



Australian Government
Refugee Review Tribunal

Country Advice

Egypt

Egypt – EGY38455 – Coptic Church –
Marriage between Copts and other
Christians – Arranged Marriages – Police
attitude to Honour Killings

22 March 2011

1. Please provide information about how marriages between Coptic Orthodox and other Christian denominations are viewed generally; also marriages between a Copt and a foreigner.

The Coptic Church¹ advocates strongly for both the bride and groom to be members of the Coptic Church. According to the official Coptic Church website, for a marriage to be performed in the Coptic Church, the bride and groom ‘**must** be of the same denomination’ (bold text from the original source).²

The Coptic Church’s attitude to marriage between its members and other Christians varies depending on the sect of the other participant. Marriages between Copts and members of some affiliated Orthodox sects³ (who hold similar values on matters such as baptism and the spiritual/physical nature of Jesus) are recognised religious marriage. Both participants are entitled to full membership of the Coptic Church.⁴

The Coptic Church recognises the marriage of its members to other non-Orthodox Christians as civil marriages. The Church does not consider such marriages to be adulterous but does consider the Coptic participant to have rejected a key aspect of their religion.⁵

¹ The term Coptic is often used broadly to describe all Christians in Egypt. In this response the term ‘Coptic Church’ is used in its narrow form and refers solely to the Coptic Orthodox Church.

² ‘Sacraments of Holy Matrimony’ 2005, Coptic Orthodox Church Network, Undated, http://www.copticchurch.net/topics/thecopticchurch/sacraments/6_matrimony.html - Accessed 22 March 2011 – Attachment 1.

³ These include certain non-Chalcedonian Orthodox Oriental Churches in communion with the Egyptian Coptic Church such as the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (see http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/subdivisions/coptic_1.shtml)

⁴ ‘What are the different options available in marrying someone of a different Christian religion? What are the different steps involved?’ undated, Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States, <http://www.suscopts.org/q&a/index.php?qid=1291&catid=581> - Accessed 22 March 2011 – Attachment 2.

⁵ ‘Does the Coptic Orthodox Church view marriage outside it as adultery?’ undated, Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States, <http://www.suscopts.org/q&a/index.php?qid=312&catid=253> - Accessed 22 March 2011 – Attachment 3.

The Coptic Church looks unfavourably on marriage to Jehovah's Witnesses. The Coptic patriarch, Pope Shenouda III, stated that conversion to the Jehovah's Witness faith was one of two grounds for divorce (the other being adultery).⁶

No sources were located indicating a stigma in the Coptic community associated with Copts marrying Christian non-Copts. In contrast, the marriage of a Copt (especially a female) to a Muslim is considered to be shameful.⁷

The nationality of the bride and groom does not appear to be an issue for Coptic marriages; particularly in comparison to the importance placed on the religious beliefs of the married couple.⁸ The Coptic Church has dioceses in many countries outside of Egypt;⁹ marriage to an overseas born Copt would be considered preferable to marriage to an Egyptian-born non-Copt.

In the cases of an Egyptian national marrying a foreigner, the foreigner does not automatically acquire Egyptian citizenship by marrying an Egyptian. These regulations are applicable in all cases regardless of religious affiliation and require the foreign party to make an application for citizenship rather than being automatically granted. Regulations concerning the marriage of an Egyptian national to a foreigner are set out in *Article 7 of Law 26* of Egyptian national law:

A foreign woman who gets married to an Egyptian does not acquire his nationality through marriage unless she notifies her wish to acquire his nationality to the minister of Interior, and the marriage has not been terminated before the lapse of two years from the date she announces her wish, by another reason than his decease. The minister of Interior may issue a justified decree depriving the wife from acquiring the Egyptian nationality, before the lapse of the two years.¹⁰

