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ATTACHMENT AND IMAGINATION IN COPTIC CHRISTIANS' RELIGIOUS AND AESTHETIC EXPERIENCES

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Title: Attachment and Imagination in Coptic Christians` Religious and Aesthetic Experiences

Abstract: Coptic Orthodox iconography is a living tradition from a community that is underrepresented in the psychology of religion. It offers a prism for empirical investigation of religious aesthetic experiences and psychosocial factors that colour this class of experiences. This article reports a mixed-methods study focusing on attachment and imagination in experiences with Coptic icons. We qualitatively explored the significance of iconography within the community, with expert interviews revealing a dual function of the icon in public and private prayer lives. Home interviews with a subsample of Copts presenting secure attachment tendencies (n = 15) explored personal relationships to icons. These revealed themes related to physical space, narrative identity, and communication to the Divine. A cross-sectional survey (N = 88) was treated with principal components analyses, a correlation matrix, and two-way ANOVA. Participants endorsing secure attachments tended towards more intensity and security in relation to their religion and icons. In contrast, insecurely attached participants had less knowledge of icons and presented with expressive imagination, or a sensitivity to metaphor and fantasy. Developed in consultation with religious community members, this study presents new insights on attachment, imagination, religiosity, and cultural belonging.

Keywords: *attachment*; *Coptic Orthodoxy*; *empirical aesthetics*; *imagination*; *spiritual communities*;

The Egyptian Coptic Christian art of iconography is a living tradition with icons present in both homes and sacred spaces. A Christian *icon* is a revered representation of a holy person in media, such as painting, relief, or mosaic. Icons signify the presence of divinity, and each tells a different story with regards to the figures they depict, the function(s) of the object (e.g., liturgical), and their personal significance to the individual, family, or community. Icons in both the Coptic and Eastern Orthodox traditions are not aimed to depict the physical body, but the soul (glorified body) of the saint portrayed. The absence of naturalism and sensuality is a reminder that icons are not made to represent the world of the flesh. The reverence given to the icon passes onto whom the icon represents, and in the case of a saint, he or she is in turn believed to intercede for the believer (Tribe 2004). A Christian's experience with an icon is *participatory* or *relational* rather than merely aesthetic: the spiritual figure in the icon is believed to communicate to the Holy and transmit grace to the believer, and the saint depicted receives veneration from devotees. This points to a reciprocal relationship between the beholding believer and spiritual figure. The beholder must look to the icon and respond with veneration in order to tap into its power. Just as children and adults lean on attachment figures with an (at least implicit) understanding of human connection as a basic need, so too do believers enjoy psychological advantages from reaching out to spiritual figures (Granqvist, Mikulincer, and Shaver 2010; McCarthy 2011; Schiller 1971).

Recent qualitative research has inquired into Christians' experiences of iconography originating in Latin and Byzantine traditions (Lang, Stamatopoulou and Cupchik 2020; Toohey 2016). These inquiries provide insight into meaning-making processes in response to icons (e.g., salience of attachment relationships *versus* religious symbolic meanings). One study has been published that reports Greek participants' scale responses to icon stimuli to enrich a description of the phenomenology of the sublime (Stamatopoulou, Lang, and Cupchik 2019). The figures portrayed in icons represent closeness to the Divine, but they are also significant persons in scripture and history (McCarthy 2011; Schiller 1971). It is not surprising that Orthodox Christian samples reported being *in relationship to* saints portrayed in icons as well as a sense of *belonging* in their presence (Lang, Stamatopoulou, and Cupchik 2020). Representation of the Coptic Christian community and their aesthetic tradition in the psychology of religion is lacking. There have been no studies describing qualities of Copts' relationships to the saints portrayed in icons, including factors influencing the relationship as well as the strength of the bond.

Attachment

Attachment security (Bowlby 1988) is implicated at three levels in such a study: (a) identification with one's cultural-religious identity may vary in its security; (b) a believed relationship to a spiritual figure (e.g. God) may be analogous to an attachment relationship to a close other; and (c) the experience of visual art-

works depicting persons and social scenes may evoke projections that are coloured by one's global attachment security, their relationship to the cultural-religious identity, or to the Divine (Stamatopoulou, Lang, and Cupchik 2019).

Attachment is an increasingly popular construct applied to relationships beyond its parent-child origins, reaching into a subject's "attachment" to a god-image ("image" is understood, in the psychodynamic sense, as one's personal concept of the transcendent; Cassidy and Shaver 2018). Attachment theory has been utilized to conceptualize relations between religiosity, interpersonal functioning, and cultural/ethnic identity (Kirkpatrick 1997; Kirkpatrick and Shaver 1990). The focus of much of this literature has been the extent to which attachment to a personal God mirrors other relationships (Kirkpatrick and Shaver 1990; TenElshof and Furrow 2000). Studies suggest a link between attachment tendencies and religious beliefs and behaviours.

Three *behavioural hallmarks* of attachment relationships include: seeking proximity, experiencing anxiety when separated, and providing a safe haven, comfort and protection (Ainsworth 1985). Kirkpatrick (2005) argued for the presence of these behavioural hallmarks in ties to a personal God. This goes beyond an analogy between processes. Attachment to God was proposed to serve similar *functions* to personal (e.g., primary) attachment bonds, fulfilling similar needs. One may have a "personal relationship" with God (Gallup and Jones 1989) based on the "centrality of love" (James 1902), "availability" (Tamayo and Desjardins 1976), and "benevolence" (Gorsuch 1968). These qualities will be referred to as *centralities* throughout this paper. The loving relationship experienced by a Christian worshipper does not resemble a romantic one, but more closely approximates the prototypical parent-child attachment (James 1902). Parent characteristics of the transcendent are explicit in Christianity. Examples include: "gives comfort," "a warm-hearted refuge" (Tamayo and Desjardins 1976), is "comforting", "protecting", "always near", and "accessible" (Gorsuch 1968).

As for the behavioural hallmarks of attachment in the Christian context, *proximity* is maintained as God is believed to be omnipresent. Although physical proximity is not possible, religious participation provides means to render the feeling of proximity possible. For instance, one may sing, "God is near to whomever needs him," and visit the house of God (church), to rest in His presence. Prayer, "the most often practiced form of religiosity" (Trier and Shupe 1991, p. 354), is a means of attaining closeness to God (Granqvist and Kirkpatrick 2008).

