Freedom of Religion in Egypt prior to the Egyptian Revolution

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THE CENTER FOR
INTERCULTURAL
DIALOGUE AND TRANSLATIONS

Contents

1. Introduction

1.1.Delays in publication

This publication was requested in 2004 by Dr. Otmar Oehring of Missio. It was intended to be an update of an earlier text written for London Bible College in 1998.[1]
The current text was completed in September 2004, but not published for several reasons:
- We wanted to do more investigative work on the Egyptian constitution;
- We also wanted to know more about the way reconciliation meetings functioned;
- We wanted to add research on the statistics of Christians in Egypt;
  And last but not least, we wanted to give Egyptian officials and leaders the opportunity to respond.

In 2005 I met with Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dr. Salama Shaker. She then referred me to both the Human Rights Department in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (where I spoke with Dr. Ihab Gamal el-Din), but even more important to her was obtaining a response from Dr. Osama el-Baz, then political advisor to President Mubarak. I know all of the aforementioned people personally from several meetings we have attended together and I respect their views and opinions. All of them were positive about the efforts we had made, but none of them responded to questions for additional information. The draft text also went to Yousef Sidhom, Editor-in-Chief of *Watani*, Catholic bishop, Yohanna Qulta, and Episcopal bishop, Mounir Hanna. Again, we did not receive any specific new information. Bishop Qulta wrote an introduction. Bishop Mounir informed

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[1]   Cornelis Hulsman and Chawkat Moucarry, "Christians in Egypt: the impact of Islamic resurgence," *Religious News Service from the Arab World,* Week 50, Art. 2. 2002, 55, *Religious News Service from the Arab World*, 2002, Week 50_2A 54.

me later that he had used the information of this draft text for a report in presented in the UK.[2]

Dr. Abdel Mo'ti Bayoumi was ready to read and respond to the draft text, but needed the text in Arabic which was, because of its size, not feasible.

Human rights lawyer, Negad el-Borai, was willing to write a review for this text, but wanted to be paid for it. The requested payment was not available.

The efforts show it is difficult to get responses to this draft text (for many other texts it is not different). I have noted the following tendencies:
- People give general views and opinions but it is hard to get specific responses to questions about facts, probably because even with senior people there is uncertainty. In 2011, I met with Orthodox bishop, Paphnotius of Samalut, who had earlier responded several times to AWR about incidents within his diocese. When I asked in 2011 whether he had kept some documentation of these various incidents, his response was that he had not done so. Everything is based on memory.
- With a lack of sufficient access to facts, people are afraid to respond to very specific questions as they might be wrong and thus it is safer to respond in generalities and principles.

Egypt remains a country where the documentation of incidents and events is poor. It is a culture where oral transmission of information is often more important than providing written documentation. That creates problems of course, with differences in interpretation, memory loss over time, and statements often being better influenced by ideological positions than by

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[2]   Munir Hanna Anis Armanius (Bishop), "Christian Minorities in the Islamic World; an Egyptian perspective," *Arab-West Report*, Week 13, Art. 29, September 15, 2005, http://www.arabwestreport.info/year-2006/week-13/29-christian-minorities-islamic-world-egyptian-perspective.

facts. That makes people selective in remembering facts and presenting these to a wider audience.

Because of the time required to obtain all of this additional information, this report was, unfortunately, never published by Missio. It is placed in *Arab-West Report* because it nevertheless contains a great deal of important background information, in particular in providing context, comparing law and practice, and describing a number of incidents. This report was language edited in 2005 by Tracy Lowe. Jenna Ferrecchia completed this in 2013. I have then also added a few footnotes to the 2005 text.

Missio has requested a new, up-to-date text on freedom of religion in Egypt which, due to the massive attacks on churches and Christian institutions in August 2013 was to a large extent based on explaining the background of these attacks. Much information that is found in this report could not be included in the new report for reasons of space. This report, therefore, provides more detailed information on various legal issues before the January 25, 2011 Revolution than the new report that was written for Missio.

Cornelis Hulsman, October 1, 2013

1.2. Bishop Yohanna Qulta, September 2004

Religious freedom is the fruit of political, social, and economic freedoms and should not be treated as mutually exclusive. Religious freedom cannot exist in any country in the world without political freedom, democracy and human rights. Looking for religious freedom in a vacuum is an unrealistic fantasy.

In Islamic countries, particularly in Egypt, we can make out two attitudes towards religious freedom found in everyday life and throughout history. Each of these attitudes has its own aspects, causes, and sources.

The first attitude is a theoretical, dogmatic attitude. Muslims use verses from the Holy Qur'an as an evidence of the religious freedom Islam guarantees to non-Muslims, for example, the verses: "No compulsion in religion" and, "To you be your way, and to me mine."

These verses are repeated in all dialogues between Muslims and Christians. Other verses stating that Islam is the complete, absolute truth and invalidating other religions, branding them *kafir* (religions of unbelief), such as, "The religion before Allah is Islam," and, "If anyone desires a religion other than Islam (submission to Allah), never will it be accepted of him," are not mentioned. Islam regards itself as the complete divine revelation.

Islam for a Muslim believer is 'the truth', the true faith, the only path to paradise, and the source of ethical values and social regulations.

This theoretical and dogmatic attitude prevails in all levels of Islamic education and culture. In Egypt, and some other countries, there is a kind of openness to other cultures, and to religious freedom, but it is always conditional on the public and political space given for political and cultural freedom, and on the ruler's convictions.

The second attitude is related to everyday life and social relations. Muslims believe that they are "the best of peoples, evolved for mankind" and they have the Holy Qur'an and the *Sunnah* as the primary source of ethical and practical values. Muslims have a feeling of superiority over others, both spiritually and psychologically, and sometimes this feeling is mixed with contempt for followers of other religions. This superiority complex has

increased since the early days of Islam following the tremendous, rapid military triumphs that accompanied the first call to Islam.

Muslim conquerors controlled countries that were previously under the control of the Byzantine and Persian empires. The Islamic empire extended from India and Central Asia in the East to Andalusia and Central Africa in the West. Muslims brought with them a new faith and a new language that swept away the civilizations of these countries which receded into history. Some countries controlled by Islam became centers of the development of Islamic *fiqh* (jurisprudence) and culture. Some of these countries' natives became prominent Muslim imams and pioneers of Islamic thought. Christianity came to an end in Northwest Africa and in many other places.

Egypt's Coptic, Pharaonic, Persian, Greek, and Roman civilizations faded away. All the lands controlled by Muslims turned into Islamic nations. Nevertheless, churches where Christianity had deep roots survived at the mercy of [Muslim] rulers. These churches sometimes enjoyed religious freedom and at other times faced persecution. It all depended on the whim of the ruler.

Religious freedom in Egypt, and in Eastern countries in general, remained conditional on the ruler's mood and interest. Islamic supremacy lasted for many centuries. This was typical of the Middle Ages in general; the North (Europe) came under the control of the Church and clergy, while the South and East were dependent on the caprices of their rulers.

I believe that the concept of religious freedom for non-Muslims never used to bother Muslims. A Muslim allows the 'other' to keep his faith and practice his religious rituals as a kind of a 'grant' or a 'gift'. You could say that it was prerequisite for co-existence with a group of people who were defeated militarily, but who still managed the country's affairs, working with the triumphant conquerors to siphon off the nation's produce for the benefit of the ruler and his allies.

It would not be at all hyperbolic to say that the Arab East did not have religious freedom, as it is understood today (neither did the West until recently). Religious freedom was not among the rights of the defeated; it was not a law or a subject open to discussion. It was a gift from the powerful to the weak.

I believe that the term 'religious freedom' began to be heavily stressed in Arab and Muslim countries following what happened on September 11, 2001 in America. After September 11, there has been a lot of talk about religious freedom, which has become the subject of many books and articles in different languages all over the world. I believe that the used of the term 'religious freedom' and the calls for this freedom caused astonishment among Arabs and Muslims and they felt provoked.

First: The discussions on religious freedom shocked the Arab World, particularly Egypt, as religious matters are still deeply influenced by laws dating to the Ottoman Empire. These laws stifled the influence of the Enlightenment and progress in all of its forms in all the countries under its yoke for hundreds of years. Some systems which the Ottomans created that affect religious freedom are still found in Egyptian society, including the Hamayouni law which divided society into masters and slaves, people of power and faith, and non-Muslim subjects.[3] Many years after the traditions developed, discriminating between the followers of the religion of the state (Islam) and non-Muslim subjects of the rulers had deepened its roots.

The Arab World was astonished because the issue of religious freedom was brought up unexpectedly in an attempt to change an old social system. Many questions were raised: Have non-Muslims lost rights? What are non-

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[3]   Cornelis Hulsman: I asked the Human Rights Department at the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs about this Ottoman law in 2005 and was told that there are no Ottoman laws in force in Egypt today. This does not mean that there are no cultural influences dating back to Ottoman times.

Muslims asking for when constitutions [of several countries] proclaim that the state has one official religion and the source of its laws is Islam?

Oriental Christians including Copts, Syrians, Chaldeans, and Armenians had been satisfied with their lot for many centuries. Was it then acceptable that the call for religious freedom came from the West, stirring up factionalism and fanaticism?

The Muslim mentality in Egypt, and the Arab World in general, does not allow for religious equality. It only allows for the supremacy of Islam. So, do non-Muslims have any rights to demand? It ought to be said that this is a similar way of thinking to the thinking that prevailed in the Middle Ages among both Christians [towards non-Christians] and Muslims [towards non-Muslims].

Second: The term 'religious freedom' provoked the Arab mentality, in practice the Egyptian mentality, because it is a phrase imported from the non-Muslim West. This phrase is used to put pressure on Arab regimes and it represents a heavy burden on governments afraid of how extremist Islamic groups will react.

Muslims with a traditional mentality challenge this term because they do not believe religions are equal. They believe Islam is the absolute truth and the greatest religion. Accordingly, for these Muslims, religious freedom does not mean that Muslims and non-Muslims have the same rights and duties. They understand 'religious freedom' as "the freedom to practice religion." This practice is done under the very rigid restriction that "Islam is the official religion of the state."

Muslims with a traditional mentality fear the consequences of [the application of] the term 'religious freedom,' where non-Muslims obtain equal rights to Muslims, Muslims who are the vast majority of citizens and the possessors of absolute truth.

I would like to refer back to what I previously mentioned about religious freedom being the fruit of political, economic, and social freedom. Religious freedom cannot be realized in an atmosphere dominated by tyranny, illiteracy, and poverty. When the tree of democracy is planted, it bears the fruit of religious freedom.

The Ottoman Empire collapsed in the early twentieth century and the age of European occupation started. France, England, and Italy distributed the Arab countries among themselves. Following the end of the Muslim Ottoman occupation was the new occupation by Christian countries.

Arab and Oriental Christians had a golden opportunity to join forces with their Muslim brothers in defense of the "liberty of the homeland." Many things that had formerly stifled religious freedom ended. Muslims and Christians had a common objective, which led to improved relations between them: national independence.

Furthermore, there was a very significant new factor which began to break down the walls of the Arab mentality and to increase its exposure to the cultures of other parts of the world. This factor was the activities of the generation of intellectuals and politicians who got to know Western culture, tasted freedom, and realized what renaissance really meant.

Lutfy Al-Sayyed, the inaugural chairman of the first Egyptian university (King Fuad University, since 1952 known as Cairo University) declared that the university had one objective: "knowledge."

Taha Hussein, the great author who was the Minister of Education until the 1952 Egyptian Revolution, reviewed hitherto little known pre-Islamic literal heritage what does this mean? Maybe 'amalgamated Western and Eastern literary techniques'? and shook up deeply-rooted but unscientific beliefs, establishing a school of critical thought.

Saad Zaghloul, the leader of the Egyptian revolution in 1919 against the British occupation explicitly stated that "religion is for God and the nation is for all."

While William Makram Ebeid, a major Christian politician, courageously said, "I belong to a Muslim nation and a Christian faith."

Many similar events took place in other Arab countries. There was a new movement to allow religious freedom. It accompanied the boom in political action, the beginnings of democracy and the drafting of national constitutions. This was a time of intellectualism and great leaps and bounds within not only political and cultural life, but social life, too. This era (1935 to 1952) was a golden age for Copts and religious freedom.

During this renaissance and time of increasing religious freedom, some groups of Islamic fundamentalist fanatics who were concerned about the general direction of travel of their societies towards greater freedom went on the counterattack. As a consequence of this, the Muslim Brotherhood was established in the 1930s. The Muslim Brotherhood became the breeding ground for violent, extremist, *takfiri* (groups accusing others of unbelief) groups. These groups played a crucial role in the Egypt's modern history, especially in hindering religious freedom. They opposed Gamal Abdel Nasser and attempted to assassinate him in 1954.

These groups used mass media to reach young people, and they spread all over Egypt. They divided the Egyptian people into two segments: Muslims and non-Muslims.

Terms dating back to the Middle Ages started to reappear in books, articles and sermons in mosques, terms like as *ahl dhimma* (free non-Muslim subject living in a Muslim country, who in return for paying a per capita tax, receives protection and safety), 'land of Islam' (Islamists tend to divide the

world in a part ruled by Islam and another part not ruled by Islam), and *ahl al-kufr* (nonbelievers). Muslim imams began to spread the idea of the re-establishment of Islamic rule. They called for an ideal Islamic state similar to Plato's "utopia" based on Islam, Islamic legislation, and Islamic morals. The activities of these religious groups reached their peak on October 6, 1981 with the assassination of President Anwar Sadat.

Egypt entered a dark period in its history. The Egyptian Church withdrew within itself awaiting better times. There was a wave of terrorist attacks and Egyptians feared a dark future after some intellectuals and authors, including Naguib Mahfouz, Farag Foda, and Shaykh al-Dhahabi, became targets for terrorist attacks.

President Mubarak was able to control the situation and restore equilibrium in Egyptian society. Nevertheless, the term 'religious freedom' is still under discussion between, on the one hand, enlightened Muslims and Christians and on the other, those who adhere to old, fundamentalist ways of thinking.

Further darkness plagued Egypt as extremist Islamic groups persecuted Copts. Their attacks targeted Coptic churches, schools, farmers, merchants and students. The future seemed black. Religious freedom and political freedom were neglected. Extremists tried to destroy Egypt, dreaming of establishing an Islamic government. They had a single aim: "Islam is the solution."

How did Egypt find the chink of light needed to get out of the darkness of this period; the period from a little before Sadat's assassination in 1981 until the mid-nineties in President Mubarak's rule?

How was the Egyptian psyche able to get over this nightmarish experience after it had affected every facet of Egyptian life with its terrifying specters

and after Islamic groups had become widespread within the state apparatus, and even controlled syndicates, universities, and media outlets?

Some imams promoted extremism and contempt for anything that is not seen as Islamic. The spread of the *niqab* seemed to end the existence of women, just as extremism tries to make centers of thought and analysis visible.

The number of veiled women, girls, and children increased. Religious freedom vanished completely and the Egyptian psyche became full of panic and anxiety.

How was Egypt able to move on from this bleak period and how did the concept of 'religious freedom' start to re-appear? It was President Mubarak's wisdom, clarity, and complete loyalty to Egypt that stopped this destructive hurricane of extremism. In addition to this the following reasons also helped in ending extremism:

A) The nature of the Egyptian people.

Egyptians are not violent or extremist by nature because of Egypt's unique history and unique geographical position, as Dr. Gamal Hemdan explained in his encyclopedic book, *Egypt's Identity*. In Egypt, there are Christians and a Christian church that was respected from the very beginning by the conquering Muslims. The Coptic Church is still present in Egyptian life.

Egypt cannot be compared to Lebanon or Algeria. Egypt is a nation that cannot be divided into tribes and clans. The only division, which is promoted by extremists, is religious division. Egypt has never had a civil war—it has only ever suffered oppression at the hands of its rulers and their followers.

The migration of millions of Egyptians to oil-rich countries and their subsequent, wealthier return had a negative effect on Egyptian national and cultural identity. The minds of those Egyptians became filled with the extremist dogma that prevails in the Gulf countries, particularly the Wahhabi idea that all that is non-Islamic is *kufr* (unbelief). I believe that this wave is receding as a result of the flexible nature of the Egyptian people, who reject bloodshed and violence. Furthermore, the daily co-existence of Muslims and Christians in Egypt has brought the two groups together. It has removed the tarnish on the Egyptian psyche from the negative effects of extremist media and the effects of living in extremist Islamic countries.

If there were no illiteracy, which is sadly all too prevalent among both members of the lower classes and women, terrorism and extremism would be unlikely to reappear and the public space would allow greater religious freedom. Culture, enlightenment and dissent, and fair media would help give religious freedom a bright future.

B) Some intellectuals were courageous and made a pioneering stand against extremism and fanaticism, also defended Christians in certain cases. Those intellectuals courageously called for religious freedom. The assassination of Farag Foda in Cairo and the attempted assassination of Naguib Mahfouz prompted intellectuals to stand up to extremism.

C) Christian schools, especially the 170 Catholic schools which are run by monks and nuns in cooperation with Muslims, enhanced Muslim-Christian co-existence and developed a kind of common culture. Fifty percent of their students are Muslim. The graduates of these schools are the intellectual and artistic elite and they both reject violence and advocate religious freedom. The role of Christian schools in Egyptian society is one of the strongest reasons for progress in Egypt.

D) The efforts of extremists and fanatics to curb the spread of Western culture, science and technology have failed. This is despite both their strong opposition to an imported civilization that is accused of *kufr* and satellite TV channels that preach extremism and fanaticism.

Religious freedom in the Arab World is going through a challenging time at the moment, but in all likelihood this will neither avert the course of progress nor end people's thirst for knowledge and freedom.

E) Arab strategies for dealing with the Palestinian issue have failed, on top of their failures in Iraq, Algeria and Sudan. Arab peoples suffer from overwhelming illiteracy and they live under the rule of what can only be called totalitarian regimes when one compares them with the freedom allowed to people in the West. These failures prompted Arab people to question the validity of the religiously motivated movements and the results they could actually achieve. The level of competence of Arab people in various fields has deteriorated. It seems that Arab people have started to lose confidence in extremist movements and have begun to develop an inclination towards increasing religious freedom. This is occurring in addition to two things: an increasing awareness of human rights as well as the fall of several Arab dictators. The Islamic governments in Iran and Sudan have failed to achieve progress and have stifled the freedom of intellectuals and artists. It has been, and continues to be shown that progress is unachievable in societies based on religious fanaticism and extremism. Freedom is inevitable and it is the only basis for progress in any society.

In conclusion, I believe that the following pages of Dr. Cornelis are a true and fair presentation of the facts. I am sure that they will help not only in understanding the state of religion in Egypt but also, as I would like, in increasing freedom within Egyptian society.

Religious freedom is slowly increasing in Egypt. Egypt is following the same pattern as other Arab and Muslim countries. It seems that the Egyptian psyche is beginning to realize that freedom is not in conflict with religion. Instead, it is the enemy of violence and extremism.

An important movement advocating freedom has started to gain new ground among various segments of the Egyptian society.

The influence of fundamentalist ideologies in the Gulf countries has receded after they were shaken by violence. These countries have discovered that extremism is the enemy of progress.

The status of religion in Egypt is changing and there is increasing freedom here that will in time grow to extend to various Arab and Muslim peoples.

Freedom is the starting point for civilization and progress.

1.3. Introduction to the 2005 Edition

Cornelis Hulsman, September 2004

This report is based on ten years of monitoring religious freedom in Egypt through systematically following media discussions and investigative reporting for the *Religious News Service from the Arab World* and its successor *Arab-West Report* in Cairo, Egypt, in the period 1994-2004.

Freedom of religion in Egypt cannot be understood without placing it in the context of Egyptian history and the polarization that has rapidly grown between the Arab World and the West after September 11, 2001, a development that has increased Arab feelings of frustration toward the West. The text of this report is therefore split into four sections. This first

section introduces the question of religious freedom in Egypt and why this is a particularly important study to be done at this point in time. The second section provides a short history of Egypt with a general background to issues of religious freedom in modern Egypt, as well as outlining the need to place these issues in their proper cultural context. The third section describes the legal status of Muslims and Christians in Egypt, both in theoretical and practical terms. In the fourth chapter conclusions are drawn.

Understanding the social context for this study is very important. This means not only looking at laws and their legal applications but also trying to understand the society in its wider context, including its history, social values such as honor and shame, current affairs, the role of religion in society and socio-economic factors such as illiteracy and poverty.

Egypt is a very religious society. Many people believe that the laws God ordained should prevail over the laws people have created, whether they were passed by a democratic government or not. Egypt is also a strongly community-oriented society and thus communal interests often prevail over the interests of individual people. Understanding the culture of honor and shame adds an extra layer of insight as these strong emotions can dramatically affect the way information is reported and presented, whether anecdotally or in the press.

Many reports have appeared in the West about freedom of religion in non-Western countries, including Egypt. Those reports tended to focus on one particular religious segment of society, often Christians or Jews, without taking the entire society into account. This has resulted in misconceptions and inaccurate interpretations of the situation, sometimes by the author(s) of a report but very frequently by the readers of those reports because they were not sufficiently informed of the social and cultural context of the facts reported.

There is a strong tendency in the West to simply accept statements or claims about human rights issues when they are critical of Islam and Muslims or to associate patterns of behavior such as a tendency toward conspiracy theories or religious fundamentalism with Muslim cultures. These assumptions are wildly inaccurate. Such traits are neither culture- nor religion-specific; they affect both Egyptian Muslims and Christians and, naturally, many Muslims and Christians also oppose those tendencies.

In Western societies, one finds many activist groups trying to influence the politicians in their country, often through efforts to influence public opinion. Most have laudable goals such as advocating for a universal basic human rights standard, or raising the standard of living for the poor and for the most vulnerable segments of society while others focus specifically on the interests of particular groups, whether religious, ethnic, or otherwise.

