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## A Letter from an American Heart

*Ayman Soliman\**

Some people label me as an Arab-American. Others label me as Middle Eastern American. But as far as I'm concerned, I'm a very proud *American*.

I was born in Egypt. As a Christian Egyptian, I belonged to a sector of the people that represented only 10% of the population.<sup>1</sup> This population suffered throughout their lives from persecution, hatred, harassment, or the least to say embarrassment on the hands of Moslem extremists.<sup>2</sup>

While the Egyptian government advocates equal rights to all its citizens, the constitution of the land separates between Moslems and non-Moslems. The laws treat them differently. No Non-Moslem can be a President.<sup>3</sup> No more than *ONE* Non-Moslem can be a minister in the government.<sup>4</sup> Egyptians have to carry national ID cards that specifically state the religion to which each person belongs. Along with these set of laws, that ID card alone causes Chris-

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<sup>1</sup> *Love and Politics on a Cairo Campus*, THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION, Jan. 22, 1999, at A37.

<sup>2</sup> According to the US State Department, Al-Gama'at al-Islamiyya specializes in armed attacks against Egyptian security and other government officials, Coptic Christians, and Egyptian opponents of Islamic extremism. *Three International Terrorists Caught in Uruguay*, Agence France Presse, Jan. 31, 1999.

<sup>3</sup> Constitution of the Arab Republic of Egypt, Art. 1.

<sup>4</sup> On October 06, 1999 The State Department released its annual report on international religious persecution. The report describes the discrimination of Coptic Egyptians, another name for Christian Egyptians, in Egypt by Muslim extremists, as well as by the government. For instance, no Coptics hold positions in the military, or as governors. Rebecca Wyatt, *Lawmakers Intervene to Help Persecuted Christian in Egypt: Urge Mubarak to Stop Muslim 'Human Rights Violations'*, THE WASHINGTON TIMES, Oct. 07, 1999, Part A at A11.

tians to be viewed always as inferior and unequal.<sup>5</sup> It causes Christian competent candidates to lose job opportunities, elder Christians to endure unusual lengthy delays for their social security and the underprivileged Christians to stand last in the line for food stamps.<sup>6</sup> In short, they are viewed as outsiders in their own country. These laws plant prejudice and hate in the hearts of the people and create a society that is ignorant and intolerant where extremists can roam around freely spreading their evil thoughts. As a result of preaching intolerance by the extremists, women are insulted and attacked for wearing crosses, churches are burnt, Christian Children are beaten in schools for they are "infidels," trips to monasteries are attacked, priests are spit on and church goers are mass murdered.<sup>7</sup> My mother's uncle, a physician, was shot to death in front of his three-year-old son for failure to pay his monthly "ransom"<sup>8</sup> to one of the Islamic extremist groups who controlled the town where he operated his clinic.

Flocks of Christian Egyptians started moving to the United States beginning in the 60's.<sup>9</sup> Most did not come to the United

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<sup>5</sup> "In the last two decades, Christian Egyptians have been systematically eliminated from positions as Cabinet ministers, army officers, police officials, governors, bankers, parliamentary representatives and university professors." *Muslims' Fury Falls on Egypt's Christians*, N.Y. TIMES, March 15, 1993, § A (Foreign Desk), at 1.

<sup>6</sup> "A majority of Christians and the Coptic Church leadership argue that the Government fosters a climate of religious intolerance that encourages violence against them. Benign neglect and pointed discrimination against Copts have been practiced by successive Egyptian Governments". *Muslims' Fury Falls on Egypt's Christians*, N.Y. TIMES, March 15, 1993, § A (Foreign Desk), at 1.

<sup>7</sup> "Sief Shafiq Sief Makar, known to his friends as Hosni. Makar was among six people killed last week outside the 1,600-year-old Deir el-Muharraq monastery, considered one of the most important landmarks of Egypt's Coptic Christian faith in March, 1999 on the hands of Islamic militants." *Coptic Christians Stage Protest March in Memory of Slain N.J. Man*, THE RECORD, Mar. 19, 1994, at A19.

