

Al-Azhar University: the Muslim Vatican?

Maureen Fiedler | Dec. 23, 2013 NCR Today

Al-Azhar University in Cairo has been a highly respected intellectual center for Sunni Islam throughout the Muslim world for more than 1,000 years. It is also an institution heavily involved in Egyptian secular politics. We featured Al-Azhar University last week on "Interfaith Voices" as we continued our "God and Government" series in Egypt.

At one point, I asked one of our analysts, Jessica Winegar of Northwestern University, if there were any institution in the world comparable to Al-Azhar. "Maybe the Vatican," she replied.

However, she noted that Vatican decisions are usually binding, whereas the "fatwas" coming from Al-Azhar are not. (Al-Azhar also has a call-in line where you can get your own personal "fatwa"! No, really. And in more than one language. Imagine if the Vatican had something similar. Press 1 for the commandment of the day!)

In any event, this whole episode on Egypt made me glad, once again, that we have separation of religion and state (for the most part) in the United States. The Egyptian government controls Al-Azhar University, including its finances. When Mohammed Morsi was in power, the Muslim Brotherhood wanted to use it to promote its brand of Islam, and today, the military government of Egypt is using it to foster its brand of Islam. The notion of separating religion and government is a very distant idea on the banks of the Nile.

But if such separation would ever happen, even in small ways, it would be especially good for two other Egyptian groups of notable size: Coptic Christians and secularists. The Copts have been the targets of violent attacks in 2013, and many Egyptian secularists just want all the religion in government to go away. But both group are minorities.

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