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Egypt

A bit more religious freedom

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Apostasy need not necessarily be punished by death

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TWENTY-SEVEN years ago, Egypt revised its secular constitution to enshrine Muslim *sharia* as "the principal source of legislation". To most citizens, most of the time, that seeming contradiction—between secularism and religion—has not made much difference. Nine in ten Egyptians are Sunni Muslims and expect Islam to govern such things as marriage, divorce and inheritance. Nearly all the rest profess Christianity or Judaism, faiths recognised and protected in Islam. But to the small minority who embrace other faiths, or who have tried to leave Islam, it has, until lately, made an increasingly troubling difference.

Members of Egypt's 2,000-strong Bahai community, for instance, have found they cannot state their religion on the national identity cards that all Egyptians are obliged to produce to secure such things as driver's licences, bank accounts, social insurance and state schooling. Hundreds of Coptic Christians who have converted to Islam, often to escape the Orthodox sect's ban on divorce, find they cannot revert to their original faith. In some cases, children raised as Christians have discovered that, because a divorced parent converted to Islam, they too have become officially Muslim, and cannot claim otherwise.

Such restrictions on religious freedom are not directly a product of *sharia*, say human-rights campaigners, but rather of rigid interpretations of Islamic law by over-zealous officials. In their strict view, Bahai belief cannot be recognised as a legitimate faith, since it arose in the 19th century, long after Islam staked its claim to be the final revelation in a chain of prophecies beginning with Adam. Likewise, they brand any attempt to leave Islam, whatever the circumstances, as a form of apostasy, punishable by death.

But such views have lately been challenged. Last year Ali Gomaa, the Grand Mufti, who is the government's highest religious adviser, declared that nowhere in Islam's sacred texts did it say that apostasy need be punished in the present rather than by God in the afterlife. In the past month, Egyptian courts have issued two rulings that, while restricted in scope, should ease some bothersome strictures. Bahais may now leave the space for religion on their identity cards blank. Twelve former Christians won a lawsuit and may now return to their original faith, on condition that their identity documents note their previous adherence to Islam.

Small steps, perhaps, but they point the way towards freedom of choice and citizenship based on equal rights rather than membership of a privileged religion.