

A Christian appeal to Islam: A Coptic leader invokes the Qur'an

by [Saad Michael Saad](#) in the [February 23, 2000](#) issue

After years of enduring harassment and violence, Egypt's Christians, the Copts, have seen their situation improve in recent months. The media have become more friendly to Christianity, and plans are being made to purge school textbooks of their hate messages. Certain newspapers have begun to publish articles that try to integrate Christians and their heritage into the Egyptian social and cultural fabric. Muslim religious and political leaders have been visible at Coptic events, attending groundbreaking ceremonies for new churches and the funerals of victims of violence against Christians. The Coptic Church, one of the Oriental Orthodox Churches which rejected the christological decisions of the Council of Chalcedon in the fifth century, comprises 10 percent of the population.

Why the change? One has to start with Egypt's growing alarm at terrorism. In response, Muslim religious leaders began exhorting their flocks against violence. The *Watani* newspaper, a Cairo weekly run by Coptic nationalists, spearheaded a campaign in which moderate Copts and Muslims led a constructive public debate. The pressure on the Egyptian government brought by the Clinton administration and the U.S. Congress, protests by human rights organizations, and lobbying by American-Coptic political activists all played an important role in halting the persecution of Christians. That persecution had included attacks by Islamic fundamentalists against churches, individual Christians, tourists, government leaders and security forces.

One other important initiative has helped improve the position of the Copts—an appeal to the human rights tradition embedded in Islam and in the Qur'an itself.

In the early '70s, when attacks on Christians and Christianity started, Pope Shenouda III, then the newly enthroned patriarch of the Coptic Orthodox Church, started his campaign of addressing the Islamic conscience by appealing to the Qur'an, and he has patiently continued that strategy, augmenting it with appeals to

Islamic history, culture and even poetry. Unfortunately, not many Copts had sufficient knowledge of Islam to participate in this kind of appeal. Even worse, certain Coptic constituencies resisted the approach, either because they were not prepared to collaborate with the patriarchate or because they feared a theological and political backfire if the strategy did not succeed. A powerful third sector of the church insisted that the church is “not of this world” and therefore should not interfere in politics. A fourth group, the Coptic secularists, worried that politics based on revelation might be dogmatic and absolutist.

A charismatic leader with many spiritual and political gifts, Pope Shenouda had the courage and wisdom to persist in speaking to Egyptians “in the name of the one God whom we all worship.” This has been his opening statement on most public occasions. He annually invited political and religious leaders to the patriarchate to celebrate the Muslim holy month of Ramadan with fellowship and religious-patriotic speeches by all sides. He developed a relationship with Sheikh al-Azhar, the supreme imam of Egypt, and a multitude of Muslim religious leaders in the Middle East. He sided with the Palestinians in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, earning the title of “the Arabs’ pope.”

This title, however, came at a high price: the Israeli government refused to execute an Israeli court order requiring the Ethiopian Church to return Deir el-Sultan, a prestigious monastery adjacent to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, to the Coptic Church.

Human rights are well established in the Islamic tradition. The Qur’an emphatically grants sanctity and absolute value to the lives of non-Muslims. Surah 7:156 tells the faithful, “If one amongst the pagans asks you for asylum, grant it to him, so that he may hear the word of God; and then escort him to where he can be secure.” Freedom of religion is strongly declared in Surah 6:107: “If it had been God’s plan, they would not have taken false gods, but We made you, not one to watch over their doings, nor are you set over them to dispose of their affairs.”

The Qur’an also acknowledges the right of all people to respectful treatment. Surah 17:70 declares, “Verily, We have honored every human being.” In many verses the Qur’an teaches the right to seek justice and the duty to do justice. For example, Surah 5:9 states, “O you who believe! Be steadfast witnesses for Allah in equity; and let not the enmity of any people seduce you that you deal not justly.”

Pope Shenouda went beyond the domain of human rights to call for a spiritual fellowship between Muslims and Christians. He appealed to various Qur'anic verses that refer to Christians as people who worship the same God and as people of prayer, faith, compassion, mercy and goodness. He also reminded Muslims that their sacred book names Christians as the religious group most friendly to Muslims, and a people to be consulted by Muslims in matters of faith and revelation.

Pope Shenouda called for national unity, not mere equality, between Copts and Muslims. He declared such unity a natural realization of the Islamic scriptures and a continuation of the concord between Christians and Muslims that marked noble periods of history—"those days when Muslim rulers understood the true meaning of the Qur'an and thus Christians lived with them a good life."

Shenouda's approach has many strategic advantages. Because Egyptians are deeply rooted in religion, religion must be the foundation of any lasting political, social or legal structure. Providing a theological justification for human rights is very persuasive to the masses. Also, if the Copts do not integrate an appeal to revelation into their political and legislative initiatives, they will be regarded as promoters of secularism. Secularly inspired tolerance and protection of human rights, predicated on the relativity of all religions, is completely rejected by Muslim fundamentalists who regard it as a modern ideology introduced by Arab Christians and promoted by Zionists in order to detract from Islamic thought and to weaken Islamic institutions.

Even the Muslim moderates, liberals and modernists must seek to understand human rights theologically. Like Christianity, Islam insists on God's sovereign claim on all human beings. This implies that all human rights must be grounded in God's right to sovereignty over human life, dignity, freedom, property and the future.

Finally, revelation positively molds the structures built on reason, natural law and human rights. By revealing humanity's true nature, its relationship to God and its eternal worth, revelation deepens and broadens the dimensions of human existence. It keeps us from reducing humanity to its capacity for rational thought.

Pope Shenouda's approach is a realistic model for resolving many of the current strifes in which religion plays a part.