

Dialogue is a Problem and Remedy in Egypt

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This is a media produced crisis. A widely circulated CD contains a play, allegedly defames Islam, caused massive demonstrations, destruction of proprieties and strong fear.



A couple of years ago, some enthusiastic youth at a local Orthodox church in Alexandria decided to have contribution to fight on terror, the phenomenon, which plagued Egypt for decades. They conducted a play signifies the problem of a Christian young person, who converted to Islam for the sake of women and money. In a dramatic change, the guy joined a terrorist group and had been exposed to thoughts and practices that left him shaken in his earlier decision to convert to Islam. He started thinking deeply about the situation he was caught in. Return back to Christianity was his choice, but he paid a high price, his life. The terrorist group killed him.

The play tried to copy a widely known Egyptian movie, The Terrorist, which starred by Adel Amam, a famous actor in the entire Arab World. But, it came poor in acting and production. The play only displayed in church for only one day before church leaders decided to stop it. Only Christians were allowed to watch the one-day display. No one talked about the play over the last two years.

The CD has been largely circulated in universities, especially in Cairo and Alexandria, carrying on its cover a statement "This is a present of the feast". A weekly paper, Called Almedan, the square, published in a two page coverage flagrant message for protest and violence. On 14th of October angry young Muslims moved to the church from a nearby Mosque calling for an official apology from high ranking church figures, a removal of priests proved to be behind the work and an immediate trial for everyone took part in the play. The demonstration was basically peaceful and one week was left for church and authorities to implement the demands. The week ended, and then hell opened its gate. As expected, a large number of angry Muslims, estimated in thousands (between 5 to 7 thousand) gathered on 21st of October after the Friday Prayer in front of a nearby mosque of Saint George Church chanting anti- Christianity slogans, calling for avenge of Christians for defaming Islam in a play conducted at the church. The security forces have taken cautionary measures, surrounding the church and prohibiting demonstrators from reaching it. After demonstrators started throwing stones, the security forces extensively patrolled the scene fired tear gas and ballistic pollutes to disperse the demonstrators, who went to surrounding streets followed by security forces and started vandalizing private properties, especially parked cars. According to the statement issued by the Ministry of Interior, one demonstrator was killed and other 60 person injured including 20 policemen. The situation calmed down between 5 till 7.30 pm, when the demonstrators went to break their fast.

During night a large number of Muslims went to the mosque facing the church for Ramadan evening special daily prayer, the security forces, which set up a barricade around the church, prevented Muslims from reaching the mosque. Muslims who denied access to the Mosque attacked the policemen and went to other places in the same district attacking churches, Christian properties, Associations and Coptic hospitals. Egyptian TV channel 5 (locally-based channel) covered the incident and interviewed some figures, Muslim and Christian, including priests and Imams, in the hope of calming situation down. TV channel 1 hosted MOFTY, who spoke about the ideal way the Prophet Mohammad dealt with those who were different in religion, and he surprisingly criticized media-brokered sectarian campaigns, indicating that extremists are behind the riots in Alexandria.

In the wake of continued demonstrations and riots, Christians remained home and some of them moved to stay with their relatives outside the district. Unofficial reports claim that Christians faced harassment in street and public transportation.

The Pope Sheounda, who was in the Monastery of Saint Bishoy, cancelled the AFTAR due in Alexandria on Saturday evening and returned to his premises at Cathedral for more talks with his aids.

A Few demonstrators on Saturday morning attacked a Christian- owned hospital, ISIS, and a jewelry shop owned by a Christian. The closed shop was broken and looted. There are unconfirmed reports that 25 Christian- owned places including churches have been attacked. The mostly attacked places are liquor shops, pharmacies, jewelry shops. Reports indicate that 59 suspect have been arrested and currently being interrogated. The Pope Shenouda and Azhar grant Imam issued a joint statement calling Muslims and Christians to keep calm for the sake of peace, security and love. The statement stressed that what was misinterpreted is only redeemed through dialogue and understanding especially official investigation is underway.

Although security forces enormously patrolled the scene, their reaction to demonstrations was shaped by delay. While policemen exerted efforts to safeguard the church after Friday Prayer, the riot overnight was not adequately faced. The security forces fully concentrated their efforts to secure Saint George church, although the area is backed with other churches from different denominations. The Apostolic church was attacked by demonstrators who entered the church, destroying benches and chairs and smashing windows. Furthermore the demonstrators set fir on the outside gate of the Faith Protestant church. Bibles were torn up and scattered in streets. Additional security forces came late from other governorates.

State- owned media have tried restlessly to revive the spirit of national unity in Egyptian society through extensive coverage of the incident and interviews with community leaders.

It is noticeable that most of demonstrators haven't seen the play itself. They heard about it. They have been pushed to do vicious deeds against their neighbors and partners in society, depending

only on hearsay, not anything else. Rumors added more heat to the inflaming situation. There is a strong need for dialogue to redeem problems before they turn to disasters. Objectivity in media coverage of sectarian matters becomes a necessity not only for professional standards but also for social cohesion. Mutual liberation is a desperate need in society like Egypt, where Christians feel threatened and Muslims fear the outside intervention in domestic affairs in the name of Christians.

The situation is complicated. But, dialogue seems to be the only way to build consensus on national unity.

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