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“United in the Fraternal Harmony of Work”. Missionaries, Industrial Education and the Shaping of a Cosmopolitan Elite of Male Workers in Egypt (1890–1940)

Abstract

Over the past fifteen years, historians have explored the processes, spaces, and practices that shaped gender roles in the 20th-century Middle East. Several studies have emphasised the role of schools and education in shaping both the “new woman” and effendi masculinity in colonial Egypt. However, with few exceptions, the construction of boyhood in missionary schools across North Africa and the Levant remains largely underexamined. Drawing on various missionary and diplomatic sources, this article investigates the discourses and practices employed by missionaries to cultivate a cosmopolitan working-class masculinity in late 19th to mid-20th-century Egypt. It focuses on the Salesian Schools of Arts and Crafts established in Alexandria (1897) and Cairo (1931) in response to the growing influx of Italian migrants who made Egypt their home. Through a micro-historical analysis of practices that masculinise and discipline, as well as discourses on religious and national coexistence within Salesian industrial schools, this article delves into the complex interplay between education, gender, and cosmopolitanism in the colonial Mediterranean. It argues that cosmopolitanism was used by missionaries as a narrative device, and was both contingent and instrumental. Ultimately, it demonstrates that missionary schools were contested spaces where gender norms and notions of religious, social, and national diversity were elaborated and negotiated during an era of rising nationalisms and imperial rivalries.

Keywords

Egypt, Cosmopolitanism, Fascism, Industrial education, Masculinity

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Over the last fifteen years, researchers have examined the processes, places, and practices involved in shaping gender roles in the Middle East (Giomi and Zerman 2018; Yildiz 2015). With regard to Egypt, the links between education and the learning of gender roles have been analysed in some depth by Lisa Pollard (2005) and Mona Russell (2004). Considering the school as an “institutional agent” (Connell 1996) in the formation processes of young men and girls, these works highlighted the role of education in shaping the “new woman” (Naguib 2001; Russell 2004) as well as the formation of an *effendi* masculinity (Jacob 2011).

With just a few exceptions, though, “the construction of boyhood” in the missionary schools in North Africa and the Levant remains almost unexplored territory (Okkenhaug 2005; Turiano 2021). And yet, as Inger Marie Okkenhaug (2005) has shown in regard to Ottoman and Mandatory Palestine, studying masculinity formation in missionary education can for example illuminate the connections between gender, imperialism, and nationalism during the formative years of the Palestinian national movement. While recent research has explored the intersection of industrial work and gender (Hammad 2016), the contribution of industrial education to the development of “industrial masculinity” remains underexplored. Yet in Egypt, since the end of the First World War, intellectuals, economists, and educators stressed the importance of developing industrial education to shape an elite of male workers (Tignor 1984; Vitalis 1995).

This article aims to fill these gaps, while introducing a new element into the analysis of the relationship between manhood and industrial education: the notion of cosmopolitanism. Distancing themselves from the nostalgic and elitist approaches that have long characterised the analysis of cosmopolitanism in the Egyptian context, some historians have used the notion of “vulgar” or “ordinary cosmopolitanism” to refer to intercommunal and interfaith interactions that took place among subaltern social categories since the late 19th century (Fahmy 2004; Hanley 2008; 2017). Other scholars have insisted on the constructed character of the notion, revealing how “cosmopolitanism” has functioned as a narrative device. Elena Chiti (2016; 2018) has demonstrated, for instance, that the myth of cosmopolitan Alexandria originates from various 19th- and 20th-century sources in European languages, which portrayed it as a city *Ad Aegyptum*—“next to” Egypt, or not “in” Egypt .

Drawing on recent historiography that problematizes and historicizes the notion of cosmopolitanism (El Chazli 2018; Starr 2009), this article examines

the missionary discourses and practices aiming to shape a cosmopolitan working-class manliness. To do so, the article looks at the Salesian schools of Arts and Crafts established in Alexandria (1897) and in Cairo (1931), and whose foundations were closely tied to the growing number of Italian migrants who made Egypt their home. Although these schools were originally intended primarily for these immigrant workers, they soon began admitting students from diverse backgrounds, with Muslim Egyptians comprising 20 per cent of the student body in Alexandria by the 1930s. Greek students also formed a substantial proportion.

This article examines the five decades spanning from the late 19th century to the first half of the 20th century, a period characterised by the transition from British-occupied Egypt (beginning in 1882) to a semi-independent nation under monarchical rule. During this period, the “local foreign minorities” (Deeb 1978) who had settled in Egypt occupied various professional positions not only in the liberal and entrepreneurial professions (Abdulhaq 2016), but also and above all within the working and artisanal class. These workers interacted, collaborated, and competed daily in workshops and factories (Carminati 2023; Dalachanis 2022; Gorman 2010) as an Egyptian industrial sector and working class emerged (Beinin and Lockman 1998; Goldberg 1986; Hammad 2016; Lockman 2008). The interwar period also saw the strengthening of fascist propaganda in Egypt and the Mediterranean. Under the capitular regime, Italian institutions and schools along the Mediterranean coast—including subsidised missionary schools—were intended to serve as a showcase for the “new Italy”.

