THE POWER DYNAMICS OF RELIGION IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD: RECOGNIZING THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIAL NETWORKS IN ALLEVIATING MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN TENSIONS

A Thesis
submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
of Georgetown University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of
Master of Arts
in Communication, Culture, and Technology

By

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Washington, DC
April 19, 2011
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ABSTRACT

This research illuminates the role of communication technologies and expanding social networks in influencing the trajectory of Muslim-Christian relations. While it brings attention to perceived negative uses of such resources to provoke tension and fundamentalism, its primary objective serves to enlighten the reader(s) on the ways in which technologies and social networks can promote efforts to ease tension between the faiths. In the case studies of sectarian tension in contexts with highly distinct socio-political and cultural attributes: France, Egypt and Nigeria, I present the range of possibilities that they offer in helping to manipulate the social circumstances.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To Dr. J.P. Singh, my thesis and academic advisor and mentor, I extend my warmest and immeasurable gratitude. His energy and devotion to scholarship have been tremendous sources of motivation.

To Dr. John O. Voll of the Prince Alaweed bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding, my second reader and former professor, whose dedication to the history of Islam and interfaith matters as a lifelong career is an inspiration

To the members of my thesis colloquium, Lakshmi Padmanabhan and Brian Mehler, for their immense support and constructive feedback throughout this process

To Dr. Fida Adely of the Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, for showing me new approaches to problem solving and assessment

To Professor Nicole Fernandez of the Communication, Culture & Technology Program for shedding new light on the importance of relationships and networks

A special thanks to the Arab West Foundation in Cairo for the opportunity last summer to explore Muslim-Christian relations through observation and interviews. An equally profound thanks to the religious leaders and media personalities whom I spoke with there

To other members of the Georgetown community, my program colleagues: Zachary Allard, Lily Hughes, Uday Shakour, Rebecca Sparenberg; to Heather Kerst and Shane Hoon, the program staff as well as the staff of the College Dean’s Office for their moral support

To my mother, the rest of my family and my closest group of friends for their endless support in all my endeavors
PREFACE

My family immigrated to the States from the Philippines which has had its own share of Muslim-Christian tensions rooted mainly from the Muslim separatists’ aspirations to gain sovereignty for the region of Mindanao. However, my education in European affairs and living and travel experiences in France and Belgium during my undergraduate studies introduced an interest in immigration and integration in Europe as I became curious to compare their experiences with my own. From there, I grew more attracted to the issues regarding the intertwined histories and interactions of Muslims and Christians. My relationship with the Coptic Egyptian community around my home in Florida and my interactions with Muslims in my travels further cemented a desire to pursue study and work in interreligious and intercultural affairs.
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Introduction:

RESEARCH FRAMEWORKS and CONTEXTS

In this age of war and terrorism, of globalization and identity politics, religion has re-emerged as a pressing concern in our collective global agenda, assuming substantial dimensions in the socio-political scheme of the international community.

Saturating media coverage, scholarly debate, the agendas of policy-makers, and a litany of other public discourses is the often contentious relationship between Muslims and Christians. However, under all the layers and dimensions of these tensions, beneath the “othering,” most have forgotten their shared values, those based in both a shared Abrahamic heritage and of basic human ideals. As Bulliet declares, “the confrontation between Muslims and Christians today arises not from differences, but from a long and willful determination to deny their kinship.”

At the heart of this research, I address Muslim-Christian relations under the pressures of the current trends of globalization. I endeavor to analyze how the facets of our globalizing world have shifted the power dynamics of religious networks and subsequently changed the nature of interfaith dialogue and more specifically, how this is guiding the trajectory of Muslim-Christian relations. As laypeople are able to assume self-determined expression through their use of communication technologies, their relationships with religious leaders and in inter and intra-faith matters may be compromised. In my thesis, I argue that interconnective technologies and expanding social networks that empower and stir dialogue and action in the laypeople reorder religious networks and can be vehicles in alleviating Muslim-Christian tensions.

To support this assertion, I will address the components of constructive dialogue and cooperation, the ever-evolving relationship between religion and technology, as well as the transformation of religious networks and group dynamics by those technologies. Additionally, I will analyze contrary situations in which globalization cultivated not progressive dialogue, but friction and even fundamentalism. A focus on these issues is rather timeless, but vital to scrutinize, for religions, especially long-established ones like Christianity and Islam have always had to contend with on-going challenges presented by evolving and modernizing environments.

**Muslim-Christian Relations**

I orient this research to concentrate solely on tensions between Muslims and Christians, widespread friction between the two groups in various contexts. Historically, the causes for their tensions have varied, but in recent decades the causes have been increasingly cultural and political in nature. As Muslims and Christians constitute almost half of the world’s current population of nearly seven billion, and because their history of interactions have been occasionally strained with conflict and tension, it is critical to analyze their current interactions and formulate understanding of the resources of modernity can be applied to counter and ameliorate their situations. In the 2009 “A Common Word” declaration, it was affirmed by Prince Ghazi bin Mohammed of Jordan that with Muslims and Christians making up such a significant portion of the global population, world peace will remain more unattainable if the relationship between the two faiths continues to be strained.²

Methodology

Given that background, I present a diverse handful of cases where Muslim and Christian citizens have instigated somewhat of grassroots movements and initiatives to counter the sectarian tensions in their communities. Communication technology and network-building were significant resources that advanced their missions to counter sectarian tension. I recognize tensions to assume the characteristics of social marginalization and inequality (for the minority) to polemic discourse and public sentiment to instances of violence and brutality. I analyzed Muslim-Christian relations in three societies where tensions between members of the two faiths have been relatively frequent and intense-- France, Egypt and Nigeria. In recent years, these countries have endured much sectarian tension; France and many countries designated to exist in the Western civilization host debates on religious pluralism and multiculturalism as influxes of Muslim immigrants inadvertently prompt suspicion and discrimination; in Egypt and Nigeria, they have escalated to brutality which has on a several occasions resulted in a significant number of casualties.

I have also chosen these cases for their historical backgrounds; for instance, a context in the Arab world where Islam first flourished and the three Abrahamic faiths have often been at odds with one another, one in a Western society where the recent waves of Muslim migration compromise the social and cultural values of their Christian heritage, and another with very unique attributes including an almost evenly split population of Muslims and Christians blended with tribal and ethnic allegiances.

Although, it is necessary to examine the elements causing tension, my study focuses primarily on the ways in which tensions are being addressed for resolution and prevention. I gave
a keen deliberation to the role of the religious authorities in Islam and Christianity in those contexts, examining the resonance of their influence prevailing in the face of the competing spheres of secularism and globalization and how they engage with laypeople to counter interreligious tensions. I endeavored to expand on how the facets of our globalizing world have shifted the power dynamics of religious networks and subsequently changed the nature of interfaith dialogue.

Technological advancements and social networks can provide alleviation to Muslim-Christian tensions in various communities across the globe through the heightening of citizen/layperson participation in the processes, which inevitably puts into question the role of religious authorities and hierarchies, obliging them to reassess their approaches to leadership and influence. While it is critical to study Internet penetration in each case (because of magnitude of diffusion and content available), I studied other forms of media. The case studies provided examples of how those societies have applied organized networks, film production, television and the creation of virtual communities to foster intercultural and interfaith dialogue.

Gathering Evidence

The evidence I have compiled to support my argument is comprised of two principal themes: the avenues undertaken by lay Muslims and Christians in utilizing communication technology and networks to express their religious identities in addition to how they harness them in interacting with one another as well as the influence and engagement of religious leaders. Underneath the primary assessment of how these contribute to more peaceful relations, I also analyze who is leading the efforts-- essentially how power has been diffused among religious networks as a result of certain globalizing trends.
To support my argument, I will draw from a number of sources in several spheres including the history of Muslim-Christian relations, religious leadership, social network analysis, conflict resolution, as well as technology. Gopin’s work specifically addresses citizen diplomacy as a source of mitigation in interreligious strife, not focusing squarely on Muslim-Christian relations, but a wider range of faiths and denominations, nor does it focus on the application of modern technologies, but the intention required to advance peaceful measures. Closely aligned to my thesis topic, Gopin not only analyzes specific situations of interreligious tension, but also offers recommendations and strategies to bolster more effective means of citizen engagement.

There is a growing number of literature addressing the use of media to alleviate conflict and tension, but few specifically address the aspect of religion and interreligious conflict. In regard to Muslim-Christian relations, there appears to be plentiful literature focused on the socio-political discord between members of the two faiths, which often analyzes the causes of tensions, but does not emphasize measures for prevention or resolution. I do not intend to focus narrowly on the causes of tension, but illuminate some methods that have been used in conflict prevention and resolution, particularly the resources afforded by emerging communication technologies.

In addition to scholarly pieces from journals and books, current newspaper articles and editorials will be central and imperative to my research since they will provide the timely information and public opinion on the sectarian tensions in my case studies. These pieces are often composed by citizens of those societies and further, media professionals who have dedicated much work and study to these regions and issues. Several of the articles have the countries in my study (France, Egypt, Nigeria) as their main focus, deconstructing the various
facets of sectarian tensions in those societies, but in most cases, the cloud of political anxiety around them.

A considerable amount of study has been devoted to the changing dynamics of religious authority and religion, in general, their interface with and reaction to globalization. Some of the literature I have gathered highlights the dichotomy between tradition and modernity in religious networks, assessing how faith communities have reacted to social changes (including the use of technology to express their ethnic-religious identities, etc.).

It is my hope that this research advances improved understanding of the dynamics of the evolutions of interdependence and interconnectivity including applied technology and social networks and the power plays in religious-based tensions and to then recognize and extract advantages to create strategies that would work to alleviate them. I hope, also, that this will provide an exercise in building theory on religious-based tensions so that we may improve practice in applying interfaith dialogue as well as measures to prevent and resolve conflicts.

**Interreligious Interactions Through the Lens of Social Network Theory**

The interconnected world places great emphasis on relationships. Gopin applies social network analysis to illustrate the actions of religious networks, particularly what takes place during and as a result of interreligious interactions. The application of this theory and analysis is intended to provide a general comprehension of the role of certain individuals within the network as well as group dynamics.

Below is a basic illustration, which I have generated, of two religious networks and their interactions with one another; one faith is identified by blue nodes and the other by red nodes. Religious networks, consisting of individuals adhering to various faiths or denominations, he
claims, are strong networks because they are resistant to change their attitudes, beliefs and practices from the pressures and influence of external forces.\textsuperscript{3}

Network elements engaging in any sort of interfaith interaction, ranging from observation to dialogue, are identified as boundary spanners, those who connect their own networks to others. The substance of their interaction which can be positive, negative or neutral carries the potential to spread the others in the network of the boundary spanners. The orange lines denote new or emerging bonds between the boundary spanners, those involved and engaged in dialogue and interfaith communication.

The purple line indicates a triadic closure, the creation of a bond between two individuals that mutually are connected with one or more individuals. In this graph, the application of triadic closure usually involves one individual involved in some form of interfaith interaction. The spread of influence can be described with this social network theory’s concept which supports the notion that there is strength in weak ties. Weak ties are labeled as such because they allow influence to infiltrate their networks, and they often act as the bridges connecting to other networks. Gopin identifies the boundary spanners as weak ties, those extending beyond their own networks, but connecting them to the “outside world” of new visions and perspectives. Their positions or roles as bridges, potentially compromises the status quo and traditions of their strong network. Theoretically, the occurrence of a triadic closure results in the extension or enlargement of a network. Gopin argues that “once new ideas are filtered (in a network), there

can be potential for remarkable levels of communication and cross-fertilization.” Finally, the golden line represents a spontaneous formation of a bond between a member of one network with that of another. This may come to realization as a result of the influence of engagement of the boundary spanners that penetrated through other individuals in the network.

**Fig. 1.1: Social Network Analysis of Religious Networks and Interreligious Interactions**

The usage of technology within the networks is not a visible component in this graph, not represented by nodes or edges; but rather has the ability to connect individuals and groups and to establish relationships and bonds between them. We can speculate that with the heightened use of technology and strengthening of social networks aforementioned, laypeople boost interfaith

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dialogue and even establish potential remedies for their religious-based tensions. Those engaged in such activities and mindsets that grassroots, community-based efforts can significantly impact the outcome of larger social issues; often act as bridges between their own groups and communities and others. The actions of one or a few carry the potential to ripple to broaden influence over others.

