

## ***The History of Christianity in Egypt***

THE TERM COPT COMES DIRECTLY FROM THE ARABIC QBT, which appears to derive from the Greek aigyptos (Egypt) / aigyptioi (Egyptians), a phonetic corruption of the ancient Egyptian word Hikaptah, one of the names of Memphis. Initially the word described a non-Arabic-speaking non-Muslim. By implication, a Copt was also a Christian, since Christianity was the predominant religion of the land at the time of the Arab conquest in 641.

When the majority of Egyptians gradually converted to Islam, they naturally ceased to be Christians (aqbat, sing, qibti). In that sense, the term 'Copt' and the adjective 'Coptic' are relatively elastic in a historical, ethnic, religious, cultural, and social sense. 'Coptic' often refers to matters relating to the Orthodox Church in Egypt, which in this case has nothing to do with other Orthodox Churches. The recent new phrase 'Oriental Orthodox Churches' distinguishes between the Eastern Orthodox churches, which are in communion with Constantinople, and the [Orthodox churches](#) of Egypt, Armenia, Ethiopia, Syria, and India, which reject the Council of Chalcedon (451). Moreover, the term Coptic is used also to designate Christians in Egypt without meaning that one is necessarily an Orthodox Christian. For example, the Coptic Evangelical churches of the Coptic Evangelical Synod of the Nile use the term Coptic to denote their ethnic identity as Egyptians. There is also the Coptic Catholic Church, which is in communion with Rome. The church of the Hellenic Greeks in Egypt is known as the Greek Orthodox Church. Today, the Christians of Egypt represent the largest Christian community in the Middle East, which unofficial sources estimate at nine million or more, and the Coptic Church can confidently state it is one of the oldest in the world.

Earliest Christianity is not archaeologically visible in Egypt. Nevertheless, the New Testament provides a few hints of a Christian presence in Egypt (Acts 2:10, 6:9, 18:24). The Copts also take pride in the tradition handed

down by Eusebius, the fourth-century church historian, that St. Mark the Evangelist preached the Gospel in Alexandria and was the first to establish churches there. In his writings, Eusebius is clearly passing on previously existing traditions of the association of St. Mark with earliest Christianity in Egypt, which may be traceable to the second century, if not earlier. Other than this, there is very little information about the history of Christianity in Egypt during the first two centuries.

The new religion spread gradually into Egypt, as evidenced by the establishment of the Catechetical School of Alexandria in about 180 and the appointment of three bishops by Demetrius, the Patriarch of Alexandria (188-230). The Catechetical School of Alexandria, an important theological school, was led by great scholars, teachers, and writers of the late second and third century, such as Pantaenus, Clement, Origen, and Dionysus. In Roman times the Greek language continued to be the official and cultural language of the country, whereas Latin was used only in the army.

In 202, the [Roman emperor](#) Septimius Severus visited Egypt, and his special veneration for the pagan god Serapis may have initiated the first phase of persecutions of Christians in the country. It was under these first persecutions that Origen's father, Leonides, was beheaded. The Egyptian Christians suffered another wider persecution during the reign of Emperor Decius (249-251). In 250 he issued a universal order to [sacrifice](#) to the gods. Each citizen had to prove that he made offerings to them. Many Egyptians preferred to die than deny Christ, while others escaped to the desert or capitulated to the emperor's demand. This wave of persecution continued under Emperor Valerianus (253-260). Patriarch Dionysius and some of his companions were banished to Libya. Thousands suffered worse fates.

The most severe and systematic wave of persecution of the Egyptian Church started during the reign of Emperor Diocletian (284-305) and continued under [Emperor Maximinus](#) Daia (305-313). We do not have any

reliable data for the number of martyrs from Diocletian's reign. Church sources speak of hundreds of thousands, but some scholars estimate the number of victims at between 2,500 and 3,000. Peter I, the Patriarch of Alexandria, was martyred on 25 November 311 during the Great Persecution and given the title 'Seal of the Martyrs.' The severity of the Great Persecution prompted the Copts to use the Era of the Martyrs as the point of reference for their calendar, with year one beginning with the accession of Diocletian to the throne in 284 (that is, First Year of Martyrs—abbreviated to AM 1). Only with the Edict of Milan in 313, issued by the emperor Constantine I, did the Great Persecution finally end. The commemoration and veneration of martyrs as saints by the Copts is one significant factor that led to the survival of Christianity in Egypt and is a hallmark of [contemporary](#) Coptic faith.

