UNDER MUSLIM RULE

ON THE POLITICAL AND SOCIAL SITUATION OF EGYPTIAN CHRISTIANS

Andreas Jacobs

Christians in Egypt are awaiting the forthcoming Christmas celebrations with mixed feelings. For many, the festive joy is mixed with a recollection of the events in Nag Hammadi. During the evening of January 6, 2010, which for Orthodox Christians is Christmas Eve, unknown assailants fired from a passing car on visitors of the Christmas Mass in the Upper Egyptian town. Eight people were killed, many more were injured. Officially, the crime was called an act of revenge for the rape of a Muslim girl by a Christian in a nearby village two months earlier. According to the authorities, it was the work of individuals and had nothing to do with religious tensions and conflicts. Three suspects were arrested shortly afterwards and charged for murder. Their leader was already well-known to the police. The Christian minority in Egypt, as well as many journalists and even some politicians, were not satisfied with the official explanation. Throughout the country, there have been riots between angry groups of Christians and Muslims. Many Copts[1] demonstrated outside the Egyptian courts and in front of government buildings. The prosecuting authorities and security services were openly accused of failure, and the issue was the cause of many heated debates in the Egyptian parliament.

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The murders in Nag Hammadi in 2010 drew the attention of Egypt and the international community to the steadily worsening relationship between the Muslim majority and the Christian minority in the country. Human rights organizations, governments, and international organizations criticize the dwindling religious freedoms in Egypt,

1 | Irrespective of their denomination, all Egyptian Christians are referred to as "Copts" (from the Greek for "Egyptian").

denouncing the increased number of violent assaults and systematic discrimination of Christians. Between January 2008 and January 2010 alone, more than 50 assaults involving Muslims and Christians were officially registered in Egypt. The estimated number of unreported cases is likely to be much higher. What are the causes and reasons for this development?

MUSLIMS AND CHRISTIANS IN EGYPT

The Copts can look back on a long and proud history in Egypt. According to tradition, even the Holy Family found refuge here. Egypt was the first country in the world to become Christian. The Coptic Orthodox Church[2] is one of the oldest in the world. Christian monasticism stretches back to the time of Saint Anthony in the Eastern desert not far from the Red Sea. And the Greek Orthodox Monastery of Saint Catherine on the Sinai Peninsula makes Egypt the site of one of the most famous monasteries in the history of Christianity.

In the wake of the Muslim conquest in the seventh century, Egypt from an official (Muslim) perspective became an Islamic country. In reality, the Islamification of the country happened much more slowly. Experts suspect that parts of Egypt were still characterized by a Christian majority right up until the fifteenth century. Today, it is estimated that around ten percent of Egyptians are Christian. Ninety percent of these belong to the Coptic Orthodox Church, the others are members of various Protestant, Catholic, and further Orthodox communities. The Copts, therefore, represent the largest Christian minority in any Muslim-Arab country. Unlike in many of its Muslim neighboring countries, Christians in Egypt are not a dying breed. The churches are full, monasticism is experiencing a resurgence. Despite official limitations, churches and monasteries are still being built and extended in the country. There is also Coptic satellite channels. Coptic life is everywhere.

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2 | Hereinafter, any references to the "Church" are to be understood as referring to the Coptic Orthodox Church.

Even relations with the Muslim majority society are traditionally more relaxed than anywhere else in the Middle East. There are no ethnic or linguistic differences between Egyptian Christians and Muslims. In some instances, the ritual boundaries are even blurred or indistinguishable, particularly in rural areas and in terms of popular beliefs. Veiled women can frequently be found in monasteries and attending church services. Muslim parents have their Muslim children baptized (it cannot do any harm), and Egyptian Muslims may also have visions of the Virgin Mary. There are not many socio-economic differences, either. The richest Egyptian is a Christian – and, presumably, so is the poorest. Many Muslims are proud of their country's long Christian history and recognize the claims of Copts to be the original, indigenous Egyptians. Much effort is expended to preserve this Coptic heritage: Christmas is also a Muslim holiday and good-neighborly friendship for Muslims is often part and parcel of daily life – albeit with decreasing tendency.