However, some Western religious groups believe that their group's interests are best served by attacking their perceived adversaries, often Muslims, though this can also extend to anyone who opposes their worldview. This brand of activists will tend to offer the most inflammatory or negative interpretation of events possible, often with an anti-Muslim slant, building on existing anti-Muslim points of view.

In addition to activists, some Western politicians and journalists have been espousing anti-Muslim sentiments in an apparent effort to gain the sympathy of a wider public. They tend to give more credit to the claims of Christians in the Arab World and (secular-) Muslim[4] human rights or

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[4]   It is important to note the different connotations of "secular" and "Muslim" in each culture. In the Arab world, secular tends to imply atheistic or anti-religious with very negative connotations whereas in the west, secular has a more positive connotation referring to the separation of religion and state. Similarly, to call someone a Muslim in the Western world would imply that that person actively practices their faith whereas in the Arab world, one's religious designation only reveals the religion one was born into, not whether one continues to practice or not. Thus the same person may be referred to as Muslim in Egypt but also described as secular in the west.

democracy activists who appear critical of their government, than they do to other voices.

Christian leaders and intellectuals in Egypt who voice opinions differing from those mentioned above, particularly those who claim that Muslim-Christian relations are far better than represented by activists in the West, are generally not heard. The situation is exacerbated by the fact that these leaders are often only asked for their perspectives in areas already known to be problematic, for example obtaining permits for church building and repairs, but rarely are they asked about the overall relations between Muslims and Christians in their region.

It is the Western activist perspective that is most well-known in the West. The nature of their work leads activists to be particularly efficient, effective, and pro-active communicators; they do so to a Western public hoping this will result in Western political pressure on another country that will help them to achieve their aims. An example of this would be the U.S. Copts Association lobbying the U.S. Congress to pressure the Egyptian Government to accept more Egyptian Christians in high level positions. In contrast, many ordinary citizens are less concerned with these issues, more reticent with their views and rarely offer them voluntarily to the Western public unless they have been specifically approached to so.

Yousef Sidhom writes: "It is the voice of the vociferous minority which is usually heard, even though their views do not represent those of the majority of expatriate Copts." They imagine their work is being effective, however, Sidhom writes, "they [have] succeeded only in solving a few individual problems" in Egypt but have "failed on the more basic level of attaining full citizenship rights and equality for Copts in Egypt."[5] In other words, Sidhom feels that focusing on small, individual successes is

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[5]   Yusuf Sidhum, "The Vociferous Minority," *Arab-West Report*, Week 25, Art. 45, June 20 2004, http://arabwestreport.info/year-2004/week-25/45-vociferous-minority.

counterproductive to implementing more structural, systemic change especially when those voices for change are coming from outside of Egypt.

Coptic activists in the West, especially those living in English speaking countries, such as the U.S., Canada, Australia, and the UK, have been very active in reaching out to the other members of their own Coptic communities in the West, creating great anxiety among them over the well-being of their relatives back in Egypt. They often report on issues that are, admittedly, underreported in Egyptian media, but they will report incidents without adequate knowledge of the local context, leading to a distorted representation of the issue. This information will be posted on their websites, which young Egyptian Copts, who have little faith in mainstream Egyptian media, will visit and because alternative sources of information are often not available, will begin to generate fear, stimulate anti-Muslim sentiments and feelings of persecution.

This tense situation is exacerbated by a major language barrier. With the exception of migrants from Arab countries, not many people in the West read or write Arabic and thus a Western public generally relies on what is presented or translated for them by activists– which are often a selection of texts that have been taken completely out of context. Important reports and books such as *Al-Ahram*'s "Al-Hala Diniya" ("The State of Religion"; an excellent overview of religious institutions and developments, among both Muslims and Christians in Egypt), or reports by Justice and Peace[6] that do explain important cultural features are generally not translated.

Bishop Dr. Mounir Hanna Anis, Episcopal Bishop of Egypt, is one of the Christian leaders who is outspoken about the negative consequences of poor human rights reporting.

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[6]   The Egyptian branch of an international Catholic organization whose financial and administrative operations are autonomous and independent from the mother organization.

When rumors start here in Egypt, and are picked up by people and Christians in the West, they become magnified and transferred back to Christians back here in Egypt so we see the magnified picture. It doesn't help at all because once it is a false picture or magnified picture, it doesn't help any party. It doesn't help Christians here because it will breed self-pity. It doesn't help Christians in the West [who] become worried about relatives and friends in Egypt. And it doesn't help Christian/Muslim relations because the Muslims see that the Christians are making false reports and false stories about them. So they feel somehow attacked. And definitely, this will affect the Christian/Muslim relations here as well.[7]

Muslims see that some people in the West have been spreading falsehoods about them, and this has precipitated angry responses in the Egyptian media. What exacerbates this problem is that the general public in Egypt does not always make the distinction between Copts living in Egypt and Copts living in the West. When Egyptian Muslims hear that Western Copts are accusing them of persecuting Copts in Egypt, many will assume that the Egyptian Copts believe the same thing as their Western counterparts and so will transfer their rage accordingly. Another tendency, particularly among members of the public who are poorer and less educated when they read these reports is to assume that all Westerners are Christian – forgetting that there are many other significant religious and secular populations living in the West.

Holding this single misconception alone would make it difficult for readers to interpret journalism on religious affairs accurately. However, in combination with the other misconceptions we have mentioned, added to the plentiful sources of misinformation found at every level of reporting, it ensures very poor communication. Take, for example, the situation when

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[7]   Interview with Bishop Dr. Mounir Hanna Anis, August 2004.

someone wants to obtain a building permit for a church building. A Western journalist may hear about the difficulties a church has had in obtaining a building permit. This journalist may not be aware that the situation is an exception to the rule and write as if the struggle for building permits is an example of religious persecution in Egypt. The Egyptian journalist who reads this piece and who knows the local context better may assume that the misinformation in the first article is a deliberate attempt to slander and malign Muslim culture. The average Egyptian reader could read this inflammatory piece and assume that Egyptian Copts do not like or trust Muslims and are spreading lies about them. One can easily see how in a context of mistrust and cultural, religious, and linguistic differences, a little bit of information can be a very dangerous thing.

The belief is strong in Egypt that their country is usually unfairly represented in the Western media which has contributed to the increase in anti-Muslim sentiment in the West. There is also widespread belief that the attitude of the West is quite often hypocritical, downplaying the importance of human rights violations in Western countries, Israel and the Palestinian territories, during the US occupation of Iraq and elsewhere. Many Egyptians believe that Western political interest in religious freedom or human rights is little but an effort to exert political pressure on countries in the Arab world. There is also a strong belief that the Arab world is quite powerless to do anything about any of this, a belief that does little to enable open, frank, and honest discussion. What attempts there are at discussion are made more difficult by the intense emotion that these issues bring out in people. This often leads to exaggerated accusations, which even though they may be partially true, will be categorically denied, so the cycle of accusation and denial simply escalates with increasing anger on both sides. The combined effect of the above for both Egyptian officials and the public is not only a sense of futility, but an instinct to shut down communication with foreigners out of sheer frustration and lack of hope that any level of understanding can be reached.

Another consequence of the above is increased polarization, a widening of the dichotomies between Egypt and the West, Muslims and Christians, and between Western Christians and Egyptian Christians. This increasing psychological distance, this lack of information and this lack of communication between parties leaves all sides feeling defensive and none with the desire to work toward mutual understanding. The fearfulness of people in these scenarios is understandable, and sometimes justified, but the problem is that the fear is often paralyzing, once again closing down possibilities for dialogue and serving no one's best interest except, perhaps, the interest groups, whose misrepresentation of the situation engendered the split in the first place. The anger this polarization unleashes only appears to justify everyone's position, turning activism into a destructive self-fulfilling prophecy.

This is the general background for AWR's report on religious freedom in Egypt. The purpose is to respond to questions commonly asked in the West and to provide balanced answers reflecting the context of Egyptian society and culture today. Our goal is not to advocate changes but to understand the current status of religious freedom in Egypt, in context.

Finally, we would certainly appreciate your feedback as it will help us to further refine and improve future editions of this report.

Drs. Cornelis Hulsman
September 6, 2004

2. The Context of Muslim-Christian relations in Egypt

2.1. History

Egypt is a country with a complex history dating back thousands of years and its modern culture incorporates influences from many great

civilizations, from Pharaonic to Greco-Roman, from Coptic Christian to Islamic.

Both Christianity and Islam came to Egypt shortly after their respective founding. Neither are newcomers to the country; in fact, both religions are deeply rooted in Egypt's cultural fabric as is apparent through its physical landscape through the presence of many ancient churches and mosques.

However, Christians were strongly persecuted in the Roman period until Emperor Constantine (306-337 A.D.) came to power and later converted to Christianity himself. Many Egyptian Christians, certainly most Orthodox clergy, consider the 4th and 5th centuries to be the golden age of Egyptian Christianity, the days of many of the great church fathers of the Coptic Orthodox church and the days that Egypt turned into a predominantly Christian country. The decline of Christianity came after the schism at the Council of Chalcedon between Chaledonians and non-Chalcedonians[8] in 451 AD followed by the persecution of the Egyptian church by the Byzantine church. As a result, many Copts saw the invading Arabs in 639-641 AD as liberators from the Byzantines. The Arabs called the Christian inhabitants of Egypt 'Qibt', an abbreviation from the Greek *Aegyptos*. The word Copt therefore means Egyptian. Over the ages the word has become synonymous to Christian Egyptian.

The first generation of Copts after the Arab conquest received many privileges including being granted former Byzantine property but soon the young Muslim government found itself in need of greater resources in order to maintain the wars they were involved in abroad and placed increasingly heavy taxes on all Egyptians, including Copts who *also* had to

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[8]   Chalcedonian corresponds roughly to what we now identify as western Christianity: Roman Catholic, Byzantine, Eastern Orthodox (including Greek and Russian), Protestant. Non-Chalcedonian refers roughly to eastern Christianity: Oriental Orthodox including Coptic, Syrian, Armenian, and Ethiopian.

pay the *gizya*, a poll tax for Christians only. Many Christians even converted to Islam in an effort to avoid the *gizya.*

The history of Christians in Egypt since the Islamic conquest has been seen by many Christians as a mixed blessing. Some rulers did acknowledge the contributions of Christians, giving them high level government positions, which made it possible to build some of Egypt's greatest churches while at other times Christians were persecuted, as in the 11th century[9] when churches were being destroyed. The treatment of Christians in Egypt has also been affected by external influences such as Arab-Western antagonism following the Crusades.

When the French invaded Egypt in 1798 they found a relatively small and weakened church. There were hardly any Christians left in the Delta which had become almost entirely Muslim. At the time, Christianity was concentrated in Upper Egypt (southern Egypt) where large isolated areas were entirely Christian. Those Christians who held higher positions in society tended to live in Cairo. The position of Christians improved tremendously in the 19th century during the autocratic rule of Mohammed Ali (1806-1849) who introduced many economic and educational reforms The *gizya* was abolished and from that point onward Christians and Muslims were taxed equally. Many Upper Egyptian Christians began to migrate to the Delta because of the better economic opportunities found in the north.

Part of Mohammed Ali's educational reforms was to begin allowing Catholic and Protestant foreign missions to enter the country and establish schools. As a result, many Orthodox Christians converted to these western denominations which created feelings of resentment among many Orthodox leaders against Western Christian influences and they

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[9]   Life for Christians under the tyrannical and temperamental Caliph Hakim bi-Amr illah Abu was particularly challenging – including being forbidden from riding horses, being forced to wear black and churches being burned and replaced by mosques. Strangely enough, Hakim's own mother was Christian.

denounced Western missionary activities. But at the same time, these events helped initiate a reform movement in the Coptic Orthodox Church that in the mid-20th century became known as the Sunday School Movement. The Sunday School Movement was, in large part, a reaction to the growing presence of Protestant missionaries and the secularization of the educational system. Through telling Bible stories and the lives of the Saints at Sunday School (though of course the schools were on Fridays), stories where the emphasis when performing the Christian rites was more on individual spirituality than blind faith, they aimed to inspire young people through religious education.

Upper Egypt, isolated for centuries, opened up considerably in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Canals, roads, and later, railways did a lot to improve the communication between Upper Egypt and Cairo where the better educational and economic opportunities were. Copts started migrating, first slowly but later in larger numbers from Upper Egypt to Cairo, primarily. It is estimated that around 1920 80% of all Egyptian Christians lived in Upper Egypt. Today, an estimated 50% of all Egyptian Christians lives in Upper Egypt. This reflects a significant migration from the villages to the cities and from the cities in Upper Egypt to Cairo, and since the 1970s many of the better educated Christians have tried to find a way to Western countries, primarily the United States, Canada, Western European countries, and Australia. Migration has had a tremendous effect on the Christian communities in Egypt. Many areas in Upper Egypt that were predominantly Christian have seen an increase in their Muslim population due to migration, conversion and, on average Christians having smaller families.

For a symbol of national unity between Christians and Muslims, Egyptian media often refer to the nationalist revolt in 1919 when Muslims and Copts stood hand in hand in opposition to the British occupation of their country. The Coptic support for the nationalist movement was followed by Copts achieving high positions in the ruling Wafd Party and government. The

Coptic aristocracy was primarily one based on great wealth and land holdings that were largely lost after the 1952 Revolution. Land reforms and nationalization did not target Copts in particular but they did rob the Coptic elite of their positions and wealth.

Gamal Abdel Nasser, Egypt's charismatic revolutionary leader, did much to reduce the huge differences between the landed aristocracy and Egypt's *fellahin*, or peasants and serfs. The differences in wealth were extreme with many rich people living in huge mansions surrounded by the mud brick houses of the peasants. The land of the rich was re-divided and given to the poor. Much attention was given to making education available for all. Nasser also developed the concept of Arab nationalism, giving Egyptians a sense of pride and nationhood. But the autocratic Nasser also built up a police state with help of the Soviet Union and treated all opponents ruthlessly, both on the left and the right. Sayyed Qutb, a prominent Islamist ideologue was executed and many others were subject to torture in Egyptian prisons.

President Nasser died in 1970 and was succeeded by his vice-president, Anwar Sadat (1970-1981), who widened the gap between modernizing and conservative forces. Sadat wanted to create his own powerbase and did so by trying to dismantle the powerbase of his predecessor (which was made up of prominent leftists, secular-oriented Nasserists and Communists) and through giving more space to Islamists who had, up until that time, been persecuted by Nasser. Islamists or Muslims advocating political Islam differ from one another mainly in terms of their level of militancy, but all believe that Egypt, and other predominantly Muslim nations, should be ruled by Islamic principles, foremost through the application of the *sharī'ah*, Islamic law. What everyone wants to know, and what is most notoriously difficult to estimate, is what percentage of Egyptian Muslims are also Islamists. It is difficult to estimate, but the percentage is certainly substantial and growing. Probably around 20-25% of Egypt's Muslims are Islamists.

In 1971, Pope Shenouda was elected Patriarch, the first patriarch who had his roots in the Sunday School Movement. He led the opposition against the application of the *sharī'ah* on a national level, resulting in frequent clashes with the president, and an increasing number of incidents where not only Christians, but also Muslims, have been killed, their property defaced or destroyed, etc.

The increased religious fervor has also resulted in greater Muslim and Christian missionary fervor, much of which has been by Protestants, though not exclusively so. The number of Christians converting to Islam has grown rapidly, particularly from Sadat's time to the present. Church leaders do not have statistics but the estimates have been growing. Some Muslims also converted to Christianity; their numbers have always been very small but their arrests have often resulted in high profile attention in Western (Christian) media. Conversions from one religion to the other have two major effects: 1) it creates fear among Christians who have had friends or family members convert to Islam, that perhaps other Muslims may also try to convert their children to Islam; and, 2) the high profile attention for Muslim converts to Christianity creates fear among Muslims toward Christian missionary activities and generates increased enthusiasm among Muslims to try to reach Christians with the message of Islam.

There is also contention over the estimates given of the percentage of the population that is Coptic Christian; estimates range from anywhere between 5 to 20%. In reality, it is closer to 6% and thus the percentage of Christian youth converting to Islam could be as high as 10% of the natural growth of the Church.

The tensions during the Sadat years reached their low point in 1981 when Sadat arrested thousands of Muslim leaders and hundreds of Christian leaders, both clergy and non-clergy, in reaction to earlier clashes between Christians and Muslims. Pope Shenouda was sent into internal exile in the

monastery of Bishoi between Cairo and Alexandria. Nonetheless, Sadat was not without support in the Coptic Orthodox Church. Many leading Copts in the 1980s disagreed with Pope Shenouda's almost militant defense of the Church in Egypt.

Father Matta al-Meskeen, the father of Coptic monastic reform, told *Time* magazine (28.9.1981): "Shenouda's appointment was the beginning of the trouble. The mind replaced inspiration, and planning replaced prayer. For the first years I prayed for him, but I see the church is going from bad to worse because of his behavior...I can't say I'm happy, but I am at peace now. Every morning I was expecting news of more bloody collisions. Sadat's actions protect the church and the Copts. They are from God."

A week later, Sadat was killed by Muslim militants during a military parade on October 6, 1981. President Mubarak took over and gradually released the imprisoned leaders. Pope Shenouda was allowed to return in January 1986. He reduced the influence of bishops who had opposed him and divided bishoprics into smaller units after a bishop had passed away. This brought bishops closer to the people, but also reduced the scale of their influence. Pope Shenouda's relationship with the government had changed, becoming less confrontational and with more emphasis on trying to find solutions, in concert with Egyptian officials.

The Islamist influence remained. They had gained control over the student campuses and many student organizations in the 1970s. After they graduated, they worked to gain control over the professional syndicates in the 1980s and 1990s. They have succeeded in this effort, at least in part, within the syndicates of medicine, engineering, and law. Later on, financial mismanagement or allegations of it has lost them some popular support.

Since the thwarted assassination attempt of President Mubarak in 1995, the Egyptian government has arrested thousands of Islamists and military courts have convicted many of them for subversive activities.

Immediately after the attack on a church in Abu Qirqas (February 1997) which left nine Christians dead, Dr. Hamdy Zaqzouq, Minister of Endowments, vowed during a press conference to bring all private mosques under government control, as at least one of the shaykhs in Abu Qirqas had been preaching radical sermons for years, helping to create a negative atmosphere toward the government and Christians. This course of action affected tens of thousands of independent private mosques. Now all preachers are required to have government licensing, a stipulation against which some Islamists protested. "Why license only Muslim preachers and not Christian priests?" they have asked. Once preachers are licensed they are subject to the control of the Ministry of Endowments. A preacher therefore can be charged and tried if he violates the basic principles of Islam or calls for violence.

The government's determination to combat extremists intensified after the killing of 58 tourists in Luxor in November 1997, an incident which caused a sharp slump in tourism for nearly two years, costing Egyptians billions of dollars in income.

This attack was followed by an effective crackdown on militancy. Reports of attacks or attempted attacks on the Egyptian police, political leaders, Coptic Christians, Muslim opponents to Islamists and tourists stopped. Christians in Mallawi, a city 292 km south of Cairo, that was once a hotbed of extremism say their city has become much safer now. Shops that were once closed have reopened; foreigners are able to visit the city once again.

Peace has returned to the country and has paid dividends for the tourism industry but the years of extremism have also left deep scars in society. Older Christians and Muslims frequently speak with some nostalgia about the days before the religious tensions in the 1970s, when relations between Muslims and Christians were generally amicable. The violent extremism of the 1970s, 80s and 90s and conversions of mainly young Christian women

has resulted in a fear of Muslims among Christians, especially in areas that had been affected by tensions, and resulted in reduced in inter-religious relations. This becomes obvious when one asks young Muslims or Copts if they have close personal friends who are not from their own religion. Although, good friendships between Muslims and Copts still exist, all appearances indicate they are fewer in number than they were, in, for example, the 1960s when the communities mixed more.

Poverty is widespread and both mosques and churches have built hundreds, if not thousands, of hospitals and clinics throughout the country. Many mosques and churches provide social activities, try to tackle the problems of illiteracy and poverty, get engaged in education, and have income and employment generating projects. Projects such as these have increased the strength of religious organizations in their respective communities.

The government is currently walking on a tightrope. They have responded to some Christian requests such as declaring Coptic Christmas a national holiday in 2003 or allowing the high profile commemoration in 2000 of the arrival of the Holy Family's flight to Egypt, according to Matthew 2, two millennia ago.

Matthew 2:13-14: The angel of the Lord appeareth to Joseph in a dream, saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and flee into Egypt, and be thou there until I bring thee word: for Herod will seek the young child to destroy him. When he arose, he took the young child and his mother by night and departed into Egypt.

On the other hand, the government has had to keep a watchful eye on the strong Muslim religious sentiments in society. The Palestinian Intifadah, the harsh Israeli response and the U.S. invasion of Iraq have strengthened Islamist and anti-Western sentiments. Egyptian newspapers, on the other hand, often publish highly critical articles about Islamists, including the

Muslim Brotherhood, and question whether they sincerely believe in democracy. It is imperative that we keep this context in mind when we are discussing religious freedom in Egypt.

2.2. Consequences of September 11, 2001

On September 11, 2001 terrorists hijacked three American commercial jets and flew them into the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington. A fourth plane was hijacked, but crashed before it could reach its target.

Anti-Muslim sentiments in the West and anti-Western or anti-Christian sentiments in the Islamic world certainly existed prior to September 11, 2001, but these feelings of animosity and mistrust received a tremendous boost in the aftermath of the terrorist attack.

