

Freedom of religion in Egypt (Cornelis Hulsman)

One of the most beautiful biblical stories is that of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10). The neighbour in this parable is not the priest but a person of a despised and distrusted group, the Samaritans. The story teaches us that stereotypes about people from other groups are false and misleading.

I used this story when I was asked to speak in a church in Ishneen el-Nasara, 180 km south of Cairo. I read the Bible text but replaced the Good Samaritan with 'Good Muslim.' People in the village knew very well what I meant. The way Christians in Egypt think about Muslims is often not different from the way Jews in the days of Jesus thought about Samaritans. Of course that is mutual but Jesus made an effort to break mutual stereotypes and showed that we should approach one another with humility because no person is beyond the reach of God's love. And when we do this, persons from groups we dislike may turn out to be conduits of his grace in time of need.

Tense - the relation between Muslims and Christians

Relations between Jews and Samaritans may have been marred but this is far more so between Muslims and Christians. There is a mutual mistrust that has been reinforced by centuries of conflict; (but moments of cooperation have been there!) Crusades, Western colonialism in the 19th and 20th century, Western self-interest in relating to the Arab world, biased standards in dealing with Israel and the Palestinians, a long history of anti-Islamic statements by Western leaders and authors, and most recently the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq. Being in Egypt, one is continuously reminded of this history and Western biases. This has resulted in a widespread conviction that the West has targeted Islam, that Western Christians are making an effort to destroy Islam and that; in fact, we are witnessing a new Western crusade against Islam.

This is the context Christians in Egypt live in. Because they are Christians they are often associated with the West. Doesn't the West show more interest in their well being than that of Muslims? Don't they both use the same Bible? US President George Bush has done a lot to make the West appear Christian. Plans of US organisations to send missionaries to Iraq reinforce the belief that the West does target Islam. Millions of Christians disagree and do not want to attack Islam. But the statements of Bush and some Christian leaders in the US have become so strong and have been so often repeated in Arab media that one wonders how long it takes before the bomb bursts. The terrible attack of September 11 led to attacks on Muslims in the US and Europe. That resulted in counter attacks on Christians in some Muslim countries but not Egypt. Christians in Egypt are well aware of the tense situation at this moment. Many Christians rushed to the

Egyptian press with comments that Bush is not a true Christian. They needed to do this in self-defence.

The discussion about freedom of religion is very different in Egypt from that in the West. Westerners are focused on the freedom of individuals. Egyptians, Muslims and Christians, are focused on what they believe is good for their community; the protection of their traditions and faith. Both Muslims and Christians make all efforts to have the government on their side. Christians need to protect their community from, for example the preaching of Jehovah's Witnesses and Muslims to prevent, for example, the Baha'is from being recognised.

Both Christians and Muslims do not hesitate to manipulate facts whenever they believe this is needed to serve one's community, preserve one's (collective) honour or to deliberately harm the other in moments of tension and conflict. These manipulations can be very refined and are often not seen by foreigners who are relatively new to the country. Many journalists are guilty of focusing attention on what has happened but not on the underlying causes of events. In this way media reporting can act as a boomerang and reinforce Arab-West polarisation. Facts are often distorted because the average Muslim generally believe they are better than Christians and the average Christian believe they are better than Muslims. Doesn't this look similar to the way Jews and Samaritans saw each other in Jesus' day?

The Christian percentage of the population is diminishing

Numbers are a generally a problem. Some Coptic activists, but also some clergy, claim with the greatest of ease that 20% of the Egyptian population is Christian. The US Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 2002 puts the number at 8-10% but Western research shows that the number of Christians is probably no more than 5% of the total population. 95% of those belong to the Coptic [Egyptian] Orthodox Church. It is certain that the percentage of Christians is rapidly decreasing. Around 1925 80% of the Copts lived in Upper Egypt as opposed to perhaps 50% today. Many have migrated to Cairo, Alexandria and countries abroad. It is estimated that 70% of all Egyptian emigrants to the West are Christian. Many thousands of Christians convert yearly to Islam and Christian families tend to be smaller than Muslim families. These factors explain the steady decrease in the percentage of Christians in Egypt.

Despite their declining numbers Christians have experienced an unprecedented renaissance in the past 50 years. They have been able to build more churches and monasteries than ever before in any other half century since the Arab conquest

of Egypt. Monasticism flourishes. The number of priests has strongly increased and church activities strongly expanded.

Most conflicts in Egyptian society take place in poor neighbourhoods where people struggle for their daily survival in harsh circumstances. When people fight, they try to get support from family and friends and often do this through calling upon religious values. When conflicts take place they are often reported in the West as a conflict of Islam versus Christians but the fact that such conflicts hardly occur in wealthier neighbourhoods show the strong relation between conflicts and poor living conditions and not the relation between conflicts and religious convictions.