Social network analysis provides a nuanced perspective of interreligious dialogue and interaction; and it should be sufficient to provide a general overview. From this, it is my hope that you, the reader, will grasp a clear enough comprehension of this theory in order to apply it to the case studies.

**Religion and Technology**

Technological advancements, particularly in communication technology, have exponentially multiplied the amount of knowledge, ideas, and opinions exchanged globally among the countless masses with access. They are the tools that transmit influence. A television conveys information, mainly in the form of speech and images to countless households. Satellite devices multiply the reception and enable transnational viewership of the televised content. The Internet proliferates not only news and commerce, but opinions created by regular citizens in a borderless cyber world. In virtual spaces, public discourse is launched, and the anonymity that the Internet provides appeals to the masses because they are shielded from the social pressure that one may attract from making open, public statements or actions. These relatively recent developments have permanently shifted the way in which societies worldwide orient their worldviews and comprehension of current events, and their place in the scheme of things.
Our globalizing world constantly fosters heightened intercultural interaction and communication which includes the public discourse of religion. The products of globalization can leverage both causes and cures for religious-based tensions. As we learn more about one another, we inadvertently build awareness of our own self-identities. Interactions and access to certain information causes us to reflect on our identities, which arguably with the ubiquitous influence of others can be subject to change and hybridization in varying degrees.

As Ouaali affirms in her essay regarding Islam and modernity that, “globalization has bound our destiny and future in such a way that the only future before us is a common one.” As she emphasizes, the collective global society is undergoing an irreversible modification of the nature of and amount of interpersonal and intercultural communication, this includes how people understand themselves and consequently how they represent themselves to others. The world of today requires an interconnectivity and interdependence on many levels that often promises an enriched existence of diversity, varied sources of knowledge, competition for capacity building, and much more; to that end, isolation or self-containment seems like a detrimental path to pursue.

Not only have communication technologies contributed to the expansion of intricate social networks among groups and individuals of divergent cultural and religious backgrounds, but we are able to produce our own opinions and information for public dissemination, and as religious discourse transcends the traditional places of worship to the seemingly expansive

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6 Ibid.
realms of the Internet and in significant media saturation, we are unconsciously forced to recognize the “others,” those different than ourselves adhering to creeds and social guidelines dictated by their unique cultural and religious beliefs and practices. As waves of modernization penetrate even areas underdeveloped by technology, we are reminded of how small the world truly is as we reflect on our interconnectedness in our similarities and differences. Schmidt and Cohen describe a growing interconnectivity “where any person with access to the Internet, regardless of living standard or nationality, is given a voice and the power to effect change.”

I hypothesize that the ever-evolving technologies inadvertently make vulnerable the authority of any religious hierarchies or authorities. Any layperson is able to dispense their own opinions of religion whether they replicate or stray from the teachings and positions of the faith leaders. Any monopoly over the information or opinions in religion will no longer be consolidated in the hands of a few, but practically anyone with the right resources and access to means of propagation. These developments actively encourage self-determination in individuals, as well as fuel a propensity to create and proliferate their own ideas about faith and spirituality. There is also a risk presented as the stances of the designated leaders, the mullahs, the sheikhs and imams of Islam, the Pope(s), the cardinals, the bishops and pastors of Christianity, may be challenged or even exceeded by often anonymous others. In that sense, the leaders face the possibility of losing credibility and influence.

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Religious Leadership in a Digital Age

As laypeople realize a sense of self-determination and create and consume information that serves to shape their worldviews, their relationship with the religious leaders may assume new courses. A significant part of this research aspires to detect the ways in which the relationship between designated religious leaders and the laypeople whom they have influence over may change due to the development of communication technology and the increase in public discourse of religious matters that it propels. On the whole, technological developments are constant, human populations are perpetually challenged with adapting to them. Bulliet reminds us:

Lines of religious authority had for centuries depended on personal classroom linkages between teachers and disciples. Any literate person might read religious texts, but men who did not have a known mentor or a seminary degree commanded little attention in religious circles. Women were totally excluded. The intellectual monopoly exercised by learned men holding forth in religiously oriented schools and assemblies collapsed in the face of the widespread dissemination of printed materials.  

The hierarchies and bodies of authority leading the faithful of Islam and Christianity find their roles questioned as waves of influence from secularism to various social factors threaten to shake traditional tenets of the faiths or the purity of creed altered. With the masses gaining unprecedented access to deluges of information and also contributing to the creation of them, often taking the responsibility and prestige away from once designated professionals and trained

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individuals—such as the growing movement of citizen journalism – authority is diffused. In the religious spheres we question who has the authority to represent and process interpretations of their faiths. Who is able to speak on behalf of Islam and Christianity?

Further, parts of this research address the more traditional means of interfaith dialogue, the formal meetings of faith leaders. Although interfaith councils and dialogues gather leaders to deliberate amongst themselves and are established to promote transnational participation among Muslim and Christian leaders and scholars worldwide, undertaking the mission of improving relations or addressing common grievances by discussing the theological as well as socio-political factors, it often remains unclear how the deliberations from those meetings trickle down to and received or valued by the laypeople.

**Identifying Dialogue**

The attributes of dialogue remain difficult to detect as there exist no concrete guidelines that dictate its existence except perhaps an exchange of words between two parties. Dialogue can be unintended or intended, private or public, spoken, written, or in the countless manifestations of communication. In a general sense, it can possibly convey any connotation—negative, positive, or neutral.

The case studies in this research will highlight the variety of manifestations of dialogue, from the international to the local level and from those engaging religious leaders to those encouraging the participation of laypeople. Often, dialogue is initiated with good intentions; but frequently occurs haphazardly. This presents a challenge in measuring outcomes and leaves practitioners uncertain about the effectiveness of their efforts.
Most dialogue, wrangling the experiences, opinions and knowledge of the individuals, aims to address socio-political issues subjected upon the parties. For instance, a common trend in contemporary dialogue in Western societies involves promoting an understanding of Islamic principles and tackling the grievances of real and perceived discrimination against Muslims. Depending on the participants, theological issues may enter the discourse; but at that juncture, some would agree to disagree as some distinct qualities of each faith may be insurmountable such as the concept of a Trinity of three persons in one God to Muslims or the sacred quality of Muhammad as a prophet for Christians.

For such a jolt of involvement and fellowship to take place in any setting, people must be willing to reflect on and reassess their values and deflect the spoils of extremism.\(^\text{10}\) In the contexts of Muslim-Christian relations, an obstacle to achieving progress for this often lies squarely on harvesting enough public support for such initiatives which require collective efforts and encouragement. This recalls the notion of some societies and communities as strong networks that are resistant to change.

**A Globalized World**

Outside of the digital contexts, we should be reminded that migration and travel are also key components of globalization. Such physical movement of people triggers the innate human ability of adaptation and integration. We will observe this namely in the chapter on France concerning with Muslim immigrants, but to some degrees in the chapter on Egypt with their Coptic diasporic communities. In new and unfamiliar environments, we naturally reassess our

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identities, but the exposure to divergent ones based often on different cultures, values, and behaviors can greatly influence how we from then on treat our own. The treatment of group and individual identity issues naturally determines the course of our relationships. “Religions have been transnational networks for centuries. New is their intensity and growing international influence as a consequence of migratory flows and advances in communication and technology.”\textsuperscript{11}

The significant migratory flows have pluralized many societies, changing our personal circles of who we know and with whom we interact. Our spheres of influence, most often those in our immediate physical environments, help to shape our attitudes and behaviors—our commercial habits, our ethics, our politics, and our morals and beliefs. Thus, technology is not the sole contributor, enhancing our globalized world; it adds another dimension to the localized spheres of influence as we are able to receive and process information and opinions from far distant sources and reel in new components that can shape our worldviews. Technology and migration fuel the significant shift in the way in which we perceive and conceive of our social networks. No longer do our networks consist of those in our immediate physical circles, but propelled by the movement of people and information, our networks can enjoy almost a limitless expansion to the virtual world and a broader reality. Also, perhaps more than ever, as we navigate the World Wide Web and pick and choose our affiliations, we have gained free reign to choose whom to exclude and include into our networks.

The possibilities remain infinite and inconceivable. Technology, fundamentally through the presence of the Internet, forces us to reimagine or reconceptualize what we as individuals, smaller components of a larger populace, are capable of achieving. The main and rational purpose of communication technologies strives to heighten our interactions with others, whether to connect to known contacts or participate in an exchange of information with random others.

Considering an element as prevalent and quite ubiquitous as technology and networks, they can often be neglected or even misused in dire social situations, fostering great concern from the religious leaders themselves as well as individuals in many fields. We question whether the globalizing world can aid in the most dire of tensions and conflicts.
Chapter I:

RELIGIOUS and SECULAR DRIVEN DIALOGUES in FRANCE

Recent years have witnessed hundreds crowding the streets of France in protest of the ban on Islamic garments (first the *hijab*, then *burqa* and other full-coverage clothing) in state schools and other public places. Often sporting the *tricolore*, the French flag, the protestors ostentatiously proclaim their dual identities as both French and Muslim. The controversy on the ban on the *hijab* is just one extension of a larger debate encircling the integration of Muslim citizens in France and in Europe, with polemics that have expanded to encompass what some perceive as a hesitant development of religious diversity as well as fears of radicalization. Perceived as discrimination, of the limitation of religious freedom and rights of expression, the narratives of Muslims here echo contemporary deliberations on the attributes of the French identity, and on a wider scope, what it means to be European. Rifkin attests:

> The Muslim influence is particularly challenging because Islam has traditionally viewed itself as a universal brotherhood of the faith. One’s allegiance to Islam is supposed to supercede allegiances to any particular culture, place or political institution… Although the vast majority of Muslims are peaceful, law-abiding citizens of the countries in which they reside, it is probably fair to say that there are at least some whose loyalty to the state is thin in comparison to their loyalty to Islam.¹²

This is the trepidation that Europeans have adopted. Despite their law-abiding ways, a suspicion has grown in the shadows of the highly publicized cells of Islamists, thus blurring the lines

between fundamentalism and the reality of the diverse Muslim population in Europe. Further, their exponentially increasing numbers creates an unease for many that the socio-cultural dynamics of Europe may never be the same.

In this initial case study, I deconstruct the tension surrounding the trend of a growing Muslim population in a nation once crucial in the livelihood of the Christian civilization of centuries’ past. France’s implementation of laïcité, the strict implementation of secularism in the public sphere has been widely recognized as compromising to the practice of the Islamic faith. Yet despite the interpretation of this value of keeping religion in the private domain and restricting the rights of Muslims, Brown proposes that European society is recognizing the resources found in dialogue that aim to aid such social strains, that Europeans are actively engaged in organizations and informal and formal dialogues that address the issue of Muslim integration.13 France’s current socio-religious landscape provides us with a strong example of expansive social networks being utilized for the resolution and prevention of Muslim-Christian tension. In this context, engagement and participation in interreligious dialogue takes places in the most vital levels of society: in government, among the religious leaders and among the citizens or laypeople.

From the evidence I have gathered, dialogue and measures to promote interfaith cooperation are initiated among both religious and secular spheres, among religious leaders of varying degrees of influence as well as state and transnational initiatives. Dialogue has often

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been prescribed to diminish the tension provoked and exacerbated by what many have called “failures of integration” and the debates over the concepts of laïcité and citizenship.

The situation in France provides us with an exemplary model for the study of social networks and group dynamics, particularly in the organized networks formed to address the concerns of Islam in Europe and in the hybridization of identity among the Muslim immigrants and how they strive to incubate an atmosphere that would cultivate their personal identities as well as in their participation in networks based on their religious and cultural affiliations. This chapter highlights the challenges of organization and social cohesion among Muslims in France to confront their own dilemmas and grievances as well as the charge of local and regional governance to alleviate them.

Additionally, it is essential to assess the state of Christianity in Europe, to understand how citizens accommodate faith in their lives, to grasp comprehension of the authority and legitimacy assumed by the hierarchical structure of the Vatican in modern Europe, and to comprehend where their values toward other faiths originate. Penetrating the concern of citizens, religious leaders, and policy-makers, there seems to be no shortage of public discourse regarding the needs of the Muslim community.

