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Coptic Christians in an Age of Globalization

by Eliot Dickinson

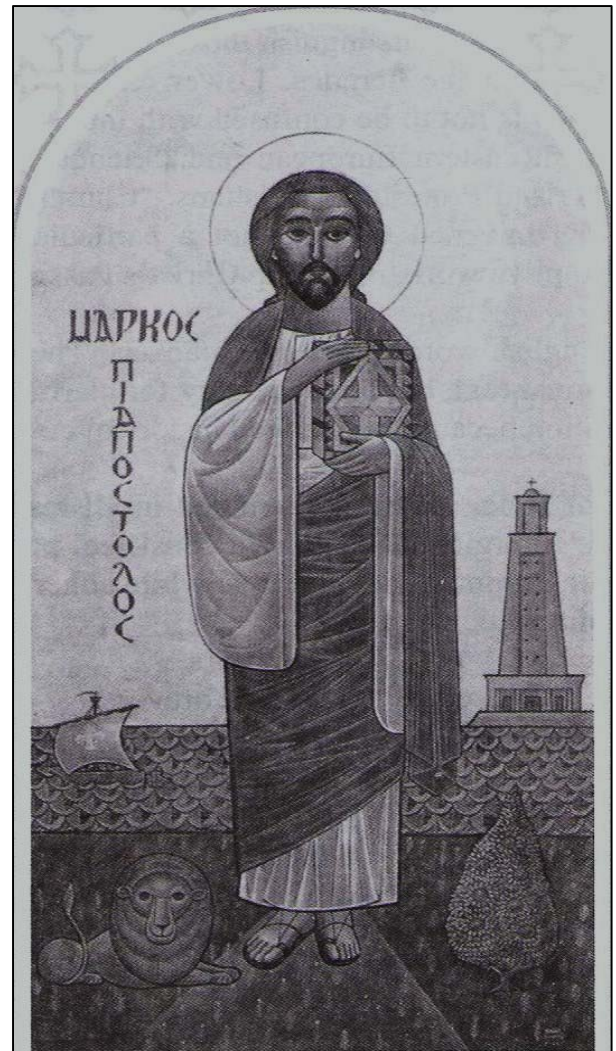
*Dr. Eliot Dickinson is professor of politics at Western Oregon Univ. He earned a Ph.D. in political science from Purdue Univ. and worked at the Univ. of the Witwatersrand in South Africa and at Hope College in Michigan before moving to Oregon. He is author of *Copts in Michigan* (Michigan State Univ. Press, 2008) and, most recently, *Globalization and Migration: A World in Motion* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2017). His current research focuses on human migration and the global refugee crisis.*

Back in 2007, when I first approached Michigan's Coptic Christian community and said I was going to write about them, they told me they believed I had been sent by God. It was an endearing response and an auspicious start to a project that profiled the Copts as an ethno-religious immigrant group and ultimately led to publication of a short book entitled *Copts in Michigan*.¹ While conducting this research, however, ominous events were occurring in the Middle East that provided a sobering background to my work. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan—bloody, murderous, and hateful to the last degree—were raging out of control. To those who felt that war was not the answer, who were not caught up in the chauvinistic, gung-ho militarism peddled by Fox News, it was a time of reckoning with what America was really doing.

Iraq, site of the biblical Garden of Eden, had been destroyed. Hundreds of thousands of innocent men, women, and children had been killed, maimed, widowed, orphaned, and traumatized. Millions more were being forcibly displaced and turned into refugees. On top of it all, the wars were also being interpreted by many in the Muslim world as a larger war against Islam, perpetrated by the West. Predictably, this had a devastating effect on Christians in the Middle East. In a tragedy of epic proportions, the Assyrian, Chaldean, and Syriac Christians in Iraq were systematically expelled from their homes, massacred by Islamist extremists, and nearly wiped out. And in nearby Egypt, the unfolding calamity exacerbated the already critical plight of the Copts, the largest Christian minority in the Middle East.

