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Copts in Egypt

A Christian Minority under Siege

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A Christian Minority under Siege

**Papers Presented at
The First International Coptic Symposium**

Zurich, September 23–25, 2004

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The Challenge of Islamism¹

Thank you so much, Mr. Adly Youssef, I am particularly relieved after hearing the last introduction of Michael Meunier. I made it through without a very colorful introduction, just a warm one. Thank you very much.

I am delighted to be here. Let me start by saying that I lived in Egypt for three years, and that it was a key experience in my life. I developed an interpretation of Islam and of the Middle East, and in fact, I have been drawing on it now for some 30 years. I learned Arabic, I had some wonderful experiences with Copts, members of the Coptic community in Egypt, and so I am particularly pleased to be here today. I think this meeting is important, and it is an inspiration. Mr. Adly Youssef is to be congratulated for taking this initiative; the Coalition for the Defence of Human Rights, the Christian Solidarity International, and Jubilee Campaign are all path breaking in their work to protect human rights around the world, in particular with a focus on Christians in Muslim countries.

I think it is particularly telling that the organization and the voice of the Copts is coming from outside the country. As you have already heard today and will hear no doubt again and again, the Copts who live in Egypt do not have the freedom to speak and, more than that, do not have a history of speaking out. It takes coming to the West and understanding that there are means and goals that can be achieved if one speaks up, that there are friends who are ready to assist, and that there are principles that can be applied. Exactly that is what can be done from here and then transferred back to Egypt. My talk today will not be specifically about Egypt. The rest of the conference looks at the specifics of the Coptic condition. My topic is something of a background briefing on the larger question, namely on the issue that stands behind so much of the Coptic problem today. It is the question of Islamism or militant Islam.

¹ German translation in G2W 1/2005, 17-20 "Der Islam fordert Europa".

I would like to begin by noting the striking contrast that exists in the world today. There are some 30 million Christians who live in countries with Muslim majorities. The largest number live in Indonesia, some 15 million, followed by the Egyptian population of Copts, somewhere between six and 12 million. Three million Christians live in Pakistan, and at the other end of the scale, there are a few dozen individuals in the Maghreb. These are by and large ancient Christian communities. We heard earlier about the coming of Christianity to Egypt in the 1st Century. And yet, they have increasingly found themselves an embattled minority, with dwindling rights, trapped in poverty and uncertainty, despised and distrusted as second-class citizens, facing discrimination in education, jobs and from police and the courts. Often they are the victims of brutality. This is not a condition unique to the Christians of Egypt; it applies in many countries with a Muslim majority. As circumstances steadily worsen, Christians are packing and leaving their ancestral lands to find a more hospitable environment in the West. The remaining Christian population in the Middle East is increasingly aged, poor, and marginalized.

In striking contrast to this dismal picture, consider the Muslim minority living in the West, in historic Christian countries where they number about 22 million. This is a population that mostly consists of immigrants who have arrived in the last generation and is increasingly established with growing affluence and protections and with acceptance as full citizens with all rights. It is winning new prerogatives in schools, the work place, and the legal system.

Some of the Muslims in the West openly advocate applying Islamic law and transforming the West into a Muslim majority area. Others engage in terrorism towards this end. Put in symbolic and religious terms: As churches are coming down in the Muslim countries, mosques are going up in the Christian ones. Actually, I personally watched in Cairo when the Anglican cathedral, which was on the [Nile] Corniche, was torn down to make way for a bridge. It just had to be right there, that bridge; it couldn't be anywhere else, had to be right, smack where the Anglican cathedral was, and it is no longer. In contrast, I have noticed how government agencies in the West from Buenos Aires to Boston have sold land at discount prices specifically for mosques to be erected. And on similar lines, observe how the bells in churches in majority Muslim countries are silenced and may not ring, but the *adhan*

— the call to prayer — from the mosques is now allowed in such towns as Hamtramck, Michigan or Oslo, Norway. This contrast between the dying Christian communities in Muslim countries and the assertive Muslim communities in Christian countries has many causes, including demography and, what one might call, traditional versus post-modern understandings of religion.