Against this backdrop, the Salesians highlighted the cosmopolitan nature of their school and its role in cultivating a cross-cultural elite of male workers for the emerging industry when addressing Egyptian authorities. This depiction of a multicultural and multid denominational school has persisted in missionary sources. As noted in the centenary memoir of the Salesian Province of the Middle East, “Salesian schools were a reflection of societies worldwide, representing an ethnic and religious mosaic” (Pozzo 2003: 27). This image has also been conveyed by a nostalgic literature portraying foreign and missionary schools in Egypt as symbols of a bygone cosmopolitan era (Aciman 2007; Sahar and Colin 2002). According to this literature, foreign schools, to the extent that they did not discriminate between their pupils for admission, had helped to erase all ethnic, national or religious differences. This “golden age”, with schools mirroring an idealised cosmopolitan society, supposedly ended with Gamal Abdel Nasser’s rise to power (1954), leading to massive departure of foreign minorities.

Drawing on various missionary and diplomatic sources, this article aims to complicate this narrative, by assessing the triple dependence in which the Salesians and their schools found themselves: the Salesian hierarchy, the Italian government (which subsidised the schools), the Egyptian authorities and school audience. Through a micro-historical exploration of practices that masculinize and discipline, as well as discourses on religious and national coexistence within Salesian industrial schools, this article explores the intricate nexus between education, gender, and cosmopolitanism in the colonial Mediterranean.

“Good Christians and Disciplined Workers”: The Gospel of Work

The Salesian congregation was founded by Don Giovanni Bosco in the Kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia in the decades prior to Italian national unification. It soon asserted itself as a capable institution that sought to bring the working class under Church influence following the revolutionary wave of 1833–48. Salesians gave priority to the instruction of the impoverished through the foundation of arts and crafts schools and oratories (Turiano 2016) At the same time, the congregation took part in the missionary awakening of the long 19th century (Dogan and Sharkey 2011: xii; Mayeur et al. 1995: 6). The arrival of the Salesian missionaries in Egypt traces back to the late 19th century, spurred by both Italian migrations to the Nile Valley and the religious revival and imperialism that turned the Eastern Mediterranean into a key destination for both Catholic and Protestant missionaries (Okkenhaug and Sanchez 2020; Verdeil 2013).

In 1897, the first missionaries established an arts and crafts school in the Bab al-Sidra district of Alexandria, offering training in various urban crafts (Turiano 2016). The Don Bosco school was the first missionary Catholic educational institution in Alexandria to provide vocational training. It played a role in the gendered division of industrial education, with pupils receiving instruction in “men’s work” such as mechanics, woodwork, and, later, electrical engineering over a period of four to five years (Turiano 2017; 2021). However, the Salesians extended their efforts beyond Alexandria. In 1931, they founded a mechanics institute in Cairo and established several elementary and commercial schools in the Suez Canal cities of Port Said, Suez, and Ismailia. What kind of men did the missionaries aim to shape through their vocational schools? What masculine ideals did they promote to their pupils, and what masculinizing practices did they employ?

The schools in Cairo and Alexandria offered a comprehensive education that integrated manual and theoretical training with Christian morality. As the missionaries articulated, “Our mission is not limited to teaching pupils to bend iron or meet their material needs; it aims above all to imbue them with the spirit and mentality of the true worker who enjoys and loves work as something that forges his character and personality, and as the highest, noblest, and most religious element of life”.¹ This statement highlights how the Salesians sought to cultivate a specific form of masculinity characterised by discipline, work ethic, and religious and moral instruction over a period of four to five years. Pupils experienced a dual education that alternated between theoretical knowledge and practical skills, with the goal of producing skilled workers who combined intellectual acuity with practical dexterity.

In both classroom and workshop, pupils were required to internalise a set of standards, rules, and obligations designed to regulate their conduct, encompassing strict behavioural and bodily conformity. Firstly, they had to obey a strict dress code that reflected the dual nature of their education. In the classroom, they had to wear a uniform (jacket and tie). However, once in the workshop, they had to change their student attire for that suited to an apprentice, with the regulations stipulating blue overalls to ensure in particular “personal cleanliness.”² The process of cultivating disciplined workers entailed the imparting and assimilation of diverse skills and values, including precision, rigour, methodology, and punctuality. Emphasis was placed on respecting time and efficiency while concurrently honouring one’s place within the workshop hierarchy.³

