

Slow, Mysterious Egypt Sits and Waits...?

The recent events in Egypt have captivated the media. Hosni Mubarak, the octogenarian president of the country for 30 years, has relinquished his office after days and nights of protests in the cities of Cairo and Alexandria. Egypt seems now to be in a kind of receivership, with the Egyptian military in charge of public order and government services, at least, one hopes, until new elections.



The media focus on Egypt has been interesting to observe. As to why all the fuss about Egypt, we have been told over and over again by the avatars of the media about the strategic importance of Egypt in relation to American interests. In addition, it seems that the Middle East is always a pot simmering on the stove and the slightest increase in heat will cause it to boil over. Things are pretty hot right now, and it could get a lot hotter.

It has been interesting to hear the Western journalistic narrative that has accompanied this story. I heard the word "freedom" and a lot of discussion about democracy, two words I have taken to signify that we should not worry because it seems that in the end, when Mubarak is gone and the sand settles, they will be like us! I have my doubts about these assurances. The political aspirations of any people are rooted in a unique history and inextricably entwined with all sorts of cultural assumptions, many of which are religious, or more specifically, theological in nature. It is likely that democracy will have a say in the governance of Egypt, but it would be my guess that a particular kind of theology and religious practice will have the last word.

Many in the West hope that secularist models of political life will prevail in Egypt and all over the Middle East. I don't think so. A Pew Forum survey of Egyptians last year found that an overwhelming majority think that the Mubarak regime was not religious enough and that the government of Egypt should be much more religious than it is.



The promise of secularism has been that it provides a system of governance that is theologically and religiously neutral, and such neutrality would promote the common good. I think that this mask has slipped in the past few decades and many, not only in the Middle East, have begun to see that this is not really the case. The secularist model not only proposes, but imposes an understanding of reality in which God is to be kept at a safe distance from human affairs and theological truths adjudicated in the privacy of one's individual conscience. It has also labored under the false assumption that all theology and religion is essentially alike. However, these kinds of claims are not neutral in regards to either theology or religion, but are making a very strong case for a particular kind of theology and religion, a case that a region as theologically and religiously charged as the Middle East has not found all that convincing, especially when it has been imposed by force.

The West seems to think mistakenly that what is happening right now in Egypt and the Middle East is simply the extension of our own political, and therefore secular, conversations. This is just not the case. I think Pope Benedict's insight in the much-maligned Regensburg Address was prescient: what we are speaking about is a theological issue- that of theological voluntarism and the kind of culture that such voluntarism necessarily engenders. Christianity has been attuned to this issue for some time now. Islam is beginning this troubling conversation. The secularist culture of the West refuses to speak about such a thing or has lost the ability and, as a result, we might find ourselves at the margins of the Middle East's future, which is perhaps more dangerous to our own culture's future than being at the center.

Who can guess what mysterious purposes Providence is working out right now, but the fact that it is beginning in Egypt is worth our reflection. Egypt is not just an exotic travel destination or the lynch

pin in American foreign policy; it is a land of particular Biblical concern. Abraham sojourned there (as did his children), and Moses (an Egyptian name nonetheless!) gave the faith of Abraham's descendents its peculiar monotheistic form. Egypt became a refuge for Israel in its exile, and for centuries the largest population of Jews outside Israel resided in cosmopolitan Alexandria. Christians will recall that the Holy Family took flight into the safety of Egypt until, at the opportune time, "out of Egypt the Lord called his Son." Alexandria was once the seat of a Christian Patriarchate that rivaled Rome and Constantinople in authority and power, and it is the Coptic Christians who speak a language whose tone and cadences the Pharaohs might recognize if they could hear it. The poet Jessica Powers wondered where "slow, mysterious Egypt sits and waits?" The events in Egypt of late indicate that though its pyramids may be at eternal rest, its people are no longer sitting and waiting.

Complete article:

<http://www.wordonfire.org/WoF-Blog/WoF-Blog/February-2011/Current-Events-Slow-Mysterious-Egypt-Sits-and-Waiy.aspx>

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