

Coptic Orthodox

The Orthodox Churches are among the oldest Christian bodies in the world. The Coptic Orthodox Church, which is the particular focus of this chapter, traces its origins to Saint Mark, one of Jesus' apostles in the first century CE. It is led by the Patriarch of Alexandria, also known as the Coptic Pope.

The Egyptian port city of Alexandria was an important intellectual and cultural centre for centuries. It was also a prominent Christian centre until the Arab conquest of the seventh century. Even the word 'Copt' is derived from the word for 'Egypt' in the ancient language of the Egyptians. The Copts are the indigenous Christian people of Egypt. With about twelve million adherents, it is the country's largest church, although today it comprises less than eight percent of the overall population.

There is also a sizable diaspora of Coptic Orthodox in several African and Middle Eastern countries. Worldwide the Church has nearly twenty million members.

Coptic Christians played a visible role in the 2011 Arab Spring revolt which demanded the resignation of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. They were frequently caught in the crossfire of the various political groups vying for power during that turbulent period.

When Pope Shenouda III died the following year, there was widespread speculation over the future of Muslim-Coptic relations, as tensions remained high at that time. In November 2012, the 118th Pope of the Coptic Orthodox Church, Tawadros II, was chosen according to ancient tradition, in which his name was picked by a blindfolded child from a glass bowl where the names of two other candidates had also been placed.

Relations between the Coptic Church and the majority Muslim population remain fragile, especially with the rise of extremist narratives in the region over the past few years. In February 2015, militants claiming loyalty to ISIS beheaded twenty-one Coptic Christians on a beachfront in Libya. They were Egyptian workers and are now considered saints and martyrs by the Church.

Teachings

At the Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE, the Coptic Church took a different position over a fine point of Christology that led to its separation from the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church, a schism which exists to this day. The precise nature of the conflict is still disputed by historians.

What is *not* under dispute is that the Coptic tradition has remained firmly rooted in the historic Orthodox Christian faith with an ardent devotion to its apostolic origins. It emphasises the foundational teachings of the Church Fathers, creeds, early Church councils and the centrality of the Sacraments, holiness of life, and the importance of prayer.

Monasticism is still a prominent dimension of Coptic faith. Like in other Orthodox traditions, priests are permitted to be married and bishops are drawn from monastic communities and remain celibate.

Throughout its history, the Coptic Church has known great suffering for its beliefs. Under the Emperor Diocletian, nearly one million men, women, and children were killed. Other waves of persecution and mass killings were to follow. Notably, the Church has consistently refused any favoured relationship with successive governments of Egypt, upholding in principle the separation of religion and the state.

Controversies

Orthodox Christians find themselves in an increasingly hostile religious environment in two countries: Egypt and Eritrea.

In **Egypt**, the current degraded situation of the Copts, who are in majority Orthodox Christians, is the result of a process which started with the unilaterally proclaimed independence of the country in 1922 and the end of the UK's protection of "foreigners" (minorities) in 1936.

After, they lost their 'protective status' of *dhimmis* at the end of the 19th century, they had to face more popular vindictiveness. A major movement, gathering one million members and sympathizers, emerged in the political arena in 1945: the Party of the Muslim Brotherhood, which was created in 1928. This movement contributed to inspiring Egyptian nationalism with an Islamist influence.

Throughout the following decades, Christians were progressively ousted from the administration, media, school system, and nationalized companies. This process accelerated under the rule of President Nasser (1956-1970).

After Nasser, President Sadat (1970-1981) followed a different political course. On the one hand, he gave a free hand to the Muslim Brotherhood suppressed by Nasser and released violent Islamists from prison who had developed a hostile strategy towards Christians, attacking them in Middle and Northern Egypt. On the other hand, the Christian community benefitted from Sadat's general economic policy. **Moreover, he modified the Constitutional clause stating that "Islam is the religion of the state, the Arabic language is its official language and the principles of Islamic Sharia are the main source of legislation." In September 1981, Sadat rescinded the presidential decree of 1971 recognizing Shenouda as Pope of Alexandria and banished him to an ancient desert monastery.**

President Hosni Mubarak (1981-2011) continued these policies until 1985. Under his rule, the islamization of society and public space continued inexorably.

In 2011, the Arab Spring reached Egypt. The Egyptian military assumed the power to govern.

In 2012, Mohammed Morsi was elected president and social hostility against Christians dramatically increased. One year later, Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood government was removed by the military.

In 2014, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, the head of the Egyptian Armed Forces, who at that time was in control of the country, resigned from the military and was elected president. He worked to repress the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafists, but this did not cause violent attempts against the Christian community to cease.

Throughout the last decades, the Coptic Orthodox Church has become particularly vulnerable. The Copts' historic presence in Egypt provides scant protection against Islamist violence and a failed judicial system that rarely brings perpetrators to justice.

Another phenomenon that has been hitting the Coptic Orthodox Christians is the prosecution and the imprisonment of members under vaguely-worded criminal charges, such as blasphemy, insulting the Prophet or 'causing harm or damage to the public interest.' Accusations of this nature have led to angry reactions, massive riots, and pogroms against the Copts fuelled by islamists and sympathizers of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Even when no offense is intended, any hint of mockery towards Islam or discussions over the life of Prophet Muhammad can trigger an extreme response from people who are looking for places to vent their rage.

In **Eritrea**, the Orthodox Christians cannot be regarded as Coptic since the Coptic Pope granted autocephalous status to their church in 1994. Even still, the Eritrean Orthodox Church has been historically under the Patriarch of Alexandria. The Church has known severe restrictions since the current government in Eritrea took power following the war for independence from Ethiopia. After persistent objections to state interference in religious affairs, the government deposed Patriarch Abune Antonios in January 2006 and placed him under house arrest. Another patriarch, selected by the regime, has governed the Church since that time.

Orthodox in Prison

Egypt

In 2017, two Coptic Orthodox Christians, sentenced in 2012 and 2015, were still in prison on fabricated or false blasphemy charges.

Kirollos Shawki ATALLAH was arrested in 2014 and sentenced to three years in prison in 2015 for posting photos on Facebook deemed defamatory to Islam.

Makram DIAB was arrested in 2012 and sentenced to six years in prison for telling a Salafi Muslim that Muhammad had more than four wives, which resulted in an argument. In March and April 2012, two appeals were rejected.

Eritrea

Eritrea is a one-party state with the distinction of having the poorest human rights record in the world after North Korea. All religious activities in Eritrea are strictly repressed.

ABUNE ANTONIOS, Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, has been under house arrest since January 2006 for resisting government interference in religious affairs. He is 87 years old and in bad health. In 2004, he had protested the secret imprisonment of three Orthodox priests. The following year church authorities removed his executive powers. On 27th May 2007, the government appointed a new Patriarch, Abuna Discoros I. The Pope and Patriarch of Alexandria does not recognize the state-appointed Patriarch of Eritrea and condemns the non-canonical disposition of Patriarch Abune Antonios.

Conclusions

Salafist influence in the Middle East and beyond has contributed to the fragmentation of Egyptian society. The toxic environment of political rivalry, deep social hostility, restrictive government policies and abusive practices of police and security forces has made the country untenable for many Egyptians today and especially minority groups such as Coptic Orthodox Christians.

This has limited freedoms for Copts to practice their faith without fear of judicial or violent consequences. The current Egyptian government has a particular role to play in ensuring the freedom of religion or belief as guaranteed by its constitutional law. This can only be safeguarded by a judiciary that functions independently of any partisan or state influence. Judicial reform of this nature must become a greater priority of the el-Sisi government if it is to achieve the progress toward democracy to which it aspires.