Subjects resist *separation* from their attachment figure. Separation from God, characterized by anxiety (lack) and grief (loss), is described as torturous (Granqvist, Mikulincer, and Shaver 2010), and such language permeates Roman Catholic poetry on the soul's *dark night* (Mother Teresa 2007).

The *safe haven* hallmark refers to the tendency to seek attachment figures when faced with any of a class of situations activating the attachment system (e.g., illness, injury, frightening stimuli, separation, or loss; Hood Jr. et al. 1996). Likewise, believers turn to God when they face hardship and distress (Granqvist, Mikulincer, and Shaver 2010), or pray in response to threatening events (Argyle and

Beit-Hallahmi 1975). God is not only their safe haven equivalent to a parent but also an eternally strong and wise "secure base," granted belief in His omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence. If a worshipper's relationship with God qualifies as an attachment relationship, then there may also be degrees of security and insecurity.

Among models proposed to conceptualize the God-attachment dynamic, the *correspondence* and *compensatory hypotheses* are prominent (Granqvist, Mikulincer, and Shaver 2010; McDonald et al. 2005). The correspondence hypothesis postulates that a subject possesses a global attachment tendency that is consistent across relationships (trait-oriented model), whereas the compensatory hypothesis poses that relative security in some relationships exists to counteract for other, relatively insecure attachments (process-oriented model). There is mounting evidence in support of the former (McDonald et al. 2005), and Hall and colleagues (2009) identified that one ought to bear in mind that attachment dynamics (and their correspondence among relationships) operate at the *implicit* level and may have little to do with explicit religiosity.

Secure attachment in current relationships has been found to be associated with relatively stable and emotionally close God-attachments (Hall and Edwards 2002). Secure attachment has also been associated with a positive view of God and greater religiosity (Kirkpatrick and Shaver 1992). A study by Merck and Johnson (1995) found that retrospective reports of secure attachments among Orthodox Christians were associated with higher levels of religious belief. Similarly, studies exploring anxious attachment tendencies in romantic relationships revealed correspondent anxious God-attachments. Avoidant attachment has also predicted lower levels of religiosity (Kirkpatrick 2005). The present study advances this line of research investigating the possibility of correspondence among global attachment tendencies and God-attachment in the rarely studied Coptic diaspora.

Imagination

Imaginative processes are at play in both icon creation and perception. Adherents to various denominations differ in their theological imaginations. Denominations have distinct aesthetic sensibilities, creative practices, and languages of signifiers through which scriptural stories and doctrine are communicated. Christians, early and modern, have acknowledged the importance of imagination in apprehending the *Logos.* Allegory is a clear example, though perhaps even more explicitly, Ignatius Loyola (trans. 2015) advised the faithful to engage in *imaginative prayer*—a practice that involves imagining oneself situated in a scene, such as the foot of the Cross, in vivid detail, empathetically engaged and in search of grace.

In the present study, it was important to take into account the potential role of *imaginativeness* in relationships to culture, religious beliefs and behaviours, and how individuals experience artworks (Rudowicz 2003). The construct of imagination used was based on a five-factor model developed by Feng and colleagues (2017). Among North American, German and Chinese samples, it was found that

rather than being a unitary faculty, imaginativeness may implicate engagement of expressive and instrumental processes, trait openness, past/future mindedness, and adherence to conventions. Individual and cultural differences were found in the extent to which adult survey respondents endorsed each dimension of imagination. The central dichotomy between expressive and instrumental processes is of most interest in the present study. *Expressive imagination* is defined as the propensity to reflect and detect poetic and figurative meanings, while *instrumental imagination* refers to the capacity to generate creative solutions to functional problems.

Imagination was deemed appropriate to explore at the trait level, because as with our inquiry into attachment correspondence, we did not presuppose any uniquely "religious" psychological process (e.g., a "religious emotion"). As Beit-Hallahmi (1986) proposed, "religion is not unique in terms of process, but rather in terms of content" (p. 1). That being said, we were also cautious not to psychologize or "explain away" spiritual experiences. We aimed to represent the Coptic community, spiritual leaders and parishioners through interviews and a collaborative approach to instrument development.

Research Questions

Our aim was fourfold: (a) explore experiences of culturally relevant visual artworks depicting persons and social scenes in a sample of Coptic Orthodox Christians (Copts) in Canada; (b) inquire into participants' relationships to their cultural and religious identities, nested in a bottom-up understanding of the significance of iconography to the community; (c) examine their relationships to spiritual figures; and (d) generate and test hypotheses concerning the roles of attachment, imagination, and religiosity, in experiences with sacred art. Coptic iconography was a prism for empirical engagement with the constructs of interest. Our sample was strategically selected for its ethno-religious art and limited representation in prior studies.

METHODS

Data collection, analysis, and results are presented in three parts. First, two interviews with a curator possessing expertise in the Coptic tradition was conducted to gather contextual data. Lived experience interviews with 15 members of Coptic Orthodox churches in Canada followed. Insights from the qualitative component were used to inform the proposed model of variables for inferential statistics applied to cross-sectional survey data from the community.

The researcher responsible for data collection spoke Arabic and English and had lived experience in the Coptic Egyptian context. She was a student at the time of the interviews and held graduate training in psychology at the time of writing. Two additional researchers based in Canada consulted and contributed to analysis and writing, one of whom had a background in psychotherapy, and the others held a faculty post in psychology. A fourth contributor was based at a university in Greece. These contributors came from Roman Catholic, Jewish, and Eastern Orthodox contexts, respectively.

Data Sources

Expert Interview

One female adult in Canada provided informed consent to participate in two audio/video-recorded interviews. The participant was employed as a curator at a Coptic museum in Canada, and interviews were conducted in English. The curator volunteered to participate after the interviewer contacted the museum.

Surveys and Home Interviews

The *Role of Icons in Coptic Culture* (RICC) is a pen-and-paper survey with items concerning religious beliefs and practices, the significance of icons in their lives, creative imagination, and attachment patterns in social relationships. A subsample of participants who completed the survey were purposively selected based on whether they were members of a Coptic community, possessed Arabic or English literacy, and a score on items constituting the *Attachment Patterns in Social Relationships Questionnaire* (Stamatopoulou, Lang, and Cupchik 2019) that placed them within the range of a *secure* global attachment tendency. They were invited to partake in interviews in their homes regarding icons.

