

A Catholic contribution in Egypt

John L. Allen Jr. | Feb. 18, 2011 | All Things Catholic

For better or worse, Egypt is now a bellwether of the struggle for the soul of global Islam. While a great deal is up in the air, one point seems crystal clear: If the post-Mubarak choice comes down to Islamic militants on one side and Western-style secular liberals on the other -- what we might call the "Facebook crowd" -- then the militants are going to win, and they're going to win huge.

As in other Islamic societies, the vast majority of Egyptians are not radicals, but they are practicing, believing Muslims, who would not feel represented by a regime which doesn't take their faith seriously and doesn't recognize Islam as a core pillar of social organization.

What Egypt therefore needs is something akin to an Islamic version of the old Christian Democrats in Europe -- a political movement led by serious Muslims, perceived as such by the Muslim street, who are also committed to democracy and the rule of law.

It's possible that the Muslim Brotherhood could evolve in that direction. That was the thrust of their Feb. 10 opinion piece in *The New York Times*, calling for "a democratic, civil state that draws on universal measures of freedom and justice ... which are inherently compatible with and reinforce Islamic tenets." If not, some new force will have to arise, led by Egyptian versions of [Konrad Adenauer](#) [1] and [Robert Schuman](#) [2].

Building a coalition of "Muslim Democrats" is, of course, something the Egyptians have to do themselves. External interference, especially from the West, will likely be counter-productive. Egypt is gripped by a spirit of national pride at the moment, with people painting their faces the color of the national flag and celebratory concerts being staged across the country. Egyptians feel they've done just fine handling things on their own, and they aren't in the mood to be hectored by outside forces -- especially, perhaps, by countries they perceive as having propped up the Mubarak regime.

Nonetheless, there are three compelling reasons to believe that Christianity, and the Catholic church in particular, could play an important supporting role in the Egyptian drama.

I was in Vancouver earlier this week, keynoting a conference of Catholic educators. I also spoke at a luncheon hosted by Archbishop Michael Miller for some priests and other personnel of the archdiocese, which gave me the opportunity to work out these ideas. I'm grateful for their interest and feedback.

Benedict's vision for Christian/Muslim relations

Pope John Paul II was a great pioneer in Catholic/Muslim relations, typically grounding his outreach on the usual pillars of inter-faith relations: peace, tolerance, and in the case of the Western monotheistic faiths, our common heritage as sons of Abraham. Benedict XVI has embraced all that, with a slightly sharper emphasis on matters of religious freedom and the need for Islamic leaders to reject violence -- usually as part of his broader analysis of the intrinsic relationship between reason and faith.

Benedict's genius, however, lies in adding another basis for Christian/Muslim solidarity to the mix, one with special appeal to the hawks on both sides. It boils down to this: We have a common enemy, whose name is secularism.

The basic fault line in the 21st century, Benedict has argued in a variety of venues, does not run between Christianity and Islam. It runs between belief and unbelief -- that is, between those who take religion seriously and who want it to be a vital contributor to public life, and those who seek to muzzle and marginalize religious faith. In that great struggle, the pope believes, Christians and Muslims are natural allies.

That's what Benedict had in mind when he called for an "Alliance of Civilizations" between Christianity and Islam during his May 2009 trip to the Middle East, a phrase coined as an alternative to Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations."

The concept of an "Alliance of Civilizations" actually comes from a United Nations initiative by that name, which ironically was first floated by Socialist Prime Minister José Luis Rodr'guez Zapatero of Spain, the radical secularist *bête noir* of the European Catholic imagination. Though they're not mutually exclusive, Benedict's version of an alliance can engage Muslims at a level the U.N. can't, because Benedict represents a set of common spiritual and moral convictions.

In his recent book-length interview with German journalist Peter Seewald, Benedict was asked about the long history of Christian/Muslim antagonism. Without disowning the past, this was his answer: "Today we are living in a completely different world, in which the battle lines are drawn differently. In this world, radical secularism stands on one side, and the question of God, in its various forms, stands on the other."

The notion of an "Alliance of Civilizations" in defense of a robust public role for religion, while still respecting human rights and especially religious freedom, could provide a key component of the intellectual infrastructure for a "Muslim Democrats" movement -- one which sees Christianity as a partner rather than a threat.

Christianity's sociological footprint

In terms of raw numbers, Egypt has the largest Christian population in the Middle East. The consensus estimate is that there are eight million Christians, representing close to 10 percent of the population. The vast majority is Coptic Orthodox, but there are also seven Catholic communities: Syrian, Maronite, Melkite, Armenian, Chaldean, and Coptic, in addition to the Latin rite. The Coptic Catholics are the largest group, estimated at 200,000.

Christianity thus has a sociological footprint in Egypt it lacks in most other Muslim nations, making Christianity not just an outside force but an important domestic constituency.

To be sure, those Christians face rising fundamentalist pressures, the most dramatic recent expression of which came in a New Year's bombing of a Coptic church in Alexandria which left 21 people dead and 80 injured. Given that background, Christians naturally feel a mix of hope and fear about the country's new course.

Yet Egypt's demographics mean that if a moderate majority is to take hold, it must be a three-legged stool composed of Muslim Democrats, Christians, and secularists. Take one of those legs away, and the stool falls.

At the moment, Egypt's Christian leadership may have some credibility to recover. Until the very end, both Coptic and Catholic leaders were making statements supportive of Mubarak and instructing their people not to participate in the protests -- advice that went largely unheeded. Now they need to position themselves as partners in the new Egypt, which was the thrust of a recent statement from the Coptic Catholic Patriarch,

Cardinal Antonios Naguib, pledging that the church will work to build a nation "based on laws, justice and equality, that respects one's freedom and dignity based on citizenship."

