

ENQUIRE WITHIN

Question: *After the revolution in Egypt last February (2011) we thought that things would improve for everyone in that country. So why are there new riots reported in October and this time by Coptic Christians and who are they?*

Answer: The official name of the Church is the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria and it is the largest Christian church in Egypt and the Middle East. It is a Church claiming foundations in the personal missionary work of St. Mark, making it one of the oldest Christian Churches in Christendom. It became a separate Church when it broke up with other Orthodox Churches out of a theological disagreement some 500 years earlier than the big split in the 11th century which created the Latin West and the Orthodox East bits of the Christian Church. Its leader is His Holiness Pope Shenouda II who is pictured.

Yes, it is complicated.

The Coptic Church makes up about 10% of the population of Egypt and although it may have had high hopes of a free Egypt, things have not gone so well since the revolution.

The Egyptian Federation of Human Rights, which is headed by a Coptic lawyer Naguib Gabriel, has claimed that over half of the Coptic Christians have deserted Egypt out of fear for their future and the future of their children. Their fear is that they are being targeted by extreme Muslims and that Egypt will end up as a mono-religious country, intolerant of minorities and that there are people willing to drive them out by force. If you look in the newspapers and the television news reports, the evidence is compelling. The situation is so bad that it is estimated that a quarter of a million Coptic Christians will have fled Egypt by the end of 2011, some to the USA, some to Canada and some to Europe. On 10th

October, 2011, The Guardian newspaper reported as follows:

“At least 24 people have been killed and more than 200 injured in the centre of Cairo after a protest over an attack on a church erupted into the worst violence since the 18-day uprising that ousted Hosni Mubarak as president of Egypt in February.



Trouble began when a demonstration against the attack in southern Egypt (pictured) was reportedly met by gunfire close to the state television building.”

In the emotional turmoil of Egypt's Coptic Christians, there may be exaggerations and over-reactions, but the message from them is clear. They fear that the actions of extremists who wish to burn church and kill Christians are either not being prevented by their Government, or worse, they are actively supporting anti-Christian activities. This would be indeed very shocking if it were to be proven to be true.

For us in Britain, where multi-faith issues are also under question, the situation in Egypt looks appalling. We have religious freedoms assured by International Human Rights provisions as well as by the laws of our own Parliament. So too should the Coptic Christians of Egypt. It would be a very bad omen for the

future if an Islamic state could drive out a Christian or other faith minority which has had a home in that country from a time before the emergence of Islam as a religion.

It raises questions about how much control of extremists the mainstream and peaceable Muslims can exercise once matters become very emotional and deaths follow and the air is filled with cries of revenge. It will be a matter for the Egyptian Government to address through legislation and through law enforcement and the prevention of crime, especially crimes concerning religious hatred.