



Center for Religious Freedom

Event Transcript

Coptic Bishop Thomas on Egypt's Christians:

The Experience of the Middle East's largest Christian community during a time of rising Islamization

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The Betsy and Walter Stern Conference Room
Hudson Institute
1015 15th Street, NW, Sixth Floor
Washington, D.C. 20005

Center Director Nina Shea:

Welcome to the Center for Religious Freedom of the Hudson Institute. I'm very enthusiastic to introduce our guest today; we're very honored to have His Grace Bishop Thomas from Egypt. He's an old friend of the Center for Religious Freedom and of many of you here in the audience. His Grace was the recipient of the Center's 'Religious Freedom Award' in 1999.

We have been very active in reporting on religious freedom issues in Egypt over the years. Egypt's Coptic Christians, of course, are not only the largest Christian community in the Middle East but they are the largest non-Muslim religious minority in the Middle East. This is an ancient church, an apostolic church, one of the five original ones and it's probably the one of them that's faring the best, apart from Rome.

His Grace is Bishop of El-Qussia and Mair Diocese in Upper Egypt. This is a heavily Christian part of Egypt; about 30% of the population there are Christian. He became a monk in 1983 and was ordained a priest in 1987. Bishop Thomas works tirelessly to strengthen religious freedom and human rights in the face of personal risk. He was the first recipient of the St. Stephen Prize, a human rights award by the Norwegian mission to the East, for his efforts to speak out against the oppression of religious communities. Bishop Thomas is active in building schools and developing educational programs within Egypt's Coptic Church. In 1999 he built the Anaphora Farm and Retreat Center just north of Cairo, where many of the monastic communities of the desert fathers lived 1500 years ago. He is acutely aware of the patrimony of the ancient Church in Egypt and is trying to preserve the art and culture of that community, but he is also working

very hard to revitalize and to keep flourishing and invigorate the Christian community in Egypt today.

There was an article that you may have seen in the Washington Post last week entitled “Egypt’s Coptic Christians Are Choosing Isolation: Violent Clashes With Majority Muslims and an Increase in Separate Institutions Help Sever Centuries-Old Ties”, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/07/06/AR2008070602283.html>. It states that attacks this summer on monks and shopkeepers belonging to Egypt’s Coptic Christian minority and scattered clashes between Muslims and Christians have compelled many of the Copts in Egypt to isolate themselves within their nation. So we are very privileged to have Bishop Thomas with us today for he will address some of his concerns and some of these issues and talk generally about the situation in the Middle East and in Egypt. So please join me in giving him a very warm welcome.

Bishop Thomas:

Thank you very much for this invitation and for the introduction. I really thank the Institute for all the efforts for awareness and justice for everyone.

The word “Copts” doesn’t ring a big bell for many ears. Sometimes [people here] don’t know what are Copts, who are they, and why they are called Copts. That’s why I felt that it is worth it to start by explaining why we are called Copts and the explanation might tell you a little bit of the dilemma we have.

Egypt has been always *Aigyptos* and everybody knew Egypt as *Aigyptos*. In the 7th Century there was a shift in the name and the country. When the Arabs came to Egypt, or, rather, *invaded* Egypt, they could not pronounce *Aigyptos* because of the linguistic differences. They pronounced it *Gypt*; so they took away the “*Ai*” and the “*os*.” So *Aigyptos* became *Gypt*, and, when they wrote it, they wrote it with a “*Ka*” so it became “Copt.” The whole country was that of the Copts.

But gradually, for various reasons, whether because of taxation or pressure of some kind, or ambitions in dealing with the leaders or the governors of the country, some people converted. Those who converted were no longer Copts. They became something else, and those who remained Christians were the ones who were called “the Copts.”

Here I will stop and pose a question: What makes a person change the identity of his own nation and shift the focus of his identity from Egypt to become “the Arabs” even though ethnically they are the same persons? They are the same people, but no longer “Copts.” That’s a big question mark and that’s a big reason for what is happening now. The Copts have been always focused on Egypt; it’s our identity, it’s our nation, it’s our land, it’s our language, it’s our culture. But when some of the Egyptians converted to Islam, their focus changed away from looking to their own [language and culture]. They started to look to the Arabian, and Arabia became the main focus. Instead of looking to where they are, they start to look elsewhere. So the focus here has changed and they will never be called any more “Copts.” That’s a big shift and this is actually a very important reason for what is happening now. Are they really Copts or

have they really become Arabs? That's why it leaves a big question mark. If you come to a Coptic person and tell him that he's an Arab, that's offensive. We are not Arabs, we are Egyptian. I am very happy to be an Egyptian and I would not accept being "Arab" because ethnically I am not. Second, I speak Arabic. Politically now, I am part of a country that was Arabized and politically I belong to an Arabic country but that doesn't make a person Arab. That is not the same situation with another fellow citizen who lives in Egypt but is not a Copt, with the same meaning of "Copt" that I explained. But the main thing became something different for, by identity, he considers himself or herself an Arab. So the main focus is the pan-Arab area. That means shifting the nation, the identity of his or her nationality to the widespread Arabic area.