The Catholic footprint is also enhanced by the presence of a talented nuncio, or papal ambassador: English Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald, the former president of the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. A member of the Missionaries of Africa, Fitzgerald is the real deal -- an academic expert on Islam who holds a degree in Arabic from the University of London, with decades of experience in the relationship.

When Benedict XVI sent Fitzgerald to Cairo in 2006, many Vatican-watchers took it as a demotion or an exile. Today, however, the assignment looks prophetic, as Fitzgerald stands on the front lines of the most compelling drama in the Muslim world.

Diplomatic relations between Egypt and the Vatican were recently interrupted when the Mubarak government withdrew its ambassador in protest over comments by Benedict XVI in January, calling for greater protection for the country's Christian minority. Now there's a chance to rebuild the relationship, and whether by foresight, providence, or just dumb luck, the Vatican has the perfect architect in Fitzgerald.

The American parallel

Catholics, especially in the United States, have something particular to offer to the Egyptian conversation. In a nutshell, American Catholics have stood before roughly where reform-minded Egyptian Muslims stand today -- wondering how to bring their religious faith and their democratic convictions into alignment.

American Catholic legal analyst Kevin Seamus Hasson, president of the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty, lays out the argument this way: In the United States, Catholicism was never a state-imposed monopoly. Catholics here had to make their way in a pluralistic culture from the very beginning, and the great discovery was that in a society marked by religious freedom and the absence of state support, the faith not only survived but thrived.

For a long time, American Catholics were thus caught between their lived experience and an official theology which rejected a separation between church and state. At the Second Vatican Council, American Catholics led the way for the universal church towards a new understanding of religious freedom, enshrined in the declaration *Dignitatis humanae*.

Many American Muslims say their experience is eerily similar. Imam Shamsi Ali of New York's Islamic Cultural Center told me in a 2007 interview that "aside from a small minority, most Muslims have bought into the American approach. We don't have to formalize Islam publicly. We live *shariah* here better than Muslims in many other places where it's supposedly the law."

Today, Egyptians find themselves wrestling with much the same question: How can their new society be both seriously religious and genuinely democratic? With allowances for obvious cultural and historical differences, the American Catholic journey, and more recently that of American Muslims, could provide powerful resources for reflection.

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I surveyed a few Catholic leaders in Egypt this week to ask what Catholics in the United States could do to be of help, without appearing to interfere. The following were the three most common points I picked up.

First, try to offer a balanced picture of the situation facing Christians. For sure, there are real threats -- not just the occasional terrorist attack, but also daily discrimination in employment, housing, public life, and so on. Yet there are also positive trends that often don't command the same attention.

For instance, Western media outlets covered the New Year's church attack extensively, but didn't devote nearly as much attention to its aftermath, in which a large numbers of Muslims actually attended Christian services to express solidarity. Local experts say that experience helped forge a climate of cooperation which extended into the anti-Mubarak protests. In Tahrir Square, Muslim protestors performed their daily prayers, but there were also prayer services for Christians in which many Muslims participated, organized by the young people themselves.

Too much focus on anti-Christian hostility, without acknowledging the generosity and tolerance that also have a strong following in Egypt, risks breeding resentment and thus becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Second, Catholics can visit Egypt to express their solidarity and concern for the local Christian community. One Catholic leader in Cairo offered an intriguing twist on that idea: It would be an even more positive signal, he suggested, if Christians and Muslims together were to come, meeting with both local Christians and local Muslims and seeing their holy sites. Among other things, such a joint outing might offer a way for American Catholics and Muslims to talk about the American experience with their Egyptian counterparts.

Third, Catholics could support local educational and humanitarian initiatives associated with the church. Here's one possibility, out of many deserving initiatives: The Association of Upper Egypt for Education and Development, a lay-run Catholic group that operates in rural communities, which tend to have sizeable Christian populations and which also tend to be disproportionately poor. Their services are also open to Muslims.

The association's Web site can be found here: www.upperegypt.org [3] For those concerned about Egypt's future, it's one concrete way to make a difference.

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Last week, I published an interview with [Luis Lugo and Greg Smith of the Pew Forum](#) [4], trying to make sense of their 2008 "Religious Landscape Survey." The study found that there are now 22 million ex-Catholics in America, by far the highest net losses for any religious group, and yet the Catholic church also has one of the highest retention rates for any Christian denomination in the country.

As I told Lugo and Smith, the background for the interview was my experience of the Catholic lecture circuit. Almost everywhere I go, somebody asks about the Pew study, and I've never known quite how to respond. The need to put the findings in context has therefore been in the back of my mind for a long time.

By coincidence, what prompted me to do so last week was the recent Murray/Bacik Lecture at the University of Toledo by noted theologian Richard Gaillardetz, in which, among many other points, he referred to a "mass exodus" from the church on the basis of the Pew data. My aim was not to engage Gaillardetz's broader analysis -- the only reason I mentioned the lecture at all was to illustrate that reactions to the study are still making the rounds.

In retrospect, however, I realize that I did Gaillardetz an injustice.

Lifting an isolated sound-bite out of his 7,500-word text hardly captured the spirit of a thoughtful, and nuanced, analysis of the American Catholic situation. What I should have added last week is what I'll say now: If you want to know what Gaillardetz said, don't rely on second-hand characterizations by me or anyone else. Listen for yourself, which you can do at this link: www.knowledgestream.org [5].

Though Gaillardetz's prescriptions are admittedly likely to be most congenial to what we might call the Catholic "center-left," his historical review of recent currents in American Catholicism offers a terrific descriptive

synthesis from which everyone can benefit, no matter where they stand in today's debates.

Over the years, Gaillardetz has always tried to overcome the polarized climate in the church, not to exacerbate it. Especially in that light, I'm sorry if I created a false impression about his lecture.

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