The contents of the survey completed by Coptic Orthodox Christians age 16 and older were as follows:

Religiosity and Icon Theology Questionnaire. This component of the RICC was comprised of four items exploring the importance of icons and religious practices in Coptic Christians' lives. It utilized 7-point Likert type items which were modified from items found in the *Centrality of Religiosity Scale* (Huber and Huber 2012) to be tailored to icon theology.

Icon Importance Questionnaire. These 14 items of the RICC utilized 7-point Likert-type items and explored three aspects of the Coptic Orthodox religion: *Personal icon meaning* (items 5-10), *Icon potency* (items 15-19), and *Icon knowledge* (items 11-14). Items 5-8, were based on the private practice dimension of the CRS (Huber and Huber 2012). The remaining 10 (items 9-19) were rationally constructed in consultation with four priests.

Imagination Questionnaire. This questionnaire utilized the same 10 items as the validated *Self-Descriptive Imagination Scale* (Feng et al. 2017) with modified 7-point Likert response options (i.e., entirely not me – entirely me). This involved items related to creative activities, abilities, and ways of imagining the self (Stamatopoulou, Lang, and Cupchik 2019). A central contrast was between expressive and instrumental dimensions of imagination. Items relevant to *instrumental imagination* probe the ability to think outside the box in terms of functional problems. The complementary *expressive* dimension explores immersive attitudes (i.e., creating fictional narratives and imaginary worlds) in both childhood and adulthood (Cupchik and Gignac 2007). The expressive dimension is also intrinsically motivated and person-centered, reflecting the richness of interior life. One item was taken from the *conventionality* factor, while another reflected *openness* to variations.

Attachment Patterns in Social Relationships Questionnaire. This short questionnaire was composed of eight items on 7-point Likert scales (Stamatopoulou, Lang, and Cupchik 2019). Items were designed with reference to Bowlby's taxonomy of adult attachment styles (1988). Likert-type questions (ranging from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 7 = "strongly agree") inquired into experiences in close relationships across the lifespan that may be implicated in current attitudes towards intimacy. Four dimensions of attachment security were considered in rational item construction: (a) *Primary anxiety,* or experiences with parents/caregivers related to trust and abandonment; (b) *Primary avoidance,* or experiences with parents/caregivers related to dependence; (c) *Global anxiety*, or attitudes towards relational trust and abandonment; and (d) *Global avoidance,* or attitudes towards relational dependence.

Data Collection

Dialogues with the Curator

Both interviews were conducted in the museum and audio/video-recorded using an iPhone camera to minimize recall bias. The first was 20 minutes in duration and unstructured. The curator spoke freely to the interviewer on the theme of iconography and presented artefacts relevant to the content of the discussion. The second interview followed a structured approach whereby the curator was asked a set of predetermined questions. Audio recordings were manually transcribed by one researcher.

Survey Administration and Home Visits

Eligible participants had parents or grandparents born into the Coptic Egyptian culture and were practicing the faith. Prospective participants were excluded if they were <16 years of age or were converts to the faith to maximize homogeneity for analysis. Prior to survey administration, a copy was given to the priests of three churches for approval. Paper copies of the survey were presented to parishioners during open hours at each church. Participants were provided verbal consent to take part in a study and complete a 10 min survey (RICC).

Visiting 15 eligible parishioners' homes for interviews, the researcher dialogued in participants' mother tongue, Arabic. Participants were invited to select three icons in their home to speak about, and digital images of the icons were captured with permission. Interview prompts tapped into detailed encounters and aspects of the relationship with the spiritual figures represented in the chosen icons. Field notes and in-the-moment transcriptions of discourse were used to avert potential anxiety arising from audio/video-recording during home visits.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Historical and Theological Importance of Coptic Icons

As a single case report, a narrative summary— *restorying* of discourse (Creswell 2007)—was generated from the transcript of the two curator interviews. This

was discussed with two other researchers. The account of the curator permitted representation of art historical and theological perspectives on iconography in the Coptic Orthodox Church, whereas community interviews and the survey focused on aesthetic and relational experiences.

The curator discussed functional contrasts between icons found in churches and those in homes. The former are consecrated and represent narrative moments, and the latter tend to deviate from traditional characteristics and have personal significance to (or a relationship *with,* by way of intercession) an owner. Traditional Coptic icons that are physically located in houses of worship and narrative stories utilize a fixed colour pallet, are always drawn on wood, and have some likeness to the Byzantine style. Conversely, icons found in homes may not have these characteristics. The participant reported that icons are central to Coptic lives, present in Coptic homes, and are usually bought or gifted by family and friends.

The participant reported that "we write icons because they have to reflect the dogma and doctrines of the church and the biblical stories and stories of the martyrs." They are not considered paintings: "painting is the technique," the skill required to articulate the symbolic meaning. It is analogous to the alphabet and grammar in that the signifiers are necessary for writing a text but not the essence of the text itself. The participant reported to conceptualize of painting as a skill to "write" icons and tell the story of belief.

The interviewer was introduced to a special exhibition of 21st century icons by Victor A. Fakhoury, a student of Isaac Fanous, father of Neo-Coptic iconography, evoking dialogue about the cultural significance of icons. Fakhoury has written Coptic icons in Egypt and Ottawa, Canada. Commemorating the revolution of January 25, 2011, Fakhoury reportedly wanted to contribute to the culture through his way of communicating: icons. The first contemporary icon shown was entitled, "Blessed is Egypt My People," one of many icons given Biblical titles (not created by the artist). Here, the curator walked through the story of the art-object, interpreting that the artist uses an ancient Egyptian boat to symbolize the state of the church, and Copts in the 21st century are sailing, prayerfully *ad orientum* in waiting for Judgment. The curator noted that the ship is a recurrent image for Fakhoury, reinforcing that Copts are descendants of historical Egyptians, firmly locating the church culturally in light of religious extremism in the country. These icons are timeless: no date. The icon speaks for itself. Yet, significant dates appear for the sake of cultural memory. The crescent appears as a symbol of political Islam in the region. The participant identified to the interviewer that there were 25 crescents to signify January 25. "I could spend more than an hour on this," the curator reported, pointing to an icon referencing the martyrs of Maspero. Twenty-four (24) Copts were killed in a demonstration against church destruction in Egypt in 2011 and, as expressed by the participant, in defense of their right to worship freely. This had a particular impact on the cultural narrative of the Copts as resisting an oppressive force. Ancient Egyptian and Christian symbols were interwoven in the icon, and three Biblical passages were used as a symbolic foundation to write the icon. These included Isaiah 49:16, which the participant paraphrased:

"I have inscribed you on the palm of my hand," singling out a representation of a papyrus covered with the blood of the martyrs. A ship (the church) is in the palm of the hand of God, and the curator referred to Christ's stigmata in thematic connection to the blood of the martyrs.

