

FREEDOM OF BELIEF

Words versus Deeds



By Donnelly McClelland

Mourners gathered in Egypt on Monday (10 April) to remember Coptic Christians killed in two deadly Palm Sunday church bombings. At least 47 people were killed and more than 100 injured in bomb attacks on two Coptic churches in the latest assault on a religious minority increasingly targeted by Islamic extremists. The attacks happened a week before Easter, and in the same month that Pope Francis is scheduled to visit Egypt. In response, President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi said a three-month state of emergency would be imposed.

These bombings come as the Islamic State's branch in Egypt appears to be stepping up attacks and threats against Christians. In February this year, Christian families and students fled Egypt's North Sinai province after a spate of targeted killings. Those attacks came after one of the deadliest on Egypt's Christian minority, when a suicide bomber hit its largest Coptic cathedral, killing at least 25 people in December 2016.

Egyptian Christians (accounting for 10-15% of the population, the largest Christian presence in the Middle East) do not feel more secure hearing the president speak of implementing a state of emergency. One man, attending a funeral for the victims of Sunday's attacks said: "I do not think that the state of emergency will protect Copts. Strict Muslims... are bombing our churches and killing us to put Sisi in an embarrassing situation: that he can't protect Copts." Mr Sisi has, on many occasions, spoken eloquently of Egypt's unity and has worked hard to reduce Muslim-Christian tensions, at least publicly. But Christian representation in government remains disproportionately low (just 36 Christians out of a total of 596 members), as do Christians within the influential security establishment. "They [the government] say they are fighting religious discrimination, but amid the police and army at the church in Tanta yesterday there were no Christians," says Mr Beshoy Tamry, a Coptic activist. "We don't know of a director of security who is Christian, a provincial governor who is Christian, ministry interior leaders who are Christian. How can you fight discrimination when you practice it yourself?"

In many instances of religiously motivated attacks, Egyptian police have been absent or slow to respond. Often following these attacks, Christians say they must attend humiliating 'reconciliation' sessions with Muslim leaders. These sessions often replace criminal law proceedings.

FREEDOM OF RELIGION IN EGYPT



On paper, Egyptians enjoy ‘absolute’ freedom of religion guaranteed by the 2014 constitution. But the constitution also decrees that Islam is the state religion, and that conversion to any religion other than Islam is prohibited. Sharia (Islamic) law is also the primary source of all new legislation. Egyptian Christians know their government can only do so much to keep them safe inside their churches, but many say they’d like to see the government do more to better protect their constitutional right to religious freedom. For example, there are currently only about 2,600 churches in Egypt for a Christian

population of at least 10 million (1 church for every 3,900 Christians).

Church construction has been a bone of contention in communities (especially the smaller, more rural settings) for years. Recently, a new law that sets a maximum decision time of four months (for governors to decide after new church construction permits are submitted for approval) has come into force. In addition, licenses must now be given retroactively to all existing churches so long as they are structurally safe. However, these decisions will be largely based on the size of the Christian population in a town or village, thus if the provincial governor feels there aren’t enough Christians in an area to warrant the construction of a church, he can reject the permit application.

Many Egyptian Christians view this new law as simply more ‘window dressing’ and believe they will still be attacked, their churches burned and new construction halted by militant Muslims, despite the new law. And most say the police and government will do little – if anything – to stop it.

Rights on paper versus rights on the street

For Egypt’s minorities, there is a large gap between *de jure* and *de facto* rights—what exists under the law versus what exists in practice. Despite *de jure* protections, Mr Sisi himself fails to acknowledge the *de facto* discrimination against Copts (and other Christians). By refusing to acknowledge the differences between Christians and Muslims, he does not recognise Copts as a minority in need of protection, and thus is unwilling to extend the necessary measures to proactively protect them against or respond to attacks.

The true issue of sectarian* incitement has been one that far too few are willing to tackle head-on since it is so often used as a tool to rally political support. However, once that ‘genie is out the bottle’, it is extremely difficult to return.

Egypt is not alone in this challenge.

* *‘Sectarianism’ is a form of bigotry, discrimination or hatred arising from attaching relations of inferiority and superiority to differences between subdivisions within a group*

FREEDOM OF RELIGION IN INDIA: THE WORLD’S MOST POPULOUS DEMOCRACY

India’s constitution provides for its citizens (including minorities) equality before the law and equal protection of the law. It prohibits discrimination on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth and grants freedom to profess, practise and propagate any particular religion, along with freedom of religious instruction and worship. But the minority communities in India, as elsewhere, are inhibited by several factors in the exercise of the basic human, social and legal rights guaranteed in the Constitution of India and the general and special laws of the land. They are regularly victims of poor representation in the administration, police and other institutions of governance. Christianity is India’s third-largest religion according to the census of 2011, with approximately 27.8 million followers, constituting 2.3 % of India’s population.



