

# Conquering Rome: Constructing a Global Christianity in the Face of Terror. A Case Study into the Representations of the Beheading of Twenty-One Migrant Workers in January 2015

*Lucien van Liere*

## 1 Introduction

On January 15 2015, a video was posted on the internet by Al-Hayat Media Center, showing the beheading of twenty-one men (Schnellmann.org). The video was claimed by Islamic State's "Tripoli Province", a group allied to Islamic State, and addressed to "the nation of the cross". Political and religious leaders responded with shock and abhorrence.

In the video, the twenty-one men were presented as "people of the cross, followers of the hostile Coptic Church". One of the killers explained that the captives were murdered as a revenge for the suffering of members of the Muslim community in Egypt. Responses to the atrocity, from Egypt as well as from Europe and the US, appealed to religious ideas of unity and solidarity. These 'frames' were particularly set through interpretations that were spread on the Internet. In this chapter, I will show how these interpretations played an important role in constructing frames of global religious connectivities. Attention for translocal connectivities is considered a key feature of a World Christianity approach as outlined elsewhere in this volume. This contribution illustrates connectivities and dynamics of incorporation forged through discourse and shows that such connectivities can be construed by agents both from within and outside the Christian tradition(s). By using the word 'frame' I refer to a set of convictions and related practices that evolves through selection, emphasis, exclusion and elaboration and promote a causal interpretation between events, and a moral evaluation of these events (McCombs 2004: 89). Starting with a contextualization of the above-mentioned video this article seeks to make clear that information technologies play a significant role in the development of these frames that use well-worn Christian theological concepts with deep historical roots like 'the baptism of blood' and 'martyrdom' as vivid building blocks to stress a world-wide connectivity and solidarity that support a

'global Christianity' based on images and narratives of suffering communities spread through the Internet.

Besides exploring the contours of this 'global Christianity' by focusing on the construction of 'martyrdom', I will draw attention to yet another but related theme that comes to the fore in the video: the 'crusader', a theme charged with historical memories. Both constructions, I will propose, work as frames in the sense mentioned above and are related, loading events with meanings and proposing causality between events and a moral interpretation. This chapter shows that these frames can change twenty-one migrant workers (twenty from Egypt and one from Chad), looking for jobs in Libya, into Christian crusaders with strong links to Europe ("Rome") on the one side, and into Christian martyrs with strong links to (the whole of) Christianity in past and present on the other.

I will use a structure-based approach to conflict, which means that I will not locate conflict in the individual agency but in representations of global collectivities in speeches, news reports and videos. By doing so, I will use the Internet as a significant source of information on the one hand, but on the other hand critically analyze the information as being part of a medium that 'uploads' and styles information into the rather stereotypical frames of 'martyr' or 'crusader'. At this digital level, a grand narrative of global solidarity is construed by at least two sides within a comparable pattern; crusaders and martyrs are both historically charged conflict-frames that entail perspectives on suffering communities. But while the crusader-image in this narrative points to a suffering Muslim community, the martyr-image reactivates theological perspectives on Christian communality based on 'blood'. To sum up, I will analyze the discursive fields in which references towards these men are charged with wider and deeper layers of historical representations. It will become clear how on the Internet and in speeches and letters from officials the January 2015 atrocity evokes a perspective on Christianity as a unified religion that owns its dynamics from the frames of 'crusaders' and 'martyrs'. A 'global Christianity' as used in this article, is a discursively constructed Christianity charged by the traumatized memories,ologies and articulations of 'crusaders' and 'martyrs' and not an effort to describe a global context. From this perspective, I will show how a 'global Christianity' is discursively constructed on the one hand as a violent effort against the Islamic *umma* while on the other hand as a world-wide network of solidarity.

## 2 Prelude

On January 12, 2015, *Dabiq*, by then the on-line glossy of Islamic State, published a report about the capture of twenty-one "Coptic crusaders". The Copts were

migrant workers kidnapped in Sirte on December 27, 2014 and in January 2015. According to *Dabiq*, the action was a revenge for “Kamilia Shehata, Wafa Constantine, and other sisters who were tortured and murdered by the Coptic Church of Egypt” in 2010 (*Dabiq* 2015b: 30).