The participant also discussed Zachariah 2:7 in the context of this icon, stating "the Lord of hosts, He sent me after glory to the nations which plunder you, but he who touches the apple of my eye touches me." In the icon is the eye of God with a tear encircled by nine crescents—October 9, the date of the Maspero Massacre. Fakhoury's third Biblical passage beneath the icon was Malachi 4:2, "but to you who fear My name, the sun of rightness shall arise with healing wings." The participant thematically linked this to the ancient Egyptian symbol of the eagle in the art-object, pointing to the Coptic cross in its middle a symbol of spiritual protection. "Of course, gold in iconography is the light of God," stated the curator. In Coptic icons, every colour has meaning. Light emanates from the top of the image onto the martyrs, from a representation of the Coptic cathedral in Cairo. Two angels hold the halos which the martyrs will receive in heaven. Archangel Michael holding two palm branches is written in the icon as well, because he is believed to receive the righteous in heaven. Palms in Christian tradition are a symbol of victory of over death.

The participant continued on with symbolic interpretations of Sts. George and Mark as well as the Lamb of God, associating stories of Coptic resilience with the lives of saints and events in Revelation. He described episodes of violence against Copts, including an attack against women and girls by an individual who had thrown a bomb into a church in Cairo around the season of Nativity in the liturgical calendar. She described having been moved by the icons, reporting that all in the Coptic community have either direct or indirect connections to victims of attacks. Messages of peace were described as challenging given this reality, but iconography grants access to the promises of love and protection from God for this community.

Two expert interviews on historical and theological perspectives on icons relevant to the community revealed three themes. They served to fulfill our objective to build a bottom-up contextual understanding. First, iconography was conceptualized as central to Coptic public worship and private prayer. Secondly, icons may be categorized by location, and these categories of artworks tend to have aesthetic and functional differences. I.e., there are narrative-oriented traditional church icons *versus* less traditional home icons loaded with personal meaning. Thirdly, iconography is a living tradition that writes two stories: the Coptic ethno-religious story and the religious story (Bible and lives of saints), in the symbolic language of visual art.

Iconography in the Lives of Copts

Transcripts and noted observations from home interviews were subject to a manual inductive coding process whereby the interviewing researcher identified common *themes* across texts based on particular occurrences (Creswell 2007). An initial proposed coding scheme was refined through individual consensus meetings

with two other researchers. Horizontal analysis was conducted with special attention to qualities of experiences in relation to icons. Experiential categories considered included: physical characteristics of the icon (materiality and aesthetics), the environment (spatiality), evocative qualities and how their relation to a particular icon may have evolved over time (temporality; Cupchik and Hilscher 2008). Thus, the approach was informed by phenomenological method (Creswell 2007). Each dimension provided a vantage point into participants' constructions of meaning. In this approach, representation of diverse experiences takes precedence (Tobin and Begley 2004), so aggregated findings (recurrent themes) are reported qualitatively.

Fifteen (15) members from five Coptic churches provided informed consent and participated in transcribed semi-structured interviews. All Copts described themselves as religious, attended church regularly, participated in rituals, and valued their relationship to God. They reported having a minimum of four Coptic icons in their homes. At least one of these was connected to a personally meaningful experience, and this experience was almost always accompanied with emotional language. Icons were understood to have the potential to reawaken the emotional charge that accompanied the memory of the meaningful episode.

Four themes emerged in horizontal analysis: (1) physical space, (2) narrative significance, (3) relational qualities, and (4) personal ritual. Several narratives involved answered prayers, and icons were utilized as projective devices.

Physical Space

Participants preferred to maintain proximity to their icons. Most icons were located either in the living room or bedroom. Icons were also carried in other personal belongings (e.g., wallet). All participants highlighted that the locations were strategically chosen to allow for "frequent gazing at the icons" during activities of daily living and "to feel emotionally close" to the spiritual figures. An icon is an "essential object of the home," reported one participant, referring to its sacredness, like most in the sample. Its presence was considered essential, and its absence, unusual. Participants mentioned that if the icon was removed from their home, they would feel "weird and upset." "I know they are watching over my home," reported one participant. Here, the mere presence of an icon provides "protection," "comfort," and security—a belief that, at minimum, denotes symbolic significance of a treasured object, or otherwise may indicate supernatural beliefs (Lang, Körner, and Körner 2023). Other participants described that a home without an icon is "unbearable." For these Copts, the icon is an image of a family member.

Fourteen of fifteen homes visited contained a sanctuary in the bedroom or living room. Home sanctuaries, or spiritual corners, held over 10 icons, and according to one participant, they "allow for full immersion in prayer." When asked how sanctuaries were created, participants described having slowly built it by adding one icon at a time: "The more saints I learn, the more I would add." Sanctuaries contained a diverse collection of saint images, but icons of God and Saint Mary were consistently present in each of the 15 homes. Oftentimes, icons of God and Saint Mary were larger than the other icons. They were also placed in the centre with other icons of saints surrounding them. This aesthetic choice is intended to

show that the saints are venerating God, Who is always in the centre. This mirrors Coptic church architecture where the central alter contains the dwelling of Christ enthroned with His Apostles surrounding Him.

Narrative Significance

All participants described experiencing a miracle or spiritual encounter (meaningful episode) from the saint represented in their home icons. Participants justified their choice of icon through these episodes. Many turned to these saints in times of need (safe haven). Their enduring relationships to the figures "written" in the icons were described as "healing," "mentoring," "comforting," "miraculous," and "protective." Three subcategories of narratives emerged from thematic reflection on texts: *reassurance*, *triumph*, and *resolution*.