Central to this system was the figure of the supervisor, who embodied the ideal male role model. Ideally, the supervisor was a Salesian coadjutor (a lay Salesian) trained in Italy, although many were recruited locally from among former students, typically of Italian or Greek origin. The supervisor was entrusted with the crucial task of training the young boys, shouldering numerous responsibilities. He was expected to “cultivate the professional conscience” of his pupils by setting an example, while also developing his own qualities of order and dedication, alongside maintaining impeccable morality.⁴ Apprentices were to begin their exercises only under the supervisor’s instructions, and operating machinery without prior authorization was strictly prohibited. Adherence to the procedural norms established by the supervisor was essential for the successful completion of practical tasks. The supervisor was also responsible for enforcing strict discipline within the workshop, instilling in apprentices a work ethic that aligned with the demands of the factory’s operations.⁵

In addition to manual and theoretical education, sports played a significant role in physical and muscular training, as part of the broader practices of masculinization. From the missionaries' perspective, physical education offered a dual advantage: it preserved the moral and physical vitality of apprentices by encouraging exertion, energy maintenance in the face of risk, and acclimatisation to physical recuperation. Moreover, similar to the principles of muscular Christianity (Macaloon 2008), sports education aimed to instil values such as self-sacrifice and collective action over individual self-effacement. Consequently, physical education was charged with promoting a sense of cohesion and discipline.⁶

This bodily and disciplinary education, through manual training and sports, was designed to cultivate a meticulous, hard-working workforce accustomed to a regular work rhythm. The image the Salesians projected to the outside world centred on the disciplined apprentice who valued time and hierarchy. They asserted that “our apprentices will one day serve as exemplars of order, discipline, and industriousness”.⁷ This physical and disciplinary education was closely intertwined with moral and religious instruction. At their vocational schools in Alexandria and Cairo, the Salesians prioritised shaping “good Christians” above all. The teaching of catechism and regular participation in the sacraments were central to this mission.

Catholicism was deeply embedded in both the weekly schedule and the school-year calendar. In 1908, each day at the Alexandria boarding school began with Mass and concluded with a “goodnight” sermon, while the year was punctuated by religious festivals and celebrations that all pupils were required to attend.⁸ Further efforts to enhance religious education included the establishment of religious guilds, such as the Company of St. Joseph in 1904. St. Joseph, often depicted as a craftsman or carpenter in Christian tradition, served as an ideal model of masculinity, particularly relevant for apprentices who were being trained to become skilled workers.⁹ These guilds aimed to prepare boys for communion and, eventually, inspire a religious vocation through scheduled gatherings, discussions on religious matters, and inspirational narratives.

A variety of educational tools and extracurricular activities were employed to reinforce religious instruction. In the early 20th century, the introduction of school bands and theatrical performances played a significant role. Music, a key component of Salesian education, was seen as a way to refine the perceived “rough habits” of students from working-class backgrounds.¹⁰ The establishment of a brass band in 1901 was part of a broader effort to enhance religious

education, based on the belief that it could steer children from humble origins away from vice and immorality while fostering a sense of fraternity. By 1902, the Alexandria brass band exclusively admitted the most proficient students, focusing primarily on marches and religious compositions.¹¹ In addition to music, theatre was regarded by the Salesians as a powerful tool for moral edification,¹² and it was introduced into their Egyptian schools early on. Most theatrical plays carried a moral dimension, aiming to reinforce gender-based roles within Christian families, with male characters consistently portrayed as fathers and breadwinners.¹³

A Cosmopolitan Working-class Elite for the Egyptian Industrial *nahda*?

Initially, the Salesian vocational schools were predominantly attended by Italian nationals. However, by the 1930s, these schools began to broaden their reach, including a more diverse student body in terms of nationality and religion. By this time, 20 per cent of the students were Muslim Egyptians, and many of the apprentices in the mechanics section of the Alexandria school were of Greek nationality. In the early 20th century, Salesian schools played a significant role in fostering a small entrepreneurial sector and providing managerial and administrative personnel for businesses and industrial enterprises. Some alumni secured administrative positions, primarily as accountants for foreign companies, and, less frequently, in specific government departments. This wide range of employment opportunities in both large and small industries helped the schools gain popularity beyond national and denominational boundaries (Turiano 2021; 2016).

