Shawky F. Karas on
EGYPT'S BELEAGUERED CHRISTIANS

Egypt's Christian (Coptic) Church is one of the oldest churches in the world. During its long history, the church and its followers have experienced periods of glory and of trial; but today the Coptic Church is passing through one of the most difficult periods of its existence. Egypt's nine million Christians, some 20 per cent of the nation's population, are in imminent danger of being cut off completely from the rest of Egyptian life, and the Egyptian Government is actively encouraging this brutal form of religious ostracism.

Following the Arab invasion in 641 A.D., Egypt's Christians were gradually reduced from a majority to a minority, owing to migration from Arabia, persecution, and forced conversions to Islam. With the rise of the Mameluke Dynasty from 1256 until the Turkish conquest in 1517, the Copts experienced overt and at times bloody persecution.

During Britain's colonial rule of Egypt, Christians enjoyed a great degree of freedom and flourished socially, economically, and politically. Nevertheless, at the beginning of the twentieth century Christians joined with Muslims, under the leadership of Saad Zakhlol, in the struggle for independence; and together they pursued the promise of equality and justice for Muslims and Christians alike. For a brief period following independence that promise was kept; but with the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood organization, equality and religious freedom for Egypt's Christians was forsaken.

The 1952 revolution, which deposed King Farouk and brought an end to monarchical rule in Egypt, was carried out by army officers who were former members of the Muslim Brotherhood. Since then the persecution of the Copts has continued unabated. During the Nasser era (1956-70) land reforms and nationalization of companies benefited Muslims exclusively. Lands confiscated from Christian landlords were distributed to Muslims alone, and Christian-owned companies, when nationalized, were assigned Muslim administrators. Christian schools and hospitals were confiscated; and most of the Church trust land was seized by the Ministry of Islamic Affairs.

President Anwar el-Sadat began the process of transforming Egypt into an Islamic religious state. In 1971, Sadat altered the second article of the constitution and made Islam the state religion and the Koran a major source of civic law. On April 30, 1980, the Egyptian People's Assembly approved changes in the second article to make the Koran the principal source of law. Such an article provides the constitutional basis for treating Christians and other non-Muslim minorities as second-class citizens. According to Koranic principles, non-Muslims are to be denied leadership positions, may not build or repair churches, cannot testify against a Muslim in court, and may not own property.

Though Article 46 of the Egyptian Constitution explicitly recognizes the equality of all Egyptians before the law, the Supreme Court of Egypt recently declared that the second article, stating that Islam is the state religion and the Koran the main source of civic law, now supersedes all succeeding articles on religious freedom and equality. All interpretations of other articles should be made in this context and not contradict the second article. Accordingly, non-Muslims are dhimi (protected) people, who do not possess equal rights.

With the increasing legislative Islamization of the country, the government has proceeded to institutionalize specific discriminatory policies that will formalize the second-class citizenship of Christians. For example:

- State-administered and financed El Azhar University is closed to Christians, and Christians are not allowed to build their own university, even if privately financed. Admission of Christians to graduate school and to military and
police colleges is restricted to 3 per cent, as is the number of those awarded fellowships to study abroad.

• Egypt's Christians are denied leadership positions throughout the country. No Christian is a college dean, a university president, a police commissioner, or a city manager. And there are no Christians among the top 160 appointed officials of the rank of minister or higher outside the cabinet.

• Though there are approximately nine million Christians among Egypt's forty million citizens, the Egyptian Government understimates their number at a mere 6 per cent. In addition, the state-controlled media characterize Christians as infidels, and the government severely censors Christian authors who write books and articles defending their faith.

• The Egyptian Government has retained a law issued in 1856 by the Ottoman Empire, when Egypt was one of its colonies, which requires a presidential permit to build a church or repair an old one. Additional restrictions were imposed in 1934, which made it virtually impossible to secure a presidential permit.