The story of Kamilia Shehata and Wafa Constantine which *Dabiq* references is vague, but circles around questions regarding the conversion-rights of two Egyptian Christian women to Islam five years earlier, in 2010. The stories of both women have become intermingled. Gossip, rumors, fear and anger accompany what is narrated. The function of gossip is ample and important to mention, especially because of its rapid spread through digital media. As Christopher Boehm explains, gossip functions as a courtroom, as a “system through which the group’s idea of what should be morally acceptable or unacceptable is continuously rehashed and refreshed” (Boehm 1984: 84). In the current tense Egyptian context notions of victimhood accompany ideas about what ‘the other’ is doing. One story-line narrates that Shehata and Constantine were both married to Coptic priests. Wanting to divorce from their husbands, they converted to Islam (which would make the initiation of the divorce easier). According to a Muslim narrative, Christians were less happy with their proposed conversion and forced them to enter Coptic monasteries or, as another story-line claims, forced them back into their churches. Another, Christian, story-line narrates that Shehata had left her husband after a dispute. Fearing that she was kidnapped by Muslim activists, her family started to worry. Later on, she showed up telling that she was just visiting some relatives. The narrative created much outrage in Egyptian society in 2010 (Fadl 2010), with Muslims and Christians each believing their own stories (Durie 2015). Tensions remained high. On 17 February 2011, a month after the bombing of the Al-Qiddissin Coptic church in Alexandria (the bombing killed twenty-three people and took place in a tense atmosphere of gossip and rumor), a video was uploaded onto the internet showing a person claiming to be Shehata. While looking straight into the camera she said that she has never been abducted nor forced to reconvert to the church. Speaking in front of a painting of Jesus, she confessed that the church proclaims freedom and love (EpsajeeTV 2011).

The harsh version of the story however, the one of conversion and repression, was referred to by Dawlat al-‘Irāq al-‘Islāmiyyah (Islamic State in Iraq or ISI, the precursor of Islamic State) as justification for a bloody attack on a Catholic church in Baghdad taking fifty-eight lives (*Dabiq* speaks of “more than one hundred” (*Dabiq* 2015b: 31)) and wounding seventy-eight others on 31 October 2010 (Spencer 2011). According to witnesses, quoted by *The Guardian*, gunmen shouted upon entering the church: “All of you are infidels. We are here to avenge the burning of the Qur’an and the jailing of Muslim

women in Egypt”, and then they started to kill churchgoers (Chulov 2010). With the first part of their claim they referred to the (at that time still) intended burning of the Quran by Terry Jones, founder of a small political organization called *Stand Up America Now* and pastor of the *Dove World Outreach Center*, a small nondenominational congregation in Florida, USA. Jones explained his plans to burn a Quran first on Twitter on 12 July 2010 and later also on Facebook and YouTube. At the time of the Baghdad-killings Jones had not yet burned a Quran in front of a camera.<sup>1</sup> The second part of the gunmen’s claim is a clear reference to the cases of Kamilia Shehata and Wafa Constantine.

### 3 The Magazine and the Video: Turning Migrant Workers into Crusaders

The *Dabiq* article that was published on 12 January 2015 mentions that five years after “the blessed operation in Iraq, Allah granted Islamic State expansion to Libya, Sinai, and elsewhere, allowing it to easily capture the Coptic crusaders” (*Dabiq* 2015b: 32). A few days later, on 15 January 2015, the afore mentioned video entitled *A Message Signed With Blood to the Nation of the Cross* (with Arabic subtitling) was posted, showing the beheading of the twenty-one men near a coastline identified as a waterfront near Tripoli, Libya.

The aesthetic arrangement and choreography of the video suggests power, difference and fixed roles. Beside these twenty-one men, dressed in orange, the video shows twenty-one executioners all dressed in black, except for the spokesman standing in the middle, with caps covering all of their faces except for their eyes. A Quranic text is shown: “Allah, 47:4 ‘strike [their] necks’” at the bottom of the video. The video refers to the victims as “Coptic crusaders”. A semiotic analysis of the video suggests that the contrast between the executioners and their victims is continually stressed in color, movement, and position. The orange jump suits of the captives for example can be taken as a reference to the prison garb of Guantanamo Bay. The video is addressed to “the nation of the cross” and later on to “the people of the cross”. The victims walk to a beach while each one of them guarded by an executioner. The only sound we hear is the sound of the sea. All the executioners are ‘higher’ than their victims, a position we have seen earlier on videos published by Islamic State. The prisoners are forced to kneel down. Their executioners are holding

1 On 21 March 2011 he eventually posted a video on the internet, showing a “trial” and then the burning of a Quran (Daily Mail Reporter 2010), but at the time the gunmen started to spray their bullets no Quran was burned by Jones.

knives, taking up-right positions behind their victims. After a message is spoken out in American English (subtitled in Arabic) by the one standing exactly in the middle and dressed in military garb, the captives are beheaded synchronously. The camera does not turn away but takes the right angle for bloody close-up shots. Screams are heard while acapella music starts to play. The video appears extremely well-structured and esthetically organized. The colors black versus orange, the heights up (the executioners) versus down (the victims), the number of twenty-one which facilitates that one man stands exactly in the middle, holding a speech before the slaughter, the calm, the exact timing making the executioners move in unison, cutting the throats of their victims all at the same time, and the open faces of the victims versus the covered faces of the executioners all refer to a strong difference-construing, staged spectacle.