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MILESTONES OF DISCRIMINATION

Many Copts point to the military coup of 1952 as the first milestone in the history of increased discrimination. While it used to be perfectly usual to find many Copts holding leading positions in government, they were successively dislodged from these positions of authority during the Nasser era. Observers equate this to the anti-colonial ideology of the Nasser period. As the previous conquerors and suppressors were Christians, the new masters should have as little as possible to do with the old times. In particular, the well-to-do, Western-educated Christian elite came under suspicion at the time of being the fifth column of the despised West. Arabic nationalism, which, incidentally, was founded with the help of Christians, officially emphasized the equality of all Arabs. However, at the time, Muslim Arabs were de facto the preferred normal citizens. The characteristic structural underrepresentation of Christians within key political, administrative, and academic posts in Egypt can be traced back to that time. Christian ministers, state secretaries, and even parliamentarians became increasingly rare. For a long time, none of the important governor's office posts was given to Christians.

There is not a single university chancellor in Egypt who is Christian and there are almost no Christian deans. Christians are not permitted to become commissioned officers in the Egyptian Army. They are not even employed by the security services.

In the 70s and 80s, religious discrimination started to emerge alongside political discrimination. This could be seen when Anwar El-Sadat declared himself the Muslim president of a Muslim people and drove forward the successive Islamification of state and society. This brought about a change in religious inter-relations. In many places, the increasingly religious Muslim majority and labor migration to conservative Arab Gulf States fostered religious resentment towards Christians. Ideas about Christians as infidel, immoral, impure – which were either alien to Egyptian thinking or had long since been overcome – began to resurface. At the same time, Islamic terrorist groups, prepared to use violence, tried to turn their vision of an Islamic state into reality by carrying out a number of bloody attacks on Christians and Christian establishments. As a result, many Copts turned away from this president and this people, and turned towards their church.

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This political and religious discrimination was followed by a social discrimination – on both sides. While under every president, including Mubarak, the idea of equality for all Egyptians has been uphold and the existence of a religious minority within the country has been denied, Muslims and Christians alike increasingly withdraw into their own communities. At roughly the same time, the background and circumstances of violent attacks against Christians were changing. Whereas they had previously been carried out by militant extremists with a clear political agenda in exposed areas (churches, monasteries), they now stem from the center of the Muslim (and Christian) population and often result from trivial arguments. Disputes about property, money, and honor, or interdenominational, amorous adventures and sex offenses often escalate to become bloody acts of violence. Observers largely blame increasing Islamification for this tendency.

MUSLIM LEADERSHIP CLAIMS

The triumph of Islamic society, which is politically tolerated and supported, is accompanied by a tendency towards "Islamic mainstreaming" in Egypt. Nearly all areas of politics and life, many of which had hitherto not been an issue or went without saying, are now tested for their conformance with Islam and adjusted accordingly, at least officially. Social, political, and legal dealings with the country's Christian minority increasingly succumb to classic Islamic beliefs, or rather specific interpretations thereof. According to these beliefs, Islam was a continuance and completion of the Jewish and Christian revelations. Christianity was therefore "contained within Islam" and became obsolete in light of the Islamic revelation. In an Islamic commonwealth, Christian authority over Muslims is just as undesirable as an expansion of the Christian faith itself.

This understanding can be found in Egyptian schoolbooks, for example. Following the eras of the Ancient Egyptians and the Greeks and Romans, there came a Christian age, which was (finally) supplanted by a Muslim epoch in the seventh century. Again and again, deep respect for the Christian religion and "the prophet" Jesus Christ is expressed. However, no attention is paid to Christian life and Christian beliefs in the world of today. Copticism is indeed seen as an inherent part of Egyptian history, but it is not viewed as an integral part of Egypt's present or future. The Coptic way of life under Muslim rule is not mentioned or is treated only as a phase-out model. Christianity is presented as a form of incomplete Islam. The central tenets of Christianity – the meaning of the resurrection and the structure of the church – do not play a role in the Egyptian school curriculum.[3] Despite all the rhetoric of centuries of shared Christian-Muslim history, a Muslim student in Egypt presumably knows less about Christianity than a student of the same age in Germany, with its great number of citizens of Turkish heritage, knows about Islam. This is often true for adults, as well.