I would like to focus on the angle that I think has particular importance for us here, namely the role of Islamism or militant Islam in both arenas of the traditional Muslim countries and the traditional Christian countries. In the Muslim world, Islamism leads to profound intolerance toward Muslims who disagree with this approach to Islam. Think of the hundred or more thousand deaths in Algeria. And, of course, it leads to a lack of tolerance towards non-Muslims. Islamism leads to an assertiveness and an attempt to dominate. My talk is entitled "The Challenge of Islamism", and as you can see, the challenge is similar, but opposite in those regions. During my time with you this evening, I like to dwell on three topics: the nature of Islamism, its role in the Middle East especially vis-à-vis the Christian minorities, and its role in Europe.

Now *Islamism* is called by many names. In English, it is called *militant Islam*, *radical Islam*, *fundamentalist Islam* or *political Islam*; they all refer to the same thing. It is an interpretation of Islam, and I believe it is a mistake to either use a euphemism or to see Islam the religion as the problem. It is not terrorism, which is a tactic, that is not the problem. *It is not Islam, a personal faith, that is our problem. It is Islamism, an ideology that is our problem.* This ideology is in many ways familiar to us because we in the West have encountered two prior versions of Islamism as a radical utopian ideology that is derived from the writings of books. I do not mean here the Koran, but rather 20th century interpretations that devoted countries then try to use as a basis for taking over states. In the process of taking over states, they are brutal in their methodology and totally intolerant of those who disagree. Once they take over a particular state, they acquire total power over their subjects and immediately try to export it so that they can achieve a global hegemony.

In short, this is the third of the totalitarian movements, the first and second being the fascist and the communist. The details are very different, but the approach is similar, using all means to acquire power in the

hopes of world hegemony. In the Islamic case, there is a focus on the Islamic law, and the mechanism by which the Islamist ideology attracts adherents and fulfills its mandate is by emphasizing Islamic law. Islamic law is a massive legal system that the Islamists have extended to areas where it previously did not apply. The classic Islamic legal code dealt with a limited number of issues. The Islamists have extended it so that, for example, there is an economic philosophy, there are details for governance, and there are details of education. All areas of life fall under the Islamists' control. The most perfect example of this can be seen in Afghanistan under the Taliban, where every aspect of life from amusement to sexuality, to raising children, to economics, to foreign policy was interpreted in the light of the Taliban's understanding of the Koran and Islamic Law. It is an ideological version of Islam. It is a transformation of a personal faith into a system for ordering power and wealth, and it derives from medieval sources. There have been certain writers like Ibn Taimiya [1238–1328] who were forerunners of these ideas. But in its current form, it is modern and dates back to the 1920's when simultaneously in India and in Egypt various thinkers and activists like Hassan al-Banna began to respond to the totalitarian movement in the West. It was in 1920's when the Nazis were growing in power, the fascists were already in power, and the Soviet model was at its peak. And so it was a time when many intelligent people thought that the totalitarian way was the way forward. They did not know the horrors that would come. They did not even know the horrors that were taking place then. And these Muslim thinkers and activists responded to that belief and hope that totalitarian methods would succeed. They were coming up with their own version, and they developed it over the subsequent decades. They sought power and finally, 50 years later in 1979, they came to power in Iran; it was the first time that the Islamists overruled the government. And immediately they tried to expand without great success. There have been other successes, however, in Sudan since 1989, and Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001. One can argue that there are strong Islamist tendencies in many other countries, but none have quite the revolutionary, totalitarian power of those three.

