

Cutting Genitals, Like “Making Cookies”:
The Tradition of Male Circumcision Among the Coptic
Orthodox Church Community

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Abstract

Like “making cookies,” male circumcision among the Coptic Orthodox community of Egypt is a tradition that is deeply rooted in perceived history and customs. This study set out to investigate the politics of this practice and understand the structures that perpetuate and enforce it. To understand the perceptions around male circumcision, forty six members of the Coptic Orthodox community were surveyed and three priests and one bishop were interviewed. The study revealed major fragmentations in the communication structures within the Coptic Church, along with a silence around issues of sexuality and the body that were left aside for medicine to explain. Perceived history also played a significant role in perpetuating this practice that has become a fact of this historical moment and has gone unquestioned, possibly to the detriment of the lives of millions of boys. As expected, the legal aspect of circumcision was mostly ignored among the community, or given very little attention. These findings point to the interplay of institutions in enforcing a silence around a “surgery” performed daily in Egypt, with major implications on the role of conversations around sexuality within the Church and beyond.

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CAUTION!

Dear post person,

Please handle the following envelope with care, as it contains my undergraduate research capstone. Why in an envelope, you might ask? Because Salina, my capstone classmate, insisted that we not write academic papers and Professor Findlay, my capstone advisor, was excited about the letters and C.S. Lewis, my capstone inspiration (though dead) and ironically a theologian, did it a long time ago, so why not me? But seriously, I will tell you the real reason.

After years of researching female genital cutting (more commonly known as “mutilation” or FGM), while theoretically examining the subject and struggling with a cultural relativist’s arguments, I found myself questioning the entire grounds on which I stood as an outspoken anti-FGM activist. I had never questioned male genital cutting (more commonly known as circumcision). This is not to say that I am a relativist, for as you open the envelope you will see that I am not, but that I simply decided to be comfortable with being uncomfortable and making a lot of other people uncomfortable while talking about penises.

This project set out to investigate the politics of male genital cutting in the Egyptian Coptic Orthodox church community into which I was born and raised and to which about ten percent of Egyptians belong. My findings were fascinating and left me everywhere from depressed to awe-struck, but with all the more hope that a

conversation is possible and paradigm shifts are on the horizon. Dr. Lauren Weis' jaw drop and Dr. Eileen Findlay's exclamation clap attest to that.

To the 14 EGMs, 9 USMs, 17 EGPs, and 6 USPs, (Egyptian Coptic males, American Coptic males, Egyptian Coptic parents, and American Coptic parents) who took the time to fill out what others deemed too long a survey, I thank you, but more importantly I ask you to forgive me if my own narrative has been written over your story. I acknowledge the struggle of attempting to take your words for what they are and not for what my political agenda perceives them to be. But analysis is analysis, so thank you for every word you said, for every N/A you typed in and every survey answer box you managed to somehow get around the system and leave empty. You are truly Egyptian in that sense, I applaud you!

To the priests and Bishop, the ones who sat across the church pew from me, mustered up their strength and ignored their discomfort with the subject (thanks to the Honors Program at AU for funding my trips), and the ones whose detailed email responses left me in awe, I not only thank you but hope that these conversations will not be the last. The struggles of analyzing survey and interview responses was an illuminating experience, though often frustrating, so much of my thanks goes to WGSS 500 for the invaluable insight. And in the tradition of oral historian Alessandro Portelli, I realize that "even errors, inventions, or lies are in their own way forms of truth."ⁱ

This being said, there is another truth so valuable it cannot be left unacknowledged. That truth is my family. From my mom's initial conversation which sparked this project, to my dad's insistence that "people don't know how to talk about these things," to my grandpa's connecting me with anyone he deemed valuable and being my church history guide, to my grandma's prayers, there is truth in knowing no matter how uncomfortable I make you all, you are my greatest supporters and will always have my back.

While the Coptic Orthodox church community is foreign to most of the people who have been in conversation with me about my project, I am thankful that you were open to learning from me and teaching me! Tea, Jill, Nicole and Marianne, your input has been priceless. To my American boys, Kyle and Andrew, thank you for thinking outside your comfort zone thoughts and digging into your own selves to help me grapple with the politics of scarred penises. And to every pair of eyes that looked over this work, to Autumn, Aly, and Kyle especially, thank you! A special shout out to the great folks who waited on me at Tryst, whose shifts began and ended while my behind became numb on the same chair writing this capstone. On a more serious note of thanksgiving, the depth of this project would not have been possible had it not been for Coptic Nationalist (don't ask me what that means, I am yet to figure this one out; one Coptic issue at a time!) blogger, Dioscorus Boles, whose excavations have given me an incredible study in the history of circumcision in the Coptic church, one that none of the priests or even Bishop I interviewed knew of. So it is in light of our church fathers (unfortunately, no mothers were found) that I write.

A note to the feminist world:

I myself am surprised that the culmination of a feminist's degree is one that strayed from what my major's very title is: Women's Gender & Sexuality Studies. This project might be seen as a Men's, Gender & Sexuality Studies. But that is not to say that it should be deemed any less valuable to our pursuits. "Focusing on masculinity should not be seen as a shift away from feminist projects, but rather as a complementary endeavor, indeed one that is organically linked."ⁱⁱ

But still, why letters? Because as I thought of my audience, I realized that Western feminist academics are not those who I intended to address. The letters are thus my humble attempt to reach the Coptic Orthodox community (granted, these are in English, an Arabic translation is due soon...maybe). Some are addressed to an archetype of the recipient, others I wrote with my survey respondents or interviewees in mind, some written as responses to previous correspondence, others as initial letters. The myriad of issues I hoped to address and persons I hoped to reach pushed me to do what C.S. Lewis set the precedent for. So I write in the tradition of this great theologian, whose "Screwtape Letters" inspire me daily, however, with hope that my own will not be perceived as diabolical ventriloquism (dialogue of the devil) as his were intended to be.

Out of the silence of the church on what one priest deemed a tradition equivalent to making a certain type of cookies during the feast came these letters. Everywhere

there is silence something bigger than words is being said. And so, I have gone forth intending to shatter this silence, ever so gently, lest anyone get hurt by the broken pieces. But if we must get hurt, let it be so, for I would rather a scar in our relationship than those on the penises of baby boys forever.

Signed, sealed, and post person, please deliver!

Mariam Aziz

Cutting Genitals, Like "Making Cookies":
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the Coptic Orthodox Church Community



Dear self,

Who are you and what do you want? What makes you think that you, a young Egyptian woman, an uncircumcised young Egyptian woman, an uncircumcised young Egyptian upper class well educated Egyptian woman have the right to talk about circumcision like this? And where do you get the guts to talk about MALE CIRCUMCISION? Do you even know what your genital organs are called in your own language?

Actually, I do. But I only learned that in my last semester of college. I have been a Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies student for four years now, and a feminist for much longer, and it wasn't until last month that I could name my own vagina in my native language. Embarrassing, I know. Apparently my vocal cords are that much more important than my vagina.

Now if you couldn't name your own organs, what makes you think you can talk about male organs?

You see, self, just because I couldn't name it, doesn't mean I won't struggle to understand its politics. Its politics of silence and of power, of domination, triumph and tradition. Its politics of cutting and culture.

Why was I not circumcised (you know you'll get attacked for calling female genital cutting circumcision not mutilation, right? Yes, yes, we'll get to that later!) but my brother was? (Oh, now I see what you mean, why is a female "mutilated" but a male "circumcised?" Yes, self, but there's more to it, and I certainly don't mean to totally equate both practices.)