According to investigations led by the United States, the attackers were Muslims from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, and the United Arab Emirates. This discovery resulted in an outpouring of anti-Muslim sentiment in the West. Muslims were attacked, mosques were damaged, Islamic schools and institutes were targeted. A Coptic Christian in the U.S. was killed, apparently because the attackers mistook him for a Muslim. Some Coptic Christians in the West started wearing obvious Christian symbols such as crosses in order to avoid being mistaken for Muslim.

The attacks on Muslims in the West were mirrored by those against Christians in some Muslim countries, such as the tragic attack in October 2001 on a church in Bahawalpur in Pakistan in which 16 Christian worshippers were killed.

In contrast, the religious situation in Egypt remained relatively calm. Muslims in Egypt did not respond to Western attacks on Muslims with similar attacks on Christians in Egypt.

These attacks on Muslims in the West tended to be interpreted by westerners as isolated incidents that were not representative of Western sentiment as a whole. Egypt had a similar interpretation of the situation in the early 1990's when extremists attacked both Muslims and Christians in Egypt as well as at times tourists in order to harm Egypt's tourism industry. Government officials and non-officials frequently denounced tragic incidents perpetrated by extremists and stated that they did not believe these acts reflected Egyptian sentiments in general. Given this, it was upsetting that these incidents were fixated upon in the West and that people often used them to condemn Islam as being the real culprit for them. This happened in spite of all of the Muslim leaders who have consistently denounced terrorists operating under the name of Islam as acting completely contrary to the religion.

Many Muslims and Christians believe that God has allowed this tragedy to happen; therefore it must have happened for a reason. Some also believe that the U.S. brought this attack upon itself for its unjust foreign policy toward the Middle East. The U.S. is widely seen as the big bully in the region, showing obvious favoritism to Israel by neglecting Israeli crimes against Palestinians and pursuing an unjust policy towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The U.S. has supported the Israelis in taking more and more Palestinian land while robbing the Palestinians of their water resources, ultimately leaving the Palestinians with no place to live. The people of Iraq were punished through a twelve-year trade embargo for the doings of their leaders, focusing on alleged possession of weapons of mass destruction which have never been found, while at the same time the U.S. turned a blind eye to Israel developing its own weapons of mass destruction. This list is quite extensive and can be supplemented with many more examples from Arabic sources that demonstrate that the U.S. inspired little confidence or sympathy from the Arab World even before September 11.

However, U.S. policy following September 11 did little to improve the situation. The attack on the U.S. was followed in the next two years by U.S.-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. The invasion of Iraq was particularly criticized, not out of any sympathy for the Iraqi rulers but for the havoc and suffering it brought upon the Iraqi people, not to mention that it was a unilateral invasion in defiance of both world opinion and the UN Security Council.

September 11 was followed by an outburst of articles in the West in which authors vented their negative opinions about the Arab and Muslim world. As stated previously, similar sentiments existed prior to September 11 but the events of that day gave them a significant boost.

Several Christian leaders in the U.S., including Jerry Vines, Jerry Falwell, and Pat Robertson, made highly derogatory comments about Islam that were widely reported in the Arab world. In contrast, Egyptian Muslim leaders of a similar status have never made such derogatory statements about the Christian faith.

This situation has left Muslims in the West feeling like they have been put on the defensive. Dr. Nasr Abu Zeid wrote to me in the weeks following September 11 saying: "I do not have to tell you what an unpleasant context it is to be a Muslim living in Europe nowadays. It is even more exhausting to be a Muslim scholar of Islamic Studies who has to deal with all the misinformed statements spreading through the media about Islam and Muslims." Dr. Zeid was not alone in this feeling; he reflected a sentiment shared by many Muslims.

A number of smaller religious journals in the West, both print and electronic, printed articles that took Qur'anic verses out of context and gave them interpretations no Muslim scholar would ever accept. Sometimes references were made to the Qur'anic interpretations of well-

known Islamic radicals, thus creating the misleading impression that they were representative of mainstream Islamic thought.

Several organizations and the media in the West focused on specific articles in the Arabic press or on the emotional, angry statements of some writers, frequently neglecting to provide adequate context and thus giving the average Western reader a very distorted picture of the Arab World. Reports in the *Guardian* (August 12, 2002), *On-Line Journalism* (April 2, 2002)[10] and *Neue Zurcher Zeitung* (November 29, 2002)[11] were explicit in criticizing the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI) for its reporting choices.

The MEMRI presented a report in October 2001 titled, "Egypt's Al-Azhar Clerics: We Declare War on America." The title is highly inflammatory: it feeds the existing dominant view in the West that Islam is anti-American, anti-Western, and anti-Christian - all of which serve to deepen the belief that no reconciliation with Islam is possible and that a war with Islam is inevitable. This was no longer an example of selective journalism but deliberate misrepresentation. The report implies that many, if not most, Azhar scholars declared war on America. Quotes in the report were included from six scholars, four of them belonging to the Azhar. Furthermore, of the four Azhar scholars none were actually entitled to speak on behalf of the Azhar; they represented a train of thought that is rejected by the Azhar administration. We wrote to the MEMRI, asking them to explain their rationale but on December 9, 2002 they responded to us with a threat: "Next time you relate to us we will sue you in the Netherlands."[12]

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[10]   See also *Religious News Service from the Arab World*, 2002, Week 45, Art. 15-19.

[11]   "Gloomy view of Arabic media; an institute translates newspaper articles and TV-broadcasts," *Neue Zuercher Zeitung*, November 29, 2002, translated in *Arab-West Report*, Week 3, Art. 32. November 29, 2002, http://www.arabwestreport.info/year-2003/week-3/32-gloomy-view-arabic-media-institute-translates-newspaper-articles-and-tv.

[12]   Cornelis Hulsman, "The Israeli-Palestinian conflict results in polarized media," *Religious News Service from the Arab World*, Week 48, Art. 19, December 7, 2002, http://arabwestreport.info/year-

It is clear that the Western media operate under a host of misconceptions and biases, but members of the Arab media are guilty of similar biases. Some of the Arab media make reports about Western biases, but when doing this they are just as selective as many of their Western colleagues, giving the impression that most people in the West are anti-Arab and anti-Muslim. Others use an arsenal of 'techniques' to arouse the anti-Western sentiments of their readers: using unclear or vague sources, making it difficult to verify the claims made in a text, giving far-fetched interpretations quite far removed from the facts, using generalizations and exaggerations, writing highly opinionated texts and sometimes using explicitly offensive language and gross distortions. Some do this to vent their great frustrations toward the West. Others do this in the mistaken belief that they are "defending Islam."

The media both reflect and reinforce popular sentiments, in both the West and the Arab World. The problem is that most people, from journalists to activists to the general public, tend to accept information uncritically if it fits into particular preconceived ideas about 'the other'. Stereotypes and prejudices are rarely broken but instead are confirmed and reconfirmed. This happens at all level of society and across all mediums of expression.

This growing polarization since September 11, as expressed by the irresponsible statements of some Western opinion makers and journalists, has increased the level of unjustified fear in the West toward the Arab and Islamic world and, conversely, increased fear in the Arab World that the West has rapidly become anti-Muslim and is deliberately trying to crush Islam. It is alarming to discover how many individual Muslims from all

2002/week-48/19-israeli-palestinian-conflict-results-polarized-media and Cornelis Hulsman, "MEMRI responding to the *RELIGIOUS NEWS SERVICE FROM THE ARAB WORLD*," Week 48, Art. 20, December 7, 2002, http://arabwestreport.info/year-2002/week-48/20-memri-responding-*Religious News Service from the Arab World*; Cornelis Hulsman, "International Christian Concern responds," Week 49, Art. 21, December 14, 2002, http://arabwestreport.info/year-2002/week-49/21-international-christian-concern-responds.

walks of life believe this. That belief may be exaggerated but, unfortunately, it is not without justification.

Egyptian schoolbooks pay particular attention to the Crusades, Napoleon's brutal suppression of Muslim resistance, and to Western colonialism of Muslim countries (including Egypt), rather than to examples of mutual cooperation in history, so tending to reinforce negative impressions about the West. Western support for Israel at the expense of the Palestinians and the U.S.-British occupation of Iraq fit the pattern that has been outlined in Egyptian textbooks.

German researcher Wolfram Reiss completed a study of Egyptian text books (More on this study in Section 3.8: The Freedom to Pursue Education) that came to a similar conclusion as above: that the historical facts themselves are correct, however the careful selection of which facts to include and a lack of proper context reveal a wariness toward Western nations. It is thus not surprising then that when President Bush used the word, 'crusade' after September 11 that this was not seen as simply an accidental lapse but proof that the Western crusade against the Islamic East has continued since medieval times and only its appearance has changed through the ages.[13]

The second characteristic of Egyptian schoolbooks is the promotion of the belief that the Arab-Islamic culture is superior to that of the West. Although we do not have a specific study to cite regarding Western textbooks, it would be safe to say that Western schoolbooks are no different in propagating a belief that Western modernity is superior to cultures from "the Orient."

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[13]   Wolfram Reiss, "Europa - der Erzfeind der islamisch-arabischen Kultur? Die Darstellung des Christentums in ägyptischen Schulbüchern," In *Koexistenz und Konfrontation*, ed. Martin *Tamcke* (Hamburg: LIT 2003) pp. 35-49.

The message implicit in these school texts is that the Islamic world should defend itself against the imperialist ambitions of the west. It should be noted, however, that that interestingly Egyptian schoolbooks are careful to distinguish between the barbaric Christian West and Christianity as a religion, which is valued very highly.[14]

Anti-Western sentiments following the U.S. response to September 11 have not had direct consequences for Egyptian Christians, but several church leaders initially feared in the months following September 11 that they could become squeezed between the West and the Islamic world. They worried about this not because of the state or Muslim intellectuals, but because of the sentiments of the Muslim masses, which often do not make the same distinctions as the intelligentsia. They often do not see the difference between the Christian of Eastern and Western origin, especially when frustrated and alienated crowds gather and a mob mentality takes over. They also often do not distinguish between the meanings of the terms Western and Christian. On top of this, President Bush's highly religious vocabulary did nothing to help to clarify these distinctions, thus Egyptian Christians have been placed in the precarious position of being conflated with the West's anti-Arab, anti-Muslim sentiments.

The U.S. Commission of Religious Freedom published reports on human rights and freedom of religion in Egypt in which great attention was given to the place of Christians, Islamists and Baha'is in Egypt. A number of Islamists criticized their reports, stating that the attention given to Christians does injustice to Muslims. Dr. Zaghloul R. Naggar, a prominent Islamist writer, even speaks about Muslims having become "the victim of a spoiled Christian minority that is able to obtain more privileges than Muslims." He believes Muslims in Egypt are being harassed and arrested for wanting to be devout Muslims. His statements are an expression of the belief that Western interest in human rights in Egypt is generally biased

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[14]   Ibid., 48.

towards Christians despite the close attention the Commission also paid to Islamists. The consequence is that despite careful efforts of individuals to compose these reports in the U.S., they are not trusted by many in Egypt because the U.S. is seen as biased.

Hisham Kassem, chairman of the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights, expressed his concern over the American interest in Christian rights in Egypt during a visit of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom in March 2001. Kassem asked: "Is it in line with [the] Christian faith to behave like a bull in a china shop and jeopardize the well-being of Christians in Egypt? Pushing for the rights of Christians in a country which is perhaps 10% Christian and 90% Muslim is bound to lead to ill feelings from Muslims which only can spell trouble for Christians."

Kassem was upset because some Christians in the West are "portraying the Qur'an as a bloody book that calls for the annihilation of others." He said: "Don't blame the book for man-made mistakes. It aggravates the feelings of [over] one billion Muslims. Do not polarize, instead find ways for understanding." Kassem is aware that members of the commission have made an effort to choose their words carefully, however in such a highly charged atmosphere, even the most benign comments can be misinterpreted and add to tensions.[15]

This statement was made prior to September 11. Polarization has since become far worse, and if this does not end, it could regress into a mob mentality against Christians. This polarization has also made Muslims more sensitive to any report addressing issues of religious freedom and the place of Christians in a Muslim society. Any report that lacks balance, which focuses on the rights of Christians but not on similar rights for Muslims, is automatically suspect.

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[15]   *Christianity Today*, May 2001; "The US seen as the bull in Egypt's china shop of Muslim-Christian relations," *Religious News Service from the Arab World*, Week 16A, Art. 14, April 18 2001, http://arabwestreport.info/year-2002/week-3/3-islam-innocent-silliness.

2.3. Egypt's Christians: caught between the West and Islamic sentiments?

Egyptian sentiments toward the West are closely related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Egypt's Christians are frequently associated with the West, a West which is often seen as being incredibly unfair in dealing with the Arab and Muslim world. This also explains why many Christian leaders are not happy with such an association.

The mutual onslaught between Israel and the Palestinians, with innocent civilian victims on both sides, has done much to polarize relations between the Arab and Muslim world on one side, and the West on the other. One-sided media reporting in both the Middle East and the West adds to the confusion, with Israeli media focusing primarily on Israeli casualties, Arab media focusing primarily on Palestinian casualties and Western media tending to be more concerned with Israeli suffering than Palestinian suffering. This type of reporting reinforces the feeling that one group is being victimized at the expense of the other.

The Arab media report about Israelis killing Palestinian civilians, including women, children and old people, arresting thousands of young men, demolishing homes, destroying infrastructure, crops, etc. Israelis claim that the land was promised to them by God, a claim that Muslims and most Christian Egyptians do not accept. They see no difference between the colonization of the land of Israel and that of other Western colonization efforts in the past. The belief is strong that Israel has just been using religion in order to justify its attempts to force the Palestinians from their land. Against this backdrop there is considerable anger toward Western nations for continuing their support for the state of Israel.

This backdrop has made Egyptians look with great distrust upon any Western interference in the Arab World, including Western interest in human rights and religious freedom.

The terrorist attack on September 11 and the subsequent responses have greatly widened the polarization between the West and the Islamic world and created a widespread fear that this polarization may continue at the expense of Muslim minorities in the West and Christian minorities in the Islamic world. This fear motivated different Egyptian authors to write about the plight of Muslims in the West.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom[16] expressed concern about the Christians in Egypt and asked the U.S. State Department on March 19, 2003 "to remind foreign governments of their responsibility to protect the lives and freedoms of members of minority religious communities."

"The Commission is concerned that extremists have tried to portray military action against Iraq as part of an alleged US attack on Islam, and that retribution will be sought against Christians, Jews, and others throughout the Islamic world, as well as in the West, who are perceived as having some affiliation or affinity with the United States or its coalition partners," said a letter addressed to former Secretary of State Colin Powell.

U.S. interest in Egypt's Christians has been for the most part well-received by the younger generation of Egyptian Christians. Others, however, are opposed to such interference. Many, but certainly not all, praised President Bush for his robust, Christian language and praised the U.S. for its attack on extremism which they associate with Islam.

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[16]   "3/19/2003: Religious minorities in peril; Secretary Powell warned about potential for retribution," U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, March 19, 2003, http://www.uscirf.gov/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=251.

The United States has been severely criticized in the Egyptian media, and the Egyptian media has at times associated U.S. foreign policy with Christianity in general. Several Christian leaders and writers in Egypt feared the consequences of Egyptian Christians being associated with the U.S. This led to Christian writers placing articles in the Egyptian press criticizing President Bush, questioning the sincerity of his faith, and the wisdom of U.S. policy.

It is not only dangerous but also unfair for the West to interfere on behalf of Arab Christians and other minorities without the proper awareness of their local context (which includes the causes of Arab frustrations). It increases the risk of driving a wedge between Muslims and Christians in Arab countries. This is certain to happen if Westerners are seen, rightly or wrongly, to champion the rights of specific groups in society, hearing only the complaints of some highly vocal Christian activists or activists of other minorities, while neglecting or being believed to neglect examples of Muslim-Christian equality and cooperation; if they present complaints as if they represent the general atmosphere in Egypt. Arab responses add to this if they focus their criticism primarily on the statements of small numbers of Christian activists rather than the areas of cooperation.

The Egyptian government is making an effort to keep popular sentiments in check and in so doing is, along with other governments, being criticized by Amnesty International because hold down the wave of discontent Egypt finds it necessary to restrict the rights to freedom of expression and assembly. Egypt also has been criticized for the excessive use of force by police against anti-Iraq war demonstrators (Statement of Amnesty International on March 30, 2003).

It is widely feared that if these popular sentiments are not kept in check they could easily escalate, causing widespread property damage and giving troublemakers the opportunity to try to incite mobs into attacking easy targets, including Christians. This has happened on several occasions

in the past. Activists generally find it very easy to mobilize mobs because popular frustrations are based on many, ill-defined factors. Millions of people are frustrated about growing poverty and challenging life circumstances and tend to pass blame around freely, eager to find a scapegoat: Christians, if they are wealthier or have made careless comments, people associated with the West whether Christian or Muslim, and the government.

The argument that it is necessary to keep popular sentiments in check is strong, but the methods used to accomplish it are often not very refined and thus merit criticism. Even here, though, one should take into account the fact that a large percentage of the police force is poorly educated and equipped.

2.4. An Egyptian interpretation of freedom of religion and thought

Many Western reports on human rights are suspect in Egypt because they tend to focus on the rights of individual members of society to express their beliefs, even if they would violate Muslim or Christian faith or traditions. Many Egyptian Muslims and Christians, including clergy, are concerned about maintaining the traditions of their respective communities.

A few Muslim scholars, much denounced by other scholars, have made it a habit of accusing fellow Muslims of 'apostasy' when they express thoughts they believe go against the basic tenets of Islam. Such accusations have served as signals for young radicals to carry out attacks. Liberal thinker Dr. Farag Foda was gunned down in the early 1990s. Nobel Prize winner Naguib Mahfouz narrowly escaped death in an attack in the mid-1990s and Dr. Nasr Abu Zayd fled to The Netherlands because a court ruled he, a so-called apostate, could no longer be married to his non-apostate Muslim wife. This was seen as even more serious than the other accusations since it was confirmed by a judge. The government took no chances and surrounded Abu Zayd with security in order to protect his life, but this

hampered his contact with students. Later the court ruled, quite surprisingly, that its judgment should not be enforced. Dr. Hamdy Zaqzouq, Minister of Endowments, stated that Abu Zayd was free to return to Egypt. Abu Zayd feared he would have to be continuously surrounded by security personnel but nevertheless returned to Egypt for a vacation in the summer of 2003. Abu Zayd still believes that teaching in Egypt is not a viable option.

Accusations of apostasy receive wide publicity in the West and help to confirm the dominant notion that Islam is radical. However, opposition to this radical Islam from mainstream Egyptian Muslims is almost never acknowledged by the Western media, and nor were changes in the law making it more difficult to declare someone an apostate.

2.5. The Importance of Relations

Egyptian society is strongly focused on human, interpersonal, relationships. The rules and obligations that these relationships imply are often seen as being more important and more relevant to one's life than laws. In order to achieve any goal, the emphasis will always be on human relationships. On the one hand, this gives one insight into the importance of friendship, loyalty, and trust in Egyptian society. This emphasis on community often means that the collective good is valued more highly than individual achievements. On the other hand, this emphasis on personal relationships can result in using one's *wasta* - influence, connections, in ways that are quite surprising to Westerners, and to some may even appear unethical. The bottom line is that if good personal relationships are in place, many things can be achieved. Laws and regulations can be interpreted or overlooked. But if those human relationships are not in place, then laws and regulations can be delayed in a morass of red tape or people can be try to sabotage the progress of others by seeking out ways in which someone may have broken the law or violated regulations.

2.6. Muslim and Christian groups' attempts to get the government on their side

Many religious leaders, Muslim and Christian, believe they have the duty to involve the government if they feel the rights of their community have been infringed upon. They have no difficulty in asking the Egyptian government to stop the activities of groups or individuals that seem to be trying to expand at the expense of the established religious communities. Pope Shenouda did this frequently with the Jehovah's Witnesses. Muslim scholars continually try to obtain government support for banning books they believe are in violation of Islam.

Around May 2000, following tensions between the Coptic and Greek Orthodox Churches in al-Tur over the mutual use of the local Greek Orthodox Church, the Coptic Orthodox Church in al-Tur, Sinai, wanted to establish a new church, and started using space in an available building. When a Greek Orthodox priest heard Copts praying in a nearby building, he felt that this was too close to his church, informed the Egyptian security services, and asked them to close the building. They did. Within hours, the building was closed and the Copts were robbed of a location for prayer. The Coptic Orthodox Pope Shenouda III later obtained a building permit for a new church and the problems were solved, but this incident was a clear example of how local church leaders will not hesitate to involve the security services if it suits their purposes. There are thousands of other examples, but most of them are kept out of the public eye.

Episcopal Bishop Mounir explained in September 2001 why he does not want the Western concept of religious freedom: "Both Muslims and Christians in Egypt are opposed to Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons. The great majority of Muslim and Christian Egyptians believe they should protect their faith and values. The same applies to Satan worshippers and homosexuals. From a secular point of view these groups should have their

rights but most Christians and Muslims in Egypt believe the protection of faith and values has priority.

> I would like to compare this to the government trying to control terrorism. Many people in the West accuse the government of violating human rights. But are the procedures put in place to curb terrorism against human rights? They have been developed to protect an innocent majority against the violence of a few. The majority has the right to live in security. In a similar way there is a tension between certain degrees of freedom and the protection of the faith and values of the majority of Muslims and Christians.[17]

2.7. Manipulation of Facts

Facts are frequently manipulated to present one's own position as favorably as possible, either to prevent one's own errors and culpability from being made public, or to deliberately harm the other party. Revenge is a common motivation and culturally accepted in Upper Egypt. If you are in a weak position vis-á-vis your opponent, the tactic is to make use of false accusations, exaggerations, and other practices to draw as black a picture as possible of the other person. Anecdotal evidence reveals that both local Muslims and Christians use these techniques freely.

