

Edward Norden

America's Oldest (and Newest) Christians

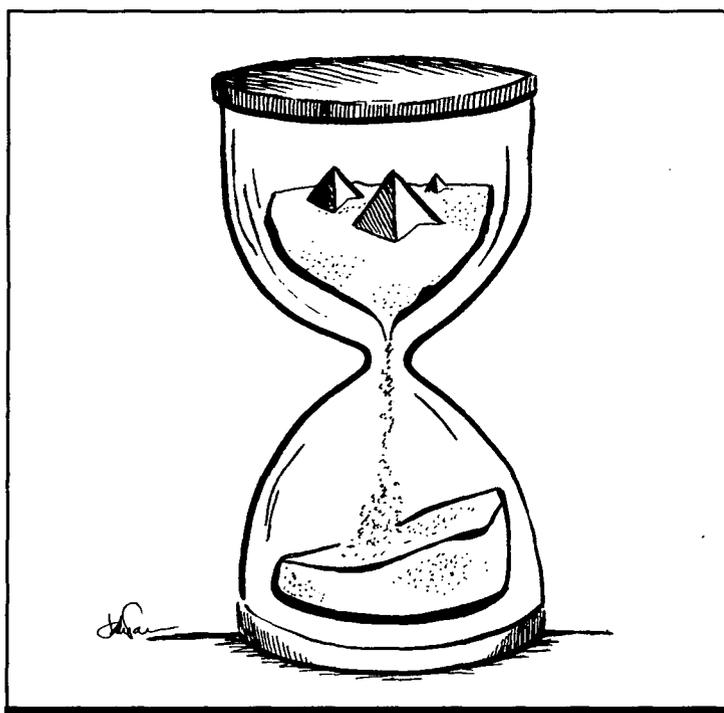
As Egypt crumbles under fundamentalist pressure, where else can the Copts go?

Brooklyn

It was standing room only at St. George's on a bitterly raw Palm Sunday back in April. But this Coptic church is also packed on less important Sundays. There are worshippers and faithful socializers who come by subway—we are speaking of the Bay Ridge neighborhood in deepest Brooklyn—and there are those who drive over, parking up and down the neat, Italian-American streets with their tomato vines in the backyards, plaster saints on the lawn, and at least one decal on a storm window telling the world, "I'm NRA and I vote." This is Archie Bunker country, home to cops and firemen, studied with pizza joints.

Enter St. George's, however, and it's as if you were in neither Brooklyn nor Italy but Egypt. Here were the positive clouds of incense associated with the Eastern branches of Christianity. Here were all the dark-skinned men sitting on one side of the aisle, all the dark-skinned women on the other, the gilded icons and murals of the Apostles, of the Last Supper, of the blonde, blue-eyed Madonna and her blue-eyed Child, of St. George spearing a writhing green

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dragon. Here were the candles. Here was the jovial, childless Father Mina in his white-and-gold hood and vestments at the altar, chanting the tremendously old prayers in Arabic, backed up by the young deacon Magdi and the acolytes. Above all, here were the kids, kids underfoot, everywhere kids, kids being the only thing besides history, wit, and misery Egypt has plenty of. There were infants who had just

been baptized, and little girls in snow-white dresses with superbly intelligent chocolate-brown eyes who joined their fidgety older and younger brothers in nagging their loving parents for greenbacks to stuff into the poor box.

Yet there were also signs for anybody in the know that St. George's isn't really in the Old Country. For example, there were the warm coats racked in the vestibule. For another thing, Father Mina every so often switched the chanting into accented but definite English. Also, if centuries and millennia of usage mark the churches and monasteries of Egypt, it being hard to build or even repair a church or synagogue in a Moslem country, the interior of St. George's is brand new. Nor would you be likely to see a kid in Egypt wearing a satinized Mets jacket or another with his trousers held up by Bart Simpson suspenders.

