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We need more, not less, about religious freedom

By Margaret Wentle

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Expanding Christian minorities are likely to provoke violent reactions from other groups that feel under threat - we need to know more, not less

Here's a sampling of recent news from around the world that you may have missed.

In Egypt, tens of thousands of Coptic Christians - who make up 10 per cent of the population - have fled the country. The so-called Arab Spring has not been good news for them. In October, 27 people died when security forces opened fire on a crowd of peaceful demonstrators who had gathered to protest against church burnings. And last week, a teenaged Coptic boy was arrested for posting pictures of the Prophet Mohammed on his Facebook page. "Copts worry that even mainstream Muslims don't really care that much about the defence of Coptic rights," says Paul Sedra, associate professor of history at Simon Fraser University.

In Bangalore, India, 200 activists from a right-wing Hindu group invaded a Christian church during Sunday prayers, and attacked the pastor for allegedly trying to convert Hindus to Christianity by offering them bribes. "We were informed by a family member of one of the Hindu men taking baptism that he was asked to convert to Christianity as he loved a Christian girl," one activist told a reporter. "We immediately rushed to the church and stopped the conversion process."

In Pakistan, Asia Bibi, a Christian mother sentenced to death for blasphemy, is doing "well," according to her husband. She was sentenced after drinking water from a well reserved for Muslims, and for allegedly making derogatory remarks about Mohammed. Human-rights groups have reported that she is so frail she can barely stand up. Shahbaz Bhatti, a Christian cabinet minister who had attempted to defend her, was assassinated last March, shortly after predicting his own death.

In Nigeria, a violent pseudo-Islamic sect called Boko Haram is thought to be behind a series of deadly church bombings, including one on Christmas Day. Christian-Muslim tensions are on the rise, and Christians have also massacred Muslims. In Uganda, on Christmas Eve, Islamic extremists threw acid on a church leader and partly blinded him.

In Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim nation, the country's leading bishop warned that Muslim fundamentalists are attacking Christians with impunity. Mobs of Muslims have burned and ransacked

churches, and rights groups report that violence against religious minorities has escalated. This week, according to The Jakarta Globe, a hard-line Muslim group attacked some church members after one of them displayed a bumper sticker on his car saying, "We need a friendly Islam, not an angry Islam."

In Iraq, two-thirds of the pre-war Christian population has fled the country. Some experts predict that Christianity in that country, as well as in the lands where Jesus walked, will soon be extinct.

There's more, but you get the picture. Religious strife is on the rise, and religious persecution is a serious problem in some of the world's biggest countries. You can say what you like about the Harper government's plan to launch an Office of Religious Freedom as part of its foreign policy. You can say that it's naive, or dumb, or a blatant effort to appeal to the domestic religious base. But you can't say the issue doesn't matter.

In the U.S., scholars across the political spectrum are trying to persuade the Obama administration to give the issue much higher priority. Among them is Thomas Farr, director of the Religious Freedom Project at the Berkley Center in the U.S. On his blog, has argued that people "who think this idea is a fantasy of the Christian right, or that it represents illicit American exceptionalism, or cultural imperialism" fail to understand the connection between religious freedom and fundamental issues of justice and human dignity. In areas of the world where religion still matters - that is, most of it - promoting religious freedom is one of the most important ways to promote human freedom.

Last summer, the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life released a sobering look at the decline of religious freedoms around the world. It found that between 2006 and 2009, restrictions on religious beliefs and practices rose in 23 countries. Because some of these countries are so populous, the increases affected a much larger share of peoples and states. "More than 2.2 billion people - nearly a third of the world total population - live in countries where either government restrictions on religion or social hostilities involving religion rose substantially." Governments in 101 countries used some measure of force against religious individuals or groups, "including individuals being killed, physically abused, imprisoned, detained or displaced from their homes, as well as damage to or destruction of personal or religious properties." Fifty-two countries experienced mob violence.

A lot of progressive people in the secular West like to think that religion is playing less and less of a role in world affairs. They couldn't be more wrong. As religion scholar Philip Jenkins warns, religious conflict and issues of minority rights will play a major role in world affairs for years to come, especially in Africa and large parts of Asia as well as the Middle East. "The most disturbing features of contemporary Christian/Muslim conflict is how very commonplace they have become," he writes. "The bloodshed in Nigeria and Indonesia does receive some coverage in the West, yet violence of this sort has become almost too widespread to report." Expanding Christian minorities are likely to provoke violent reactions not only from Islam, he says, but from other religious groups that feel under threat.

If you're interested in the forces that will shape the geopolitics of this century, a serious study of religion is a good place to start. We need to know much more about religion and society, not less.

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