

Christian Persecution in Egypt

On January 6th, in the Egyptian town of Nag Hammadi, a group of Coptic Christians were leaving a worship service. They were celebrating the Coptic Christmas Eve. What they didn't know was that some of them would never celebrate Christmas again.

As the crowd left, three men drove by and began shooting indiscriminately. When they were finished, seven Cops and a Muslim guard were dead. 10 people were wounded. In the days that followed, there were riots and reports that both Christian and Muslim homes and businesses were set on fire. The cause for this violence? An allegation.

“From what we understand, a Muslim girl was raped. A Christian man was blamed for that and it was an allegation that was made. And so a group of Muslims – militant Muslims – went to the Church. It was a Christmas Eve service and they began attacking and shooting people.”

Greg Musselman is Chief Communications Officer for the Voice of the Martyrs Canada, an organisation that advocates and supports persecuted Christians around the globe. He says that although Christians and Muslims have lived in relative peace in Egypt, in recent decades, religiously-motivated violence against the Christian minority has been escalating.

“We've seen it not only in Egypt but in many countries where Christians are in the minority because they're treated as second class citizens, and these are often used as a reason to attack the Christians.”

And while the Nag Hammadi shootings made international headlines, Musselman says often when it comes to Christian persecution, unless many people are killed, it goes unnoticed and unreported.

“A lot of the time it's suppressed and so even organisations like ours, when we come out with these stories, “Oh no, those are just isolated stories” or the things you've read on the Internet and heard about.”

One group that's keeping a close eye on events is the Coptic diaspora. In Toronto, within days of the Nag Hammadi attack, the Coptic community organised a bus trip to Ottawa to protest at the Egyptian embassy. In Toronto, they rallied in the streets to raise awareness of the issue and at a recent prayer meeting, they raised money for Cops who lost their homes and businesses in the riots.

“So internationally, Egypt, because of its strategic position in the Middle East and its attitude with its neighbours, so they don't care much about what's happening inside Egypt. We have to raise our plight to all the people around the world. Either you are for human rights or against human rights. You can't be in between.”

Father Marcos is an Orthodox priest in Toronto and one of the first members of the Coptic Church to arrive in Canada in the 1960s. Marcos says even if the allegations that a Christian

man raped a Muslim girl are true, the attacks on the Church goers in Nag Hammadi were unjustified.

“So he was a young man. He could have raped her. But do we kill the whole community, or attack the whole community because of the fault of one person? In which law, in what law of land this happens? They know the name of the girl. They know the name of the boy. The police can find them and everything. What has the community done? Do we penalise for the mistake of one person?”

He says the rise of extremism in Egypt is the reason behind the increase in religiously-motivated attacks against Christians.

“Not all Muslims are fanatics, this is what I would like to stress. The trend of fanaticism or extremism started in the last 30 years. So because of this, that’s why our people are suffering. Usually the Muslims go and give good wishes to the...the Muslims will come to give good wishes to the Christians on our feasts, and Christians go out to give good wishes to the Muslims on their feasts, and so forth.”

Greg Musselman agrees but says it’s not just about religion. Economic and social factors also play a role.

“There has been a growth in the Church. You know, not just a Church that is passive and sitting back, but they’re becoming more passionate about sharing their faith in Jesus Christ. Things like you know, jobs – people will use the fact that Christians are wanting to have professional jobs and get an education, and then using religion to put people down.”

While Egypt is widely known as a Muslim nation, it’s also still home to a large Christian community, says Musselman, one that people know little about.

“Most of the Christians that are in Egypt are Coptic. There are of course some Protestant Evangelicals as well, and some Catholics but for the most part, the Christians in Egypt are Coptic. Coptic Christians were the Orthodox Christians, and their history goes right back to the time of Jesus. And at one time of course, in Egypt, Christians were the predominant religion in that country, up until about the 7th Century when the Islamic invasion came, and they have since that point been the minority.”

While the Egyptian constitution states there is religious freedom, it’s not quite what you think, he says.

“So if I was a Coptic wanting to become a Muslim, they’re free to do that. But to go the other way, you can’t do that. You can’t leave Islam, and join the Coptic Church or the Baptist Church, or an Evangelical Church or Presbyterian Church. It’s not permitted in their society.”

All Egyptians, says Musselman, must carry identity cards which bear both the name and religion of the cardholder, which can make them easy targets for discrimination.

“And that’s how you differentiate between somebody who’s a Muslim and a Christian. And if they do see the card, you know, it says ‘Christian’, they can refuse them a job, they can refuse

to serve them, they can not allow them to go into the university or college so they can further their education.”

And for Muslims who convert to Christianity, having their identity card changed is often difficult and dangerous, says Musselman.

“Now, a well-known case – and it’s not the only one but it’s the most prominent – a Christian by the name of Mohammed Hijazi, an Islamic man that had converted to Christianity and is a Christian, he said, “I want to have my identity card changed to say ‘Christian’.” And so Mohammed Hijazi’s case, it caused quite a stir in the media, where you had Islamic leaders coming out and saying this man must be insane, and his own father said he would kill him.”

Building codes in Egypt have also been a source of contention for the country’s Christians. A rule from the days of the Ottoman Empire known as the Hamayouni Decree required non-Muslims to have building permits and repairs approved by the President. In 2005, a new Presidential law gave Egypt’s governors the power to approve or deny permits for existing churches and although intended to level the playing field, it hasn’t, says Musselman, and it serves a purpose.

“Well, it is to stop the growth of the Church. Clearly they’re being discriminated against, and it seems illogical. Now there are those within the Egyptian culture, Muslims, that are saying, “No, let the Christians fix their buildings. Let them build their buildings, we don’t have a problem with that.” But there are many within the culture that do and so sometimes, the voices of more reason are drowned out by more of the militant voices.”

“But I love you so much because you are my dad, and because Jesus taught me to love.”

And although they face harassment and a possible threat to their lives, he says Christians living in Egypt are speaking out despite and against discrimination.

“We’ve met many wonderful Christians there, that are working underground. We’ve met lawyers, those that are trying to approach it from a legal standpoint and reminding government officials and others that they have rights.”

Here in Canada, Father Marcos says his community is using, and will continue to use, peaceful means to draw attention to what’s happening to their Christian brothers and sisters.

“We don’t have anything to defend ourselves except through prayer, fasting and good will. And that’s it. With the fanatics, it’s...these things are seen as points of weaknesses. For us, it’s a point of strength because God defends his own Church. But still we have to ask for our rights. When Paul was persecuted, he said, “I raise my case to Caesar.” He was asking for his because he was a Roman citizen.”

In January, three people were arrested for the Nag Hammadi shootings. In the meantime, Coptic communities around the world are moving forward, continuing to defend their rights and shine a light on an often-forgotten community increasingly at risk of dying because of their faith.

“We just ask everybody to pray for us and we will pray for them, but just please do something.”

In Mississauga, Ontario, Bridget Antwi, 100 Huntley Street.