

# The Coptic Tradition

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I have a few minutes this morning to give you a thumbnail sketch, a very quick one, of the Coptic tradition, and I'd like to begin first of all with the name Coptic because it's surprising that many people have no idea really what it means. The name comes from the Egyptian word for Egypt, which is Egyptos, and it is a corruption of that, Coptic. So it simply means Egyptian.

So the word Coptic describes Egyptian Christians. It also describes the ancient Egyptian language, which was spoken in Egypt until Arabic started to supersede it around the 15<sup>th</sup> century. It also describes Egyptian art and architecture. So it's an all-encompassing word, but we're using it here to describe the Christian faith of Egyptian folk.

I want to just read to you one or two verses from St Matthews Gospel, Chapter 2. Now we're all familiar with the story of the Wise Men bringing their gifts to the infant Jesus, and the way in which they declined to obey Herod's command, and being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way. And that's the end of the reading we normally hear. But the next verse goes on to say,

Now when they had departed, behold an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream saying, 'Arise. Take the young child and his mother. Flee to Egypt and stay there until I bring you word, for Herod will seek the young child to destroy him', and when he arose he took the young child and his mother by night and departed for Egypt and was there until the death of Herod that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, [i.e. Isaiah] saying 'out of Egypt I called my son'. Now when Herod was dead, behold an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt saying, "Arise, take the young child and his mother and go to the land of Israel for those who sought the young child's life are dead".

So Egypt figures in the very early life of our Lord. In fact, it's the only other country that Christ visited in his time on earth and he was there as a young child with his mother and St Joseph, and if you go to Egypt today, you'll find there are pilgrimage sites and shrines in all the places which claim to have been locations visited by the holy family in their time in Egypt. So you can understand that Egyptian Christians are very proud of that fact that the Lord Christ was in their land, and that the prophet Isaiah prophesied that he would be called out of Egypt.

Now moving on, the church in Egypt marks its foundation from the year 58 AD when St Mark, the apostle and evangelist and author of the gospel, established the church in Alexandria and, some six years later in 64 AD, St Mark was martyred in the same city by being tied by the feet on a

rope to the back of a chariot and dragged through the streets of Alexandria until he was dead.

It is very interesting that only quite recently some very ancient texts of St Matthew's gospel have been discovered which were found in Egypt, and they were found along with some business documents. These documents allow the fragments of the gospel of St Matthew to be dated. They were written on papyrus and their date is 65 to 66 AD.

The documents say that the accounts, for that's what they were, they were bills, were dated in the 12<sup>th</sup> year of the Emperor Nero, and the archaeologist who established that the papyrus, on which the text of St Matthew was written and the ink and the characteristics of the writing, all fit into the same period as the business documents. So that was only months after the martyrdom of St Mark. Alexandria developed as a great centre of religious and philosophical studies. It was if you like, the Oxford and Cambridge of the civilised world in those days and became the most important centre of religious learning in Christendom.

Another claim of the Coptic Church is the monastic life. The first person to establish the religious life, the monastic life, was St Antony the Great who lived from c251 to 356. Astonishingly, the monastery that he established down by the Red Sea continues to flourish to this day. It's built very close to the cave in which he spent his last few years. So there's a sense of connection in the Coptic Church, a very clear sense of connection with the very earliest days of the Christian faith.

And, in the centuries following St Antony, there was a great explosion in the number of monasteries and hermitages in the desert. There were hundreds, literally, scattered throughout the deserts of Egypt and their influence spread far and wide. It spread through Spain and France into Britain, into the West Coast, into Ireland and into Scotland. If you've ever been to Iona, the monastery there, established by St Colomba as a direct result of the monastic life in Egypt, it's interesting that those early Christians in the West Coast of our own land described the sea as their desert, and they established hermitages and monasteries on nearly all those little islands scattered down the West Coast of Scotland.

Moving on in time, the next landmark in the history of the Coptic Church is the year 451 and the Council of Chalcedon. Now a dispute arose at this Council over the nature of Christ. They were wrestling with the problem of how to define or describe the nature of Christ and to balance the human with the divine, and all this took place against a background of political interference which was opposed by the Pope of Alexandria, St Dioscorus. Sadly, the Coptic Church, the Egyptian Church, the centre of learning in those early days, was accused of following the teachings of one called Eutyches, and Eutyches believed that our Lord Jesus Christ had only one nature, the divine, and not two natures, the human and the divine. And this doctrine was known as monophysitism and, unfortunately for political reasons, the spin-doctors of Byzantium tarred the Coptic Church with the brush of monophysitism. This has never been the faith of the Coptic Orthodox Church. Our church teaches that our Lord was perfect in his divinity and perfect in his humanity, and that his divinity and his humanity

were united in one nature called “the nature of the Incarnate Word”. That was the phrase used by St Cyril of Alexandria.

So Coptic Christians believe in two natures, human and divine, that are united in one without mingling, without confusion and without alteration, as we say in the Coptic Liturgy of St Basil.

Now disagreement over this definition at the Council of Chalcedon led to a schism within the early church and sadly we still see this today because there are two families of Orthodox Christians. The Eastern Orthodox, that’s the Greek, Russian, Serbian and so on, and the Non-Chalcedon or Oriental Orthodox, that is the Coptic, Syrian, Ethiopian, Armenian, Indian, Eritrean, the churches of North Africa. Now fortunately steps are being taken to resolve this situation, which has sadly impaired our fraternity for 1500 years. Meanwhile we are unable to share communion with one another.

