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Says Christians have same rights as Muslims to worship Give Christians more church land: Egypt imam



Egypt's Coptic Christians make up 10-12 percent of the population (File)

DUBAI (Al Arabiya)

A top Egyptian preacher has called on the government to allocate more land for Christians to build churches and blamed sectarian tension in Egypt on extremists from both sides, press reports said Tuesday.

Sheikh Khaled al-Gindi said in an interview with the London-based Asharq al-Awsat that the government should allow Christians to build churches the same way Muslims expect to be able to build mosques in the West.

"All citizens have the right to practice their religious rights," Gindi said. "As we demand that the West allows us to build mosques, we have to do the same here (in Egypt) with churches. This is what Amr ibn al-Asdid."

Gindi went on to say that the tension between Muslims and Coptic Christians in Egypt does not mean there is a sectarian strife but rather communication problems, for which he held extremists on both sides accountable.

"These problems have always existed, but did not come to the surface before. Extremists who incite hatred are more dangerous to Muslims than they are to Copts," Gindi said, adding extremists were behind the clashes that have erupted over the years between Muslims and Copts.

"Extremists have caused the Muslim mind to be afflicted with psychological disorders. Therapy is what Muslims need now. Islam has become torn between the ignorance of its followers and the helplessness of its scholars," Gindi—who is regarded as a moderate—said.

Married to a Christian

In response to a question about whether he really married a Coptic woman and enrolled his children in Coptic schools, Gindi said it is true.

"Islam allows a Muslim man to marry a Christian woman. As for the schools, if I trust a Christian woman enough to marry her and have kids with her, then I will definitely trust schools she came from with my kids. Otherwise, I will be contradicting myself."

Gindi added that Muslim children in all Arab countries join Western schools to learn foreign languages, which is the case with his two daughters who speak English and French fluently.

Gindi divorced his Coptic wife a few years ago.

Gindi also criticized some scholars at Egypt's al-Azhar University, the leading institution of Sunni Islam, for not standing by him as he plans to launch an Islamic channel.

Al-Azhar has refused to supervise the channel, set to start broadcasting in the holy fasting month of Ramadan, which bears its name and accused Gindi of trying to make a profit by using its name.

"I belong to al-Azhar in spite of all of them," he said, adding he would be launching a channel called Azhari, Arabic for affiliated to al-Azhar, and said "I will not allow anyone to obstruct its success."