



DEFENDING FREEDOM OF RELIGION IN CONFLICT-TORN COUNTRIES: A BRIEF ANALYSIS OF AMERICAN STRATEGIES IN CONTEMPORARY EGYPT (1998-2013)

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Summary: When President Clinton signed into law the International Religious Freedom Act in 1998, he provided the members of the religious right with a unique opportunity to promote their vision of the world through the publication of annual reports assessing religious freedom worldwide. This paper presents a critical analysis of the Commission's reports (1998-2013) on sectarian strife in Egypt and discusses the ideological implications of the discourse adopted by the commissioners. In a second step, this discourse will be confronted to the arguments put forward by members of minority groups who oppose any legislation establishing the US as the religious police of the world.

DEFENDING FREEDOM OF RELIGION IN CONFLICT-TORN COUNTRIES: A BRIEF ANALYSIS OF AMERICAN STRATEGIES IN CONTEMPORARY EGYPT (1998-2013)

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In assessing the role and image of the American missionary movement during the civil war which in 1860 opposed, in the Levant, Christians and Muslims, author Adele L. Younis came to the conclusion that missionaries were “wedged between fighting factions” and that “consequently, both sides regarded them as impartial” (Younis 1995, 55). Be that as it may, the issue of religious freedom was, at the time, at least in Washington, nobody's concern. However, since then, major changes have occurred in the relationship between foreign policy and religious affairs. The ratification by President Bill Clinton in 1998 of the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) constitutes a pivotal moment in the history of US diplomacy because the new law officially inscribed the promotion of religious freedom in the foreign affairs agenda. It should be recalled that following the 1994 Republican Revolution, both houses of Congress were in the hands of conservative factions who maintained close ties with evangelical and fundamentalist churches (such as the powerful Southern Baptist Convention). Hence emanating from the Christian right¹ which made its mark in the prerogatives of the US Congress, this new piece of legislation allowed the creation of a federal commission (The United State Commission on International Religious Freedom -USCIRF) whose main duties has been to provide lawmakers with an annual report on the conditions of religious freedom in the world in order to impose various economic and other sanctions to offenders².

If the constitutionality of initiatives seeking to involve the federal government in the religious affairs of foreign nations is a legitimate question, this analysis will discuss US engagement with religion in foreign policy development particularly in context of conflict-torn countries. More precisely, it will aim to identify, through a critical reading of the USCIRF reports published between 1998 and 2013³, the ideological implications of the religious right's (and their fundamentalist allies) involvement in favor of imperiled minorities abroad. In a second part, the article will confront this discourse to the social reality as it is perceived and analyzed by local opponents to U.S. initiatives. Indeed, in several countries, many citizens have vigorously opposed any interference from the United States. Because Middle-Eastern Christians have been a key target of American missionaries since the early 19th century⁴, we shall look in particular at the reactions of intellectuals and political leaders in Egypt. How can the reluctance of some Egyptian dignitaries to the work of Americans for universal religious freedom be explained, especially when Coptic or Shi'a communities have repeatedly suffered

violence at the hands of fellow citizens affiliated to another religious group? Ultimately, our intention is to bring to light the effects of “America’s unavoidable responsibility”⁵ on the balance of power between the various communities which form the Egyptian social body.

Incriminations *versus* ideological discourse: A critical reading of USCIRF’s reports

Although present on the political scene since Ronald Reagan’s first term, evangelical activists filled in 1998 the vacuum left in the corridors of power by the liberals and sought the enactment of a federal policy designed to promote religious freedom abroad. This commitment whose main expression was the participation in the drafting of USCIRF’s annual reports, offered the Christian movement the opportunity to promote in official documents its own vision of the world.

Each year, countries under observation are classified in two lists: the Watch List, which includes, as its name indicates, countries which ought to be closely monitored, and the Countries of Particular Concern list for those that commit systematic violations of religious freedom. If Iran, Pakistan or China have invariably appeared in every report, Egypt first appeared in the Watch List in 2002, before being reported in the second in 2011, at a time when new popular uprisings eventually toppled President Hosni Mubarak.