Why was my mother's response to my inquiry about the reason for circumcising my brother a confident, "I don't know?" And why is this answer not only commonplace but also acceptable?

Wait, you mean she didn't know why they had him circumcised? Precisely. And it turns out that all males in the Coptic Orthodox Church community of Egypt are circumcised as well. WHAT? WHY? Well, that's exactly why I write. I write because no one will listen. No one will listen to a respectable young Christian woman when her sentence includes the word vagina. But wait, do they say arm? Foot? Face? Now say VA-GI-NA. And now say PE-NIS!

So let us talk about the mutilated penis. If you're a Coptic man, that includes yours. If you aren't, read on for the sake of your father, your brother, your son and all them...

Sincerely,

Your Self

Dear Great-Grandma,

We miss you around here. I am sure this is the least of your concerns beyond the grave, but I will ask you anyway: WHY did you circumcise grandpa?

I can only imagine how confused you are by my question, but I'm dead serious. And I guess you would know how serious death is, no?

Have people in the Coptic Orthodox community always circumcised their sons or was this practice re-adopted in a later century? You were the earliest born Copt I've met, so I thought maybe you would have an answer.

Let me tell you a story I've heard from the similarly dead church fathers and you tell me if you've heard of this yourself.

I'm sure you know how the Abyssinians, who you may have known as the Habesha people of Ethiopia and Eritrea, were closely connected to the Coptic Church; the Pope in Egypt even appointed the archbishop of their church.ⁱⁱⁱ Well, Pope Jacob, the 50th Coptic Pope who was enthroned from 819 to 830 had appointed a Bishop John to the Abyssinian church. Poor Bishop John was driven back to Egypt by the Abyssinian people, but after drought, famine, disease and war plagued the land, the king of the Abyssinians wrote the 52nd Coptic Pope, Joseph I, asking that Bishop John be sent back. When he was, the people went to the king with a weird request. They asked the king... You know what, great grandma, let me break our tradition of telling

the story and I'll let you read the words yourself from the "History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria" lest you think that I'm making this up!

"We request thy majesty to command this bishop to be circumcised. For all the inhabitants of our country are circumcised except him.' And the working of Satan was so powerful that the king approved this proposal, namely that the aged bishop should be taken and circumcised, or else that he should return to the place whence he had come. And when the bishop recollected the hardships of his journeys, both when he departed and when he returned, and then of what he would experience again, he dreaded the difficulties of the road both by land and water. So he said: "I will submit to this, for the salvation of these souls, of which the Lord has appointed me shepherd without any merit of mine."^{iv}

Great grandma, am I crazy to think that this means that Bishop John was NOT circumcised? And is it even crazier to think that this means that the Copts did not practice circumcision until at least the 9th century? Poor Bishop John obviously rejected this practice on theological grounds, but the circumstances of his journeys and his care for the salvation of the Abyssinian people pushed him to accept it. I wonder whose salvation depends on the circumcision of Coptic boys today; would you happen to know?

If circumcision hasn't been practiced throughout history like some people have said, including his grace a Bishop in the current church, who told me that male

circumcision is a “custom and tradition that is ingrained in the Egyptian people,”^v then when and how and why did it reconstitute itself as the norm? I’ll have to do a bit more digging. But while I’m at it, I hope I hear back from you, maybe you can help me figure this out.

With love,

Your Great Granddaughter

Dear Priest,

I write to you as a dismayed church daughter. The Coptic church regulates divorce, correct? A couple married in the church cannot divorce except by the approval of the Pope? It seems that marriage is given an extremely high value. But some marriages seem to have been forgotten, and being a daughter of the church, I would be devastated to see an official divorce go through. But what would be even worse is a marriage in disaster. It is for this reason that I write to you, humbly requesting your assistance.

The marriage that I write to you about is not one between a man and a woman. We know that divorces there can cause severe harm to the children, but even more so a destructive, dysfunctional marriage; now imagine marriages whose destruction causes harm to all the church's children! The marriage I refer to is that between the church and sexuality.

In a country like ours, where sexual education is not taught at school, and worse, the lesson on biological functions of the genital organs in the science curriculum has been removed altogether,^{vi} does the church not find its relation to sexuality an extremely important one? It seems to me that the church has assumed that membership in its congregation nullifies the sexuality of a human being. Does the church imagine that its children will naturally function within the Christian boundaries of sexuality without any education or conversation?

There seems to be no agreement on whether sexuality issues are mentioned at your church, not even on the most basic issues.^{vii} Some of your boys say that there is no talk at all about the human body, others say that the only issue discussed at church was the evils of masturbation, and a few remember some talk on the human body. One of the Sunday school teachers says that such talk is given “like an anatomy lesson...[but] it’s been a while since they did that.”^{viii} And another explained that “usually a doctor gives the lesson.”^{ix}

This brings me to an important concern regarding the marriage at stake: the meddling of family members: medicine. What has a doctor got to do with explaining sexuality from a Christian perspective? I appreciate the church’s attempt to do what is no longer done by the Egyptian school system, but is that all? Anatomy? Explained by a doctor? That barely scratches the surface.

I am not alone in thinking that if the church expects its children to live within the Christian boundaries then it must talk about those boundaries. A Sunday school teacher agrees that “it’s the community and school’s responsibility [to educate its young members on issues relating to sex and sexuality] but since this is screwed up then the church has to tackle the subject early, to put a strong correct understanding to the subject before the kids go look for information in the wrong places.” But, sir, listen to what happened when said teacher attempted to take on this role as an educator and mentor... The church doesn’t do a good job, he explained, “because they sometimes get shy. I remember once when I wanted to go a bit deep [in the

lesson] and wasn't backed by elder leaders, plus the influence of the society that you can't delete."^x If the elder leaders are too "shy" to do it, will they not even let us? Succumbing to culture? But shouldn't the church be above this influence? Aren't we called to be in the world but not of it? To not conform to its patterns?^{xi}

And what happens when the church does talk about such issues of sexuality? A son of the Coptic church in the United States left the church thinking that it reinforces "the idea that the body is sinful/perverse, therefore it must be controlled through spiritual regiment. Unfortunately this had the effect of being very shaming."^{xii} Would you not agree that shame is the last thing the church should aspire to plant in its children?

A product of this unhappy marriage, in which the spouses have failed to communicate, is male genital cutting. There seems to be some confusion in the church about who this weird person is. Some say he's religious sacrifice, others that he's a sign of being purified, of chastity, of hygiene, and a stopper of concupiscence.^{xiii} I wonder what you have to say to that. Please do let me know.

Sincerely,

A Dismayed Daughter of the Church

Dear Bishop,

You are right, Your Grace, that the Coptic Orthodox community is an “Eastern community that adheres to the customs and traditions of the East.”¹ The question then becomes, do we simply consider this a historical fact beyond questioning? My answer would naturally be no. How did these customs and traditions come to be part of the church’s identity, when its identity, from my humble reading and understanding of the Scriptures, should be grounded in Christ alone?² And if, as I agree with you, the Coptic Orthodox church community holds firmly to Eastern customs and traditions, doesn’t that mean that in essence it also holds on to Islamic customs and traditions that have come to influence the East greatly? The custom that concerns me, as you are aware from our previous correspondence, is that of male circumcision. I must gravely disagree with you in your opinion that “there is no influence in regards to this practice amongst the Copts from Muslim traditions.”³ Furthermore, I will have to also not only disagree in opinion, but tell you that Your Grace is wrong in saying that the practice of male circumcision is “deep-rooted and ingrained in the Egyptian people.”⁴

¹ Bishop of General Services of the Coptic Orthodox Church. Written (Arabic) and emailed interview response. November 9, 2012. Translation mine.