Narratives of reassurance included episodes that reminded the individual that they are "heard," "protected," "watched over," and "safe." Participants reached out to saints in the icons for protection. This involved intercessory prayer or merely carrying the icon on their person (e.g., wallet or cellular phone case). The following is an exemplar (translated from Arabic to English) of a narrative of reassurance:

> I asked St. Mary to intercede on my behalf for a baby boy, because I really wanted one. The same day when went I went home, I went into the balcony, and oddly enough I found a letter on the floor. This has never happened to me before to find anything on my balcony. The letter was folded in four, and without opening it, you can directly read text on it. It was Psalm 20 right on it. It was insane that I got my response this way loud and clear that the St. Mary and the Lord have heard me. A year later, I was pregnant with a baby boy.

This participant reached out to St. Mary in the icon knowing that they can trust the saint to deliver an answer. However, for Copts, receiving an "answer" is not always what reinforces their behaviour to continue to ask for intercession. Participants reported to believe that having no answer may just mean it is "not the right time" for this specific request. "I don't think I rely in my relationship with them based on me having to have my prayers answered," reported one participant. "Most of your prior prayers are answered usually in a time you never thought, or a way you never thought," they continued, "You just know God hears your words."

Encounters with icons and the saints they portray went beyond the time spent in front of the art-object. For instance, one participant kept an icon of Pope Kirollos in his bedroom. One of his recounted significant memories was a dream with this saint. He dreamt that Pope Kirollos passed away in his home, and a couple of weeks later, his own father passed away the same day of the death of Pope Kirollos. The participant explained that this dream was reassuring him that Pope Kirollos took his father up in heaven with him. This provided peace and "strengthened the relationship" to the saint and icon.

Some narratives had a distinctly triumphant tone. In this subcategory of coded narratives, prayers recounted were considered "answered" by the narrators through a "miracle." Some narrative examples included: "praying to Father Faltaos that the

tumour is benign," "praying to Saint Marina to bear a child," "asked Saint Kyrillos for a job," "received a new job after asking from archangel Michael," and asking "Father Steven to heal infection on my son's hand." These encounters were described as meaningful in the participant's life narrative. As one asserted, the miracle "will never be forgotten." Participants described feeling more closely connected to these saints in the icons when their prayers were answered. In one text coded as a triumph narrative, a participant asked for her son to be healed from an infection, and indeed, he regained his health. In another case, a participant's car containing an icon of Pope Kirollos was reportedly stolen and remained lost after 20 days. The participant was at a physician's appointment when he noticed another icon of his intercessor, Pope Kirollos. He asked and received:

Why did you let the car get stolen with your picture in it? I noticed that the hands in the picture moved as if to say, 'I will drive the car back to you.' The next morning, someone came knocking at the door and told us that they found our car! From that day on my relationship with Pope Kirollos has never been stronger. I love him!

Finally, narratives coded to the resolution subtype included participants' recollections of having asked for help without waiting for a miracle or specific answer. For example, a participant prayed to the Virgin Mary to name her son. She then went to church and overheard a priest asking a parishioner to whom the prayer was going. The parishioner answered, "my beloved George." The participant took this as a sign from Mary that she loves the name, George, and the participant named her son accordingly chosen by Mary.

Relational Qualities

The relationship between the beholder and saint was described as "powerful," "loving," and "a blessing." Icons also served as a "starting point" for prayer, cathartic venting, and contemplation. Participants described that when looking upon the icons, they would empathetically identify with the human struggle of the spiritual figure, easing their attitudes towards challenges in their lives. Home icons were also described as reminders and sources of inspiration. The beholder is reminded of "the saint's life narrative," "the miracle that they encountered with that saint," and of "Jesus sacrificing His life for us on the cross." Some were reminded of theological precepts, with one stating that "God is our heavenly Father, who doesn't ever lose sight of his children," and another reminded of "God's abundant and unconditional love."

Personal Ritual

The personal ritual theme included coded texts referring to a set of behaviours that the narrator usually enacts when communicating to the icon. These behaviours reportedly serve the purpose to venerate or feel a more intense personal connection with the spiritual figure portrayed. For instance, upon entering her sanctuary, one participant always said "good morning" to all the saints by their names, and also "goodnight" before bed. Prior to any travel, one participant touched an icon hang-

ing in his car, then placed his hand on his mouth to receive the blessing and made the sign of the cross. These rituals were described as integral to life. “I always do this,” said one Copt.

Toward a Model of Variables

Interviews explored theological and interpersonal meanings of iconography within the community of Coptic diaspora in Canada. The art historical and theological standpoint was represented through expert interviews with a museum curator. This revealed an interweaving of ethnic and spiritual histories and a dual function of the icon in public and private prayer lives. From the lived experience/interpersonal standpoint, interviews with Copts in their homes explored personal relationships to icons among community members. That phase of the study revealed themes related to physical space, life narrative, and communication with the saints, concerning protection, clarity in decision-making, and miracles. The literature and qualitative component of the study made clear that icons are an appropriate means of tapping into Copts’ relationships with God and other spiritual figures. In light of the research thus far, we hypothesized the following in analysis of survey data:

1. Greater religiosity will predict stronger subjective importance of iconography. Religiosity is defined for our purposes as belief and engagement in regulated practice (public or private), and the measure was tailored to this cultural context in which icons play a role in theology.
2. Global attachment security will be positively associated with religiosity and subjective icon importance ratings denoting security in religious beliefs and identity.
3. Global attachment security will be positively associated with ratings of icon personal significance or meaning, potency, and knowledge, which suggest a measure of the strength of “attachment” to the spiritual figures represented.
4. Lower global attachment security will predict stronger reported expressions of trait expressive imagination.

Treatment of Survey Data

Principal components analyses (PCA) were performed on survey data. Pearson product-moment correlations were conducted using factor scores to screen for relationships among variables. A two-way ANOVA with gender and age as independent variables and factors from PCA as dependent variables was then conducted.

Sample Composition

Eighty-eight (88) RICC surveys were administered (37 males, 43 females). Participants ranged from 16 to 75 years old (M = 32 years). Participants reported Coptic Egyptian Orthodox heritage and practiced the faith.