Coptic Identity

Simply put, the Copts are Egyptian Christians who trace their history back to the time of the pharaohs and the birth of Christianity. The name “Copt” is likely derived from the ancient Egyptian capital city of Hikaptah, whose inhabitants the Greeks called *Aigyptios*. The roots of these words—kapt and gypt—later evolved into Qubt in Arabic and Copt in English, and meant Egyptian. When Alexander the Great conquered Egypt in 332 BCE, he not only named the city of Alexandria after himself, he also made Greek the official language. This was a crucial step, because the Greeks then transcribed the Egyptian hieroglyphics using the Greek alphabet, which evolved into written Coptic. Over the ensuing centuries, the Coptic language became an enduring symbol of the Copts' culture and identity. Although spoken Coptic died out in the 17th Century, it is still recited in the liturgy today, and the script can be seen in Coptic translations of the Bible.



A Coptic icon of St. Mark the Evangelist

The Copts belong to one of the oldest branches of Christianity in the world. According to biblical tradition, Baby Jesus and the Holy Family spent time in Egypt, where Jesus lived among the Copts, spoke the language, and drank from the Nile River. It is further believed that St. Mark the Evangelist came to Egypt in 41 CE, where he was the first patriarch of what was to become the Egyptian Church and later the Coptic Orthodox Church. He has since been succeeded by an unbroken line of 118 Coptic Popes, all the way down to the current Pope Tawadros II. Following Pope Shenouda III's death in March 2012, Pope Tawadros II was selected by a blindfolded altar boy who drew his name from a chalice in an elaborate selection ceremony in St. Mark's Coptic Orthodox Cathedral in Cairo.²

When Islam emerged in the 600s CE, it spread rapidly across the Middle East and North Africa and marked the beginning of a long decline of Coptic life in Egypt. Most Copts were forced to convert to Islam at the point of a sword, and by the end of the 800s they no longer made up a majority of the Egyptian population. Copts were forced to pay a special tax, or *Jizyah*, for being Christian, and those who continued to speak Coptic ran the risk of having their tongues cut out. Today the

<p>THE OFFERING OF EVENING AND MORNING INCENSE</p> <p>The priest uncovers his head, stands at the door of the sanctuary, and says:</p> <p>Priest: Have mercy on us, O God, the Father, the Pantocrator. All-Holy Trinity, have mercy on us.</p> <p>O Lord, God of the powers, be with us, for we have no helper in our tribulations and afflictions but You.</p> <p>Then he says the Lord's Prayer.</p> <p>Our Father who art in heavens, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.</p> <p>In Christ Jesus our Lord, for Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.</p>	<p>Παλα Οὐπὶσθῆνοντι ἡτε Ἐανάροντι Νεμ Ἐανάτοτι</p> <p>رفع بخور عشية وياكر</p>	<p>يكشف الكاهن رأسه ويقف أمام باب الهيكل ويقول:</p> <p>يقول الكاهن:</p> <p>إرحمنا يا الله الآب ضابط الكل. أيها الثالوث القدوس ارحمنا.</p> <p>أيها الرب إله القوات كن معنا لأنه ليس لنا معين في شدائدنا وضيقاتنا سواك.</p> <p>ثم يقول الصلاة الربانية:</p> <p>أبانا الذي في السموات، ليقدس اسمك ليأت ملكوتك لتسكن مشيتك، كما في السماء كذلك على الأرض، عيزنا الذي للغد أعطنا اليوم، واغفر لنا ذنوبنا كما تغفر نحن أيضاً للمذنبين إلينا ولا تدخلنا في تجربة لكن نجنا من الشرير.</p> <p>بالمسيح يسوع ربنا، لأن لسلك الملك والقوة والجد إلى الأبد. آمين.</p>
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The Lord's Prayer in English, Coptic (middle), and Arabic

Michigan has a Coptic community of several thousand living mostly in the Detroit area. By all accounts, they are thriving and flourishing, raising families and running businesses, studying and worshipping freely in ways that would not be possible back in Egypt. Coptic life is centered around St. Mark Coptic Orthodox Church on Livernois Road in Troy, the wealthy northern suburb of Detroit, where Fathers Mina Essak, Maximus Habib, and Mark Ibrahim lead the church and guide the growing flock. They offer a range of activities including 5:00 a.m. mass, choir, school tutoring, town hall meetings, Arabic Bible study, and Coptic language classes. As one would expect, the church functions as more than just a place of worship. It is where people socialize, network, integrate newly-arrived immigrants, prepare the youth for future leadership and, of course, meet, date, and marry.³

What Will the Future Hold?