² Bible, *Philippians 3:20*. New International Version.

³ Bishop of General Services of the Coptic Orthodox Church, Written (Arabic) and emailed interview response. November 9, 2012. Translation mine.

⁴ Ibid.

After reading two stories in the Orthodox Synaxarium⁵, one dating back to 300 AD, the other to around 400 AD, both confirming my suspicion that male circumcision has not always been practiced in the Coptic Orthodox Church community, I wrote to my deceased great grandmother asking if she knew more about this issue and its history. I have included for your reference a copy of my letter to her, which includes the two stories. But if you take a look at on the shelves of the Coptic Cathedral's library, the library in which you are likely now reading my letter, you will find both the Synaxarium and the "History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria," both of which include the two stories. My great grandmother's response further proved my hypothesis. She recommended several sources to me, furthering my discovery of the richness of history within the Coptic Church on this issue.

Never mind the writings of Jacques de Vitry, crusader and Bishop of Acre at the time of the 5th Crusade (1213-1221 AD), which was directed at the Ayyubid state in Egypt, who wrote that the Copts circumcised their children "in the manner of the Muslims."⁶ Also never mind French author Jacques Tagher's claim that "Amongst the customs that the Copts took from the Muslims early is the circumcision of children, which had been banned by Christianity and wasn't practiced in Egypt prior to the

⁵ The Synaxarium is a compilation of hagiographies, highly regarded by the Coptic Orthodox church and used during its liturgies.

⁶ De Vitry, Jacques. *Historia Orientalis*. Bucharest: Editura Universitatii Din Bucuresti, 2005.

Arab invasion.”⁷ I do not mean to ignore these historical writings, rather, I am tempted to ignore them in our conversation lest you say that these are not Coptic men and thus their perceptions might be skewed.

Allow me to instead focus on history produced from within the church, calling upon a rich historical tradition of debate on this issue. Though I realize that the church now regards the Church Father Origen of Alexandria as a heretic, his writings are nonetheless important and widely referenced. In his work, “Contra Celsum,” Origen explains that Christ’s disciples were “forbidden to circumcise themselves, and are reminded by the apostle [Paul]: ‘If ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing’.”⁸ It is fascinating that since Origen’s writing of “Contra Celsum” in 248 AD until the church canons of the 12th century, there was what I have called the first great silence on the issue of circumcision. The second great silence is the one we currently live in, though they are very different, given that the earlier silence was due to the absence of the practice at the time and thus a lack of need to talk about it.

Church canons prior to the 12th century, “though they were written and enacted to address new problems as they emerged, never spoke about circumcision.”⁹ It wasn’t until well into the Middle Ages that male circumcision was discussed, appearing for

⁷ Boles, Dioscorus. "CIRCUMCISION AND THE COPTS – A HISTORY: PART II." Web log post. *On Coptic Nationalism*. N.p., 16 Feb. 2012. Web. <http://copticliterature.wordpress.com/2012/02/16/circumcision-and-the-copts-a-history-part-ii/>

⁸ Origen. *Origen: Contra Celsum*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1980.

⁹ Boles, Dioscorus. "CIRCUMCISION AND THE COPTS – A HISTORY: PART II." Web log post. *On Coptic Nationalism*. N.p., 16 Feb. 2012. Web.

the first time when Patriarch¹⁰ Cyril II (1078-1092 AD) in his 1086 AD canon stated: "The Faithful who would like to circumcise their boys ought to circumcise them before baptism. No one should circumcise his son after baptism. Whoever breached this should be interdicted and not have share with us."¹¹ In reading this within the cultural context in which it was written, where Muslims circumcised their sons when they were five years or older,¹² it seems that the Copts were beginning to adopt this practice and Cyril II canonized it in order to regulate its practice before baptism for the few who chose to do so. Interestingly, this idea has stuck around. A Coptic Orthodox priest, currently shepherding a congregation in the US, explained that it should be clear "if you will circumcise your son, circumcise him before baptism. During baptism the body becomes dedicated to God."¹³ He however, disagrees with what you have said is the official Coptic Orthodox's stance on male circumcision: that the church "supports and endorses male circumcision,"¹⁴ explaining that he believes that "religiously, it is up to culture."¹⁵

After 45 years of its regulation as a pre-baptism, up-to-your-discretion, practice, the tone with which circumcision was addressed drastically changed. In his pre-papal years, Patriarch Gabriel II (1131-1145), then a church deacon, wrote in his

¹⁰ The terms "Patriarch" and "Pope" are interchangeable and mean the same thing.

¹¹ Boles, Dioscorus. "CIRCUMCISION AND THE COPTS – A HISTORY: PART II." Web log post. *On Coptic Nationalism*. N.p., 16 Feb. 2012. Web.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Priest. Interview conducted in Arabic at St. Mark's Coptic Orthodox Church in Fairfax, VA. November 15, 2012. Translation mine.

¹⁴ Bishop of General Services of the Coptic Orthodox Church. Written (Arabic) and emailed interview response. November 9, 2012. Translation mine.

¹⁵ Priest. Interview conducted in Arabic at St. Mark's Coptic Orthodox Church in Fairfax, VA. November 15, 2012. Translation mine.

nomocanon¹⁶ a chapter dedicated to the collective problems of castration, penile amputation and circumcision; “Gabriel II grouped them together because he considered them all to be undesirable mutilation of the body, God’s perfect creation.”¹⁷ Similar to Origen’s earlier theological anti-circumcision stance, Gabriel II in his nomocanon invokes a canon from the First Council of Nicaea as well as several New Testament verses to support his argument. Most interesting of these verses is the translation he chose to use for the verses from Philippians 3:2, which directly translated from his Arabic text reads: “Beware of the dogs. Beware of the people of circumcision.” Isn’t it true that this verse reads very differently in all the modern translations?¹⁸ Can Your Grace see the severity with which Patriarch Gabriel II viewed this practice of circumcision?

Following Gabriel II’s death, this issue became hotly contested. Priest Mark Ibn Al-Kanbar, who forbade circumcision, seeing it as a non-Christian practice belonging to the Jews and Muslims,¹⁹ was later banished and eventually excommunicated by Patriarch Mark III (1166-1189 AD), who actively defended the practice. But at least there was conversation. It seems that today, like any day of humanity’s existence,

¹⁶ A nomocanon is a collection of ecclesiastical law consisting of the elements from both the Civil law and the Canon law.

¹⁷ Boles, Dioscorus. "CIRCUMCISION AND THE COPTS – A HISTORY: PART II." Web log post. *On Coptic Nationalism*. N.p., 16 Feb. 2012. Web.

¹⁸ A common translation of this verse in Philippians 3:2, as seen in the New Kings James Translation, which most closely resembles the common Arabic translation used today states: “Watch out for those dogs, those evildoers, those mutilators.”