• Arabic language and history courses are heavily saturated with Islamic teachings and overtly prejudicial to Christianity; Christian children are obliged to memorize verses from the Koran that characterize Christians as infidels. In history courses the Christian era in Egypt, approximately seven hundred years of history, is completely ignored.

• No one who attacked or killed a Christian during the presidency of Anwar el-Sadat has been prosecuted. Christian properties have been seized by Muslim fundamentalists

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EXCURSUS 2

Ross K. Baker on SON OF HUAC

Though the House Un-American Activities Committee has been defunct for a good many years now, it appears those old antic sprzęis have not abandoned Capitol Hill altogether. Today's Subcommittee on Security and Terrorism belongs to the Senate Committee on the Judiciary, and to examine its roster of Republican members is to penetrate deep into the Senate's Hall of Primitives. The chairman is Senator (né Admiral) Jeremiah Denton, an ex-POW, one of the group that is displacing ex-astronauts for the title of moral unsalability. Other members include Orrin Hatch of Utah and John P. East of North Carolina. The chairman of the full committee is none other than J. Strom Thurmond of South Carolina. One's heart goes out to the two Democrats dragged to serve with them: Pat Leahy of Vermont and Joe Biden of Delaware.

Unlike that wily opportunist Richard Nixon, who gave only the most cynical lip-service to anticommunism, these senators are cardinals in the College of Conspiracies. What they are up to tells us a great deal about the preoccupations of the radical Right as well as about the relations of the United States with the developing world in the age of Reagan. It is summed up in a committee report entitled “Soviet, East German and Cuban Involvement in Southern Africa.” Its conclusion admonishes us that “Those in our society who, blinded by the success of the Soviet Union and its Communist allies in appropriating and distorting the language of liberty, have misguidedly embraced these Soviet-sponsored terrorist organizations [e.g., the African National Congress and the Southwest Africa People’s Organization] have a particular need to study this report…. This is followed by the vow to “conduct an investigation of the support apparatus established in the United States to provide assistance to these…terrorist organizations.”

Imagine how much staff time, witness fees, travel expenses, and printing costs were expended on the effort to establish links between Southern African liberation movements and the European Communist states and Cuba! Had they given me, or anyone else who reads a newspaper, the cab fare to go over to the Senate, I could have told them that these movements receive military, financial, and moral support from the Communists. Where are they going to turn? To the Reagan administration?

Perhaps the most creative use of inferential reasoning is found in Senator Denton’s letter that accompanies the report:

As this report goes out, I am saddened and shocked to learn of the death of Mr. Bartholomew Hiapane, a former member of the African National Congress (ANC) and the South African Communist Party, who was murdered in his home on December 16, 1982, in Soweto by assassins using an AK-47 Assault Rifle. Based on the modus operandi and the choice of weapon, it appears that these people were ANC terrorists.

Based on the same evidence, I can state categorically that the assassination of Mr. Hlapane was perpetrated by any or all of the following groups: (1) the Palestine Liberation Organization, (2) the Sandinistas, (3) the Irish Republican Army, (4) the Baader-Meinhof Gang, (5) the Corsican Mafia. Tracing the authorship of a deed by the parentage of the weapon requires inferential leaps of Olympic proportions. Accordingly, Leon Trotsky was done in by a Swiss mountaineer because the weapon was an Alpine axe.

The wacky irresponsibility of the terrorism subcommittee would, I suppose, be harmless in and of itself if it did not unleash a kind of Gresham’s Law, whereby bad anticommunism drives good anticommunism out of circulation. One may well believe that the Soviet Union is a reproach to human freedom, that it is a dreary totalitarian state capable of acting out of the basest of motives. This, however; does not require one to accept Soviet involvement in every plot culled from the pages of Readers’ Digest. Such international scandal-mongering ascribes magical powers to a bleak and faceless police state, which is bad enough; but it tends as well to diurate and discredit more substantive and serious