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(60A) CHRISTIANITY IN EGYPT – ORTHODOX PERSPECTIVES

Wedad A. Tawfik

Religion	Pop 2010	Pct 2010	Pop 2025	Pct 2025	Gr Pct 1970 2025
Christians	7,576,000	9.2%	8,508,000	7.8%	0.8%
Independents	125,000	0.2%	203,000	0.2%	3.3%
African initiated	122,000	0.1%			
Orthodox	7,208,000	8.8%	7,700,000	7.1%	0.4%
Oriental Orthodox	7,205,000	8.8%			
Protestants	493,000	0.6%	605,000	0.6%	1.4%
Roman Catholics	195,000	0.2%	170,000	0.2%	-0.9%
<i>Pentecostals/Charismatics</i>	584,000	0.7%	720,000	0.7%	1.4%
<i>Evangelicals</i>	402,000	0.5%	500,000	0.5%	1.5%
Muslims	73,986,000	90.2%	99,729,000	91.5%	2.0%
Baha'is	2,000	0.0%	2,500	0.0%	1.5%
Chinese folk-religionists	1,600	0.0%	2,000	0.0%	1.4%
Hindus	1,200	0.0%	2,000	0.0%	3.6%
Buddhists	760	0.0%	1,000	0.0%	1.8%
Jews	91	0.0%	100	0.0%	0.6%
people professing no religion	473,000	0.6%	695,000	0.6%	2.6%
Total population	82,041,000	100.0%	108,939,000	100.0%	1.9%

Source: Centre for the Study of World Christianity (CSGC), Boston, Gordon-Conwell TS

A Brief History¹

Christianity in Egypt dates back to the very beginnings of Christianity itself, even to the escape of the Holy Family to Egypt from King Herod, in fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecy: ‘Out of Egypt I called my son’ (Matt. 2:15). There were also some figures from Alexandria who had good knowledge of Christianity, as we read in the Book of Acts about Apollos of Alexandria, who was ‘an eloquent man and mighty in the Scriptures’. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and taught accurately the things of the Lord (Acts 18:24-27).

Nevertheless, the foundation of the Church of Alexandria is ascribed to Mark the evangelist. After his journeys and service with Paul and Barnabas and Peter, he finally evangelized in Alexandria.

Mark founded the Church of Alexandria (the See of St Mark), known as the Coptic Orthodox Church.² But his life ended as a martyr at the hands of the heathen and his blood flowed over the streets of

¹ For a more extensive overview see Samir Fawzi Girgis, “Of the Copts’ Heritage”, Volume I [in Arabic] (Cairo: St. John the Beloved Publishing House, 2004).

² The word Copt refers to the Egyptians in general, for it is derived from Aegyptos derived from the old Egyptian term Het-Ka-Ptah, meaning “the house of the spirit of Ptah”, referring to Memphis the capital at that time. From the word Aegyptos came the English word Egypt. According to some, the Egyptians are the descendants of Mezraim, the son of

Alexandria, irrigating the seeds of faith. That was on 8th May AD 68. From this beginning, martyrdom became a characteristic of the Coptic Church.

A Suffering Church

Coptic Church history is both glorious in her illustrious figures, and tragic in her suffering. The pride of the Coptic Church is the Cross, represented in the persecutions that began in AD 68 with the martyrdom of Mark, followed by persecution at the hands of the Roman rulers and most of the following rulers of Egypt. The Christians of Egypt suffered severely under the Roman rulers Severus (AD 204), Decius (AD 250), Valerian (AD 251), and Diocletian (AD 284-303). This made the Copts take the year of the reign of Diocletian in AD 284 as the beginning of their Coptic Calendar, to commemorate the faith of the martyrs. Historians witness to the Coptic Church as preserving the light of the Christian faith for centuries, in spite of incredible oppression and persecution.³

Christianity spread all over Egypt within half a century from the coming of Mark to Alexandria, as is evident from the texts of the New Testament that were discovered in many parts of Egypt. It is the fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecies, as written in Isaiah 19:19: 'In that day there will be an altar to the Lord in the midst of the land of Egypt, and a pillar to the Lord at its border.'

Egypt under Muslim Rule

A new era began in the seventh century with the Arab invasion of Egypt. New types of persecution began and were faced by the Copts with the same steadfastness of faith. They proved loyal to their faith and country, in spite of all the hardships and tribulations.

