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Egypt's Muslims show virtues of public religion

By Nathan B. Oman

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For all of the sturm und drang of debate in the United States, our politics are actually quite tame. Right-wing parties in Europe push the things labeled "socialist" in America, and American traditionalists are wild-eyed liberationists by the standards of many African and Asian countries. This relative tameness is especially true when it comes to religion in politics.

Consider recent events in Egypt. While majority Muslim, Egypt is also home to the Copts, a large minority and one of the oldest Christian communities in the world. Last year a Muslim gunman killed six Coptic worshippers (and a Muslim security guard) in a religiously motivated rampage. These murders were followed by the New Year's bombing of a Coptic church in Alexandria that left 21 dead.

This is religion on the public square in its most virulent form. There is a long tradition in Egyptian politics of regarding the nation's problems as the result of abandoning Islamic ideas of justice and good government. The radical wing of this movement has frequently resorted to violence directed at infidels, both "apostate" Muslims and — in the case of the Copts — Christians.

America recently celebrated Martin Luther King Day. King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference, along with nineteenth-century abolitionists, is properly remembered as among America's great prophetic movements. Speaking from explicitly religious premises, they invoked the higher law of God to attack injustices taken as given by less fervent citizens. The ability to offer such destabilizing criticisms of the existing order is one of the virtues that religion can bring to public life.

Events in Egypt reveal the darker side of such criticisms. Radically questioning the existing order can also release believers from the constraints that order places on violence and aggression. If the laws are unjust before the bar of divine judgment, then the claims of those laws on our darker impulses are also undermined.

The murder of Egypt's Copts, however, has a more hopeful conclusion. According to the Coptic religious calendar, Christmas Eve fell on Jan. 6 this year. On that night, thousands of Egyptian Muslims offered themselves as human shields for their Coptic countrymen, standing vigil outside of churches while Copts celebrated mass within. There were no attacks that night.

There is a strong current in public life insisting that religion should be kept entirely private, never spilling into politics. Opponents of this view are apt to cite the example of King and the abolitionists, whose religious fervor gave them the fortitude to attack injustices accepted by others. Those defending the privatization of religion, however, are quick to point to the long history of murderous religious violence in the pursuit of political goals.

The truth is more complicated. In the end, religion is too powerful for simple stories of triumphant righteousness or villainous fanatics. This power leads me to think that the effort to relegate faith to some private realm is a pipe dream. Egypt's Muslims, however, give us reason to hope that public religion contains the resources to redeem itself from its own sins and excesses.

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