In this context, official visits by Egyptian authorities allowed the Salesians to highlight the multinational and multi-faith character of their vocational schools. For example, during a 1939 visit by ‘Abd al-Salām al-Shādhilī Pasha, the governor of Cairo, a student from the Cairo mechanics school warmly addressed the governor: “Your Excellency! You see us here, representing various nationalities and religions, yet united in the fraternal harmony of work, showing mutual respect under the esteemed banner of the great modern educator, Don Bosco. In the name of God, Don Bosco established hundreds of schools worldwide to morally and materially uplift working-class youth, moulding them into compliant and productive members of the nation, society, and family!”¹⁴

The purpose of such statements was to depict the Salesian vocational schools

as a melting pot where students from diverse backgrounds interacted and where the collective effort of mastering a trade transcended national and denominational boundaries. This image of harmonious coexistence was also reflected in the correspondence between the Alexandria school and the municipal authorities. The Salesians emphasised their commitment to non-discrimination, informing the municipal authorities in a letter that their school was open to “all students, without any prejudice”.¹⁵

These official statements must be understood within the context of a rapidly evolving economic landscape. The interwar period saw the rise of a local industrial elite that pursued a strategy of economic diversification, fostering an indigenous industrial sector in cooperation with foreign capital alongside the dominant agricultural sector (Tignor 1984; Vitalis, 1995). This strategy led to the creation of several institutions aimed at promoting Egyptian industry. The first of these, the Miṣr Bank, was established in 1920 and gradually became a powerful economic group. In 1922, the Federation of Egyptian Industries was founded to represent the non-Egyptian segment of the industrial bourgeoisie (Cottenet-Djoufelkit 2001: 139), with the goal of encouraging the formation of industrial associations. The critical impetus for industrial development came with the tariff reform of 1930, which introduced protective measures for nascent industries against foreign competition. These years witnessed a growing involvement of Egyptian capital in foreign companies and the creation of enterprises composed exclusively of Egyptian shareholders. Investors, who had traditionally focused on land, increasingly turned their attention to industry (Mabro and Radwan 1976).

During these years, debates flourished on the need to develop industrial education aimed at training a working-class elite for Egypt’s emerging industries (Labib and Turiano 2024; Meyer 1928: 589). Several vocational schools were established during this period. By 1934–35, their number had grown to 26 across Egypt, educating nearly 9,000 students: 17 were under the auspices of the Ministry of Public Education, six were administered by municipal councils, and three were managed by charitable organisations. Debated since the early 1930s, the reform of vocational education (*al-ta’līm al-mihanī*) led to a reorganisation of cycles and curricula at the start of the 1938 academic year (Shunnūda 1967: 267). Previously, education had been provided in two stages, lasting three and two years respectively. The new structure introduced a single five-year cycle and implemented the principle of dual education, combining theoretical and practical training.¹⁶ Similar developments were taking place

in Italy and other European countries (D'Amico 2015; Lembré 2016). The circulation of pedagogical knowledge was facilitated by the establishment of special committees and the organisation of international congresses, which helped make education a transnational sphere (Matasci 2012).

Amid the rising tide of economic nationalism and industrial development, the Salesians felt compelled to legitimise their presence in Egypt. To this end, they emphasised the contribution of their vocational schools in cultivating a cross-cultural and cosmopolitan cohort of male workers, ready to serve the country's expanding industry, which increasingly demanded skilled labourers and supervisors. In 1937, during a visit by the Egyptian Minister of Education, 'Ali Zāki al-'Urabi, to the Salesian industrial school in Cairo, a student mechanic named Alfredo Menache delivered a welcome speech in Arabic. He highlighted the role of Salesian missionaries in training "intelligent, educated, and capable individuals upon whom Egypt can rely as its industrial progress accelerates". He further underscored the contribution of missionary schools to "the common good, the advancement of society, and the dissemination of knowledge in our nation".¹⁷

These excerpts illustrate how official visits by Egyptian ministers provided missionaries, through the voices of their students, with the opportunity to emphasise the role of their schools in cultivating a disciplined male working class poised to support the country's industrial development. In this context, the Salesians adopted the term "industrial renaissance" (*al-nahda al-sinā'iyya* in Arabic), which gained significant traction in 1930s Egypt as industrialization became central to economic progress and political discourse (Monciaud 2002: 376).

Alongside the rise of domestic industry, the interwar period also saw the strengthening of fascist propaganda in Egypt and the broader Mediterranean region. Fascist representatives expected state-subsidised missionary schools, like those run by the Salesians, to implement a policy of national preference, prioritising Italian nationals. How did the above-mentioned praised melting pot within the Salesian industrial schools sit with the nationalist propaganda conveyed by fascist representatives in Egypt?

...Or "*Prima gli Italiani*"? Fascist Ideology of National Preference at Work in Missionary Schools

Amid the totalitarian shift of the 1930s, Fascist Italy exhibited a renewed ambition to extend its influence across the Mediterranean. In the Middle East, the regime supported Arab nationalist movements that opposed the policies

of French and British mandates (Arielli 2010). Fascist propaganda also spotlighted the Italian colonies in the region as a showcase for the “new Italy”. In the late 1920s, *Fasci all'estero* were established to manage the influx of Italian migrants (De Caprariis 2000; Gentile 1995: 906–11).¹⁸ Piero Parini, the new secretary of the Fasci, emphasised the need to combat the “denationalisation of emigrants”, aiming to instil the language and the ideals of the Fascist party within the Italian diaspora (Franzina and Sanfilippo 2003: XI).