In the video, Christians are addressed as “crusaders”. During his speech, the gunman in the middle claims: “Safety for you crusaders is something you can only wish for”, looking straight into the camera, he continues:

especially when you’re fighting us all together, therefore we will fight you all together until the war lays down its burdens and Jesus—peace be upon him—will descend, breaking the cross, killing the swine. The sea you’ve hidden Sheikh Osama bin Laden’s body in, we swear to Allah we will mix it with your blood.

Ahram online 2015

At the end of the video, the speaker declares: “We will conquer Rome, by Allah’s permission” (Ahram online 2015) echoing the words of Sheikh Abu Muhammad al-Adnani al-Shami, the former official spokesman of Islamic State: “We will conquer your Rome, break your crosses, and enslave your women” (Wood 2017: 192). On the screen the words appear: “The filthy blood is just some of what awaits you”. The video shows a red sea, suggesting that the blood of the laborers heralds the blood of the uniting crusaders. It is clear that the twenty-one men were not ‘bad guys’ who deserved the death penalty according to *sharia*. The executioners wanted to ‘hurt’ the category these men represented.

In the video, as well as in *Dabiq*, the atrocity is explained and justified as revenge for “Kamilia Shehata, Wafa Constantine and other sisters who were tortured and murdered by the Coptic Church of Egypt” (*Dabiq* 2015b: 30). The “jailing of Muslim women in Egypt” that the gunmen clamored in the Catholic Church in Baghdad before starting to shoot, now had reached a next level by using the words ‘torturing’ and ‘murdering’. Because it was impossible in 2010 to take revenge in Egypt for this ‘torture and murder’, the Baghdad Catholics, a “different kuffar” but still having “allegiance to

each other in the face of Islam” (Dabiq 2015b: 31) were killed, *Dabiq* claims. ‘Now’ however, in 2015, “the Islamic State strikes terror directly in the hearts of the Copts after striking terror in the hearts of their Catholic allies before” (Dabiq 2015b: 32).

It is noteworthy to see how individual biographies transform into digitalized stereotypes of fundamental conflict. The—predominantly Egyptian—migrant workers from Sirte become anti-Muslim crusaders killed as retaliation for the ‘torture and murder’ of supposititious ex-Coptic Muslim women. This perspective of retaliation includes ideas of a suffering community that transforms these men into perpetrators or crusaders. By using the term ‘crusader’, the representation of suffering is given a historic dimension. I consider the term ‘crusader’ to be a stereotype with a dense sense of historic memory. By using the term ‘crusaders’, the Copts and Chadian are placed within a genealogy of violence representing a Europe-Muslim world binary, and become the current heirs of the historic perpetrators, although neither the Copts nor the Chadians were ever part of any crusade. Charles Strangor defines stereotypes as representing “the traits that we view as characteristic of social groups, or individual members of those groups, and particular those that differentiate groups from each other” (Stangor 2009: 2). The term ‘crusader’ however is more than just a characteristic and differentiating term. Muslims ‘down through the ages’ have spoken about the West’s crusader mentality (Tolan et al 2013: ix). The term ‘crusader’ here is an implosive category that covers a history of (violent) relationships. In our case it bluntly refers to a history of violent conflict that is evoked every time the term is used. In Islamist discourses, Thomas Hegghammer writes,

the term ‘Crusader’ has become a buzzword. The discourse of (...) global jihadists tended to highlight Muslims’ suffering at the hands of the so-called Jewish-Crusader alliance. Their texts were characterized by long enumerations of places and events which demonstrated that Muslims were victims of oppression, occupation, and war.

Hegghammer 2006: 13

Indeed, the term appears abundantly in speeches and writings of Islamic State leaders like Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (Ensor 2015, al-Baghdadi was killed in October 2019) and Abu Muhammed al-Adnani (who was killed in August 2016) but also in Islamic State media. A *Dabiq*-article for example states that “Bush spoke the truth when he said, ‘Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists.’ I.e. either you are with the crusade or you are with Islam” (Dabiq 2015a: 43). In this context, ‘Rome’ is on the one hand the seat of power that called for crusades against Muslims in the past and at the same time the apocalyptic

focal point that will be conquered in the future (Wood 2017: 253–254). The term ‘crusader’ therefore covers a specific conflict-loaded view and raises the issue of a suffering community within the frame of justified ‘defence’.