**Muslim Migration**

Largely as economic immigrants who have fled their homelands for improved personal security and advancement, the masses of Muslims that have settled in France have more often than not encountered the obstacles of real and perceived racism, discrimination, and the coercion
to assimilate into French society which many find compromises their values and traditions.\textsuperscript{14}

Muslims, especially those who have migrated from Muslim-majority countries are classified as a minority here based not only on their creed, but ethnicity and race. French Muslims generally are of North African origin—of Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia, though a small percentage have origins in West Africa and Asia. As France opened its doors to immigration with the guest worker program of post World War II and the post-colonization period, the society quickly transformed, and found itself contending with the concepts of multiculturalism and pluralism.

As many discussions about religion in France will declare, the state does not require any official census or recording of demographic information. As such, the exact number of Muslims in France is unknown; but current estimates have been placed at ten percent of an overall population of nearly 62 million. Of the 15-20 million Muslims that have settled across the European continent, France has the largest proportion, estimated to be around five million. Considering the continued migration patterns into Europe as well as the high fertility rates among Muslim immigrants, it is anticipated that that figure will double by 2025.\textsuperscript{15}

\textit{‘The Eldest Daughter of the Church’}

Before we begin to analyze the conditions for Muslims in present-day France, we must be aware of the modern nation’s roots in Christianity. France holds a place of high regard in the heritage of the Catholic Church. Today, religious tourism draws in bountiful revenue from sites including Lourdes, and the countless cathedrals, monasteries and abbeys scattered throughout the country. It nurtured the likes of several religious leaders including popes, holy men of all ranks,

\textsuperscript{14} Warner, Carolyn M. and Manfred W. Wenner. “Religion and the Political Organization of Muslims in Europe.” \textit{Perspectives on Politics}: American Association for Political Science, (September 2006).

\textsuperscript{15} Leiken, Robert S. “Europe’s Angry Muslims.” \textit{Foreign Affairs}. (July-August 2005).
and saints. Legend also says that Mary Magdalene and two other future Saint Marys settled in its southern coast shortly after the crucifixion. Given its history, it has bestowed upon the title of “the eldest daughter of the Church.”

However, much to the dismay of the Vatican, recent polls indicate that more French are leaving their Catholic roots in the past, leaving the faith as heritage and not carrying it on to practice in contemporary times—the figures of those who identify as Catholic have drastically plummeted while the number of professed atheists rose to about 30% according to an independent survey conducted by the nation’s leading newspapers.

Given the sharp decrease in practicing Catholics, individuals, straying from the guidance of the established Church hierarchy, have sought self-guided path to spirituality, leaving the construction of the worldviews and opinions to their own discretion and factors external to the Church. Since Pope Benedict XVI assumed the papacy in 2005, the French have only established a mediocre relationship with the Church and the philosophies of the new Pontiff. A poll taken in 2009 cited that more than 65% practicing Catholics in France do not agree with the Church and its stances on issues including contraception, abortion, divorce, and homosexuality. Almost 50% of those surveyed said the Pope has done a “rather bad” job in defending the values of Catholicism.16

The Pope’s mission to advance Muslim-Christian relations is challenged by the steady decrease in religiosity, of practice and belief among Europeans. The statistics of sharp decreases

in individuals taking holy orders, in church attendance, and Catholic marriage are some issues on
the Church’s litany of concerns.

In 2010, he led efforts to revive the Christian roots of European society. Last year, the
Vatican established the Pontifical Council for the New Evangelization, an initiative with the
objective of communicating Catholicism to modern generations. Seizing advantage of the
effective communication of the Internet, the Pontiff, head of the oldest Christian denomination,
funneled influence through the creation of the Vatican’s official YouTube channel where
videos of public addresses and events may be broadcast.

This is just one out of many ways in which the Vatican has applied technology in their
outreach to the billion Catholics worldwide. During the 45th World Communications Day held at
the beginning of 2011, the Pope urged Catholics to recognize technology as the “fruit of human
ingenuity... and that they must be placed at the service of the integral good of the individual/user
and of the whole of humanity.”\(^{17}\) This declaration included guidelines for the ethical use of social
media. He underlines the application of media to promote “dialogue, change, solidarity and the
creation of positive relations.”\(^{18}\) France’s Conference of Bishops also regularly publishes its
interfaith activities, declarations and other efforts on their website. While they remind the readers
of the realities of Islamism and Islamic-based radicalization and acts of terrorism which they
condemn and have sought to withdraw those negative perceptions and suspicions from narratives

\(^{17}\) “Truth, Proclamation and Authenticity of Life in the Digital Age.” Message of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI for
the 45th World Communications Day. Website of the Holy See, January 2001:
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/messages/communications/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20110124_45th-world-
communications-day_en.html

\(^{18}\) Ibid.
of what they call “moderate” Muslims. Jean-Pierre Ricard, Cardinal and Archbishop of Bordeaux, however, lamented that even though dialogue is being encouraged between the Muslim and Christian communities in France, many young Christians are not as engaged as older members of society (namely those aged 60 and above).

With the growing diversity of beliefs and the state’s push for secularism, culture, more than religion binds the people of France. Still, with the influx of new immigrants from France’s former colonies and various parts of the world, France strives to protect its cultural heritage; one built largely on contributions to the humanities—in philosophy, language, the arts and so on. The efforts to preserve French culture in the face of globalization have fervently pushed religion into the private domain.

Skeptics remain unconvinced of a Catholic revival in France, much less in Europe given current opinion polls and the statistics that place most practicing Catholics in the older age brackets. Many blame a host of factors including secularism, the rise of science and human rationality in addition to the concept of *laïcité*, the very institution compromising the interests of French Muslims. If this is true, then despite the events and people that contributed to centuries of Catholicism in France, the French are steering the country toward more humanistic values rather than spiritual ones.

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Laïcité and the French State

The persistent debates over immigration reform, especially the appeal to restrict foreigners from settling in Europe ignites with them the debate over integration versus assimilation. Assimilation suggests an adoption of cultural values and social norms and practices; whereas integration recognizes and maintains inherent cultural and ideological differences. French society calls for a strict separation of religious and state affairs; the concept of laïcité, or secularism, remains at the heart of the Constitution. Although the architects of this concept in France made nationalism and citizenship a priority, it is still often misinterpreted to denote discrimination. The waves of Muslim immigrants continue to challenge France’s secularism and to an extent, its religious freedom.

Since the 1980s, the French government enforced a highly criticized policy that prohibits public expression of religion, including Christian crosses and Jewish stars-of-David and yarmulkes; for Muslims, this most notably alluded to forbidding Muslim women from wearing Islamic garments including the headscarf, or hijab, and the niqab, burqa, and other clothing which masks and loosens the contours of the body, leaving only, in most cases the eyes and the hands publicly visible-- a veritable compromising position in their assemblage of beliefs in a society committed to erasing signs of public religious affiliation.

Pratt Ewing compares the secularist approaches of France and Turkey, both of which have imposed top-down efforts to transform society, leaving the government control over religious practice in the public sphere. She alludes to the contestation of a law passed in 1994 which banned the Islamic headscarf in state educational institutions. “The rule seemed to have
left room for wearing yarmulkes or crucifixes, while barring the headscarf for being ‘outrageous, ostentatious, or meant to proselytize.’”

Due to the variance of Islamic schools in which the Muslims adhere, their decentralized organization and allegiances, state authorities are often frustrated in dealing with the grievances and concerns of the well-being of the ummah, or Muslim community. The government finds a great burden in responding to the needs of the various Muslim communities in France for the fact that they lack a consolidated hierarchical structure similar to other religious groups. Pratt Ewing asserts that the French government would like for the leader of the Grande Mosquée de Paris, the largest and mosque in France with the greatest number of adherents and which many would categorize as ‘moderate’ in ideology, to “act as a spokesperson for the Muslim community at large,” fundamentally “to displace Muslim groups that it regards as radical or fundamentalist.”

Reverting to Leiken’s argument on the formation of ill-intentioned networks, the second and third generations embody a “volatile mix of European nativism and immigrant dissidence,” and as he assessed, “the very isolation of these diaspora communities obscures their inner workings, allowing mujahideen to fundraise, prepare, and recruit for jihad with a freedom available in few Muslim countries.”

23 Ibid.
Islamic Leadership in France

Migration poses serious challenges to the structure of religious networks, in circumstances which calls into question intercultural coexistence and tolerance, diasporic populations are tasked with the obligations of reassigining roles to ensure the survival of their beliefs and practices under the pressures of influence from the host culture’s values and social expectations. Religious leaders contend with the ordeal of reinterpreting their system of beliefs. They must rely on their networks elsewhere in Europe and in Muslim-majority countries for guidance and influence in discerning how to reapply the tenets of their faith to an environment based on divergent cultural values and expectations.

The first generations did not have imams to lead their religious communities, but rather “ill-prepared individuals would rotate in serving as leaders of the prayer.”25 During the 80s, migrant communities began to recruit leadership from abroad; however, of significant concern was the issue that often the imams and clerics often espoused the ideologies of the sponsoring foreign governments. Perceived as antagonistic to Western societies and not well-versed in the local language and customs, it has been cited that these leaders are not well-prepared to help their communities with the integration processes.26

Conversely, as Bulliet claims, “Islam is immersed in a crisis of authority.” In many instances, “the local imam is the last word for many, but others follow the advice they glean from pamphlets, magazines, radio preachers, and the Internet.” There seems to be a trend, a

26 Ibid.
growing impetus in many Muslim communities “to suppress divergent local beliefs and win people to more conventional interpretations of Islam.”

**New Identities in New Lands and the Dilemma of Integration**

In a comparative analysis of the immigration experiences in the United States and Europe, Rifkin asserts that “Immigrants (to Europe) are not anxious to assimilate. Most take their cultures with them, much like gypsies have for centuries. Cultural diasporas have forced a rethinking of the very idea of immigration and, in so doing, created new challenges and opportunities in Europe.”

The challenges presented by the demands for multiculturalism have inadvertently forced French Muslims to reassess their identities and their participation in the host culture and society. With migration, the network of Islam expands, and so too do the cultural legacies of the Arab and West African states from which they came. Influence still funnels through the ties and relationships between the new citizens and their connections in their countries of origin. The hybridization of identity and a creation of new identities that occurs as a result of the migration vis-à-vis the influence of new environments and elements contributes to the intergenerational changes in the approaches to the teaching and interpretation of Islam. In recent years, Tariq Ramadan, the Swiss-born scholar of Islam has garnered a great deal of popular appeal among Muslims in Europe and influence in academic circles with his school of Islam that strives to readapt the faith’s dogmas to Western social codes. He and many Muslim leaders and Islamic scholars...
scholars support the notion that Islam is indeed compatible with democratic societies and the West and promote a behavior that urges Muslims to be dutiful to the laws around them, all the while observing proper Islamic code.

Not all Muslims face difficulty in adapting to the norms and expectations of French society. It cannot be generalized that all Muslims or all immigrants are confronted with threats to their identities. However, pressures to integrate (as elements to personal success) into the host societies have been so great, so insurmountable that some individuals have renounced their Muslim identity completely.30

Intergenerational change in a diasporic society or one of migrant roots as a whole will likely undergo a compromise in the way in which the religious networks are structured especially the influence and approaches to leadership assumed by the authorities of any given faith or denomination. Vulnerable to “external” influences that may jeopardize the traditional or established interpretation and practice of Islam, Many Muslims strive to preserve the core elements of their beliefs. But as Peter argues that the clerics and imams leading the Muslims of France are continuously tasked with the burden of reconfiguring their communal vocations and practices to comply with the local state policies.31 In France, Muslims have not used solely their religious identity to form organizations. National origin, rather, is both a bonding and fragmenting element among the ummah. Islam in their countries of origin differ; thus Islamic

31 Peter, Frank. “Leading the Community of the Middle Way: A Study of the Muslim Field in France.” The Muslim World. 96 (October 2006).
organizations specific to those countries of origin have emerged. This has presented somewhat of a unique challenge to Muslim leaders and their fragmented interests and identities in the way they represent themselves in interfaith interactions and gatherings.