2. Are marriages recognised by the Coptic Church? If not, what are the legal consequences of this lack of recognition?

According to the *International Religious Freedom Report 2006*, Egyptian family law is based on the rules of the Islamic, Jewish and Christian churches – the three religions the country officially recognises. Laws relating to marriage are intrinsically linked to the edicts of the church of the persons involved.¹¹

For marriages in Egypt to be legally recognised, civil and religious certification is needed. Egyptian law states that a religious certification issued by one of the three main faiths is

⁶ 'Pope Shenouda warns Copts that marriage with Jehovah's Witnesses is ground for excommunication, divorce' 2002, Associated Press article on Worldwide Religious News website, 19 July, <http://wwrn.org/articles/10757/> - Accessed 22 March 2011 – Attachment 4.

⁷ Fraser, C. 2009, 'Egypt's Coptic Christians battle for ID cards', *BBC News*, 26 December http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/8424599.stm - Accessed 22 March 2011 – Attachment 5.

⁸ 'Does the Coptic Orthodox Church view marriage outside it as adultery?' undated, Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States, <http://www.suscopts.org/q&a/index.php?qid=312&catid=253> - Accessed 22 March 2011 – Attachment 3.

⁹ 'Coptic Orthodox Church' undated, *BBC*, http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/subdivisions/coptic_1.shtml - Accessed 22 March 2011 – Attachment 6.

¹⁰ UNHCR 1975, *Law No. 26 of 1975 Concerning Egyptian Nationality*, 29 May <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/refworld/rwmain?docid=3ae6b4e218> - Accessed 22 March 2011 – Attachment 7.

¹¹ US Department of State 2006, *International Religious Freedom Report 2006 – Egypt*, undated <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2006/71420.htm> - Accessed 22 March 2011 – Attachment 8.

mandatory for a marriage to be recognised by civil authorities.¹² For Christian ceremonies, a Priest conducts the ceremony and acts as an agent for the state, fulfilling the dual civil and religious requirements.¹³

The Coptic Church¹⁴, in general, recognises marriages between Copts and Christian non-Copts conducted under the rules of another church as legal civil marriages but considers the ceremony to lack the approval and blessing of the Coptic Church. The Egyptian Coptic Church does not recognise marriages with only a civilian element, that is, marriages registered in secular ceremonies and taking place outside of any recognised Christian church.¹⁵ A Church member who marries outside the church ceases to become a full member of the church and is no longer eligible to receive the Eucharist.¹⁶

It is unclear whether the Egyptian Coptic Church has a process in place for providing religious recognition for marriages involving Copts and other Christians. As noted above, this certification is a requirement for the legal recognition of a marriage in Egypt. It is of note that the Coptic Church does not consider marriage between a Copt and a non-Coptic Christian as adulterous,¹⁷ and therefore provides some recognition of these marriages as legitimate Christian marriages. Nevertheless, no information was located as to whether this recognition would extend to the issuing of a religious certificate of marriage being granted.

No sources were found indicating whether religious certification could be granted by the Catholic Church in Egypt or overseas or whether other Christian Churches outside of the Coptic Church were able to grant religious certification for Christian marriages in Egypt. It is also unclear as to whether any churches are able to provide a religious certification for a ceremony that took place overseas.

In May 2010, the Egyptian Supreme Court recognised the constitutional right of a Coptic Egyptian to remarry even though Coptic Church refused to allow him to do so.¹⁸ This ruling was in response to an appeal brought before it and therefore dealt with the specific question of remarriage following divorce. It is not clear whether this ruling will have further application to marriage regulations but represents a significant shift in the regulation of marriage law by the Supreme Court's recognition of the supremacy of constitutional rights over religious practice where the two are contradictory.

¹² Guindy, A. 2007, 'Family Status Issues Among Egypt's Copts: A Brief Overview', *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, vol. 11, no. 3, September <http://meria.idc.ac.il/journal/2007/issue3/jv11no3a1.html> – Accessed 23 May 2008 – Attachment 9

¹³ Guindy, A. 2007, 'Family Status Issues Among Egypt's Copts: A Brief Overview', *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, vol. 11, no. 3, September <http://meria.idc.ac.il/journal/2007/issue3/jv11no3a1.html> – Accessed 23 May 2008 – Attachment 9

¹⁴ Referring to the Coptic Church as a global religion rather than the Egyptian branch.

