



## 'We Refuse to Be Muslims By Force' Say Egyptian Christian Twin-Boys After Losing Court Case

Posted GMT 4-26-2010 1:32:0

(AINA) -- On March 30 an administrative judicial court in Egypt dismissed a lawsuit filed by Mrs. Camilia Lutfi, mother of the Coptic Christian twins boys Mario and Andrew, against the Interior Minister, and the director of the Civil Status Department for refusing to re-instate the Christian religion on their birth certificates, and invalidate those which were forcefully changed to "Islam" in 2005 by their father Medhat Ramsis Labib, who had converted to Islam.

After his conversion, Andrew and Mario became Muslims in what is called "Islamization by dependence," by which children follow the religion of a converted parent (to Islam only) until they reach the age of puberty (fifteen), because Islam is "the best among all religions," according to Egyptian Court rulings.

The purpose of Lutfi's litigation was to restore back to her twins their identity as Christians, before reaching the age of 16 in June, when they will have their national ID cards issued. Camilia said that because of the developments in their case, her worst nightmares would materialize, in which they would have Islam as religious affiliation on their ID cards. "If they change to Christianity after that, they will be considered apostates," she told Freecocepts advocacy. She expressed her surprise at the intransigence of the judiciary in dealing with the issue of her sons, especially after they have already reached the legal age of 15-years, when they can choose their own religion. "The boys have lived this tragedy for the last ten years, through no fault of their own."



EIYoum 7 Newspaper reported that 15-years-old Mario and Andrew were extremely disappointed with the court verdict, saying "faith is not by force, we want to remain Christians and we do not wish to become Muslims." Both boys are practicing Christians and were consecrated last year as deacons in their regular church in Alexandria.

The court explained in its verdict, which was issued on April 14, that Camilia Lutfi has not presented a verdict from a relevant court (it did not say which court) proving the change of her sons' religion from Islam to Christianity. "How come that when their father changed their religion from Christianity to Islam, he required no court verdict, and now that they want to revert back to Christianity, the court requires a verdict?" she told Freecocepts.

Although the mother's lawyers presented to the court a portfolio containing 15 different certificates proving they are Christians, contradicting what was written on their birth certificates, the court said in its reasoning that it does not recognize the validity of a certificate issued by the Church as a document of change of religion from Islam to Christianity, as "churches by law are not competent to issue such certificates." The courts only accept certificates of religion change from Al-Azhar (the Muslim theology school in Cairo). Moreover the Court said that there is no law to force the Interior minister and the Civil Status Department chief to change the religion of the boys on their documents without a court ruling to this effect.

Camilia criticized the judiciary in Egypt for being biased, based on her personal experience. "I do not believe the recent verdict has been taken solely by the judges. I feel there is a higher authority which orders the judges to decide in a certain way, even if it goes against the documents in front of them," she told Freecocepts.

Mario and Andrew were born on June 24, 1994 to Christian parents, sea captain Medhat Ramsis and tax inspector Camilia Lutfi, but in February 2000 their father converted to Islam to marry a Muslim woman. In 2005 Medhat changed their twin boys birth certificates to show that they are Muslims, born to a Muslim father and a Christian mother.



Mario and Andrew with their mother, Camilia.

The case of Mario and Andrew caught the attention of the media in May 2007, after they challenged the Ministry of Education which forced them to sit in for the Islamic Religion exams at school, where students are obliged to pass in order to be promoted to a higher class. They refused to answer the questions. On his answer sheet Andrew wrote "I am Christian" and Mario wrote "My religion

is Christianity." They failed the exam and had to re-take it, but again insisted on writing these single phrases. Due to public pressure, the Minister of Education exempted them from passing those exams until their case was finalized by the court. On national television they declared: "We do not want to be Muslims. We are born Christians, will remain and die as Christians."

After a five-year legal battle, Lutfi won a landmark victory in June 2009 when Egypt's Court of Cassation gave her the right to retain custody of Andrew and Mario. The Court also affirmed, for the first time, the right of a non-Muslim mother to retain custody of her child until the age of fifteen, as stipulated by Egypt's Personal Status Law, even when the child's father converts to Islam and the state automatically changes the child's religion as a result. Previously it was only until the age of seven, which is considered the age of "religious maturity" by the Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence ([6-20-2009](#)).

At a press conference held on Thursday April 22, Lutfi said that the refusal of the judiciary to establish the religion of her children as Christians is a blow to the principles of citizenship, and a "disregard" for Christianity and Christians. She called on President Mubarak to protect the freedom of religion by issuing laws "to tie down the hands of the judiciary in deciding on these issues without a legal basis." She also addressed a message to the President of the State Council saying that all judgments regarding conversion to Christianity take as a starting point that Islam is the State religion, and the State guarantees freedom of religion but ends up by "insulting Christianity and those wishing to convert to Christianity."



During the press conference, Camelia also called on the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar to issue a Fatwa (Islamic religious edict) to remind the authorities of the Quranic verse "Let there be no compulsion in religion."

Dr. Awad Shafik Awad, international attorney based in Switzerland and President of the Confederation of Coptic Human Rights Organizations in Europe, stated his intention to refer the case of Mario and Andrew to the international courts, after all stages of litigation in Egypt have been exhausted. He said that the recent court's refusal to prove the Christian faith of the twin boys was "unjust and has nothing to do with the law."

Coptic attorney Ramsis elNaggar stated that his law firm represents thousands of Christian children who were forced to become Muslims following the conversion to Islam of one of their parents, and tried in vain to revert back to Christianity.

In 2007 the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights issued a joint report with Human Rights Watch entitled 'Prohibited Identities: State Interference with Religious Freedom', regarding involuntary "conversions." It quoted 89 cases of Egyptians whose religious affiliation in official documents was changed by the state to Islam against their will -- and in some instances without their knowledge -- after their fathers converted to Islam. Moreover, the Interior Ministry has refused to change their religious affiliation to Christianity when they reached the age of fifteen, in violation of the law. The report highlighted the far-reaching consequences for the daily lives of those affected, including choosing a spouse, educating one's children, or conducting the most basic financial and other transactions ([report](#)).



Last month before the court dismissed their case, CBN News carried out an interview with Mario and Andrew, bringing their fight to retain their Christian identity and the fear of being considered as apostates and getting killed to the international public ([video](#)).

Renowned Coptic activist and writer Magdi Khalil calls for the non-application of Islamic Sharia law on Christian families in Egypt, saying that the case of Mario and Andrew represents the situation of the Copts under Sharia. The Egyptian Personal Status Law for Muslims and non-Muslims of mixed religions or denominations is based on the Sharia law according to the Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence, "which discriminates against fundamental human rights, and against women in general as lawyer Ms Safaa Zaki describes it," he said. Khalil warns about a wider application of the Second article of the Egyptian Constitution which stipulates that the principles of Islamic Sharia law are the main source of legislation. "If Sharia is applied to all the laws, this would be a real catastrophe to the secular state, for Muslims and Christians alike and a bomb ready to explode," he said.

By Mary Abdelmassih