week 4, art. 6.
19 Bāhir Dukhān, Azhar student and AWR intern, Dr. Salīm al-'Awā speaking about dialogue with the West, in AWR, 2008, week 49, art. 3 and Cornelis Hulsman, Responding to Dr. Salī m al-'Awā, AWR, 2008, week 49, art. 4.
20 Cornelis Hulsman, Interview with Dr. Philippe Fargues about Coptic Statistics, in AWR, 2008, week 52, art. 17. In this interview Fargues argues against the 12% figure Pope Shenouda, head of the Coptic Orthodox Church, had provided.
21 Amin Makram Ebeid, My First Experience in the Middle of Tahrir Square, AWR, 2011, week 5, art. 3, http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/27724; Jayson Casper, A Christian Face to the Protests, AWR, 2011, week 5, art. 10, http://www.arabwestreport.info/Christian_Face_to_Protests
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