But the subtlest and best sign that this church is in the U.S., not in Cairo or Alexandria or Assuit, was the relative absence of worry on the faces of adults like Edward or even of his lately arrived, very homesick brother with the five o'clock shadow. The Copts in the land where their church was born, where it never gets truly cold, and where until very recently all of them lived are going through a difficult time. Father Mina is glad to tell you that his people are well acquainted with trouble—in fact, ever since their conversion from sun-worship by St. Mark, they have had to put up with discrimination in the best of times, pillage and massacre and martyrdom in the worst. Father Mina's namesake was martyred by the Romans before Constantine had that dream. It's well known, the jolly father had said in the library upstairs a few days previously, that the dust from the ruins of St. Mina's shrine, west of Alexandria near where Montgomery stopped Rommel, cures leprosy and other skin ailments. The father had worn his weekday black robes and a puffy black turban and silver cross and had stressed that the Copts are the original, the only true Egyptians. They aren't Arabs, and would not abandon Christianity for Islam when the Arabs burst out of the desert and conquered the banks of the Nile some thirteen centuries ago.

Granted, the European and American historians are dubious about St. Mark converting the Copts. They agree, however, that these are very old Christians who have always tended to get it coming and going. Chronically harassed by the Moslems, they were also maltreated by the blue-eyed Crusaders. Yet if there is anything the hospitable and talkative Father Mina relishes discussing as much as the lives and miraculous works of the martyrs, it's his people's attachment to their homeland through thick and thin—5,000 years old, persecuted for the last 2,000 years, the Copts only started forming their diaspora after Gamal Abdel Nasser's revolution in 1952, and only really started leaving in droves around 1968.

"I'm a religious man, not a politician," the priest begged off when asked what finally kindled this exodus. And then he went right on to explain that middle-class Coptic parents realized that in a new, post-colonial Egypt, where Islam was in the constitution as the state religion and pan-Arabism all the rage, their children would suffer from a very thick, quite low glass ceiling. Hence the Copts whom Father Mina and his wife found living in New York in 1972, when he was sent to minister to them, had emigrated to give themselves and especially their kids a fair chance, and not because of actual Moslem violence, which lay in the past and the future. Yes, Coptic priests are encouraged to marry—"It's better that way, don't you

think?" No, Father Mina and his wife, who holds a master's degree in nursing and a Ph.D. in hospital administration, have no children. With the same jolly, indeed delightful smile, he said that everything in the New World is all right, however. If on his arrival there were only four Coptic churches in North America, now there are seventy-five, leading him to estimate that while there are nine million Copts remaining in Egypt, the diaspora contains a million.

Both of these population figures are certainly inflated. On the other hand, no one disputes that the number of Copts in Egypt is large, at least equal to the number of Jews in Israel, and that converted and purpose-built churches bearing the stubby double cross have been sprouting across North America lately—there's even a desert monastery halfway between L.A. and Las Vegas. These churches serve a diaspora swollen by the violent turn of events in Egypt, where Islamic groupings like the one inspired long-distance by

These churches serve a diaspora swollen by the violent turn of events in Egypt, where Islamic groupings like the one inspired long-distance by Sheikh Rahman of Jersey City are out to make a theocratic state on the Iranian or Sudanese model.

Sheikh Rahman of Jersey City are out to make a theocratic state on the Iranian or Sudanese model. Sheikh Rahman's admirers went around Egypt torching churches and murdering Copts pretty much with impunity well before President Hosni Mubarak, whose regime gets more than \$2 billion annually from the U.S., pulled out the stops last year and sent in

the army. It's no exaggeration to say that Father Mina's homeland is today in a state of siege.