¹⁹ Boles, Dioscorus. "CIRCUMCISION AND THE COPTS – A HISTORY: PART II." Web log post. *On Coptic Nationalism*. N.p., 16 Feb. 2012. Web.

there is disagreement on this issue amongst the church clergy, but what also seems to be true is that no one knows of this disagreement!²⁰

What is not foreign, Your Grace, is your attempt to see this practice as an historical one that has always belonged to the Egyptians. Bishop Mikhail, the Metropolitan Bishop of Damietta during the patriarchate of Mark III, preached that St. Mark the Evangelist, founder of the Church in Egypt and its first patriarch, approved this practice when he found the Egyptians performing it. There appears to be no other evidence to support his preaching.²¹ The second great silence, in which we currently live, seems to have started since Patriarch John VI (1189-1216 AD), a contemporary of Bishop Mikhail, made male circumcision mandatory²², the closest known historical church position to the one Your Grace and the current and past patriarchate have taken. You have him to thank for institutionalizing this practice within the Coptic Church and making it seem as authentic to it, “deep-rooted and ingrained.”

²⁰ Interviews conducted with two Coptic Orthodox Priests in the US and one in Egypt show that the clergy all disagree on what they believe the reasons behind circumcision to be. Furthermore, they are unaware of what the Bishop states is the official position of the Coptic church on male circumcision.

²¹ According to blogger, Dioscorus Boles, who has done extensive research and writing on the history of male circumcision in the Coptic Orthodox church, there is no evidence other than the words of Bishop Mikhail that St. Mark had allowed the first Egyptians who converted to Christianity to circumcise their children.

²² Boles, Dioscorus. "CIRCUMCISION AND THE COPTS – A HISTORY: PART II." Web log post. *On Coptic Nationalism*. N.p., 16 Feb. 2012. Web.

Now that we've established that there were in fact other great silences that were broken with rich debate, discussion, writings, and even excommunications (though that is far from what I'm after!), would it be ok to discuss the current predicament in which the church finds itself, or rather does not find itself, though it is in fact in?

Not surprisingly, a Coptic Priest in Cairo, when discussing this unspoken of issue, invoked the fact that Jesus was circumcised on the 8th day.²³ True, Jesus was circumcised on the 8th day in obedience to Jewish law. But to "emulate his physical circumcision is to follow Joseph and Mary's example, not Christ's own choices, acts, or teachings concerning righteousness and the kingdom of God."²⁴ Would you not agree?

This same priest explained the reasoning behind the practice of male circumcision by saying that

"In Egypt, people live according to customs and traditions more than anything else - even the commandments of the Bible - and have inherited this habit and find it difficult to stop it and God has nothing to do with habits among people. There are habits such as: making sugar cookies during the feast and the bachelorette party before the

²³ Bishop of General Services of the Coptic Orthodox Church. Written (Arabic) and emailed interview response. November 30, 2012. Translation mine.

²⁴ Bigelow, Jim D. "Evangelical Christianity in America and Its Relationship to Infant Male Circumcision." *Male and Female Circumcision: Medical, Legal and Ethical Considerations in Pediatric Practice*. Ed. George Denniston, Frederick M. Hodges, and Marilyn F. Milos. N.p.: Springer, 2001.

wedding... No one can cancel these and other habits... And circumcision is one of them.”²⁵

Besides my surprise over the choice of a bachelorette party of ALL the Egyptian habits and the comparison between genital cutting and making sugar cookies, do you think that he assumed I was trying to “cancel” this tradition? I hope I said nothing to that effect. Don’t get me wrong, though, Your Grace, this doesn’t mean that I am supporting it either. Maybe we could look into a process of reverse assimilation?

I realize that you, as well as the priest I mentioned to you, both deny the influence of Islamic customs and traditions, but two other Coptic Orthodox priests strongly assert this influence. One explains,

“When you look at the history of the church...its impossible to say that the church has never been influenced by the events of history. To say that there’s absolutely no influence from Islam and no Islamic influence within the church I think is an incorrect statement. I’m sure others may disagree but I think it’s an incorrect statement to say that there’s no influence, so for sure there is some influence within the church.”²⁶

Now, despite contemporary disagreements in opinion, given what history has revealed to us about the introduction of this custom into the church around the 12th

²⁵ Priest. Written (Arabic) and emailed interview response from Cairo, Egypt. November 16, 2012. Translation mine.

²⁶ Priest. Interview conducted at St. Mary’s Coptic Orthodox Church in Savage, MD. November 7, 2012.

century, it seems appropriate to consider the historical reality of the arabization “and the Islamic assimilation or culturalisation of the Copts... – a process by which Copts, as individuals or collectively, consciously or subconsciously, abandoned their traditions, customs, behaviors, etc.; or in one word their culture– and acquired parts of Islamic culture.”²⁷

I hope this is sufficient to convince you that Copts have in fact been Arabized, if the evident language shift from Coptic to Arabic isn't enough. Assuming that you are convinced, Your Grace, I would like to suggest that circumcision be formally discussed amongst the clergy, some of whom believe that the topic should be brought up with their congregations in order to clarify the Biblical mandate. One priest put it this way:

“I think the church has nothing to fear in bringing up something like [circumcision], since its very clear within the Bible what circumcision actually means and really our current day practice of circumcision is essentially baptism. I'm sure there is a lot of confusion or misunderstanding regarding circumcision likely due to lack of education, lack of knowledge and understanding really what it meant.”²⁸

²⁷ Boles, Dioscorus. "CIRCUMCISION AND THE COPTS – A HISTORY: PART I." Web log post. *On Coptic Nationalism*. N.p., 28 Jan. 2012. Web.

²⁸ Priest. Interview conducted at St. Mary's Coptic Orthodox Church in Savage, MD. November 7, 2012.

But is it very clear what circumcision means in the Bible, given the disagreement on whether or not the Church even supports it? A Coptic Priest in the United States explained that “The Church has a single reference, but with our brothers the Muslims there are different doctrines and views, so they adopt more than one view.”²⁹ This doesn’t seem to be true given that the clergy is altogether unaware of the Church’s current position of supporting and endorsing the practice. The Coptic Church sent one of its priests, who was a doctor prior to his ordainment, to UN workshops and conferences to represent the Church in its opinion on medical issues. This is the same priest who I mentioned to you earlier, who said that “religiously it is up to culture.”³⁰

Furthermore, there seems to be an underlying understanding of the relationship between circumcision and baptism, with some Coptic priests explaining that the latter replaced the former in the New Testament. Your Grace has made no statement to this effect despite our previous correspondence on whether circumcision is a prerequisite to baptism. First allow me to ask you about your response to this issue in the last letter I received from you, and then I’ll get back to what priests are saying.

You mentioned, Your Grace, that “It is not a requirement to be circumcised before baptism. Baptism may be a few hours or days after birth (in the case of the child is

²⁹ Priest. Interview conducted in Arabic at St. Mark’s Coptic Orthodox Church in Fairfax, VA. November 15, 2012. Translation mine.

³⁰ Priest. Interview conducted in Arabic at St. Mark’s Coptic Orthodox Church in Fairfax, VA. November 15, 2012. Translation mine.

ill).”³¹ But that has left me all the more confused. Do you mean to say that circumcision is usually a requirement before baptism but that in the case of early baptism because of illness it can be foregone? Some Coptic Priests have said that baptism replaces circumcision altogether. But others may not be quite on the same page. Let me share with you what a son of the Church who was born in the UK³² told me:

“basically I don’t know if I was prevented from baptism before circumcision but that is what ended up happening perhaps because the priest who presided over the [Coptic Orthodox] church in Kuwait at the time had instructed my parents to do so. Or perhaps it was my parents applying their own judgment on the grounds of some tradition rather than a practice.”³³

I guess I shouldn’t be blaming the priest since this man himself, circumcised at age 10 in order to be baptized, cannot confirm whether it was the priest who had mandated that or whether it was his parents’ decision. Whichever scenario unfolded in reality, doesn’t that still show you, Your Grace, that there is deep confusion within the church, as a result of the second great silence, over this important issue. Whether or not the world concurs that it is a “medically” necessary procedure, shouldn’t the children of the church and

³¹ Bishop of General Services of the Coptic Orthodox Church. Written (Arabic) and emailed interview response. November 9, 2012. Translation mine.