And that means that you are not belonging to the same group...You are in or out, you belong or you don't. And this is a big dilemma that is happening for the Copts who kept their Christianity, or, rather say, that they kept their identity as Egyptian with their own culture, trying to keep the language, trying to keep the music, trying to keep the calendar of the Copts. That means the cultural issue of the old Egypt is still carried on. Meanwhile our fellow citizens, they dropped it for another culture. That means a process of Arabization has been ongoing in this country for many centuries, since the 7th century. We would say that this is part of a dilemma. At the same time Islamization as well is a dilemma that started and is still carrying a lot of the problems. So when we hear the word "Copt," that doesn't mean only Christian, it is Egyptian. This is the literal word, "Egyptian." What makes an Egyptian become a Copt, and an Egyptian not become a Copt? Simply, this is the shift that has happened in Egypt since the Arabic invasion of Egypt. And now when you look at a Copt, you don't see only a Christian, you see an Egyptian who is trying to keep his identity versus another imported identity that is working on him. And that means if these two processes are still actively working till now, it has never stopped because Egypt has not yet in its own mind completely Islamized or Arabized.

That means the process still has to go...You can't study the Coptic language, the native language of the land, in any public school in Egypt. That's not allowed, although we can teach in our public schools any other language. You have a lot of schools that teach English, French, and German, Spanish and Greek, a lot of languages, but never Coptic. Why? Because that clashes with the process of Arabization. And this is a very dangerous attitude. The cultural heritage of Egypt has been taken away. This is something that doesn't care about anything with religions, but it cares about something with the reality of the culture that is dying, and the Copts suddenly felt that they have a responsibility to carry on their own culture and continue it and to fight for it. Yes, we are still fighting very much for our strong heritage of Egypt because we love our heritage and we want to keep it. And that means that if you try to teach your language in a public school, that would not be the right way to do it, so that means that the Church will carry the responsibility to take in this heritage and work with it, keeping it in a very good nursery till the time would come when openness and good thinking would occur, when this country will come back to its own roots and lift it up. But, until then we have to keep it in a nursery, in a church. We don't want to keep it in, we don't want to isolate it, but we cannot throw it away so nobody will take care of it. That's why we keep it. ... This is not withdrawal. We could say that this is keeping the heritage in a nursery till the time comes when it will be open and serve all the Egyptian community. So the word "Copt" here is not only religious, but it has cultural import.

The process of Arabization is still working on, not only with language, but with different [aspects of] culture. It's with the calendar, with the traditions, with the way of art. But we feel actually a little bit betrayed by our fellow brothers and sisters in this nation that suddenly our own culture, our own art has been taken away, and this art is labelled with another label. For example, the woodwork that has been always a handcraft of the Egyptians, suddenly, it has been taken away from being an Egyptian handcraft to being an "Islamic art." Simply because one person or a group of people or a million people has converted to become Islamic, that doesn't take away the fact that this art has been always an Egyptian handcraft art. But suddenly it, too, was converted, to become an Islamic art. That means that the Egyptians will look at themselves and say, "Where does this art come from? Is it an Islamic art?" And we know that the Arabia at that time didn't have any wood handcrafts with the same style because it was a desert and this desert doesn't have many forests to help these kind of things. And that means that suddenly my culture has been stolen and been labelled in another way, and this is, I think, historical [inaudible], which is still active.

If we talk about the culture for hours and hours, we could give many examples, but let's shift now to the Islamization process. ...It is still an ongoing process. And Islamization here, it doesn't have to be just pushing you, pushing people to convert....when you sit all the time in your school since you were young and hear always that Islam is the right way to live. Our young kids as small minorities have to live with this fact that they will hear and be educated in a completely different way from what they have been educated in by their churches. Imagine if you were a small little kid, and you go to school and hear something and then you go back home and hear another thing. And then you have to memorize verses from the Qur'an. You will go to your school and [take] your exams and write this, exactly what they have been telling you, its verses. So did I have to as a little kid, to study the Qur'an to pass my exams. But kids are growing up with this kind of direction. And that means, when you study history, you have to study the history of the victorious Islamic invaders. And that means that as a little kid you have to praise the Arabic troops that came to your country. And how does that make you feel? And meanwhile, you have very little studies in your history about the old Pharonic time. And you have very little studies about your heritage of being a Copt. And you have very little studies about the everyday life of a nation. But most of the things that you have to study, you have to study this direction. So, we grew up -- and I am part of it -- I grew up memorizing the Qur'an, memorizing a lot of the Hadiths, hearing the stories of the history, how the Islamic troops were victorious. And we have to study that and we have to write it in our exams and we have to praise it and praise it. ...Nowadays media has the same style and you can always sit wherever you are and you hear Qur'anic reciting and you cannot say "stop." It shouts everywhere and this is part of the pressure that people are living in. We are not telling them "don't pray," but you don't have to make everyone who is in the streets and in his home and in his bedroom hear all this without stop. And this is part of the pressure.