Related to the crusader-stereotype is the Islamic State-construction of a globally interconnected Christianity “in the face of Islam”, as *Dabiq* explains, as a network of anti-Islamic perpetrators. The crusader-frame is the uniting frame used to address this interconnectivity. Catholics in Baghdad and Copts in Egypt are united as ‘crusaders’ opposing Islam. Precisely this term makes it possible for Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) in 2010 and for Islamic State (IS) in 2015 to transform churchgoers and migrant workers into antagonistic subjects and charge them with the “torture and murder” of Egyptian women. This way ‘Christians’ are labeled as violators of the ‘fragile’ parts of the *umma*. The term ‘crusaders’ projects a self-perspective of the *umma* as a suffering and threatened community, upon Iraqi and Egyptian Christians. It alludes to extend the violent effort to ‘abolish’ this category by the classic threat to conquer Rome. The term ‘crusader’ in this ‘traumatic’ context signifies “the nation” or “the people of the cross” and constructs a ‘global Christianity’ from a jihadist perspective that is antagonistic, violent and attackable. Parallel to this categorization of Christianity, Islamic State can profile the *umma* as victim of an aggressive global Christianity and explain its deadly anti-Christian attacks as ‘counter-violence’ within the crusader-frame.

#### 4 Responses: Turning Crusaders into Martyrs

Responses to the video were many. Egypt almost immediately launched air-strikes on IS-positions in Libya. Political leaders condemned the atrocity. Egyptian president Abdel Fattah al-Sisi spoke about an “abhorrent act of terrorism”, while The White House officially spoke about a “despicable and cowardly” act (Cunningham and Habib 2015). On Twitter, the Coptic bishop Anba Ernia published the names of the victims.

Protests were organized in Cairo where the faces of the beheaded workers appeared on colorful banners, but also in Washington DC, where a small group of Coptic immigrants showed up in orange suits. They were reported chanting “Obama, Obama, did you see? Christian blood in the sea” (Constable 2015).

The Coptic Church officially declared these men as “martyrs of the righteous” (Mack 2015). Six days after the massacre, the Coptic Church made an important announcement. It declared that the murdered Coptic men would from ‘now’ on be commemorated in the Coptic Synaxarium, the Church calendar, as ‘martyrs of faith’ on February 15 of the Gregorian calendar (which is

the 8th Amshir of the Coptic calendar). Interpreting the video, many people argued after watching, that some victims had been seen mouthing the words 'Lord Jesus Christ' just seconds before their deaths, or had been seen mumbling prayers. In an interview with SAT-7 ARABIC, an Arabic Christian channel, Beshir Kamel, who was presented as a brother of two of the 'Coptic martyrs', thanked Islamic State: "ISIS gave us more than we asked for when they didn't edit out the part where they declared their faith and called upon Jesus Christ. ISIS helped us strengthen our faith," he said. The martyrdom of his brothers was "a badge of honor to Christianity", he claimed (Vatican Radio 2015; see also Mosebach 2019).

Recently, the Coptic community has been frequently targeted, especially since president Abdul Fatah al-Sisi has intensified Egypt's policy to roll up Islamist networks. Many Copts situate these attacks within a 'frame of martyrdom' that has been part and parcel of Coptic collective memory. Martyrs own an important part of the commemoration calendar of the Coptic Church. In Coptic martyrologies and calendars, the so-called 'Era of Martyrs' functions as a point of reference. This persecution started under Emperor Diocletian in 303 and ended with the Edict of Milan in 313. It contributes to the idea that the history of the Copts in Egypt is a history of violence and persecutions. The Coptic calendar is dated to this Era of Martyrs. Vivian Ibrahim writes that the Era of Martyrs is a useful tool "by which modern Copts can identify any form of persecution or discrimination as part of a historical process of eternal martyrdom" (Ibrahim 2011: 5). More than that, martyrdom is also a frame by which Coptic Church officials view current situations of conflict. On 9 October 2011 for example, during a Coptic mass-protest against the attack on a church in Marinab, in the Aswan province, that killed twenty-seven people, bishop Stephanos was reported saying: "Christians are currently experiencing their worst time in recent centuries. (...) Nevertheless, all Coptic Christians are prepared for martyrdom, as at the beginnings of Christianity" (Hoft 2011). This frame of suffering has been part and parcel of the Coptic tradition and has deep roots in Coptic theology. Zeidan argues that Copts view their history "as a long series of persecutions, massacres, forced conversions and destroyed churches, as a sad tale of a subjugated people precariously surviving among a dominant and hostile majority. Martyrdom and suffering have a high symbolic meaning for Copts as they perceive themselves as facing a constant existential threat" (Zeidan 1999: 56). Despite voices that raise attention for the great variety of Egyptian Copts and their involvement in society (Guirguis 2012), suffering has become part of Coptic identity (Henderson 2005: 163) and is as a—what Aleida Assmann calls—"hot past" that is 'present' (Assmann 2011: xi) not only in liturgy, theology and collective memory, but also in the interpretation of its current



vulnerable position in Egyptian society. Within this vein, Ishak Ibrahim argues that “the gruesome video thus joined a historic litany of martyrdom and became a source of pride in the community” (Ibrahim 2015).