³² Less than twenty percent of males in the UK are circumcised. Dave, S S; Fenton, KA; Mercer, CH; Erens, B; Wellings, K; Johnson, AM (2003). “Male Circumcision in Britain: Findings from a National Probability Sample Survey.” *Sexually Transmitted Infections* 79 (6): 499–500

³³ Follow up email with United States Coptic Male

her priests understand where Scripture stands and what the Lord commands?

It is in light of this confusion that I call upon the Church fathers' writings, but more importantly on the very Scriptures of our Lord, on Acts 15, Romans 2, 1 Corinthians 7, Ephesians 2, Galatians 5, Galatians 6, Philippians 3 and Colossians 2, all of which I am sure you are familiar with, in pleading that you reconsider your and the patriarchate's views on this issue of male circumcision and its relation to the Church. And if all else fails, I'll have been glad to have, hopefully, said a word or two on the road to breaking the second great silence.

Sincerely,

A Daughter of the Fathers

Dear Friend with a Penis.

Let's talk about all those jokes you and your boys have been cracking at church about bodily functions! And you say that's the only talk at church about the human body?^{xiv} Well, you know what, as far as I'm concerned, we ARE the church^{xv}, so let's do some talking. Please?

Is it true that you too have never heard male circumcision being discussed?^{xvi} Have you never wondered why a part of your penis is no longer there? Does it not frustrate you that it was cut without your consent? Do you not feel violated? Scarred? Dear friend, do you even know much about what was done to you and why it was done? Or are you like your boys who say "[I know] nothing really," "I've been told..." "I vaguely know..."^{xvii}

Maybe I need to tell you what your parents have said, since they've never talked to you about this... shocker. "It doesn't change the male sexual anatomy,"^{xviii} they've explained. Hmmm, I know you might be tempted to agree based on the fact that you've never known your penis except in its current state. But has your anatomy not been altered? Let's review the anatomy of the penis at birth, shall we? Penis? check. Glans? check. Frenulum? check. Corona? check. Shaft? check. Foreskin? woops!^{xix}

Your parents have also said, "it doesn't deprive men from any of their sexual abilities and enjoyment."^{xx} Aristotle begs to differ; here's what the ancients have known since the BC era: "the glans, which is at the end of the penis, is covered with a

very thin membrane, by reason of which it is of a most exquisite feeling. It is covered with a preputium or foreskin...and by its moving up and down in the act of copulation brings pleasure both to the man and woman.”^{xxi} Of course there’s been much advancement in studies of sexuality and bodily functions that we cannot merely depend on the words of the ancients, but I include them in this letter to show you that this isn’t an issue absent from history. Studies conducted since the 1950s, the latest in 2007, have shown the presence of thousands of erogenous nerve endings on the inner layer of the foreskin.^{xxii} Some studies have gone as far as to argue that the foreskin contains the tissue on the penis most sensitive to fine-touch.^{xxiii} ^{xxiv} Your parents’ claims that the foreskin is “unnecessary, extra, excess, [an] accessory skin”^{xxv} may not be so valid after all!

Something else I’d like to hear your thoughts on is the theological aspect of circumcision. No, no, not the actual Scriptural commandment, but its interpretation by a Coptic priest, who explained that the “same way that Christ died for the sake of the church, the male accepts circumcision for the female, so there is no circumcision for females. Circumcision means to accept death. And it means that a part of the body is removed. The New testament talks about circumcision of the spirit and the heart.”^{xxvi} Do let me know what your thoughts were when you “accepted” death on behalf of the female at x days old!

Before I let you ponder these questions, I would like to share with you one more aspect of this surgery performed on you, of which you, not surprisingly, know very

little. Some priests have said that it is important that circumcision precede baptism, at which point the body is consecrated to the Lord.^{xxvii} In some way this might make sense. But here's the issue: if this is a medically necessary procedure, -though that is not true but is what this priest perceives to be completely agreed upon in science-, shouldn't it be allowed after baptism as well? I thought you got a hernia repair surgery last month; sorry I've been too busy worrying about your penis, that I forgot to ask you about your hernia. Have you been well, my friend? Maybe you need to talk to the priest about getting re-baptized since a consecrated part of your body was tampered with. Let me know how that goes.

Sincerely,

Your Concerned Friend with a Vagina

Dear Friend with a Vagina.

You ask whether I'm surprised at your confusion. I certainly am not. I myself continue to be confused. And no, I did not expect you to know much about this. You're right, there is no talk of this issue of male circumcision in our community.^{xxviii}

With that said, however, I hope you won't find it too uncomfortable to discuss this with me. I don't claim to have the answers, but I have many questions and concerns that I wish to share with you. For the record, the reason I think you should care about this is that by Egyptian standards you're right around marriage age, which also means you're right around being a mama age. Would you circumcise your son? I guess I know the answer, sadly. Also, because of the sensitivity of this issue, and any issue relating to the body or sexuality, I have found it easier to talk to you about this than with our friends with penises.

I talked to a Bishop about my concerns and confusions. I was curious to know where the church officially stands on this issue. He first told me that circumcision is "non-binding," which seems theologically sound to me, since we no longer observe the Old Testament laws. Do we not wear clothes made of two materials?^{xxix} Do we not eat pork?^{xxx} Is someone who touches you during your menstrual cycle considered unclean till evening?^{xxxi} So why would circumcision still be binding? I was comforted to know that it was not. But here's what threw me off. After saying that circumcision is no longer binding, the Bishop later said that the church officially supports and endorses it. "Why then?", you might wonder. I'm wondering right with you my

friend. In the letter I received from him, he provided no explanation whatsoever as to the reason for the Church's position. I was expecting to read something about hygiene or medicine, but despite the fact that this Bishop was a general physician prior to being ordained, none of the reasons you would expect to hear were in his letter.

Even more confusing was his answer when I directly asked him about the reasons behind this procedure. He explained to me that males are circumcised because it is a "custom and tradition ingrained in the Egyptian people" and because "male circumcision is mentioned in the laws of Moses to the Israelites in the Old Testament."^{xxxii} You know from our previous correspondence, in which I mentioned to you the history of circumcision among the Copts, that the Bishop's first reason is not true. But it seems that cultural traditions have little to do with factual realities and much more to do with what people *perceive* to be an ancient tradition and current norm. It's the second reason he gave that puzzled me. Why does male circumcision being mentioned in the laws of Moses make it a reason to practice it now, and more importantly, the reason why the Church officially supports and endorses it? I thought that though "the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ,"^{xxxiii} and it is by this "grace you have been saved."^{xxxiv} Our teeth seem to be holding on too tightly to the laws while we cut off the foreskins of our boys. Maybe some loosening there and tightening here would work better in light of the New Testament.

Something else that the Bishop said that really concerned me was that the Church only teaches a few pieces of information on the human body in courses for youth leaders. Why is it that the Church insists on not talking about the human body and sexuality in general? If such talk isn't regulated, any church can choose what its "culture" will mandate it to do. And as you know, the rural areas of Egypt are much more conservative, so there will likely be no talk at all. Are these boys' penises less important?