In the first place, we note that the commission’s reports are expanded and gradually enriched with illustrations and photographs, but also contain many paragraphs which are simply copied-pasted from one year to the other⁶. The chapter devoted to the state of religious freedom in Egypt grew in length from a single page in 2000 to more than fifteen pages in 2013. Hence, the latest publications contain a selection of the year’s most important political events followed by a complete account of the persecution or discrimination exercised against religious minorities. The communities surveyed by the commission are: the Baha’is (a syncretic religion of Iranian origin), the Shi’a, the Coranists (a current of Islam), the Jewish community and the Jehovah’s Witnesses. However, most pages are devoted to Middle-Eastern Christians and to the Coptic Orthodox community precisely. In the 2006 report, for example, three pages deal with the situation of Copts against a half page for each other minority. The observers present a chronological inventory, summarizing in detail the attacks, murders or cases of discrimination against Egyptians of the Christian faith. Are reported for example the violent incidents that took place in the town of Esna in Upper Egypt, the arbitrary arrests, or the failures of the judicial proceedings against those responsible for confessional strife (USCIRF, 2006, 223). This prioritization of the Christian case was, it must be emphasized, one of the reasons which had hampered in 1997 the passage of a first bill called the Wolf-Specter bill. At the time, the evangelical discourse was not yet associated with that of the secular humanists. In June 1997, at a preliminary hearing before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Nina Shea⁷ explained that never in history had the Christians suffered as much, and that the secularist-liberal approach for the promotion of human rights had shown its limits: “Christians are the most persecuted religious group in the world today [...] why don’t we know about it? Well, Mr. Chairman, I think that our own discriminatory attitudes and secular myopia have prevented us from recognizing the problem” (Shea 1998, 1).

After a single reading of these thirteen reports, one notices that if the focus of investigation has sometimes widened to include other minorities in a more balanced manner (see the reports of 2010 and 2011), the issue of religious freedom has always and foremost meant, for the members of the commission, the safeguarding of Christianity. The fact that each commission has always included in its midst two or three representatives of the evangelical movement (such as Richard Land of the Southern Baptist Convention), often shouldered by a

conservative Catholic (like Charles J. Chaput, the very orthodox archbishop of Philadelphia)⁸, is obviously not without link to the permanent support granted to the Christians of Egypt.

If we now look more closely at the proposed review of the social context in Egypt, we notice that very often the angle adopted is that of news in brief. In fact, the contributors often relate cases of violence which, they explain, occurred following simple rumors or allegations. Thus in the 2008 report, for example, one can read: "In February 2007, Muslim groups reportedly set fire to several Christian-owned shops in southern Egypt due to rumors of a relationship between a Muslim woman and a Coptic Christian man" (USCIRF, 2008, 224). Besides cases of personal vengeance, family vendettas or sexual assaults, very few explanations are provided as to other points of contention, as to more influential political or socio-economic conditions that may have triggered such acts. The role played by faith leaders in the lives of the communities is for instance never acknowledged. There is no mention of Pope Shenouda, patriarch of the Coptic Orthodox Church and privileged spokesman to the Egyptian ruler from 1971 to 2012. Similarly, the Muslim Brotherhood's schemes to sway public opinion and rise to power after 2011 are never brought into connection with sectarian violence. The same factual paragraph is almost identically reproduced from one year to the other and inserted at the end of the report. In sum, clashes between Muslims and Christians are depicted as if they resulted from an outbreak of irrational hatred, as if they were totally independent from any parochial or sectarian influence. However, in 2000, it is indicated that religious strife had long been aggravated by the Egyptian president who implemented *de jure* discrimination. The commissioners emphasize in particular the difficulties encountered to obtain government permission and the necessary funds for the construction or restoration of places of worship (USCIRF, 2000, 20). Another contextual explanation, but provided much later in 2005, is the state of emergency imposed by force for more than thirty years (1981-2012) and used as a pretext for discriminatory legislation (USCIRF, 2005, 108). The accusations formulated by the members of the commission thus only focus on the regulatory function of the state and usually leave aside the mediating function of civil society. Hence, the portrait made of Egyptian civil society excludes the political dimension and endorses the model of a society structured around religious communities such as it was promoted by the national authorities until 2011.