To return to the Coptic time chart, the next significant date after Chalcedon was the invasion of the Muslim Arabs in 641 AD when under the banner of Islam, they conquered Egypt, and for the following four centuries, despite this, the church in Egypt generally flourished and Egypt remained basically Christian due in large extent to the fact that the prophet Mohammed had an Egyptian wife and she was the only one of his wives to bear him a child. He preached a special kindness towards the Copts commanding his people, “When you conquer Egypt, be kind to the Copts for they are your protégés and kith and kin”. That didn’t of course stop the Muslim rulers from imposing a tax on Christians. It was called a tax. What it was in fact was protection money. It was fine if you paid it; you were allowed to go about your life in peace, but if you couldn’t afford to pay, then you had two choices, either to convert to Islam or to be put to death. So it wasn’t a very pleasant situation.

And then things got worse, unfortunately, and over the last thousand years, life has been very difficult for Coptic Christians with frequent periods of persecution and always being treated as second class citizens with very few rights.

What of the Coptic Church today? Astonishingly, after fourteen centuries of Islamic rule there are still an estimated nine to ten million Coptic Christians in Egypt out of a total population of sixty million. The tenacity of Coptic Christians is an inspiration for us all. And we shouldn’t underestimate the contribution of the desert monasteries to this steadfastness.

There are still some twenty monasteries spread throughout the length of Egypt. You may wonder what happened to all the hundreds that were there earlier. Well the biggest problem for the monasteries was the Black Death. Now until I went to Egypt I didn’t realise how widespread the Black Death in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries was, but in Egypt it wiped out nine-tenths of the monasteries. The ancient monastery of St Antony founded by the Saint in the fourth century flourishes. In fact, you could even say it sparkles because a team of American archaeologists and art restorers have recently completed the restoration of the icons and murals in the churches within the monastery and they’re a feast for the eyes.

The religious life in Egypt, over the last recent years, has enjoyed a huge resurgence at the time when religious vocations in the West have been in decline. In Egypt the monasteries have been swelling to bursting point, most of them now have well over a hundred monks, and they have been sending monks abroad to cater for some of the ex-patriot communities.

At the principal festivals thousands of Coptic Christians make their way to the monasteries. If you live in Egypt, Islam is all pervasive and oppressive, and if you are a visitor, you're woken at quarter to five in the morning by the call to prayer from the tannoys on the pinnacles of the Mosques. This noise repeats through the day, and it's a very oppressive thing. On the major festivals the Christians escape to the monasteries and they go in huge numbers. One of the monasteries which I have visited called St Bishoi, has recently built a new and larger church to accommodate these folk, and this particular one would hold 5,000 people. And, of course, when they go, they don't all go home at the end of the day; most of them will sleep on the floor or whatever during the festival.

The devotion of the Egyptian Copts puts us to shame. Do you know that every Wednesday evening our patriarch, Pope Shenouda addresses the youth and others in the cathedral in Cairo? Now I've counted the pews and there's a hundred in each row, and it seats 8,000, and every Wednesday night there is standing room only in the cathedral—and this for an address on some aspect of Christian living and Christian spirituality followed by a question and answer session.

Sadly, many Copts have fled Egypt and moved to the West, to Australia, Canada, United States and United Kingdom, and there are some large communities established. Here, in the United Kingdom, there are some quite large communities of Copts in Newcastle and Brighton and Hove and London and so on, and so in order to serve them, the church has provided priests and churches. In fact, most of our Coptic Churches in this country are former Anglican ones, many of them glories of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, lofty spacious buildings. And we've just built a new cathedral in Stevenage. It's not exactly the centre of the universe, but it's a magnificent new cathedral built just outside the town there.

You may wonder where English people fit in. Of course, a number of Egyptians have married English folk and so there are English people in the congregations in the principally Arabic speaking communities. But in order to accommodate English people wishing to become Orthodox in a more English way, our Patriarch established a small English diocese which is rather grandly called the British Orthodox Church. We have an English bishop, ten English priests and a number of small communities throughout Britain where we are able to worship within the Coptic Church, but entirely in the English language. For this we are deeply grateful.

If I were to summarise the characteristics of Coptic spirituality, it's characterised by humility and devotion. Humility, devotion and worship are in their blood. Do you know, there is a notice advertising services at a church close to where I live. The highlighted point of the notice about the services there says "Guaranteed no service longer than thirty minutes". Coptic Christians wouldn't understand that at all because they think the longer the service, the better it is. Some of the services in Egypt go on all

night and the faithful are there for the duration. They are a wonderful example—these Eastern Christians to Western Christians—they really are an inspiration to us. And at a time when we are confronting or being confronted by aggressive Islam, it beholds us to remember that these Christians have withstood the claims and the difficulties of Islam for fourteen centuries.

There is a very lovely book written by a Catholic Benedictine Monk from America who has stayed in some of the Coptic Monasteries and wrote a book called *Journey Back to Eden*. If ever you want to learn more about the Coptic Church and its spirituality, this book is a window into the Coptic Church in Egypt through the eyes of a Western monk. It is enchantingly and sympathetically written and an uplifting book to read.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Gruber (ed. M. Michele Ransil), *Journey back to Eden: my life and times among the desert fathers*, Orbis Books (c2002) ISBN 1570754330.