

## *Historical Dictionary of the Coptic Church*

Gawdat Gabra. *Historical Dictionary of the Coptic Church* (with contributions by Birger A. Pearson, Mark N. Swanson, and Youhanna Nessim Youssef). Historical Dictionaries of Religions, Philosophies, and Movements: No. 84. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008. 332 pp. \$93.50. Hardcover. ISBN: 9780810860971.

To understand the character of the modern Coptic Church and its people, one must be aware and appreciative of the marked experiences of this ancient institution that have persisted through the millennia until today. It is no casual coincidence that the Coptic calendar is calculated from the accession of the Roman emperor Diocletian as the beginning of the “Era of Martyrs,” or years A.M. (*anno martyrum*). Contemporary martyrs are continually being added to the rolls of the blessed who died for or more often because of their faith; sadly, the list on pages 131-133 already needs to be updated.

Long-standing suffering from adversity, persecution, and martyrdom accompany a flourishing cultural pride. Success and growth on its native soil continue for the largest Christian community in the Middle East, while “exile” throughout history persists today as emigrating Copts leave Egypt for religious freedom in such Western countries as Australia, Canada, and the United States. As a result, it is a striking yet rational observation that the Arabic language of Islamic Egypt will fade away with time as English, French, German, and the other secular languages of the Diaspora (91-92) coexist in the Coptic liturgy with a revived Coptic language, a direct descendant of ancient Egyptian. Having split from the Byzantine church as a result of the Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE, the Copts were either conquered (or initially liberated!) by the invasion of Arab Muslims, who saved the Copts from other later upheavals in the Christian church but commenced discriminatory policies of varying severity from 641 CE to the present.

The Coptic Church has yet to receive its rightful place in the history and maintenance of the Christian religion, and this volume will, one hopes, make its rich history and beliefs more accessible to the English reader. Men such as St. Antony, the record of whose anchoritic life influenced St. Augustine; St. Athanasius (295-372 CE); the Gnostic Valentinus, who was almost elected bishop of Rome!; Pachomius, the founder of cenobitic monasticism; and even Yuhanna Sheftishi, who taught Champollion (who deciphered the Rosetta Stone) the Coptic he used to comprehend hieroglyphics, are among the panoply who have played an important role in shaping Christianity and the rediscovery of the ancient antecedents of the Coptic worldview.

Though not always in a clear manner, the annotated dictionary introduces the reader to the theology, practices, literature, and liturgy that define and distinguish this religion. After the brief foreword and preface, the volume includes a short chronology, which is a helpful tool for those unacquainted with the history of the Middle East and the debates and councils that led to schism and isolation from the West. Also present is the struggle of the Church to survive in an alien culture and among a hostile religion implanted on the soil of its birth, a great monotheistic religion which treats the Coptic Church as a foreign entity for potential expulsion!

The introduction is a concise summary of the Coptic experience and mindset, highlighting the two profound moments in the founding of Christianity in Egypt: the flight of the Holy Family from the Roman province of Judea

and the evangelism and martyrdom of St. Mark in Alexandria—despite the lack of concrete evidence for either event. It is intriguing that the first two centuries of Christianity in Egypt—during which time Gnosticism and Christianity seem to have been interlocked—are cloaked in the fog of later revisionist history until the founding of the Catechetical School in Alexandria and the allegorical works of Origen, an Egyptian considered the earliest and greatest Christian exegete, and to many a heretic.

The historical dictionary constitutes the bulk of the text (over 250 pages). Main entries and cross-references are indicated in bold, and the places within the text where these are overlooked are forgivable. Within the historical dictionary the reader discovers that the Egyptians played a leading role in extinguishing Arianism, opposing the Patriarch Nestorius of Constantinople, and eventually (but not finally) disagreeing with the dynophysite nature of Christ accepted as orthodox at the Council of Chalcedon. The history of the Coptic Church after the Muslim “liberation” of Egypt is a complex relationship that has tested, truncated, and tweaked the ability and willingness of the Coptic Church to live among other Egyptians while resisting the pressure to convert and blend into the dominant religion. Yet significant early accomplishments and ongoing persecution have tempered the believers, grooming them to resuscitate and build upon their ancient endeavors. Successful merchants, scholars, and indispensable civil servants, the Copts are needed yet sometimes reviled by Egyptian Muslims. Coming under surprising criticism (at least to this American reviewer) is the late President Anwar al-Sadat, who is said to have “promoted” Islamic fundamentalism before falling victim to the malevolence he created, a monster that resurges by periodically massacring Copts.