Do you not think that there is influence from Islam on this or other practices among Copts? I hope not! The Bishop thought there was none. Some Coptic priests, however, completely disagree. One priest in the United States explained the influence of culture wherever the Church is situated: "There's definitely an influence of American culture and American society within the Church. Copts who are born here are 'Americanized'."^{xxxv} This same priest, in explaining the reasons why male circumcision is practiced, said that along with hygiene reasons, it is practiced for "aesthetic purposes."^{xxxvi} Now if that alone isn't enough to convince you of the influence of surrounding cultures on not only the church members, but its clergy as well, I don't know what will!^{xxxvii}

I realize I mentioned medicine and hygiene several times, let me elaborate. Many Coptic parents circumcise their sons for hygienic and medical reasons.^{xxxviii} Not many know much else, however. What does "medically it is better"^{xxxix} even mean, you think? I'll spare you the details, but this reminds me that I need to write to the

surgeon who circumcised my brother. I'll have to do that later. Suffice it to say that in our rapidly moving world, even science has many opinions concerning this issue. There is no conclusive research on whether it is better or worse to circumcise males. So I ask you to consider this in making the decision about your son, sooner or later. And lest you fear you are disobeying the Church, I'll leave you with the words of a Coptic Priest who unaware of the Church's official position said: "Male circumcision is cultural, whoever would like to like to do should do it and whoever would not like to shouldn't."

With love,

Your Friend Who Also Doesn't Have a Penis

Dear Dr. ,

What does “surgery” mean? According to the Oxford English Dictionary, surgery is “the treatment of injuries or disorders of the body by incision or manipulation, especially with instruments.”^{xi} Assuming that you agree with this definition, and knowing that you do consider male circumcision to be a surgical procedure,^{xli} would you kindly let me know what injuries or disorders are found in the male genitals that require this surgery to be performed? If my understanding is correct, and not all males are born with a disorder, why is it that you perform this procedure?

I thought it fascinating that you said the reason this is practiced is “cultural, religious...recurrent infection and/or stenosed opening of the prepuce (phimosis), or fixed retracted constricting prepuce (para-phimosis).”^{xlii} I don’t mean to read too much into this, but the order in which you listed the reasons seems indicative of how this plays out in reality, or should I say the way in which it “cuts off” in reality. Is there that much more emphasis on culture and religion than this being a medically necessary procedure, which from what I gather from your response, it is NOT necessary except in the case of phimosis^{xliii} and para-phimosis? Even where these conditions are present, is it not true that though “Circumcision has been the traditional treatment for phimosis, now [it] is not the only management option, the best of which appears to be topical steroid application?”^{xliv} And more importantly, is it not also true that “phimosis probably is over-diagnosed” perhaps to justify this procedure where cultural influences are not strong enough?

And did you say that “chopping off [a] small piece of the glans penis” is a potential complication of the procedure of circumcision? Do parents know that? And they still choose to have this SURGERY performed on their baby boys? Are they told that there is no medical reason, from what you have kindly explained to me, for this procedure?

I expect no answers. This is rhetorical. Though an answer would be most welcome.

Sincerely,

The One Day Mother of a Perfectly Healthy Baby Boy

Dear Son and Daughter,

My children who I have not given birth to nor am pregnant with, I write to you so that you may one day forgive and thank me. I will make sugar cookies during the feast, but I will not cut your genitals. What on earth do these two things have to do with each other, you might be wondering? Here's what a Coptic Priest once told me:

"In Egypt, people live according to customs and traditions more than anything else - even the commandments of the Bible - and have inherited this habit [of circumcising males] and find it difficult to stop it and God has nothing to do with habits among people. There are habits such as: making sugar cookies during the feast and the bachelorette party before the wedding... No one can cancel these and other habits... And [male] circumcision is one of them."^{xliv}

Now given that I've raised you, I know that you will agree with me in my utter confusion over these comparisons. Cutting genitals like "making cookies?" Well, believe it or not, these practices have more in common than you would think. Making the type of cookie this priest referred to, "kahk," and male circumcision were both practiced by your ancestors, the Pharaohs; evidence of the former is found on papyrus manuscripts^{xlvi} and the latter on bas-relief on tombs.^{xlvi} "Kahk" actually gets its name from the name of one of the Coptic months, "Keyahk," which was a month of festivities among the Pharaohs.^{xlvi} Though I doubt that the priest who made the comparison knew about all of this, it is interesting how the practice of male circumcision among the Copts of Egypt and the cookies inspired by a Coptic month both continue. Though there is no record, as far as I know, of the cookies

being forced on anyone, we cannot say the same of circumcision. Bas-reliefs^{xlix} on tombs of Pharaohs show that “far from participating willingly in the practice, one of the men at least appears to be being forcible restrained.”^l As I have told you before, however, circumcision ceased to be practiced for the first 12 centuries of Christianity’s existence in Egypt. I don’t know about the cookies, though.

All this to say that much of why the practice of circumcising males has continued among the Copts has little to do with any informed reasons besides “culture, tradition, and habit.”^{li} One friend described it this way: “There is no theological explanation to justify [this] practice except convention and emulation...both being unconvincing.”^{lii} It is this idea of “emulation” and “habit” that I am trying to get across to you, my dear children. As described in sociological practice, “habitus” can be understood “as a structure of the mind characterized by a set of acquired schemata, sensibilities, [and] dispositions.”^{liii} Basically, the idea is that habitus depends on history and human memory,^{liv} so that a certain behavior or belief “becomes part of a society’s structure when the original purpose of that behavior or belief can no longer be recalled and becomes socialized into individuals of that culture.”^{lv} Here’s a little anecdote to prove my point. Long before you were born, I talked to a Bishop in the Coptic Orthodox Church about male circumcision. He was certain that this practice was historically “ingrained in the Egyptian people,”^{lvi} despite admitting to not knowing anything about the history of the practice among the Copts. If I’ve taught you one thing in life, it has been to question social norms and

habits. I hope this explanation of the irrationality of this habit will have you convinced that it was not a sufficient reason for me to circumcise you.

Now daughter, I love you. I have fought, both as an academic and an activist, to protect your rights and ensure your equality. So forgive me for focusing more on your brother's genital's lack of circumcision. In our well to do society, your intact genitals are much more acceptable than his. However, I have included you in this letter if for no other reason than the benefit of your education and for the day when you will have to make the decision of whether or not to circumcise your own son. This is not to say that I am completely equating the cutting of your genitals and his, but that there are grounds for comparison. Let me explain. I have heard it said that females should not undergo genital cutting because "Female genital mutilation is a violation of human rights because it uses force;"^{lvii} I guess they've never heard the unbearable screams of a baby boy being forcibly circumcised. "Because you stole from her body;"^{lviii} did your x days old son gift you his foreskin? "Because it is something that is against the creation of God;"^{lix} was it the devil who created the foreskin? Because "everything should stay how God intended it to be;"^{lx} why would God create the foreskin if He didn't intend for it to stay there? I am not alone in thinking that God created what He intended for us to keep. Mark ibn al-Kanbar, an ordained Coptic Priest, wrote in 1160 AD, "to give up the practice of circumcision, because God created Adam perfect and free from defects...As God created the form of Adam and perfected it, so it is very good, and this tradition of circumcision is not accepted."^{lxi}

You get the picture, my children. Though female circumcision, or genital cutting, or mutilation, whatever your informed self decides to call it, is usually practiced intentionally to control a female's sexual drive,^{lxii} male circumcision, or genital cutting, or mutilation, whatever your informed self decides to call it, is not commonly practiced for this reason. Notwithstanding this fact, I have found both procedures to be equal on legal terms. Though international law is seldom respected these days, let's look at a couple of articles in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, on which Egypt is a signatory. "Article 8, part 1: States Parties undertake to respect the right of the child to preserve his or her identity." "Article 13, part 1: The child shall have the right to freedom of expression." "Article 24, part 3: States Parties shall take all effective and appropriate measures with a view to abolishing traditional practices prejudicial to the health of children."^{lxiii} Neither your right to your identity or freedom of expression would have been preserved had I decided to cut off your foreskin, dear son. It is your decision which part of your body to keep and which to get rid of. Thanks to your well-informed father, you have been well taught how to clean your penis (he had to learn in order to teach you, since he is foreskin-less; don't forget to thank him too!) So out the window goes the hygiene argument. Plus, you know, son, less than 30% of males in the world are circumcised.^{lxiv} We don't see a penal hygiene epidemic, do we? Thank God for showers and running water, we need not cite Stone Age arguments any more.