During and after the persecutions, Alexandria continued to serve as a center for [Christian education](#) and theological training. Emperor Constantine I (306-337) favored Christianity, which therefore flourished in Alexandria. In approximately 320, Alexander, Patriarch of Alexandria (312-326), assembled one hundred bishops in a synod. In the second half of the fourth century, the majority of the inhabitants of Alexandria were Christians. By the early fifth century about 80 percent of the Egyptian population was Christian.

The patriarchs of Alexandria played a significant role in the theological controversies and the formulation of Christian [doctrine](#) during the fourth and fifth centuries. Patriarch Alexander I and his young deacon Athanasius, who later became the most important Coptic patriarch, fought against the heresy of Arius. Arius (256-336), a presbyter of Alexandria and an eloquent speaker, began, in approximately 318, a controversy over the nature of Christ's relation to the Father that differed from Alexander's orthodox position. Arius and his followers, taught that Christ, the Son was not eternal with the Father: he had originated by the creative act of God, the Father's will. Thus, the Arians stressed Christ's creaturely nature and dependence on God's nature and will. By contrast,

Alexander's position expressed the orthodox belief that Christ and the Father shared a common nature or essence. Arius's teachings were ultimately condemned by the Council of Nicea in 325.

In 330, Constantinople (Byzantium) became the new eastern capital of the Roman empire, thus rivaling Alexandria's political and theological supremacy. During the rule of Patriarch Athanasius (328-373) nationalist feeling increased among the Egyptians, a trend that was subsequently strengthened by the theological controversies of the fifth century. Patriarch [Athanasius](#) was a hero of orthodoxy, the chief protagonist in the struggle against the Arians. He spent twenty of the forty-six years of his patriarchy in periods of exile imposed by the imperial authorities. In his second exile, which lasted three years in Rome, he was accompanied by a number of Egyptian monks. During his exile Athanasius introduced the Egyptian monastic system to the West. He was the first Alexandrian patriarch who knew the Coptic language.

In 392, emperor Theodosius I passed an edict forbidding paganism throughout the empire. The church historian Socrates (380-450) informs us that Emperor Theodosius granted Patriarch Theophilus's request that the temples be destroyed. According to Coptic tradition, the aged Patriarch [Athanasius](#) expressed to his secretary Theophilus, the future patriarch, his wish that the Serapeum be closed. Theophilus (385-412) took this opportunity to limit both pagans and heretics within the church. The Alexandrian mob destroyed the Serapeum, which was a huge complex of buildings that included a temple to the god Serapis, lecture halls, a library, and shrines for other gods.

Theophilus's successor, Patriarch Cyril I (412-444), spent five years at the Monastery of St. Macarius in Wadi al-Natrun and counted monks among his supporters. Intolerance of paganism continued under Cyril's patriarchy. In 415 Hypatia, a female philosopher and leader of the Neoplatonist school, was brutally murdered in Alexandria by a Christian mob thought to include monks from Wadi al-Natrun.

After the orthodox struggles with the Arians in the early fourth century, theologians continued to argue about the unity or duality of Christ with God the Father. Nestorius, Patriarch of Constantinople (d. ca. 451) supported his chaplain, Anastasius (328-373), who had preached against the application of the word Theotokos (God-bearer) to the Virgin Mary, thus questioning her [divine](#) motherhood on the grounds that she was the mother of only the humanity of Christ. Cyril opposed the theology of Nestorius in the Council of Ephesus in 431. The Holy Virgin was declared Theotokos, and Nestorius was condemned and exiled first to the Kharga Oasis and then to Akhmim in Upper Egypt. Cyril's writings reflect his great qualities as a theologian, and his theology prevailed in the church until his death in 444. Patriarch Dioscorus I succeeded Cyril the Great in the See of St. Mark. The Alexandrian See reached its apogee through the efforts of [Athanasius](#) and Cyril.

