

The **CROSS** and the **CRESCENT** in Egypt

by Johan Tangelder

Egypt is one of the most densely populated areas in the world with its population chiefly concentrated along the fertile valley of the River Nile. Its history spans 5,000 years. In the Bible Egypt has a dual role. On the one hand it is a home of slavery. On the other hand, it is an asylum, a safe haven in times of famine and unrest. Joseph was sold to Ishmaelites and carried to Egypt where he became a slave, served time in prison, and was exalted as ruler. During a long period of famine the sons of Jacob, through Divine providence which made use of Joseph, found refuge in Egypt (Gen. 37-50). Many years later the Israelites were oppressed as slaves until God delivered them in wondrous ways. The story of Pharaoh's compassionate daughter, and the finding of Moses – the future leader of Israel – in a papyrus basket among the reeds along the bank of the Nile is one of the most moving accounts in the Old Testament. Her defiance of her father's cruel edict, her achievement in saving the life of Moses, in offering him royal protection, and in educating him in one of the priestly colleges revealed a woman of character and courage (Ex.2).

The Gospels record that Joseph, Mary and Jesus fled to Egypt after King Herod issued a decree to kill all the boys under two years old in Bethlehem (Matt. 2:13-15,19-21). The oldest tradition is that they stayed in the city of El Matariya near Cairo. A famous site in that city is the Virgin's Tree, a sycamore tree planted in 1672 as a shoot of a fourteenth-century tree that stood in the same spot and supposedly gave shade to the Joseph, Mary, and Jesus. Many pilgrims still visit it.

The Coptic Church

Egypt also features prominently in the history of our Lord's Church. It has been an Islamic nation for so long that many people are surprised to learn it was one of the cornerstones of the Church. Even those who know this are sometimes unaware that Christianity has never died out in Egypt. For Egyptian Christians it is a matter of historic pride that Christianity has been continuously present since apostolic times. In fact, Egypt has the largest Christian church in the Middle East. Of the approximately 60 million inhabitants, about 10 percent are Christian. Tradition says that St. Mark was the founder of the Egyptian Church and was martyred and buried in Alexandria, where his relics were venerated until the Muslim conquest.

The indigenous Coptic Church, whose members are descendants of the ancient Egyptians, the tradesman and artisans of Egypt, preserved and still use Coptic, a debased form of the language of the Pharaohs, in their liturgy and literature. Second only in authority to Rome, and at one period superior in scholarship, the Patriarchate of Alexandria was one of the pillars of the Universal Church until the Fifth Century. Its first known Christian scholar was St. Clement of Alexandria (155-220). Egypt's intellectual giant Origen (185-254) became a famous theologian and one of the first Bible commentators. Athanasius (296-373), the bishop of Alexandria, was the champion of Orthodoxy against the Alexandrian presbyter Arius, who denied the eternal pre-existence of Christ.

Although Egypt remained largely pagan in the early centuries of the Christian era, Christianity was a considerable force. The Roman emperor Gaius Decius (249-251) tried to eradicate it. But the consequence of the fierce persecution was the spread of the faith. Emperor Diocletian also sought to eradicate the "plague" of Christianity. The suffering was incredible. The slaughter was so catastrophic that the Copts to this day consider 284 A.D., the year of the tyrant's ascension to power, as the beginning of their calendar.

In the fifth century Monophysitism was a controversial issue with political overtones. Cyril of Alexandria (412-444) argued that Christ had a single, divine nature. The humanity of Christ was downplayed and relegated to the realm of unimportance. The great bulk of the native-born population of Egypt either believed in Monophysitism, or was ready to believe because it had been condemned by the Byzantine Emperor, who was occupying their country. The Council of Chalcedon condemned this teaching in 451, and from that moment the national church in Egypt separated itself from the Catholic Church, partly through the Monophysite controversy and partly through the slow breakup of the Roman empire. When the Monophysite Patriarch of Alexandria was deposed as a heretic, the whole country went up in riot and bloodshed. Contemporary Copts don't want to be called Monophysitists. And modern theologians agree that the controversy was one of vocabulary, not substance, and no longer consider the Copts heretical.