The Miracle of Coptic Culture

Coptic culture is deep-rooted, dating back to Egypt's Pharaohs. It continued miraculously for 2,000 years in spite of all attempts at marginalization and destruction. All countries that occupied Egypt, whether Roman or Byzantine, Turkish or Arab, tried hard to destroy Coptic culture and identity, but all of them failed, for it was built on steadfast faith and adherence to Coptic identity. With this culture, the Copts contributed to Egyptian history in spite of all the pressures they endured. The miracle is that it is a culture of a people who have faced enormous challenges throughout the past twenty centuries, and who still face them today, continually offering sacrifices of the blood of thousands of their martyrs so that they may not surrender their existence, their land or their church.

The Contribution of the Coptic Church to World Christianity

Nobody can speak of the contribution of the Coptic Church to world Christianity without tracing it to its early centuries, for any present contribution is based on and derives from these roots. The Copts follow in the steps of their fathers.

The most significant contributions of the Coptic Church to world Christianity are the Catechetical School of Alexandria and the Monastic Movement.

Ham, the son of Noah. Consequently, all Christians and even the Moslems are also considered Copts.

³ Montague Fowler, *Christian Egypt: Past, Present, and Future* (Book II. Ch. i.) (London: Church Newspaper Company Limited, 1901), 189.

The Catechetical School of Alexandria

The Catechetical School of Alexandria was founded to counter the heathen school that was there with its pagan philosophies. The first great scholar who headed the School was Pantaenus, who died in AD 200 and was succeeded by Clement of Alexandria, followed by Origen, then Dedymos. Many of the early church fathers either graduated from or headed it. It was revived in 1893 by Pope Cyril V, in Cairo. It developed at the hands of great Coptic scholars, like St Habib Gerguis. By this time, numerous branches had been opened in Alexandria, Cairo and in other districts of Egypt, and abroad in the USA (Los Angeles), Germany and Australia. It is now situated within the Patriarchate area.

Another academic postgraduate school, the Institute of Coptic Studies, was founded over sixty years ago, in 1954. Its aim is to promote studies in the various branches of Coptic culture. It prepares graduates for service in the church and academic work in the various branches of Coptic culture: theology, history, the Coptic language, art, hymnology, etc. It awards a Diploma of Coptic Studies in these branches after two years of study, following which a graduate prepares a thesis under the supervision of the professors of the Institute, ending with the thesis being examined and the successful researcher being awarded the MA degree, and afterwards the PhD degree for the researcher's dissertation. It encourages research work, and plays a distinguished role in the field of theology and ecumenism. It has an irregular scholarly magazine, besides the various publications of its professors.

The Monastic Movement and Asceticism

This is the second outstanding contribution of the Coptic Church to world Christianity. From the fourth century onwards, Egyptian Christianity was characterized by its emphasis upon the ascetic life, and the neighbourhood of Alexandria started being filled with monasteries, which grew more numerous as time went on.⁴

Monasticism began in Egypt and had its influence in the formation of the Coptic personality through the teachings and writings of the great church fathers of Egypt. It began at the end of the third century and flourished in the fourth century. The first anchorite was St Paul the hermit (228-343), but the first who founded a monastic community was St Anthony (251-356) who is known throughout the world as the father of monasticism. Afterwards St Pachomius (292-346) founded the cenobite system of monasticism with its rules. The third was St Shenouda, who founded the White Monastery in Upper Egypt, following the Pachomian system, but more strictly. Many other prominent figures were involved, like St Makarius the Great.

From Egypt, monasticism spread elsewhere into the world. St Basil, for instance, who organized the monastic movement in Asia Minor, visited Egypt in 357 and derived benefit from it. St Jerome also visited Egypt in 400, writing in detail of his experience of Egyptian monasticism. In the sixth century, St Benedict established monasteries after the example of the system of St Pachomius. There were also Coptic missions to northern Europe, like St Maurice the commander of the Thebes Legion who left Egypt to serve in Rome, but ended up evangelizing the mountain inhabitants of Switzerland. There is a small town and a monastery there, both bearing his name where his holy body lies with some of his books and belongings.

The monastic movement witnessed some decline due to persecution, but its revival came at the hands of Pope Shenouda III, through the restoration of old monasteries and the building of new ones, and the ordaining of many monks and nuns. There are now over two thousand of them, in dozens of monasteries.⁵

⁴ Otto F.A. Meinardus, *Christian Egypt: Ancient and Modern*, 2nd Revised Edition (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1977), 164.