In October 1993 in the village of Tema, about 90 miles south of El Minya, 4 Christians were killed with axes in their homes by Muslims. The fundamentalists returned in greater numbers the next day and burned 64 houses and dozens of stores owned by Christians as well as a church before the police and firemen showed up. *Muslims' Fury Falls on Egypt's Christians*, N.Y. TIMES, March 15, 1993, § A (Foreign Desk), at 1

<sup>8</sup> This was a monthly payment that he was required to pay to the Moslem extremist group in order to continue operating his clinic. The group orders businesses to pay a monthly sum of money in return for a guarantee of protection. However, in my mother's uncle's case, it was to permit him to live.

<sup>9</sup> Nearly half a million Coptic Egyptians in the last 10 years have left Egypt. They include a large number of University professors, professionals and wealthy

States for a better opportunity or a better life, but simply to stay alive. I moved to the U.S. 10 years ago and I started enjoying things that others may take for granted at times. Aside from the vast wealth of culture that America offers, I enjoy equal rights and impartial treatment that are protected by fair laws and evenhanded enforcement of these laws. As a citizen of this country, I have legal and moral rights. I have the right to be treated with fairness. I have the right to religious freedom. I can assert my right to voice my dissent. I never take all these rights for granted. In short, I have my freedom—an inherited right to all human beings.

What happened on the 11th of September was an attack on America's freedom—my own freedom! I was saddened over the death of these innocent lives and I was heart-broken over their families' sorrow as all Americans did. Yet I was concerned that people, while angry, may view me as part of their problem just because I was born in Egypt. I shed tears—as all Americans did—over the lives that were lost, yet I was feeling that I might not be even entitled to cry over them. I felt like an outsider—yet again—and the difference this time was only a matter of geography.

However, it did not take me that long to realize that my country—America—is different than the country I was born in. America is fair, just and righteous. It protects all people, from all backgrounds and all races. The vast majority may not know what the law exactly says or how far does it extend its protection, however we all know that we ought to do what is fair, just and right. Our strong Constitution and our just laws simply became a way of life for all of us. For when the foundation is strong, when the debates are constructive and the laws are fair, a society's morality is refined over time and the line is struck, once and for all, between what is decent and what is not. Our laws do not only ensure order in our society, but they also shape our morality.

Right after the attack, I watched all officials, politicians, television programs and radio stations preaching tolerance and respect to all human beings from all races. And one of the things that struck me the most is the fact that officials did not order people to abstain from attacking minorities because it is illegal. However, officials

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businessmen. From their new homes in places like the United States and Canada, some are trying to call the world's attention to the Coptic plight while pressing the Coptic Church to be more active. *Muslims' Fury Falls on Egypt's Christians*, N.Y. TIMES, March 15, 1993, § A (Foreign Desk), at 1.

went out on the air to talk about respect and tolerance and to correct views and misconceptions.

One of the ads that particularly touched me provided, "Don't teach your kids to be prejudiced, not even with jokes. Jokes teach hate." It is clear now that over time we became a society that does not tolerate human suffering of all forms, and that is no weakness; that is greatness. Americans, even in the middle of it all, still know how to respect each other, protect each other, and embrace their constitution and their laws. That is exactly what makes us great. And that's why *I am* a proud American.

I study the law and I enjoy it. And to me, it is more than a status or a potential lucrative career. It is the shield that protects freedom and human dignity.

America will always be the beacon of freedom to the whole world. America makes mistakes at times,<sup>10</sup> but we always correct our mistakes. And we may commit new mistakes now again, but I know we will correct them, sooner or later. We lose the way at times, but the vision is always there. We will always be the world's lighthouse that guides through darkness and will always shine rays of hope, life and freedom to the entire world.

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<sup>10</sup> In *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, 60 U.S. 393 (1856), the court in an attempt to protect the system of slavery decided that black people were not citizens of the United States. In *Roberts v. City of Boston*, 59 Mass. 198 (1850), the court upheld the segregation policy and it ruled that a black child can be required to attend an all black school although it was further from her home because it was in all other respects "equal." The same argument was later rejected and corrected in *Brown v. Board of Education*, 347 U.S. 483, 74 S. Ct. 686, 98 L. Ed. 873 (1954).