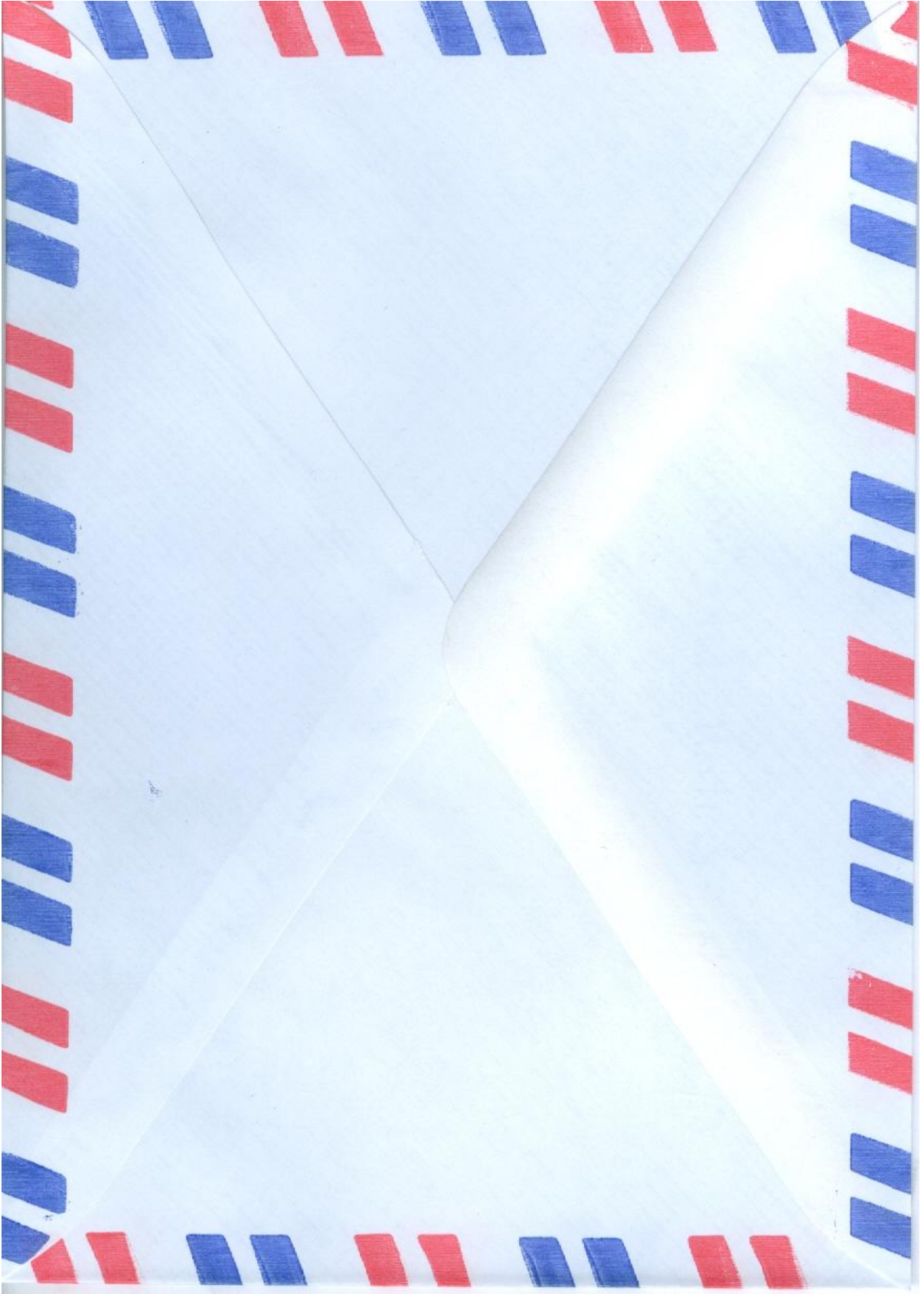
Back to the legal aspect, and more specific to Egypt, the constitution written in

1971, the same year the former Coptic Orthodox Pope was enthroned, states, “Article 43: No person shall perform any medical experiment or surgery on any human being without their free consent.”^{lxv} Interestingly, the next constitution to have been written (in 2012)^{lxvi} was the same year the current Coptic Orthodox Pope was enthroned. It states, “Article 41: No person may be subjected to any medical or scientific experiment without free, documented consent, and in accordance with the established foundations of medical science, in the manner regulated by law.”^{lxvii} The law has taken this issue one step further by requiring documented consent. Hopefully the patriarchate will reconsider its position as well. Furthermore, my dear children, the Egyptian Criminal Law in article 240 states, “Anyone who creates in another a wound or beating that results in a cutting or separation of a bodily part that loses its benefits...or causes a permanent disability shall be punished with imprisonment for three to ten years.” In attempting to be a law-abiding citizen, and even though this law is not enforced given that 100% of males are circumcised, likely with only you, my son, being the exception, I decided to uphold the law and defend your right to self-determination.

Oh no, I got carried away writing you this letter; I forgot that I left the “kahk” cookies in the oven. I have to run and get them out lest I be thought of as rebelling against ALL traditions.

Love,

Your Un-habitus, Law-Abiding Mother



Following the controversy these letters sparked between the author and the recipients, the letters were published in *Coptic Anonymous Magazine*, Issue 1120. The editor received the following letter a week after this issue's publication and it is available in issue 1121.

Dear Ms. Aziz,

Or is it Mrs.? I doubt that it is, given your evident lack of knowledge on penises. I write to you as a well-educated Coptic Orthodox man who is proud of the traditions and culture of my church and country. Circumcision "is not a matter of discussion, it is a fact."^{lxviii} Even if there are no medical or hygienic benefits, since it does not cause any harm, it is important to uphold the customs of our society, whether they have been practiced since the Pharaonic era without ceasing or have ceased for a short period of time. The fact that circumcision came back and was widely accepted to the point that all males in Egypt are circumcised speaks to the importance of this practice.

I hope you will reconsider your opinions and write again to your readers on the importance of this practice as part of our Coptic identity. There are other problems in the Church that you would do better discussing.

Sincerely,

Mr. 1Thessalonianian Five-Twenty^{lxix}

Author's Response

Dear Mr. 1Thessalonianian Five-Twenty,

I greatly appreciate you taking time to share your thoughts with us. To your dismay, I must inform you that my position has not and will likely not change. I would like to share with you and the rest of the readers some of the responses I received from conducting a survey on male circumcision.