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3 | For an outline of Christianity in Egyptian schoolbooks, cf. Wolfram Reiss, "The Portrayal of Christianity in Egyptian Textbooks: Conclusions of Investigations and Proposals for Improvement," in: *Arab-West Report*, 15 (2003), 40-55.

Therefore, there is hardly any talk in Egypt of a Coptic-Muslim dialog. Christians and Muslims alike react by shaking their heads at the idea of promoting inter-religious dialog that is so popular in the West. On the Islamic side, an unbiased discussion of Christianity presents a theological problem as one runs the risk of being seen to contradict the Quran's message. At best, conservative Muslims expect that Christians will adopt Muslim perceptions of Christianity as a result of an "inter-religious dialog," and that they will back away from any form of missionary activity. Things are no better from the Coptic perspective. From a safe distance, many Copts pass catastrophic judgment on Islam. Many deny it has a right to exist. In this part of the world, therefore, virtually nobody would dream of debating seriously the different aspects of faith with a person of another religion without any specific cause. From the Muslim point of view, everything that needs to be said about Christianity has already been said. From the Coptic perspective, there is nothing to say about Islam.

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Therefore, although Islam has traditionally treated Christianity with respect, it continues to assert a leadership claim, which sets clear boundaries for the political and social ambitions of Christians in the eyes of many Muslim rulers. These boundaries are just as hidden as they are pronounced in Egypt today, and are marked by two red lines: firstly, authority, or rather, jurisdiction of Christians over Muslims and, secondly, the visible expansion of Christianity. All inter-religious conflicts in Egypt can be traced back to the actual, or perceived, compliance with these two lines – or violation of them. Above all, this includes conflicts about missionary work and conversion as well as the construction of churches and family law.

MISSIONS AND CONVERSION

According to the Egyptian constitution, the country enjoys religious freedom, but with one important limitation. In 2008, the courts decided that Muslims were not entitled to change their religion, thereby losing their right to an inherent component of religious freedom. As a result, the state does not officially recognize the conversion from

Islam to Christianity or any other religion. Laws against the defamation of religion or public order disturbances have been used as the legal basis. This has grave consequences for those affected. In Egypt, a person's affiliation to one of the three "permitted" religions – Islam, Christianity, and Judaism – appears on all official papers and identity documents. Erroneous details about religious affiliation will be prosecuted. Failure to state one's religion "correctly" means a person cannot obtain an identity card, cannot attend school, cannot work, and cannot exercise his or her legal rights – it is not even possible to buy a car.

Christians converted from Islam have to date been unsuccessful in suing the administration for changes to the religious status in their identity papers or in demanding from the state not to register denomination. In recent years, however, protests and litigation by those affected, as well as international pressure, have caused judges to take action, sometimes for the sake of at least doing something. According to the judgment of an administrative court from 2008, converts to Christianity should be entitled to obtain identity papers. However, these must state their previous Muslim faith. This judgment has yet to be implemented. And besides, the extent to which it will help those affected is questionable.

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The reasons for the Egyptian state not to recognize conversion from Islam to Christianity are clear. Since 1972, Islamic law, the Sharia, has been the main legal source. Egypt describes itself as an Islamic state. According to a classic Islamic understanding of the law, renunciation of (Islamic) faith is to be punished by death. The fact that this punishment is not meted out in Egypt today does indeed fit with a sense of justice shared by the majority of Egyptians. However, from the point of view of state-controlled religious authorities, it requires some explanation. Based on the understanding of Islamic law that currently prevails in Egypt, conversion to Christianity from Islam is so clearly unacceptable that judicial recognition would unequivocally reveal the state in the eyes of its enemies to be "non-Islamic."

Moreover, since the Coptic Church rejects conversions in principle, they should not officially occur, or at least should not be recognized officially. On occasion, drastic measures are employed to ensure this. Converts are placed under surveillance by the security services and are prevented from leaving the country. Even lawyers, friends, and relatives come under targeted pressure. Arbitrary arrests, interrogations, and abuse are part of the daily norm. Missionary work and the public distribution of Bibles are forbidden and punished. Foreign missionaries are often detained directly at the airport and priests, who marry Christians to converts, receive long prison sentences.