As a result, in the ideological model shaped by the American commission, the religious freedom of the individual overshadows collective initiatives. The free and devout individual is the only vector of social harmony. This focus on the individual is, according to Sebastien Fath, a basic element of the American evangelical rhetoric: "Contrary to mainline Protestantism, [this rhetoric] favors the individual more than the institution, more than the infrastructure" (Fath 2004, 66). But above all, it encourages, according to Mokhtar Ben Barka, "an indifference to issues pertaining to social justice" (Ben Barka 1998, 20). Indeed, in the 2008 report, no mention is made of the national strike organized by the workers of the textile mill Ghazl El-Mahalla, the largest to engulf Egypt since the 1950's. The implicit effect of American action is therefore to incite the Egyptian believers's empowerment so that they may eventually transcend "the hierarchies of power, knowledge or fortune" (Keppel 2004, 61).

In all the commission's reports, a following chapter is devoted to the issue of religious proselytizing. As it has been extensively documented, proselytism is of paramount importance for evangelicals. Being "born again" means being an example, and spreading one's faith. Mokhtar Ben Barka concurs, explaining that: "The zeal of the converter does not stop at all with those who are near him. The borders of the world are the limits. The good news must reach the whole of mankind" (Ben Barka 2008, 94). Although, Section 107 of IRFA has granted any US citizen equal access to American missions abroad for religious activities, the commission's reports do not, paradoxically, provide any explicit account of soul-saving

activities. Thus avoiding any clear reference, the commission simply alludes to the difficulties encountered by American “foreign workers” who under various guises have tried to transform Muslims and Catholics alike into born-again disciples of Christ⁹. The taking of hostages in Egypt or in other countries of the Arab World of itinerant pastors, such as Reverend Michel Louis founder of a Pentecostal church in Boston and abducted while on a missionary trip in 2012¹⁰, proves the not easily quantifiable presence of these mercenaries of faith.

Following the paragraph devoted to religious proselytizing, all reports deplore the discrimination or persecution suffered by those Egyptian Muslims who have converted to Christianity. No example of violence against Egyptian Christians converted to Islam is mentioned. The proposed analysis of the motives for conversion remains equally superficial. Only cases of marital conversion are mentioned. The reader learns that in matters of divorce, the Christian orthodox Church is rather strict since it only validates the procedure in cases of proven adultery. This explains why many Copts convert to Islam in the first place, and once divorce is obtained, revert to Christianity. If the commissioners remain discrete on the rigidity of clerical authorities, they criticize the administration’s refusal to provide re-converts with new identity documents reflecting their adoption of the Christian faith. Since the beginning of 2000, hundreds of Christian re-converts have indeed initiated legal actions to have their religion recognized in official documents¹¹. But, besides this utilitarian practice, no analysis is offered on the motivations other than matrimonial which have led these people to recant their original faith. Yet, though the process of conversion remains a subject of heated debate, many scholars have laid bare the intricacy of motives. As demonstrated, for example, by the work of Raymond F. Paloutzian, J. T. Richardson and L. R. Rambo, conversion may constitute an effective resource to renegotiate identity and status: “Conversion results in profound, life transforming changes in mid-level functions such as goals, feelings, attitudes, and behaviors, and in the more self-defining personality functions such as identity and life meaning ” (Paloutzian, Richardson, and Rambo 1999, 1070). More specifically, in a study devoted to the phenomenon of conversion to Islam in Egypt, Laure Guirguis observed: “[Christians converts] see in Islam a way [...] to get rid of the self-hatred instilled in the individual Copt by the multiplication of signs of inferiority in the collective space” (Guirguis, 2012, 76). The complexity of identity issues related to conversion is therefore not taken into account in the depiction of the Egyptian confessional landscape, where faith often determines social status.