Between law and practice

The Egyptian government subscribes to Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that recognises that "everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. This right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship, and observance". But in the Egyptian interpretation greater value is given to the protection of values in society over individual freedoms. Egypt's state policy is de facto secular. Article 2 of the Constitution stipulates, "the principles of the Shari'a [Islamic law] are the principle source of legislation." This means that laws should not be in violation with the Shari'a.

The Egyptian constitution guarantees the freedom of belief and religious practice. It speaks about 'citizens' without making a distinction based on faith. However, Egyptian law distinguishes between officially recognised religious communities, Islam, Christianity and Judaism who can present requests, complaints, etc. on behalf of their community, and non-recognised religious communities who are not able to do this. The officially recognised religions and denominations can present their faith to a wider public through TV, radio, religious publications and other activities that are considered to be non-offensive for the other. Naturally Islam is much bigger than Christianity in Egypt and religious oriented presentations have been dominated by Islam. Religious communities that are not officially recognised by the Egyptian authorities such as Jehovah's Witnesses and Baha'is do have the right to practice their religion, but their practice should not be offensive to one of the officially recognised communities. This means in practice that they hardly can go public with their activities. Christians and Muslims are practically equal before the law. Christians are free to assemble in their houses of worship whenever they want but Muslims cannot do this outside the five times per day

permitted for prayer. This is the result of a government policy to prevent radical groups from meeting in mosques.

Egypt is a religious country. People attach great importance to the values of their respective religions. Both Muslims and Christians adhere to many of the same values such as honour and the strong desire to protect one's own traditions. Article 98f of the Penal Code prohibits citizens from ridiculing or insulting one of the officially recognised religions or inciting sectarian strife. This law has been used by both Muslims and Christians to punish those who offended their faith.

Egyptian law does not prevent a Christian from becoming Muslim or a Muslim to become Christian but there are nevertheless legal barriers for those wishing to leave Islam. One's religion is mentioned on one's identity papers. While it is easy to change one's identity papers from Christian to Muslim it is practically impossible to change one's identity papers from Islam to any other religion. That can create numerous problems, especially if one is young and plans to marry, since mixed religious marriages are taboo. Prominent Muslim leaders say Muslims are allowed to leave Islam but should not attack Islam once they have left but many others believe such apostasy is in violation with Islam and should be punishable by death. Former Muslims have been punished according to Article 98f but have never been sentenced to death in the modern history of Egypt. There are no statistics published about conversions in either direction but certain is that the conversion of Christians to Islam is hundreds of times larger than the conversion Muslims to Christianity. Some Christians have claimed that these conversions were the result of physical force but research showed a total lack of evidence for such claims. The main factors for conversion are a whole range of social problems often in combination with nominal Christianity.

The official position of the Egyptian government is that there are no prohibitions against the construction and maintenance of places of worship. President Mubarak delegated the right to issue permits for repairs of churches to the governors in Presidential Decree 13 of 1998. This resulted in a sharp increase in permits but it seems permits are more easily obtained when church leaders and local authorities have good relations rather than the contrary.

Discrimination but no Persecution

Discrimination against Christians is often reported but is rarely related to the law but to a poisoned social climate that is related to strong feelings of superiority and strong Muslim feelings that injustice has been done to them by the West. There have been violent attacks on Christians committed by extremist Muslim groups in the 80s end 90s as the attack that killed 58 foreign tourists

in Luxor in 1997. Since 1997, the Egyptian government has done a lot to prevent further killings. address extremism. The violence that has been reported since 1997 was not related to extremist groups but to mobs or sentiments of mobs, often around church buildings.

It would be incorrect to speak about persecution in Egypt in sense of something organised, planned by a government or, at the very least, something that is part of a deliberate, planned program of neglect by a government in protecting a particular religious group. This does not exist in Egypt, which does not mean that neglect could not happen in particular regions.

[This text is a brief summary of a recent Arab-West Report on freedom of religion written in consultation with Egyptian church leaders, scholars and other experts. Free copies of this report can be obtained through Arab-West Report: jourcoop@intouch.com]

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Further reading:

- "Muslim Perceptions of Christianity", Hugh Goddard, Grey Seal, London, 1996.
- "Two Thousand Years of Coptic Christianity", O.F.A. Meinardus, The American University in Cairo Press, 1999.
- "Among the Copts", John H. Watson, Sussex Academic Press, Brighton, Portland, 2000.
- "Conversions of Christians to Islam", Rodolph Yanney, RNSAW, 2001, week 01, art. 4.
- "Christians in Egypt: the impact of Islamic resurgence" (covering developments until 1998), Cornelis Hulsman and Chawkat Moucary, RNSAW, 2002, week 50-2.
- "Religious Freedom and Civil Society in Egypt", Cornelis Hulsman, RNSAW, 2002, week 50, art. 31.

More documentation can be found with the Religious News Service from the Arab World (RNSAW) that changed on January 1, 2003 into Arab-West Report. The Centre for the Study of Christianity in Islamic Lands (CSCIL) in London, UK, has an important archive.