It is modern, and it is important to understand that it is modern. Furthermore, it is an answer to modern problems, and by and large, it is modern people who pursue the Islamist ideology. It was, for instance,

been: "Let's come up with our own anti-liberal tradition and follow it." This is the third attack. It has deep, deep economic implications. Economics plays a role, but it goes much deeper in terms of what it means to be Muslim. If one takes as an example the 19 suicide hijackers of 9/11, one notes that they were distinguished by their privilege, affluence, and education. These were not poor people who were in despair. These were people who were ideologues, who believed that by carrying out this action they were furthering their cause. *Islamism has become one of the central issues in world politics, if not the issue.*

Now my second topic is the Middle East. Since the bulk of the discussions at this conference concerns the Christians of Egypt, I would like to take a little detour and look at a very timely issue, namely the Christians of Iraq. Saddam Hussein's foul regime, no matter how horrible the totalitarian rule was, had some saving graces. And among those saving graces in the case of Iraq was that the Christian minorities had a safe stop; they were not persecuted more than anyone else by the government. With the collapse of the Saddam Hussein regime and the uncertain circumstances at the moment, the Islamists have grown in power, and one of their first actions has been to target the Christians. There have been many episodes there and many attacks on Christian installations of various sorts. According to the Barnabas Fund, at the end of 2003 there was a missile attack on a convent in Mosul; bombs were placed, but defused in two Christian schools in Baghdad and Mosul; a bomb exploded at a Baghdad church on Christmas Eve, and a bomb was placed, but again defused at a monastery in Mosul. And finally came the last major attack on August 1 of this year, between 6 and 7 p.m. Since Sunday is a workday in Iraq, the Christians of Iraq go to church on a workday. There were a series of coordinated explosions in Baghdad and Mosul that killed 11 people and injured 55. These bombings in Iraq are part of a larger pattern of persecution of Christians that has taken the form of attacks on liquor stores, music stores, fashion stores, and beauty saloons. Such attacks make it clear that these particular kinds of establishments are not welcome. Christian women have been threatened in order to force them to cover their heads. Random Christians have been assassinated. These assaults have prompted Iraqi Christians, one of the oldest Christian bodies in the world, to leave the country in record numbers. An Iraqi deacon observed a month ago that on a recent night the church had to spend

more time filling out baptismal forms needed for leaving the country than it did on the worship service itself. Iraq's minister for "displacement and migration", herself a Christian, estimated that 40,000 Christians left Iraq in the two weeks following the August 1, 2005, bombings.

Whereas Christians make up three percent of the country's population, the proportion of its refugee flow into Syria is estimated to be somewhere between 20 and 95 percent. Looking at the larger picture, one estimate says that some 40 percent of the community has left since 1987, with a census of 1.4 million Iraqi Christians. Although Muslim leaders uniformly condemn these acts calling them criminal actions, this process of attacks appears to be unstoppable and appears to be leading to the decline and possible disappearance of Iraqi Christianity. This seems all the more likely given that this is part of a more general trend of Islamists in the Middle East. Let me mention a few other cases, again leaving Egypt aside. Bethlehem and Nazareth, the most identifiably Christian towns anywhere, enjoyed Christian majorities for nearly two millenia. But this is no longer the case; now they are majority Muslim towns. In Jerusalem, the number of Christians outnumbered Muslims in 1922. Today, the Christian population of Jerusalem is about two percent. The same applies to other parts of Israel. There are reports from the Galilee town of Turan quoting a Christian store owner saying: "Most Christians leave as soon as they can sell their houses and shops. We cannot live among the Muslims anymore." As one report puts it: there are more Palestinian Christians living in Bayt Jala of Chile, than in Bayt Jala on the West Bank, Bayt Jala being until recently a Christian town. Prince Hassan of Jordan has noted that today more Christians from Jerusalem live in Sydney, Australia than in Jerusalem itself. In Turkey, the Christian population had numbered two million in 1920 and now numbers a few thousand. In Syria, Christians represented about one third of the population early last century; today they count for less than 10 percent. In Lebanon, the numbers went from about 55 percent 70 years ago to under 30 percent today.