Of the 14 Egyptian Coptic males surveyed, only 2 said they would ever consider not circumcising their sons. However, after asking them if they would consider not circumcising their sons if evidence showed that there are no medical, hygiene or sexual reasons for this procedure, 7 said they would consider this.^{lxx} Mr. 1Thessalonianian Five-Twenty, if we can infer nothing else from this, we can at least say that though this practice is thought of as a tradition and custom, it is further perpetuated by misperceptions. When this same question was asked to 17 Egyptian Coptic parents, only 5 said they would consider not circumcising their sons if evidence showed that there are no medical, hygiene or sexual reasons for this procedure.^{lxxi} I hope the fact that 50% of under 35 year old single Coptic male respondents saying that they would consider not circumcising their sons, but only 30% of Coptic parents agreeing with that would show you that the revolution our country is undergoing is not just one of politics, but mindsets.

You should be proud that the younger generation is learning to question traditions and habits that have gone unquestioned for centuries. From asking whether there is

a better political system than tyranny, to asking whether cutting off a male's foreskin is really necessary, a great liberation is underway. I hope you will decide to join.

Sincerely,

A Revolutionary of the Mind

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- ⁱ Portelli, Alessandro. *Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue*. Wisconsin: 1997.
- ⁱⁱ Ghoussoub, Mai, and Emma Sinclair-Webb, eds. *Imagined Masculinities: Changing Patterns of Identity for Middle Eastern Men*. London: Saqi, 1999.
- ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/ethiopia/abyssinian.htm>
- ^{iv} Ibn Al-Muqaffa, Sawirus. *History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria*. Vol. 4. N.p.: P. Fages, 1904.
- ^v Bishop of General Services of the Coptic Orthodox Church, Written (Arabic) and emailed interview response. November 30, 2012. Translation mine.
- ^{vi} <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/no-more-birds-and-bees-lack-information-schools-could-harm-public-s-sexual-health>
- ^{vii} See Appendix X. Members of St Mary/Maraashly church.
- ^{viii} See Appendix X
- ^{ix} Ibid.
- ^x Ibid.
- ^{xi} Bible, *Romans 12:2*. New International Version.
- ^{xii} See Appendix X
- ^{xiii} Ibid.
- ^{xiv} See Appendix X
- ^{xv} Bible, *1 Corinthians 12:27*. New International Version.
- ^{xvi} See Appendix X
- ^{xvii} See Appendix X
- ^{xviii} See Appendix XX
- ^{xix} http://highered.mcgrawhill.com/sites/dl/free/0073382663/562220/kelly9e_sample_ch03.pdf
- ^{xx} See Appendix XX
- ^{xxi} Aristotle, *Aristotle's Complete Masterpiece*. 1749.
- ^{xxii} Masood, S, et al. "Penile Sensitivity and Sexual Satisfaction after Circumcision: Are We Informing Men Correctly?" *Urologia Internationalis* (2005).
- ^{xxiii} Sorrells ML, Snyder JL, Reiss MD, Eden C, Milos MF, Wilcox N, et al. "Fine-touch pressure thresholds in the adult penis." *BJU International* (2007).
- ^{xxiv} The most prominent studies on the sensitivity of the foreskin include Winkelmann 1956 "The cutaneous innervation of the human newborn prepuce," Winelmann 1959 "The Erogenous Zones: Their nerve supply and significance," Taylor 1996 "The prepuce: Specialized mucosa of the penis and its loss to circumcision," and Cold 1996 "The Prepuce."
- ^{xxv} See Appendix XX
- ^{xxvi} Priest. Interview conducted in Arabic at St. Mark's Coptic Orthodox Church in Fairfax, VA. November 15, 2012. Translation mine.
- ^{xxvii} Ibid.
- ^{xxviii} See Appendix X
- ^{xxix} Bible, *Leviticus 19:19*. New International Version.

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- xxx Bible, *Leviticus* 11:8. New International Version.
- xxxi Bible, *Leviticus* 15:19. New International Version.
- xxxii Bishop of General Services of the Coptic Orthodox Church. Written (Arabic) and emailed interview response. November 9, 2012. Translation mine.
- xxxiii Bible, *John* 1:17. New International Version.
- xxxiv Bible, *Ephesians* 2:8. New International Version.
- xxxv Priest. Interview conducted at St. Mary's Coptic Orthodox Church in Savage, MD. November 7, 2012.
- xxxvi Ibid.
- xxxvii Out of 46 filled surveys from Coptic Church members and interviews with 3 priests and 1 Bishop, this priest was the only one to mention aesthetics.
- xxxviii See Appendix XX
- xxxix Ibid.
- xl <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/surgery?q=surgery>
- xli Surgeon. Written and emailed interview response. November 30, 2012.
- xliv Ibid
- xlvi Phimosis is "a congenital narrowing of the opening of the foreskin so that it cannot be retracted." Oxford English Medical Dictionary.
- xliv Dewan, Pa, et al. "Phimosis: Is Circumcision Necessary?" *Journal of Pediatrics and Child Health* 32.4 (1996)
- xliv Bishop of General Services of the Coptic Orthodox Church. Written (Arabic) and emailed interview response. November 9, 2012. Translation mine.
- xlvi Moushira Abdel-Malek, culinary expert and author of food column in Al-Ahram Weekly Newspaper, Egypt. Written and emailed interview response. December 10, 2012.
- xlvi Aggleton, Peter. "'Just a Snip'?: A Social History of Male Circumcision." *Reproductive Health Matters* 15.29 (2007).
- xlvi Moushira Abdel-Malek, culinary expert and author of food column in Al-Ahram Weekly Newspaper, Egypt. Written and emailed interview response. December 10, 2012.
- xlvi See Appendix V
- l Aggleton, Peter. "'Just a Snip'?: A Social History of Male Circumcision." *Reproductive Health Matters* 15.29 (2007): 15-21. Web.
- li See Appendix XX
- lii See Appendix X
- liii Scott, John & Marshall, Gordon (eds) *A Dictionary of Sociology*, Oxford University Press, 1998
- liv Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. London, Routledge (1984).
- lv Ibid.
- lvi Bishop of General Services of the Coptic Orthodox Church. Written (Arabic) and emailed interview response. November 9, 2012. Translation mine.
- lvii See Appendix XX
- lviii Ibid.

lix Ibid.

lx Ibid.

lxi Boles, Dioscorus. "CIRCUMCISION AND THE COPTS – A HISTORY: PART II." Web log post. *On Coptic Nationalism*. N.p., 16 Feb. 2012. Web.
<http://copticliterature.wordpress.com/2012/02/16/circumcision-and-the-copts-a-history-part-ii/>

lxii <http://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/topics/fgm/fgm-sexuality/en/index.html>

lxiii <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm>

lxiv *Male Circumcision: Global Trends and determinants of Prevalence, Safety and Acceptability*. World health Organization and UNAIDS. 2007

lxv <http://www.constitutionnet.org/files/Egypt%20Constitution.pdf>

lxvi As of the date of writing this later, it remains a draft constitution subject to a nation wide referendum.

lxvii <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/egypt-s-draft-constitution-translated>

lxviii See Appendix XX

lxix 1 Thessalonians 5:20 reads: "test everything that is said. Hold on to what is good." The name of the author of this letter is intended to humorously portray the lack of upholding this Biblical Scripture.

lxx See Appendix X

lxxi See Appendix XX