Leiken compares the immigration phenomenon in Europe to the situation in the U.S., noting that the failed integration of this minority group presents detrimental consequences for the social landscape and security of Europe. His writing, following suit of other scholars and journalists, addresses the reality of their Muslim marginalization, but also conjures up phobia that their conditions are moving them to take drastic measures tinged by anti-establishment sentiment.

The footprint of Muslim immigrants in Europe is already more visible than that of the Hispanic population in the United States. Unlike the jumble of nationalities that make up the American Latino community, the Muslims of Western Europe are likely to be distinct, cohesive, and bitter. In Europe, host countries that never learned to integrate newcomers collide with immigrants exceptionally retentive of their ways, producing a variant of what the French scholar Olivier Roy calls "globalized Islam": militant Islamic resentment at Western dominance, anti-imperialism exalted by revivalism.

This essay was published in the summer of 2005, months before a wave of riots proliferated in the HLM (habitation à loyer modéré), the high-rise housing projects, and the banlieues, or suburbs of France’s largest cities, with the media and the general public marking Arab Muslim youth as the culprits. Echoing the theme of Leiken’s essay, sociologists pinned

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disenfranchisement and frustration over their socio-economic conditions as the catalysts for the civil unrest.

Their rapidly growing numbers and the vocal advocacy for social and political rights of Muslims by some in recent years have contributed to social tension and in many areas in Europe, an escalating mistrust of those in the Islamic community. The advocacy for rights, not only pertaining to religious freedom, but for equal citizenship drives the mission of those engaged in social activism for those causes. These organized social networks, in their efforts to ensure the well-being of Muslims, also inadvertently push interfaith and intercultural dialogue and understanding into the public arena. In addition to the constant media attention, debates in the circles of academics and policy-makers, integrating Islam into French society has been made. The debate surrounding Islam’s place in French society fuels public discourse of the matter, most notably through the creation of civil society networks in organized activism and through the engagement of citizens through social media.

**Measures for Dialogue**

As stated in the previous chapter, interfaith dialogue on the international level was promoted widely, especially with the encouragement of the Second Vatican Council and the revitalized outlook on other religions crystallized by the movement. Since *Nostra Aetate* (Latin: *In Our Time*), the Vatican’s declaration for improved understanding and cooperation between the Church and non-Christian faiths, was issued in 1965 during the Second Vatican Council, several interfaith dialogues and councils have been lead by leaders at many levels of the Roman Catholic Church. Most Muslim leaders, on the other hand, especially those coming from Muslim-majority countries may not have had previous opportunities to practice dialogue with other faiths. They
may have been trained in theory of how to interact with non-Muslims, but application and practice was uncertain.

Dialogue among the leaders of Islam and Christianity in Europe takes place on international levels drawing in participation of religious authorities from across the globe as well as on the local level where the highest leaders may not directly be engaged, but lower-ranked figures, with their training, are sent to converge at discuss matters pertaining to the local populace. Such was the case in Roubaix, a town in northern France, where mosque construction was the center of a heated debate fueled by the extreme right. Through dialogue and engagement of not only religious, but secular leaders, the town committed a new building for Muslims to worship. Further, Brown’s study seemed to suggest that the numerous attempts for dialogue in the Nord-Pas-de-Callais region cultivated changes unique to the area that fostered social change and a sharpened ability to solve social problems between the faiths through dialogue. Such things as projects with disadvantaged youth and interfaith marriages were made possible through interreligious discourse and cooperation.

Brown brings to light the work of an international network of Muslim-Christian dialogue, the Groupe de Recherches Islamo-Chretien which as offices in Paris, Brussels, Rabat, and Tunis. These committees and groups target matters in the interface of religion and society and have been especially keen on advancing appropriate interpretations of laïcité. In France, laïcité holds a prominent place in the agenda of several meetings. Brown asserts that, “…not only does a

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consciousness of laïcité become a cause of dialogue, but dialogue also brings about different understandings of it.”

**Dialogue Across the Continent**

Not only has the migration of citizens from Western Europe’s former colonies in the latter portion of the 20th century began to transform the social landscape of Europe, but the creation and enlargement of the European Union, a regional political and economic bloc also contributed to the creation of new concepts of socio-cultural identities. With now 27 member states, citizens, by way of the operations of the regional governance have been encouraged to celebrate their collective European heritage in addition to their localized ones. This includes contemplation over the changing social fabric of the society at large with the trends of migration and global exchange that creates concern for the preservation of European heritage and culture.

Supranationally, the institutions of the EU have taken measures to address the integration of its Muslim citizens. As it values alliances with their nations of origin, largely for economic and security reasons, the EU has formed many formal bilateral partnerships including the European Neighborhood Policy Instrument and EuroMed initiatives. Fostering citizen engagement in intercultural and interfaith understanding and dialogue are among their many objectives.

Many programs and initiatives carrying the objective to promote diversity and citizenship have been the key focus of cooperation for the Commission, Council, and Parliament, the three governing bodies of the Union. Representatives from each have assembled, sometimes with faith

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leaders, to address the religious factors involved in pressing socio-political issues. Collectively, in recent years, they launched public fora for interfaith dialogue; most notably, in 2008, the EU dedicated a “Year of Intercultural Dialogue” to its agenda, with the various bodies of different specializations contributing. In that year, the institutions supported public debates in Brussels (that were highly publicized and disseminated through various media) which tackled a variety of social issues including religious and cultural sensitivity in the workplace and media representations of Islam. The newly launched Anne Lindh Report, funded by the institutions and under the umbrella of the EuroMed Program, strives to compile statistics and perspectives of leaders on the progress of social cohesion among the citizens throughout the Mediterranean region. A principal objective of theirs strives to collect opinion and information on personal values and perceptions to bolster interreligious understanding.  

Countless more programs are funded by the Commission each year, throughout member-states and in external relations with key regions such as North Africa and the Middle East.

While many of the EU-funded initiatives aim, it leaves individual states to tend to certain local matters such as their approaches to state education and certain matters of social welfare.

**Diffusion of Influence—Citizen Engagement**

Given the lack of an established hierarchy of authority in Islam, the sense of group and organization differs vastly from the Catholic tradition. Warner and Wenner appraise the French context, stating that “the general lack of broad organizations results from the decentralized institutional structure of the Islamic faith. This factor is exacerbated by the diversity of national

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origins found among European Muslims. When the structural features of Islam are combined with the obstacle of overcoming entrenched national identities, the possibilities for broad-based collective action on religious grounds are limited.”

Interconnective technologies lie at the heart of civil society engagement as well as democratic participation with the information and deliberations published in virtual spaces, but the presence of civil society organizations empowers the citizens to advocate for their causes. The interconnective tools of the Internet and social media are the tools which enable the organizations to effectively fulfill their objectives. Created in 2003 with the backing of the Ministry of the Interior, the **Conseil Français de Culte Musulman** serves as a means of representation of the Muslim communities to the government. Nicolas Sarkozy, the then head of the Ministry supported the formation despite criticism from those who wanted to protect the principles of *laïcité* and maintain a separation of religious and state affairs. Other significant groups include the Federation for Islamic Organizations in Europe and the European Council for Research and Fatwa, those of which undertake the prime mission of reinterpreting and readapting Islam to the European context. Their outreach penetrates Muslims of every class and origin in France through direct engagement via the vehicles of broadcast technology and social media.

While some private citizens have harnessed the resources and networks around them to facilitate for better integration of the Muslim community, others have utilized social media in a way that stirs qualms from the general public, activities that denote radicalization. Responding to socio-political and economic marginalization, pockets of Muslim individuals have received or

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created media carrying anti-West content that have been disseminated to sprawling networks. As Jihadi networks have spawned across the continent, so too have fears of homegrown radicalization.

The plight of Muslims in Europe has proved that separating religion from state is a daunting task for policy-makers and authorities. The recent years, political parties throughout Western Europe, labeled the conservative right, built highly publicized campaigns rallying for immigration restriction. Many more have vocalized concern over the matter of multiculturalism in countries including Germany and the United Kingdom. As the debate reverberates across the continent, so too does the uncertainty of the state of Muslim welfare. Political restrictions may threaten the well-being of the French Muslim community, but “the anxieties raised by these threats,” as Bulliet predicts, “will help the community maintain a sense of cohesion amongst themselves.”

In the next chapter, I examine the use of networks and technology in a vastly different context, amidst the sporadic sectarian tension in Egyptian society.

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Chapter II:

BEYOND UNDERSTANDING-
GENERATING INTERRELIGIOUS COOPERATION in EGYPT

The situation in France provides us with impressions of the utility and effectiveness of wide-reaching networks. Interconnective technologies—the websites, the online forums, and expedited outreach and communication permit the formation of such webs across communities, cities and national borders that may not have been possible or as effectively operating just decades ago. Within that context, the Muslim minority has thrived, yet still aims to secure their rights and recognition in what many perceive to be a secular, pluralistic and multicultural society. As such, several approaches to dialogue and networked activism there among the designated religious authorities and the general public are able to flourish under those conditions.

Turning to a different perspective of Christians as the minority of a Muslim-majority society, I now analyze interreligious relations, from past to present, in Egypt, one of the first areas in the world to experience the dynamic of Muslim-Christian coexistence, a society which has long endured both times of peace and tension.

I posit in my analysis that, in Egypt, the concept of social networks to accomplish dialogue and interreligious/intercultural accord has yet to develop into a phase that promotes national cohesion over religious identities. Conversely, I recognize the application of technology as an instrumental vehicle and burgeoning force for mobilizing the public and promulgating information that sustains the goals of interfaith cooperation. Messages transmitted via mobile phones, the Internet and television are popular media to which many have access, especially in the urban megalopolis of Cairo.
In my analysis, I first look retrospectively at the historical experiences and attitudes that have fashioned the existing status quo, additionally the trends and actions assumed by people of both faiths to secure and maintain the rites and traditions of their religious networks. I assess the nature of sectarian tension in the country, noting the ways in which both members of the Muslim and the Christian faiths in Egypt have established efforts to articulate their socio-religious identities (externally and to themselves). Interspersed among these queries, I deconstruct how interconnective technologies and dynamic social networks are changing the interaction among and between the devotees of the two faiths, highlighting toward the end, efforts for composing stronger social cohesion. Before doing so, I describe the historical context which is vital to form an awareness of the historical established status quo consisting of the popular approaches to spirituality and the application of religion in daily living in addition to the existing social climate based on the expected behavior and embedded cultural values in order to assess the conditions that breed sectarian tension and the prospects for curing them.

*Fourteen Centuries of Coexistence*

Islam flourished in present-day Saudi Arabia during the mid-seventh century, and in mere decades, spread rapidly across Western Asia and North Africa. Before that time, the region consisted of a mélange of Christians, Jews and pagans; but the demographics soon changed as waves of conversion took place.\(^{41}\) Even today, with Egypt’s population of over 80 million, it is home to the largest group of Christians in the region. Collectively, the Copts, or Christians of Egypt, include those of the Orthodox (which comprises the overwhelming majority), Catholic,

and Protestant traditions. The term Copt, or the adjective Coptic, originated from the Greek word meaning Egyptian and was later Arabicized.

In Egypt, entrenched cultural perspectives on diversity and pluralism aggravate sectarianism and leverage tensions. We should be mindful of the cultural foundations that breed this tension. Murray alleges that “unless human lives are at stake, it is not considered conflict, but healthy competition.”

People continue to perceive disputes as part of the social landscape alongside religious practice. Thus religious identity often fuels this alleged competition, despite common citizenship. It encompasses a competition for followers, of public religious expression, and to realities that are wrongly attributed to religion such as economic success.

As Lakousha assesses of the situation in Egypt today, “You will always find a religious interpretation of any conflict between Coptics and Muslims because we live in an era of tension between the religions that I’ve never seen registered at this level. That’s why in any conflicts between Muslims and Coptics, in the subway or in the market, it will always end up being taken in the religious context.”

On the surface, tensions between people of different faiths are more often than not perceived as fundamentally religious-based or acts of intolerance; but in fact, the heavier stressors of economic and political quandaries eclipse the discernible differences in culture and identity, and people are too quick to recognize the identity issues over the socio-political ones.