Even more Copts would be moving to America, Father Mina said, if they didn't have to compete for visas with both sensible and fundamentalist Egyptian Moslems. Only those Egyptians who can show a close relative already here may hope to come now—the rest, unless they're prepared to sneak in, must wait in the pipeline for years. Meanwhile, the terror and incitement to terror continue. The state-censored TV allows the sheikhs to tell viewers that Christians are infidels, that their property and blood are forfeit. Indeed, said Father Mina, who revisits the Vatican-like headquarters of the church in Alexandria regularly, the crackdown, the state of siege that Amnesty International complains of, has nothing to do with protecting the Copts. It came only after tourists and policemen began to be killed and the regime feared for its only hard-currency earner, not to mention its survival.

So Father Mina, who earned a degree in engineering before heeding the call, let himself be drawn out. Will the U.S.-backed regime be able to squelch the militant Islamic clerics and their bright-eyed followers? He wasn't sure—it was late in the day, maybe too late. Is this a religious

problem? No, at bottom it's of course an economic one. The sheikhs tell the masses that they're wretched because Mubarak flouts the Koran, but in fact there's too little arable land, no natural resources, private enterprise is smothered by corruption and bureaucracy, the Moslems have too many babies, and furthermore the country mortgaged its future by warring against "the Jews" for thirty years. Now that there's peace with Israel and the bill has come due, the Christians suffer the most because they're not quite as poor and they're the minority. Failing the discovery of a monstrous oil field, he didn't see Egypt making economic headway, meaning that the squeeze on his people would continue and the sheikhs might even take power somehow. Would it spell the end of the Copts in Egypt if they did? Father Mina smiled his nonstop smile. "We have had faith in the Lord for twenty centuries."

Young Magdi, the deacon of St. George's, came from Alexandria by himself last year, quitting engineering school, because he saw little future for himself in Egypt—he hopes to finish his studies and settle here. Like Father Mina, he's full of stories about the ongoing miracles of long-dead saints and Coptic popes. Unlike Father Mina, he warns about the Moslems who are coming to the U.S., which he says they hate, and who take cynical advantage of American hospitality and liberty to foment a totalitarian revolution in Egypt. Yes, he says

"Moslems," not "fundamentalists" or "some Moslems." He says Americans don't know the Moslems like the Copts do, an echo of Father Mina's remark that only the Copts and the Jews from the Arab countries really know what Islam is.

When it's put to Magdi that he is making a great and perhaps unfair generalization, that surely most Moslem newcomers in this country mind their own business just as he does, he says yes, maybe, but even they curse America among themselves and were pleased about the World Trade Center bombing. He knows, having some Moslem acquaintances. The fact is that Americans are very naive and altogether too nice, and it may well be too late in Egypt—the same themes would be sounded by board members Dr. Guirguis and Dr. Youssef. What Mubarak should have done ten years ago, according to the bright-eyed young deacon with his tales of miracles, was to kill 10,000 of what are called in America the fundamentalists.

Because he didn't, Mubarak now will have to kill many more, and even this may not work. All this from the tall, dark, unsmiling, clean-shaven young man in his white robe and red sash now attending the beatific Father Mina as many of the worshippers, divided by gender, lined up to take communion.

Many, by no means all. Few of the English-speaking teenagers born in this country or brought here as infants took communion. Father Mina may have said that they are proud of their heritage and love to learn about it, but now more than a few were trying to escape St. George's before the end of services and the beginning of Sunday school. A young woman teacher with the cross tattooed on the inside of her wrist—something you see a lot of in

Egypt, especially in the countryside where Copts raise pigs and make wine—had posted herself at the door. She was making sure no one got out, no matter how creative his or her excuse. "Is this a jail?" asked a teenaged girl. She had insisted, in vain, that she had to leave for just a minute to place an urgent phone call.

No, it certainly wasn't a jail. Maybe in jail you could have a priest circulating and handing out unused portions of communion bread among the congregation, and having his ring kissed, as Father Mina was now doing. But following this, you'd hardly see in any jail the radiant mothers of those infants previously baptized parading up and

down with their newborns as other women who have never heard of Gloria Steinem ululated with joy and menfolk squinted into camcorders.