Dino Grandi, Under-Secretary at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, declared in 1927 that there would no longer be “emigrants” but “Italians abroad”, a statement reflecting the goal of aligning Italians outside the peninsula with the nationalist and imperialist ambitions of the National Fascist Party (Collotti 2000: 140). As the Second World War approached, approximately 60,000 Italians were residing in Egypt, forming the largest Italian community in the Middle East. Hence, due to their significant presence, and facilitated by the wide-ranging privileges of the capitulations, the Fascist regime concentrated its propaganda efforts on the “Italiani d’Egitto” (Italians of Egypt) within the broader Mediterranean context (Viscomi 2019).

The fascistization of Italian institutions in Egypt involved not only the creation of new regime-led entities but also the appropriation and transformation of existing ones. Central to this strategy were Italian schools—both state-sponsored and subsidised, including missionary institutions—which were regarded as centres for “national regeneration” and the shaping of the “new man” (Milza and Matard-Bonnucci 2004). The newly appointed consul in Cairo underscored the urgent need for comprehensive educational reform, aiming to convert these educational establishments into symbols of the “new era” and effective conduits for disseminating fascist ideology (Petricioli 1997; 2007).

Regarding subsidised missionary schools, diplomats shared the conviction that supporting congregations with an “undeniable Italian character, such as the Salesians”, was a priority.¹⁹ The Salesians were particularly lauded for their vocational and arts and crafts schools, which were seen as instrumental in influencing the emerging middle and working classes. Numerous diplomatic reports from this period underscored the importance of enhancing vocational education in Egypt, with the aim of preparing a skilled workforce for Italian enterprises operating in the country. Moreover, vocational education was considered well-suited to the socio-professional profile of Italian communities in Egypt. As early as 1921, the consul in Cairo, Impallomeni, submitted a report on the Italian colony in the city, emphasising the potential of an arts and crafts

school to instil morality in the youth of a colony predominantly composed of workers and craftsmen, whose morals were deemed “dubious”.²⁰ The Salesian mechanics school, which opened in Cairo in October 1931, received significant ministerial funding from the outset.²¹

In addition to the moral-driven rationale, worsening economic conditions significantly influenced the Italian government’s support for Salesian institutions. The 1930s, marked by a global crisis and rising unemployment, underscored the need to train skilled workers capable of securing employment, particularly as unemployment grew in the tertiary sector (Owen and Pamuk 1998: 34–35). In a 1938 letter to the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MAE), Cairo consul Morganti emphasised the pressing need to further develop Salesian vocational schools in Cairo and Alexandria. He noted that graduates from these institutions would readily find employment as specialised workers in Egypt.²² Morganti proposed increasing the ministerial subsidy to modernise the schools by equipping them with up-to-date machinery and teaching materials, and by placing them under the supervision of experienced technical staff. This perspective was echoed by other diplomats, with most consular reports portraying Salesian schools as “the sole institutions capable of securing a future for young nationals in Egypt”.²³

However, diplomats stipulated certain conditions for the increased ministerial subsidies. When the Cairo vocational school was inaugurated in 1931, Consul Liberati expressed a willingness to provide additional support to the Salesian congregation, contingent on their commitment to prioritise the enrollment of the most disadvantaged Italian nationals.²⁴ Nonetheless, by the start of the 1932–33 academic year, the school had opened its doors to a broader student body, extending beyond Italian nationals. A similar trend emerged in Alexandria, where numerous non-Italians began attending vocational training courses during the 1930s. The Consul General in Alexandria, Giurati, criticised this development in a report sent to the MAE in autumn 1939, noting that the Salesian schools were educating “a majority of foreign students who, in a few years’ time, will compete fiercely with Italian workers in Alexandria”.²⁵ Giurati proposed a solution in which 80 per cent of the available places would be reserved for Italian students, with 20 per cent allocated to Egyptians to appease the Egyptian government. He further recommended that other nationalities, such as Greeks, be “excluded”, arguing that they were “competitors on the labour market and predominantly anti-fascist”.