Not only the Coptic Church, but also the Egyptian government addressed the victims as martyrs, opening a more nationalistic trajectory of martyrdom. The state officially announced seven days of national mourning directly after the video was published. The government claimed that the victims were “martyrs of the revolution”, subscribing them to the martyrs of the January 25 Revolution (2011). This entitled their families to receive social and financial support. Officials, including representatives from the *Nour Party*, an Egyptian Salafist group, travelled to al-Our, where thirteen from the twenty-one men came from, to condole the family of the victims. Government officials granted the Copts of al-Our permission for the building of a new church which would be named “The Church of the Martyrs of Faith and Country in al-Our” (Ibrahim 2015) (which would lead to social unrest and clashes in al-Our later on). Contrary to their reluctance to cover the story of the kidnapping of the Copts before their beheading, media-attention in Egypt was phenomenal after the men were killed. However, as Ishak Ibrahim from *The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy* observes: “Little to no discussion could be found noting the victims’ religion as the main reason that they were taken hostage and then killed” (Ibrahim 2015). While Ibrahim is referring to the Egyptian context, this lack of attention for the religious affiliations of the victims was absolutely not true for global media-framings of the beheadings outside of Egypt.

On the internet, *Dailymotion*, one of the biggest video platforms in the world, uploaded a video unto its website with footage from the 1S-video, projecting almost continually three crosses on the background while Kari Jobe is singing her gospel song *I am not alone* (Dailymotion). Similar artistic interpretations in which the death of these twenty-one men was reframed as Christian *marturion*, show a strong identification between the Coptic migrant workers and the suffering Christ. Paintings were uploaded unto internet, one for example, showing Jesus wearing his cross while the Copts and their executioners follow; another—from the migrant Coptic artist Tony Rezk, living in Virginia USA—showing the 21 as martyrs receiving a crown from angels and be welcomed by Jesus. In an interview with Kathryn Jean Lopez from *The National Review*, Rezk explains: “We believe that their martyrdom will help the Church grow stronger” (Lopez 2015). Martyrdom became the uniting category for an envisioned ‘global Christianity’ based on solidarity with the victims. Cardinal Timothy Dolan, American cardinal prelate of the Catholic Church in New York, argued in *The New York Post* that the workers “were beheaded for nothing less

than their religious convictions. It moves me to prayers. It moves me to tears, yes, as a Christian, but also as an American, who recognizes religious freedom as our first and most cherished liberty.” IS is, Dolan claimed, “threatening civilization” (Dolan 2015). Other church officials but also individuals and NGO’s responded on different websites strongly against the “Islamic threat” and asked global attention for the structural persecutions of Christians in Muslim countries. Mariz Tadroz for example published an article in *50.50 Inclusive Democracy* entitled *Are We All Beheaded Copts?*, and wrote that the abductions and killings of minorities reveal an ideologically driven political project “which is intended to clear the Middle East of its religious minorities, and liquidate religious pluralism” (Tadroz 2016). The crusader-frame was replaced by the martyr-frame.

However, not only the Coptic Church was addressed by the IS-video. The message also contained a clear threat to Rome. As a matter of fact, even though Copts were killed, the threat to conquer Rome, and not Cairo or Alexandria, was clearly made. The blood that flows into the Mediterranean at the end of the video (which is the suggestion being raised), can be seen as a symbolic impudence to Rome. The suggestion is created that this blood as shown on the video, is indeed the blood of the beheaded men. But while this blood oozed into the Mediterranean as crusaders’ blood, at the other side of the sea their blood drifted ashore as martyrs’ blood. Not only in Egypt these men became martyrs of faith, but also in the threatened city of Rome, where the beheaded men became unifying symbols of an intra-Christian solidarity based on blood.

## 5 Reaching Rome

Pope Francis was swift in responding to the video. A day after the atrocity, on February 16, he wrote a letter to the moderator and representatives of the Church of Scotland. Writing to the Presbyterian Scots, Pope Francis was searching for words of unity and included the fresh news about the Copts. He expressed his “profound sorrow” and, referring to the beheadings, wrote that

their only words were: ‘Jesus, help me!’. They were killed simply for the fact that they were Christians. (...) The blood of our Christian brothers and sisters is a testimony which cries out to be heard. It makes no difference whether they be Catholics, Orthodox, Copts or Protestants. They are Christians! Their blood is one and the same. Their blood confesses Christ. As we recall these brothers who died only because they confessed Christ,

I ask that we encourage each another to go forward with this ecumenism which is giving us strength, the ecumenism of blood. The martyrs belong to all Christians.