Immediately following which, there was food and unsegregated socializing downstairs in the noisy Virgin Mary Hall. Edward, in the U.S. a decade, was there with his family, and his ex-Egyptian army officer brother, here a few months, was there with his. Edward nibbled an Egyptian sweet while heaping praise on America. The freedom, safety, rationality, size, expertise, generosity, and tolerance of this country made it the only one where he could now imagine living—the fact that he knew of fellow Copts in Brooklyn who had been mugged or whose apartments or businesses had been burglarized worried him very little. Why, look at what the American doctors had done for his son, born prematurely weighing just two



pounds! The eight-year-old he called over and lovingly presented was stocky, the picture of health.

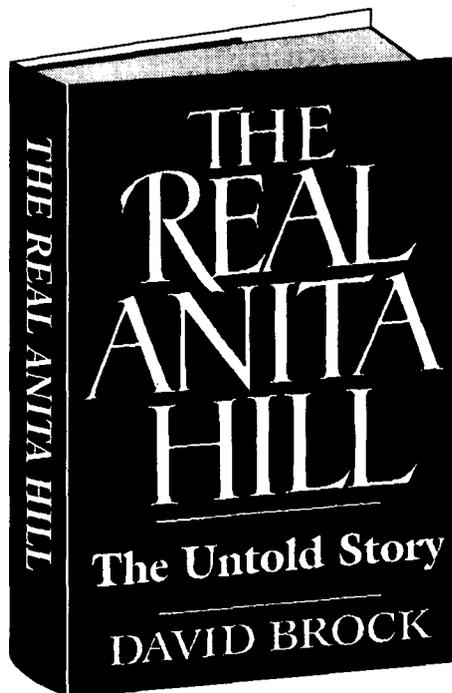
To which Edward's brother, the Egyptian patriot, responded by saying that America doesn't have a monopoly on such miracles. His own son, born prematurely in Egypt, had been cared for by Egyptian doctors, and look at him now. This boy was equally the picture of robust health. For seventeen years Edward's brother, who needed a shave on this holy day, served in the Egyptian army. Asked what the fate of the peace treaty with Israel would be if the bearded ones take over, he said over the din, "Straight into the garbage can." Asked what the chances are that the rank-and-file soldiers, uncomplicated Moslems, would mutiny, he shook his head. "They will do as they are told." In other words, Edward's brother was vividly homesick and wished to believe that it will be possible for him to return. His naturalized brother, on whose invitation he, his wife, and their kids were accorded visas, was complacent. "He'll stay. You know the World Trade Center? That's what the Copts in Egypt face every day!"

The brothers disagree on the inevitability of an Islamic republic in languid Egypt. But they agree that the indulgence shown by the American authorities and system towards Sheikh Rahman and his Brooklyn and Jersey City cohorts is amazing. Edward ceases heaping praise on America when it comes to the sheikh being allowed to slip into this country despite being listed as a bad guy, or the Egyptian alleged killer of Rabbi Meir Kahane being sentenced on a lesser charge, or the suspects in the World Trade Center affair being represented by excellent Jewish legal talent. Are Americans just stupid, is it a question of international politics, or does secret money passing through hidden channels explain it?

This disapproving amazement was voiced also by Doctors Guirguis and Youssef. Educated men, in some measure sophisticated, keeping tales of miracles to themselves if indeed they believe

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them at all, they sit on the board of St. George's and appreciate that this is a nation of extensive civil rights, where defendants are to be considered innocent until proven otherwise, the worst criminals have the right to the best defense, and even foreigners who sneak in have the right to an entire series of hearings and appeals stretching for years before deportation. Nevertheless, Dr. Fayez Guirguis, an obstetrician-gynecologist who immigrated in 1981, was hopeful that the World Trade Center bomb would open American eyes somewhat to the fact that the militants are waging an international offensive and are not just after the Egyptian government or the Copts.