Winds of change in the secular nation

India, it would appear, is moving steadily towards a Hindu nationalistic mode at the cost of its secular ethos, unnerving many minority groups. India's prime minister, Narendra Modi, celebrated his party's crushing triumph in Uttar Pradesh (UP) state elections last month (March) with a soothing speech on the need to unite for the common good. Yet shortly afterwards, he appointed a firebrand, hard-line Hindu priest, Mr Adityanath, to run the state. Pratap Bhanu Mehta, a columnist in the daily *Indian Express*, described the Hindu priest-turned-politician as "the single most divisive, abusive, polarising figure in UP politics". In UP, according to the 2011 census, the population comprises 79.73% Hindus, 19.26% Muslims, 0.32% Sikhs, 0.11% Jains, 0.10% Buddhists and 0.18% Christians (0.29% of people didn't state their religion).

Mr Adityanath has championed a range of reactionary Hindu causes, from the banning of cow slaughter to the notorious proposed construction of a temple to Lord Ram, at the god's supposed birthplace in the UP city of Ayodhya. On the proposed site stood a grand 16th-century mosque, until a mob of Hindu fanatics tore it down in 1992, sparking riots across India that left approximately 2,000 dead. Time and again in UP, incendiary talk has helped turn ordinary disagreements into ugly sectarian clashes. Mr Adityanath himself has vouched that he wants to convert UP into a Hindu 'nation' (rashtra) before converting the whole of India into the same.

Some theorise that the best indication of Mr Adityanath's intentions will be the building of the Ram temple in Ayodhya. Hindu-nationalist 'moderates' have long counselled patience regarding the building of the temple; hard-line groups, however, say they want it to happen now. It remains to be seen which approach Mr Adityanath will take.

FREEDOM OF RELIGION IN TURKEY: THE MODERATE MUSLIM, 'SECULAR' NATION



Turkey has often been praised (especially by Western, democratic nations) for being secular and a 'future role model' for other majority Muslim societies. It has been claimed that Turkey is a 'beacon of hope' and that it is evidence that democracy and secularism can exist within a mainly Muslim nation state. However, there are many who assert that Turkey is only secular on paper and not in reality. In fact, it appears to have been more about Turkish nationalism, and secularism did nothing to protect the religious or ethnic minorities of this diverse and strategic nation.

Many are opposed to the declaration of one's religion on Turkish identity cards, which for decades have been formatted to note one's gender and religion. Despite government claims and a constitutional guarantee of religious freedom, the Turkish government denies full legal recognition for religious minorities, including Christians. Non-Muslims are denied the right to train clergy, offer religious education, and own and maintain places of worship. Conversion is not illegal, but converts have been charged with "insulting Turkishness". Christians frequently experience discrimination, slander, personal attacks and attacks against churches. The Turkish media sometimes portray Christians as 'foreign intelligence agents', intent on undermining the Turkish state.

Today, less than 0.2% of Turkey's population is Christian. But even this tiny, dwindling minority is still routinely exposed to discrimination on many levels.

Turkey under President Erdoğan

Turkey's governing Justice and Development Party, or AKP (which won its first elections in 2011), has not touched the secular basis of the republic thus far. Instead, it has used existing structures to give religion a greater role in society. One of the key institutions at the AKP's disposal is the Diyanet, the directorate for religious affairs. It was once installed by Turkey's modern founder, Kemal Atatürk, to control the influence of religion. If one defines secularism as the separation of state and religion, which is the most common definition, then Turkey can't be considered secular at all. Frédérique Geerdink, a Turkey expert and Kurdistan correspondent, shared her views:

“From the early years of the republic, state and mosque have been closely intertwined. All mosques are state-owned, all imams are state-employed and for decades, the Friday sermons were centrally written and distributed. The religious curriculum at primary and secondary schools is obligatory and defined by the state. It focuses solely on the state’s preferred version of Sunni Islam.”

Another observer, Mustafa Akyol, states that under the AKP government of current President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (starting in 2007), "hundreds of secularist officers and their civilian allies" were jailed, and by 2012, the "old secularist guard" in positions of authority was replaced by members/supporters of the AKP party and the Islamic Gülen movement. On 25 April 2016, Turkish Parliament Speaker İsmail Kahraman told a conference of Islamic scholars and writers in Istanbul that "secularism would not have a place in a new constitution", as Turkey is “a Muslim country and so we should have a religious constitution”.

BY CONTRAST: THE UNITED STATES AND THE LGBT LOBBY

The United States is a secular nation – it does not have an official religion at either federal or state level. There are some traditional and unofficial customs such as the use of a Bible when taking oaths in court, or for the President of the United States during the oath of office, but neither of these are required or codified by law.



