Summary

This research is part of the EURYI project led by Prof. Bas ter Haar Romeny at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. My colleagues and I have been involved with several independent projects concerning various aspects of identity formation among Copts and Byzantine Orthodox Christians from the middle Ages up to the present. This Project follows up on the findings of the earlier PIONIER project that dealt with Syrian Orthodox identity formation, of which I had not been a part.

The purpose of my research is to shed light on the inner workings of Coptic identity formation outside of Egypt, namely in the Netherlands, France and the United States. I emphasize the official position of the Church as it is expressed in sermons reflecting the contents of what it means to be a Copt. I have chosen to divide my thesis into four segments in order to highlight the processual nature of identity formation in the Coptic Orthodox Church.

In chapter one I describe and analyze the tools with which deeper meaning is cast into the Coptic sense of self. These tools are subject to the inherently variable meaning of such terms as identity, morality, ethnicity, minority, migration, diaspora and transnationalism. Each term allows for a certain creative mutability that may affect change and growth or decline by permitting the various external and internal actors to impact the contents and direction of Coptic identity, while all the time appearing to leave it untouched. The idiom thus created enables Copts to achieve a reified sense of self as a community unbounded by previous historical limitations. I utilize the framework
of Institutional Rational Choice Theory in order to explain the authority of the Church as it is put into force through its priests as a tenable vehicle for collective social action. In addition, this chapter surveys the travails involved in restructuring the methodology of the research.

In the following chapter, I describe the raw historical conditions that formed the available building blocks for Coptic identity as well as the various forces that limited choice. In order to clarify how Coptic identity came to exist as it does today, I highlight various pertinent aspects of Egyptian history and geography, political and social restrictions, changing languages as carriers of identity, as well as the illustrative lessons of other Egyptian groups that chose alternative paths.

In the third chapter, I turn to the sorting logic reflected in the choice of practices for reinforcement in the face of countervailing currents in the diaspora. I show that the practices that have been actively chosen by the Church for reification are those that promote an internalization of moral identity. This type of identity is more demanding but offers greater benefits in the long run.

To conclude, I examine the most significant actors who will in my view affect the future recasting of Coptic identity. This is done in order to stress that defining what it means to be a Copt is a fluid process that only appears solid and stable over short time periods.

My research shows how small group leadership is able to subtly manipulate aspects of identity in order to influence the integration and survival of their group even while maintaining the appearance of strict conservatism. This is achieved through multiple and repetitive aggregate dialogs where sermons represent a mediated and more quotidian version of official Church
dogma. This analysis may serve others wishing to explain change in other conservative groups that experience sharp changes while remaining strongly grounded in identity discourse.