

Persecuted Coptic Christians Still Hopeful

Former **Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams** took Britain's Christian community to task last month when he said that Western Christians need to "grow up" and stop claiming they are persecuted just because they are sometimes made to feel uncomfortable about their faith.

"When you have any contact with real persecuted minorities you learn to use the word persecuted very chastely," he said.

Persecution has undeniably become the plight of Christians in Egypt, where, the same week that Williams made his comments, more than 30 churches were attacked—many of them burned to the ground—and the Coptic patriarch, Pope Tawadros II, suspended weekly public events due to safety concerns. Since then, the toll of churches that have been ransacked or worse has risen to more than 90.

And yet, many of Egypt's Christians have refrained from claiming they are **persecuted** in recent days. How can that be?

As the largest and one of the oldest in the Middle East, Egypt's Christian community has significance far beyond the country's borders. It is a bellwether for other religious minorities, not just Christian, in both Egypt and the greater region.

Christianity came to Egypt around 42 A.D. when the Apostle Mark founded a church in Alexandria, now officially known as the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria; its line of patriarchs has been unbroken since. By the fifth century, the majority of Egyptians were Christians. It wasn't until several centuries after the Arab conquest of 641 that Islam became the country's predominant religion.

To get a sense of what an integral part of the Egyptian national fabric Copts are, one need only look at the name itself; the word *Copt* is based on the ancient Greek word for Egyptian. Today, this homegrown minority, which traces its roots back to the Pharaohs, makes up an estimated 10 percent of the population in Egypt.

For the most part, Copts and Muslims say they live together peacefully. And yet, the fault lines revealed in recent days have been present since the beginning of Christian-Muslim relations in Egypt. Copts have suffered discrimination almost continuously under Egypt's many rulers, albeit to varying degrees.

In the decades leading up to the overthrow of the monarchy by Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1952, Copts enjoyed what is known as their golden era. The country was in the midst of one of the most liberal periods in its history. It had a democratically elected parliament and Christians were leaders in government, business, media and many other sectors of society.

Even then, though, Copts were not treated equally under the law—although much of the oppressive legislation that was on the books wasn't enforced. Still, **Christians** have long been and are still—required to get official approvals to build churches, which have been notoriously slow to be granted, and are barred from holding high-level positions in key institutions.

The revolution of 2011 brought with it the possibility of a new era for Copts; one in which they might finally enjoy equal rights. Instead, their worst fears came true, and the new constitution of 2012 was more Islamically rigid.

When, in late June of this year, the call came to take to the streets and push for the ouster of Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated President Mohammed Morsi, Copts were there in force, along with many non-Brotherhood-affiliated Muslims who

felt their concerns had been marginalized.

As Defense Minister Gen. Fattah al-Sisi made his televised announcement about the removal of Morsi, Pope Tawadros appeared on stage with the general, along with the grand sheikh of Cairo's Al Azhar, who is considered the highest authority of Sunni Islamic thought.

Morsi supporters then took to the streets, staging a prolonged sit-in at Rabaa al-Adewaya mosque. The army's subsequent dispersal resulted in the bloodiest day in Egypt's modern history. More than 1,000 people were killed during the clearing of the sit-in, the vast majority of them supporters of the **Muslim Brotherhood**.

In an already polarized Egypt, that was all it took to unleash the most sustained and virulent wave of aggression against Copts in living memory. While attacks against Copts had been on the rise for some time— Christians were already fleeing Egypt in ever-growing numbers—the carnage at Rabaa poured fuel on the fire.

Within 24 hours, scores of Coptic churches, monasteries, shops, schools, clubs and orphanages had been plundered and burned, and Christians were attacked and threatened. The intense violence continued in the following days and, while their frequency has abated, the attacks continue.

What prevents **Christians** in Egypt from saying they are being persecuted is that they regard the recent spate of attacks as terrorism carried out by radicals, not systematic persecution being perpetrated by the government. If anything, though the threat to their physical well-being has increased, they feel that, overall, their situation has taken a turn for the better.

In contrast to the brief period of Morsi's regime, when the ruling party's goals were clearly religiously defined, Egypt has entered a new moment of Christian-Muslim solidarity,

because Copts and moderate Muslims are united in their opposition to radical and political Islam. And with the amending of the 2012 constitution now underway, Copts are, once again, hopeful the day is coming when they can exist and worship freely in their homeland.