⁵ Famous monasteries at present include: four in Wadi Natrun, namely: monasteries of St. Makarius, St. Bishoy, Baramous, and Surian; one near Alexandria is St. Minas Monastery; various in Middle and Upper Egypt, that of St. Samuel, Al Moharraq, St. Paul, St. Anthony and the White monasteries. These are inhabited

Throughout history, the monks have played a key role in Christianity. Great theologians from among the monks had their influence on world Christianity alongside lay theologians, and their writings still have influence. The popes and bishops of the Coptic Church are chosen from among the monks. Recent popes who have been influential include the late Pope Kyrillos (Cyril) VI, and the late Pope Shenouda III. The 110th patriarch, known as Cyril IV, also known as the Reformer,

was one of the most significant milestones in the history of the Coptic Church. He sought to consolidate the Coptic Church in Egypt and was committed to raising the educational standard of the Copts, through establishing schools.⁶

More Contributions of the Coptic Church to World Christianity, Past and Present

- Her great theologians defended the faith against heresies and left a treasure of theological and ascetic literature, which greatly influenced Christian theology and asceticism. Among these were St Athanasius the Apostolic (bishop 328-373), who played an important role at the Council of Nicaea and left a treasury of writings. St Cyril of Alexandria of the fifth century was a great defender of the Incarnation and also left important theological writings.
- Her present fathers and scholars still follow the same path and defend the faith against heresies and atheism. Recently, Metropolitan Bishoy and Bishop Raphael, besides some clergy and scholars, have continued this tradition through a series of seminars, lectures and writings.
- The translation by the Copts of the Scriptures into Coptic in the second century was a major contribution. The world's museums and libraries contain copies of these translations.
- They were the first to invent the method of chiselling into wood for blind students (fifteen centuries before Braille).
- The first private Arabic printing presses were founded by Pope Cyril IV around 1855.⁷
- Coptic art is distinctive, be it painting, architecture or textiles.

The Modern History of Christianity in Egypt

The standing of the Copts began to improve in early nineteenth century with the rule of Mohammed Ali. The unity of the nation, including Christians and Muslims, became more apparent, and it was able to face the extremists in the 1919 Revolution. The church has always separated itself from politics.

However, in the next few decades persecution resumed due to extremist Islamic movements, such as the Salaphees and the Muslim Brothers who ruled Egypt for one year, a period characterized by many violent practices. Thanks to God that their rule ended after a year through the revolution of 30th June 2013, in which all the people rose up, supported by the army. They ousted the president, and a new president (El Sisi) was elected showed himself to be wise, loyal and brave, not discriminating against the Copts. He has been trying hard with the help of the army to put an end to terrorism in Egypt. We pray that he succeeds.

In February 2015, a harsh new act of terrorism was perpetrated against the Copts by the terrorist Islamic movement ISIS. They brutally beheaded twenty-one Egyptian Coptic labourers in Libya and broadcast the whole crime on t social media, defying the whole world and alleging that they were defending Islam. The truth of this was contradicted by their preceding murder of dozens of the Egyptian army and police.

by hundreds of monks.

⁶ Otto Friedrich August Meinardus, *Two Thousand Years of Coptic Christianity* (Cairo: American Univ in Cairo Press, 2002), 69-70.

⁷ Meinardus, *Two Thousand Years of Coptic Christianity*, 70.

In spite of all such brutal acts, the Copts hold fast to their faith, trusting that the Lord never forsakes his people in Egypt. God's care of the Copts appears in the blessings with which God strengthens them. An example is the repeated apparitions of the Holy Virgin Mary, beginning in April 1968 in her church in Zeitoun District for years. This apparition was witnessed by millions of Christians and people of all religions and nationalities, and was broadcast by Egyptian TV and published in the worldwide press. Similar apparitions were repeated in other churches and districts, even in Upper Egypt in Assiut and in Guiza, Cairo. This is taken by the Copts as a comforting sign of God's support for them in their days of tribulation and suffering, giving them hope and refreshing their souls.

As for the number of the Copts at present in Egypt, there are no accurate statistics, for the trend is to avoid religious classification. But it is estimated at over twenty million out of a total population of approximately ninety million, in addition to those living overseas.

