

Another Reason Why You Can't Trust 'The New York Times'

A recent *New York Times* article exemplifies why the *Times* simply cannot be trusted. Written by one David Kirkpatrick and titled "Vow of Freedom of Religion Goes Unkept in Egypt," the article disingenuously interprets some general truths in an effort to validate its thesis.

Much of this is done by omitting relevant facts that provide needed context. For example, Kirkpatrick makes Abdel Fattah el-Sisi and the military—widely recognized as the heroes of the June 2013 revolution that toppled former President Morsi and his **Muslim Brotherhood**—appear responsible for the poor state of religious freedom in Egypt, when in fact the military has no authority over the judicial system, which is independent.

Even so, there is much evidence that Egypt, while far from becoming a Western-style democracy, is on the right path—one certainly better than under the Muslim Brotherhood. But these are seldom mentioned in the *NYT* report. Most recently, for example, the military-backed government jailed a popular Islamic scholar for contempt against Christianity—something that never happened under Morsi, when clerics were regularly and openly condemning and mocking Christians.

Similarly, Sheikh Yassir Burhami, the face of Egypt's Salafi movement, is facing prosecution for contempt against Christianity for stating that Easter is an "infidel" celebration and that Muslims should not congratulate Christians during Easter celebrations. Previously under Morsi, Burhami was free to say even worse—including issuing a fatwa banning taxi drivers from transporting Christian priests to their churches.

Some positive developments are twisted to look as attacks on religious freedom. Kirkpatrick complains that “The new government has tightened its grip on mosques, pushing imams to follow state-approved sermons,” as if that is some sort of infringement on their rights, when in fact, mosques are the primary grounds where Muslims are radicalized to violence, especially against religious minorities like **Coptic Christians**, amply demonstrated by the fact that the overwhelming majority of attacks on churches and Christians occur on Friday, the one day of the week when Muslims congregate in mosques and listen to sermons.

“State-approved sermons” are much more moderate and pluralistic in nature and the government’s way of keeping radicals and extremists from mosque podiums.

If Kirkpatrick truly cared about the religious freedom of Egypt’s minorities, he would laud this move by the government, instead of trying to portray it as an infringement of the rights of the radicals to “freely” preach hate.

Another positive development overlooked by the article is that Egypt’s native church, the Coptic Orthodox Church, was involved in drafting the new, post-Morsi constitution, and was allowed to voice its opinion over controversial Article Two, which deals with how influential Islamic Sharia will be in governing society. The Church accepted a more moderate version than the previous one articulated under Morsi, which the Church as well as millions of Egyptian Muslims, were against due to its draconian, Islamist nature.

Speaking of the Copts—who are Egypt’s litmus test concerning religious freedom—a closer examination of them alone demonstrates the disingenuous nature of Kirkpatrick’s observations.

Early in the report, and in the context of stating that “the new military-backed government has fallen back into patterns

of sectarianism that have prevailed here for decades,” Kirkpatrick asserts that “Prosecutors continue to jail Coptic Christians ... on charges of contempt of religion.”

Interestingly, while this suggests Christians are being jailed under the current government on charges of blasphemy, a close reading reveals that that is not the case. Rather, Kirkpatrick is referring to the many Copts who were incarcerated under Morsi’s reign, some of whom still remain in jail.

Kirkpatrick seems to think that those not yet freeing Christians—due to the chaos it would likely cause among the already highly aggrieved Islamist/Salafi population—are as religiously intolerant as those who threw them in prison in the first place.

Of course, back then under Morsi, when the full extent of “legal” persecution of Christian Copts in the context of “blasphemy” was revealed, the *NYT* and Kirkpatrick were remarkably silent.

The dissembling continues. Writes Kirkpatrick: “Many Coptic Christians and other religious minorities cheered the military takeover because they feared the Muslim Brotherhood, a religiously exclusive movement whose leaders have a history of denigrating non-Muslims” (emphasis added).

Christians did not “fear” the Brotherhood because their leaders have a long “history of denigrating non-Muslims,” but rather because their leaders have a long history of inciting violence and hate against Christians, leading to countless attacks on Copts and their churches over the decades.

Under Morsi, Coptic Christianity’s most symbolic church and papal residence, St Mark Cathedral, was savagely attacked by an Islamist mob, aided and abetted by state security. Then, Coptic Pope Tawadros said that Morsi had “promised to do everything to protect the cathedral but in reality we don’t see this. ... We need action not only words. ... There is no

action on the ground. ... This flagrant assault on a national symbol, the Egyptian church, has never been subjected to this in 2,000 years.”

Also speaking of the Copts, Egypt’s litmus test on religious freedom, Kirkpatrick fails to inform his readership that due to Muslim Brotherhood incitement against them for participating in the June revolution against Morsi, in “retaliation,” some 80 churches in Egypt were bombed, burned or simply attacked by Brotherhood supporters.

And, also left unsaid by the *NYT*, it was Sisi who pledged that the armed forces would rebuild and renovate the destroyed churches. According to church officials, the army will be done renovating and rebuilding 16 of the churches destroyed by the Brotherhood by the end of June, at which point they will begin phase two of renovating the rest of churches.

Far from pointing this out, Kirkpatrick implies Sisi is indifferent to the Copts, writing for example that “unlike a rival presidential candidate, [Sisi] declined to attend Mass” at the Coptic cathedral during Easter. The fact is, due to Brotherhood assassination attempts—which the rival presidential candidate need not worry from—Sisi has had to decline many public events, not just Easter.

From here one can understand why Kirkpatrick’s next assertion makes perfect sense, even as he offers it with some puzzlement: “But the complaints about continued sectarianism have not deterred church leaders from firmly supporting Mr. Sisi as their protector against worse treatment by the Muslim majority. The Coptic pope, Tawadros II, has hailed Mr. Sisi as overwhelmingly popular, ‘a competent patriot’ on ‘an arduous mission,’ and ‘the one who rescued Egypt.’ “

In short, when it comes to religious freedom and tolerance, the current government, although far from perfect, is also better than its Brotherhood predecessor. Hence why, not only

the Coptic Church, but the majority of Egypt's millions of Christians, support Sisi.

Needless to say, that is not the impression the Kirkpatrick gives, as he quotes an unknown Copt calling the pope's statements which were supportive of Sisi "stupid and myopic."

Thus it is only in the most general of ways that Kirkpatrick's *NYT* article is accurate—in that, yes, **religious freedom** is still very problematic in Egypt, especially for minorities such as the Copts. It is true that police and security often do little to protect the Copts and their churches from Islamists—but this is partially because police stations are also under attack. Even the Coptic Pope recently confirmed that, in light of the circumstances, the police and government in general are doing much better than under Morsi.

Overlooked and ignored are the true culprits of radicalization—the Muslim Brotherhood and allied Islamists, who, through the mosques and satellite stations, have been radicalizing Egypt for decades. It will take a long time, if ever, to eradicate their influence, but the post-Brotherhood government is a first step in the right direction—despite the *NYT*'s nonstop propaganda to whitewash the Muslim Brotherhood and sometimes even al-Qaida.

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