CHURCH BUILDING

The question of church building is less problematic politically-speaking, but is just as explosive socially. The current Egyptian law for the regulation of the erection of sacred buildings comes from 1856. Since that time, the (re-) construction of a church has required the head of state's permission. A law passed in 1934 places further restrictions on church building including the agreement of Muslim neighbors. Often, many of these are not willing to accept

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churches in their neighborhood. Violent altercations, such as the dispute surrounding the site of the Upper Egyptian Monastery of Saint Fana in 2008, are not infrequent. More often than not, they concern secular arguments about land and money, but these are nearly always fueled by religious reservations about the spread of Christianity.

From a theological perspective, church building presents less of a problem than conversion. Even many Muslims recognize an imbalance and push for change. Hence, for several years now, the state has endeavored to simplify and harmonize the regulations. A new bill has been under discussion since 2008. However, despite the support of many prominent Muslims, it has yet to be presented to Parliament. Unofficially, justification centers on consideration for the religious sensitivities of conservative Muslims. However, in 2005, licensing powers for church building were delegated to provincial governors. Today, structural alterations only require the authorities to be notified. And permission should only be withheld in

justifiable instances. In practice, however, victimization and delays are still frequent occurrences. Over and over again, there are reports of security concerns, police breaking up services in unauthorized churches, and delays and refusals to grant planning permission. Here, too, observers speak of targeted provocation and escalation on both sides.

CUSTODY

The respective laws and customs of the various religious communities are applied to Egyptian family law. Thus, Sharia applies to Muslims, canon law for Copts, and Jewish law to the few Jews left in the country. If the parties are of different denominations

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or from different religious communities, it is always the Sharia that serves as basis of judgement. Hence, custody disputes and divorce settlements between a Coptic wife and Muslim husband, but also between a Protestant and Orthodox Christian, are decided according to Islamic law. In turn, these rulings cause particular problems in the case of conversion. When a Christian husband converts to Islam, his children automatically become Muslim and must be brought up as such. In the case of a non-Muslim mother, custody rights have hitherto automatically been given to the father, who has converted to Islam.

In mid-2010, 50 custody disputes between converts and their spouses were pending hearing before the Egyptian courts. At around the same time, an Egyptian court granted custody for the first time ever to a Christian wife over her children up to the age of 15, even though the father had converted to Islam. Up to now, though, the courts have not gone against the equally contentious principle of "automatic conversion" of children upon the father's conversion. Thus, relatively little has actually changed. While children may remain in the charge of a (Christian) mother up to a certain age, they must still be brought up according to the (Islamic) religion of the father. Many Muslims argue that the aforementioned historical and religious understanding is important: a Muslim upbringing familiarizes the child with all the prophetic traditions, whereas a Christian upbringing only gives them one perspective. Thus, the former is preferable in the context of a broad religious education.

DIVORCE LAW

In the case of the disputes outlined above, the Coptic Church and its patriarch, Pope Shenouda III, play a role that many observers find difficult to follow. Pope Shenouda in particular hardly ever misses an opportunity, despite his ailing health, to publicly declare his allegiance to the government. He is seen as a firm supporter of President Mubarak and has repeatedly called for the president's son, Gamal, to succeed his father. The government's "one people rhetoric" is also backed by the Church and it denies the existence of religious conflicts within the country almost as a reflex. The Church has even failed to state its official position towards the events in Nag Hammadi. Instead, it has praised the work of the security forces and the investigating authorities.

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The reason for this demonstrative allegiance to the state lies in the particular relationship between the state and the Church in Egypt. The Egyptian government seeks to push the Church to become an institution governed by public law – such as the Islamic al-Azhar – that in certain areas has the power to implement state administrative acts. The Church wishes to avoid this state usurpation and insists on obtaining a special status with legal powers. All other disputes are secondary to the Church's aim of securing power and influence. This explains why, on the one hand, the Church is reluctant to comment on the altercations between Christians and Muslims but, on the other, allows itself to be drawn into a tangible conflict with the state on a seemingly marginal issue: divorce law.

Over the past few decades, the Coptic Church has systematically tightened the requirements for a church divorce. At present, adultery is the only valid ground for divorce. The fact that there is no civil marriage in Egypt means that Orthodox Copts are *de facto* unable to divorce (and, hence, remarry) as far as they do not convert or wish to subject themselves to the social and legal stigmatization of adultery.

