

Faithkeepers – the discussion following the film

By Charles Stevenson

The cost underwriter, or sponsor, of the film asked me to respond to the discussion that followed the film Faithkeepers. What follows are some of my observations and thoughts that I shared with the sponsor, the Lappin Foundation (<http://lappinfoundation.org>).

In order to give the film a more personal touch, the sponsors brought in a well-known Coptic Christian to describe his community's experiences with persecution during their time in Egypt. After he concluded his talk, he took questions from the floor. Some of the discussion was rancorous, and I suspect that some attendees complained to the sponsor or the hosting synagogue about comments offered by the invited speaker.

I found the questions and statements made by people in attendance to be a small but representative sample of the range of attitudes found I often encounter on Boston's north shore. Some members of the audience lamented the lack of interest by the larger Christian community, others condemned "political correctness," some defended Sharia law as consistent with western values and the US Constitution, and one man in the front row blamed Christians for the Holocaust, stating that they colluded with Hitler to murder Jews.

There were a large number of Jewish people in the audience, which is not surprising given that the film was sponsored by a well-known Jewish philanthropic organization on Boston's north shore and that it was shown at a local synagogue. However, a significant Christian presence was conspicuously missing from the community event. When the clergy were invited to stand, I saw three rabbis, three priests from Greek Orthodox or Arminian churches, with myself serving as the only protestant representative. All of this from a city of 56,000 people located in the densely populated north shore region.

I applaud the success of the Lappin Foundation in promoting the event, but their success only highlights the poor response from the Christian community. Three years ago my tiny congregation paid to bring in an expert in Middle East refugee relief from Lutheran World Relief. I wrote to every Lutheran pastor within 50 miles, a bishop in another group, everyone in the local clergy group, a local seminary, plus every additional clergy person I could find. We put it in the local paper, handed out flyers, and posted the flyers at Starbucks. My congregation and two other pastors, one of whom was a personal friend, showed up.

An older, Jewish lady asked the invited speaker why Christian communities in the US care so little about persecution in the Middle East. No one chose to respond.

During the presentation I thought the speaker's strength was that he spoke directly from his heart and the experiences of his Coptic community.

In stark contrast to my positive reaction, some individuals expressed their concern that they perceived his comments as antagonistic to the world-wide Islamic expression of faith. Yet his remarks were entirely consistent with the portrayal of Coptic history found in Raymond Ibrahim's book, *Crucified Again*.

I sought to learn the basis for the criticism, as I thought that his comments regarding the Coptic community were historically accurate and, considering the suffering of his community, quite measured in their tone. A representative response came from the person who passionately told me about a CNN interview that he had seen with a Muslim woman who complained that her religion was being hijacked. This individual worried that criticism of Islam would offend peaceful Muslims, such as the one he saw on cable television. I marveled at how far we've come from the free speech days of Thomas Paine and *Common Sense*.

The speaker allowed himself to be drawn into a discussion of Sharia Law, where he offered his opinion that it is incompatible with the US Constitution. This drew a wave of criticism from the floor as a number of people found these remarks to be overly critical of Islam and untrue.

My unstated rebuttal to those audience members who find Sharia Law compatible with western values is to cite the *Reliance of the Traveler*. This 14th century compilation of Islamic law is accepted by all four major Sunni and both Shia schools of jurisprudence. The law manual prescribes death for the crimes of leaving Islam, adultery, as well as "sodomy and lesbianism." Specific details and citations can be found in the National Review article by Andrew McCarthy: <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/395876/dont-blame-charlie-hebdo-mass-murder-extremism-andrew-c-mccarthy>.

There was considerable discussion of the role of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. I was surprised when I heard the invited speaker describe the infiltration of the US government by members of the Muslim Brotherhood. Many people in his audience responded quite negatively to his assertion, with a number telling me that they thought it was a kook conspiracy theory. But I came to understand his opinions there as an expression of the persecution the Coptic community has experienced. He wants us to know that the persecutors simply will never stop or give up, and will seek political power in both Egypt and the US to accomplish their goals. With my comfortable life I can't really comprehend what the Copts and others have endured.

I was momentarily jarred when a gentleman in the front row linked the Holocaust and other horrors to Christian belief and practice. But, before the words were fully out of his mouth, the mostly Jewish audience booed him.

Churches that decide to offer educational programs on religious persecution in the Middle East, Africa, and other regions by Muslim groups should be prepared for the difficult conversations that will follow. Perhaps the use of a designated and experienced moderator would reduce the tension by keeping the conversation focused on the central issue, rather than permitting someone to divert the discussion into partisan topics that will only serve to agitate people.

I was moved by the speaker's courage and honesty in describing the persecution of his community. I admired the Lappin Foundation's commitment to drawing attention to the plight of religious minorities in the Middle East. It was a distinct pleasure to work with the executive director of the foundation, as well as Mr. Lappin, before and after the educational program. We are all looking forward to collaborating again in the near future.