As Nasr emphasizes, in the cases where Christians thrive as the minority in a Muslim-majority

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society, “it is almost always based not on religious issues, but on political and economic factors derived from the fact that local Christians have often sided with Western ruling powers against the Muslim populations in the past two centuries and today; although a minority, they enjoy much more economic and political power than their numbers would warrant.”

In local terms, several instances of sectarian tension in Egypt, as many will argue, have been based on rumors and misunderstandings. Ansari cites specific cases, especially in Upper Egypt-- the most highly-concentrated Coptic areas, where tensions have been blamed on a wide range of causal factors from rumored Christian conspiracies to offset the population imbalance to alleged conversions. On the other hand, one of the most significant agents contributing to sectarian tension are the laws that limit church building, going back to the restrictions imposed by the government to “permit free worship, but deny them the right to expand their activities.”

This revisits the allegation that social views of competition exacerbate tensions as some would put forth that the enforcement of these laws aim to contain the growth of Christianity in Egypt as well as the curtail their visual symbols from over-occupying the landscapes.

As a religious minority, Coptic Christians have heavily opposed local decrees that push such limitations, citing them as discrimination and persecution; however, distinguishing an enemy between the government and the established Muslim culture seems rather complex. Largely, though, fault of the real or perceived discrimination and persecution falls on the

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government and institutions within Egypt. The 2007 report on religious freedom in Egypt assembled by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom highlighted specific issues and cases of religious discrimination by the Egyptian government and the Muslim majority on religious minorities, especially the Copts. It states, “Christians face official and societal discrimination. Christians are rarely found in high-level government and military posts, or in the upper ranks of security services and armed forces. There is only one Christian governor out of 26; one elected Member of Parliament out of 444 seats; no known university presidents or deans; and very few legislators and judges.”

These instances have triggered or contributed to a sense of othering, of perceiving the non-believer, the outsider as the enemy, to both Christians and Muslims. Many would concur with the assessment that religious tension in Egypt arises not from the stressing of theological or cultural differences, but more often than not, economic and political factors. Religion may often too be used as a scapegoat when institutionalized policies and random discrimination of religious minorities are to blame for social tensions. Recognizing that they may be unable to change their situation on their own terms, citizens play out their anger and frustration on each other instead of the institutions at-large.

**Religious Networks in Egypt**

Egyptian society holds high regard to religion and its place in the lives of its citizens. As such, religious leaders, immensely significant sources of spiritual and social guidance, the protectors of the faith doctrines, yield great influence among their flocks. The networks of

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followers, as introduced in the first chapter, correspond under the auspices of organized religion, inherently a system of leaders and followers in an intricate web of relationships where authority spreads. Muslims and Christians in Egypt are expected to follow designated leaders, figures who have gained that authority through ordination, privileges earned from self-discipline, intensive theological study and public service.

The Copts have established a system of hierarchy similar to the Vatican, with a Pope yielding the highest and supreme authority among their faithful along with bishops, deacons, monks, priests and nuns supporting the framework of Coptic beliefs and traditions. As a relatively small Christian denomination (estimations ranging between ten to 15 million worldwide—including the diaspora), it can be posited that there are closer ties between the leaders and the laypeople, and amongst the laypeople themselves.  

Their grievances over persecution and discrimination in Egypt only strengthen their cohesiveness.

Although there is no official hierarchy in Islam, no designated organization of leadership such as the well-known structure like that of the Roman Catholic Church, for example, some degrees of authority are bestowed upon those who are the most learned in Islamic theology and scripture. Generally, “leadership in Islam is not reserved for a small elite; rather, depending upon the situation, every person is the ‘shepherd’ of a flock,” and leaders should only be appointed in “an effort to reach certain objectives.”

Thus any person possessing the appropriate motivation, background in religious principles, and ability to muster trust to others may be recognized as a source of authority. Institutions that pride themselves on providing curriculum dedicated to

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Islamic codes such as the al-Azhar University in Cairo produce Islamic scholars who endeavor to uphold its mission of propagating Islamic theology and culture. This has created a niche in the ummah, the collective international Muslim community, for imams, sheikhs, and others who have assumed responsibilities in leading prayers, interpreting sacred texts, and imposing fatwas, or religious opinions concerning Islamic law.

**Islamic Egypt and Globalization**

Al-Azhar Mosque and University, one of the oldest and most central institutions in the guidance of Sunni Islam has been situated in Egypt since the 900s.\(^{50}\) As such, not only does this institution have a significant place in the comprehension and interpretation of Islam in Egypt, but the nation as a whole enjoys a key role in influencing the values and conduct of countless Muslims worldwide. However, as this institution is lead by a select few, their opinions and counseling is not binding, but highly subjective.

If faiths are fragmented by ideologies, leaders tend to surface, attempting to persuade and assemble followers to support their viewpoints. With the growth of extremist cells and networks, the Azhar has openly condemned terrorism and warned against the spoils of extremist ideology. As a beacon of authority in Islam, it has issued countless statements condemning attitudes and behavior that promotes violence, attempting to orient the masses to what has been called a more moderate leaning. The actions perpetrated by Muslims of extremist leanings often saturate interfaith dialogues in which the Azhar is involved. In councils and meetings where designated figures discuss religion’s interface with socio-political matters, representation and understanding

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is crucial. The Azhar assumed wary concern of the representation of the ummah and has been compelled to defend what it perceives as the true foundation of Islam.

In this digital era, influence can be transmitted from countless sources to countless recipients. Most religious leaders would readily recognize the threat of globalization, the secularization that challenges traditional teachings and expected behavior, the external influences that are capable of yielding potent persuasion. On the other hand, shrewd leaders have utilized the media and emerging technologies in attempts to regain control of propagating their authority. Coptic and Muslim leaders have both endorsed the creation of television channels that carry their respective religious content; for the Copts: Aghapi TV, CTV (CopticTV) and for the Muslim viewership: an Azhari-funded channel, Azhari, and Iqra, just to name a few. Additionally, with satellite technology, cables usher in foreign programming, most notably from Saudi Arabia and other neighboring Arab states.

Islamic telepreaching is just one emerging brand of influence attempting to moralize Egyptian society. Religion and television, as Fore affirms, “share similar attributes in their roles of engaging people and heightening their participation in public life, but often compete over influence with one another.”51 Through television and satellite technology complimented by their entertaining and engaging communication techniques, Islamic telepreachers are able to reach wider audiences than the conventional methods and worship venues of clerics and imams.52

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Contrarily, considering the trend in migration of numerous Egyptians relocating to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries in search of employment opportunities, Al Aswany cites that strains of Wahhabi influence, a more conservative Islam, brought from those societies pose threats to the moderate interpretations and the supposed secular governance in Egypt. Of the hundreds of television networks and channels that the country maintains, many of them are devoted to religious content, and 17 of them have been labeled as promoting Wahhabi ideals. While Wahhabism is not directly equated to radicalism or extremist actions, its invitation for people to readopt the practices of Muhammad’s seventh century Islam and views has been widely criticized even within the faith as overly rigid and conservative, undermining myths of Islam being a monolithic and uniform entity with unified visions and interpretations. Surely, this influence of a stricter interpretation of Islam impacts Muslims in their intrafaith as well as interfaith matters.

**Christians of Egypt and Globalization**

Ansari professes that Pope Shenouda III (papacy from 1971-present) took a “radical position” with the authorities, “representing a movement within the Church hierarchy which as growing impatient with the moderate lay members… affecting the interests of the Church.” After the 1970s, the Church adopted a more militant approach in the face of what they perceived

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as obstacles to expanding their religious practices including church building and the growth of Islamist movements in the region.\textsuperscript{56}

In recent years, the Copts in Egypt have launched their own campaigns, many of which have gone viral, in defense of their rights in their homeland. All the while, the millions of Copts that have fled the country as religious refugees and economic immigrants help to bring international attention to the strife of their churches in Egypt. Recent estimates claim that about three million Copts have migrated out of Egypt, most of who have settled in the U.S. and Canada.\textsuperscript{57} Advocating for the perceived injustices of the Copts in Egypt, Copts in the diaspora often engage in organized efforts through social networks spanning their local communities and even engaging the international community in addition to social media to promote protection, rights, and freedom from oppression. Diasporic communities and transnational brotherhood such as that of the Copts have helped not only to bring pressure from worldwide supporters to leverage their goals, but also created sources for financial backing.\textsuperscript{58}

They utilize social activism and other organized networks to advocate for their protection, their rights, and freedom from oppression. Copts United, Free Copts, and the Coptic Assembly are just a handful of notable organizations established to engage diasporic Copts as well as those in their immediate communities to bring attention to the condition of the Coptic minority of their homeland. For the most part, the messages diffused through these organizations do not necessarily uphold antagonistic fronts against Muslims or Islam, but rather toward the

\textsuperscript{56} Ansari, Hamied. “Conflict in Egypt and the Political Expediency of Religion.” \textit{Middle East Journal}, 38, no.3 (Summer 1984): 397-418.

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid.

Egyptian government and institutionalized discrimination for which they have not been held accountable.

**Congress, Conventions and Councils—Spaces for Formal Dialogue**

A movement in interfaith dialogue emerged in the mid 20th Century after the Second Vatican Council, a landmark development in Muslim-Christian relations. This event encouraged Christian theology to move away from an exclusionist stance in regard to Islam and other religions and called on others to promote mutual understanding. Since then, multiple initiatives have been launched, and the Coptic churches joined in formal discussions with Muslim groups and leaders in Egypt and in the Arab world. In recent years, no longer were these dialogues kept within the circles of the religious authority, but Internet postings of the deliberations allowed the public to comment and reflect on the issues as well. The leaders had welcomed these new platforms of public participation as this gave way to a renewed way of interacting with their religious communities. Still, in this information age, before us are a “wealth of platforms that allow individuals to consume, distribute, and create their own content” without the control of authority figures. In many contexts, the role of religious leaders today have evolved into more advisory roles than one of supreme authority as they find themselves having to compete against external forces such as the fragmentation of ideologies as mentioned earlier and secularism.

Cooperation in formal meetings to discuss religious affairs in society between the Azhar and the Copts remains sporadic, occurring fundamentally in international levels of dialogue as in

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“A Common Word,” the World Council of Churches, and various other interfaith councils. Pulling together religious leaders and scholars from across the globe, these initiatives strive to cultivate a transnational means of discussing religion’s role in current events and the shaping of modern society. Considering that several conflicts worldwide are recognized as fueled by religious tension, the international community of religious leaders recognizes that as a root of the problem then it “must be part of the solution.”  

Citizen Engagement in Interfaith Peace-Building

In terms of an effective and progressive dialogue and cooperation between Muslims and Christians and Egypt, efforts have not yet been undertaken on a grand scale. That is to say that progress may be occurring under the radar, on small scales, from person to person, but the concept has yet to be adopted on more expansive, far-reaching levels.

The Internet contributes to the growing potency of social networks as a means of building public discourse in some cases, action concerning sectarian issues in Egypt. With the constantly emerging and developing communication technologies, we are finding it difficult to continuously adapt to these changes and maintain knowledge of their operations. Internet penetration in the Arab world is still escalating, with Egypt reporting almost four and a half million users; challenges have long existed in providing developing nations such as Egypt with updated forms. Extensive access remains unattainable with many in the lower income brackets finding the high costs of regular Internet “difficult to justify” and less developed infrastructure to host it in rural

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However, mobile phone usage (50.6 per every 100) drastically exceeds that of Internet through fixed land lines which often are of irregular or poor quality. Top providers like Vodaphone and Mobinil are now providing more advanced models and smart phones capable of offering handheld Internet access, both to purchase and rent.

As Hofheinz found, patterns of Arab Internet usage are no different than those of other parts of the world. However, he cites two outstanding characteristics of the Arab demographic: …religion has a greater weight than almost anywhere else and that Arab users are particularly eager to discuss, especially politics, religion and sex. In both domains, a growing assertion of the individual as an active speaker and decision-maker, not a passive recipient of authoritative discourse is apparent.

Interreligious dialogue, distinctively between Muslims and Christians certainly takes place in the plethora of virtual forums from the social media and online social networks that encourage individuals to gather and exchange their opinions with one another, often as anonymous users. Individuals are able to build networks based on similar or common interests through vehicles such as Facebook, Twitter, blogs, threaded forums, and even through the ability to share and comment on published news articles and opinion-editorial pieces. However much progress these modes of communication may bring, they can also potentially bring adverse or

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insincere participation; these forums may or may not be moderated, thus allowing the possibility for inflammatory comments and counterproductive disputes.