Most Copts point out that they love Egypt, their ancestral homeland, more than any other place in the world. Those who emigrate do so only reluctantly, usually for a combination of reasons including abject poverty, lack of opportunity, religious

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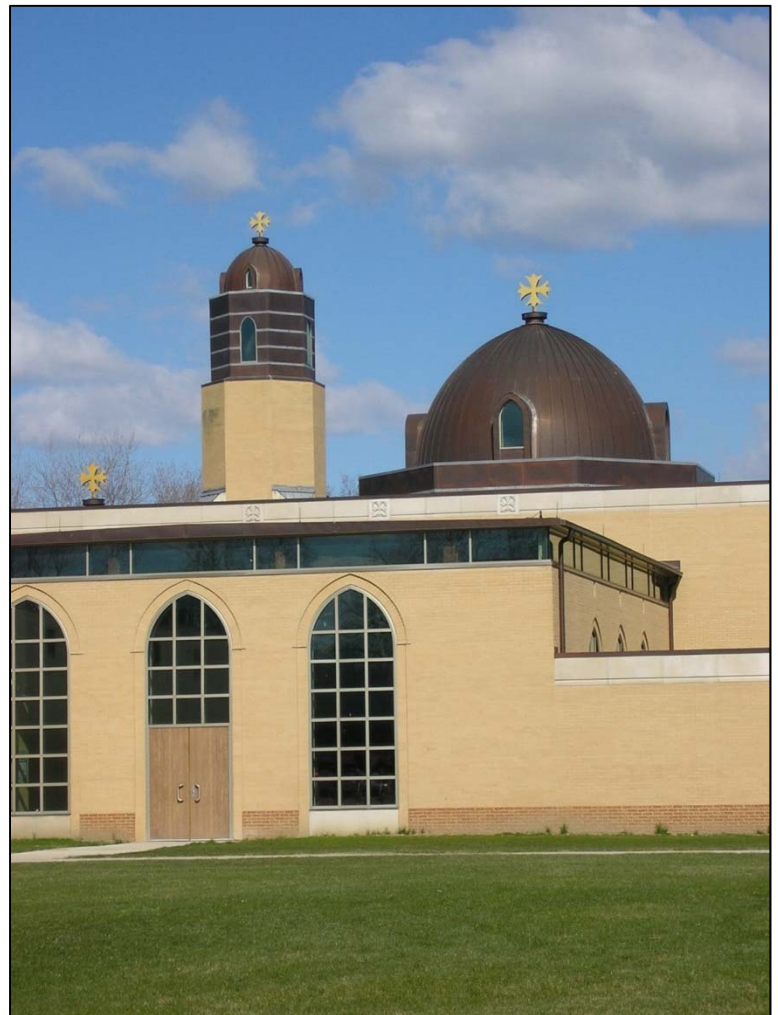
St. Mark and St. Mary and St. Philopater Church in Troy, Michigan

Copts in Egypt speak Arabic, although they do not self-identify as Arab, which is associated with being Muslim. Many have a small Coptic cross tattooed on the inside of their right wrist as a symbol of their Christian faith and identity.

The Coptic Diaspora

It is hard to say precisely how many Copts now live in Egypt. The uncertainty comes from the fact that the Egyptian government has traditionally undercounted the Coptic population, while the Copts themselves have routinely exaggerated their numbers. Best estimates range from a low of about 6% of the population, if you believe government census counts, to a high of 25%, if you believe the leaders of the Coptic community. While the true number is likely somewhere near the middle, it is commonly reported in the mainstream media that Copts make up about 10% of the current Egyptian population of 95 million.

