

Continued killing of Copts heightens debate over meaning of martyrdom

Some members of the 2,000-year-old church worry that the veneration of those martyred by militants goes too far.

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This article appears in the [November 22, 2017](#) issue.



Coptic Orthodox Cathedral, Cairo. Photo by Ashashyou via Creative Commons license.

As a boy in Sunday school, Bassem al-Janoubie was fascinated by the illustrated stories about the martyrs of Egypt's Coptic Church.

“Even more than cartoon comic books, the dramatic events and details of the ordeal of each saint held my attention,” remembers al-Janoubie, now a 40-year-old graphic designer. “They were like superheroes—not accepting attempts to change their beliefs or efforts to get them to deny their Christianity despite torture and even death.”

The 2,000-year-old Coptic Church of Egypt has a long tradition of hallowing those who died affirming their faith in the face of violence. But the group that calls itself the Islamic State has launched attacks on the Coptic community in recent years—killing at least 70 and wounding scores of others—an assault that has opened a debate in the community about martyrdom.

In October, a Coptic priest in a poor Cairo neighborhood was stabbed to death. A suspect was arrested, but his motive is still unknown.

Boules George, a well-known Coptic priest from the Cairo suburb of Heliopolis, expressed gratitude to the Islamic State terrorists for the Palm Sunday church bombings, saying they provided “a rocket” that delivered the 45 victims straight to heaven.

“Thank you very, very, very much,” George told the viewers of his program on Egypt’s Coptic TV channel just hours after the terror attacks. “You have given us the death of Christ himself, and this is the greatest honor that of any of us can attain.”

Many Copts rejected that assertion.

“Father Boules’s doctrine is insidious,” said Jacqueline Ezzat, 21. “Jesus died for a cause and a purpose. Those who die in violence are lost to us for no reason.”

The Islamic State intensified its insurgency on the Sinai Peninsula and targeted Coptic Christians, police, and military facilities in Egypt after the 2013 ousting of President Mohamed Morsi, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Glorifying a particularly bloody December attack on a Cairo church, the militants in February released a video declaring that Christians in Egypt were their new “favorite prey” and pledging to wage a jihad similar to those in Iraq and Syria.

Comprising an estimated 10 percent of Egypt’s 90 million people, the Coptic Church is the largest Christian denomination in the Middle East and North Africa.

“We are Egyptian citizens as well as Christians,” al-Janoubie said. “We need to stop viewing this harassment toward us with pride and saying terrorism gives us a chance to play the same role our ancestors did, like in those Sunday school stories about the torture of martyrs.”

Public statements from Coptic leader Pope Tawadros II offer a measure of support to the idea that these deaths benefit the church.

“The blood of our martyrs, the tearful prayers of our monks, and the sweat of all those who serve the church is the source of our spiritual power,” said Tawadros in a message to the faithful in September.

Some Coptic leaders hope to build a new church dedicated to the 28 martyrs of a jihadist attack in May that occurred on a desert road between the Egyptian city of Minya and the monastery of Samuel the Confessor, a sixth-century saint tortured at the hands of a rival Byzantine Christian sect. Survivors said their assailants, who killed their husbands and brothers, ordered them to fast because it was the holy month of Ramadan.

“After spraying us with gunfire and taking our jewelry, they ordered the women and children who were still alive to recite a testimony to convert to Islam,” said Hanan Adel, a 28-year-old survivor.

Yet some in the hierarchy of the Coptic Church say martyrdom is widely misunderstood.

“It is true that we love martyrdom, but we also love life,” said Bishop Raphael of Cairo, assistant to the pope. “We do not hate life on earth, because our Lord created us to live in it, not to die.”

This summer, Raphael implemented an Egyptian Interior Ministry directive to suspend church events in difficult-to-secure locations in order to minimize exposure to new attacks.

Raphael said, “The fact that we receive death with a spiritual philosophy does not mean that our blood is cheap.” —Religion News Service

A version of this article, which was edited on November 9, appears in the November 22 print edition under the title “Continued killing of Copts heightens debate over meaning of martyrdom.”