A central tenet of the American ‘way of life’ is individual freedom. So, despite the fact that American history is closely associated with Christian belief and influence, American leaders never enshrined it as the national religion. Approximately 75 % of Americans freely identify themselves as Christian according to a 2015 poll. Many forms of religions, including the Eastern faiths and Abrahamic faiths, do not support homosexual sex. Yet, amazingly, the small percentage of Americans who identify as LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender – estimated at 2-6% of the US population) has created an ‘over-sized image’ far larger than its numbers. This small group — along with their allies — drives an agenda to redefine marriage and family, to transform American society’s views of sex and sexuality, and to overturn deeply important theological views.

How has such a small minority group gained such a ‘loud voice’? The highly visible and influential group has achieved law-changing status in just 40 short years. The LGBT community has easily recognisable, colourful symbols, and is known for big celebrations, lavish fundraisers and numerous parades. LGBT ‘holidays’ have been proclaimed all through the calendar, often accompanied by presidential, state and local proclamations and endorsements. Thousands of LGBT groups and organisations have been formed. Hollywood and Broadway have, in television, movies and theatre, increased the number of LGBT characters and themes. The academic world joined by creating ‘gender studies’ departments in universities and colleges. Political and lobbying groups have spent millions campaigning for federal, state and local ordinances and candidates, and these groups have worked to place judges and government appointments at all levels. To round off the societal representation, most of the mainstream media caters to the LGBT agenda and adopts their language — anyone that disagrees with this agenda is labelled “homophobic”, “anti-gay” or “bigoted”.

Such a phenomenal growth in acceptance of a small minority within a society would not have been possible had the society not already had certain values in place. The right to individual freedom, the separation of church and state (both entrenched in the constitution) together with the growing role of political correctness within American society, along with other factors, played a role in making this societal change possible.

FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

Although Christians have lived in the Middle East – the birthplace of Christianity – for nearly two thousand years, due to years of persecution and discrimination (especially in the past 15 years) they now constitute between 5-10%

of the region's population, down from 20% a century ago. Christians are not the only minority being discriminated against in this region, but their plight is often more visible in many places.

There are several factors contributing to the persecution of religious minorities in the Middle East and elsewhere. Although sectarian conflicts in the region are not new, the 2003 Iraq War and the 2011 'Arab Spring' unleashed a new torrent of violence between Sunni and Shia Muslims and against other religious minorities.

The rise of extremism has been a singular driving force in the plight of religious minorities, creating a societal mindset that posits other religious groups as 'the enemy'. Groups like Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS) exploit this intolerance of religious and inter-religious 'out-groups', often to new and barbaric heights.

Socio-economic factors also play a role. The fact that there is rampant unemployment and limited opportunities for higher education, and that tens of millions of Muslims (and in the case of India, Hindus) live in poverty, all foster a sense of resentment against minorities and the tendency to find a 'sacrificial lamb' to blame one's ills on.

Nationalism is another major factor that was reinvigorated in the wake of Arab Spring in the Middle East (and the rise of Hindu nationalism in India) and results in discrimination against Christians sharpening in certain countries. The growing influence of Islam (as with Turkey) and Hinduism (in India) into the state framework has created deep splits between religious minority groups and the majority.

Christian response to sectarianism and persecution

Current trends in the nations of Egypt, India and Turkey would indicate that the situation for minority religious groups (which include Christians in all three nations) is not improving. How should these communities respond in the face of increasing pressure? Since the prevailing circumstances within these nations are not conducive to a 'LGBT-style' push for legitimacy, how should Christians respond to sectarianism and rising persecution?

How can Christians remain compassionate, kind, humble, meek, patient, forgiving and loving (Colossians 3:12-14) in the context of persecution by extremists?

Faithful, not fearful

Christians should not ignore the horrors of violence in the search for peace. But the challenge is to refrain from fear-based responses. Fear and hatred are neither faithful nor politically expedient responses that lead to sustained peace. If we as Christians believe in the peace of Christ and in the truth of Christian scripture, then it is precisely in the context of suffering and conflict that the applicability of our faith will be tested.

Bridge-building

Building caring relationships that lead to deeper mutual respect and understanding between Muslims, Hindus (etc.) and Christians is crucial. For violence to end, it is imperative first for injustices to be openly named and resolved. People need to mutually relate, eat together and discover together in settings of safety. Jesus gave His disciples the mandate of reconciliation, and thus believers can anticipate the assistance of His Spirit in achieving it.

Dialogue

We must talk about the things that matter to us most. Dialogue does not require that we agree. Through dialogue, people may be surprised to discover similarities they did not know they shared and yet they may still be quite different.

For believers who are not facing direct persecution, it is important that we be willing to enter into solidarity – to the point of mutual suffering and sacrifice – with our brothers and sisters who are severely pressed from every side. This begins by at least being aware of them, and then, where possible, acting on the knowledge.

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