A few months' ago, an Egyptian administrative court decided that the Church must allow Copts to divorce and remarry. The Church sees the judgment as interfering in its internal affairs and its religious freedom. In the view of the Church, marriage is not an an administrative act, but a sacrament.

For many Coptic high officials, the dispute about divorce is not simply a matter of faith. Instead, it strikes at the very heart of the authority and unity of the Church. In mid-2007, a self-styled "antipope" caused a furor in Cairo when he promised church reforms in precisely the areas many young Copts desire to change: in the liturgy and in the divorce law. Many Egyptians, quite a few of whom are secular Christians, agree that there is a tendency towards an alienation of the Church among its followers. For them, the Church has become too powerful and independent, encouraging Christians to distance themselves from the Muslim majority society and endangering national unity with its calls to recognize its special status. Such criticism comes at an inopportune moment for the Egyptian state. Increasing distance between the Church and believers reduces the Church's room for maneuver *vis-à-vis* the state and secures the Church's support for the intrinsically decisive political question of national security in the country.

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THE PRIMACY OF SECURITY

When the violent riots started in March 2010 in the Northern Egyptian city of Marsah Matruh between Muslims and Christians, the governor, as one could have expected, declared that this was not a religious conflict but merely a dispute similar to any that might arise within a group believers all of the same faith. The government also disputed a religious motive following the murders in Nag Hammadi, declaring that the crimes were acts of revenge by criminal individuals. Ibrahim Issa, recently dismissed editor-in-chief of the influential, independent daily newspaper *Al-Dostour*, wrote at the time: "When have the victims of an act of revenge ever been selected at random? Vendettas have clear rules and clear victims. This was a crime committed by terrorists and fanatics, not by individual criminals."

References to ethnic and denominational disputes and divides are taboo in Egypt. On state television, in the state-run media, but also in schools and educational establishments, the same message is constantly repeated: the Egyptians are one people; all Egyptians are equal; there are no differences between Christians and Muslims; therefore, there are no religious tensions. Anyone who says anything to the contrary is merely a mouthpiece of (foreign) interests that seek to threaten the stability of Egypt and weaken the country. The usual suspects are Israel and the USA as well as foreign Copts and their organizations.

The "one people rhetoric" is not just advocated by the state and the authorities, it is also backed by a considerable part of the population. Even Egyptians that are critical of the government view the claims of the Copts with some skepticism. They deplore a wide-spread victim mentality, the tendency towards self-isolation, and protests about a special role. It is often heard and said that, at the end of the day, the Copts' demands for recognition as a religious minority will only threaten national unity and security. From this point of view, the increased number of interdenominational conflicts is not based on increasing anti-Christian sentiments, but on ever more demanding claims by Christians levied against the state and society.

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This also explains the peculiarly superficial reporting on interdenominational disputes within the Egyptian media. Although there is wide-scale reporting of the scale and events of actual conflicts, the relationships and reasons behind them often remain unclear. Instead, accusations about the loss of a glorified past, in which Copts and Muslims were first and foremost Egyptians, dominate as well as indictments of the government's inability to act.

The Coptic issue is politically difficult for the government, not because the Copts represent a real threat for the regime. Quite the opposite, in fact: Christians are some of the most ardent supporters of the current regime. The Egyptian state is, therefore, less worried about the ambitions and activities of the Christian minority within

the country. Instead, it fears the reactions of the Muslim majority and the damage to Egypt's international reputation. The state's answer to this has been to pursue a strategy of ostensible privileging with concomitant structural discrimination.

PRIVILEGING AND DISCRIMINATION

Increasing national and, above all, international awareness for the situation of Christians in Egypt has caused the state and the authorities to take placatory measures in the more recent past. In 2002, the government declared Christmas as a national holiday. In 2006, a Coptic provincial governor was appointed for the first time in over thirty years. Also, a few Copts, some of which were women, were appointed to senior academic and political posts. Two ministers in the Egyptian cabinet are Copts. Boutros Boutros-Ghali, himself a Copt and former UN Secretary General, is now head of the National Council for Human Rights. At the end of 2008, for the first time ever in the country's history, a woman and Copt was appointed mayor of the Upper Egyptian village of Komboha. And since 2009, the idea of a "Copt quota" has been under discussion in the Egyptian parliament. In addition, there have been the aforementioned judicial measures to simplify church building and a few sensational judgments in favor of Copt parties in disputes.