Although the main architecture and the broad content of the reports remain unchanged, some variations in the field of investigation may however be observed. While in 2003, the overwhelming majority of commissioners shared rather conservative moral values (whether they were Catholic, Protestant or Jewish)¹², the report focused exclusively on freedom of religion. The following year, the appointment by Democrat Nancy Pelosi, Speaker of the House of Representatives, of two new commissioners -Patti Chang, a feminist activist from California and Khaled Abu El Fadl, a jurist and scholar of Islamic law- coincides with a widening of the analytical focus. Thus the 2003 version announces: “Serious problems of discrimination against a number of religious groups remain widespread in Egypt” (USCIRF 2003, 15). In contrast, the 2004 report first confirms that: “Serious problems of discrimination and other human rights violations against members of religious minorities remain widespread in Egypt”, but continues with the following comment: “Egypt has a poor overall human rights record that includes repressive practices that seriously violate freedom of thought, conscience, and religion” (USCIRF 2004, 72). This discrete yet meaningful variation reveals the disagreements which intermittently opposed the newly-appointed members of the commission. It also reflects the political beliefs or moral values of the various administrations which have held sway between 1998 and 2013. However, in spite of these moments of tension, in the editions of 2008, 2009, 2010 and 2013 the last paragraph bears a title which

clearly privileges freedom of religion over any other freedoms: "Promoting Freedom of Religion and Belief and related human rights".

It becomes obvious, as Dominique Decherf, diplomat and French author also noted, that the American legislation on freedom of religion is quite distinct from the international human rights law from which it avowedly draws its legitimacy¹³ (Decherf 2002, 7). As we have seen, the act isolates a single article and elevates religious freedom over other equally valuable rights. Yet Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights stipulates, in this order, that; "Every person has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion" (United Nations 1948, 5). In fact, IRFA imbalances the architecture of these texts, in granting a privileged status to the freedom of worship, when freedom of conscience is designed by the secular community as the faculty left to each to adopt –or not- the religious, but also philosophical or political doctrines that he deems good, and to act accordingly. The American fundamentalist discourse, even if it has sometimes been moderated, therefore permeates the content of each report ; the chapters or the topics covered being predominantly the reflection of an ideology aimed at giving a spiritual basis to the social body. The message as it is articulated in the reports encourages individuals to define their identity not by membership to a collective and national culture, but by the sole identification to a spiritual order. The question of religious identification being particularly salient in the contemporary history of Egypt, it is now appropriate to look at the reactions of indigenous opponents and to examine the arguments set forth to oppose this prioritization of rights.

An ideological model against social reality: the reasons for rejection

The year which preceded the vote of the American law, President Hosni Mubarak was renewed in his functions after obtaining 97% of the votes. Scoring a similar landslide, he was re-elected in 1999 and 2005. If the verdict of the ballot box was many times called into question in the street, the authoritarian regime maintained the state of emergency and resisted until the constraint resignation of its leader on February 11, 2011. Over the past two decades, the regime pressured upon the social fabric to assert its authority. As a result, political parties, along with religious congregations, competed to obtain governmental favors. Such is the observation of American sociologist Mohammed Bamyeh: "The government was regarded, by its elites and constituents alike, as simply a source of situational favors" (Bamyeh 2012, 56). It was in such particular context that on March 22, 2001 an American delegation led by Elliott Abrams, President of USCIRF, traveled to Cairo in order to conduct their investigations. The reception organized at the United States embassy, it was reported, was only attended by two representatives from the Egyptian civil society, one of the guests later denying his presence at the embassy (Langohr 2001, 1). In truth, the visit of the commissioners raised the indignation of Coptic as well as Muslim dignitaries. Relaying their dismay, the Egyptian press lambasted American officials for justifying at home what they condemn abroad. *Al-Ahram*, Egypt's most distributed daily, called attention to certain practices such as the use of "secret evidence" authorized by the Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996 which allowed the holding in detention of the accused without any court order or review (Abdel-Latif 2001, 1). In addition, several Egyptian associations for the defense of human rights emphasized the double talk of the US commission who does not decry the curtailment of the Palestinians' civil rights in the Occupied Territories (Langohr 2001, 2). But beyond these somewhat predictable criticisms, what are the effects of the American action on the civil and sectarian strife tearing contemporary Egypt?

