The Story of the Copts the True Story of Christinity in Egypt

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Not long ago, Providence so willed that I sit at table with a number of foreigners. During the conversation, my host asked:
“Since when did you adopt Eutychianism?” I answered: “We ever adopted it, nor ever will. We are Orthodox and have been so since Christianity began until now.” My host resumed: “But I read somewhere that you have deviated from Orthodoxy.” I rejoined: “We never deviated, nor ever will, by the Grace of God. But it happened, that when we went to Chalcedon . . . .” Here, one of the guests interposed: “When did you go to Chalcedon?” I answered: “We went in A.D. 451.” At which all those present roared with laughter, then my host said gently: “To hear you speak thus, one would imagine that you went this year, or at most last year, and that you were among those who went.” It was my turn to laugh as I answered: “Such are we Copts - when one of us has attended, we have all attended. And there is no difference between the delegates attending in 451 or in any other year, because our history is one whole indivisible unit. Nay, it is life itself, and not some ephemeral pictures on a screen. The proof of this fact is that the three first ecumenical councils, the only ones acknowledged by the Coptic Church, have decreed laws by which we still abide. Also, we still suffer from the baleful consequences of Chalcedon. History is, therefore, indivisible, though it appears to us in diverse pictures; it is like unto matter which is never destroyed though its forms change.” Here, I found it compatible to quote the comment Dr. Cyprian Gordon, the eminent contemporary American scholar, made once on our behavior at Chalcedon. It was: “When the Egyptians went to Chalcedon, they were proud of their Pharaonic heritage, and rightly so; they were proud of their Alexandrian Fathers, and rightly so; they frankly told the whole world what they believed, and, when the world refused to listen, they walked out, and rightly so.” And, since history is life, it is consequently the story of the people, wherever they are. For this very reason, it recounts the struggle of the nations for freedom and dignity; their aspirations towards liberty, and their heroic achievements. This yearning after the ideal should be the pivot of our study of history. Moreover, to gain a full appreciation of the history of the Coptic Church, it is essential to know the prominent features of its adherents. The Copts have a very strong leaning towards the mystic and the spiritual. Sir Flinders Petrie depicts this leaning very aptly in the following words: “. . . a difference in the conception of a period before the existence of time would seem purely academic and indifferent to a Western mind . . . . To the Egyptian mind, however, this difference was in the essence of things. The distinction of eternity before time which the West could hardly grasp or feel to be of any importance has been fastened by the two Egyptian presbyters upon all later Christianity.”3

Reflecting on the profound impact of the Coptic Church on the Church Universal, this same Egyptologist remarks: “If, now, we try our historical imagination by supposing that there never had been any of the refinements of the Trinitarian controversy; that no monastery had ever sterilized the best of the race; and that 9 the Madonna and Child were alike unknown to devotion and to art, we may gain some sense of what changes Egypt wrought in Christianity, and how utterly foreign to the Judaic origin was its influence.”4

T. E. Cheyne says of the history of the Copts, that “The Copts have a history, after all, which is not different from that of other people; it is the story of man. man was in closer contact with God, and his spiritual aspirations were more easily satisfied in Egypt than in other countries.”5

The import of this legacy lies not only in its veracity, but rather in the qualities of the national temperament which it uncovers - a temperament which could be imbued with such an interpretation. In due season, the Word was sown in Egypt, and brought forth fruit: thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold.6 Before beginning the story, however, one remark is necessary. James H. Breasted, the eminent American Egyptologist and one of the greatest historians of all times, said that what seems fabulous in other countries is natural in Egypt. Also, during the less complex and less sophisticated ages, man was in closer contact with God, and a sort of fellow-feeling bound them. With these two facts in mind, it is easier to comprehend the Copts and their history.

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Coptic Christian Religious Persecution. Religious liberty in Egypt is hindered to ranging degrees by prejudicial and prohibitive state policies. Consequently, Coptic Christians, being the biggest religious minority in Egypt, are negatively affected by religious persecution. Copts have endured growing marginalization after the 1952 coup d'état led by Gamal Abdel Nasser. Until lately, Christians were expected to receive presidential approval for even trivial renovations in churches. Background: The demography of Copts in Egypt is subject to an intense debate in the context of a dearth of analytical studies on this community. Our objective was to estimate the size of the Coptic community in Egypt, map its geographical clustering, and describe demographic, socioeconomic, and health-associated indicators. Methods: We conducted descriptive and Kulldorff spatial scan statistics analyses using the 2008 Egypt Demographic and Health Survey (EDHS) data. We also used chi-square trend analysis and earlier EDHS data to examine the temporal trend in the proportion of Copts. Results: The Coptic Orthodox Church is the main Christian Church in Egypt, where it has between 6 and 11 million members. While most Copts live in Egypt, the Church has around a million members outside Egypt; there are over 100 churches in the USA and a cathedral in the UK. Copts believe that their Church dates back to around 50 AD, when the Apostle Mark is said to have visited Egypt. Modern Copts claim that they are still disadvantaged and play a lesser part in Egyptian public life than their numbers justify. There are still occasional violent clashes between Copts and Muslims. Firsts for the Coptic Church include the first specifically Christian educational establishment in the School of Alexandria and the start of Christian monasticism.