Principal Components Analyses (PCA)

Religiosity and Icon Theology Questionnaire. PCA with varimax rotation was conducted (N = 88). One factor with an Eigenvalue greater than 1.00 accounted for 60.55% of the variance was derived. Factor 1 was labelled subjective *Icon importance and religious practice*. Items with loadings .50 or greater were: how important are icons in your spiritual life (.87), how important is it for you to communicate with icons in times of need (.80), how important is it for you to go to church regularly (.74), and how important is it for you to pray at home regularly (.69).

Table 1
Principal Components Analysis (PCA) of the Religiosity and Icon Theology Questionnaire

Factors and Eigenvalues	Item	Loadings
Importance of icons and religious practice 2.42	(3) Importance of icons in your spiritual life	.87
	(4) Importance of communicating with icons in times of need	.80
	(1) Importance of going to church regularly	.74
	(2) Importance of regularly praying at home	.69

Icon Importance Questionnaire. In the first analysis, three factors with Eigenvalues greater than 1.00 accounting for 68.44% of the variance were extracted. Item 13, "Icons have a symbolic meaning to me," was removed due to cross-loading (Jamali, Ayatollahi, and Jafari 2018). In the second analysis, three factors with Eigenvalues greater than 1.00 and accounted for 67.64% of the variance were derived. The three factors were: (2a) Personal icon meaning, (2b) Icon potency, and (2c) Icon knowledge.

Factor 2a, *Personal icon meaning*, accounted for 27.21% of the variance. Items with loadings .50 or greater were: Icons often remind me of personal life events (.79), I feel moved by some icons (.76), The placement of the icons in the home has special meaning (.73), Icons often remind me of personal miracles encountered with the saints depicted in them (.72), I receive strength when looking at the icons (.72), Every icon has a specific meaning and history in my life (.67). Factor 2a was interpreted as an evaluation of the personal and emotional signficance of icons in participants' lives.

Factor 2b, *Icon potency*, accounted for 24.46% of the variance. The items with loadings .50 or greater were: Icons received as gifts often have a special place in my heart because they remind me of the individual who gave them to me (.78), I often feel that a particular problem was resolved after reaching out for help from a saint on an icon (.77), I often reach out to the saints depicted on icons to guide me in difficult decisions (.73), Having an icon in my home provides me with peace,

knowing that my house is being watched over by the individual(s) depicted on the icons (.70), Icons represent the actual presence of the individuals they depict (.59). Factor 2b constitutes an assessment of the strength of participants' relationships with icons.

Factor 2c, *Icon knowledge*, accounted for 15.97% of the variance. Items with loadings .50 or greater were: The painters of icons used specific colours to depict Jesus or the saints in the icons (.81), Icons play a very important role in the church's theology and architecture (.68), Give reverence to the icons, due to their sacredness (.52). Factor 2c assesses degree of knowledge of the icon's importance in church theology.

Table 2

PCA of the Icon Importance Questionnaire

Factors and Eigenvalues	Item	Loadings
(1) Personal icon meaning 3.81	(5) Icons often remind me of personal life events	.79
	(7) I feel moved by some icons	.76
	(9) The placement of the icons in the home has special meaning	.73
	(6) Icons remind me of personal miracles encountered with the saints depicted in them	.72
	(8) I receive strength when looking at the icons	.72
	(10) Every icon has a specific meaning and history in my life	.67
(2) Icon potency 3.43	(19) Gifted icons have a special place in my heart because they remind me of the individual who gave them to me	.78
	(18) I feel that problems were resolved after reaching out for help from a saint on an icon	.77
	(17) I reach out to the saints depicted on icons to guide me in difficult decisions	.73
	(16) Icons in my home provide me with peace and safety knowing that my house is being watched by the saints in the icons	.70
	(15) Icons represent the presence of the individuals they depict	.59
(3) Icon knowledge 2.24	(12) The painters of icons used specific colours to depict Jesus or the saints in the icons.	.81
	(11) Icons are important in the church's theology and architecture	.68
	(14) Give reverence to the icons, due to their sacredness	.52

Imagination Questionnaire. PCA with varimax rotation was conducted on the Imagination items (*N*=86). Two participants were removed from the Imagination and Social Relationships datasets due to missing data.

In the first analysis, there were three factors with Eigenvalues greater than 1.00 accounting for 53.79% of the variance. Items 1, "I like to take seemingly unrelated elements (characters, objects, ideas) and put them together in a story," and 5, "Following traditions and conventions is very important to me," were removed from the analysis after restricting loadings to .50 and above.

In the second analysis, there were three factors with Eigenvalues greater than 1.00 and accounted for 60.83% of the variance. Item 6, "Sometimes I act, role play or pretend to be someone else for fun," was removed due to cross-loading, and item 7, "I am not worried about being wrong when I imagine solutions to problems," was removed, because it was the only item loading onto a third factor (3c). In the final analysis, two factors with Eigenvalues greater than 1.00 were derived and accounted for 55.60% of the variance. The factors were labelled: (3a) Expressive Imagination and (3b) Instrumental Imagination.

Factor 3a, *Expressive imagination*, accounted for 29.60% of the variance. The items with loadings .50 or greater included: When I was a child, I sometimes created imaginary worlds involving myself or others (.90), Sometimes I become so immersed in a fictional world (i.e., novel, movie, video game) that it feels as if I were there (.79), I often have vivid and interesting dreams in colour (.58). This replicates the factor from Feng et al. (2017) interpreted as tapping into the expressive imagination construct, or tendency towards immersion in fantasy and perceive metaphor and symbol.

Factor 3b, *Instrumental imagination*, accounted for 26.00% of the variance. Items with loadings .50 or greater were: From a young age, I have been interested in figuring out how things work, even if it was not necessary to do so (.76), I like to discern patterns or structures in things or events (.66), I can quickly pick up on connections between things, even if they are not explicitly explained or demonstrated to me (.62). This replicates the factor from Feng et al. (2017) of the same name, evaluating creative problem-solving tendencies.

Table 3

PCA of the Imagination Questionnaire

Factors and eigenvalues	Item	Loadings
(1) Expressive imagination 1.78	(2) As a child, I created imaginary worlds involving myself or others	.90
	(9) Sometimes I become so immersed in a fictional world that it feels as if I were there	.79
	(3) I often have vivid and interesting dreams in colour	.58

(2) Instrumental imagination 1.56	(8) From a young age, I loved figuring out how things work	.76
	(10) I like to discern patterns or structures in things or events	.66
	(4) I can quickly pick up on connections between things, even if they are not explicitly explained	.62

Attachment Patterns in Social Relationships Questionnaire

PCA with varimax rotation was also conducted these data (*N*=86). In the first analysis, three factors with Eigenvalues greater than 1.00 and accounted for 59.86% of the total variance were extracted. Item 6, "I find it difficult to trust that people are really there for me," was removed as it was the only item loading onto a third factor (4c).