¹⁵ Leila, R. 2010, 'Church and state', *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 10 January <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/print/2010/1001/eg7.htm> - Accessed 22 March 2011 – Attachment 10.

¹⁶ 'Does the Coptic Orthodox Church view marriage outside it as adultery?' undated, Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States, <http://www.suscopts.org/q&a/index.php?qid=312&catid=253> - Accessed 22 March 2011 – Attachment 3.

¹⁷ 'Does the Coptic Orthodox Church view marriage outside it as adultery?' undated, Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States, <http://www.suscopts.org/q&a/index.php?qid=312&catid=253> - Accessed 22 March 2011 – Attachment 3.

¹⁸ Kaiser, K. 2010, 'Coptic Marriage Law and the Church-State Divide in Egypt', *Faith and International Affairs*, 17 September <http://www.rfiaonline.org/extras/articles/678-coptic-marriage-law-and-the-church-state-divide-in-egypt> - Accessed 22 March 2011 – Attachment 11.

3. Is there any evidence of honour killings being carried out in Upper Egypt in circumstances where a male marries without his family's consent when a marriage has already been arranged for him?

There are examples of honour killings being carried out in Egypt, including by Coptic Christians. Few reports were found of honour killings involving Coptic Christians, although the under-reporting of reports of honour killings makes it difficult to measure the extent of honour killings. Honour killings involving Coptic Christians were only found in cases where a Coptic female had married a Muslim.

In October 2008, a Coptic man was arrested for murdering his sister who had converted to Islam and married a Muslim man. The incident took place in Amiriya, east of Cairo.¹⁹ No sources were found citing cases where Copts were victims of honour killings involving marriage to other Christians. No examples were located of Coptic Christians being killed for refusing to participate in an arranged marriage.

In 2010, Robert Fisk writing for *The Independent* newspaper in London noted that honour killings are under-reported in Egypt; victims of honour killings are instead officially categorised as suicides or accidents.²⁰ Fisk quotes Egyptian women's rights campaigner Azza Suleiman²¹ stating that this attitude is especially prevalent in Upper Egypt.

No substantial information was found on the practice of 'arranged marriages' in the Egyptian Coptic community. One writer on a Coptic discussion forum answered an enquiry on the matter by denying the existence of arranged marriages and stating that members were free to choose their partners.²² Although it appears that the Church itself does not support the practice, sources were found indicating that arranged marriages do occur within the Coptic Community.²³ No sources were located in relation to honour killings carried out in instances where a Copt refused to participate in an arranged marriage or in cases where a Copt married without the consent of his family.

4. Would the police provide protection in such circumstances?

Sources stated that Egyptian police are generally unwilling to intervene or even acknowledge instances of honour killings. As noted above, there is a tendency for police

¹⁹ Abdelmassih, M. 2009, 'Will Christian Copt in 'Honour Killing' Get Same Justice As Muslims?' *UK Copts webpage*, 26 May

http://www.copts.co.uk/index2.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2884&pop=1&page=0&Itemid=41 - Accessed 22 March 2011 – Attachment 12.

²⁰ Fisk, R. 2010, 'The lie behind mass 'suicides' of Egypt's young women', *The Independent*, 9 September <http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/fisk/robert-fisk-the-lie-behind-mass-suicides-of-egypts-young-women-2074229.html?service=Print> - Accessed 22 March 2011 – Attachment 13.

²¹ Suleiman is the head of the Centre for Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance based in Cairo.

<http://www.cewla.org/>

²² Coptic Forums 2003, 'Questions about Coptic Orthodoxy', 8 August <http://www.coptichymns.net/PNphpBB2-viewtopic-t-1024-start-25.html> - Accessed 22 March 2011 – Attachment 14.