For critics, though, these steps are little more than window-dressing. While the government's policies of promoting certain "flagship careers" following public criticism are highly symbolic, many still claim that discrimination and victimization is increasing in daily life and interaction with the authorities. Copts remain barred from pursuing careers in the public sector, the police force, the judicial system, and universities. They may not study at the state-financed al-Azhar University. Priests live on donations and charity from the Church, while imams are paid by the state. Muslim and Christian children in Egypt learn Arabic with the aid of the Quran (and not the Bible) and in art classes pupils are required to draw the Islamic creed or the Kaaba in Mecca (and not the Holy Family). Also, in the wake of the so-called

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"swine flu" pandemic, all Egyptian pigs were slaughtered, which many Christians viewed as a measure to undermine their livelihoods.

Legal proceedings against official discrimination and victimization are often hindered or drawn out as a result of sloppiness or procedural tricks. One such favored tool is the so-called "reconciliation commission." This commission aims to promote an alternative dispute resolution following

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a dispute between Christians and Muslims by taking into account local requirements and situations. What at first glance may appear to be a progressive instrument of alternative mediation in fact serves to elude international attention and to exert pressure on the weaker party involved in the dispute – and that in most cases is a Christian. If this pressure does not work, the authorities sometimes turn to harsher measures. As a result of kidnappings and arrests of Copts and Coptic monks in the past, pressure was continually exerted on church leaders and followers to prevent disputes from being taken to court. Even in the case of the dispute surrounding the site of the Monastery of Saint Fana in 2008, the local authorities are said to have arbitrarily arrested Copts as a means of blackmail against the Coptic leaders. This is supposed to stop the Church from instigating legal proceedings against Muslim parties involved in the dispute and demanding compensation through legal channels.

CONCLUSIONS

The question about the role and the rights of Copts in Eqypt is currently one of national security. The victory of cultural Islam has caused religious reservations in the country to increase. Secular conflicts are essentially fueled by religion. This plays right into the hands of the Islamic opposition. The state reacts, on the one hand, by pushing forward the Islamification of the state and society and, on the other, by seeking to minimize escalations in disputes between Muslims and Christians using all means possible. The coupling of the Copt question to the issue of national security is, therefore, both a blessing and a curse for Christians in Egypt. On the one hand, a sustained and fundamental deterioration in the situation of Christians in the

country is not in the interest of the Egyptian state, as this would represent a security risk. On the other, though, the state has shown itself to be increasingly willing to accept discrimination and alienation of the Christian minority as the price for law and order.

Although the situation of Christians in Egypt is currently of less cause for concern than in many neighboring Muslim countries, it is still unacceptable in view of religious freedom and human rights. Little is likely to change given the present conditions. Social Islamification in Egypt means that theological claims of the rule of Islam over Christianity have a direct influence on politics. Sustained improvements in the situation of Christians in Egypt can only be achieved by abandoning the political implementation of this claim. Intellectual (Muslim and Christian) critics, as well as a few politicians, argue that this would require to completely rethink the state of society. This has been echoed by the former UN Secretary General Boutros-Ghali: "It is not enough that the Pope and the Grand Sheikh embrace each other. What we need is fundamental education on human rights and religious freedom."[4] To date, there are very few signs that such a change of thinking is taking place. In 2009, a film starring the two Egyptian cinema icons Omar Sharif and Adel Imam captured Muslim-Christian relations in Egypt from a humorous perspective. The Egyptian best-selling author Alaa el-Aswany has as well ventured on this contentious area in his latest book. Whether these are the starting points of socio-political reorientation or merely occupational therapy for the small, secular upper class still remains to be seen. One thing, though, is for certain: Egyptian Christians will have to continue to cope with Muslim rule.

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4 | Boutros-Ghali gave an interview in Arabic to the London newspaper, *Asharq al-Awsat*, which appeared on March 16, 2010.