



The Coptic Church As An Apostolic Church

The Term "Copts"

The term "Copts" is equivalent to the word "Egyptians." It is derived from the Greek "Aiggyptos," which in turns is derived from the ancient Egyptian "Ha-ka-Ptah," i.e. "the house of the spirit Ptah," a most highly revered deity in Egyptian mythology. From the Arab conquest and until today, This term refers to the Christian Egyptians to distinguish them from the native Muslims.

The Copts are one of the oldest Christian communities in the Middle East. Although integrated in the larger Egyptian nation, the Copts have survived as a distinct religious community forming around 10-20% of the population, though estimates vary . They pride themselves on the apostolicity of the Egyptian Church whose founder was the first in an unbroken chain of patriarchs.

Foundation of the Egyptian Christian Church

According to ancient tradition, Christianity was introduced to the Egyptians by Saint Mark in Alexandria, shortly after the ascension of Christ and during the reign of the Roman emperor Claudius around 42 A.D. The legacy that Saint Mark left in Egypt was a considerable Christian community in Alexandria. From Alexandria, Christianity spread throughout Egypt within half a century of Saint Mark's arrival in Alexandria, as is clear from a fragment of the Gospel of John, written in Coptic, which was found in Upper Egypt and can be dated to the first half of the second century, and the New Testament writings found in Oxyrhynchus, in Middle Egypt, which date around the year 200 A.D. In the second century, Christianity began to spread to the rural areas, and scriptures were translated

into the local language, today known as the Coptic language (which was called the Egyptian language at the time). By the beginning of the 3rd century A.D., Christians constituted the majority of Egypt's population, and the Church of Alexandria was recognized as one of Christendom's four Apostolic Sees, second in honor only to the Church of Rome. The Church of Alexandria is therefore the oldest church in Africa.

Contributions to Christianity

The Egyptians contributed immensely to the formation of the worldwide Christian mind. For example, the Catechetical School of Alexandria was the oldest catechetical school in the world. Founded around 190 A.D. by the scholar Pantanaeus, the school of Alexandria became an important institution of religious learning, where students were taught by scholars such as Athenagoras, Clement, Didymus, and the great Origen, who was considered the father of theology and who was also active in the field of commentary and comparative Biblical studies. However, the scope of this school was not limited to theological subjects; science, mathematics and humanities were also taught there. The question-and-answer method of commentary began there, and 15 centuries before Braille, wood-carving techniques were in use there by blind scholars to read and write.

Another major contribution made by the Egyptians to Christianity was the creation and organization of monasticism. The most prominent figures of the monastic movement were Anthony the Great, Paul of Thebes, Macarius the Great, Shenouda the Archimandrite and Pachomius the Cenobite. By the end of the fifth century, there were hundreds of monasteries, and thousands of cells and caves scattered throughout the Egyptian desert. Worldwide Christian monasticism stems, either directly or indirectly, from the Egyptian example. Thus, Saint Basil the Great Archbishop of Caesarea Mazaca, and the founder and organiser of the monastic movement in Asia Minor, visited Egypt around 357 A.D. and his monastic rules are followed by the Eastern Orthodox Churches; Saint Jerome, who translated the Bible into Latin, came to Egypt while en route to Jerusalem around 400 A.D. and left details of his experiences in his letters; and Saint Benedict founded the Benedictine Order in the sixth century on the model of Saint Pachomius, although in a stricter form. Countless pilgrims have visited the Egyptian Desert Fathers to emulate their spiritual, disciplined lives.

Copts in the middle ages

In 641 A.D., Egypt was invaded by the Arabs who faced off with the Byzantine army, but found little to no resistance from the native Egyptian population. Local resistance by the

Egyptians however began to materialize shortly thereafter and would last until at least the ninth century.

The Arabs in the 7th century seldom used the term Egyptian, and used instead the term Copt to describe the people of Egypt. Thus, Egyptians became known as Copts, and the non-Chalcedonian Egyptian Church became known as the Coptic Church. The Chalcedonian Church remained known as the Melkite Church. In their own native language, Egyptians referred to themselves as rem-en-kimi, which translates into those of Egypt. Religious life remained largely undisturbed following the Arab occupation, as evidence by the rich output of Coptic arts in monastic centers in Old Cairo and throughout Egypt. Conditions, however, worsened shortly after that, and in the eighth and ninth centuries, during the period of the great national resistance against the Arabs, Muslim rulers banned the use of human forms in art (taking advantage of an iconoclastic conflict in Byzantium) and consequently destroyed many Coptic paintings and frescoes in churches.

Copts in modern Egypt

The position of the Copts did not begin to improve until the rule of Muhammad Ali in the early 19th century, who abolished the Jizya and allowed Egyptians (Copts as well as Muslims) to enroll in the army. Conditions continued to improve throughout the nineteenth century under the leadership of the great reformer Pope Cyril IV, and in the first half of the twentieth century (known as the Golden Age by the Copts) during Egypt's liberal period. Copts participated in the Egyptian national movement for independence and occupied many influential positions.

The current head of the Coptic Orthodox Church is His Holiness Pope Shenouda III.