One of the Coptic's chief strengths is their great ascetic-monastic traditions, their source of spiritual survival. The founding of monasticism indicates the contribution made by Egypt to Christianity during the first great period of her Church history. The hermit Saint Anthony (ca. 251-356), was the first Christian monk, the original desert father. Desert fathers are considered "the athletes of God." Their spirituality is highly individualistic. Hermits lived alone in caves and rocks, studying the Scriptures, spending hours in prayer, attempting to stamp out all the desires of the body in order that the soul may rise triumphant. Pachomius (c.287-346) founded communal monasticism to fulfill his vision of an ascetic community which was to have its most influential development in Western Christianity. By the time of his death thousands of monks in eleven monasteries, including two for women, obeyed his direction as superior.

The Coptic Church is headed by the elected Patriarch Shenouda III (born in 1923) – also called Pope. Before he was enthroned as patriarch he spent many years as a hermit in the desert. According to Coptic tradition he is the one hundred and seventeenth successor of St. Mark. His seat originally in Alexandria, was later transferred to Cairo; he must be approved by the government.

Coptic Theological Perspective

The Copts have a high view of Scripture. Patriarch Shenouda has no patience with the "the new theology," which declares the early chapters of Genesis and the books of Jonah and Job as mythological. Nor can he understand New Testament scholars who question the Gospel of John: "How can we benefit in such a doubtful way, guiding people to doubt, not to faith?" He says that only Egyptian theologians educated in the West, are doing such things. The doctrine of the Trinity is the heart of the Coptic faith. The great theme in Coptic theology is the incarnation, the Son of God becoming man, and the consequences of this event for believers. "God became man, that man might become God." But the full realization of being partakers of the divine nature (2 Pet.1:4) must

await the final consummation of all things in Christ. But to really know the Coptic Churches, their religious observances should be studied. Their spiritual practice consists of seven daily prayers and the veneration of the Virgin Mary, the martyrs, and the relics of saints. Though the Copts will not allow statues in their church, they revere ikons, and some of them are of remarkable antiquity. And they believe that certain ikons are capable of working miracles. The painting of ikons is considered a "divine" art. Copts worship with spirit and body. Crossing oneself and bowing or kneeling until the forehead touches the ground testifies of the believers' daily devotion to God. They fast often, study the Scripture intensely, and for hours prepare long hymns of adoration for the mass, which is celebrated with lavish use of incense and punctuated by triangles and cymbals which set the rhythm for the chanting. In church liturgy, Coptic and Arabic languages are used. The Copts also observe customs once common to the early church to this day, which have now died out everywhere except in Egypt. For example, infants receive communion immediately after baptism. The origin of this rite dates back to the early church when converts were usually adults. So every Coptic baby is baptized today with the same rites that admitted adults and aged pagans into the Church of the First Century.

Islamic Invasion

In the seventh century the Arab-Muslims swooped upon Egypt, driving out the Byzantine garrisons, receiving no opposition from the Egyptians. At first the Arabs let the Christians run the country for them, build their mosques, and do their books. But it was not long before the Copts were persecuted and discriminated in every possible way and Egypt became a Muslim-majority country. A wealthy, educated minority of Christians survived by paying outrageously high taxes to their oppressors. The Copts who were unable to pay their ruinous tax burden abandoned their villages and lands. Pursued by the tax collectors, they were brought back by force. The state recouped its losses from insolvent Coptic peasantry by enslaving their children. The Copts were also forbidden the possession of weapons, the riding on horses, and the wearing of white or colored turbans. Many converted to Islam, but others were ready to suffer and die for their faith. Under the Caliphs, especially El Hakim biamr Allah (c.1000), the destruction of churches, monasteries, and the massacre of Christians helped to spark the crusades. El Hakim forced Christians to wear a five-pound cross around their neck.

The coming of the Turks in 1517 expanded the history of incredibly harsh persecution. Historian Adrian Fortescue wrote, "The wonder is rather that any Copts at all kept faith during these hideous centuries. When the last day comes, weightier than their theological errors will count the glorious wounds they bore for Him under the blood-stained banner of Islam." In the 19th century, with the growing modernization and Westernization of Egypt and the increasing influence of Western powers, the Christians gradually acquired a standard of wealth and education superior to that of the average Egyptian.