Manipulation of facts is often related to a lack of transparency. Decisions are made unexplained, or explanations are given but not trusted. This applies to both government and religious institutions, whether Muslim or Christian. It also applies to many other institutions in society such as universities, companies, etc. Lack of transparency can hide one's own

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[17] Cornelis Hulsman, "Anglican Synod in Australia speaks about persecution in Egypt without consulting their sister church in Egypt," *Religious News Service from the Arab World*, Week 37, Art. 4, September 18 2001, http://arabwestreport.info/year-2001/week-37/4-anglican-synod-australia-speaks-about-persecution-egypt-without-consulting-their.

machinations, but it also makes it possible for others to manipulate the situation. This lack of transparency creates mistrust which, in turn, breeds rumors and conspiracy theories. When people do not trust official interpretations of events, they tend to make up their own explanations, which tend to not be very reliable.

The issue of honor is extremely important and is linked to the tremendous difficulty in admitting one's errors. And thus people try to convince others, sometimes with great theories and force of argumentation, that they were not wrong, others were. Honor means not accepting blame for yourself, your family, your mosque, church or community. Egyptian Muslims and Christians do not differ in this. This tendency to blame others is very obvious in the stories about Christian girls being kidnapped. This is how many Christian parents respond after the conversion of their daughter or son to Islam. Claiming external pressure was involved puts the responsibility on the other party and draws attention away from mistakes (real or imagined) the claimant may have made, like not paying enough attention to Christian education in the family or that there were family conflicts that may have forced a girl to escape through conversion to Islam. Situations like this are always much more complicated than they are made to appear.

We have seen examples of Egyptian asylum seekers presenting falsified documents. We also know of lawyers who have helped asylum seekers fabricate stories of persecution in order to be able to emigrate to the West. Falsified documents have included made-up medical documents, often with the help of a medical practitioner, court documents and witnesses. Knowing that falsified documents and testimonies exist should make one careful when evaluating claims of persecution. Of course, it is likewise important not to fall into the trap of automatically dismissing claims of persecution that people have made as each claim deserves to be investigated individually.

As a culture, Egyptians are in general friendly, group-oriented, and place great value on their emotional integrity. However, this emphasis on emotion sometimes leads to decisions being made on an emotional instead of a rational basis, with questionable results. When people realize this with the benefit of hindsight, they often try to conceal their rashness. For many Egyptians, solidarity with one's own group and supporting its interests has priority over the interests of individuals (the general order of importance is: family, extended family or clan, religion, nationality, Arab solidarity). But these loyalties also color the way Egyptians report issues.

Loyalty and authority are extremely important. When the bishop, a priest, father, sheikh or anyone else in a position of authority has spoken, his word should not be criticized. On occasions where someone does dare to speak up against the authority figure, others will step forward to criticize that person for speaking up, even if they agree with the criticism that has been made.

Bishop Yohanna Qulta, Deputy Patriarch of the Coptic Catholic Church, says that many people having a superiority complex is another reason that facts are often distorted. Average Muslims generally believe they are better than Christians, and average Christians believe they are better than Muslims. Orthodox Christians often look with the same feeling of superiority at small Protestant and Catholic denominations as Muslims do with Christians in general. Egypt is now approximately 94% Muslim and 6% Christian. Father Matta el-Meskeen once said that if these numbers were reversed, and Egypt was 94% Christian and 6% Muslim, Christians would not treat Muslims any differently from how Muslims currently treat Christians. The superiority complexes are often expressed in very subtle ways, usually insufficient to called human rights violations, but certainly enough to make the other person feel like he is not valued or equal.

Conversely, envy and resentment can also play a role, both in motivating people to manipulate the facts and, as in the case of Beni Walmis as

outlined in section 4.2 also leading to the escalation of tensions resulting in violence.

One should be aware that though this manipulation of facts often occurs, it certainly does not mean that all Egyptians massage the truth. That would be drawing a very unfair picture of the country. Creative misrepresentation of facts happens most frequently when one is personally involved in the affair and when one's honor is at stake, or when one's interests financial or otherwise, are at risk.

2.8. Living in a Pressure Cooker

When social pressures on a population increase, the risk increases that tensions between groups can worsen and get out of control. That is a social pressure cooker, building up pressure until a government is no longer able to contain all of the tensions. If this happens, the result can be chaos, lawlessness and violence, the rich and well-educated leaving the country and an increase of the suffering of the weakest members of society.

There are a number of factors which affect whether the social pressures in society will increase. They include the population density, level of poverty, standard of education, hygiene and sanitation, and the expectations that people have about their quality of life.

Egypt has a fast growing population. The *Algemeene Nederlandsche Encyclopedie* of 1865 gives the population at that time as 4.5 million. The population of Egypt increased to 40 million in 1978 and was between 70 and 76 million in 2004. Within fifteen years the population is expected to pass the 100 million mark. How will Egypt cope with this growth?

99% of Egypt's population lives in the Nile valley and Delta, approximately. 3.5% of Egypt's surface or 33,000 km² of arable land making the country very overpopulated. On average, 2,300 people live per square

kilometer., one of the highest population densities in the world. Roads and cities are overcrowded. Cairo has a population density of some 25,000 inhabitants per square kilometer.

Egypt was once a primarily agricultural society but due to rapid population growth, farms in old fertile lands (thus not newly reclaimed desert lands) have become smaller, farmers and landless laborers were pushed out which added to growing urbanization (38% in 1960 and 43 % in 2005[18]), including slum areas with millions of poor.

32% of the population depends on income from agriculture. The number of small landowners, those with fewer than five *feddans*, increased from 2.92 million in 1961 to nearly 3.29 million in 1984, while the area they owned dropped from 3.17 million *feddans* to 2.9 million *feddans*, an indication of *increasing* land fragmentation which is often tied to poverty.

Agricultural land is being lost to urbanization and sandstorms, increasing soil salinity below the Aswan High Dam and desertification. Water pollution from agricultural pesticides, raw sewage, and industrial effluents reduces the quality of the very limited natural fresh water resources. Oil pollution is threatening coral reefs, beaches, and marine habitats. Rapid population growth is overburdening the environment.

Egypt has been making a great effort to reduce the illiteracy rate but still 45% of the population of over 15 years old cannot read or write. Expectations are that this will drop in the near future since 70.5% of 15 to 24 year olds are now literate.

According to official statistics round 10% of the population is unemployed. Among the young people who are between 15 and 24 years old this percentage is as high as 20.4%, but these figures are deceptive because they

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[18]　"The Demographic Profile of Egypt in: World Population Policies," The United Nations, 2009, http://www.escwa.un.org/popin/members/egypt.pdf.

do not reflect the millions of people who are underemployed; they have accepted jobs below their capabilities because they otherwise would not be able to make a living, so the wasted economic and human potential is much higher.

According to the official Egyptian figures, just over one third of the Egyptian population lives below the poverty line, as based on individual food consumption needs (i.e. how much one needs to eat in order to survive and function).[19]

Egypt is also a country with huge disparities between rich and poor. According to the FOA the poorest 10% of households earns 3.7% of the country's income, while the richest 10% of households gets 29.5%. Some two million people live below the minimum level of dietary energy consumption.

Monetary pressures on an overvalued Egyptian pound decreased dramatically in January 2003 so increasing local prices. In September 2003, Egyptian officials increased subsidies on basic foodstuffs, helping to calm a frustrated public but increasing an already deep budget deficit.

Poverty, huge income disparities and increasing prices are a breeding ground for gangs of alienated young people who are often from the lower classes and have lost hope for the future. These young people will easily be swept along by marauding crowds because in a crowd they get the opportunity to loot or settle personal scores. Christians have been, per capita, relatively more likely to be the victims of such mobs than Muslims due to the fact that Christians are relatively well represented among middle class shopkeepers and traders.

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[19]   Cornelis Hulsman, "Christian Life" in: *Upper Egypt, Life along the Nile*, ed. N.S. Hopkins, Moesgard Museum, 2003.

The National Institute of Planning carried out a study to research the quality of life in each Egyptian governorate. The study gave the governorates of Minya, Assiut, and Beni Suef the lowest quality of life ratings. All three have traditionally had a large percentage of Christians residing in them. These are also the governorates that together accounted for 95% of all acts of terror up until a few years ago. The situation deteriorated after extremists from other parts of Egypt fled to these governorates in the early and mid-1990s after the Egyptian police had been able to push them out of other governorates. They joined local extremists who already had a base of local support. Since 1997 the Egyptian security forces have been able to reduce the level of violence but have been criticized by human rights organizations for their heavy-handed approach. The tremendous social pressures present have of course affected Christians living in these governorates.

People living under increasing pressure as a result of growing poverty, decreased living space, and deteriorating quality of life are naturally more likely to explode in anger over something small than people exposed to less pressure. It is therefore not surprising that poor neighborhoods experience more conflicts than wealthier ones. As a rule, conflicts between Muslims and Christians usually take place in poor areas and primarily involve the lower social classes. These conflicts usually have little or nothing to do with religion, but conflicts can very easily divide along religious lines.

The division along religious lines is more likely to happen in areas where both Muslims and Christians have a substantial presence—that is to say where both Muslims and Christians each make up at least 25% of the local population. Both Muslims and Christians make an effort to strengthen the religious identity of an area to favor their group. They often do this through building and enlarging churches or mosques, actions which can be resented by the other party, especially if good relations between the faith communities do not exist, and most particularly if the changes planned result in a substantial alteration in the perceived status quo. Resentment by

Christians usually has to be kept silent or internalized as they are the minority in relation to Muslims (which can result in Christians complaining to other Christians or to foreigners about Muslims). But if Muslims resent a Christian effort to strengthen their public identity it can, at least in some cases, result in mob violence by Muslims.

Rumors can serve to heighten tensions. They can be created by both Muslims and Christians and are often made up by people who want to settle a personal score with someone else, or even with political leaders. As you can read in the "Incidents" section, a misplaced rumor can even result in mob violence. Provocateurs can mix among them and direct the mob. If the information is rumored to come from someone who is powerful or highly placed in government, this can become even more dangerous. Late president Anwar al-Sadat falsely accused Copts in the late 1970s of wishing to establish a Coptic state in Upper Egypt with Assiut as its capital. That was a wish of some individual radical Copts outside Egypt but it was not supported by the majority of the Coptic population or Pope Shenouda. The accusation, however, did considerable damage and at the time turned many Muslims against Christians because they perceived Christians to be a threat.

2.9. The Place of Christians in Egyptian Society

Copts are an integral part of Egyptian society. When, in 1994, the Ibn Khaldoun Institute wanted to organize a conference on minorities in the Arab world, including the Kurds in Iraq and the Armenians in Lebanon, and the well-known journalist Muhammad Hasanein Haykal saw that Copts were to be classified as a minority, he protested. Copts, he wrote, are not a minority. Since then, the debate over whether Copts constitute a minority or not has been repeated in the media and in public discussions.

No one denies that there are fewer Copts in Egypt than Muslims; the main objection is to the political connotations of the word "minority," which can

be read to imply ethnic minority. Muslims and Christians in Egypt share the same culture and the same historical experiences and are ethnically of the same stock. Coptic Christians are as much a "minority" as, for example, the Methodists in the United States. Despite a distinct religious background and pre-Islamic history, they do not differ from their Muslim compatriots. Indeed, sometimes, Muslim intellectuals (but not the average Muslim) call themselves "Muslim-Copts" in an effort to stress national unity with Egypt's Christians. Since the word "Copt" literally means "Egyptian," a Muslim-Copt is for all intents and purposes simply a Muslim-Egyptian.

Coptic demographics are rapidly changing. It was estimated that in 1925 approximately 80% of the Coptic population lived in Upper Egypt, with a large percentage in rural areas. Today, less than 50% of Egypt's Coptic population lives in Upper Egypt. In the 1986 census, Christians were 16.5% of the urban population of Upper Egypt, and 9.2% of the rural population. This amounts to Christians making up about 11% of the population of Upper Egypt, where nearly one-third of Egypt's population of 70 million lived in 2003.[20] This would bring the number of Christians in Upper Egypt to around 2.5 million, so bringing the total Christian population in Egypt up to around 5 million, or 7.1% of the population.

Numbers are of course of great political significance because the greater the size of the Christian population, the greater the weight that can be given to the argument that Christians are being discriminated against. Some Coptic activists, priests and bishops, such as the late Bishop Gregorius, have claimed that up to 20% of the Egyptian population is Christian. And since the number of Christians in top government positions is far below 20%, it is therefore claimed that Christians are discriminated against or even persecuted. The estimate of 20% of the Egyptian population being Christian is excessive, but estimates of 10-15% are also frequently heard. Also those claims lack any verifiable evidence.

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[20]   Ibid., 10-11.

The U.S. Freedom of Religion Reports between 2001 and 2004 put the number at 8-10%, which is a change from a year earlier when they reported 10%, and substantially higher than the 6% given in the CIA's World Factbook. A Jesuit priest in Minya, in contrast, suggests that the percentage may be lower. He has been systematically asking young Christian army conscripts for many years how many Christians there were in their unit. On the basis of this he calculated that the number of Christians is probably no more than 5% of the total population. Other Western research supports estimates between 5 and 8 percent. But these numbers, unfortunately, are inflated for political reasons. Egyptian Christians are lobbying for more church permits, more Christians in higher positions, and so on, and higher population estimates would help those causes.[21]

However, despite variable figures it is clear that the percentage of Christians is rapidly decreasing. Rural Christians have migrated to Upper Egypt's urban centers. Others have moved to Cairo, Alexandria and abroad. It is estimated that 70% of all Egyptian emigrants to the West are Christian. Thousands of Christians convert to Islam every year, and on the whole, Christians tend to have smaller families than Muslims. These factors all contribute to the steady decrease in the percentage of Christians in Egypt.

Approximately 95% of Egypt's Christians belong to the Coptic Orthodox Church. The Coptic Catholic and Coptic Evangelical Churches (which evolved out of the Presbyterian tradition) each have tens of thousands of members. Other Catholic and Protestant denominations are much smaller. As with the total Christian population, their numbers are difficult to estimate accurately. Many members of the Coptic Evangelical church would estimate their total congregation to include approximately 125,000

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[21]   Supplement to the *Religious News Service from the Arab World*, 2001, Week 8, "Comments on Egypt Country Report on Human Rights Practices -2000," Released by the U.S. Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor on February 2001.

members but John Lorimer, a retired American Presbyterian missionary who spent forty years in Egypt, estimated their number to be around 30,000. Church attendance itself is higher because many of the Orthodox worships not only in Orthodox churches, but also in Catholic and Evangelical Churches as well without making the formal step of changing their denomination.

Despite the declining percentage of Christians, the Sunday School Movement precipitated a revival that altered The Coptic Orthodox Church in the second half of the 20th century. A crucial moment was the ascension of the former leader, Pope Shenouda III, to the throne of St. Mark in 1971 because he was the first Pope who has his roots in this reform movement.

The Sunday School Movement brought about a revival of spiritual life, resulting in educated youth entering monastic life. This increased the talent pool from which the bishops and pope are elected. The revival had a profound impact on the whole church and the numbers are very impressive. Around 1950, the Orthodox Church had 50-60 monks. At the time of His Holiness Pope Shenouda's ordination as patriarch, there were nine monasteries with about 300 monks. Today there are about 1500 monks in 16 Egyptian monasteries. Six ancient monasteries were repopulated, one new monastery was built, old monasteries have been expanded and new buildings have been added. The monastery of St. Bishoi had only five monks living in it in the early 1970s. Today St. Bishoi has 150 monks; after 30 years there are now 30 times as many monks.

E. J. Chitham stated in 1986 that a parliamentary commission after the incidents at Khanka in 1972 found that there were 1,442 Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant churches, (500 unauthorized) active in Egypt.[22] That number has apparently doubled in the past thirty years.

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[22]   E.J. Chitham, "The Coptic Community in Egypt," (Durham: University of Durham: 1986), 106.

The number of Orthodox Church buildings doubled between 1971 and today, to approximately 1500. Protestant and Catholic churches also doubled their number of church buildings to around 1500. In Cairo alone 100 Orthodox Church buildings were added and 20 in Alexandria. The number of Orthodox priests doubled in the same period to approximately 3,000 today. When Pope Shenouda was enthroned as patriarch, there was only one seminary in Cairo; today there are ten. Over a course of almost 70 years, between 1900 and 1969, approximately 500 students graduated from the various theological seminaries of the Coptic Orthodox Church. But between 1971 and 1994 (less than 25 years) 2,300 students graduated from Orthodox theological seminaries. The number of students entering the seminaries has increased to 500 per year.[23]

The Orthodox revival kept many young people in their church but also created a Coptic Orthodox sense of identity that sometimes resulted in negative statements toward Catholics and Protestants, who were seen at times as intruders from the West.

The Coptic Catholic and Coptic Evangelical Churches are more influenced by the West than the Orthodox Church. They also have better connections in the West and highly organized relief agencies which receive large sums of money from Western donors.

More of the members of the Orthodox Church are poverty-stricken, which is one possible reason for the different approach taken by the different relief agencies. Orthodox relief agencies strongly focus on their own denomination, where the level of poverty is much greater and available

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[23]   "Interview with Metropolitan Bishoi, Secretary of the Holy Synod of the Coptic Orthodox Church, November 14, 2002," *Religious News Service from the Arab World*, Week 47, Art. 16, November 21 2002, http://arabwestreport.info/year-2002/week-47/16-interview-metropolitan-bishoi-secretary-holy-synod-coptic-orthodox-church and Cornelis Hulsman, "Interview with Bishop Marcos about the succession of Pope Shenouda, Father Matta al-Meskeen, excommunications and other subjects," *Religious News Service from the Arab World*, Week 48, Art. 22, December 7 2002, http://arabwestreport.info/year-2002/week-48/22-interview-bishop-marcos-about-succession-pope-shenouda-father-matta-al-meskeen.

funds per church member are much smaller. Members of the Evangelical and Catholic Churches are generally wealthier, so in addition to tending to their congregations, their relief agencies are also able to help those outside their own denominations regardless of religious orientation. Christians of all denominations and also Muslims are able to benefit from these development programs.

Another important distinction between the Coptic Orthodox Church and the other denominations is the shortage of ordained priests in some impoverished areas and dioceses. For that reason, the ratio of parishioners to priest is much higher than in any of the other churches. Some priests may serve congregations of up to 10,000 or more members.

What aggravates the situation is that large congregations in rural areas are often spread out over several villages. Geographically, it is impossible for those priests to visit individual families on a regular basis. Most of those large congregations are located in poor, sometimes extremely poor, neighborhoods where the population is confronted with a host of social problems as a result of their poverty.

As with any cross-section of society, there is a significant range of attitudes and approaches each community has for dealing with the other. Some Muslims and Christians live together very cooperatively; others have a more confrontational approach. It should come as no surprise that Muslims and Christians who choose to cooperate, in general, have better relations across religious boundaries and, as a consequence, are able to achieve more for their community than those who have adopted a more confrontational approach.

The U.S. Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2002 notes that the position of Coptic Christians has improved "in the past 2 years in some areas, such as the introduction of the Coptic era into history curriculums in

all government-run schools and increased coverage of Christian subjects in the mass media.[24]

Although there was improvement in a few areas, government discriminatory practices include: discrimination against Christians in the public sector; discrimination against Christians in staff appointments to public universities; payment of Muslim imams through public funds (Christian clergy are paid by private church funds); and refusal to admit Christians to Al-Azhar University (which is publicly funded). In general public university training programs for Arabic-language teachers refuse to admit non-Muslims because the curriculum involves the study of the Qur'an; however, in 2001 the first Christian graduated from an Arabic-language department at the Suez Canal University.

Since 2000 U.S. country reports on human rights have noted improvements. The reports of 2002-2004 devoted entire sections on improvements. In 2004 an entire section was called: "Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom". It stated that "in some areas, there were improvements in the Government's respect for religious freedom; however, there continued to be abuses and restrictions during the period covered."[25]

Although there have been improvements in a few areas, government discriminatory practices continued to include discrimination against Christians in the public sector, discrimination against Christians in staff appointments to public universities, payment of Muslim imams through

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[24] "2000 – improved somewhat. 2001 - The government generally respected the human rights of its citizens in some areas, and its record improved somewhat over the previous year in areas such as extrajudicial killings, deaths from torture, and disciplinary actions taken against officers involved in deaths from torture; Other areas such as military courts and child laws did not improve. 2002 - With some exceptions, there was a continued trend toward improvement in the government's respect for and protection of religious freedom during the period covered by this report."

[25] "International Religious Freedom Report 2004: Egypt," U.S. Department of State Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 2004, http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2004/35496.htm.

public funds (Christian clergy are paid by private church funds), and refusal to admit Christians to Al-Azhar University (a publicly-funded institution).

The same U.S. report mentions, "There were no Christians serving as governors, police commissioners, city mayors, university presidents, or deans. There were few Christians in the upper ranks of the security services and armed forces. Discrimination against Christians also continued in public sector employment, in staff appointments to public universities," and calls these "discriminatory government practices."

Many Egyptian Muslims were upset by these claims made in this U.S. report. Dr. Zaghloul al-Naggar says in an interview with AWR for this report that this statement is unfair, and goes on to compare this with the, in his opinion, low number of Muslims holding high ranking positions in the United States.