²³ 'Egyptian Weddings... Try "Walking Like These Egyptians"! 2010, *African Wedding Traditions website*, undated <http://www.africanweddingtraditions.com/egyptian-weddings.html> - Accessed 22 March 2011 - Attachment 15;

Watterson, B. 1998, *The Egyptians*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, p. 316

http://books.google.com.au/books?id=bm1YdwLQ3pYC&pg=PA316&lpg=PA316&dq=Copts+arranged+marriages&source=bl&ots=-19k1u5DqG&sig=Ht6ovN2Gz6arNPnwYrUVi8Xxe6E&hl=en&ei=OrCCTfLsCIIm8uwO1uq29CA&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=4&ved=0CCUQ6AEwAzgy#v=onepage&q&f=false - Accessed 22 March 2011 – Attachment 16.

to falsely categorise honour killings as suicides or accidents. In 2010, Azza Suleiman who spoke with senior police in Upper Egypt commented:

But we found that in their books, they transfer 'honour' killings into suicides. They think that by doing this, they are helping the victim's family – even though the family was responsible for the murder. So in these cases, the police have become accomplices of the killers.²⁴

Suleiman also claimed that in instances where a girl or woman escaped from family members threatening violence, the police were more likely to return her to the family than offer protection.²⁵

²⁴ Fisk, R. 2010, 'The lie behind mass 'suicides' of Egypt's young women', *The Independent*, 9 September <http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/fisk/robert-fisk-the-lie-behind-mass-suicides-of-egypts-young-women-2074229.html?service=Print> - Accessed 22 March 2011 – Attachment 13.

²⁵ Fisk, R. 2010, 'The lie behind mass 'suicides' of Egypt's young women', *The Independent*, 9 September <http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/fisk/robert-fisk-the-lie-behind-mass-suicides-of-egypts-young-women-2074229.html?service=Print> - Accessed 22 March 2011 – Attachment 13.

Attachments

1. 'Sacraments of Holy Matrimony' 2005, Coptic Orthodox Church Network, Undated, http://www.copticchurch.net/topics/thecopticchurch/sacraments/6_matrimony.html - Accessed 22 March 2011.
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5. Fraser, C. 2009, 'Egypt's Coptic Christians battle for ID cards', *BBC News*, 26 December http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/8424599.stm - Accessed 22 March 2011.
6. 'Coptic Orthodox Church' undated, *BBC News*, http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/subdivisions/coptic_1.shtml - Accessed 22 March 2011.
7. UNHCR 1975, *Law No. 26 of 1975 Concerning Egyptian Nationality*, 29 May <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/refworld/rwmain?docid=3ae6b4e218> - Accessed 22 March 2011.
8. US Department of State 2006, *International Religious Freedom Report 2006 – Egypt*, undated <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2006/71420.htm> - Accessed 22 March 2011.
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10. Leila, R. 2010, 'Church and state', *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 10 January <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/print/2010/1001/eg7.htm> - Accessed 22 March 2011.
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13. Fisk, R. 2010, 'The lie behind mass 'suicides' of Egypt's young women', *The Independent*, 9 September <http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/fisk/robert-fisk-the-lie->

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<http://www.coptichymns.net/PNphpBB2-viewtopic-t-1024-start-25.html> - Accessed 22 March 2011.
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16. Watterson, B. 1998, *The Egyptians*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, p. 316
http://books.google.com.au/books?id=bm1YdwLQ3pYC&pg=PA316&lpg=PA316&dq=Copts+arranged+marriages&source=bl&ots=-19k1u5DqG&sig=Ht6ovN2Gz6arNPnwYrUVi8Xxe6E&hl=en&ei=OrCCTfLsCIm8uwO1uq29CA&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=4&ved=0CCUQ6AEwAzgy#v=onepage&q&f=false - Accessed 22 March 2011.