

Church weddings

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A growing body of Coptic laymen and women are demanding change in church rules governing divorce and remarriage, reports [Gamal Nkrumah](#)

Once upon a time lepers carried bells and divorcees remained stigmatised for life. Now, though, in the United States at least, 50 per cent of all marriages end in divorce and 75 per cent of divorcees remarry. It is a situation many leaders of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Egypt want to avoid at all costs.

In some predominantly Catholic countries, such as Malta and the Philippines, divorce is not allowed. Not so in mainly Muslim Egypt where divorce laws which are derived from Islamic Sharia are far more lax than the ecclesiastical annulment of Coptic Church marriage. Even so, among the country's Coptic Christian community, there is a growing belief that church-sanctioned divorce regulations are tantamount to an infringement on human and citizenship rights. The current controversy over divorce and remarriage has emerged as a contentious issue among Copts and is debated endlessly in the media.

Civil marriage, or remarriage, as opposed to a Church wedding, is one option for Copts intending to secure conjugal unions. At the moment Church-sanctioned remarriage is out of the question. An increasing number of Coptic Christians are converting to Islam and other Christian denominations where the annulment of marriages is easier. The curiosity, though, is that this has not always been the case.

"Sometimes divorce is the only answer to a problem marriage. People who cannot stand each other must not be stuck together forever because of a particular interpretation of a Biblical injunction," Karima Kamal, author of the controversial *Coptic Divorce* told *Al-Ahram Weekly*.

"We are faced with two major challenges: the church and the state. Let me start with the state. Far from being secular, the state increasingly poses as being religious. It is against this backdrop that the church is adopting an evermore defensive posture. It is very difficult for Copts to oppose the church and in the current climate to openly oppose the church is seen as little short of treachery."

The Consultative Assembly of Lay Copts (the *Melli Majlis*), founded in 1874, is a vehicle through which prominent members of the Coptic community participate in church affairs, including the promulgation of ecclesiastical laws. Akram Habib, a Coptic layman and member of the Secularist Coptic Trend, an organisation that aims to revive the tradition of active lay participation in church affairs and decision-making processes, believes Copts must become more attuned to civil marriage.

Among Copts the annulment of conjugal unions had been permitted on the grounds of adultery, abandonment, obvious evidence of ill treatment, mental disability and impotence. Things changed radically after Shenouda III ascended to the Coptic Papacy. He promptly rejected divorce on any grounds except adultery and extremely cruel treatment.

Increasing numbers of Copts, though, want the church to take human and citizenship rights into account. Many Christians are yearning for the "hegemonic control of the Coptic Church over the Coptic laity" to be curtailed, says Mariz Tadros, assistant professor of political science at the American University in Cairo. "Historically, we have had instances of the infringement on the rights of Coptic Church to govern according to its own bylaws, and the church has voiced grave concern of any violation of its rights," she points out.

Pope Shenouda III recently declared that he rejected the ruling of an Egyptian court that permitted a Copt to convert to Islam, obtain a divorce and then return to the Coptic fold, on religious grounds. "We only abide by the Bible," he told the daily Arabic *Al-Ahram*.

The Coptic pope explained that the courts have "civil, not religious" authority. But what does this mean in practical terms?

The Coptic Church provides for the annulment of marriages in cases of adultery. Coptic Christians who are granted a civil divorce are not, however, permitted to remarry in the Coptic Church. And while Copts have always had the option of remarrying in the church of another Christian denomination the resulting unions are not recognised by the Coptic Church.

The problem was brought into sharp focus when a court acknowledged the right of an Egyptian man to remarry after a civil court granted him a divorce. The case of Atef Kirollous hit the headlines after Egypt's Administrative Court rejected an appeal by the church against Kirollous after the church had refused to allow him to re-marry.

The Coptic Church claims it is upholding a Biblical injunction against the annulment of marriages. "What God has joined together let no man put asunder," the Bible states in Matthew 13:44. "Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh".

There are fears among devout Copts that rulings such as that in favour of Kirollous will open the floodgates, leading to a rising tide of divorce and a consequent attrition of family life. For Habib, though, the bigger problems come from forcing couples to remain in unhappy marriages. Some also see double standards at work. Celebrities, such as actress Hala Sidqi, have been granted the right to remarry by the church, though as Sidqi herself admits she obtained a divorce by changing denomination.