The U.S. report does not ask why no Christians are serving in the above-mentioned functions. First of all, the number of Christians living in Egypt (and thus Christian candidates) is generally much smaller than presumed. And when dealing with such a small percentage of the population, it becomes increasingly difficult to differentiate between patterns of discrimination from patterns of chance. Discrimination would be where Christians were being passed over for positions that they are equally or better qualified for than Muslim candidates. But for example when AWR board member, Prof. Dr. Mary Massoud, was asked to become Dean at one of the newer universities in Greater Cairo she declined because she preferred teaching over an administrative function. Also, a Christian was governor of South Sinai in the 1970s. But it is difficult to imagine a Christian becoming governor in most governorates over the last ten years because this could easily increase tensions in a country that is so divided along religious lines. Governors are usually Western-oriented moderate officials who make an effort to focus on economic development and avoid

religious tensions. Many are known to have excellent relations with local Christian leaders.

2.10.   Misreporting

It is obvious from the previous paragraphs that a substantial portion of both the Western and Arab media is biased. Stereotypes and prejudices are rarely broken but instead confirmed and reconfirmed. Journalists and their readers tend to accept claims as true if they fit into pre-conceived ideas of what must be true. Confirmation bias is rife.

The popular media, in particular, is often selective, focusing on the more sensationalist and negative news and rarely doing fact checking on material they receive in unsolicited from political activists in the West, whether Muslim, Coptic, or secular. Checking claims would often require investigative work that is time-consuming, costly, and often not very rewarding. Even if journalists make an effort to investigate claims, they are not always aware of the political agendas that surround them, especially if they are new to the country and are unaware of the many cultural factors present, such as the intense importance of honor, and how these, in turn, influence people's behavior. Journalists are often not prepared to deal with people who present them with blatantly false information, not to mention that they can face false accusations and abusive statements by some of these activists if the journalist's findings do not meet their political agenda. Many journalists would rather withdraw from a subject than confront abuse. Of course not all activists and media are the same and some certainly make an effort to avoid such biases.

Political activists in the West are usually linked to political activists in Egypt who under the guise of human rights promote their own personal or political agenda, or some combination of the two. One of the most notorious of these was Coptic 'human rights' lawyer Maurice Sadeq who made an art form out of transforming civil disputes and social problems

into religious freedom or Coptic rights issues. He made numerous claims that Christian girls were being forced to convert to Islam, stories that were easily accepted by many organizations and media outlets in the West. Reports by Hulsman and Yanney[26] from the AWR show that while conversions did indeed take place, there is no evidence that either physical force or the threat of physical force was involved.[27]

One of the most common problems of activists in this particular arena is that of hyperbole. Language inflation is when the choice of words used to describe any given act or event is grossly exaggerated or inflated; the terminology is also often inflammatory and sensational. Words such as "kidnapping," "rape," and "persecution" which are both inflammatory and very difficult to prove are examples of language inflation. Such language inflation is harmful because it is seen as unjust by the accused party (usually a Muslim) and can result in anger and worsening the atmosphere in Egypt, either within the whole country within a specific region.

The activists are most often non-clergy, but sometimes clergy also get involved. The Anglican General Synod of Australia accepted, for example, in July 2001, after some Coptic demonstrations in Sydney and Melbourne, a resolution speaking about Christian persecution in Egypt without actually defining what was meant by the word "persecution." Remarkably enough, the resolution was accepted without first consulting the Anglican bishop in Cairo or Anglican experts in England who are all well acquainted with the

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[26]   Dr. Rodolph Yanney, President of the Society of Coptic Church Studies and founder and editor of *Coptic Church Review* in 1980, gave the *RELIGIOUS NEWS SERVICE FROM THE ARAB WORLD* permission to print his articles from the *Copts Digest* and the *Coptic Daily Digest*, published in 1999, together in one report describing the factors leading to the conversion of Christians in Egypt to Islam. Dr. Yanney is disappointed in the responses of the Digests' readers and the clergy. He calls the issue of converting to Islam "a threat to the survival of the Coptic Church and still it is not taken seriously."

[27]   Cornelis Hulsman, "Forced Conversions or Not?" *Religious News Service from the Arab World*, Week 26, Art. 37, June 28 1999 http://arabwestreport.info/year-1999/week-26/37-forced-conversions-or-not and Rodolph Yanney, "Conversions of Christians to Islam," *Religious News Service from the Arab World*, Week 1, Art. 4, January 9, 2001, http://arabwestreport.info/year-2001/week-1/4-conversions-christians-islam.

church in Egypt. Passing resolutions in the Australian Anglican General Synod concerning the position and role of Christianity in Egypt without first consulting Egypt's clergy is simply counterproductive.[28]

3. Between Law and Practice

3.1. Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognizes that "everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. This right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship, and observance."

The Egyptian government subscribes to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as well as all Arab and African human rights treaties and conventions. The government subscribes to all international human rights declarations as mentioned in the U.S. Freedom from International Persecution Law of 1998 but the Egyptian government vehemently disagrees with the U.S. belief that it has the right to impose unilateral sanctions on those countries that grossly violate their Freedom from International Persecution Law.

Persecution, in view of these international treaties, is something organized and planned by a government or, at the very least, something that is part of a deliberate, planned program of neglect by a government in protecting a particular religious group. This does not exist in Egypt.

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[28]   Cornelis Hulsman, "Forced Conversions or Not?" *Religious News Service from the Arab World*, Week 26, Art. 37, June 28 1999 http://arabwestreport.info/year-1999/week-26/37-forced-conversions-or-not and Rodolph Yanney, "Conversions of Christians to Islam," *Religious News Service from the Arab World*, Week 1, Art. 4, January 9 2001, http://arabwestreport.info/year-2001/week-1/4-conversions-christians-islam.

3.2. The Constitution

The Egyptian state is *de facto* secular. "Islam reigns but doesn't govern. It is to be compared with the constitutional royal families in Europe. Queen Elizabeth reigns but does not govern," says Father Dr. Christiaan van Nispen, Professor of Philosophy and Islam at the Catholic Seminary in Cairo.

In reference to Article 2 of the Egyptian Constitution, it is often reported that the main source of law in Egypt is the *sharī'ah*. This is not correct. What the article actually says is, "the principles of the *sharī'ah* are the principle source of legislation." The principles of the *sharī'ah* are found in "clear and unambiguous texts of the Qur'an and Sunna."

The *sharī'ah* is not applied directly in Egypt. Proposed laws, before they become law, should be compared to the principles of the *sharī'ah* and should not be in violation with its principles. Although interpreting Egyptian law through *sharī'ah* principles implies a preference for Islam, it should be pointed out that the law does not discriminate against other religions. In fact, *sharī'ah* law argues strongly in favor of harmony and equality between the three Abrahamic religions.

Article 40 regulates the freedom of religion: "All citizens are equal before the law as they are equal in respect to the general rights and duties; there is no discrimination between them in that regard on account of sex, origin, language, religion or belief."

Article 46 guarantees the freedom of belief and religious practice: "The nation guarantees freedom of belief and freedom to practice one's religious rights."

The constitution speaks about "citizens" without distinguishing between different faiths but these articles have been reinterpreted in the context of Islamic law since the late 1970s.

3.3. Protection of Religion

Egypt is a religious country. People attach great importance to the values of their respective religions. Consequently, a number of articles in Egyptian civil law guarantee the protection of religious values.

Article 98f of the Penal Code prohibits citizens from ridiculing or insulting any of the officially recognized religions or inciting sectarian strife.

Article 160.2 prohibits sabotage of and defacement of places of worship which are used for religious practice.

Article 161.1 makes punishable by law any deliberate alteration when publishing the text of a holy book, whether it is the Qur'an, the Torah and the Tanakh (also known as the Old Testament) or the Bible (which is made up of Old Testament and the New Testament together).

Article 161.2 prohibits the ridicule of any religious ceremony.

3.4. The status of officially recognized religions

Egyptian law distinguishes between officially recognized religious communities and non-officially recognized religious communities. The leaders of the officially recognized religious communities are recognized by the state and thus have, according to Article 63 of the Constitution, the right to act on behalf of their community with the state. They can present requests, complaints, etc. on behalf of their community.

Islam, all Christian denominations that have been recognized by one of the three Christian community councils (Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant), and Judaism are the officially recognized religious communities in Egypt.

The officially recognized religions and denominations can present their faith to a wider public through TV, radio, religious publications, and other activities that are considered to be non-offensive to the others. Naturally Islam is much more prevalent than Christianity in Egypt, and religious oriented presentations have been dominated by Islam.

Video versions of *Jesus of Nazareth*, an American film by Franco Zeffirelli, have been advertised for sale on Egyptian TV. Some explicitly Christian films such as *Quo Vadis* (about Christian persecution in the days of Roman Emperor Nero) have been shown on Channel One on Egyptian TV. Frequent attention is given to Christian traditions and the opinions of Christian leaders on various issues. The Coptic Orthodox Church would like to see more liturgies on TV, but thus far this has been limited to annual liturgies on Christmas and Easter. But radio listeners can tune in every week to a Christian service from any of the Orthodox, Catholic, or Protestant churches.

The Egyptian Bible society has placed advertisements for Bible sales along the highway between Cairo and Alexandria. Evangelical material is sold in the yearly Cairo book fair and in several bookstores and churches. Some churches organize "welcome" services to which non-Christians are invited. But direct unsolicited evangelism, such as distributing pamphlets on the streets, is not allowed for any religion other than Islam.

Religious communities that are not officially recognized by the Egyptian authorities do have the right to practice, but their practice must not be offensive to any of the officially recognized communities, which in practice means they can rarely go public with their activities. And because they are

not recognized, these religions have no formal communication with the state.

The Jehovah's Witnesses and the Baha'i are examples of religious communities that are not officially recognized. Government statistics do not record them but German researcher Johanna Pink estimates that there are probably several thousand Baha'is and at least as many Jehovah's Witnesses in the country. Opposition to Jehovah's Witnesses comes primarily from Egypt's Christian churches while it is mainly Egyptian Muslims who oppose official recognition of the Baha'i.

3.5. The freedom to change one's religion or belief: Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Conversions from one religion to another are not prohibited in Egyptian civil law. The law does not prevent a Christian from becoming Muslim or a Muslim from becoming Christian but while government procedures (described below) exist for a Christian to convert to Islam, no procedures exist for the reverse.

3.5.1. Leaving one's Christian denomination

According to Egyptian civil law, under clauses 135 and 136 of the official government communiqué number 5 in 1970, no one was allowed to convert to Islam who was under the age of 16. There are known cases of government intervention to prevent the conversion of Christian girls under the age of 16 after Church officials protested that the minimum age of 16 was still too young for conversion. This was before the subsequent law passed in 1996, specifying that the minimum age for conversion, without a parent's permission was 18.

The government rose the minimum age for conversion to Islam in Item 2 of Civil Law no. 12, 1996, specifying that a child reaches maturity at 18 years.

Since the new law has been brought in, 18 has become the legal age for conversions of both boys and girls to Islam. However, it has to be said that most Christian leaders and human rights activists still think that 18 is too young.

Christian human rights lawyer Mamdouh Nakhla argues that Egyptian law specifies that young people cannot get married under the age of 21 without the consent of their legal guardian. Egyptian civil law mentions nothing about guardianship after conversion to Islam but since Islamic law specifies that no non-Muslim can have guardianship over a Muslim it has resulted in making the Personal Status Prosecution Office the guardian over a Christian convert to Islam between ages 18 and 21. Christian human rights activists argue that the guardianship of Christian parents should not be taken away and thus that no conversions to Islam should take place below the age of 21.[29]

Some conversions take place after a Christian couple has started a family. Many such conversions involve a married Christian couple who is having marital problems and the husband subsequently becomes involved with a Muslim woman. A conversion to Islam would force a divorce which the church would otherwise not grant. If such a conversion takes place and the other partner remains Christian the family is de facto broken. Custody over underage children is provided to the partner who has become Muslim and insists on keeping his or her children – which can be a significant emotional burden for children if they have reached an age where they can understand religion. Egyptian law, seeing as it is based on *sharī'ah*, states that religion is passed down through patrilineage, therefore children follow the religion of their father. Even the if a father shows no interest in assuming custody of his children after a divorce, the religion on their identity papers will be changed to Muslim, even if they continue to live with their Christian mother and are raised in a Christian atmosphere. This creates untold

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[29]   Nahla also argued in a meeting that Egyptian civil law No. 31 (1948) set the legal age at 21. This age must have later been reduced? Nahla did not provide that information.

problems for those children when they later want to marry and raise their own children.

Churches in Egypt do not formally reject Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights but they *de facto* do not accept it. The Coptic Orthodox Church strongly opposes its church members converting to other denominations, let alone to Islam. Many priests and bishops preach against other denominations to warn their own flock from against straying to other churches. Other churches tend to be more permissive, discouraging their members from leaving but allowing them to go without any ill will should they wish to do so. The Coptic Orthodox Church is the least lenient of Egyptian churches in this sense. All Christian denominations oppose anyone of their flock converting to Islam. On the whole their attitude is similar to Muslims who oppose any of their own who wish to convert to any religion outside Islam.

When a Christian converts to Islam, the pastor often advises the family to break all contact with the convert. A convert from Christianity to Islam is as much an outcast in his community as a convert from Islam to any other religion. The difference is that because Muslims are in a much stronger position in Egypt than Christians, a convert from Christianity to Islam is more easily protected from persecution by his Christian family and others in the Christian community than a Muslim convert would be. In addition, most Christians, in light of their small numbers, fear the anger of Muslims if they offer help to a convert from Islam to Christianity.

The Coptic Orthodox Church does not accept inter-religious marriage or inter-denominational marriage. Neither Orthodox men nor women are allowed to marry someone from another denomination or faith. Those who do can no longer take part in the sacraments of the church are de facto cut off from their original communities. If this should happen, they also cannot receive an Orthodox burial which is a terrifying prospect for many people in the Orthodox Church.

3.5.2. Responding to reports about forced conversions to Islam

Muslims frequently refer to the Qur'anic verse that states one should never force anyone to convert to Islam. Several Western organizations have nevertheless claimed, without providing any verifiable evidence, that radical Muslims in Egypt are using a variety of heinous tactics to force Christian women to convert to Islam and marry. Their claims include that tactics such as kidnapping, brainwashing, and rape are used in order to force conversion.

The author of this report investigated dozens of cases of Christian girls allegedly being kidnapped between the years 1995-1997 for the Dutch Christian organization Open Doors. Virtually all investigations were carried out in cooperation with local Egyptian Christians, yet in not one of these cases could evidence be found that the girl had been forced to convert to Islam against her will. Several Christian families claimed that Islamic extremists were involved or that drugs were used. But every time the author was able to investigate the claims of Islamic extremist involvement, the allegations proved to be false. No convincing evidence has ever been presented that drugs had been administered, knowingly or unknowingly in order to force conversion. Coptic political activists also have made claims of the existence of "Islamic re-education centers" devoted to 'brainwashing' Christian youth but it has thus far been impossible to find any of these alleged centers. Similarly, none of the allegations of frequent, recurrent abduction of Christian girls were proven to be true.[30]

So why are these accusations being made in the first place? For the most part, it would appear to be the family members of the person involved who are alleging forced conversion in order to save their own honor and divorce themselves from accepting any role or responsibility in the

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[30]   Cornelis Hulsman, "Conversions to Islam,"; Rodolph Yanney, founder and editor-in-chief of Coptic Church Review, later backed up this report in Yanney, "Conversions of Christians".

conversion. The most common scenarios include: 1) An inter-religious match of which the Christian family does not approve. 2) Domestic violence which a young Christian woman wishes to escape through marrying a Muslim man. 3) Similarly, a young Christian woman wishing to escape poverty through marriage. 4) A young Christian woman finding herself pregnant out of wedlock and needing to marry either the father of the child or another man as soon as possible. As you can see, in each of the above scenarios marriage plays a significant role; the conversion takes place in order to permit the marriage. There are a significant number of social problems such as poverty and domestic violence that push Christian girls towards conversion which have been described in detail by Yanney and Hulsman.[31] A Christian source close to Pope Shenouda estimates approximately 10,000 to 15,000 Christians convert each year to Islam, most of who are below the age of 25 and female.

3.5.3. Leaving Islam

There is no doubt that this is the most sensitive subject in Muslim-Christian relations, and values clash. Most Muslims believe Westerners are trying to push their values of freedom and autonomy upon them, whereas Muslims believe that they have a duty to protect the *umma*, the community of Muslim believers, through the application of principles that Muslims believe to be divine instructions. The strong desire by Muslims to protect their community of believers is not something specific to the Islam, however. Egyptian Christians have a similar sense that protecting their community of believers is more important than the right of individuals to choose their religion.

No law prohibits conversions from Islam but there are nevertheless legal barriers for someone wishing to leave Islam. There are two distinct categories of Muslims who choose to leave Islam:

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[31] Ibid.

a) Those who were born into a Muslim family (these numbers are extremely small)
b) Those who were born into a Christian family, converted to Islam, and later want to return to their original faith. For most Egyptian church leaders and human rights activists this is the key category because their numbers are larger and conversions to Islam have often split and devastated Christian families. .

In the years prior to Sadat, Christians who had converted to Islam could in some cases return to their original faith with no major complications.[32] However, this changed, so that now no distinction is made between people who were born Muslim and between Christians who convert to Islam, to the great dismay of Christian human rights activists and church leaders who would like to see greater ease for Christian converts to Islam to return back to their faith of birth.[33]

The Egyptian High Court ruled on April 8, 1980 that Islamic law would need to be applied for cases of religious conversion: "In so far as the person mentioned is an apostate from the sublime Islamic law, he no longer has any civil rights from the government with all its institutions."[34]

Losing one's civil rights means that that person is deprived of the right to take care of his or her underage children. If the man converts but the woman remains Muslim the Personal Status Court can rule the couple divorced. The person who leaves Islam loses the right to inherit and the right to make contracts as well as the right to move freely.[35]

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[32]   Meeting senior Egyptian journalist Usama al-Ghazouly.
[33]   For Egyptian authorities Muslims and Christians in Egypt automatically get the faith of their parents.
[34]   Wolfram Reiss, "Erneuerung in der Koptisch-Orthodoxen Kirche. Die Geschichte der koptisch-orthodoxen Sonntagsschulbewegung und die Aufnahme ihrer Reformansätze in den Erneuerungsbewegungen der Koptisch-Orthodoxen Kirche der Gegenwart," *Studien zur Orientalischen Kirchengeschichte*, 5 (1998), 295; Shane L. MacLaren, MacLaren, "Religious Freedom in Egypt: Does it Exist?" *Copts* 19 (1992): 3/4.
[35]   Ibid.

One's religion is clearly marked on one's identity papers which can play a significant role in one's life being during one's education at school. Children with Muslim identity papers are forced to attend Muslim religious classes. Children with Christian identity papers are forced to attend Christian religious classes. While it is easy for Christians to convert to Islam and change the religion on their identity papers, it is practically impossible to change one's Muslim identity to a non-Muslim one. Sometimes identity papers have been changed with bribes, but if these are ever discovered the persons who offered and accepted the bribe are severely punished. Living as a Christian with Muslim identity papers can be extremely difficult, especially if one is young, plans to marry,[36] or has children at school.[37]

Human rights activist and counselor Naguib Gibriel argues that the obstacles created to alter one's identity papers are in violation with the abovementioned Articles 40 and 46 of the Constitution that guarantee freedom of belief and equality before the law. Islamists, however, believe priority should be given to Article 2 about the *sharī'ah* being the source of law and since *sharī'ah* does not allow conversion from Islam, Articles 40 and 46 would be null and void.

Changes are afoot, however. On April 13, 2004, a court verdict, according to Gibriel "the first of its kind in the history of Egypt and Copts, gave a girl

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[36]   A Muslim who has become Christian but is still living with his Muslim identity card will find it extremely difficult to find a partner to marry. Another Muslim would not likely accept such a conversion and thus finding a Muslim partner is no option. Most Christians fear difficulties resulting from marrying such a person, in particular for the children the couple would get since the government would see them as Muslim and requiring them to follow Muslim religious education at school.

[37]   Children from such a marriage would be raised as Christian at home but would need to go to Muslim religious classes at school. This would be particularly confusing for very young children and there would also be the risk that a small child would tell the teacher that both his parents at home are Christian and thus would reveal that his father is an apostate. This is not accepted in society and could result in great tensions and possibly even violence for the family.

who converted to Islam and later wanted to come back to Christianity the right to return to Christianity and get back her original [Christian name]."

"After that we brought dozens of similar cases before the State Council and we presented this verdict to the Ministry of Interior demanding that this verdict become a rule to be applied in similar cases. But the Ministry of Interior did not accept that and insisted that each case should be examined individually."

Problems occur when someone goes public with his or her decision not to live according to the teachings of Islam any longer. There are many secular-oriented, nominal Muslims and Christians, but as long as they do not go public with their opinions about Islam or Christianity, they are not likely to incur any difficulties for their lack of faith. It becomes difficult when conversion results in a formal step to leave Islam where religious rituals such as baptism are involved. Egyptian society is in the main opposed to any formal conversion away from Islam and so Christian converts from Islam have to watch what they say far more than Christians who were born in Christian families.

If former Muslims try to proselytize their newly acquired faith they tend to make comparisons between their former and new faith. That in itself is seen as an offence because such comparisons, in combination with the formal act to leave Islam, are interpreted as a statement that "Islam was not good enough." Others use more derogatory language about Islam, which is bound to lead to conflict. Converts only seem to be arrested if people (family and acquaintances) hear a convert speaking about his conversion and are offended by this, either because of the perceived derogatory language used by the convert or simply because they are convinced such a conversion is not allowed according to Islam. These converts could be sentenced based on article 98f of the Penal Code which prohibits citizens from ridiculing or insulting any of the officially recognized religions or inciting sectarian strife.

A large segment of the public as well as many conservative scholars believe apostasy should, unless renounced, be punishable by execution. The general practice is that if people stick to their conviction not to return to Islam, their ties with their family and friends will be broken. The death penalty is not practiced in Egypt. Stories are told about converts being beaten and tortured by the police. Obviously, the law prohibits this kind of behavior and a police officer could be severely punished for it.

