

## Egypt's Momentous Event

Every American knows that Egypt is an overwhelmingly Muslim country, by far the most populous Arab Muslim state. Many Americans, on consideration, might also be aware that, before the arrival of Islam, Egypt was just as solidly Christian, the cultural and spiritual heart of the early Church. How did one situation give way to the other?

Although Egypt's Christians had been subject to previous outbreaks of persecution, these events now reached an alarming new intensity. Mobs demanded that Christians and Jews recite the Muslim profession of faith upon threat of being burned alive. The government struck at churches and confiscated the estates of monasteries, destroying the financial basis of the Coptic Church. And the persecution now reached the whole country, rather than being confined to Cairo. Under increasingly violent conditions, many Christians accepted Islam, in a massive wave of conversions. Muslim historian Al-Maqrizi reports the unprecedented scale of the change:

Many reports came from both Upper and Lower Egypt of Copts being converted to Islam, frequenting mosques and memorizing the Quran . . . In all the provinces of Egypt, both north and south, no church remained that had not been razed; on many of those sites, mosques were constructed. For when the Christians' affliction grew great and their incomes small, they decided to embrace Islam. Thus Islam spread among the Christians of Egypt and in the town of Qalyub alone 450 persons were converted to Islam in a single day. . . . [T]his was a momentous event in Egyptian history.

These events occurred in 1354, at a time when Europe was entering the early Renaissance, decades after the time of Dante, and, more to the point, 700 years after the initial Arab conquest of Egypt.

In light of popular constructions of history, the Egyptian story seems multiply wrong, in terms both of the chronology or religious change and, more particularly, of its manner. Partly, we suffer from the

curse of oversimple maps. As any number of textbooks and television documentaries tell us, Islam rapidly extended its power over the Middle East, in a movement symbolized as a fast-spreading stain. The maps imply that conversion to Islam was a swift and painless process: Presumably, infidels rapidly came to acknowledge the superior virtues of Islam.

The notion of an easy, amiable conversion fits well with the many recent books that stress the tolerant nature of Islam and its reluctance to impose its beliefs by force. Karen Armstrong famously contrasts Muslim tolerance with the bigotry so evident in Christian history. Writing of Islamic Spain in the ninth century, she remarks that, "Like the Jews, Christians were allowed full religious liberty within the Islamic empire and most Spaniards were proud to belong to such an advanced culture, light years ahead of the rest of Europe." The notion of Islamic tolerance is often associated with idealized pictures of the friendly coexistence that supposedly prevailed in medieval Spain, the *convivencia*.

Coexistence in some times and places does not preclude persecution in others, however. Much as Christian Europe treated its Jewish population, good social relationships between Muslims and Christians could endure for decades or even centuries. But in the world of Islam as in Europe, persecution, when it did arise, could be savage, devastating the minority community, and, in both cases, the 14th century witnessed a crescendo of violence and discrimination. Even in the most optimistic view, Armstrong's reference to Christians possessing "full religious liberty" in Muslim Spain or elsewhere beggars belief.

Undeniably, many Christians and others (Jews and Zoroastrians) were driven to accept the new faith, whether by outright persecution or systematic discrimination, exercised over centuries. Nor did Christianity simply fade away of its own accord, following a centuries-long downward slope to oblivion. Across the Christian worlds of Africa and Asia, the 12th and 13th centuries marked a widespread cultural renaissance in many lands and many tongues, movements that produced



some of the greatest thinkers and authors of the Christian Middle Ages, dazzling Syriac scholars such as Bar-Hebraeus and Jacob Bar Salibi. Only around 1300 did the ax fall, and quite suddenly.

So extensive, indeed, were persecutions and reductions of minority groups that it is astonishing how little they have registered in Western consciousness, or how readily the myth of Muslim tolerance has been accepted. One factor distorting memory has been the total oblivion into which the non-European Christian communities have fallen, coupled with the assumption that the familiar realities of the present day must always have existed. For those accustomed to a near-solidly Muslim Middle East, it seems incredible that a different situation might ever have existed, or, if it did, that it could ever have experienced a different outcome. And such a vision has contemporary relevance: If we know nothing of Middle Eastern Christians, we care little for their welfare: hence, the moral blindness in U.S. policy toward the region over the past century.

To stress intolerance in Islamic history does not mean that we must abandon one mindless stereotype — universal *convivencia* — and replace it with another image, that of ceaseless violence and persecution. Anyone who believes that boundless aggression and ruthless tyranny over minorities are built into the DNA of Islam needs to explain the quite benevolent nature of Muslim rule during its first six centuries; but advocates of Islamic tolerance must work equally hard to account for the later years of the religion's historical experience. Though Muslim regimes could tolerate other faiths for long periods, that willingness to live and let live did fail at various times, and, at some critical points, it collapsed utterly. The deeply rooted Christianity of Africa and Asia did not simply fade away: It was crushed. ☹

## The New Math: $66 < 60$

How much would you pay for a library card? In Rockford, if you are not a resident, you have to pay \$140 per year for the privilege of using the Rockford Public Library system. With six branches scattered throughout the city and over 400,000 volumes, most avid readers who aren't relying on the library for scholarly research would get their money's worth in a few months.