Libreria Editrice Vaticana 2015a

According to the Vatican spokesman Federico Lombardi, Pope Francis phoned the patriarch of the Coptic Orthodox Church, Pope Tawadros II, to “express his profound participation with the pain of the Coptic Church for the recent barbaric assassination of Coptic Christians by Islamic fundamentalists” (Vatican Insider 2015). Pope Francis assured the Coptic Pope that “tomorrow, during the funerals of the victims, he will be united in spirit with the prayer and the pain of the Coptic Church” (Saul and Golding 2015).

Blood plays an important role in Pope Francis’ construction of an ecumenism that unites all confessions. His predecessor John Paul II already spoke about an “ecumenism of martyrs” (Bräuer 2017: 4–14). Pope Francis has taken up this theme while speaking about an “ecumenism of blood” and using this theme to develop a more inclusive perspective. In the video, blood is present as the blood of the twenty-one beheaded men, flowing into the Mediterranean. The Islamic State-commander points to this flow as a stream of blood that will eventually reach Rome. It indeed reached Rome. The “filthy” blood of the so-called ‘crusaders’ transformed into the uniting blood of Christian martyrs that unites all Christians. In this sense Pope Francis seeks to construct an “ecumenism of blood” in the face of current terror, based on an old Christian concept of martyrdom.

Ascribing a unifying role to the blood of Christian martyrs is certainly not a new issue. In an interview at the occasion of Christmas in 2013, Pope Francis already spoke about relations with other Christian denominations and talked about an “ecumenism of blood”:

for me ecumenism is a priority. Today there is an ecumenism of blood. In some countries they kill Christians for wearing a cross or having a Bible and before they kill them they do not ask them whether they are Anglican, Lutheran, Catholic or Orthodox. Their blood is mixed. To those who kill we are Christians. We are united in blood.

Tornielli 2013

The beheading-video fitted well within this perspective. Two days after the video of the beheading was uploaded, on February 17 2015, the Pope said during the Morning Meditation at Domus Sanctae Marthae: “We offer this Mass for our 21 Coptic brothers, slaughtered for the sole reason that they were

Christians. (...) Let us pray for them, that the Lord welcome them as martyrs, for their families, for my brother Tawadros, who is suffering greatly” (Libreria Editrice Vaticana 2015b).

Pope Francis’ claims that the Copts died as martyrs and that—as martyrs—they belonged to all Christians also raised old disputes within the Catholic Church about the question whether someone who dies ‘as a Christian’ but outside ‘the Church’ can be recognized as a martyr by the Church (Denzinger Bergoglio). The ultraconservative website *Novus Ordo Watch* for example heavily criticized the martyr-frame for the Copts because although the ‘baptism of blood’ could possibly apply for the Copts, this concept does not cover an “ecumenism of blood”. If all people who are killed because they are perceived as Christians become martyrs, this would mean that the motive of the killer could cause Christian unity, even among Protestants and Catholics. An ‘ecumenism of blood’ is an “absurdity, simply the latest in Modernist-indifferentist hogwash dressed up as Catholic theology and foisted upon an unsuspecting populace by the enemies of the true Catholic Faith” (Novus Ordo Watch 2015). Pope Francis’ argument does not point to the belief of the victim in order to determine whether someone is a ‘real martyr’ but indeed seems to grant that power to the perpetrator. On October 2016, he explained the ecumenism of blood on Vatican Radio:

When terrorists or world powers persecute Christian minorities or Christians, when they do this, they don’t ask: ‘But are you Lutheran? Are you Orthodox? Are you Catholic? Are you a Reformed Christian? Are you a Pentecostal?’ No! ‘You are a Christian!’ They only recognize one of them: the Christian. The enemy never makes a mistake and knows very well how to recognize where Jesus is. This is ecumenism of the blood.

Vatican Radio 2016

The perpetrator becomes the key agent for uniting all Christians.

Martyrdom and the function of the blood of the martyrs have deep historical roots within the Christian tradition (Matthews 2010). By charging blood of victims with meanings like unity and the perseverance of a persecuted community, Pope Francis evokes ‘old’ meanings that were given to the blood of the martyrs in the first centuries of Christianity but had never disappeared from the Christian tradition. The so-called ‘baptism of blood’ (*baptismus sanquinis*) was never undisputed by theologians, but throughout the second to the fourth centuries, many saw the baptism of blood as a powerful ritual (Chidester 2000: 90–94). Dying for faith had a saving power even if the victim had not received the sacrament of water baptism before her or his death.