Major Muslim leaders in Egypt accept Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, says Dr. Abdel Mo'ti Bayoumi, member of the Islamic Research Institute and one of Egypt's most influential Muslim scholars. Muslims are, in his opinion, allowed to leave Islam, but once they have left they should not attack Islam and so should keep their conversion private.

The Committee of Creed and Philosophy at the Islamic Research Institute at the Azhar declared in 2002 that an apostate should not be killed because he should have the chance to recant for the remainder of his life. This decision resulted in much debate in the Egyptian press, during which opinions both for and against the decision were expressed. Western media paid little attention to the decision or the subsequent debate.

There are no statistics published about conversions in either direction, but it is certain that the conversion of Christians to Islam is hundreds of times larger than the conversion of Muslims to Christianity. The number of former Christians returning to their original faith is small while many Muslims who have converted to Christianity do not remain.

Most converts are young, mainly between 17 to 25 years old. Many, if not most of them, emigrate to the West, sometimes with prominent Western assistance. Once in the West, many fall away from their newly acquired faith, often succumbing to the temptations of a secular lifestyle. Some have

converted because they wanted ties with the West, wanted to leave the country, were looking for a job, or came from a background where love was in short supply.

The involvement of the United States, especially through its adoption of the American International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, for which many mission-minded American Evangelicals had lobbied, added a new dimension to missionary work in Egypt. The Act refers to the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which includes in Article 18 the freedom to change one's religion or belief. Egypt endorsed that declaration but is, in the view of many Evangelicals, not providing enough freedom for Muslims to become Christians.

The law increased negative sentiments in Egyptians toward Western Christians. It made some foreign and Egyptian Christians think that this law gave them extra protection, in that any violation of it by Egypt could potentially lead to sanctions.[38] American intervention has made some missionaries in these years to grow even bolder in preaching the gospel (others would call their behavior reckless), which in turn has created anger among Muslims who see this law as an unwelcome intervention from a Christian country.[39] This perception has been reflected in several Arab media reports that paint a very negative picture of Christian missionary work and Christianity in general.

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[38]   The hope for such foreign protection was largely delusional. Egyptian authorities and the wider Egyptian community rejected such foreign pressures. The 'protection' it might have provided was perhaps some reduction in the harshness of a sentence but even this is not certain.

[39]   I have met in the late 1990s and early 2000s some Western Christians in Egypt who told me of examples of Christian witnessing (others call it proselytizing) that I would consider reckless in maintaining harmonious Muslim-Christian relations. Examples concerned distribution of pamphlets, at times unsolicited, organizing Christian meetings in which Muslims participated, and asking converts from Islam to speak about their experiences. These are all very risky things in Egypt to do that could cause Muslim-Christian tensions in an area. When I told them about the risks of tensions they responded that their mission was different from mine. That was true but avoided a discussion about the consequences of their methods of work.

3.6. The freedom to construct or repair houses of worship

The official position of the Egyptian government is that there are no prohibitions against the construction and maintenance of places of worship. The building and maintenance of churches is regulated by the Hamayouni law of 1856 which was originally created to ease the obtaining of building permits for churches. Later, however, clauses were added that practically nullified these improvements in the law. In 1934 El-Azabi Pasha, general-secretary of the Ministry of Interior added ten conditions that had to be met before a building permit would be issued. There are no such conditions for mosque building and it is primarily these ten conditions that are currently being criticized. The law was amended by Presidential Decree 13, 1998. In this amendment the president delegated the right to issue permits for church repairs to the local governor. The governors have added their own regulations. The Presidential Decree resulted in a sudden increase in permits but it also seems clear that permits are more easily obtained when church leaders and local authorities are on good terms with each other.

Because permits can be difficult to obtain, as in instances where the local church has strained relations with authorities, some priests and bishops build without obtaining the proper permits. This often results in protests by Muslims and does nothing to help to improve the relations which are needed in order to obtain permits in the first place.

The Egyptian weekly *Watani* has reported several cases where Christians have experienced problems in restoring and expanding church buildings.[40] *Watani*'s sources tend to be one-sided, often printing the stories of local church leaders – which may very well be accurate, but often to the exclusion of other sources. In the course of AWR's investigation into

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[40]　Christian Fastenrath and Corin Kazanjian, "Important Factors of Church building in Egypt," *Arab-West Report*, April 2008, http://www.arabwestreport.info/important-factors-church-building-egypt.

problems reported by Bishop Marcos in Shubra al-Kheima, AWR was told by Governor Adli Hussein that *Watani* had reported the Church's point of view but had not consulted his office at all.[41]

It is actually quite common for officials to react to public accusations with feigned ignorance. Difficulties often involved in obtaining official responses make accountability tough to place. This seems to happen more frequently with complaints that are published about church building, not least because it is often difficult to obtain official responses as to why authorities had made certain decisions.

Because securing building permits can be a challenge, many church leaders have resorted to building 'church service buildings' and have made requests to officials accordingly. Church service buildings provide the local community with space for weddings, social activities, Sunday school classes, etc. It is much easier to obtain permits for buildings that provide community services than for buildings for prayer. As a result of these difficulties, many church leaders, however, have blurred the distinction between buildings for prayer and buildings providing community services. Prayers are being held in many of these buildings, often with an explicitly designated chapel with an altar, further confusing the function of these buildings. It is thus possible that the actual distinction between a church and a church service building is nominal. This, in turn, has made authorities more hesitant in providing permits for church-service buildings.

Neither the Coptic Orthodox Church nor the Egyptian State Information Service, or other government bodies on the national level, provides figures

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1. [41] Dale Gavlak and Cornelis Hulsman, "Interview with H.E. Councelor Adli Hussein, governor of Qalyubiya on Tuesday March 20, 2001," *Arab-West Report*, Week 22, Art.11, June 1 2001, http://www.arabwestreport.info/year-2001/week-22/11-interview-he-councelor-adli-hussein-governor-qalyubiya-tuesday-march-20-2001.

for permits issued for new construction or repairs of existing structures. The government's wish would be for churches to provide them with a complete list of church buildings and religious institutions. However, church leaders would prefer not to publish exact numbers of churches and institutions because some were built illegally decades ago and have continued to be used ever since.

Figures released from the governors of Qalyubiya and Assiut reveal that the numbers of permits granted for church restoration have been considerable but there have only been a few permits issued for new church construction. Between November 1999 and March 2001, the governorate of Qalyubiya issued 16 restoration permits, two permits to build extra floors on existing buildings and one permit for a new church services building. The permits in this document are not dated but probably relate to the period November 1999 when councilor Adli Hussein became governor of Qalyubiya and March 2001.[42] The governorate of Assiut with a much larger population of Christians gave 80 permits for restoration, 9 for renovation and 3 for completely rebuilding a church between October 10, 1998 and October 2002. Six more permits have been requested and are now being processed.[43]

'Completely rebuilding a church' usually involves tearing the old structure to the ground and reconstructing a new, much larger, structure on the same location. Throughout the country, one finds several such enlarged church buildings: the Coptic Orthodox Church on Geziret el-Dhahabi

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[42]   The date these figures were provided, "A Statement On The Procedures Taken Concerning Churches In Qalyoubeia Governorate," *Religious News Service from the Arab World*, Week 22, Art. 13, June 1 2001, http://www.arabwestreport.info/year-2001/week-22/13-statement-procedures-taken-concerning-churches-qalyoubeia-governorate.

[43]   Governorate of Assiut, "List of churches in Assiut Governorate for which governorate decrees for restoration and presidential decrees for building and renovation were issued," *Religious News Service from the Arab World*, Week 50, Art. 15, December 23 2002, http://www.arabwestreport.info/year-2002/week-50/15-list-churches-assiut-governorate-which-governorate-decrees-restoration-and. The difference between renovation and restoration in this document from the governorate of Assiut is not clear.

(Gold Island) in the Nile between Giza and Old-Cairo in Cairo and churches in Maghara, Sawada, and Aswan are but a few examples of this.

On occasion, the government has provided the Coptic Orthodox Church with free land for the purpose of erecting a new church. The church in al-Ubur City, just outside Cairo, is an example.

3.7. The freedom to assemble as religious communities

There are at least two interesting distinctions between Christianity and Islam with regards to their freedom to assemble as religious communities. Christians are free to assemble in their houses of worship at any time of their choosing, but this is not the case for Muslims. Because of the Ministry of Endowments' involvement in mosque affairs in order to combat radical Islamic movements, Muslims are only allowed to assemble in mosques during the five daily prayers and during Friday prayers.

Christian denominations are also free to choose their own pastors. Shaykhs in mosques, however, need to be licensed by the Ministry of Endowments. Christians are free to choose their own religious leaders in general, including those who represent them in official functions with the government. Muslim leaders, however, such as the Shaykh Al-Azhar and the Mufti, are nominated by the state.

3.8. The freedom to pursue education

Article 19 of the Constitution requires that all elementary and secondary schools, both public and private, offer religious instruction. Religious education is mandatory and both Muslims and Christians have the right to organize their own religious education in public schools. This happens with minimal problems.

In recent years, Islamists have been pressuring the government to make several changes in the Islamic school system including increasing the number of hours devoted to Islamic religious education. Islamists also would like to see the marks for religious education play a role in determining whether a student will be permitted to continue in a higher class.

In the 1980s, an agreement was reached by scholars from various Arab and European countries to study the representation of Islam in Western text books and Christianity in Arab text books for primary school children. German scholar Dr. Wolfram Reiss was responsible for the study of Egyptian and Palestinian text books. Other German scholars studied textbooks in Turkey and Iran. Reiss examined some 200 Egyptian text books and found in them "a fundamental attitude of respect for the Christian religion." He gives several examples of this in his report. However, despite this fundamental attitude of respect the texts are not supported by an equally thorough base of information. Almost no explanation is given of the Christian faith and certainly none of contemporary, evolving Coptic culture. Egyptian textbooks accentuate that Egyptian Christians are united with Muslims 'in blood and fate.' Much positive attention is given to Christian history up to the Arab conquest in 641 AD "but their continuing contributions to the Egyptian society and their life in the following centuries are totally ignored."[44]

For the school year 2002-2003 the Ministry of Education introduced a mandatory ethics class called "morals and values education," which was to be taken by both Muslim and Christian students who were in the first three grades of primary school. The lessons are obviously focused on promoting patriotism and feelings of kinship between Muslims and Christians. Critics of the new class argue that ethics are indivisible from religion, yet they say the new subject tries to separate them.

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[44]   Wolfram Reiss, "The Portrayal of Christianity in Egyptian Textbooks. Conclusions of investigations and proposals for improvement. Report from a visit to Egypt," October 4-12, 2002.

Pink, who wrote about religion and nationalism in the Egyptian public school system, found that religious pluralism is presented as more or less a fact of life. She concluded that religion is used to emphasize certain desired types of behavior including responsibility, fulfilling one's duty, belonging, and respect. These values are consistently presented as being more important than individual freedom, which illustrates again that the Egyptian value system is "essentially anti-individualistic."

"Religion is depicted as a general source of values, but not the primary one - patriotism and the wish for [national] development play a far more important role. The textbooks don't want to promote religiosity, they rather take it for granted. Often, religiosity appears just as a part of national culture - there are Christians, there are Muslims, that's the way it is, and they should get along."[45]

No official prohibitions exist against the pursuit of education. Any Egyptian national is free to pursue any form of education provided by the state with no restrictions other than the usual academic ones. There are, however, limitations enforced by convention and tradition. For example, Azhar University and its schools are limited to Muslims only. The state-financed Azhar is Islam's most prestigious institute of learning. Although once open to the education of non-Muslims, non-Muslims can no longer study at the Azhar. Likewise, the privately funded Coptic Orthodox, Catholic, and Evangelical seminaries are for Christians only.

To some the government's funding of the Azhar with taxpayer money from both Muslims and Christians is a symbol of discrimination because the Azhar is closed to non-Muslims, and the government does not finance an equivalent Christian institute. However, this lack of attention is seen by

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[45]   Johanna Pink, "Nationalism, Religion and The Muslim-Christian Relationship: Teaching Ethics and Values in Egyptian Schools," Paper presented at the CESNUR Conference, Vilnius, Lithuania, 2003.

some as a boon; because the seminaries receive no government financing, there is no government interference - a freedom which many at the Azhar would like. And in reality, even if the door of the Azhar were open to non-Muslim students, it would never attract large numbers of Christians, so this question is not seen as being a terribly pressing one.

In the past ten years, individual Christians have made claims that they were discriminated against in the grading of their examinations after they were given poor marks. Such claims are, however, very difficult to substantiate. Written examinations are standardized across all state schools, colleges, and universities. Students are assigned numbers with which to identify themselves on their exams in an attempt to ensure impartiality on the part of the exam-marker. Since names can reveal important information about oneself – including gender and religion, this system helps to preclude preferential treatment for certain students who might be favored for whatever reason, including religion.

3.9. The freedom to pursue public office

In Egyptian civil law there are no prohibitions against the pursuit of public office based on religious background. Article 8 of the Constitution enshrines equal opportunities for all citizens into law. This freedom is also regulated in Public Office Law 47, 1978 and Law 48, 1978. There are criteria for public office where they make stipulations regarding qualifications and nationality of candidates but none of the criteria are related to religion. Christians nevertheless frequently speak of discrimination against themselves in obtaining positions of authority. Egyptian society functions on the basis of personal connections. Both Christians and Muslims can be discriminated against if they lack the necessary personal connections. Many claims of discrimination based on faith are more likely the result of lacking the right connections or not being a member of the right party. This is not to preclude the possibility of discrimination based on faith; however, like the claim of preferential grading, it is difficult to prove.

Political parties based on religion are illegal. As a result, the Muslim Brotherhood, though tolerated, is technically banned. However, members speak their views openly and publicly and 17 independent candidates backed by the Brotherhood were elected to the People's Assembly in 2000. Members of the Muslim Brotherhood are sometimes arrested and charged with belonging to an illegal organization and some have been known to be prevented from travelling abroad.

3.10. The freedom to publish and distribute religious material

Article 48 of the Constitution provides for freedom of speech and freedom of the press, with the exemption if a state of emergency is declared or in time of war, certain limitations may be imposed on the media if necessary for public safety and national security. This happened, for example, in March 1998 when *al-Dustur* published a very radical statement by extremists which called for the death of certain prominent Coptic businessmen. Egyptian security received instructions to take that issue of *al-Dustur* off the newsstands because the public safety of Egyptian citizens was at stake. However, when *al-Dustur* did not appear again, this led to protests claiming that the very principle of freedom of the press was at stake.

In 2001, the government shut down the Islamist bi-weekly *al-Shaab* after a legal case of libel against the Egyptian Minister of Agriculture and in 2000 for inciting the public against a book by Syrian author Haider Haider, resulting in demonstrations of students who, in many cases, believed the book to be in violation of the laws of Islam, without ever having read it.

Freedom of the press is limited by Article 98f of the Penal Code, which prohibits citizens from ridiculing or insulting any of the officially recognized religions or inciting sectarian strife. However, the article does not seem to be enforced if the attacks concern Judaism, which is an

officially recognized religion in Article 98f. But since the Jewish community has become very small no one seems to be willing to raise the issue of media attacks on Judaism before the court. Naturally, the person doing that would risk being vilified in the Egyptian media as being pro-Israeli.

3.11.   The freedom to marry and divorce

Egyptian civil law gives Muslims and Christians of all denominations the freedom to define their own regulations for marriage and divorce.

No article in Egyptian civil law hinders the choice of one's partner. But restrictions are strongly implied within Egyptian society, since people in Egypt are expected to marry within their religious communities. The pastor in a church functions as the registration officer for the government and enabling the enforcement of the canon law of the various denominations.

According to Islam, a Muslim man is allowed to marry a Christian or Jewish woman, but a Christian or Jewish man is not allowed to marry a Muslim woman.

The Coptic Orthodox Church does not allow the marriage of Orthodox men or women with non-Orthodox women or men. The Coptic Orthodox Church excommunicates women members who marry Muslim men. The Catholic and Evangelical Churches allow mixed marriages between Christian denominations. Only the Coptic Catholic Church allows the marriage of a Catholic with a non-Christian, but it also has specific regulations governing this.

Whenever two partners belong to the same denomination and religion, the canon law of the relevant denomination is applied. Whenever two partners belong to different denominations or religions, be they a Muslim and a Christian or two Christians of different denominations, the *sharī'ah* is applied. As a result, Christian Churches much prefer in cases of mixed

marriage that one of the two partners converts to the other's denomination, after which the marriage can take place according to the canon law of that particular denomination.

The Coptic Orthodox Church is strongly against divorce and accepts this only in exceptional circumstances, such as adultery or conversion of one of the partners to another denomination or faith. If partners choose to divorce without the church's approval, remarriage may be prohibited. Divorce in the Catholic and Protestant churches as well as in Islam is much easier, as is remarriage after divorce.

3.12.   The law of succession

According to the "Egypt Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1998" of the U.S. State Department, Christian widows of Muslims have no inheritance rights.[46] The annual Egypt Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2000 and 2001 state "Under Islamic law, non-Muslim males must convert to Islam to marry Muslim women, but non-Muslim women need not convert to marry Muslim men. Muslim female heirs receive half the amount of a male heir's inheritance, while Christian widows of Muslims have no inheritance rights. A sole female heir receives half her parents' estate; the balance goes to designated male relatives. A sole male heir inherits all his parents' property. Male Muslim heirs face strong social pressure to provide for all family members who require assistance; however, this assistance is not always provided."

The Egypt country report for 2002 adds that "in January 2000, the Parliament passed a new Personal Status Law that made it easier for a Muslim woman to obtain a divorce without her husband's consent,

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[46]   There are not likely any Muslim widows of Christians since Muslim women are not allowed to marry Christian men. Muslim widows of Muslim men or Muslim widowers have the right to inherit.

provided that she is willing to forego alimony and the return of her dowry."[47]

3.13.   Other legal differences between Muslims and Christians

Muslim and Christian employees have the same right to take leave on officially recognized national Christian and Muslim holidays, although the only public holiday which is of Christian origin is Coptic Christmas. Christian employees also have the right to paid vacation on officially recognized Christian holidays that are not national public holidays. Friday is the official day off and Sunday is a normal workday, but Christians have the right to start their work on Sunday at 10:00 a.m. in order to be able to go to the early mass in church.

3.14.   Protection of civilians by the state

Christians in general are not afraid about living in a Muslim society. Christian women walk on the streets with obvious Christian crosses. Some Christian shopkeepers place obvious Christian pictures and religious imagery in their shops, which they would not do if they feared it would cost them customers.

Despite amicable relations on the whole, there were a number of violent attacks by extremists against police officers, some politicians, Christians and other Muslims prior to November 1997 when extremists killed 58 tourists in Luxor.

Between 1992 and 1997 extremists killed some 1,100 Egyptians, among them around 220 Christians which has received a great deal of publicity in the West, but it was the attack in Luxor that resulted in a government

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[47]   A similar formulation is found in the Egypt country report for 2004.

crackdown on Islamic extremists. Between 1997 and 2005 no violent attacks by extremists have been reported.

Another concern is the spontaneous eruption of violence in the form of riots or lynching. Christians have been the victim of such violence on more than one occasion, for example when a mob burned the houses of Christians in Kafr Dimyan in 1996. Since then, violence stirred up by a mob mentality has continued to erupt every now and then. The greatest tragedy of this kind was the death of 21 Christians in al-Kosheh on January 2, 2000. This, however, could have been prevented if the tensions that had been growing between Christians and Muslims in the area since August 1998 had been better managed by the civil and religious authorities. The killing of Christians came on the third day of mob violence. After the tragedy, police were criticized for interfering only after people had been killed. However, two years later, in another case of mob violence against Christians in Beni Walmis (180 km south of Cairo) the police were able to bring in reinforcements in 1.5 hours to quell the unrest.[48] (More details on each of these in the section on incidents.)

In the early to mid-1990s, human rights activists raised the issue of protection money being extorted by alleged extremists in some parts of Upper Egypt. The system was simple: "Pay or you will be killed." Christians who refused to pay were indeed killed and served as an example for others that if they did not pay they would suffer the same fate.

Some Egyptians called this *itawa*, a neutral term which means protection money while others called it *gizya* which has a strong Islamic connotation. Until the Khedive Mohammed Ali changed this law, Christians had to pay the *gizya*, a special poll tax, to the Islamic authorities. In return they were not conscripted into the army and were protected by the state. Whenever

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[48]   Cornelis Hulsman, "Background to the riots in front of the church in Beni Walmis," *Religious News Service from the Arab World*, Week 6, Art. 9, February 14 2002, http://www.arabwestreport.info/year-2002/week-6/9-background-riots-front-church-beni-walmis.

Islamists dare to raise the *gizya* issue (and it happens only rarely) other Muslims shout them down; most Muslims in Egypt have no interest in reinstituting the practice.

Christians have virtually always claimed that they have had to pay extremists, but the reality has been that local thugs have frequently asked for protection money. The term "*gizya*" was often used as a kind of Islamic justification for Mafia-style thuggery, even though it had nothing to do with Islam. The thugs targeted the weakest people to this kind of coercion and in most cases these were members of the Christian middle class, including shopkeepers, jewelers, and medical doctors.

Most reports on protection money date from 1995, 1996, and 1997 and are mainly connected to the towns of Abu Qurqas and Mallawi from which several Christian families fled to Cairo. During visits to the area in the years 2001-2004 Christians said that this *itawa* system does not exist anymore. The police have been able to clamp down on the extortionists, allowing shops that had been closed for fear of paying *itawa* to reopen.