Graduated from medical school in Cairo in 1970, he had to spend the next five years in the army, "a waste." Then he took his specialty training, also in Cairo, and finally got married, but couldn't afford to set up a practice. His Coptic identity conspired with the general impossibility of making an honest, decent living in Egypt to force his emigration. Were he not a Copt, he could have won an appointment at a government hospital, obviating the need to finance a private practice. Yet plenty of Moslem doctors have also turned their backs on the mess and despair of their native land and made their way to America. The mental wrench of leaving Egypt was more distressing for Dr. Guirguis than the American paper chase—with a naturalized brother already here, an immigrant's visa wasn't hard to get. Today he has not one but two offices in Brooklyn, is prosperous enough to sit on the church board. He has American-born kids. And he remains bitter and pessimistic about Egypt, the land of the previous 1,500-plus generations of Copts.

As is the older Dr. Ezzat Youssef, a pin-striped oncologist. He too emigrated because he felt discriminated against, and had to confess that he had a hard time containing himself when Sheikh Rahman was given endless time on CNN and elsewhere to spread his cunning poison. The sheikh made fools out of his ignorant and much-too-respectful interviewers. Why were they so respectful? Because he's supposed to be a man of God? Why didn't they ask him about the burning of churches, the murders of Copts done with his encouragement? These are prime human rights violations that the press and government of Dr. Youssef's adopted country are supposed to be dedicated to exposing and stopping. He said he hoped that Clinton would bring them up when he welcomed Mubarak in a few days.

It was time, Dr. Youssef said, and Dr. Guirguis agreed, for Copts to be given preference by the Immigration and

Naturalization Service. Clearly victims of religious persecution, those wanting to leave Egypt and having no relatives in Brooklyn, L.A., or Pompano Beach ought to be admitted to the U.S. as refugees, asylum seekers. They shouldn't have to compete with Moslems for regular visas under the Egyptian quota. The present rules effectively trap the Christians of the Nile in the land which has been theirs since history began to be written, but which the doctors agreed is probably on the verge of an Islamic revolution, one that will take a fearful toll on the non-Moslems at hand before it burns itself out in bigotry and failure.

An outsider didn't have the heart to tell Drs. Youssef and Guirguis that unless the insurgents depose Mubarak, and start officially and in an organized way doing to the Copts what Khomeini did to the Iranian Jews, Zoroastrians, and Bahais, no U.S. administration is likely to order the INS to put Copts on its refugee list. It's unlikely, for the same reason that Clinton wouldn't mention the Copts in his news conference with Mubarak—to

do so would embarrass a crucial ally at a dicey time. The Copts are still too few in America, and have been here too briefly, to be able to lobby for the interests of their helpless brethren against what the men and women of Foggy Bottom naturally advise Warren Christopher and the White House is the national interest. So they, like the Maronites of Lebanon and at the end of the day the

Bosnian Moslems, and unlike the Israelis with their still-potent lobby and reputed nuclear stockpile, must be ranked as minor players at best by the practitioners of liberal Realpolitik.

That the revolution is coming with a high degree of probability the two Coptic doctors were agreed. The so-called economy of Egypt is such a black hole and the regime has proved itself so helpless to cope with it, that an Islamic republic, which has never yet been tried in that relatively easygoing, civilized land, seems increasingly worth trying, and not to the masses alone. A state of siege won't help. Worse than impotent, the regime is seen as rotten, inefficient, irresponsible, in a word uncaring. The two jobs that Dr. Youssef believes must be done before Egypt can hope for anything—halving the birthrate and teaching the masses to read and write—are quite beyond this government, as they were beyond those preceding it. And so the country of his birth, his childhood, his young manhood, and his sweetest and bitterest memories, seems destined for a period of misrule by men who consider his people fair game. □