But what if you had to pay \$4,197.24? And what if the cost of your library card were based on the assessed value of your house, so that, in all likelihood, it would rise every year?

That's what one homeowner in Bradley Heights/Larchmont will have to pay if the city of Rockford succeeds in annexing the neighborhood—and that's in addition to the actual tax levy for the library, which will amount to another \$580.50 (approximately). Meanwhile, the 94 property owners in Bradley Heights/Larchmont will pay an average of \$1,124.11 over the next year (as well as the actual tax levy) for the privilege of being able to check out the latest Dan Brown novel. That's the difference between the taxes they would have paid if their neighborhood had remained an unincorporated area in Winnebago County (with a 2006 property-tax rate of 8.189 percent) instead of being forced into the city of Rockford (with a 2007 property-tax rate of 10.4709 percent), according to a spreadsheet put together by Bradley Heights resident Betsy Easton. (The tax rates are applied to equalized assessed value, which, in Illinois, is one third of market value.)

Now, to be fair, the city's legal director, Patrick Hayes, in a form letter sent to Mrs. Easton and all other property owners in the Bradley Heights/Larchmont neighborhood, made it clear that

Becoming a resident of the City of Rockford has several benefits and services, including full-time police and fire protection, ambulance and paramedic service from the Rockford Fire Department; maintenance and repair of streets and snowplowing of local streets by the Rockford Department of Public Works; and a free Rockford Public

Library card.

For an average of a little over \$1,100 per year, these services might make for an attractive package, if the residents of Bradley Heights/Larchmont weren't already receiving them from Winnebago County or Rockford Township—all, that is, except for the Rockford Public Library card.

Not surprisingly, the vast majority of residents of the neighborhood have been strongly opposed to the city's gracious offer to provide them with "free" library cards against their will. Patrick Hayes argues that the neighborhood is "eligible for annexation into the City of Rockford under Illinois State Law based on the fact that [it] is less than 60 acres and surrounded by the City." Bradley Heights/Larchmont is indeed surrounded by the city of Rockford on all sides, and the Illinois Municipal Code does state that

Whenever any unincorporated territory containing 60 acres or less, is wholly bounded by (a) one or more municipalities, . . . (d) one or more municipalities and property owned by the State of Illinois, except highway right-of-way owned in fee by the State, . . . that territory may be annexed by any municipality by which it is bounded in whole or in part, by the passage of an ordinance to that effect after notice is given . . .

There's a third detail to be considered, however: Is the territory of Bradley Heights/Larchmont really "less than 60 acres"? That, it appears, depends on who is doing the measuring, and with what purpose in mind.

Both the residents of Bradley Heights/Larchmont and Hayes agree that the neighborhood covers approximately 66 acres. And, under normal circumstances, 66 would be greater than 60. But with more than a million dollars in tax revenue over the next decade at stake, the city went looking for a way to make 66 be less than 60.

And, Hayes contends, they found it in a July 28, 2006, ruling from the Second



District Appellate Court of Illinois. In that case, the city of West Chicago annexed a parcel of 62.75 acres by claiming that the area occupied by Route 64 (a highway owned by the state) should be excluded from the total. That brought it down to 57 acres and made it eligible for annexation. The appellate court sided with the city of West Chicago, pointing out that the Illinois Municipal Code requires a municipality annexing a parcel bounded by a state highway to annex the highway as well, "to prevent any question regarding jurisdiction, maintenance, financing, and traffic control once the annexation has taken place."

That decision, Hayes argues, applies to the annexation of Bradley Heights/Larchmont by Rockford. Anyone who looks at a map of the area, however, cannot help but notice what would seem a salient fact: There are no state highways bounding the neighborhood. Nor, for that matter, are there any state highways running through the neighborhood. The nearest state highway lies to the west of the neighborhood, running through property already claimed by the city of Rockford.

Still, the functionaries at the city, well trained in the New Math in the Rockford public schools, did a few quick calculations and determined that the size of the neighborhood is really 56 acres. How did they arrive at that number? Simple: Hayes told them to remove all streets and rights-of-way from the total.

Problem solved. Now the 94 poor, benighted property owners in Bradley Heights/Larchmont can enjoy their "free" library cards! Those who had previously paid the \$140 fee to obtain a card can now apply it to their \$1,100 property-tax increase instead! It's a win-win situation!

And I've got a state highway to sell you. When Rockford Mayor Larry Morris-