Popular outbursts against Christians are sporadic and often traceable to particular, unusual progressions of events. Feelings of powerlessness get transformed into rage, resentment, and mistrust which can then be conveniently transferred onto the nearest scapegoat resulting in tragedy. Profound differences in wealth between Muslims and Christians can create jealousy as can sudden changes in the appearance and grandeur of church buildings – for example, from a poor church to a rich one. [For examples, please read about Beni Walmis and al-Kosheh in section on incidents] Some Christian leaders (bishops, priests, and pastors) demonstrate considerable wisdom when building, encouraging interaction and friendships with local Muslims, while others tend to isolate themselves, avoiding relations with local Muslim leaders as much as possible. As one would expect, it is in areas where the latter policy has been followed that spontaneous outbursts are more likely to occur.

Human rights groups frequently criticize the Egyptian government for the way it deals with Islamists and other political activists. This includes reported mistreatment during arrest and imprisonment. The AWR has come across instances where these stories of abuse have been exaggerated; however, there have also been documented instances of the police using excessive violence when controlling demonstrations.

The excessive police violence is often related to Islamists or other political activists who mix in the mobs and try to stir them up - which, incidentally, is not that difficult to do because there is already much discontent about the deteriorating economic situation. Ordinary policemen and low ranking police officers are poorly trained and will tend to deal with political agitators with excessive violence, particularly when they are interrogating them. Only the most extreme cases have been noticed and punished but of course much more could be done to ameliorate the situation. Policemen, especially those outside the large cities, are poorly equipped to control demonstrations and do investigative work. Taking fingerprints is expensive, and so it is rarely done, whereas confessions are particularly important in any court case. Therefore, the police do what they can to extract these confessions, and if the suspect comes from the lower social classes, the police often resort to physical violence.

3.15. Nation building

The government is very intently focused on economic growth at least in part in the hope of reducing inter-communal tensions. The government strongly promotes the concept of the national unity of all Egyptians, Muslims and Christians. People criticizing the government would say these concepts are not enforced strongly enough but the government is walking a fine line between people from political opposition movements (both Nasserists and Islamists) who believe the government is not strong enough in enforcing equality. For Islamists this is in violation of Islamic principles.

In the past few years, the Egyptian government has initiated several projects promoting the status and rights of Coptic Christians. Examples of these are the government's return of the Coptic endowment lands which had been taken from them in the early 1970s by Sadat to the church, the commemoration of the Holy Family's flight to Egypt 2000 years ago, the bringing in more study of the place of Copts in Egyptian society into the Egyptian public school curriculum, and declaring Coptic Christmas (January 7) a national holiday.

4. Incidents

Religious conflict in Egypt, and particularly incidents between Muslims and Christians, usually receives a significant amount of attention in Western media, human rights and religious freedom reports such as the recent American "International Religious Freedom Report 2004 on Egypt," released on September 15, 2004, by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor.[49]

The way such incidents are presented in these reports often inadvertently implies that they take the side of one party and presume bad intentions on the part of the other party. They also commonly imply the presence of Muslim fanaticism. In so doing they fuel distrust between the Arab World and the West and between Muslims and Christians instead of creating an atmosphere of understanding, an atmosphere which would help to clear the way towards adequately dealing with these issues.

The main problem in reporting is that Western media and reports usually pay little or no attention to the context in which these incidents occur and thus risk Western readers interpreting events from their own context. They

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[49]   "International Religious Freedom," U.S. Department of State, http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2004/35496.htm.

reinforce existing stereotypes instead of helping the reader to understand what really happened.

We have investigated and documented many Muslim-Christian incidents since 1995, especially those that had been reported in Western media or in reports. In the course of this study, we have tried to emphasize that it is important to ask the question of why specific incidents have taken place. There is also of course the tricky question of determining which elements of an incident indicate that it is isolated and which elements suggest that it is reflective of more generally held beliefs and cultural norms.

If we were to present a comprehensive list of incidents of religious conflict, we would risk creating the impression that there is a lot of violence in Egypt. That is certainly not the case. In interviews conducted in August 2004 bishops, priests, pastors, and human rights activists were adamant in their view that Muslims and Christians in general live together in peace. There is much mutual interaction and cooperation among religious communities but every now and then conflicts flare up and an effort needs to be made to understand why they occur.

Many incidents can be generally classified in the following categories:

1. Church building or restoration without having a building permit,
2. Tensions after having obtained a building permit,
3. Escalations of non-religious conflicts into religious conflicts,
4. Incidents related to attempted conversion to Islam,
5. Incidents related to blood feuds or extremists.

Many incidents in recent years seem to be related to the building or restoration of churches. When Christians find it difficult to obtain permits to build or restore churches, they tend to engage in building without the required permit, often resulting in tensions in the community. The tensions in or around Kafr Dimyan (1996), the convent of Patmos (1996-2004), the

monastery of St. Anthony (2004) and Taha al-'Ameda, Samalut (2004) are all examples of this.

The tensions around church restoration in al-Timsahiya (1996), Dafash (2000), Shutb (2001), al-Ubur (2002) and Beni Walims (2003) developed after building permits had been obtained and Christians tried to add elements that were not included in the permit.

Incidents of escalation from non-religious conflicts into religious conflicts are exemplified by the violence that occurred in Dimyana (1996), Abassiya, Cairo (2000) and al-Kosheh (1998-2000).
One incident in Wasta (1996) was related to an attempted conversion to Islam.

Several incidents were reported about extremist violence against Christians but the government has made a considerable effort to get this type of violence under control and no new terrorist attacks on Christians have been reported since 1997.

All incidents have been described in greater detail in publications of the Religious News Service from the Arab World and *Arab-West Report*. Of the incidents in Wasta and al-Kosheh we have also collected many court documents that have not been published in *RNSAW*/AWR.

4.1. Incidents related to church building or restoration without building permits

Kafr Dimyan (1996)

In February 1996, a priest in the Delta village of Kafr Damyan started making a cover for an oven to bake bread for the Holy Communion without having a permit. Rumors spread that the priest was building a synagogue and a mob of many thousands of Muslim youth marched to the

village, burned Christian houses and looted all they could find. No people were killed. The looting led to widespread protest among both Muslims and Christians in Egypt and a committee was formed of Muslims and Christians to help rebuild the village. The material damage was widely reported internationally but the Muslim protest against the violence was not.

The Convent of Patmos (1996-2004)

The International Religious Freedom Report of 2004 reported the incidents around the convent of Patmos, a Coptic Orthodox social service facility on the Suez Road east of Cairo. In January 2004, Christian workers at the Patmos Center confronted soldiers and an army bulldozer dispatched from a military base adjacent to the facility when the army attempted to remove a recently built gate. The U.S. report mentions that during the confrontation, one of the Christian workers was fatally struck by a private bus attempting to drive around the crowd. This incident was the latest in a series involving Patmos and the neighboring military base. The report refers to "the army's reported pretext," - no longer simply reporting different arguments but suggesting that one of them is not to be trusted, though without providing a reason as to why. Officials had told the local bishop that changes in local zoning regulations required a distance of 100 meters from any building to the main road. The U.S. report goes on to describe what Christians told them which amounts to a conspiracy theory, claiming "that the army's intent was to harass the Christians until they quit the site so that it could be annexed by the military." There do not seem to be any justifications given for the recent actions of this unit of the army, but there are also no indications in the report that would make one presume that the army planned to annex the area. The U.S. report quoted what others told them, it was not their conclusion, but quoting without questioning the quotes added to the credibility of these quotes.[50] It also

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[50]   I have visited the area repeatedly and do not think these quotes were credible since no other evidence could be presented to back up the claims that were made.

noted that "other observers believed the military's enmity was engendered by the 'stealthy' way the church developed a Christian service facility on a site originally billed as an agricultural 'desert reclamation project'." AWR described the history of problems between the army unit and Bishop Botros whereby the bishop has not been honest to authorities in what he intended to build on the land he had acquired and the army unit had not presented the reasons of their objections.[51]

The U.S. report does not explain what was "stealthy" about the church's behavior. Bishop Botros had already made plans to build a convent as early as 1995. A convent needs at least one church in it and since he had expected that it would be difficult to obtain a permit he presented his project to authorities as a desert reclamation project. When he was told in 2003 that he had to move the wall of the building project (he had placed the wall 50 meters from the road and it now had to be 100 meters from the road), despite not having a building permit for it, he built the church immediately behind the wall that had already been built in the knowledge that any attempt to move the church would result in international outcry against the Egyptian authorities. Tactics such as these may work in the short run in a system which is highly bureaucratic and lined with red tape but also create much irritation among authorities. Another example of Bishop Botros' tactics was the reporting about the death of a church worker in January 2004 which was immediately presented by the bishop, who was present in the crowd at the time, as a deliberate attempt to kill him while other Christians who were present believed it to be an accident.[52] The story spread like wildfire in Christian circles in poor Cairene neighborhoods where stories also grew up that not one but several Christians had been

[51]   Cornelis Hulsman, "The history of problems between an Egyptian army unit and Patmos land," *Arab-West Report*, Week 1, Art. 16, May 1 2004, http://www.arabwestreport.info/year-2004/week-1/16-history-problems-between-egyptian-army-unit-and-patmos-land.

[52]   Christian human rights activist and investigator, Ra'ed al-Sharqawi, was on location. He said the bus tried to get around the road block Christians had made. The bus driver also did not know that the bishop was in the crowd. Furthermore, the bishop was on many meters distance from the place of the accident and thus, al-Sharqawi concluded, he could not have been a target as he himself claimed.

killed in the incident.[53] As *AWR* reported, it was highly unlikely that the death was an attempt on the bishop's life. Incidents such as these, followed by highly inflated stories contribute to making Christians believe that they are being persecuted by the Egyptian government.

The Monastery of St. Anthony (2003)

The International Religious Freedom Report of 2004 reported that:

> In August 2003, at the historic monastery of St. Anthony at a remote location in the eastern desert, Christian monks and supporters confronted more than 100 security personnel and numerous bulldozers deployed by the Governor of the Red Sea province to destroy a wall built by the monastery that enclosed land belonging to the State. Although they admitted they did not have title to the land enclosed by the wall, monastery leaders asserted that the wall was built at the urging of government security officials. After a tense standoff, a compromise was reached in which the Government agreed to sell the land enclosed by the wall to the monastery.

It is unlikely that the wall was built at the urging of government security officials. There is no evidence to back this statement up. Important information was missing.

Monks in the Monastery of St. Anthony feared that one day Muslims could build a mosque nearby their monastery, as has happened to other monasteries, Christian retreat centers, and churches. In order to prevent this from happening, they built a four kilometer long wall incorporating some 500 acres of land. When authorities attempted to remove the wall, the monks resorted to international publicity in order to pressure the

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[53]   Several Egyptian Christians from poor neighborhoods working with foreign Christians in Maadi told us that many other Christians had told them that several Christians had been killed in this incident.

government to back down from their plans. They confronted the security personnel with photo and video cameras and very quickly put this information on the internet and sent it to Coptic activists in the West who turned the situation into dramatic stories portraying the monks as the soldiers of God and the police force as the soldiers of evil, and implying that the historical monastery of St. Anthony was endangered. Negotiations followed between government officials and Pope Shenouda resulting in the government agreeing to sell the land to the monastery that it had illegally fenced off. An *AWR* report concluded that forcing Egyptian authorities to accept a church demand through international media pressure is bound to result in a backlash at some point in time, risking turning the exaggerated outcries of Coptic activists into a self-fulfilling prophecy.[54]

Samalut (2004)

In May 2004, Father Ibrahim Mikhail and two members of his church were killed in a vehicle driven by a police officer after he had ordered them to come to the police station to make a report regarding the church's unauthorized repair of a fence. The event took place late at night, after midnight, when the officer lost control of the vehicle and it fell into a canal, killing the three men. In an obituary placed in *al-Ahram*, Egypt's main newspaper, the three victims were described as "martyrs" of the 1856 Ottoman church building decree.

The death of the three Christians triggered rumors that their death had been intentional. *AWR* studied the local circumstances, interviewed the bishop and concluded this was highly unlikely. It is more likely they were the victim of the police officer's irresponsible driving behavior. His actions became the subject of an investigation for possible violations of procedure.

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[54] Cornelis Hulsman, "Coptic activists escalate tensions around wall Monastery of Antonius," *Arab-West Report*, Week 34, Art. 30, September 6 2003, http://www.arabwestreport.info/year-2003/week-34/30-coptic-activists-escalate-tensions-around-wall-monastery-antonius.

4.2. Tensions after having obtained a building permit

Al-Timsahiya (1996)

The Coptic Orthodox Church in Al-Timsahiya, near al-Qussia, 330 km south of Cairo, obtained a permit to repair their church. They encountered no problems during those repairs but when they replaced the old wooden cross on top of the church tower on March 3, 1997 with a plastic fluorescent cross, making it, unlike the old one, very visible at night, local Muslims complained. They said they did not want their village to 'look too Christian'. The priest refused to remove the cross and a local sheikh called for a demonstration against the church during Friday prayers on March 7 resulting in material damage to Christian shops and property. The police intervened during the demonstration, preventing it from escalating further.[55]

Metropolitan Athanasius of Beni Suef later responded that he would be willing to avoid fluorescent crosses, high church towers and other symbols of Christian identity in his diocese if this would help to obtain building permits without creating social tensions. Other bishops disagree and believe Christians have the right to be visible, even if this would entail the risk of local tensions. The late Metropolitan Athanasius' approach has made it possible to build some 60 churches in the period he ruled his diocese (1962-2000).

Dafash (2000)

The Coptic Orthodox Church of Dafash, some 5 km from Samalut, 220 km south of Cairo, obtained a permit to restore their church. Nevertheless there was protest in the area, leading to local Christians comparing their village to al-Kosheh (an exaggeration) and the police stopped the

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[55]   Cornelis Hulsman, "Samenleven van Moslims en Christenen in Egypte; ideaal en praktijk" *Kontekstueel*, June 1997, pp. 17-21.

restoration. Dr. Samir Marcos of the Coptic Center for Social Studies, which functions under the auspices of the Coptic Orthodox Bishopric of Ecumenical and Social Services, explained that the story of Dafash shows "the problem is not a matter of paper or permits but one of atmosphere."

Al-Ubur, Cairo (2001)

The Coptic Orthodox Church had obtained land to build a church in a satellite city near Cairo and was on the point of receiving a formal permit. The priest made a makeshift building for a first liturgy on December 16, 2001. That first liturgy was followed by a destruction of the fence by local authorities who were upset that a first prayer was organized before the formal permit had been obtained. The press release of the US Copts Association was, as usual, greatly exaggerated claiming that "a newly built Coptic Church" had been destroyed.

Shutb, Assiut (2002)

The Coptic Orthodox Church of Shutb, 5 km south of Assiut, 375 km south of Cairo, had obtained a permit to restore their church building which was in very poor condition. The permit allowed restoration of the current structure. However, once the construction began, efforts were clearly made to enlarge the church through building a second floor. When that was discovered, the authorities stopped construction. The US Copts Association released a highly dramatic and sensational press release with the headline "Egyptian governor orders the destruction of a newly renovated Coptic church in a small village in Egypt." The governor did not order the destruction of the church but that of the additional floor which was not in accordance with the building permit. The press release stated: "We call on President Mubarak to open an investigation in this matter and to stop this hideous act of Islamic extremism. It is about time that Egypt rids itself of Islamic fanatic leaders who are ruling the country. If Egypt wants to be an effective partner in the war on terrorism, it can start at home by

prosecuting terrorist members of its government like Governor Ahmad Hamam Atyah who is now terrorizing this small Christian community in Shutb, Assuit." Al-Usbua hit back with the inaccurate title "Emigrant Copts launch war against the governor of Assiut." [56]

Beni Walmis (2003)

The Coptic Orthodox Church repaired this church in accordance with their building permit. Christians make up around 15% of the 6,000 inhabitants of Beni Walmis and had received a lot of financial support to beautify their church from churches in Heliopolis, Cairo. The building itself became quite impressive, even magnificent. Christian young people were proud that the restoration of their church had been completed in only a few months whereas the local Muslim community had not been able to complete the restoration work on their mosque. This show of pride developed into arguments between them and Muslim young people and on February 10, the day Bishop Aghathon of Maghara (180 km south of Cairo) was supposed to bless the church, quarrels escalated, the crowd grew and fireballs were thrown at the church, burning church benches. Three cars were burned. Christian human rights activist Ra'ed al-Sharqawi reported "Both Christians and Muslims had the incidents of Al-Kosheh in their minds. For the Muslims, Christians are rich, are dealing in alcohol [prohibited in Islam] and deliberately provide biased information to foreign media and Coptic groups abroad. Christians look at Al-Kosheh as an example of injustice done to them." In this way the incidents in Al-Kosheh formed the backdrop to these incidents. The different perceptions between Muslims and Christians about Al-Kosheh have neither helped to create a relaxed atmosphere nor given people any confidence in cooperating across religious lines.

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[56]   Hani Zayd, "Emigrant Copts launch war against the governor of Assiut," *al-Usbua*, December 16, 2002, as summarized in: *Arab-West Report*, Week 50, Art. 13, December 16 2002, http://www.arabwestreport.info/year-2002/week-50/13-emigrant-copts-launch-war-against-governor-assiut.

The governor of Minya went to the church that same day and ordered that the damage to the church and private properties be repaired from government funds. Victims of the violence agreed not to press charges, and the 49 persons detained were released. On April 27, 2002, the repaired church was re-consecrated in the presence of the governor and local Christian and Muslim clergy.

The International Religious Freedom Reports of 2002 and 2004 mention the incident and described it as a case of Muslim villagers firebombing a newly reconstructed church. The report does not mention how the tensions arose, thus giving the impression it was another example of Muslim extremism.

4.3. Escalations of non-religious conflicts to religious conflicts

Dimyana (1995)

In the summer of 1995, seven Christians were killed in Dimyana, not far from Mansoura in the Delta. Dimyana has traditionally been a very quiet village without problems or tensions between Muslims and Christians. Two traders, one Christian and one Muslim, got into a conflict over the payment of a small sum of money. The Christian started insulting the Muslim's faith. The Muslim did the same to Christian and soon a conflict over virtually nothing had transformed into a full scale religious conflict.

Tens of Muslims drove cars with loudspeakers around the village using inflammatory language to mobilize Muslims against Christians, including statements that "Bosnia and Herzegovina had come over the village." With this they were insinuating that Christian behavior in Dimyana was similar to that the Serbs attacking Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Thousands of Muslims joined in. The Christian man had meanwhile obtained support from his family and they ended up drawing weapons. The Muslims did the

same. By the end of the day, seven Christians were dead and 18 Muslims were wounded.

Abassiya, Cairo (2000)

Sudanese refugees and Egyptians clashed on July 24, 2000, after a government bus hit a 26-year old Sudanese youth near the Catholic Sacred Heart Church in Abassiya, Cairo. The ensuing conflict quickly escalated and would have changed from an ethnic conflict to a religious conflict if the police had not intervened.

Some Sudanese asked the bus driver to drive the injured youth, who though injured was not life-threateningly so, to the nearest hospital, which many Egyptians on the bus, passers-by and the driver himself refused because the bus had a schedule to follow. The difference led to a fight between several Sudanese and Egyptians. The Egyptians quickly got support from other Egyptians in the area and the Sudanese youth withdrew behind the walls of the compound of the Sacred Heart Church where some 400 Sudanese had gathered for someone's farewell party. The gate was closed. Stones and empty bottles were thrown over the wall of the compound. Angry Sudanese youth returned them. Negative stories were told about the Sudanese. The crowd of angry Egyptians swelled to thousands of people, most of them lower class Egyptians who had no idea how the conflict had started but knew it was directed against the Sudanese in the church.

Comboni priest Father Cosimo, a much respected man in the area, called the police who came with two trucks full of policemen and a fire engine which pumped water at the crowd.

The fight developed because local Egyptians had been complaining about the Sudanese. Some of them had been drinking alcohol in front of the church because the priests do not allow them to drink in church. Local

Egyptians made generalized claims about Sudanese drinking alcohol and some even claimed that they did drink in the church. The Sudanese complained about the way Egyptians treated them, making slurs about their dark skin by calling them 'chocolate'. These mutual grievances clearly show that neither Egyptians nor the Sudanese trust each other, which makes it very easy for rumors about each other to develop.

The conflict started as an ethnic conflict in which Christian Egyptians were as critical of the Sudanese as Muslim Egyptians were. Most Sudanese were Christian but there were also some Muslims among them. The conflict started with derogatory language against the Sudanese for their skin color, however after the Sudanese had withdrawn behind the walls of the church, the crowd started chanting Muslim slogans. If the police had not interfered in time this conflict could well have developed into a large-scale religious conflict.[57]

Al-Kosheh (1998-2000)

In August 1998, two Christians were killed during an altercation over gambling in the village of Al-Kosheh, in the governorate of Sohag, some 500 km south of Cairo. Local Christians responded by suggesting a local Muslim may have been responsible, a claim for which no evidence was presented and which angered local Muslims. The local police tried to find the perpetrator(s) through heavy handed interrogations of a large number of Christians often using violent methods including threats, insults, torture, beatings, and electricity. While such questioning methods are clearly wrong and unethical, they are by no means used exclusively on Christians; Muslim suspects are frequently treated similarly in totally unrelated cases. Bishop Wissa, the local bishop, complained. A high level representative of

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[57]   Cornelis Hulsman, et al., "Tensions around Sudanese refugees supported by the Comboni Fathers in 'Abāsīyyah, Cairo," *Religious News Service from the Arab World*, Week 26, Art. 24., July 2 2001, http://www.arabwestreport.info/year-2001/week-26/24-tensions-around-sudanese-refugees-supported-comboni-fathers-abasiyyah-cairo.

the Minister of the Interior was sent to Al-Kosheh and put a stop to the harsh investigative methods.

