



USEF PANEL DISCUSSION NOTES

December 15, 2004

Christianity in Egypt: The Coptic Tradition

Speaker

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Moderator

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On December 15th, the United States-Egypt Friendship Society (USEF) hosted a presentation by Dr. Robie Samanta Roy entitled, “Christianity in Egypt: The Coptic Tradition,” an overview of Egypt’s Coptic community from its origins to the present day. Egypt’s Copts are one of the oldest and largest Christian communities in the Middle East, dating back to early conversions by St. Mark the Evangelist. While Dr. Roy’s “day job” is analyzing aerospace-related national security affairs for Congress, he has actively pursued his interest in Middle East issues, comparative theology, and Christianity in Egypt, building on his undergraduate studies of Middle East history and his personal interest in Egypt, his wife’s home country.

Dr. Samanta Roy began his presentation with an introduction to the Coptic Christian Church in Egypt. The term *Copt*, derived from a Greek word meaning Egyptian, refers to Egypt’s Orthodox Christians. While estimates vary, the number of Copts in Egypt today is generally believed to be around 10 – 12% of the population, or around 8-10 million. The origin of the Coptic Church dates to St. Mark the Evangelist’s conversions of pharaonic Egyptians in the first century AD. The term *Orthodox* is a Greek word meaning “straight opinion” or “right belief,” and reflects theological differences dating back to church councils in the first millennium.

Dr. Roy described the history of the Coptic Church as having five distinct eras. The first era dates from the establishment of the Christianity in Egypt until its legalization by Emperor Constantine in 312. The second era dates from 312 until 641 and encompasses the Coptic Church’s “golden” area and subsequent decline. The third era, the “dark ages” of the Coptic Church, dates from the Arab invasion in 641. The fourth era was the age of European contact and the rise of Egyptian nationalism. The fifth era is the modern era dating from the establishment of the Egyptian state.

From the birth of Christianity until its legalization by Emperor Constantine in 312 AD, Christians faced extreme persecution under the Roman Empire. However, the early Christian church grew, and became organized under patriarchs representing the largest communities of Christians. During this period, Egypt was at the geographical center of the Christian world and Alexandria was already an ancient center of learning, so the patriarch of Alexandria became a leading figure in the early Church. Early church fathers of Alexandria such as Clement, Origen, and Athanasius played important roles in shaping the theology of Christianity.

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Under the reign of Emperor Constantine, Christianity was legalized and it flourished in Alexandria. Alexandrian church leaders left their mark on the Church councils of Nicea (325), Constantinople (381), and Ephesus (431). St. Anthony began the practice of monasticism in Egypt and Alexandrian Christians spread the faith throughout Africa, the Middle East, and Europe. At the Council of Chalcedon in 451, however, disagreements between the patriarchs led to a schism of the Orthodox churches, and the patriarchate of Alexandria lost its preeminent status. This schism has lasted to the present day in the differences between the Eastern Orthodox Churches (Greek, Russian, Antiochan, and Slavic) and the Oriental Orthodox Churches (Coptic, Syrian, Armenian, Indian, Ethiopian, and Eritrean). Since 1964, efforts have been made to reconcile these differences.

In 641, Arab invaders from the Arabian Peninsula invaded North Africa and ushered in a period of relative adversity and decline for Coptic Christians. As *dhimmi*, “people of the book,” Copts were considered second class citizens. They faced varying degrees of discrimination and persecution during this period under a succession of Muslim rulers: Arabs, Abbasids, Fatimids, Ayyubids, Mamluks, and Ottoman Turks.

The arrival of the Ottomans and then Europeans in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries began a new chapter in Coptic Church history. Muhammad Ali Pasha and Sayyid Pasha’s reforms in the nineteenth century introduced greater equality between Muslims and non-Muslims. Copts also benefited from contact with the Europeans. They took advantage of European missionary schools to a greater degree than their Muslim counterparts as a means of escaping discrimination. As opposition to European occupation grew in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Copts and Muslims united under the banner of Egyptian nationalism.

Since the 1960s, the Coptic Church has experienced a revival. Through the efforts of Pope Cyril VI, Coptic seminaries have been strengthened and new churches have been established in North and South America, Europe, Africa, and Australia. The Church still faces persecution in Egypt.

Q&A Highlights

Q. How is the patriarch selected?

A. The modern leader of the Coptic Church is selected from monks who have the necessary skills and backgrounds to become patriarch. After a religious ceremony, the patriarch is chosen by drawing lots.

Q. What is the Coptic language like?

A. The Coptic language traces its origin to the hieroglyphs of the ancient Egyptians. The use of the Coptic language was instrumental in deciphering the Rosetta stone.