How did the Salesians respond to these stances? Since the conclusion of the First World War, their allegiance to Italy had been unequivocal. Their Catholic

identity was deeply intertwined with patriotism. In the 1930s, the congregation's correspondence and official documents reflected this alignment, adopting language that praised the Fascist authorities. Excerpts from a prospectus for the Cairo school, published in 1933 as part of a volume dedicated to Italian schools abroad, provide insight into the tone adopted: "The institute prepares young individuals of sound mind and physique to join the ranks of the *Avanguardisti*".²⁶ Sports education is meticulously planned. All young Italians are enlisted at the *Opera Gioventù italiana all'estero* (OGIE) [...]. The Institute embodies pure Italian spirit. Annually, we celebrate the radiant 24th of May within its walls, led by veterans, in the presence of authorities and the colony. [...].²⁷

All key themes of Fascism, including youth guidance, the defence of Italian identity, and fascist commemorations, are evident in these excerpts. However, despite this apparent alignment with Fascist Italy's values, the diplomats' demands for national preference met resistance from the Salesians, rooted in both spiritual and financial considerations. While the Salesians did offer free admission to some underprivileged Italian students in Cairo and Alexandria to comply with ministerial and consular stipulations, they were unwilling to reduce the number of "indigenous and foreign" students. These students, on the one hand, exemplified the mission's influence, and on the other hand, provided a reliable financial influx through their tuition fees. Notably, non-Catholic students in the mechanics section of the Alexandria school, mainly Greeks, paid the full boarding fee (400 Egyptian piasters for boarders and 250 Egyptian piasters for half-boarders).²⁸

Thus, in response to diplomatic pressures, the Salesians reaffirmed the priority of their apostolic mission to Egypt, which could not be limited to merely "serving Italy's interests" in the country.²⁹ Consequently, Salesian schools continued to admit students of diverse nationalities and, to a lesser extent, different denominations. By 1933, only seven out of the total pupils in Cairo were Italian, while the remaining students were either natives (52) or foreigners (14).³⁰ A similar pattern emerged in Alexandria, where Egyptians, Greeks, and Italians were almost equally represented until 1938.³¹

How was this diversity—praised by the Salesians to Egyptian authorities and defended to Italian representatives, mainly for financial reasons—effectively managed within the schools? A closer examination of the congregation's internal archives reveals that this diversity was somewhat limited, particularly from a denominational perspective. Furthermore, analysing the management of pupil diversity complicates the portrayal of these schools as mirrors of cosmopolitanism.

A “Dangerous” but Necessary “Mixture”: Discourses and Management of Pupils’ Diversity

From the standpoint of denominational affiliation, the industrial schools in Alexandria and Cairo conformed to the profile of other missionary establishments in Egypt (Abecassis 2003; Mayeur-Jaouen 1992). Throughout the 1930s, their student bodies remained predominantly Christian. Christians constituted between 75 per cent and 85 per cent of the school population at both establishments. Notably, the Alexandria school was predominantly Catholic, with Latins forming the largest group, significantly outnumbering Eastern Catholics of all rites. Although Greek Orthodox students were the majority during the 1930–31 school year, their numbers diminished in subsequent years, leaving them second to the Latins.³²

The mixing and coexistence of pupils in the boarding schools, though somewhat limited from a denominational perspective, was deemed necessary for practical reasons, primarily financial. Catholics received free admission or reduced fees, while non-Catholics were required to pay full tuition, with a few exceptions. Only Muslim students from “good” and “respectable” families were admitted, particularly those from families with minor civil service roles (e.g., policemen and customs officers), lower-level white-collar workers (including clerks, bank and post office employees), and tradespeople (such as stationers, hosiers, and bar owners).³³ For instance, in the 1935–36 academic year, a student named Ismail Zahran, the son of Muḥammad Amin Zahran Bey—a minor irrigation inspector at the Ministry of Public Works—was enrolled in the mechanics section.³⁴ Families of these public administration employees and civil servants sought practical training for their children, particularly in mechanical trades. Indeed, 90 per cent of Muslim pupils were enrolled in mechanics, the most popular section, where no fee reductions were permitted.³⁵

At the same time, this mixing was perceived as “dangerous” both by the missionaries on the ground and by their superiors, who were concerned about the religious implications of such diversity. Indeed, the positive perspective on the multi-faith nature of Salesian schools in the Middle East, which can be found in contemporary sources, or official statements, was absent from the internal archives of missionaries during the interwar era. On the contrary, some missionaries referred to a “mishmash of different elements” in their internal correspondence.³⁶ Others went further, describing the mix in some of their schools in Palestine and Egypt as “pestilential”. Although they did not

always express themselves in such terms, the Salesians were unanimous when it came to describing the negative effects of this cohabitation on the students and “their morality”.³⁷

Anxiety linked to religious diversity grew in the early 1930s. During the 1930–31 academic year in Alexandria’s boarding school, there was an equal number of Orthodox and Catholic students, with non-Catholics (Orthodox, Muslims, and Jews) constituting the majority. In a 1933 report to the Superior Chapter, the Provincial Inspector voiced significant concern: “In Cairo, all boarders are Latin Catholics. Conversely, in Alexandria, the diversity is striking. Among artisans, there were around a dozen Muslims and approximately forty schismatic Greeks. Of the 38 mechanics school students, at least 32 were schismatics. Can such cohabitation be reconciled with canon law? Is it morally acceptable?”³⁸

The fear surrounding cohabitation and the apprehension about religious diversity among boarding students reflect the Salesians’ primary concern with maintaining denominational uniformity and protecting their Catholic pupils from non-Catholic influences. In this context, the presence of Muslim students was particularly problematic, as Islam was often regarded by missionaries as a “corrupt and corruptive” faith, synonymous with fanaticism. This perspective was not unique to the Salesians but was consistent with the broader essentialist view of Islam held by Latin missionaries in the Middle East (Verdeil 2013).