Various Denominations in Egypt⁸

The largest denomination in Egypt is the Coptic Orthodox Church, while there are also other Orthodox churches, and the two main Catholic and Protestant churches.

The Orthodox Churches

THE COPTIC ORTHODOX

This is the largest denomination, representing about 90% of the Christians in Egypt. The present Patriarch, the 118th of the See of St Mark, is HH Pope Tawadros II, succeeding the late Pope Shenouda III, a great figure who did much for the church, world Christianity and church unity. The present Patriarchate is based in St Mark's Cathedral in Cairo, and has another seat in Alexandria. It has numerous dioceses all over Egypt and abroad, headed by bishops, of whom the Holy Synod is presided over by the Pope. A lay council helps manage church finances and forms a link between the clergy and the Holy Synod. The Seminary and the Postgraduate Institute of Coptic Studies are the church's main educational institutions.

OTHER ORTHODOX CHURCHES INCLUDE:

- The Greek Eastern Orthodox Church, dating back to the first century, with churches in Cairo and Alexandria, and some ecclesiastical and private schools.⁹
- The Oriental Armenian Orthodox¹⁰ and Syrian Orthodox Churches, with churches, educational institutions and social activities.

The Roman Catholic Churches, presided over by the Pope of Rome¹¹

The Patriarchate of Alexandria for the Coptic Catholics: This dates back to 1219. They have a cathedral and some churches all over Egypt, besides a seminary.

Other Catholic churches include:

Greek, Armenian, Syrian, Maronite, Chaldean and Latin Catholic Churches.

⁸ Youssef Sabri, "Introduction to the Personal Status Laws," Lectures to the Seminary.

⁹ Fowler, *Christian Egypt: Past, Present, and Future*, 224-228.

¹⁰ Fowler, "Christian Churches & Missions in Egypt," in *Christian Egypt: Past, Present, and Future*, Book II Ch. iv, 273.

¹¹ Fowler, "Christian Churches & Missions in Egypt", Ch. iii, 232-234.

Protestant (Evangelical) Churches

There are over 150 traditions. They work through the 'Evangelical Nile Synod', a mother body that manages many churches and institutions.

OTHER EVANGELICAL CHURCHES IN EGYPT¹²

The twentieth century witnessed the coming of missionaries to Egypt from the West and spreading all over the country. The present churches include: Presbyterian, which is the largest, Episcopal (Anglican) Church,¹³ Reformed, Apostolic Grace Church, Apostolic Church (including the Baptist), Pentecostal, Plymouth Brethren and Adventists. Many other evangelical churches have been founded by other missionaries or independent movements.¹⁴

Efforts for Church Unity and Relations with Muslims

Since the 1970s, the late HH Pope Shenouda III encouraged dialogue with other churches, including the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and Anglican, as well as with Muslims. His ecumenical efforts were distinguished. Pope Tawadros II followed the same path, commencing with exchange visits with the Roman Catholic and Russian Eastern Orthodox Churches. The Coptic Orthodox Church was among the first churches to join the World Council of Churches. Its bishops and theologians have always participated effectively and actively in WCC meetings and efforts for unity.

Internally, a Council of all churches of Egypt was founded in 2013 to bring together all churches together in one Spirit in Christ, and to promote amicable relations with Muslims. It works alongside the Middle East Council of Churches, which has always played a great role in fostering church unity and deep relations with the Islamic countries of the region.

Exchange visits between church leaders and Al Azhar (the official Islamic institution) focus on feasts and special events. Sharing common national events is encouraged, especially among youth from both sides. The Youth Bishopric of the Coptic Orthodox Church and the Ministry of Youth take the lead, celebrating such events together. At a state level, the trend is the same. For instance, a large celebration was held for the second millennial anniversary of the Coming of the Holy Family to Egypt, escaping from King Herod. This reveals the readiness of most Egyptians to strengthen their co-existence.

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¹² Adib Salama, *History of the Evangelical Church in Egypt* (Cairo: Dar Al Thakafa, 1982), 50-93; 113- 140; 321-328; Eissa Diab, *Introduction to the History of the Evangelical Churches and their theology* (Lebanon: Arabic Baptist Theological School, 2009) 115-120. www.st-tekla.org.

George Onsy, "Map of the Christian Denominations in Egypt", January 2015.

¹³ Meinardus, "Christian Egypt: Ancient and Modern", 572-573.

¹⁴ Fowler, "Christian Egypt: Past, Present, and Future", 274-277.

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