It is also unclear how many Copts live in the United States because the U.S. Census Bureau counts Egyptian immigrants, but not Egyptian Christians as a category. As a result, estimates usually run between 250,000 and one million, with the actual number again probably somewhere near the middle. The vast majority of Coptic immigrants in the U.S. arrived after implementation of the 1965 Immigration Act, which liberalized American immigration law by removing race as a criterion of entry. They settled primarily around large cities such as New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Houston, and Detroit. Like other immigrants, they followed jobs and educational opportunities as they built new lives in their new country.



Coptic Christians *continued from page 11*

persecution, and extreme prejudice. In recent years, mob violence against the Copts in Egypt has worsened considerably. One reason for this is the aforementioned war in Iraq, which marked the beginning of a new era of radicalization in which Coptic Christians were targeted and killed by Islamist extremists. Another reason is the Arab Spring, the revolutionary uprising that began in Tunisia in December 2010 and swept across the Middle East. Hosni Mubarak, the U.S.-backed dictator of Egypt, was forced out in 2011 after 30 years in office. He was followed in rapid succession by Armed Forces Chairman Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, Mohamad Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood, Adly Mansour, and now Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. In this dangerous fog of political upheaval, the Copts have not fared well.

Space does not permit a full listing of all the deadly terrorist attacks against the Copts that have occurred in Egypt lately, but a brief look at just a few of the more egregious examples will suffice to give an idea of the extent of the problem. In December 2016, a suicide bomber killed 29 people, mostly women and children, inside St. Peter and St. Paul's Coptic Church in Cairo.⁴ On Palm Sunday 2017, Islamic State militants attacked St. Mark's Coptic Church in Alexandria and St. George's Coptic Church in the Nile Delta town of Tantra, 60 miles north of Cairo. Suicide bombers walked into the two churches during mass and blew themselves up, killing a total of 45 worshipers and seriously wounding more than 100.⁵ In May 2017, Islamic State gunmen stopped a bus full of Coptic pilgrims on their way to St. Samuel the Confessor Monastery in the western province of Minya and mercilessly executed 28 people.⁶ In sum, the Copts have become the Islamic State's "favorite prey" at a time when the Egyptian government is either unwilling or unable to afford them protection.⁷

It is difficult to say for sure what will happen to the Copts

in Egypt, but it seems likely that their numbers will dwindle over time as a result of persecution and emigration. In this age of intensifying interconnectedness and globalization, however, they must know that they are not alone. The global Coptic diaspora is appealing to national governments in Europe and North America for help. The United Nations is advocating for greater protection of the Copts and all persecuted minorities. Pax Christi International hears the cry of the Copts and is actively working on their behalf. In my own little corner of the world I am using the power of the pen, trying to raise awareness, and walking the narrow path of nonviolence—and if I ever decide to get a tattoo, it will be a small Coptic cross on the inside of my right wrist. •

Endnotes

1. Eliot Dickinson, *Copts in Michigan* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2008).
2. For a brief video, see "The Coptic Christians of Egypt", *60 Minutes*, 15 December 2013, available online at <https://www.cbsnews.com/videos/the-coptic-christians-of-egypt/>.
3. For a closer look at St. Mark and St. Mary and St. Philopater Coptic Orthodox Church in Troy, MI, see <http://www.stmarkmi.org/>.
4. Ruth Michaelson and Harriet Sherwood, "It's a War on Christians': Egypt's Beleaguered Copts in Sombre Mood Before Papal Visit", *The Guardian*, 27 April 2017.
5. Taylor Luck, "Copts Attacked: Can Egypt Resist Incitement of Sectarian Strife?", *Christian Science Monitor*, 13 April 2017.
6. Declan Walsh and Nour Youssef, "Gunmen in Egypt Force Coptic Christian Pilgrims from Buses and Kill 28", *New York Times*, 26 May 2017.
7. Samuel Tadros, "Coptic Christians: Islamic State's 'Favorite Prey'", *New York Times*, Op-Ed page, 26 May 2017.

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Left: Midwest Coptic Orthodox Youth Conventions have been held annually since 1984.

Right: An English and Arabic advertisement aimed at the Coptic community in Michigan.