Based on Matthew 10:32 (“Everyone therefore that shall confess me before men, I will also confess him before my Father who is in heaven”) and 10:39 (“He that shall lose his life for me shall find it”), the theme still belongs to the official teachings of the Roman Catholic Church and refers to the obtaining of “the grace of justification by suffering martyrdom for the faith of Christ” (New Advent). In past and present, disputes circled around the church as the locality of salvation. Outside the church salvation could not be received, and thus only baptized Catholics could officially die as martyrs. Pope Francis’ “ecumenism of blood” is an allusion to this tradition and at the same time an inducement to raise new questions. An ecumenism of blood blurs the boundaries within the Church as the parameters of salvation are widened in such a way that it also includes Lutherans, Pentecostals and Orthodox Christians. They are all gathered within an ecumenical Christianity through their suffering while their blood is seen as a *martyrion*, a testimony of confessing Christ. It is in Pope Francis’ discourse not only the Church, but also “the enemy” that “recognizes” the Christian. This is, so to say, at least a remarkable argument within Catholic soteriology. Nine months after the video-posting, on 29 November 2015, while visiting the Protestant faculty in Bangui, in the Central African Republic, Pope Francis once again explained his “ecumenism of blood”, saying:

God makes no distinctions between those who suffer. I have often called this the ecumenism of blood. All our communities suffer indiscriminately as a result of injustice and the blind hatred unleashed by the devil. (...) In these difficult circumstances, the Lord keeps asking us to demonstrate to everyone his tenderness, compassion and mercy. This shared suffering and shared mission are a providential opportunity for us to advance together on the path of unity; they are also an indispensable spiritual aid. How could the Father refuse the grace of unity, albeit still imperfect, to his children who suffer together and, in different situations, join in serving their brothers and sisters?

Libreria Editrice Vaticana 2015c

Pope Francis’ ecumenical efforts were acknowledged by the Coptic Church. When two years after the video was posted, on 16 February 2017, people commemorated the killings during several services worldwide, Bishop Amba Angaelos, General Bishop of the Coptic Orthodox Church said during a commemoration service held in the chapel of St. Mary Undercroft in London: “One profound result and gift of this horrific act is that it brought people together.” And he continued: “These men paid the ultimate price, but gave us a cause to advocate for all those persecuted; they also showed us that there was a level of

evil that we must all stand in solidarity against, and a level of courage, faithfulness and defiance that we must all aspire to" (Zaimov 2017).

In April 2017, after four attacks on Coptic communities and churches following each other in a rapid sequence, Pope Francis visited Egypt on a journey of "unity and fraternity". At the Al-Azhar University, where the pope spoke at a peace conference with Muslim and Christian leaders on April 28, showing cognizance of his audience, he condemned religiously inspired hatred as an idolatrous caricature of God and declared that "Peace alone (...) is holy and no act of violence can be perpetrated in the name of God, for it would profane his name" (Glatz 2017). In the presence of Muslim leaders, Pope Francis did not speak about an ecumenism of blood but about "peace" as central monotheistic theme. Whereas suffering and blood as the result of violence unites all Christians, 'peace' unites people from all faith traditions.

## 6 Chadian Conversion

As already noted, not all men that were murdered came from Egypt. One migrant worker, identified as Mathew Ayairga, kneeling precisely in the middle in front of the group-leader, came from Chad (although earlier reported as Ghanaian). Whereas the narratives about the Egyptian men focus on martyrdom, the stories circling around the Chadian migrant worker also include conversion. Especially sites communicating a more evangelical theology endorsing conversion as personal choice and experience, and interpreting a suffering Christian community as a sign of the end of times, focus on Ayairga's 'decision' to become a Christian in the last minutes of his life. Lindsay Steele from *Mission Network News*, summarizes this story-line as follows: one of the perpetrators asked Ayairga 'Do you reject Christ?' and he responded with 'their God is my God'. Thus, Steele claims, he became one of the twenty-one men "laying down their lives for their faith in Christ" (Steele 2015). Whether this small conversation between Ayairga and his executioner really took place remains unclear from the footage, but websites dramatically explore this story-line (see for example: *The Voice of the Martyrs* 2015; Kelly 2015; Bos 2015; Brown 2015) and refer to "Mathew Ayairga, still in the prime of life, wanted to be beheaded for Christ rather than living on earth as a Muslim" (Bos 2015). Whether Ayairga was a Muslim or not, is not clear but enthusiastically embraced as a 'fact' by many English websites. Interestingly, the agency of Ayairga is strongly filled in and related to the martyrdom-frame addressed to the Egyptian victims. Their strong faith in Christ already worked as a witnessing power at the moment of the atrocity itself. As *Voice of the Martyrs* narrates:

According to reports, Mathew was not a Christian. However, just moments before his death, when the ISIS militants demanded he follow Islam, Mathew turned them down. After reportedly witnessing the “immense faith” of the Egyptian believers, he decided to become a follower of Christ himself. On camera, one of the terrorists asked Mathew, “Do you reject Christ?” He responded boldly: “Their God is my God.” He then became one of the 21 men who laid down their lives for their faith in Christ.