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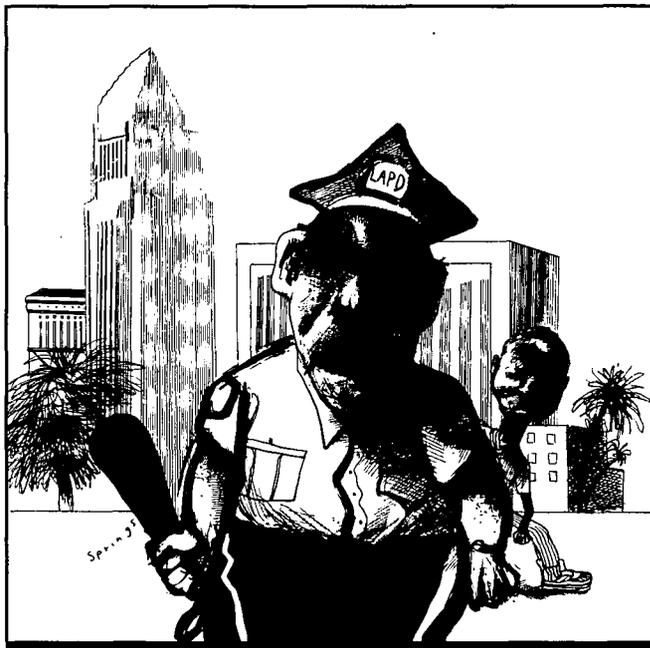
Christopher Caldwell

Universal City

From a cast of twenty-four mayoral aspirants, Los Angeles chose Richard Riordan and Michael Woo, two mellow guys with clashing visions for the capital of the post-melting pot world.

It's hard to conduct a mayoral election while you're waiting for a riot, but that's what Los Angeles residents did in the days leading up to the April 20 primary. Those who expected rioting in the wake of the Rodney King civil rights trial turned out to be wrong, but it was nonetheless fitting that trial season and primary season should have overlapped. The King affair marked the close of an era of biracial politics, whose primary obsessions were—depending on who was in power—white racism and black crime, and whose culmination was a riot in which 3,500 businesses were destroyed and 55 people killed in the name of everyone getting along together. All over L.A., Latin and Asian immigrants and their children were working in occupations that hadn't even existed ten years before. Whites were the second-largest minority in town, and blacks were soon to be the fourth. But eighty-six percent of the votes cast in the primary were cast by blacks or whites, giving these two groups one last chance to create a society in which some degree of fellow-feeling could be fostered.

Los Angeles is the world's first truly universal city. Here it will be determined in the next half-century whether the American democratic capitalism towards which most of the world is moving can be made to work in a polity that is already atomized by ethnicity. Los Angeles is the capital of



the post-melting pot world, and April started the season in which Los Angeles would find out whether it had a politics worthy of the role or a leader worthy of the moment.

Three days after the April 17 verdict, Los Angeles residents chose two men—off a confusing roster of twenty-four candidates—to enter the June 8 runoff to replace Tom Bradley. Bradley, the first black mayor of a major American city, had been elected to City Hall during

the Nixon administration. L.A. had had only two mayors since the Kennedy administration; and this year's was the first mayoral election without an incumbent since the Hoover administration. The 62-year-old Irish-American venture capitalist Richard Riordan, a Republican who had staged one of the most expensive campaigns—and one of the most spectacular dark-horse rallies—in recent mayoral politics, took 33 percent of the vote; Democratic City Councilman Michael Woo, 41, the first Chinese-American to have won elected office in L.A., took 24 percent to finish second.

Broadly stated, Riordan was running on law-and-order and Woo was running on racial harmony. Despite L.A.'s non-partisan primary system, a legacy of the Progressive era, it looked on the outside like a traditional mayoral race, even a caricature of one—with a conservative Republican tycoon facing off against a Democratic minority professional. Angelenos were certainly being offered two competing

Christopher Caldwell is assistant managing editor of The American Spectator.