In recent history radical Muslims began to agitate for the imposition of Islamic law on Egypt's social and legal fabric. For them Islam is the answer for Egypt's political and social problems.

Constitutional amendments endorsed by a referendum in 1979 included one establishing Islam and the Shari'a as the main source of legislation. Conversion from

Islam to another religion remained illegal, and Christians were regarded as inferior citizens, belonging to an inferior religion. Strict laws limit the building of Christian churches. Presidential permits are required, and some congregations wait for years for permission to make small repairs. Churches cannot be built within a specified distance from a mosque, and steeples are not allowed to spear higher than minarets. The Copts are also discriminated against at all levels of government, holding none of the 160 positions outside the Egyptian government. In September 1981, President Sadat withdrew Government recognition from Patriarch Shenouda III, causing a grave crisis within the Coptic community which continued to regard the deposed Patriarch as their spiritual leader; he was reinstated in January 1985 by President Mubarak. The Muslim Brotherhood, a populist movement founded in 1921, generally considered the first "fundamentalist" movement in the Muslim world, has widespread influence – particularly among the urban lower classes. They view Egypt "to be in a state of pagan ignorance" and thus justify the use of force to bring about change. Some extremists have clashed repeatedly with security forces. They also agitated against the Copts, and several times attacked them. In January 2000 twenty-one Christians were massacred by Muslim mobs in the village of El-Kosheh.

Spiritual Renewal

In the midst of all their tribulations, a spiritual awakening began. In the 1950s reform groups and societies were said to exist. This movement stirred renewal in Coptic monastic life. In 1954 the Higher Institute of Coptic Studies was founded in Cairo. A society known as the Friends of the Bible sought to promote the study of the Scriptures. Many young people began to attend the services, in contrast with the situation a few years earlier when the congregations were largely older women. Sunday Schools flourished. Thanks to them many young people entered the priesthood or became monks. An order of "active" nuns was also established. The latter built schools, clinics, homes for the elderly, and set up programs for drug addicts etc.

Various Denominations

The overwhelming majority of the Christians (about 93 percent) belong to the Coptic Orthodox Church. The Coptic Catholic Church is the largest Roman Catholic community. The rise of nationalist feelings and especially the Suez Crisis of 1956 brought about the exodus of thousands of Roman Catholics. The Coptic Evangelical Church (Presbyterian) is by far the largest Protestant body in Egypt. In many respects it is also the strongest Protestant church in the Middle East as a whole, the result of mission work by the United Presbyterian Church of North America. Its members were drawn chiefly from the Coptic Church, not by active proselytism, but by steady enrolment, without re-baptism of those who wished to join. In 1926 it became independent of the church which founded it. Numerically very small denominations are the Greek Orthodox, Maronite Catholic, Assemblies of God, Brethren (2 groups), Free Methodists and the Egyptian Anglican Church. The recent wave of persecutions has brought together Coptic and Protestant leaders as never before. Of great concern is the emigration phenomenon as a consequence of discrimination, persecution and economic hardship. As in previous

times of crisis, many Christians opt to emigrate out of the region, usually to the West, with the result that the remaining Christian presence is thoroughly weakened.

Conclusion

The Coptic bishop Athanasius said, "All people suffer, but especially the believer, because the world is against him." The long history of the Egyptian Church is marked by suffering. In this Islamic nation where the crescent is overpowering, the Church continues to live under the sign of the cross. The challenge of Islam calls for constant reflection on the meaning of the Christian faith and of its beliefs in the Islamic context of the Egyptian nation. Yet there is reason for optimism as Egypt is seeing the conversion of entire villages to Christ. Bishop Athanasius said that an essential element of restoring true Christianity is the study of the Bible. And more and more Christians are studying the Bible! There are now Bibles on newsstands. Prayer meetings are also well attended. In recent years the Middle East Reformed Fellowship (MERF), prayerfully assisted by Reformed Christians in the Netherlands and North America, has been active in ministering to Egyptian Protestants. As of October 30, 2000 MERF broadcasts seven days a week on Radio Monte Carlo's medium wave transmitter which reaches the entire Middle East region. In partnership with the Back to God Hour, four of the seven broadcasts are now being produced in MERF's broadcasting facilities in Cairo. I pray this support for our fellow Christians in Egypt will continue to grow! The need is great!