Noticeably absent is a map of Egypt indicating the towns and monasteries that are mentioned in the dictionary, and a quick reference as to locale in the Delta, Middle Egypt, or Upper Egypt (the South) would be very helpful, even if the editors must keep costs low by sketching a hand-drawn line map. A table of the Coptic patriarchs would unite in chronological order the leaders of the Church who are otherwise strewn among the alphabet. Quite often a photo, even if small and in black and white, would clarify intriguing descriptions of architecture, for example on page 196, where it is noted that the exterior of the Monastery of St. Shenute at Sohag “resembles a pharaonic temple built of limestone blocks of a considerable size.” One may wish to see just how accurate this description is. It would be helpful for the general, interested reader to have a short glossary of terms that are not dictionary entries instead of having to look them up in another reference work. Similarly, putting the Coptic calendar (70-71) in tabular form would aid comparison with other more familiar calendrical systems.

Better editing would have eliminated certain idiosyncrasies associated with the authors not writing in their native language. For example, there are a number of misspellings, missing prepositions, use of the definite article where it should not be (207), and the monotonous use of the personal pronoun beginning multiple consecutive sentences in an entry (e.g., Fanous, Isaac; Jerome; Monastery of Al-Baramous; Sheftishi, Yuhanna; Shenouda III; Theophilus; and Ya’qub, General). Some definitions are circular and could be strengthened: for example, “Apostolic See,” which is defined as “An apostolic see is a see that was founded by an Apostle.” The polyglot can only be amused by the unintended metathesis of two key letters, yielding *Apophthegmata partum* instead of *patrum* (204). Certain historical inaccuracies are probably due to reuse of phrases from other entries that were not edited completely: Jerome is said to have attended the Catechetical School of Alexandria under Origen (158), but Origen had been dead for about 120 years (218). Abbot Shenute of Atripe’s death date is omitted (241). Its presence would certainly be significant for the reader, for Shenute lived perhaps to be 110 (the ideal age to which a true sage would aspire according to the ancient Egyptians), giving him the time to produce what scholars estimate to have been 25,000 pages of Coptic literature.

Frustrating is the entry “Nestorians and Copts,” to which many other entries refer the reader. Here one amazingly reads about Nestorians but the entry never defines them! For the definition, one must mysteriously find page 249 on the “Theology of the Coptic Church.” The entry on page 212 states also that there were no more Nestorians in Egypt by 1181, yet two sentences later the authors mention Nestorians living in Damietta in 1346. And the Melchites, a major “enemy” of the Coptic Church, do not have a main entry, being defined on page xix of the Chronology section.

Despite the minor annoyances, this book contains many valuable summaries such as in the entry “Monasticism, Egyptian” and the longest entry, “Theology in the Coptic Church.” Gems of information abound such as Paul of Thebes becoming the first Christian hermit around 250 CE, during the severe persecutions of Emperor Trajan Decius (222), and the role of women in the Coptic Church (267-269), which began formally when Pachomius founded two “monasteries” for women (219), appointing his sister mother superior of one of them (267). Even some of the sayings of the desert fathers were acts and statements of faith by a desert mother by the name of Syncretica, whom the authors assure us, for a reason that can be assumed but they do not clarify, “is never described as having male features...” (246).

Two tidbits relating to the Coptic dialogue with the Catholic Church should be pointed out. The Bishop of Alexandria was called pope (“papa”) earlier than the title was employed by the Bishop of Rome, and in an act of arrogant appropriation indicating his view of the paternalistic supremacy of his post, Pope Gregory VII in 1073 “prohibited the use of this title by any other bishop...” (226). Having desired over the centuries to reunite with its errant cousin in the East, the Church of Rome attempted to force the Bishop of Alexandria to defer to the Catholic Church as the sole arbiter of the Christian faith, but when a representative of Patriarch John XI signed in Florence a 1442 bull of union uniting the two great churches, no concession or admission of the supremacy of the Pope or Roman Christology was made (9, 161).

The authors of this book leave a marked impression that many major texts, obscure or unknown to most, need to be studied more closely for reassessment and published more completely in critical edition. The complete Coptic liturgy still remains scattered throughout the Coptic hagiography (169) and must be ferreted out, compiled, and reconstructed. Fertile areas of research include the Coptic Bible itself, which “has not yet been systematically applied to a textual criticism of the Greek Bible” (46), not surprising since “there is not yet a complete critical edition of the Coptic Old Testament and no concordance for any dialect [of Coptic]” (47). Such study alone will revivify Coptic Christianity and invite comparisons with Western views of worship.

The bibliography, arranged selectively topically and then comprehensively alphabetically, captures the most important works on Coptic studies. The reviewer recommends that this book—despite its hefty price tag—be added to the collection of any general interest library, and it is indispensable for every theological library.

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