In Yusuf’s study of Facebook groups categorized as promoting unity between Muslims and Christians, most were discourse driven, rather than action driven. Such groups as “Viva Crescent and Cross,” “Muslim + Christians = Egyptians,” and “One Country… One People” particularly invite Egyptians into a forum for dialogue focus primarily on building national unity while addressing sectarian tensions and correcting misconceptions each group has on the other.66 As Yusuf confessed, these groups were found to have had disproportionate member bases that consisted more of Muslims than Christians. Nonetheless, these virtual communities act as a positive means for constructing and deconstructing individual identities for the sake of strengthening a collective national identity.

Egyptians with access to the Internet are able to connect to fellow Egyptians and those of other nationalities to discuss and exchange opinions on countless topics including religion. These online forums persist as some of the most potent tools for engaging the public in interfaith dialogue. Although many may have foundations outside of Egypt, these more often than not grassroots organizations and non-profits thrive among the Egyptian populace, available as resources for those with access and a will to engage. The Soliya Program, Seeds of Peace, and Hands Along the Nile are just a few well-developed organizations (based on endowment and fellowship) with offices in Cairo or with programs facilitated in Egypt with interfaith and intercultural understanding remaining a chief priority and mission. Soliya, a formidable model of

interfaith dialogue and citizen and youth engagement aims to “provide a new intercultural generation of young adults with the skills, knowledge and relationships they need to develop a nuanced understanding of the issues that divide them” through social media and other forms of “cutting-edge” and innovative technologies. While these projects establish a set of indicators to measure the effectiveness and success of their programs such as testimonials from participants, the impact on the wider societal scale within the framework of Egyptian society remains questionable and uncertain. Like many cause and effect-centered projects and initiatives, time also remains an uncertain variable that often leave the overall outcome undefined.

The uprisings that began in January 2011 and eventually toppled the three-decade regime of president Hosni Mubarak dramatically shook Egypt to its core, bringing about numerous institutional changes. Many of the anti-government protestors claimed to be united, regardless of religious affiliation, against the government which they found oppressive generally in dealing with citizen rights and labor and economic matters. Social media in these instances were heralded as the instruments that enabled “the will of the people” to organize themselves and to strategize their moves against the opposing parties. The social fabric of Egypt had been through immense tumult, stressed in the wake of the bombing of a church in Alexandria that killed 21 and a litany of other incidents in the past year (Nag Hammadi, the case suspected Islamic conversion of Camelia Shehata, etc.). The media captured images and reported stories of both Muslims and Christians rallying to change the regime; however, just weeks later, another episode of violence erupted between the two faiths—a Coptic priest was murdered which ignited violence resulting in 11 casualties. Further, amidst the uncertainty of nation’s political regime,
members of the international community and especially the Egyptian Christian’s were wary of control being seized by the Muslim Brotherhood or other Islamist parties who most fear would ignite an agenda that would persecute Christians and other non-Muslim groups. Not only will any significant change in aspects like social welfare and income distribution likely affect the nature of intercultural and interfaith dynamics, but we must also eye emerging trends of interconnected influence fostered by our globalized world.

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The analyses of France and Egypt unveiled factors that contribute to the intensity of interfaith and intercultural tensions. These factors include the history of Muslim-Christian interaction, contemporary society’s attitude toward pluralism as well as socio-economic factors and perceived discrimination and inequality. In the French context, the formation of networks reached advanced development and penetration in society engaging private citizens in the advocacy of their rights and the encouragement of interfaith and interreligious understanding and dialogue. While in Egypt, communication technologies were being used by mainly the younger generations to promoted public discourse of interreligious tensions; however, more action-oriented activities were not yet burgeoning on wider scales.

This chapter underlines the significantly unique dynamics of Nigeria as a society which continues to contain and combat its sectarian tension despite its history of intermittent bloody clashes and the existence of ethnic and tribal divisions. Yet despite its past, many Nigerians of all classes, backgrounds and generations, are making strides to mend the rifts in the social fabric. Front and center, both technology and social networks serve as accomplices in this trend.

First, we should consider the fundamental dynamics of the country’s demography that contribute to the nature of interfaith interactions and encounters. As we have learned in the previous chapter, Islam arrived in Africa initially through Egypt and the Eastern horn and spread westward along the Mediterranean rim and the Saharan terrains, but the faith had only firmly permeated present-day Nigeria in the early 1800s. Christianity was introduced principally
through the settlements of foreign (mainly British) missionaries in the late 18th century. Unlike the previous cases where the minority was comprised of either Muslims or Christians, the equation among the Nigerian populace is more balanced than other global populations, 52% Muslim, 46% Christian ([almost 50% of that figure Catholic and 50% Protestant] 2% traditional African faiths). Muslims dominate the North, and Christians, the South. They share power in the government with individuals from both faiths serving in public positions of authority and policy-making. As Africa’s most populous nation with an estimated 150 million inhabitants, it is vital to probe into the role of faith and belief in both creating tensions and supporting the foundations for a more stable coexistence and even to gaze at the prospect of it serving as a model for other states composed of various religious denominations.

**Causes of Tension**

Nigeria is a multi-ethnic and multi-tribal society, of which there are approximately 250, but consisting mainly of the Hausa, Ibo, and the Yoruba tribes; religious differences are stressed which have catalyzed fatal interactions. These ethnic categories present a unique challenge in assessing interreligious tensions here since the literature does not staunchly present one factor over the other, religion over ethnicity or vice versa. Depending on how individuals, not groups, prioritize their identities, there will be a persistent challenge in determining the prime catalysts for tension.

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As tribal and ethnic backgrounds press the preservation of allegiances, religious affiliations more often than not act as dividing factors. The finding’s of Alao’s study suggested that often ethnicity contributes to conflict just as much as religion. He referred to the response made in a focus group discussion conducted at the Obafemi Awolowo University in the southwest. A young Nigerian accounts:

Although I am a Muslim, I am as unsafe as a Christian if I find myself in Kano during a religious riot. This is simply because I am a Yoruba. I would first be identified as a Yoruba before they ask for my faith. This is the reality of the situation. Ethnicity plays a very important role in untangling the issues involved in religious radicalization and violence in Nigeria.\(^\text{72}\)

Sodiq notes that despite the geographic distribution of the tribes or the presence of various ethnic identities, what drives conflict is competition for religious influence and followers in addition to growing fundamentalism. Interreligious marriages are common in Nigeria, and as he stated, “there is hardly an ethnic group in Nigeria that does not have adherents of Islam, Christianity and traditional religions living under the same roof. It is in recent years that we begin to find fundamentalist groups among the Christians and Muslims who resent members of both traditions living together. Such resentment is foreign to many Africans who believe that everyone has his or her own religion.”\(^\text{73}\)

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Needless to say, the mix of ethnic and religious opposition has proven to be a volatile element in the politics of identity in Nigeria. The complexity of the Muslim-Christian paradigm in Nigeria goes beyond social discrimination and fragmentation and has often boiled over to violence. Sodiq estimates that over 60 ethno-religious conflicts have taken place in northern Nigeria alone between 1977 and 2004. Another report supported by the Council on foreign Relations claims that 50,000 casualties have resulted from sectarian violence since the mid-1990s.

Marked as one of the worst sectarian clashes in Nigerian history, in the spring of 2010, casualties numbered to more than 500 near the city of Jos, which is centrally located in the country and close to the invisible boundary that divides the two groups. As a reporter described, “Dozens of bodies lined the dusty streets of three Christian villages in northern Nigeria yesterday. Other victims of Sunday morning’s Muslim rampage were jammed into a local morgue, the limbs of slaughtered children tangled in a grotesque mess.”

The number of casualties alarmed the world and forced reflection upon Nigerians and the debates of identity constantly encircling them. Poverty, political instability, and maldistributed wealth and resources are often attributed as the causes for the interreligious strife in the country.

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Sodiq actually underlines theology as a principal culprit, pointing to a “superior-inferior attitude in interaction.”

Islam claims to be a better religion and presents itself as the completion of all previous messages... Meanwhile Christianity claims to be a universal religion, the only way in which humanity can attain salvation. Under the leadership of its missionary pioneers, Christianity in Nigeria sees itself as superior to Islam and the indigenous traditions.

Further, enforcement of Shari’a law has been a grave source of contention. Few actually are aware that since the influx of Christian missionaries in the 18\textsuperscript{th} and 19\textsuperscript{th} centuries, some Nigerian Muslims have been wary of the foreign influence potentially being filtered in. Since the establishment of the 1979 Constitution, Nigeria has recognized the enforcement of the English Common Law, Native Law, and to some extent, Islamic Law. Many Muslims remain guarded about the country’s status as a secular state, one prone to the infiltration of foreign, namely Western influence. On the other hand, Christians argue that non-Muslims would be treated as “second class citizens” with the full implementation of Shari’a.

The polarization as Abdul Karim recalls, started with the religious hierarchy and “permeated the students, civil service, and above all, the military.” This suggests that religious leaders possess a good deal of influence, capable of moving people to action. Trust and confidence is placed in those established as authority figures.

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78 Ibid.
79 Ibid.
80 Ibid.
I will also examine the engagement of Nigerian religious leaders in their religious networks and in formal interfaith dialogues. As religion becomes interwoven into political issues, the complex network of tribal leaders, politicians and external influence,

**Defenders of the Faith**

While Muslim and Christian leaders have reacted to the advancement of each other’s interests with staunch and almost combative positions to protect their own, many leaders have engaged in interfaith meetings and councils with the common interest of preserving or improving the collective Nigerian state.

Cardinal Francis Arinze, once slated to become the next Roman Catholic Pope after the death of John Paul II, yields significant influence within the borders of Nigeria as well as the international network of Catholics. Having long-served on the Pontifical Council for Interfaith Dialogue, Arinze is both a leading international and national expert and proponent for dialogue. As a leading symbol of the Roman Catholic Church and of Nigeria, he has represented not only the interests of the Church, but also those of the Nigerian Christians in the expansion of effective interfaith initiatives for understanding worldwide and in his homeland.

The majority of the Muslim population adheres to the Sunni tradition of Islam, whereas the Christians are divided into a few denominations. Their fragmentation has often led to obstacles in reaching consensus on some interfaith deliberations; nonetheless a common thread remains in their desire to forge better relations with other faiths.

Nigeria officially created diplomatic ties with the Vatican in 1975, which ushered in Nigeria’s participation in a handful of international interfaith dialogue initiatives including that if
the World Council of Churches.\textsuperscript{82} Today, in addition to its involvement in Christian-based councils, Nigeria has also earned membership into the Organization for the Islamic Conference whose primary objective is to promote the Islamic faith and the wellbeing of Muslims worldwide.

The actions of leaders in today’s world substantially prove that religion does not exist in isolation, but is relative and always thrives in a network—a network of adherents, of like-minded groups and individuals, and in interactions with those seemingly in opposition whether based on political, social or even theological grounds.

\textit{Negative Effects of Media and Technology Usage}

While on many occasions religious leaders were engaged in efforts to mend social cohesion, including some instances with interaction and cooperation from secular leaders and the general public, laypeople often act for themselves. Countering my argument that certain communication technologies aid the dialogue needed to improve Muslim-Christian relations, those technologies can also be utilized to potentially instigate conflict and trigger crises. Their accessibility, the rapid response they generate, as well as the capability of expansive diffusion of information render them volatile instruments. Harwood and Campbell stress the role that mobile phone technology, specifically text messaging, played in escalating the intensity of the sectarian clash that occurred near Jos in 2010. The messages were harrowing. “Slaughter them before they slaughter you. Kill them before they kill you.”\textsuperscript{83}

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Conflict analysts deemed the incident as an orchestrated and directed plan. The network of communication permitted by mobile technologies allowed individuals from both sides to devise plan of attacks and also measures for avoiding confrontation with the other to ensure protection and security. Reports mentioned that upon reception, the parties would “react violently based on the information they received,” with little consideration to the sources and their credibility.84

If not used in the midst of conflict, technology certainly has been proved to ignite the sentiment and attitudes with the potential to lead to conflict and other extreme measures. In Alao’s study of media as an instrument for radicalization and inciting violence, it was found that the areas with heavy technology consumption, in this case, the north, were confronted with the task of deciphering the information and opinions being transmitted into their spheres.