In the final analysis, two factors emerged with Eigenvalues greater than 1.00, explaining 52.87% of the variance. The factors were: (4a) Insecure and (4b) Secure.

Factor 4a, *Insecure*, accounted for 30.41% of the variance. Items with loadings .50 or greater included: My parents/guardians often prioritize themselves (.80), life in my childhood home was unpredictable (.75), Other people are indifferent to my life (.65), and as a child, my mother/caregiver gave me love and support when I needed it (-.60). This factor captures self-reports of lower attachment security in relationships to parents or caregivers (primary) and overall (global attachment tendencies).

Factor 4b, *Secure*, accounted for 22.46% of the variance. Items with loadings .50 or greater were: Opening up to others when something bothers me is helpful (.82), It is important that other people like me (.67), As a child, my parents/guardians let me explore and take risks (.66). Similarly, items loaded onto Factor 4b represent a constellation of both primary and global attachment tendencies. In this case, agreement responses reflect relative security in relationships with parents/primary caregivers and with close others more broadly.

Table 4

PCA of the Attachment Patterns in Social Relationships Questionnaire

Factors and eigenvalues	Item	Loadings
(1) Insecure 2.13	(7) My parents/guardians often prioritized themselves	.80
	(8) Life in my childhood home was unpredictable	.75
	(2) Other people are indifferent to my life	.65
	(3) As a child, my mother/caregiver gave me love and support when I needed it	-.60

(2) Secure 1.57	(1) I open up to others when something is bothering me	.73
	(4) It is important that other people like me	.67
	(5) As a child, my parents/guardians let me explore and take risks	.66

Correlations

Five significant correlations were found. Scores concerning *Icon importance and religious practices* (Factor 1), were positively correlated with *Personal icon meaning* (Factor 2a), $r = .55$, $p < .01$, and *Icon potency* (Factor 2b), $r = .50$, $p < .01$. In other words, more involvement in the Coptic religion (including going to church, praying, and communicating with spiritual figures depicted in icons), predicted reports of miraculous and other significant personal experiences with icons.

Secure attachment patterns (Factor 4b) were also positively correlated with Subjective icon importance and religiosity (Factor 1), $r = .25$, $p < .05$. In other words, relational security in general and with primary attachments predicted intensity and potentially security in Copts' relationships with God, spiritual figures, and the religious community, characterized by more prayer, church attendance, and deeper relationships with icons.

In contrast, an *Insecure* attachment pattern (Factor 4a), was negatively associated with *Icon knowledge* (Factor 2c), $r = -.28$, $p < .05$. Furthermore, *Insecure* social relationships was positively correlated with *Expressive imagination* (Factor 3a), $r = .31$, $p < .01$. That is, the more insecure the attachments, the more superficial the knowledge of icons, and the greater the tendency toward immersion in fantasy ("[..] I sometimes created imaginary worlds involving myself or others […]").

Two-Way Analysis of Variance

A 2x2 Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was also performed with *Age* and *Gender* reports as independent variables with the eight derived RICC questionnaire factors as dependent variables (*Importance of icons and religious practice, Personal icon meaning, Icon potency, Icon knowledge, Expressive imagination, Instrumental imagination, Secure and Insecure attachment*). Six participants were removed due to missing age and/or gender data ($N = 80$). Age was stratified into two groups: participants below age 30 and those 30 and above; gender reports were binary (M and F). Two main effects for *Age* and one interaction effect between *Age* and *Gender* were observed.

The first main effect for *Age* was found in *Importance of icons and religious practice*. The majority of subjects below 30 ($M = -.31$, $SD = 1.08$, $N = 45$) scored on the lower bound of the public and private religious practice, compared to subjects 30 and above ($M = .36$, $SD = .79$, $N = 35$), $F(1, 79) = 9.34$, $p < .01$, who scored higher on the upper bound. In other words, young Egyptian Coptic diaspora in the study did not practice their faith as much as their elders. The second was

found in *Personal icon meaning*. Subjects below 30 (M = -.35, SD = 1.02, N = 45) scored much lower compared to subjects 30 and above (M = .44, SD = .80, N = 35), $F(1, 79) = 13.18$, $p < .01$.

An interaction effect for *Age* and *Gender* was found in the *Secure* factor, $F(1, 79) = 4.41$, $p < .05$. Males below 30 (M = -.37, SD = .92, N = 19) were less secure in social relationships compared to males 30 and above (M = .47, SD = .93, N = 18).

DISCUSSION

This study allowed exploration of contexts and experiences with Coptic icons art. The research examined, qualitatively and quantitatively, participants' relationships to spiritual figures "written" in the icons (Christ and saints). Finally, we generated and tested hypotheses on which to develop theory in the psychology of religion (religiosity and art) and personality (attachment and imagination). In keeping with the correspondence hypothesis, this illuminated roles of attachment tendencies in religiosity and experiences with sacred art. Evidence sources triangulated (Tobin and Begley 2004) to form a holistic impression of the significance of icons in this community. The study opens the door to replication with larger samples and a conceptual model informed by these preliminary findings.

Expert interviews revealed contrasts on the theme of scene *versus* symbol: personal relationships to saints portrayed in unconventional home icons *versus* Byzantine-inspired traditional church icons, art-objects fit for private prayer *versus* public practice, and events in the ethno-religious story *together with* themes from scripture in the contemporary Coptic imagination. These are in keeping with the emerging literature on the dual role of Christian art as projective devices—I.e., portrayals of social scenes on which social meanings are perceived—as well as symbolic expressions or points of contact to transcendent concepts (Lang, Stamatopoulou, and Cupchik 2020). Home interviews conducted in a Coptic community revealed just how central icons were to the prayer lives of a securely attached subsample of participants, whether through their incidental presence in synchronistic moments appraised as spiritually significant or miraculous, carrying icons for protection, asking and receiving answers in prayer, or otherwise communicating in *relationship* to God or the saints portrayed. Personal icons reportedly possessed the capacity to reawaken the emotional charge of a personally meaningful life episode, which is coherent with published findings on personally meaningful objects (heirlooms, souvenirs, etc.) and the life narrative (Lang and Cupchik 2021).