So the Coptic predicament is by no means unique. At present rates, the Middle East Christians, numbering between 12 and 15 million, will in a decade have been substantially reduced to the point that they will have lost their cultural vitality and political significance. It bears noting that in this disappearance Christians are recapitulating an earlier exo-

dus some 50 years ago, namely the Jewish exodus from the Middle East. The Jews in the Middle East numbered about one million in 1948, and today, outside of Israel, they number about 60,000. If one takes out Iraq and Turkey, they number about 10,000. In combination, these ethnic cleansings of two ancient religious minorities mark the end of an era. The multiplicity of Middle Eastern life is being reduced to the flat monotony of a single religion and a handful of approved minorities. The entire region, not just the affected minorities, is impoverished by this now. For many years, the plight of Middle East Christians attracted little attention from the outside world. The early protectors of their interest, the British, French, Russian, and Greek governments as well as the Vatican turned away from them and their current problems. Recently, however, a number of organizations have sprung up including the sponsors of this conference to take up the cause of persecuted Christians around the world and primarily in Muslim and communist countries. The signs are clear in the United States, for example, where the Senate has conducted hearings on this topic and the State Department has since 1999 been releasing a survey on religious persecution world-wide. There are many other examples that suggest that the once ignored problem is becoming of interest, and this conference is among those healthy signs.

Finally, let me talk about Europe, the third of my three topics. Oriana Fallaci declared in her new book *The Force of Reason*: "Europe becomes more and more a province of Islam, a colony of Islam". She is right. Christianity's ancient stronghold is giving way rapidly to Islam. Bernhard Lewis told *Die Welt* in September 2004: "Europa wird am Ende des Jahrhunderts islamisch sein" (Europe will be Islamic by the end of this century). Two factors primarily contribute to this world shaking development, this extraordinary, huge development. The first is the hollowing out of Christianity. Europe is increasingly a post-Christian society, one with a diminishing connection to its tradition or its historic values. The number of believing, observant Christians has collapsed to the point that some observers call Europe the new dark continent. Already, analysts estimate that Britain's mosques host more worshippers per week than does the Church of England. But there are other factors besides the hollowing out of Christianity, decline of Christianity. The second is the birthrate. Indigenous Europeans are dying out; sustaining a population requires that each woman bear an average

of 2.1 children. In the European Union, the overall rate is 1.4 per woman and it is falling. One study finds, should current population trends continue and immigration cease, today's population of 375 million will decline to 275 million within seven years. To keep the working population stable, the EU needs 1.6 million immigrants every year; to sustain its present workers-to-retirees ratio, Europe requires an astonishing 13.9 million immigrants annually. Into this void of declining Christianity and declining birthrates are coming Islam and Muslims.

As Christianity falters, Islam becomes more robust, assertive, and ambitious. As Europeans under reproduce and do so at advanced ages, Muslims do so in large numbers while young. Some five percent of the EU or nearly 20 million persons presently identify themselves with Muslims. Should current trends continue, that number will reach 10 percent by 2020. If non-Muslims flee the new Islamic order as seems likely, the continent could be majority Muslim within decades. It is interesting to speculate what will follow if that happens. Great cathedrals will appear as vestiges of an earlier civilization, and they will be there so long as the Saudi style regime does not transfer them into mosques, or a Taliban-like regime blows them up. The great national cultures, Italian, French, English, and others will likely wither, being replaced by a new transnational Muslim identity that merges North African, Turkish, subcontinental and other elements. This prediction is hardly new. I am saying this in 2004. But in 1968, a British politician Enoch Powell gave a very famous speech, the "Rivers of Blood" speech, in which he warned that in allowing immigration the United Kingdom was heaping up its own funeral pile. His very promising career, by the way, came to an end because of those words. In 1973, the French writer Jean Raspail published the *Camp of the Saints*, a novel that portrays Europe falling to massive, uncontrolled immigration from the Indian subcontinent. The peaceable transformation of a region from one major civilization to another, which is now underway in this very area, has no precedent in human history, which makes it easy to ignore the fact that it is underway.

My time is up. Let me draw some conclusions from this presentation. Islamism has become one of the central issues in world politics, if not the issue. It is the force behind the violence in the "War on Terror". It is the force behind the transformation of the Middle East from what it was a generation ago to what it is today and in particular the force

behind the decline of Christian populations in the region. It is the force that is moving into Europe and taking advantage of Europe's failures. Unfortunately, Islamism is also the new global enemy of civilization. It is the barbarism that must be fought by all civilized people, Muslims and non-Muslims. It is at the core of the problem that the Christians in Egypt face. It is at the core of the problem that the Christians of Europe face.