As for the former, it has been established that there are more radios per person in Northern Nigeria than any other part of the country and that the people have more access to foreign news than any other part of Nigeria. This is because of the plethora of Hausa program services available on global radio networks. With this, the Hausa population in Northern Nigeria gets to know about events in other parts of the world more than any other ethnic group in Nigeria. This thus makes them more likely to react more quickly to global developments that they perceive to be anti-Islam.85


Often wary of foreign influence, Muslims in northern Nigeria tune into international media with keen ears and suspicions about the international community’s interface with the global *ummah* which directly affects their own perception of themselves and their relations with the non-Muslims in their immediate environs.

**Nollywood—A Thriving Forum for Religious Dialogue**

After the American and Indian movie industries, Nigeria’s film production is one of the largest in the world. In 2006, the nation filmmakers in the nation produced 872 feature films, while Hollywood, only 485. All the complexities of Nigerian culture are reflected on film—varied in theme, genre, and purpose. Not only do the storylines of the films aim to entertain, but they cater to the religious identities of Nigerian society. In terms of religion, they are more than storylines and plots, but aim to moralize and bring awareness to situations of reality. Over 20% of the films produced in Nigeria each year have been labeled as Christian, or pertaining to Christian subject matter. Instead of theaters as the venues of consumption, these films are often shown at churches where discussions are held afterwards. Of low-budget production and less advanced technology, what is important to both the producers and the consumers is the content and the message being relayed. However, like the telepreaching phenomenon of the Arab world, many are wary that the films’ producers aim primarily to capitalize from the public appeal; but regardless of the objectives fueling production, they are serving highly religious environments.

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Like other predominantly Roman Catholic societies such as those in Latin America and the Philippines, the Catholic community of Nigeria finds the growing Evangelical and Protestant communities a threat to their own existence since many Catholics are the target of the Protestant evangelism. They take advantage of film as a medium for “spreading the Word.” For devout Christians in Nigeria, the film industry provides a means of “advertising” God.

Contemporary Christian culture in Nigeria has almost become synonymous with cinema and film; though their command in this industry does not leave Muslims out, though Christian groups began producing film long before Muslim ones. Like the Christians, film has been used a means of conversion, of proselytization and reversion; however some radical authorities have called for a ban on Islamic film production on the grounds of monitoring the content to ensure it complies to their interpretation of Islamic code. Largely, the more conservative brands of Islam disapprove of the drama and behavior of the actors in the films. Many of the Northern states that abide by Shari’ a would regard this beyond inappropriate, but ‘un-Islamic.’ In terms of Muslim-Christian relations, it seems that this media is not used to fuel polemics and aggressive attack against the other. Most literature underlines its purpose of strengthening religious identity, morals, and virtue. Krings also demonstrates that both Muslim and Christian-produced films warn against paganism and the use of superstition and magic that they view as going against the will of God. Here, the film industry has been recognized as a legitimate tool for educating Nigerians of their moral responsibilities and cultural heritage.


90 Ibid.
Building Citizen Engagement

In as much as there have been several episodes of brutality and violence, there also have been considerable strides made on all levels, from the government to the private citizens, to promote peace and social stability. Most notably, groups of young Nigerians, through the use of interconnective media and technologies have been some of the most vocal proponents for interfaith peace.

In the World Economic Forum’s Global Information Technology Report of 2009-2010, most of the Sub-Saharan countries lagged behind the rest of the world in terms of network readiness. This is measured by the use of interconnective technologies by individuals, the government and businesses. Nigeria was given an overall ranking of 99 out of the 133 countries listed.\(^9\) Taken to great account in this report is the availability of technologies. Mobile phone usage exceeds that of the Internet, with 41 in 100 using phone technologies regularly and only 15 out of 100 having regular access to the Internet.

Communication technologies and network enlargement are key and vital resources of dispensing awareness and promoting proactivity for several causes in Nigeria including improving public health, with specific emphasis on the AIDS epidemic, poverty alleviation, access to education, in addition to tribal and interreligious conflicts. Leaders of Nigeria’s Muslim and Christian communities sporadically assemble to converse about and attempt to find solutions to the latest social dilemmas. If not relating purely to theological matters or the advancement of interfaith and intercultural understanding, they address other issues of common concern such as

the delegation that met in the fall of 2010 to discuss climate change initiatives with British experts and policy makers.

In 2009, the Nigerian Inter-Faith Action Association (NIFAA) was launched with the mission of applying the influence of religious leaders in initiating positive change in a variety of matters from disease outbreaks to sectarian violence. The organization worked to train hundreds of religious leaders in helping their communities and fellowships cope with and counter the strain of such social dilemmas. Given that economic, social and political issues frequently contribute to the contraction and intensification of interreligious unrest, their involvement in convening to discuss ways to ease and combat them seems like positive strides in creating lasting and sustainable outcomes. This group is just one of many devoted to hands-on, action-based social activism in Nigeria.

The climate for change is ripe in the country. Many NGOs and non-profit organizations have flourished in the past years. It is important to note that in addition to the ones chained in the international network, tied to foreign cooperation, there are several being locally created and led.

Although there is a culture of youth development and civic engagement throughout Nigeria, many barriers exist that hinder the diffusion of wider acceptance mainly rooted in “adult-centrism.” “Communication, dialogue and negotiation are central in coordinating the wide range of stakeholders working toward youth development and meaningful involvement.”

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94 Ibid.
The activities of Search For Common Ground, an international non-profit organization, prove that media can harness the power to counter radicalization and promote conflict resolution and prevention. Their impact is travels through the airwaves with television programs such as “The Station” and “The Academy” aimed at “encouraging understanding across ethnic, religious and gender lines.”\(^{95}\) Broadcast throughout the country, especially the denser areas around Lagos and Abuja, SFCG’s messages are relayed through common scenarios with the fictitious protagonists reenacting typical events and routines. Although measuring their impact on society will take time, these programs have already been warmly received by a steady viewership in the country.

As the World Economic Forum report found, the general populace of Nigeria, especially those who inhabiting rural areas, enjoys limited access to communication technologies including the Internet and television. These factors impact audience engagement. One program based at the University of Jos, at the very fault line of Muslim-Christian tensions, conducted a study of the use of information and communication technologies for the alleviation and resolution of local conflicts, especially those that are based upon religious contention. In summary, it recognized the great potency of those technologies in the recent development of Nigerian society, but their usage was often left to their discretion. It resounds the argument that technology’s impact is not based solely on its capabilities, or the tasks it can perform, but in how it is used.\(^{96}\) The report offered some recommendations in promoting responsible and ethical usage of technology. Since many sectarian conflicts have been ignited by rumors, an emerging principal recommendation


\(^{96}\) Fati, O.I. “Impact of Information and Communication Technology on Conflict Management.”
urged people to understand the consequences of relaying false information. As difficult or challenging as it is to monitor the content of the information being produced and diffused, endorsing such a seemingly basic approach may be a catalyst to far-reaching improvements. Furthermore, the report stresses the urgency of dialogue, active engagement and cooperation in the Niger Delta, one of the most economically depressed regions in the country and one that frequently undergoes sectarian violence.

Fati writes, “To achieve permanent conflict resolution development, there is a need to seek popular participation of the people, and the only way to do this is to make the Niger Delta people part and parcel of the planning process and should be involved in the formulation and implementation of plans that effect them.” As he continues, he underlines the imperativeness of careful assessment of social situations as well as the magnitude of negotiating terms of cooperation among citizens. This does not necessarily require or rely on the use of technology, but rests on the basis of a straightforward communication and exchange of interests and concerns.

The sectarian clashes of Nigeria grimly remind us of the capabilities of technology as well as the range of our networks, paying consideration to their call to extreme action and resource for recognizing and learning of methods for preventing and resolving conflict. Of the three cases, Nigeria best underscores the need to cultivate effective communication and cooperation through dialogue, the expression of interests, desires, values and identities.

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97 Fati, O.I. “Impact of Information and Communication Technology on Conflict Management.”
Conclusion:

CRITICAL REFLECTIONS- FORGING THE WAY AHEAD

From the cases of France, Egypt, and Nigeria, I found substantial evidence to prove that interconnective technologies and expanding social networks can be harnessed to alleviate tensions between Muslims and Christians, but as they also proved from the instances where technology facilitated conflict, that the force of technology lies necessarily not in what those devices are capable of, but in how they are utilized. The instruments and media vary from communication devices like mobile phones and social networks sustained by the Internet to forums for public dialogue and debate. In each case, technology and networks (albeit in varying degrees) were present as forces that contributed toward the promotion of interfaith dialogue and an understanding and tolerance of the “other.” Additionally, in studying the causal factors that contribute to the application of such resources, the elements of access to those communication technologies and the relationship between religious leaders and their religiosity were also extremely critical contributors in determining the nature of interfaith discourse.

My primary intention was to illuminate current attitudes and practices working toward the alleviation of Muslim-Christian tension; however, it was also critical to establish a foundation for the comprehension of the societal backgrounds and the causes of the tensions. The communities in each context embodied divergent factors that contributed to the intensity of Muslim-Christian tensions—the history of interaction, social attitudes toward pluralism, as well as political economic elements. We cannot dismiss factors such as Nigeria’s ethnic divisions, supranational versus state laws and codes dictating the integration of new citizens in Europe, or
the exertions of the diasporic Copts who form a network of support and advocacy for interreligious aspects of Egypt. These are vital to be taken into consideration so that in attempting to assess them and to create measures for resolution, we do not assume a one-size-fits-all approach.

**The Impact of Technology**

Each context’s access to such technologies as televisions, mobile phones, and especially the Internet stood as a critical factor in the usage of technology in alleviating sectarian tension. Access determines whether people have this means of communication. Most likely, access in developing countries will be limited and of lower quality. The World Economic Forum’s Global Information Technology Report which provided the statistics of usage and access in each case study outlined a strategy to support ICT (Information and Communication Technology) worldwide and particularly stressed a support for the application of technology in development initiatives. To that end, the report was built on the foundation of the concept of enabling and ensuring “networked readiness,” which entailed arming not only the government and businesses with ICTs to make inroads for achieving their development objectives, the report stressed that ensuring and encouraging individual usage of ICTs would support a more cohesive society.98

To countless societies the world over, adopting the latest technologies promotes local and global competition, a crucial ingredient in economic development. While business and the governments of societies lead the way in technology usage in their application toward innovation building and effective governance, it seems natural for a desire to reap the benefits to trickle

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down to other sectors and private citizens as they too can contribute to achieving the goals of development, and as the report dually notes, to a “harmonious society.” As new devices are introduced, the dynamics will yet again be changed, presenting new challenges to adaptation and new possibilities in inter and intra-faith relationships and networks.

As a response to global competition and increasing demand, the companies producing the technologies scheme of ways to mass produce mobile phones, televisions, computers and other devices, and distribute them at relatively affordable prices. As demand within a society grows, the ability to use technology becomes a highly sought-after skill by forward-thinking employers, thus more people feel the need to acquire those skills. Even in less developed countries as we have seen from the examples of Egypt and Nigeria, the popularity of basic forms of technologies like mobile telephony and television among the public have spread rampantly; however, providing Internet access remains a challenge since providing the equipment to enable access such as routers and cables has been significantly more costly. While universal access seems an ideal to many, obstacles such as high costs and in some societies, censorship from authorities, diminishes capacities for social advancement. In regard to my research, restricted or limited access dilutes interconnectivity and the social cohesion that comes with it.

**Usage of Technology**

In confronting my argument, I specifically concentrated on the relationship between the religious authorities and their laypeople in addition to the ways in which the usage of technologies affected the interreligious climate of their societies. The relationship between

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leaders and the laypeople in those societies, in a broader sense, the adherence and (levels of) religiosity of the laypeople influenced the content of the interfaith interactions. We can make the assumption that the nature of the laypeople’s devotion also dictates the content of the information and opinions being transmitted through the technologies. However, we cannot assume, though, that higher levels of religiosity and religious devotion equates with a higher inclination to perceive of those outside of a particular group as the other. Religiosity suggests loyal adherence to practice and belief, but should remain distinct from fundamentalism.  