Although PCA was used on the questionnaires, scale scores should be interpreted with caution given the low sample size. Our goal was to lay the groundwork for further research, not to develop instruments; for more robust samples would be needed, and this was not possible with the community under study. Furthermore, further interview studies would benefit from a comparison group of individuals scoring below the cutoff for secure attachment. Data collection and analysis was also conducted by the same researcher (consulting with the others). Lived experience interviews were transcribed in the moment with field notes rather than audio-

recorded, and this also leaves room for bias. This was chosen in hopes of avoiding social desirability biases and inducing a more natural setting for the participants to share their experiences and icons, thought it reduces replicability. At times, participants spoke in a mix of Arabic and English, and certain words were inevitably missed. For future studies, it is recommended to use a typed format for narratives.

Analysis of cross-sectional survey responses demonstrated that the more religious the Coptic individual, the stronger and more meaningful was their relationship with the spiritual figures in the icons. This was reinforced in the qualitative analysis, where Copts not only reported higher levels of icon meaning and potency and but also described pronounced and meaningful relationships with the spiritual figures in icons. Examples included having over 10 icons in close proximity and having a home sanctuary.

The study explored whether the general attachment pattern of Copts would mirror their relationship with spiritual figures and God. We inquired into whether Copts reporting in a manner indicating secure attachment tendencies would demonstrate intense and enduring connections to God, the saints, and the church. Indeed, results supported the hypothesis, and this is a contribution to the God-attachment literature. Participants reported to seek God and other spiritual figures in times of need through regular prayer and sought proximity through regular church attendance, which is in line with prior found associations between secure attachment and positive views of God and higher religiosity (Kirkpatrick Shaver 1992). Similarly did Merck and Johnson (1995) conclude that Orthodox Christians who reported secure attachment histories had higher levels of religious belief. Yet, contrary to our hypothesis of a negative correlation, insecure attachment did not predict religiosity. A negative correlation was, however, found between insecure attachment and icon knowledge.

Interviews with participants presenting with relatively secure attachment patterns described having "personal relationships" with spiritual figures represented in their home icons, seeking proximity, strategically placing them in common areas "to feel emotionally close" and allow for "frequent gazing" in daily life. Some of the subsample stated that the home would be "unbearable" without icons. God and saints were reported to be providers of comfort and protection (safe haven) as evidenced in participants' descriptions of personal "encounters" with spiritual figures. Participants frequently reached out for help and asked saints for intercession as they pursued a new job, prayed that a tumour to be non-cancerous, or for the healing of an infection. Copts reportedly believed their prayers were "heard," and miracles were unforgettable, leaving a lasting impact on their life narrative. Trust is implicated in the belief that spiritual figures are always available and hear their prayers for intercession. This is all predicated on a personal theology: the belief that God is benevolent, unconditionally loving, and that any intercessions made through spiritual figures reach God. Ratings of the personal significance, potency, and knowledge of icons were initially hypothesized to suggest an attachment-analogous attitude to spiritual figures in icons. These scores were correlated with those on the attachment measure, which, in the new factor solution, included security in both primary and global attachment patterns. There was insufficient quantitative evidence to support the hypothesis.

A possible reason for discrepancy between themes in participants' discourse and quantitative results may be that the items constituting icon meaning, potency, and knowledge factors did not adequately capture felt experiences of closeness to Christ, the God-Man, and the saints written in their icons through specific encounters and miracles. The centrality of *encounters,* or episodes that enhanced the *resonance* of the icon, was a core finding of the qualitative component.

A novel insight from this study is the interplay between attachment and imaginative disposition among believers. As hypothesized, insecure attachment was found a positive predictor of expressive imagination. Individuals responding with insecure attachments tended to be less engrained in their faith. This was marked by little knowledge of iconology. These participants may be understood to more likely immerse themselves in expressive imagination as a means to make sense of their experiences as opposed to leaning on conceptual, traditional knowledge. The weaker the primary attachment bond (i.e., childhood was unpredictable, parents prioritized themselves and rarely provided love and support, also marked by global interpersonal indifference), the less the individual would come to identify with the Coptic Egyptian culture and faith in adulthood, and the more he or she would report a tendency to retreat into fantasy. This has implications for ministry, because young adult believers with historically negative experiences in their home lives may find safety and meaning in the creative, expressive domain, which is more compatible with contemplative spirituality than traditionally extraverted religious community structures.

Finally, male participants ages 30 and above displayed greater attachment security than younger males. Moreover, younger Copts also scored in the lower bound on the religiosity measure. Gender and age effects demand further investigation (e.g., both low religiosity and attachment security among young men), taking into account socialization factors such as: age of immigration, level of cultural involvement, and degree of personal spirituality.

The more securely attached the adolescent or adult Copt in the community under study, the more religiously involved they reported to be. This was characterized by more profound experiences with saints depicted in icons. This relationship was most evident among male Copts. Conversely, the more socially insecure the individual, the lower their icon knowledge, and they tended toward expressive imagination. This is in line with Kirkpatrick and Shaver's (1992) finding that secure adult attachments were associated with a positive view of God and with higher religiosity. Contrary to our hypotheses and past research which found insecure (avoidant, in that case) attached individuals have lower levels of religiosity (Kirkpatrick 2005), insecurely attached individuals in the present study were not necessarily less religious but had lower icon knowledge. Participants reporting in the manner of insecure attachment still held dear their faith while neglecting or being less informed about their Coptic heritage. This proposition is coherent with Agishtein and Brumbaugh's (2013) study wherein secure attachment was related to strong cultural identification. Indeed, it was found using our survey that participants who were more securely attached demonstrated scores suggesting strong cultural-religious identification. I.e., high religiosity, more religious experiences with icons, and a stronger relationship with the saints depicted in the icons.

This mixed-methods study marks a novel addition to the growing literature in the psychology of religion, sacred art, and personality, representing Coptic visual culture and lived experiences of Coptic Orthodox Egyptian diaspora in Canada. This study also offers a replicable methodology for which research with other communities with venerated art-objects may be conducted.

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