

Wonder

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Title: **Christian in Egypt** Author: **Sam Williams**

Egyptians call their country *Masr Um al-Dunia*, “Egypt – the Mother of the World”. As any good mother, Egypt has had a profound impact on my life. She has shaped my perspective on the world and has given me a greater appreciation for God’s many blessings. I studied at the American University in Cairo for a semester in 2008 where I saw the struggles of ordinary Egyptians living in the midst of poverty and under the restrictions of an authoritarian regime. While these struggles are common to Egyptians, I saw particularly those of the Christian community. Being a minority in their country, they each carry their own crosses and hardships. The intense faith of Egyptian Christians impressed me for they have a boundless trust that Christ provides and that He is everything essential.

But who exactly were these Egyptians? In their ancient language they were known as *Hakkaptah*. The Greeks called the Egyptians *Aigyptos* as the Greeks became an integral part of the fabric of Egyptian history and culture. With the arrival of Islam and the Arabic language, the word *Aigyptos* changed to *Qubti* which is the source of the English words Copt and Coptic. Ethnically, Muslim and Christian Egyptians are the same people, but centuries of cultural separation has led to viewing the two groups as ethnically separate. For the sake of this discussion of Christianity in Egypt, I will use the term Copt to refer specifically to Christians.

One cannot begin to understand the complexities of the Coptic experience without first learning their long and often bloody history. From an early age Coptic Christians learn the stories of martyrs, ascetics, patriarchs and lay people who have lived their lives completely devoted to Christ. It seems only appropriate then to begin telling the story of the Copts with that of Christ.

After fleeing the Holy Land to escape King Herod, Jesus was taken by St Joseph and the Theotokos to Egypt where they lived for nearly four years. In these years, the young Christ lived amongst Egyptians from the north of Egypt, south to Upper Egypt. Many of the locations where the family stayed during this period were preserved and have been sites of pilgrimage for centuries. Subsequently, the early Christian Egyptians felt a sense of intimacy through their tie with the early years of their savior.

Christianity quickly spread to Egypt after the birth of the Church at the feast of Pentecost. There is no doubt that early evangelists went to Egypt in this time, but the Apostle Mark is seen as the founder of the Egyptian Church as he was the first bishop of Alexandria. The *langue franc* of the time was Greek, which over time developed alongside the native Egyptian languages to form what we know today as the Coptic language. Coptic, along with Greek, naturally became the liturgical languages of the Egyptian Church. Today, Coptic Orthodox liturgies in Egypt incorporate Arabic, Coptic and some Greek.

The Copts have always faced persecution. Coptic identity is characterized with this acceptance of the cross and the understanding that their church was built upon the blood of martyrs. Countless saints have died for their faith in Egypt. The rule of Diocletian marks a particularly

high number of deaths and for this reason 248 AD notes the beginning of the Coptic calendar. This day, commemorated on September 11 each year, is known as the Feast of *el Nayrouz* or the Feast of the Martyrs. It wasn't until after Christianity was legalized and then made the religion of the Roman Empire that Copts were able to worship out of hiding and without the risk of punishment. With this development, Copts took on a vital role in the course of Christian history.

With Christianity in a privileged position for the first time in history, many sought avenues for practicing their faith in a more radical and authentic manner. In the early fourth century AD, an Egyptian named Anthony began to raise awareness of the blessings of solitary living. Through St Anthony's influence, monasticism developed and spread throughout Christendom. At the same time, the young St Athanasius was writing *On the Incarnation in Alexandria* which explains the Church's understanding of Christ as both God and man. He proved to be of paramount importance at the First Council of Nicea in 325 AD, which defeated the Egyptian bishop Arius who taught that Christ was created.

In 451 AD, the churches met at the Fourth Ecumenical Council in Chalcedon where they discussed the divine and human natures of Christ. The Byzantine-influenced coastal areas took the position of the Council of Chalcedon while the majority of the Egyptian church did not, arguing that Christ has one nature being divine and human without separation or confusion. The unified Egyptian Church divided itself and thus began a new era and form of persecution, Christian pitted against Christian.

In this habitat of brewing animosity and heavy Byzantine taxes on non-Chalcedonian churches emerged the Muslim ruler Amr Ibn Al-As in 640 AD. He canceled such taxes with the understanding that the non-Chalcedonians would pay tribute to him. Islam quickly spread through Egypt until becoming the majority religion of the country. By the Tenth century, with the rise of the Fatimids, the now minority Christian community experienced a new wave of persecution. The Shi'a Fatimids imposed harsh regulations on Christians such as requiring them to wear all black and a five pound wooden cross. Many were fired from government positions and even the Coptic bishop, Pope Zakaria, was imprisoned.

January 25, 2011 will be a day that every Egyptian remembers. It was the start of eighteen days of public protest against a thirty year regime. This public outcry consumed the country, uniting old and young, rich and poor, Muslim and Christian. People with little to give shared food, water, song and hope. Christians formed human shields for their Muslim compatriots to pray, protecting them from anti-democracy extremists. It was a time for unity, a time to forget the inequality which has plagued Egypt for centuries.

In the last year, there have been a number of attacks on the Christian community in Egypt. On Christmas day 2010, six worshipers and a Muslim security guard were killed in a church shooting in Upper Egypt. On New Year's day 2011, there was a bombing at a church in Alexandria, killing 23 people. Most recently, a church was burned by Muslims out of anger over a relationship between a Muslim and a Christian. On March 8, street clashes broke out when Coptic Christians protested the arson of the church the previous week. These clashes left 13 dead and more than 100 wounded.

Zealously optimistic in outlook, I have faith that the Egyptian people will obtain the peace they seek, the justice they deserve and the democracy for which they have fought. I see the peaceful protests that brought the end of the Mubarak regime this year as proof of the presence of a truly democratic, peace seeking base in the Egyptian populace. The manner in which Christians united with Muslims speaks to the reality of the Egyptian worldview. This is the Egypt I know, the Egypt I love.

The persecution of Christians is a reality with which we will always live. But we are also called to learn from history, to perceive where our forefathers could have done better and bring this ideal to fruition. The Coptic Orthodox Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church are in schism. This schism led to the spread of Islam in Egypt due to instability and persecution of Christians by Christians. Today, Christians are persecuted by the state which favors Islam. Persecution can bring people together, for it forces them to reevaluate their priorities and focus more firmly on God. In the Divine Liturgy, we make present the Kingdom of God. It is our duty to bring the whole world back to God and to offer the world back to Him. We must pray too, for the unity of all in Christ and that we may grow in Him and be perfected in our suffering. This unity is possible with God, by prayer and only through Christ. By faith, Christ says, we can move mountains, *Insha 'Allah*, "if God wills".

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Discussion Questions

What is the situation of the Christian community in Egypt presently? How has it changed since this article was written?

Have Christians always been persecuted? Why is persecution important to Christian identity?