

ARMENIANS AND THE COPTS

Copts and Armenians are regarded as making up the non-Chalcedonian [Oriental](#) Orthodox churches. How early they came into contact with one another is rather difficult to surmise. For various reasons (military, political, trade, slavery), Armenians have lived in Egypt since the time of the ancient Persian rule (sixth century B.C.). Through the centuries and in successive stages Egypt witnessed several influxes of [Armenian](#) families. However, aside from a few exceptions, Armenians did not assimilate with the native people of Egypt, but strenuously preserved their identity by retaining their social and racial characteristics, their language, and their religion.

In the fourth and fifth centuries A.D., during the Byzantine rule, several [Armenian](#) monks came to Egypt from Armenia and Jerusalem to join the ascetic Coptic fathers in their solitary desert life at the famed monastic center of NITRIA. Later, when numerous settlements of anchorites and monasteries developed around the dwelling caves of holy men in the Egyptian wilderness, there also developed one such Armenian settlement (see Aghavnuni, 1929). In the eleventh century, an Armenian bishop, Krikoris Vegayasayr, who later became the first Armenian prelate to Egypt, visited “the desert of Thebes to commune with the hermits there, to understand their lifestyle, to be informed about their rules and disciplines, and to collect data in order to introduce the same (rule) among the Armenian clergy” (Ormanian, 1912-1927, p. 1283).

The Coptic-[Armenian](#) relationship of the desert life is somewhat different from that of the established church. “It is misleading,” says K. Sarkissian, “to try to find relations between the Armenian Church and Alexandria. Given the circumstances in which [Christianity](#) was introduced and spread in Armenia one cannot expect to see any regular or constant contact with Alexandria itself. Later, after the Council of Ephesus and, more particularly, after the Council of Chalcedon, relations were established for understandable reasons. At this early stage, Armenians could know

the Alexandrian tradition only through their contacts with Cappadocian Christianity and with Constantinople” (Sarkissian, 1965, p. 110).

Indeed, the Armenians were not present at the two councils: EPHESUS (431) and CHALCEDON (451). The reason was the extremely unsettled state of their country under the Persian rulers. However, some fifty years after the Council of Chalcedon, Armenians became concerned with the Nestorian-Monophysite quarrels. In 506, the [Armenian](#) Synod under the leadership of Patriarch Bapken [officially](#) proclaimed the profession of Faith of the Council of Ephesus and rejected everything that was Nestorian, including the acts of the Council of Chalcedon. Consequently, the [Christological](#) teaching of CYRIL I (412-444) as embodied in his *Twelve Anathemas* was upheld and Zeno’s HENOTICON was accepted.

During following centuries, especially when various Muslim dynasties ruled Egypt, Copts and Armenians learned to survive the hazards of a tumultuous life, as minority groups do. However, the religious history in Egypt for both the Copts and the Armenians is one of mixed nature—persecution or toleration, depending on the temperament of the period and the mood of the ruler.

Consequently, churches were built and destroyed according to the adopted policy of the rulers. This situation forced the Copts, rather than the Armenians, to either appropriate [Armenian](#) churches and monasteries or to claim ownership of these properties for one reason or another. That this is the case may be evidenced by visiting the existing as well as the various ruined Coptic churches in Egypt (e.g., DAYR AL-ABYAD monastery; see also the documents of certain writers, such as al-MAQRIZI; Kushagian, 1937; and Kardashian, 1943). It must be stated that Armenians were allowed at various periods in history to conduct their own worship in Coptic churches or monasteries (Alboyadjian, 1941-1961).

For the first time since the fifth century, the [Armenian](#) and the Coptic churches, together with the Ethiopian, the Syrian, and the Syro-Indian

churches met together at a conference in Addis Ababa, in 1965, under the auspices of HAILE SELASSIE I. Several important and far-reaching decisions were adopted at this meeting, including a new collective term of identification: [Oriental](#) Orthodox Churches (see *Report of the [Oriental Orthodox Churches— Addis Ababa Conference, January 1965](#)*).

One of the major difficulties in this area is the basic issue of sources. There are three interrelated obstacles to overcome: accessibility, relevance, and linguistic competence. The problem of accessibility of sources becomes most acute when tackling the [Armenian](#) materials. Because Armenians are dispersed throughout the world, many of their important manuscripts and documents are found in various established Armenian libraries: Soviet Armenia (Yerevan), Turkey (Istanbul), Lebanon (Antelias), Israel (Jerusalem), Egypt (Cairo, Alexandria), Italy (Venice), Austria (Vienna), and France (Paris). In addition, collections of a miscellaneous nature are also housed in certain North American libraries.

Second, the problem of determining the relevant material (both primary and secondary) is a major issue. The inherent difficulties in examining and sorting out the relevant [Armenian](#) materials that are scattered in the numerous libraries are too obvious to need any elucidation. One additional point must be borne in mind. Not all Armenian libraries have been able to catalog their material. As for the Coptic material, the problem is, in a sense, less critical, although not totally free from difficulties. Another source to be utilized is the “foreign” materials that allude to the topic under study. There is a tremendous task to perform in amassing all the relevant issues recorded in the writings of Roman, Byzantine, and Muslim Arab authors.

Third, the problem of linguistic competence is obvious. One must be capable of at least understanding the following languages: Coptic (last phase of ancient Egyptian language), Armenian (classical and modern in eastern and western dialect), Arabic (classical and modern), Latin, and Greek. Though many of the [Greek](#) and the [Latin](#) works are available in

modern European languages, the Armenian, Coptic, and Arabic materials are, by and large, still in their original languages.

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[SOLOMON A. NIGOSIAN](#)

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