

*The following article, written by Eric Marrapodi, appeared in CNN on September 14, 2012 at <http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2012/09/14/controversy-over-anti-islamic-film-shines-light-on-coptic-christianity/>*

Violence in the Muslim world over an anti-Islamic film that appears to have been produced by a Coptic Christian is bringing uncomfortable focus on the religious tradition. A staffer on the film, which has provoked anti-American protests and violence across the Muslim world, said he believed that the filmmaker is a Coptic Christian, information that has sent shock waves through the Coptic community.

The staffer said the filmmaker told him he'd been to Alexandria, Egypt, to raise money for the film, suggesting that Copts were helping finance it. Media in Egypt, where Copt-Muslim relations are tense, jumped on the news.

"Islamists' use of this idea that Copts were behind it was apparently effective in drumming up support for those attacks," said Eric Trager of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

The Holy Synod of the Coptic Orthodox Church released a statement Wednesday condemning the film, its funding and its production. The film's "release at this specific time is part of a malicious campaign targeting defamation of religions, aiming to divide the people, most notably the Egyptian people," the statement said.

"The defamation of religion, its symbols and teachings is incompatible with Christian values, the teaching of Jesus Christ and the apostles as is demonstrated in the Bible," the statement continued, "so those who participate in such a production, display or promotion of such a film should be held fully accountable for operating outside of Christian principles and church laws."

Coptic Christians are part of the Orthodox Christian tradition, one of three main traditions under the Christian umbrella, alongside Catholicism and Protestantism. Copts split from other Christians in the fifth century over the definition of the divinity of Jesus Christ.

Copts trace their history to the Apostle Mark, the New Testament figure who they say introduced Christianity to Egypt in A.D. 43. Egypt holds a special place for Coptic Christians because, according to the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus' family fled there shortly after his birth to escape King Herod, who was calling for the execution of all Jewish boys under the age of 2.

The largest group of Copts in the world is still in Egypt, where they make up between 8% and 11% of the nation's 80 million citizens, most of whom are Sunni Muslims.

In the United States, there are approximately 90,000 Copts organized under 170 parishes, according to Alexei Krindatch, research coordinator for the Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops in the United States. Many Copts came to the U.S. from Egypt, Kridatch said.

"Most of them came here as highly professional people, so you've got a lot of medical doctors and electrical engineers," he said. "So basically, the Coptic community in the United States is very well-educated and, you could also say, a very prosperous community."

Coptic churches tend to be ornately decorated, and members often stay at the church all day on Sunday for worship services and communal meals, Kridatch said.

The American Coptic community is close-knit: The tradition's churches tend to be social hubs as well as religious centers.

In Egypt, Coptic Christians have been target of recent violence.

A Coptic church was bombed in Alexandria in January, killing 21 people. Last fall, during

clashes with Egyptian security forces, two dozen Coptic Christians and their supporters were killed.

Sectarian violence in Egypt is nothing new. Maha Azzam, associate fellow of the Middle East and North African Program at the Chatham House think tank in London, says the sources of tension have focused on religious conversions, attacks on places of worship and Coptic resentment that they are not being given licenses to build new churches.

The  
**U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom**  
, an independent bipartisan federal agency, added Egypt this year to a list of the worst violators of religious freedom.

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