The Voice of the Martyrs 2015

According to *The Voice of the Martyrs*-website, many men were praying ‘Lord Jesus Christ’. Several websites dramatize this ‘prayer’ along the strongly drawn lines of martyrdom as witness. *BosNewsLife* for example, using *The Voice of Martyrs* as source, speaks about “Each man had been praying, ‘Lord Jesus Christ,’ in their final moments before they were beheaded” (Bos 2015, italic LvL). During a *World Summit in Defense of Persecuted Christians*, organized by the *Billy Graham Evangelistic Association* in May 2017, Egyptian Anglican Bishop Mouneer Anis reported to the conference, “Mathew Ayairga did not share the Copts’ faith, but he was so moved by their witness and courage, that—when challenged him to reject Jesus—he declared ‘Their God is my God’. Thus, he was then beheaded alongside them” (World Watch Monitor 2017). Interestingly, the Chadian migrant worker’s agency becomes charged with themes that dramatically mark his ‘conversion’: inner movement, decision, courage, boldness, laying down his life for his faith, wanted to be beheaded for Christ rather than living on earth as a Muslim. Although, as mentioned earlier, this ‘conversion’ remains unclear in the video and it is at least remarkable that someone with the Christian name ‘Mathew’ quotes a verse from the Bible book of Ruth (see Ruth 1:16) before he turns from Islam to Christianity, from evangelical points of view Ayairga fits well within a frame of divine power, conversion and suffering as a sign of the times. Primarily through evangelical websites, Ayairga became a brave convert through whom God intermitted the violent message against the nation of the cross.

## 7 Concluding Remarks

This chapter shows how twenty-one men searching for work in Libya became explicated as crusaders, martyrs and a convert. Internet played a decisive role as source of information, exhibiting how the ‘world’ connects through narratives of violence, offense and gossip. As I have shown in this chapter, in the case of the Baghdad church killing in 2010, Islamic State justified its violence

as counter-violence, 'quoting' an (alleged) earlier violence that soared on the streams of gossip and facilitated that the perpetrators could perceive their community as victimized. This dynamic however takes on categorical dimensions with stereotypes that contain historic memories and representations within established frames, like the terms 'crusaders' and 'martyrs'. Within these frames that were abundantly explored by the media, the twenty-one men that were beheaded were first presented as crusaders and later on interpreted as martyrs encouraging Pope Francis to seek for an ecumenical Christianity based on their blood. Their biography as Egyptian/Chadian migrant workers continually 'imploded' in the different religious and political categories and stereotypes that were applied to them.

Being charged with the collective memories of crusader- and martyr-frames, these categories are both based on perspectives of suffering communities. As crusaders and martyrs, the twenty-one men mediate perspectives on Muslim and Christian communities as tormented communities at the hands of the other. On the one hand Muslims are suffering at the hands of 'crusaders'. The gossip-based violence towards women functions as a reason to 'repulse'. However, neither the victims of Baghdad, nor the twenty-one men near Tripoli can quench the thirst for revenge with such a deep historical profile. On the other hand, as the martyrdom of these twenty-one became evident within the Coptic Church and Pope Francis 'claimed' their blood serving a 'ecumenism of blood', the men were inscribed into a much wider frame of suffering Christian communities. The January 2015 atrocity evoked frames that developed rapidly along historical memories and theologies. Several 'global Christianities' were evoked based on deep-rooted representations. One version was induced by Islamic State's "Tripoli Province" who charged its version of a global Christianity with the historic aggression of the crusader. While the Coptic Church inscribed the laborers as official martyrs into the Coptic Synaxarium, another global Christianity appeared in response to the first and became charged with the historic suffering of the martyr. While global responses of abhorrence followed on the video, Pope Francis represented the blood of the laborers as part of an ecumenism of blood that unites all Christians in suffering. An evangelical variety focused on the drama of conversion as a sign of God's grace. Each of these representations fashions the notion of a 'global Christianity' by discursively constructing connectivities through time and space. The discursive construction of these Christianities on the Internet shows how events like the January 2015 atrocity are digitally re-created as beads in chains of memories that are filled with images of suffering, obliquely implying antagonistic interpretations but also applying longings for unity. The twenty-one men never 'returned' back home as the migrant laborers they once were.



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