

Democracy's Collateral Damage

By ROSS DOUTHAT

New York Times Op-Ed, 16 October 2011

THE Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt is one of the oldest Christian communities in the world, tracing its roots to St. Mark the apostle and the first century A.D. Coptic Christians have survived persecutions and conquests, the fall of Rome and the rise of Islam. They have been governed from Constantinople and Ctesiphon, Baghdad and London. They have outlasted the Byzantines, the Umayyads and the Ottomans, Napoleon Bonaparte and the British Empire.

But they may not survive the Arab Spring.

Apart from Hosni Mubarak and his intimates, no group has suffered more from Egypt's revolution than the country's eight million Copts. Last week two dozen people were killed in [clashes](#) between the Coptic Christians and the Egyptian Army, a grim milestone in a year in which the [Coptic community](#) has faced escalating terrorist and mob violence. A recent Vatican estimate suggests that 100,000 Copts may have fled the country since Mubarak's fall. If Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood consolidates political power, that figure could grow exponentially.

This is a familiar story in the Middle East, where any sort of popular sovereignty has tended to unleash the furies and drive minorities into exile. From Lebanon to North Africa, the Arab world's Christian enclaves have been shrinking steadily since decolonization. More than half of Iraq's 1.5 million Christians have fled the country since the American invasion toppled Saddam Hussein.

More important, though, this is a familiar story for the modern world as a whole — a case of what National Review's John Derbyshire [calls](#) “modernity versus diversity.” For all the bright talk about multicultural mosaics, the age of globalization has also been an age of unprecedented religious and racial sorting — sometimes by choice, more often at gunpoint. Indeed, the causes of democracy and international peace have often been intimately tied to ethnic cleansing: both have gained ground not in spite of mass migrations and mass murders, but because of them.

This is a point worth keeping in mind when reading the Big Idea book of the moment, Steven Pinker's “[Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined](#).” Pinker marshals an impressive amount of data to demonstrate that human civilization has become steadily less violent, that the years since 1945

have been particularly pacific, and that contemporary Europe has achieved an unprecedented level of tranquility.

What Pinker sometimes glosses over, though, is the price that's been paid for these advances. With the partial exception of immigrant societies like the United States, mass democracy seems to depend on ethno-religious solidarity in a way that older forms of government did not. The most successful modern nation-states have often gained stability at the expense of diversity, driving out or even murdering their minorities on the road to peaceful coexistence with their neighbors.

Europe's era of unexpected harmony, in particular, may have been made possible by the decades of expulsions and genocide that preceded it. As Jerry Z. Muller [pointed out](#) in a 2008 essay for *Foreign Affairs*, the horrors of the two world wars effectively rationalized the continent's borders, replacing the old multi-ethnic empires with homogeneous nation-states, and eliminating — often all too literally — minority populations and polyglot regions. A decade of civil war and ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia completed the process. “Whereas in 1900 there were many states in Europe without a single overwhelmingly dominant nationality,” Muller wrote, “by 2007 there were only two, and one of those, Belgium, was close to breaking up.”

Along the same lines, the developing world's worst outbreaks of ethno-religious violence — in post-Saddam Iraq, or the Indian subcontinent after the demise of the British Raj — are often associated with transitions from dictatorships or monarchies to some sort of popular rule. And from Kashmir to the West Bank, Kurdistan to Congo, the globe's enduring trouble spots are usually places where ethno-religious communities and political borders can't be made to line up.

This suggests that if a European-style age of democratic peace awaits the Middle East and Africa, it lies on the far side of ethnic and religious re-sortings that may take generations to work out.

Whether we root for this process to take its course depends on how we weigh the hope of a better future against the peoples who are likely to suffer, flee and disappear along the way. Europe's long peace is an extraordinary achievement — but was it worth the wars and genocides and forced migrations that made it possible? A democratic Middle East would be a remarkable triumph for humanity — but is it worth decades of sectarian violence and ethnic cleansing?

I don't know the answer. But maybe we should ask the Copts.