Missionaries’ mistrust of the Orthodox was as pronounced as their suspicion of non-Christians. The Salesians viewed Orthodoxy with disdain, regarding it as responsible for schism and heresy. Orthodox Christians were often labelled as “dissidents” or “schismatics” in the Salesians’ records and were considered to have a “corrupted tradition”. Their perceived “liberty in morals” was seen as a danger to other students, particularly the Latins. Despite participating in religious ceremonies, Orthodox students’ abstention from sacraments was viewed by the Salesians as providing a “negative example” to Latin students.³⁹

Nevertheless, the Orthodox were seen as having an advantage in the eyes of the missionaries. Unlike Muslims, for whom the Salesians had largely abandoned hopes of conversion, Orthodox Christians—having received baptism—were considered more amenable to conversion to Catholicism. They were viewed as an intermediary group between Catholics and “infidels”. While conversions of Muslim students were very rare and mostly occurred in the early years of Salesian presence in Alexandria, conversions from Orthodoxy to Catholicism were more frequent.⁴⁰

To address this “dangerous” yet necessary mixture of students, the missionaries implemented differentiated strategies based on religious denomination and proximity to the Roman Catholic Church, affecting both enrollment fees and participation in religious activities. Only Catholic students were granted free admission, typically coming from impoverished or lower-middle-class backgrounds. Orthodox Christians were offered variable fee reductions on a case-by-case basis. In terms of religious instruction and worship, Eastern Catholics adhered to the same guidelines as their Roman Catholic counterparts. Orthodox Christians, often viewed as potential converts, were required to study the catechism and participate in pre-class prayers. However, they were excluded from attending liturgical ceremonies in the chapel and retained the option to observe fasting and receive Holy Communion in their own churches on Christmas Day and Easter.⁴¹

These practices were not unique to the Salesian school in Alexandria but were prevalent across missionary institutions in the Middle East (Bocquet 2007; Verdeil 2007). The objective was to fortify the Uniate churches and encourage Orthodox Christians to “return” to Roman Catholicism. Muslim students, who represented a significant minority in Alexandria’s schools during the 1930s (nearly 25% in 1939), were exempt from religion and catechism classes. Even the “morals lessons” proposed by Father Leon for Muslims in Cairo were ultimately discontinued due to concerns about accusations of proselytism amidst Egypt’s anti-missionary campaign of the 1930s (Baron 2016). Consequently, Muslims were treated as a distinct category of pupils.

Conclusion

Through the prism of the Salesians industrial schools, this article has proposed a two level- analysis of the articulation between education, gender, and cosmopolitanism in the colonial Mediterranean. On the one hand, it argued that cosmopolitanism was used by missionaries as a narrative device and was both contingent and instrumental. Missionaries underlined the cosmopolitan character of their school audience, and their participation in the industrial *nahda* in the presence of the Egyptian authorities, to legitimise their educational action in Egypt in a time of rising nationalism. This same claim was downplayed in front of the Italian representatives, whose aggressive nationalism posed a risk of financial reprisals if the missionaries did not comply with their “national preference” policy.

The analysis of missionary vocational schools also revealed how their claims to training a cosmopolitan elite of male workers translated into different prac-

tices within the institutions, particularly concerning participation in religious ceremonies and tuition fees. Similar to other missionary schools in the Levant, Salesian schools attracted a diverse student body across denominational and national lines. These schools functioned as spaces of coexistence and diversity, yet students and apprentices were expected to acknowledge their differences.

Indeed, as the analysis of missionary sources highlights, the missionaries mainly classified their school audience according to confessional criteria. This sectarian vision sometimes translated into homogenisation practices, sometimes in measures of differentiation, regarding admissions and religious observances within the schools. The distinction was not only based on religious affiliation. Nationality, as well as respectability and social background were important criteria that the Salesians took into account to differentiate their students.

Thus, rather than being the mirror of an idealised cosmopolitanism, missionary schools were contested spaces where gender norms, and notions of religious, social and national diversity were elaborated and negotiated in an era of rising nationalisms and imperial rivalries. It remains to be seen to what extent these ideas and practices of differentiation were assimilated by pupils and apprentices, and whether they translated them in their subsequent professional environments, the space par excellence of cross-national and cross-cultural interaction and competitions.

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Notes

1 - Archives of the Salesian school in Cairo (hereafter ASSC), Prospectus of the Cairo Mechanics School, 1933.