After discussing the intertwined relationship between technology and development, we can enter in the factor of religiosity. Much scholarship has been devoted to exploring the links between religion and development with many suggesting a correlation between religiosity and the economic state of a community or society. The broader cultural factors often blended or blurred with religious practice and belief determines the attitudes and perception of modernity and economic performance.  

Barro and McCleary expound on the theories surrounding the linkages between religious practice and economic status.  

One prominent theory in this literature is the secularization hypothesis, whereby economic development causes individuals to become less religious, as measured by church attendance and religious beliefs. The beliefs may refer to heaven, hell, an afterlife, God, and so on, or may just refer to tendencies of people to characterize themselves as religious. The secularization hypothesis also encompasses the idea that economic

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development causes organized religion to play a lesser role in political decision-making and in social and legal processes more generally.\textsuperscript{102}

Our case studies supports this assertion some communities around the world invalidate the secularism theory in globalization. That is to say that despite our growing interconnectivity and exposure to different cultures and influences, not necessarily of a moral-enhancing nature, people maintain their religious identities; despite the growing scientific developments and cultivated curiosity in science, faith in the Divine has survived. In these cases, globalization is not a threat to religious identity and organization, but permits a means of self-reflection and expression.

\textit{Case Studies in Review}

Tension toward France’s growing influx of Muslim immigrants is resulting in the formation of organized networks aimed principally at improving intercultural relations. The debate surrounding the integration of this demographic has spurred great concern from various communities and groups, from the local municipal levels in France to the supranational level of the European Union and even beyond if you consider the efforts that the EU makes to engage its neighbors, particularly the Arab states.

The Internet acts as the greatest connecting instrument used by these initiatives. As France is one of the largest economies in the world and a leader in technological development, its citizens may enjoy regular access to the Internet (approximately 68\%).\textsuperscript{103} It ranked at number


18 in networked readiness in the World Economic Forum report and number 15 in usage (on all
levels- individual, business and government).

Still discrimination, real or perceived, continues in France. Undoubtedly, though, the
heavy amounts of media attention this issue receives as well as the acceptance of it in public and
scholarly discourse opens opportunities for reflection, something that pro-dialogue supporters
would be so keen to capitalize.

Egypt’s Muslims and Christians have been constantly at odds over their long history of
coexistence. Presiding over the faithful are centuries old institutions steeped in tradition and
undertaking modern challenges. However, El-Anani claims that, “instead of embracing a
collective identity, institutions in Egypt have pandered to power hungry sectarians and failed to
stop bias and hatred in their tracks.”¹⁰⁴ For Egyptians, the purpose of dialogue and interfaith
interaction is not understanding, but cooperation and of realizing a collective national identity
over religious divisions. While person-to-person engagement has yet to crystallize its presence
on a wider scope, many are launching dialogue in virtual spaces, as we have grasped from the
social network usage in the country.

The case of Nigeria seemed the most harrowing of the three for the number of casualties
that resulted in the sectarian conflict over recent years. Further, the society seemed so entrenched
in identity politics and competition with one another; if it wasn’t for religion, then ethnic
allegiances or socio-economic factors may have triggered conflicts. It was here that we were able
to observe the positive and negative usages of technology, from the mobile phones that played an
instrumental role in planning the strategies around a series of violent clashes to citizen

participation in local interfaith organizations. Though the occasional clash reminds of a significant divide, a participatory culture is developing and ordinary people are realizing their empowerment and ability to counter social ills.

In terms of the reordering of religious networks, the emergence of various communication technologies and social networks has significantly changed the relationship between religious leaders and their faithful. Extracting secularism and other external influences, this research supports that technology has not compromised the role of the religious leaders in the way that completely isolates them from their fellowships. If anything, most of their authority is recognized to maintain and defend the tenets of their respective faiths. Technology provides vehicles for preaching, proselytizing, evangelizing, and strengthening the creed which we have seen in the cases of France and the Vatican’s public affairs office for evangelization and the Egyptian Azhari-funded television channels carrying a variety of religious programming.

Their influence over laypeople has not completely waned with the trends of globalization, but rather their influence has been diffused and even challenged in new ways due to technology and networked communities. The telepreachers of Egypt and the religious films of Nigeria attest to this; they do not totally discredit or compromise the influence of religious leaders, but may aid or be complimentary to their teachings. Further, many religious leaders have harnessed technology as instruments for not only strengthening the creed of others, but applying them toward the understanding and cooperation with other faiths. We see this in the numerous interfaith dialogues summoning the cooperation of Muslim and Christians in various contexts and the digitally published deliberations of numerous fora and councils allow the faithful to
ruminate over and form solutions to theological and socio-political schisms between members of the members of the two faiths.

Interfaith engagement and cooperation usually takes on two dimensions: action and dialogue. Many recognize dialogue as the first essential steps, those that encourage action. Interreligious dialogue is manifested in countless ways, with intention and haphazardly—in discrete and public ways, among faith leaders and among the laypeople. However as Gopin argues, formal dialogue and negotiation may not always be the most effective stimuli for change. As he cites, within many are the beliefs and attitudes that for now, are too static to accept change. This includes dogmatic beliefs that do not encourage self-reflection, the lack of authentic and honest dialogue, and much more.105 In these cases, we have come to learn how groups and individuals within the outlines of their societies deal with sectarian issues, but we should be reminded of the exchange of ideas and information as well as the cooperation possible on the transnational level. Those technologies and networks truly disseminate the concept of an interconnected world, but that of global cooperation and support. These media are the catalysts making our world smaller.

It is too simplistic to posit that tensions are caused by a lack of communication and that increasing the magnitude of communication through technologies will be the key to establishing more peaceful terms. Rather, as we have learned, interreligious relations, especially between Muslims and Christians are complex. However, communication, in its countless manifestations, is just one aspect of many that can contribute to conflict resolution.

**Influence in a Globalized World**

In exploring the ways in which ordinary people can engage in interfaith dialogue and even affect change, analyzing the authority structures of Islam and Christianity remain vital. We have come to understand from our research that if interconnective technologies are permitting individuals to create and access the information and opinions that shape their worldview, the influence and authority of the designated religious leaders may be compromised depending on the situation and their relationship with their laypeople.

Bulliet’s assessment of modern Islamic authority seems rather grim as he calls their continuing fragmentation in ideology (the on-going struggle of representation among labeled moderates and extremists) and discord of dogmatic interpretation and jurisprudence a veritable crisis.

My contention that institutional developments will prove more important than doctrines, innovative or otherwise, over the coming decades over this crisis situation (of where Muslims find authority). The issues are clear for both Sunnis and Shi’ites: New ways must be found to credential and empower religious authorities. Ordinary believers must be persuaded to follow the decisions of those authorities. And people with less adequate credentials must be accorded a lesser standing. Getting ordinary Muslims to accept a new authority structure, however, will depend on whether that structure is responsive to today’s moral, political and social problems.106

This recommendation to the Muslim community to strengthen the influence of leaders, but also relate traditional tenets and teachings to contemporary matters and problems appears

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similar to public appeals to the Christian churches. It echoes the case we have seen in France where French Catholics advocated that the Pope and religious hierarchy of the Church shift their ideological orientation in regard to matters such as birth control and homosexuality in order to better respond to the needs of a changing social dynamics and population growth.

Further Research

Other communities where Muslims and Christians live side by side must contend with the issue of pluralism and of addressing each others’ needs and interest, idealistically maintaining a balance. The situations in France, Egypt, and Nigeria are just three out of countless societies encountering religious-based tensions. There are many more cases on which we can reflect from across the globe, many cases of increasingly intense and dire circumstances.

Beyond Muslim and Christian tensions, some societies grapple with expanding networks of radicalization that sometimes results in acts of terrorism. Marginalization of Muslims in the Philippines, for example have fostered the rise of radical Islam and acts of terrorism in the region of Mindanao. Some point to the fact that those who perpetrate these acts are connected to more complex global networks such as Al-Qaeda. The influence of the radical group on the leaders of the region, both secular and religious, penetrated easily to many citizens as they have made their quest for an independent homeland synonymous with anti-government and an anti-Western, anti-colonialist mentality. Here, decisive issues such as independence and governance cannot be so easily managed through dialogue and must include the participation of secular government leaders.

Contrarily, even in a context that possesses the variables needed for intercultural and interreligious dialogue and pluralism, tensions inevitably rise the form of suspicion of the
“other.” With the heated debate over the mosque construction near the “Ground Zero” of the September 11th attacks and the ‘Radicalization of American Muslims’ hearing instigated by the U.S. government, many assert that in the U.S., controversy over the rights of Muslim-Americans stokes the flames of suspicion and Islamophobia. Haddad has compiled evidence to prove that American Islam remains quite distinct from the European experience in regard to rights, reasons for migration, and the experience of social and cultural integration. Although a great many outlets for social activism and public discourse about American Muslims exist in the U.S., many obstacles to full social acceptance remain. Other than migration, new challenges will arise as converts to Islam multiply in new territories such as Latin America and North America, increasing further in once predominantly Christian areas and the vice versa of Christians living in Muslim-majority countries and calling into question their values of religious freedom. Delving into other contexts, we will likely find that the similar variables of history, culture, and socio-economics orient the way citizens perceive their empowerment to change the dynamic of Muslim-Christian affairs.

**Casting Wider Nets**

As we have seen across borders and continents, technology transmits influence and can determine the trajectory of interfaith relations. The three case studies revealed the dynamics of local engagement in three highly distinct countries. However, we know well that globalization and advanced communication technologies render the world borderless and that communication tools are more expedient and is available to masses of people than ever before.

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Today, more than 50 percent of the world's population has access to some combination of cell phones (five billion users) and the Internet (two billion). These people communicate within and across borders, forming virtual communities that empower citizens... New intermediaries make it possible to develop and distribute content across old boundaries, lowering barriers to entry. Whereas the traditional press is called the fourth estate, this space might be called the "interconnected estate" -- a place where any person with access to the Internet, regardless of living standard or nationality, is given a voice and the power to effect change.\footnote{Schmidt, Eric and Jared Cohen. “The Digital Disruption: Connectivity and the Diffusion of Power.” Council on Foreign Affairs, 89, no.6. (November/December 2010): 75-85.}

Noting this, we are reminded of wide-scale opportunities to interact and learn from others whom we have not met, whose cultures to which we may not have any inklings; but everything must start with communication, of creating, sending and receiving information.

\textit{In Summary}

New technology empowers and renews human potential; it carries the potential to restructure formal and informal relationships based on power and authority. It enables established authority to resound their opinions, to evangelize and to lend guidance and ethics on social matters. More importantly, it gives power to laypeople, presenting them new ways of understanding the world around them and inviting them to participate in shaping the outcome of social issues.

Intercultural and interreligious dynamics seem like timeless perceptions, but they are still vital to scrutinize, for religions, especially long-established ones like Christianity and Islam have
always had to contend with on-going challenges presented by evolving and modernizing environments. Through the same forms of media that facilitate the small groups partaking in interfaith dialogue and initiatives for peace-building, influence is diffused to others. In learning about the participants’ efforts as well as their outcomes, we are called to add new opinions and information to our bank of impressions that we hold of the other. Through their experiences and interactions with one another, we learn and form our own opinions.

If we apply Gopin’s recommendations for public engagement in peace-building measures, we will realize the importance of setting examples and of leading by example. As we realize that leadership does not require titles, we recognize our potential to influence others. Gopin reflects at the conclusion of his own study:

The religious position on renewal also has its parallel in new thinking about how the world change and how we humans make it change… We need to embrace the changes that a new vision of global community requires for our brains and for our interaction with others… We must embrace the human being as global citizen, to help him and her become emotionally and cognitively prepared to engage the world in all its diversity and infinite complexities. ¹⁰⁹

From this, we are reminded that strength exists in numbers. To achieve as the objective of this thesis declares, the alleviation of strain between faiths and cultures, we must recognize the power of influence. I hope that this research illuminates that influence is not only yielded by the certain

few whom we have confided in to call “leader,” but by average citizens capable of commanding and manipulating their own brand of influence to orient social orders.
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