In the first place, the effects are most readily observable on inter-religious tensions. Although victims of repeated violence and discrimination, some Copts have explained that their community is an integral part of the Egyptian nation and that it should not be regarded as a

minority since its existence precedes the Muslims' arrival in the 7th century. Consequently, by focusing on the Copts, the commission inevitably isolates these populations who then become scapegoats and guilty of treason. The accusation is even more widespread that Coptic communalism has been cultivated by members of the Christian elite who argue that this ancient connection to Pharaonic history excludes *de facto* any affiliation with the Arab world¹⁴. Such is the opinion expressed by the bishop of Al-Qusiya in 2008: "If you say to a Copt that he is Arab, you offend him. We are not Arabs, we are Egyptians. I am very pleased to be Egyptian and I will never accept to be called an Arab, because ethnically I'm not" (quoted in Guirguis 2012, 70). In addition, the position taken by Pope Shenouda III and the synod of bishops in favor of the re-election of H. Mubarak in 2005 similarly poisoned relationships between Christians and Muslims, especially among the leaders of the grassroots coalition Kifâya founded in 2004¹⁵. Outraged by the Patriarch's stance, the writer and founding member of the movement Alaa al Aswany writes: "Pope Shenouda represents a spiritual authority and not a political authority. He uses his religious attributes to impose his political point of view to the Copts. By doing this, he curtails their right to change opinion" (Al Aswany 2011, 157).

In consequence, it appears that the singling out of the Copts has had the other effect of strengthening Coptic communalist sentiments and has therefore encouraged sectarianism in the Egyptian political life. The American approach resembles for many Egyptians, the strategy adopted in their time by colonizing powers (ottoman or European) which consisted in pitting Christians against Muslims with a view to divide and conquer. Accordingly, it is possible to imagine that the persecution inflicted to Christians in 2005, for example, were not simply or solely motivated by religious antagonisms, but also perhaps by strategic disputes as to the best course of action in ousting the autocrat. The attackers, mentioned in the report, may have been animated by a resentment of a believer as much as that of a citizen.

In the end, it becomes clear that the ideology promoted by the Commission encourages the formation of an Egyptian society composed mainly of religious communities, excluding or downgrading any other form of social tie and especially any other forms of mobilization. In this context, how can the creation of political parties including both Christians and Muslims be achieved? A goal which the Neo-Wafd party, heir of the oldest secular and liberal party, has pursued for years and whose favorite motto claims: "Religion is for God and the homeland is for all" (quoted in Mazourki 2013, 50). Along the same line, philosopher Murad Wahba, very critical of the fundamentalist movements, argued in the newspaper *Al-Ahram* : "Being a believer is not the same thing as being a citizen" (Wahba 2013, 1), thereby showing the existence, in the Egyptian civil society, of a Muslim secularist movement opposed to any exploitation of religion and to any violation of the national identity.

However, the American mission does not only weigh on inter-confessional relations. The ignorance of the Christian secular tradition has mobilized, here too, many intellectuals or political leaders. In condemning the singling out of the Copts, historian Vivian Ibrahim recalls that the community in question is far from forming a monolithic group: "There is an inherent assumption in most analysis and imagery that Copts act in a unified and consistent manner" (Ibrahim 2012, 1). It must be borne in mind that the divide between lay and religious Copts worsened dramatically in 1971 after the enthronement of Shenouda III who consolidated his power within the church by including political matters within his patriarchal functions. Determined to reign without sharing, Shenouda marginalized the secular Copts by, for example, taking hold of the management of many cultural or charitable associations originally created by the laity (Guirguis 2012, 137). The secularist component however, refuses that the church be the only one to define Coptic family law, particularly in matters of divorce. Because they were evicted from the community scene and opposed to the political positions of the patriarch in favor of the regime, the Coptic laity in the early days of the 2011 revolution

took to the streets to defend the rule of law. The American mission in Egypt as it has been carried out by the commission has therefore also contributed to heightened tensions within the Christian community itself.