With the growing fundamentalism in Egypt, Egypt has entered into a very difficult time for the integration of the Copts and Muslims -- and here I use the same words, or use the same connotations that they are using. ... I would have loved to use the "Christians and Muslims," or the "Egyptians," but anyway this is the message that everyone has been given. When we were

talking about the “Muslims and Serbians,” or we are talking about the “Copts and the Muslims;” this is how they were portraying the Muslims, as one group wherever they are.... So this is how we learn how to do it, although it is not really logical. But the Copts have to live this way and we have to learn how to hear sometimes in the media some people who are attacking Christianity, and we have to take it. And sometimes we have some writers who will dare to write on these issues, but they never end up in the public media, in the official newspapers. They have to go to Christian newspapers to write what they want, but not in the same place where these publications have been issued. We hope of course for a better relationship. Actually the fundamentalism started in the seventies, all the leaders now are a product of this. So when we face some injustice, we say that this behavior is the product of fundamentalism. We should learn about it, but, at the same time, this is not what it should be.

We take a few examples, what you just have read here, and I will take the example that was written and published in the newspapers, so we'll not take other examples. So what was written in the newspaper and what has been published was the attack of some groups against a monastery in Mallawi, Abu Fana Monastery. And what is this? Seven monks have been taken hostage in the monastery, been tortured, and as it was broadcast in some of the media, in the Egyptian media, some of these monks said that they tried very hard [to get] them to spit on the cross and to convert to Islam. Of course the monks would not do that. They didn't. But the point here, when these monks talked about it in the media in an interview, what was the reaction that anyone could have? The reaction here: We are taking away the religious aspect and we are putting the situation as a conflict or a dispute over land. So we leave out the main issue and take a side issue, a dispute over land. The dispute over land became the big thing and that monks have been taken as hostages, tortured the whole night, beaten, asked to spit on the cross has not been taken into consideration. ...

This is the image and reality. Egypt now is falling between two things. Is it the reality that we need to face and work on? Or, is it the image that we should put to the world? And I feel like the real Egyptian, that I love my country, I want my country to deal with the reality, not with the image that we want it to declare. It's ok that some group will act in an unwise, unjust way, but the biggest problem is that the majority of people would not act in an unjust way but would take the focus somewhere else. The point is not what happened. The [key] point is how did we deal with it. And this is what we here try to say, that it's much better to deal with reality than the image. And anyway, there have been a lot of stories on how when we deal with the issue of Arabism and Islamism we deal with image, not with reality. That makes the situation much more different and difficult to deal with because when we deal with images we put on a mask and when we put on the mask we can't deal with solutions. And this is the situation that we are dealing with it. And this [masking] would be repeated day-by-day in many incidents and many happenings on different levels. That's why I want to tell you, when you go and visit Egypt and you walk in the street you will not see differences, much difference between people there, Christians and Muslims. You can just go to a public place and you can see them walking in and out. It's the surface level where people meet each other, where people will just be nice to each other in the streets and in public places and in schools. But then as soon as something happens and it goes deeper into another layer, then things will start to become different, and then you go

to another deeper level and if these things come and happen to your neighbor that becomes a different situation, and when these things happen against you and your family, that becomes something different. We have different levels and different layers.

Just one other story to tell you about these levels, another story that was published as well in the newspapers – I'm not saying anything that's not published anyway. This is a story that happened in El Fayoum. A young girl converted some time ago to Islam and married a man and lived with him, and then suddenly she ran away from this man. Whatever the reason was. It's a story that was published. What would be a normal reaction for normal human beings? This girl would go to the court if she wants to divorce her husband, or this woman would go to seek psychological advisors or social advisors. She just would go back to her family to seek refuge and help. But, because this girl was a Christian, she converted, when the rumors came that this girl would return back to her village, suddenly there was an attack on all the Christian villagers in this village. Just simply because a rumor came that this girl will come back to this village, the villagers had to pay the price. Houses were destroyed, shops were robbed, and the story will not stop. Unfortunately the girl was not there. Police had to search for the girl and they found her, took her back to her husband, and she has to live with him the rest of her life. I don't know according to what will she has to live there.

This is a glimpse of what is happening. What do you expect from a Coptic person who lives under this atmosphere? What do you think would be their reaction? Do I have to protect myself and protect my family? Do I have to open up and go and seek communication with others? I will tell you – we are not a weak church, we are not a weak people, we are a strong people and we will survive. And the love in us, the love is much stronger than hatred. And with this love we can continue and go and work and be integrated into this society and work for the goodness of this society and try to reach out to our fellow brothers and sisters who live in this country. And if the fundamentalists or those who are spoiling the minds of people do not like it, we have to work for it. And we have to find some of the moderates and work with them. We still have some moderate writers – very very very few, but still there are one or two who still can say the truth. But the majority would go for the stereotype propaganda of what the majority wants. And this is what we want to say: that even though we are facing a lot of hardship, still we are not weak because, simply, truth is strong, love is strong, hope is strong and that makes the Christians in Egypt continue. Still, we have a lot of immigration that is happening and coming to this country. We are worried about the large number of immigrants that is leaving Egypt, like all the Middle East, that the Christians are leaving this area. This is a big question mark and this is a big cry for help to let the Christians stay in their own country.

Thank you very much. I took longer of your time but I'm very happy to be with you here. Thank you very much. APPLAUSE