Meanwhile, local protests were picked up by Western activists, resulting in several highly exaggerated articles alleging Christian persecution in Egypt, the *Sunday Times* claimed Christian girls had been raped and others had been crucified. Bishop Wissa claimed that at least 1000 Christians had been interrogated, a number deemed unlikely by the Egyptian Organization of Human Rights (EOHR) investigators [?? Well, I spoke to one leading investigator only]. The reports created great anger in Egypt. Egyptian media reported for several months about what they saw as a total misrepresentation of Egypt by Coptic activists in the West. The police responded with interrogations of Al-Kosheh's Christian leaders and arrested the secretary-general of the EOHR, which had been the group that had reported the police abuse in the first place.

William Shaiboub, a Coptic Christian who had previously been convicted of brewing and trading alcohol was convicted and sentenced to 15 years of prison with hard labor for the two murders in August 1998. Local Christians doubted he was the killer, which motivated Coptic activists in the West as well as Western Christians sympathizing with them to campaign for his release. During research for an *AWR* report, nothing was found, whether in talks with human rights lawyers or in any of court documents concerning this case, which revealed any indication that either his conviction or his sentence was based on false evidence. The campaigns in the West motivated Shaiboub to appeal but the request for the appeal was still pending in 2005.

A Protestant pastor from a neighboring village stated in December 1999 that he had heard Christian youth in al-Kosheh claiming that Christians in the village "were protected by the US". Muslims in al-Kosheh knew this

and were angry, and in this instance had the local police officers on their side as they were upset by Christians' complaints about their police-work.[58]

This charged atmosphere made it possible that a conflict over a few Egyptian pounds between a Christian trader and a Muslim customer could develop into clashes on December 31, 1999, in which both Christians and Muslims destroyed each other's property. The police sealed the area off, but did not make any noticeable effort to stop the hostilities. On January 2, 2000, the third day of the conflict, armed Muslims from surrounding villages entered Al-Kosheh, leaving twenty-one Christians dead.

Coptic Orthodox Bishop Marcos investigated the tragedy on behalf of the Coptic Orthodox Church and says "we are all certain these people did not commit suicide, but were brutally killed…"

No Egyptian Christian doubts Bishop Marcos' conclusions and they were thus greatly disappointed when in June 2004 the Court of Cassation upheld the acquittals of 92 of the 94 suspects who had been charged with the murder of 21 Christians and one Muslim in the southern Egyptian village.

Egyptian legal experts emphasize that judges rule based on evidence presented in court. Prominent Christians including Bishop Marcos believe that this evidence was tampered with. He is convinced that the police, for example, asked witnesses to change their testimonies, and the testimonies of other witnesses were not accepted because the police claimed that those people were not in the area during the killings.

Several Coptic leaders believe Al-Kosheh police have become involved in the local conflict, which helped to escalate it. As a result, they were not neutral when they were collecting evidence and presenting it to the court.

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[58]   I met with the pastor in Cairo in December 1999. He wished to remain anonymous.

Anglican Bishop Mounir believes the allegations of police negligence are important, and hopes the Coptic Orthodox Church will file a legal report to the newly established National Human Rights Council (NCHR), requesting authorities to open the files on the performance of the police in Al-Kosheh.

The International Religious Freedom Report of 2004 claims "The al-Kush [also spelled as Al-Kosheh] case has become a symbol of sectarian tensions, possibly violent, that continued to exist in the country."

The tensions in al-Kosheh have resulted in much bloodshed but there has been no violence on a similar scale in other areas of Egypt. It may be symbolic of tensions but it is not representative of the day-to-day Muslim-Christian relations. Bishop Marcos, who has been responsible for investigating the violence in al-Kosheh on behalf of the Coptic Orthodox Church, is very negative about the role of local authorities investigating the incident but he also explicitly states, "In our regular normal life, relations between Muslims and Christians are very good. They live side by side as good neighbors in the same block of flats."[59]

4.4. Attempted conversion to Islam

Only one case is known where a Christian killed his sister and relatives because the sister attempted to convert to Islam in an effort to escape an abusive family situation.

On November 30, 1997, Therese Shaker, 14, her parents and brother of 13 were found dead in Wasta, 90 km south of Cairo. Nadia, 16, was wounded, pretended she was dead, survived the attack and immediately testified against her brother Adly (in his twenties). Attorney-at-law Ali Abdel 'Aal El-Assawi defended Adly claiming the murder to be a murder of honor.

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[59]   Cornelis Hulsman, "Muslim-Christian relations in Egypt; opinions from Egyptians in various positions," *Arab-West Report*, Week 36, Art. 28, September 1 2004, http://www.arabwestreport.info/year-2004/week-36/28-muslim-christian-relations-egypt-opinions-egyptians-various-positions.

Then lawyer Maurice Sadek came in and changed the defense into a political and human rights issue. He claimed that Adly was not the murderer and that the police had cooperated with extremists to kill the family. According to his story, Islamic extremists killed the Shaker family and the police falsely accused Adly Shaker. In this way, the case would become a human rights issue and an example of the persecution of Christians in Egypt. We have received most court documents and have had lengthy discussions with Metropolitan Athanasius, the priest of Wasta, members of the family and both lawyers. There is no question that the Sadek's claims were fabricated and untrue.

4.5. Blood feuds and terrorists

The culture of Upper Egypt is one that believes strongly in both honor and revenge. In Biblical terms, it echoes the Old Testament's an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. Christians have been at times the target of terrorists, but have also been the victims of blood feuds.

Ezbet Aqbat (1996)

In February 1996, alleged terrorists killed six Christians in Ezbet Aqbat, a small village mainly made up of Copts, 340 km south of Cairo, in the governorate of Assiut. At the time it was reported that the terrorists had come from the mountains and since the village was at the foot of the mountains, it was an easy target. Three years later a Christian villager tells the same story, but instead of attributing the motivation to terrorism explains it as a conflict between families. Such differences in explanations show the need for investigative reporting on the spot whereby as many different people from different backgrounds need to be interviewed as possible. Yet, such investigative reporting is often difficult to realize because of time and costs involved.

Ezbet Dawoud (1996)

On March 13 1996, the mixed Muslim/Christian village of Ezbet Dawoud followed Ezbet Aqbat in being wracked with violence, leaving fourteen men dead, nine of whom were Christians. *Al-Ahram* reported it was most likely a blood feud. Villagers had helped the police to locate a local Gama'a al-Islamiya leader who was killed in a shoot-out. Later, extremists came to the village to retaliate.

Abu Qurqas (1997)

In February 1997, terrorists killed nine Christians inside a church in Abu Qurqas, 270 km south of Cairo. The assault was incredibly shocking since never before had terrorists actually entered a church and killed people as they were gathered together for worship. Tens of thousands of Muslims and Christians came to the funeral to show their respect for the dead and their indignation at this barbarous attack. Shortly after the attack, Egypt's four most prominent Muslim leaders traveled to Abu Qurqas to offer the Christian families their condolences and denounce the attack in the strongest possible words. The attack in Abu Qurqas was naturally widely reported internationally, but the ensuing visit of the Muslim dignitaries hardly got a mention. Such reporting creates a distorted and simplistic picture of a complex situation. It was not Muslims in any way close to the mainstream who attacked Christians; it was religious extremists who attacked Christians.

Bishop Antonius Naguib, Coptic Catholic Bishop of Minya, said in 1997 that extremists had killed some 1100 Egyptians between 1992 and 1997 – and approximately 220 of them were Christians. Those were indeed black years for Egypt.

The killing of Christians in Al-Kosheh is discussed in the section regarding escalations of non-religious conflicts into religious conflicts. Without the aforementioned escalation, the clashes in January 2000 would in all

likelihood not have taken place. It is important to make the distinction between violence that is the result of escalating tension or the result of religious conflict, and violence that is the work of terrorists. The Christians at Al-Kosheh were not the victim of terrorists, murdered with political motives. They were the victims of mob violence, which had been caused by heightened emotions and escalation of the original conflict. Three days of violence preceded their deaths. For this reason it is possible to conclude that since 1997 no terrorist attacks on Christians have taken place.

4.6. Conclusions

Incidents have often been haphazardly reported, and frequently with very few facts, if any about the factors leading up to the incident. Most incidents are clearly related to problems around church building and restoration. The killings in al-Kosheh were the result of a conflict escalating where the media played an important role. Local authorities have exhibited a very poor model of conflict management.

It is obvious that problems around church building and restoration can poison local relations between Muslims and Christians, but outside of these conflicts other incidents between Muslims and Christians are rare, which shows that Muslims and Christians generally co-exist very amicably. Thousands of villages have not experienced any violence like what was described in the aforementioned incidents. More efforts need to be made to understand the background and context of incidents in order to understand why they take place.

The new method of pressuring the Egyptian government through media campaigns in the Western press is a disturbing development because this can cause a backlash and do a lot of damage to the relations between Muslims and Christians in Egypt.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Equality and differences

All Egyptians are equal before the law but there are nevertheless some differences related to faith. The Constitution mentions only the principles of the *sharī'ah* as the principal source of legislation, with none from the Bible. But Egypt is not unique in this respect; many Christian countries, including several European ones, declare a single church to be the state church despite the fact that there are many religions that function and thrive there.[60]

The laws for the construction and repair of churches and mosques differ. The bottom line is that obtaining a permit to build or repair a mosque is easier than for a church. Christians in Egypt have asked the Egyptian government to write one law which would regulate the construction and repair of both churches and mosques.

When it comes to the right to assemble or to choose their own religious leaders, Christians, on the whole, have more freedom than Muslims.

The freedom to pursue education is a mixed blessing for both Christians and Muslims. Both are constrained by the law that mandates that everyone has to receive a religious education, but here, the difference ends. Christians are not permitted to study at any government-financed Azhar school or institute. However, the financial independence of Christian seminaries from government funding means that they are likewise not hindered by government interference. Many Muslims at al-Azhar would find this an enviable position to be in.

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[60]   The U.K., Denmark, Norway, and Sweden are examples.

Both Muslims and Christians have the right to ask the Prosecutor-General to take steps against offensive publications or expressions of art such as film.[61]

Each religious community has its own regulations for marriage and divorce. Inheritances in inter-religious families may not cross religious boundaries. In fact, even within Christian families inter-denominational inheritances can be problematic.

By law, Christians have more national holidays than Muslims, although most of the Christian festivals are not national holidays.

In January 2004, the Egyptian government established a National Human Rights Council (NHRC) to protect and improve the status of human rights in Egypt (including religious freedom). Both Muslims and Christians are represented among the NHRC's leading members; it is headed by Dr. Boutros Boutros-Ghali [Boutros Ghali was his grandfather], former UN Secretary General (a Coptic Christian) while his deputy is Dr. Kamal Aboul Magd (a Muslim). Prominent Copts also occupy five of the council's 25 seats.

5.2. Do people suffer because of their religion in Egypt?

This report shows the need to distinguish between two causes of suffering: socio-economic and faith-based. Socio-economic problems cause both Muslims and Christians to suffer. When the socio-economic suffering of either Muslims or Christians is neglected, things usually get worse. All other things being equal, Christians are often hit harder by socio-economic

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[61]   See Magnus Bredstrup, "The Religious censorship of the Azhar," *Arab-West Report*, January 2009, http://www.arabwestreport.info/religious-censorship-azhar and Abrār al-Ghannām, "Religious Censorship in Egypt: Attitudes within the Coptic Orthodox Church of Egypt," *Arab-West Report*, January 2009, http://www.arabwestreport.info/religious-censorship-egypt-attitudes-within-coptic-orthodox-church-egypt.

decline than Muslims are, though the former are more likely to receive remittances from relatives abroad, which may mitigate the disparity.

Both Egyptian Muslims and Christians can be seriously offended on account of their faiths when their religion is attacked or misrepresented in the media, either in Egypt or abroad. For example, Muslim sensibilities were seriously hurt by the Rev. Jerry Vines when he called the prophet Muhammad a pedophile.

Egyptian Christians experience discrimination and suffer on account of their faith when Muslims confuse and conflate them with Western Christians, attributing similar beliefs and motivations to them. In fact, Egyptian Christians often wish to distance themselves from Western Christians, especially as some of the latter (for example the aforementioned Rev. Jerry Vines) have caused Egyptian Christians a lot of difficulties because of their actions.

The most obvious example of faith-based suffering is that which religious converts suffer, where they are ostracized by the people of the religion they left. This happens to both Muslims and Christians who leave their religion. It is worse for converts from Islam because on top of being socially ostracized a former Muslim is forced to continue living with a Muslim identity card. This means that he or she could lose his or her civil rights, including the right to have custody of his or her own underage children. Some of this suffering can be minimized if the convert is mindful of how they speak about their former religion, especially to people who still believe in it.

A lot of suffering because of socio-economic conditions has been mistakenly characterized as being suffering for religious reasons; Egyptian Christians often do this in order to create sympathy in the West. Western persecution indexes (which are often questionnaires given to important people in a community) are frequently based on information obtained from

Christians. By not comparing this with information from Muslims, they commonly fail to adequately distinguish between suffering caused by a poor socio-economic situation and suffering because of religious reasons.

A great deal of suffering throughout history has been related to the polarization of attitudes between Muslims and Christians, which has been stoked to a large extent by interference from the West and the blowback from various news articles in the Western press about the status of Egypt's Copts.

The Egyptian economy has headed into a sharp decline, giving rise to widespread frustrations that could easily lead to a break out of violence. This is made more likely because of the ongoing suffering of the Palestinians, the American intervention in Iraq, the strongly religious language of US President Bush, and the anti-Muslim rhetoric of some of his strongest supporters.

It is important to realize that the Muslim community is not a monolithic bloc; it includes a wide range of beliefs and ideas, some quite subtle. While some schools of thought may agree in one area, in another they may be battling for power and influence so as to further their ideas. The most obvious development over the past few years is that Islamic militancy has declined and that official Islam, the Islam represented by official Muslim bodies such as the Mufti and Azhar, which is generally very traditional, has grown in strength. This is a development that has been bolstered by the fact that the vast majority of Egyptian Muslims are pious, care for adhering to religious values in daily life without getting involved in the debate between Islamists, moderates, and liberals.

Poverty is very widespread and causes a great deal of suffering among both Muslims and Christians. Poverty is often correlated with illiteracy and lack of understanding of one's own religion. This applies to both Christians

and Muslims. It is interesting to note that the government's literacy programs use reading materials that promote mutual tolerance.

Bishop Musa, General Bishop of Youth Affairs, estimates that young people make up around 35% of the total Egyptian Christian population. "Young people," says Bishop Musa, "are suffering from new inclinations in life, materialism, liberalism and some attacks concerning religion, moral life, holiness and sanctification. These are the result," the bishop says, "of the media, the Internet and connections with the West. This has also stimulated ambitions. Unfortunately, it is very hard to realize these ambitions in Egypt," the bishop says.

Egypt's population is growing at a rate of approximately 1.3 million people per year. This, by itself, brings with it a whole host of economic problems. None in the educational system is adequately developed to train and employ this quantity of people, and neither can the industrial, commercial, or trading sectors of the economy. Young people cannot find jobs or start small businesses. Without this steady source of income and the promise of future livelihood, it makes it doubly difficult for people to save enough money to purchase a flat – which culturally and traditionally is the major stepping stone towards marriage. In this way, unemployment results not only in poverty but also in isolation and hopelessness. As Bishop Musa has said, therefore, "[t]his [unemployment] leads to great disturbances in the moral life and psychological life of our young people."

The combination of poverty and radicalism has created a climate that the "Arab Strategic Report" called a "climate riddled with intolerance." Muslims in general, are not sensitive enough to Christian suffering leading to some Christians exaggerating in order to be heard. This though has just achieved the opposite of its aims, creating hostility and anger instead of sympathy.

5.3. What are some of the sources of an anxious social climate?

Each year thousands of Christians convert to Islam under conversion procedures that are not only criticized by Christians but also not always enforced. Both conversions and repeated problems around the procedures have had the effect of creating fear among Christians towards Muslims, especially in lower social classes, and thus have the potential to negatively influence the social climate in areas where such conversions have happened.

Building and repair of churches is, despite the issuing of more building permits, still more difficult than mosque building and repair, which has the potential create tension in local communities.

Muslims are upset about the efforts of (Western) Christian missionaries to convert Muslims and detest any proselytizing by former Muslims about their newly acquired faith.

It is not just Muslims who are upset by any Western interference (especially American interference) in Muslim-Christian relations, many Egyptian Christians are too. They believe it is not the West's business to interfere. In addition, they believe that this kind of interference is highly biased and mixed with self-interest.

There is a lot of suspicion towards anyone who does not belong to one's own group. It is what Bishop Bissenti, Coptic Orthodox Bishop of Helwan, has termed "sick imagination." In an atmosphere of mistrust, the imagination is fed by people's awareness that the truth is often left unspoken and leads them to imagine things that are highly exaggerated.

An examination of some of the conflicts between Muslims and Christians in the past ten years (as shown in the above examples) shows that the conflicts practically always started with a non-religious conflict, but that

religious sentiments were easily brought in by both Muslims and Christians and they helped to turn the initially non-religious conflict into a religious one.

An anxious and mistrustful climate can very easily and completely inadvertently lead to more people getting hurt. Individual Muslims, deliberately or not, may say something to attack the Christian faith. Sometimes an individual Muslim will just ask, "How can you say Christ is God?" which in a charged climate in a very religious society could be perceived as a serious attack.

There are also strong implications of outright discrimination in the workplace. Copts sometimes suffer from difficulties in getting jobs or taking posts in universities, says Bishop Musa, who is responsible for the youth ministry in the Coptic Orthodox Church. "Honestly speaking, the Constitution is very fair and the government is very fair but due to the atmosphere of fundamentalism our young people are suffering in different parts of life, in obtaining jobs and special certificates."

The only answer, according to many church leaders, of all denominations, is to strengthen Christians in their faith through meetings, magazines, and books.

The risk in such alienated and mistrustful times is that Muslims and Christians will not meet each other to have close, personal encounters to discuss what really matters to them, which creates a gulf in which Muslims and Christians never gain the opportunity to really get close to one other. The Orthodox Bishops Musa, Bissenti and Marcos, Catholic Bishop Yohanna Qulta and Rev. Safwat al-Bayadi, president of the Protestant Community Council (Maglis el-Milli) have recognized this unfortunate trend and are committed to countering it through dialogue. For this express purpose Bishop Musa developed a group to promote dialogue through intellectual discussion and a citizenship participation group. They

meet with Muslim thinkers and leaders, political leaders, playwrights, artists and so on. In the citizenship participation group, Christians are encouraged to participate in all sectors of society. "We are pushing our young people not to be isolated, but to contribute to society and social life."

"This is Christianity," says Bishop Musa, "that you are going to be like salt. It dissolves but does not vanish. It disappears but it's present. We are encouraging youth to 'pave' their hearts through Christian love—this is Christianity. And this is wisdom. The troubles were caused by a minority. The majority of Muslims are moderate."

There is Muslim extremism but the vast majority of problems have not been caused by extremists; rather, they are the result of the "human weakness and human negligence" of both Muslims and Christians, Bishop Musa says. In this he refers to weak (governmental) structures to regulate problems when they occur.

This climate of confrontation varies in strength through Egypt. There may be huge differences from area to area, from village to village, from town to town, from quarter to quarter, from department to department, and from company to company.

But it is not only a climate of anger that makes change difficult. It is also that state institutions are weak. There are hardly any institutions, if any, which can deal with problems in their embryonic form, or even when they look like they could snowball out of control. Protection money could only have arisen as a problem a few years ago because local police authorities were weak. The principal reason that the al-Kosheh incident escalated was because it was mismanaged. Stories of religious conversion can grow into enormous conflicts because the issues surrounding them are mismanaged. Many other problems that have occurred in Egypt could easily have been prevented, but this did not happen. Why? Not because the highest authorities in Egypt did not want it. The positive initiatives they have

taken over the past few years show that. All too often, problems were not stopped because local authorities did not know how to deal with them, preferred not to take any action for fear of making things worse or even maybe because they happened not to have very much sympathy for Christians. So inaction and mismanagement have frequently made it possible for problems to escalate and grow.

The church in Egypt is suffering but it is not suffering caused by a deliberate plan. Bishops Musa and Bissenti believe that persecution would be either something organized, planned by the government or a deliberate and planned lack of protection given to the Christian population by the government. They both say that this does not exist in Egypt. Thus there is suffering but no persecution. There is discrimination as a result of a climate of religious conflict and a weak state institutions but that does not amount to there being outright persecution.

The aforementioned church leaders are equally forceful in their views that foreign interference does nothing more than aggravate the negative social climate. "That doesn't mean there are no problems," says Bishop Musa. "We have problems…Yes. But this is life. We have to manage. We have to solve our problems inside Egypt. I remember many occasions in which we said: 'Please leave us alone. We can manage ourselves inside Egypt.'"

The conclusion of bishops Musa and Bissenti is that there is something positive that the West can do though: "Yes, we need your prayers. We need you to support Egypt at large because when the West is supporting the economy of Egypt this creates [a] better life for Muslims and Christians together.

Glossary

Aqida – dogma of faith

Feddan – A unit of area used in Egypt. 1 *feddan* is equivalent to 0.42 hectares or 1.038 acres

Gizya - Tax on non-Muslims under Muslim government in exchange for protection and not being conscripted into the army. Christians have always seen this as evidence of second class status and welcomed the abolishment of the tax during the rule of Muhammad Ali (1806-1849)

Itawa – protection money

sharī'ah – Islamic law

Umma - the community of Muslim believers

Wasta – personal connections that are believed necessary to achieve something