In fact, for secular Egyptians, marxist or liberal, Christians or Muslims, the hope for unity which culminated with the revolution has been hampered by schemes and policies aimed at dividing the constituents of civil society. In summary, the fundamental reason why the activities of the American commission in Egypt have met and continue to meet with an opposition is the fact that the act of 1998 privileges a vertical rather than a horizontal stratification of society. The American commitment in favor of endangered minorities leads one to believe that faith should pervade holistically every aspect of life over other principles such as class or culture.

Conclusion

The vision of America as a nation gifted with a special mission is one of the constants of American foreign policy. During the 1990's, the new Christian right intended to spread their culture and values by winning the war of ideas; the "new American century", from the name of the manifesto conjured up by neoconservatives, was hailed as the most enviable model to the peoples of the planet. The enactment of IRFA therefore enabled evangelical Christians and their allies to associate their spiritual agenda to worldly concerns, a new strategy by a religious movement which has always considered America as the agent of the divine will.

That said, it has since been shown that evangelicals in reality, between 1998 and 2008, only exercised a limited influence on foreign policy, because there has always been within the diplomatic apparatus a current of opposition to any religious legitimization of federal action; an attitude which Thomas Farr, one of the most vocal defenders of IRFA, calls "the secularist culture of American foreign service" (Farr 2009, 960). In fact, T. Farr was forced to conclude in 2009: "The outcome of religious freedom has remained unconnected to the broader imperative of US foreign policy. In most cases, no action was taken with respect to designated countries" (Farr 2009, 957). It has indeed been observed that, for example, in the wake of the September 11th, 2001 attacks, American diplomacy has preferred to silence its accusations to losing valuable alliances in its conduct of the war on terror¹⁶.

Still, it remains that the intervention of external actors on the ground can sometimes be counterproductive especially when civil war is fought along sectarian lines. In seeking the salvation of suffering and persecuted Middle-Eastern Christians, the commission has contributed indirectly to their precariousness. Moreover, the study of certain strategies exploited to promote national values abroad demonstrates that, in the process, American society transplants some of the social issues that it has recurrently struggled with.

The model developed by members of the commission recommend that social issues be looked at through the narrow prism of religion when faith is only one element at work within a multifaceted context on the ground. The traditional blindness of Americans (especially if they are evangelicals) to class issues thus reduces the debate on social injustice at the single paradigm of communalism and forecloses any questioning of structured inequalities.

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Notes

¹ The Christian Right, as M. Ben Barka reminds us, drew support from fundamentalist Protestants and politically conservative Catholics, Jews and Mormons. 2008, 7.

² For a much fuller analysis, see Allen Hertzke 2004.

³ All IRF reports can be found on the website of the State Department's Office For International Religious Freedom: www.uscirf.gov.

⁴ The first American Christian missionaries settled in the Levant in 1820. See Heather Jane Sharkley 2008.

⁵ The expression was used by President Clinton in a speech on foreign policy: "Speech at the United States Institute of Peace. See Rubinstein, Shayevich and Zlotnikov 2000.

⁶ All reports are available at : www.uscirf.gov.

⁷ Nina Shea is the director of the Center for Religious Freedom/Freedom House and has served on the commission since 1999.

⁸ Other conservative commissioners : Nina Shea and Michael Cromartie (2006-2009)

⁹ See for example USCIRF 2008 Report.

¹⁰ See Katherine Weber 2012.

¹¹ For a detailed discussion of this issue, see Sarah El Masry 2013.

¹² For example, Richard Land, Nina Shea or Michael K. Young.

¹³ All reports explain that religious freedom is enshrined in numerous international human rights declarations and conventions such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights 1966 or the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms 1950.

¹⁴ On Coptic separatism see, Guirguis 2012, 64-66.

¹⁵ Kifāya is a secular protest movement founded by a group of activists and intellectuals which organized unprecedented rallies ahead of elections in 2004.

¹⁶ See for example, Jeremy Gunn 2001.