2 - Archivio Salesiano Centrale, (hereafter ASC), F414, Yearbook 1937–1938.

3 - ASSC, Electrical Engineering Section, Location and responsibilities of second year students 1939.

4 - ASSC, Internal regulations, 1933.

5 - ASSC, Disciplinary measures, 1938.

6 - Ibidem.

7 - “La premiazione all’istituto Don Bosco,” *L'imparziale*, 23 July 1920.

8 - ASC, F038, Extraordinary visit by father Bretto, 1908.

9 - ASC, F383, Report of the Provincial to the Superior Chapter, 1903–1904.

10 - ASC, F383, Arts and Crafts School. Origins and objectives of the Institute, 1897.

11 - ASC, F383, Report of the Inspector to the Rector Major, 1903–1904.

- 12 - In 1935, for instance, a moralistic play entitled Mark the Sinner was performed on several occasions by apprentices at the Cairo and Alexandria schools.
- 13 - ASC, F771, Don Bosco Institute of Cairo, Chronicle, 1935.
- 14 - Archives of the Salesian school in Alexandria (hereafter ASSA), Speech given on the occasion of the visit of the Governor of Cairo, October 1939.
- 15 - ASSA, Correspondence with the Egyptian authorities-Municipality, The Director to the Municipality, May 1933.
- 16 - Egyptian Ministry of Finance, School statistics, 1939–1940.
- 17 - ASSA, Speech delivered in Arabic by Alfredo Menache in honour of H.E. the Minister of Public Education, 27 - June 1937.
- 18 - *Fasci all'estero* were part of the fascist organisation abroad which sought to regiment Italian emigrants and aimed to disseminate fascist ideology well beyond Italy's borders.
- 19 - Archivio storico diplomatico del Ministero degli Affari esteri (hereafter ASDMAE), Ambasciata al Cairo (hereafter AC), n.202, Circular n. 13 from the Directorate General of Italian Schools Abroad. Vocational schools, 20 February 1925.
- 20 - ASDMAE, AC, n.202, Circular n. 13 from the Directorate General of Italian Schools Abroad. Vocational schools, 20 February 1925.
- 21 - ASSA, Correspondence with the consulate, 1929–1952, Don Bosco School of Mechanics. Report to the intention of the consul, 13 March 1933.
- 22 - ASDMAE, Serie scuole (hereafter SS) 1929–1935, Morganti to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 24 June 1938.
- 23 - Ibidem.
- 24 - ASC, F771, Chronicle of the Cairo School from its foundation to 1937, p. 10.
- 25 - ASDMAE, SS, 1936–1945, n.74, Consul Giurati to the ministry of foreign Affairs, 16 November 1939.
- 26 - In the mid-1920s, the first fascist youth wings were formed in Italy and abroad. The *avanguardista* was a young Italian, aged between 14 and 18, enrolled in the ranks of the *Opera Nazionale Balilla* (from 1926) and, later, the *Gioventù Italiana del Littorio* (from 1937). Both organisations surpassed their role as cultural institutions intended to serve as the ideological counterpart of school and served as paramilitary groups.
- 27 - ASC, F414, Rod el-Farag Salesian School. Origins and aims, 1933.
- 28 - ASDMAE, SS, 1936–1945, n. 74, Morganti to the Ministry of foreign affairs, 13 February 1940.
- 29 - ASC, F741, Chronicle of the Alexandria School from its foundation to 1937, p. 79.
- 30 - ASC, F414, Rod el-Farag Salesian School. Origins and aims, 1933.
- 31 - ASSA, Registers of the boarding school 1930–1939.
- 32 - ASC, F038, Report of the extraordinary visit of Father Candela to the residences of Egypt, December 10–13 1930.
- 33 - ASSA, Register of the boarding school, 1930–1939.

- 34 - ASSA, Consulate correspondence, 1900–1935 Mansura’s diplomatic agent to the director of the Don Bosco Institute, 19 December 1935.
- 35 - ASSA, Registers of the boarding school, 1938–1939
- 36 - ASC, F038, Father Fedrigone’s extraordinary visit, 1953.
- 37 - ASC, F041, The work of Don Bosco in Egypt and the Middle East, date unknown.
- 38 - ASC, F035, Report by Father Nigra to the Superior Chapter on the state and general situation of the Salesian Province of Jesus Adolescent, 1933.
- 39 - Ibidem.
- 40 - Between 1910 and 1938, out of three cases of conversion of Muslim pupils, the chronicle records 12 cases of abjuration. These events were so important that, from the 1920s onwards, they were celebrated on Pope’s Day, to make the ceremony more solemn and symbolic. The chronicle reports on a filmed abjuration.
- 41 - ASC, F040, The director of the congregation Pro Ecclesia Orientali, January 15, 1940.

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