

## **International Perspectives on the Cross – Reflections of the One Woman’s Experience as a U.S.-born Copt**

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By Sally Bishai

If you ask me what my nationality is, I’d have a hard time answering you. That’s because there are about fourteen hundred things to consider in the composition of my answer. For example, I was born in the United States, but Americans generally don’t consider me “one of them,” despite the fact that I grew up with them and know more about them than they probably do.

My parents are from Egypt, and have lived here longer than they have there, but again, when I go to Egypt, the Egyptians there—despite my perfect Arabic and the fact that I probably stick closer to “the Egyptian Manifesto” than the people living in Port Said, Alexandria, or Heliopolis—generally don’t consider me “one of them.”

My exclusion from these categories is fine.

I—and others like me—have a totally separate culture from the accepted and traditional (and I don’t mean that in a generational sense) “Egyptian” and “American” and even “First-generation American” ones.

Other categories I don’t really fall neatly into include the “Coptic” culture, mostly because 1- I was not raised with Christian Egyptians of any denomination (though I myself am actually Protestant, and not a member of the more numerous Coptic Orthodox faith) and 2- because I much prefer to steer clear of this designation because I feel as though it only widens the gap between Muslim and Christian Egyptians, on several different levels.

For example, the disparity between Christian and Muslim Egyptians seems to be increasing in an official sense, what with the recent parliamentary win of 88 seats by the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, as opposed to the fact that there are less than 10 Members of Parliament in Egypt who are Christian.

On the other hand, though, this divide seems to be decreasing in social circles as the new generation of young Egyptians—equipped with a technology that wasn’t present when our parents were twenty-somethings—takes a more active role in fighting for democracy, equal rights, improved conditions, and a new Egypt.

An army of advocates for equality and free speech do not a democracy make, however; this may be because Egypt is rife with corruption, bribery, and bureaucracy. Meaning, if they don’t like how you look—or what you’re wearing—they can pull you aside, make you wait 10 times as long, or even deny you service.

And when I say “what you’re wearing,” I’m not talking about the hijab.

Rather, I'm talking about the cross.

It's very interesting to me how one symbol can mean so many things to so many different people.

For Madonna, it's a fashion to be worn—en masse, perhaps—on a chain.

For millions in Egypt, however, it's the only thing standing between them and a great job, or even being assured a hassle-free walk down the street.

I'm sure you won't be surprised to hear that last time I went to Egypt, in the summer of 2005, I was advised to hide the diamond-and-white-gold cross hanging around my neck until we had passed customs and security in the airport.

The reason? "They can charge you more money if they see that..."

Well, the creation is almost two inches long, and looks as expensive as it was; surely they would (mistakenly) get the impression that I'm wealthy, and tax accordingly? That must have been what got me this free advice. But maybe not...

"What about this?" I asked, holding out my branded wrist. A shake of the head. "Hide that, one, too."

I did, feeling like the worst sort of traitor. (I wasn't so spineless later on, however, and roamed the streets of Cairo and Alexandria freely, and wasn't bothered by anyone.)

On the other hand, on a 2005 trip to New York, I was pulled over by the security people, who delighted in opening every single one of my bags, from my purse to my suitcase to my camera bag. They made me do aerobics with some metal-detector thing, riffled through my belongings, then walked off, having left everything out of the bags, from socks to toothpaste to the 12-inch on Asagio Basil Wheat that I had just gotten from Subway.

I was puzzled as to why they would do this—I don't even look Arab!—when I noticed that I was wearing a gold necklace bearing my name in Arabic.

I decided to do an experiment, and made sure to very visibly wear the diamond cross on subsequent trips. All three times I did, I was left alone. The one other time I wore the Arabic "Sally" necklace, I got the same deluxe search as before.

So basically, for my own protection, I had to hide the cross in Egypt, so I wouldn't be discriminated against, and flash it loudly in America, to "prove" I wasn't in league with "The Terrorists." (If that's not racial profiling, I don't know what is.)

I can't say how sad it makes me that the cross is a threat to some people (whether in Egypt or even America).

But this isn't about Muslims criticizing or questioning their own religion. It's about racial profiling, having freedom of religion, and the different meanings that one symbol—two intersecting lines—can have to the world.