In around 448 Eutyches, an archimandrite of a monastery in Constantinople with great influence in the Byzantine court, denied the human nature of Christ. He declared that before the Incarnation, the [divine](#) and human natures of Christ were united, while after the Incarnation, Christ was fully divine. In 449 Patriarch Dioscorus presided over the Council of Ephesus (431), which had been summoned by Emperor Theodosius II (408-450). Eutyches was vindicated, and Flavian was deposed from the See of Constantinople. The theology of Eutychus was later rejected, however, by the Church of Alexandria. The death of Emperor Theodosius II in 450 led to the reversal of the theological policy.

Emperor Marcian (450-467) convoked an ecumenical council at Chalcedon, on the [Asiatic](#) coast opposite Constantinople, in 451. The decisions of the Council of Ephesus (449) were repudiated, and Eutyches was condemned and exiled; he died in obscurity in 454. The Council made the See of Constantinople second only to Rome. The nature of Christ was defined as twofold, [divine](#) and human, and united unconfused, unchangeably, indivisibly, and inseparably.

The Egyptians believed that the [doctrine](#) accepted at the Council of Chalcedon (451) would destroy the essential unity of the person of Christ. Patriarch Dioscorus did not accept the Chalcedonian decisions and was exiled to the island of Gangra in Paphlagonia. Alexandria's leading position in the Christian Church had been lost. An irresolvable schism resulted in the church after the Council of Chalcedon. The dispute over the nature of Christ led to bloodshed and caused an irreparable rift between the church in Egypt and the rest of the Christian world. The Egyptian or Coptic Church became a national church united behind the Patriarch of Alexandria. The emperors of the Byzantine Empire wanted to fill the See of Alexandria with men loyal to Constantinople (Melkite Christians) who would provide them with imperial, political, and military support. The Copts recognized only their patriarch, who often had to leave Alexandria in order to lead his church, which was far from the Byzantine authorities.

The fourth and fifth centuries also witnessed the birth and spread of Egyptian monasticism, a distinctive spiritual discipline with great influence on Christianity. It is one of Egypt's most important contributions to civilization. In the third century, the Egyptian desert had become a refuge for farmers who were forced to abandon their land under the pressure of debts caused by excessive taxation. Moreover, Christians had fled urban environments and villages to occupy tombs and caves on the desert margin to escape the Decian persecution (251). Some discovered that life in the desert areas was more suitable for religious practice and meditation. We know very little about the first monks other than the absence of rules by which they had to live.

St. Antony, "the father of the monks," was born in Coma in Upper Egypt in 251. Following the Lord's command, "sell all your possessions and give to the poor, and come follow me, and you will have treasure in heaven" (Mt 19:21), he sold his possessions when he was around twenty years old and practiced a solitary life outside the village. Between approximately 285 and 313 he lived in complete solitude in a deserted fortress at Pispir

(the present-day Monastery of al-Maymun). We are told that St. Antony came with his disciples to Alexandria to encourage the confessors at the time of persecution. Finally by 313 he had moved to the 'interior desert' at the Red Sea, the site of the present day Monastery of St. Antony. Toward the end of St Antony's life the number of ascetics increased. The influential Life of Antony, written by Patriarch [Athanasius](#) shortly after the saint's death, had a great impact on the spread of monasticism in the West. Antony, who died in 356, was a popular saint in Europe in the Middle Ages. During the rule of Patriarch Athanasius (328-373) nationalist feeling increased among the Egyptians, a trend that was subsequently strengthened by the theological controversies of the fifth century.

In about 320, St. Pachomius established the first community at Tabennisi, in the district of Nag' Hammadi, in Upper Egypt. He founded coenobitic or communal monasticism, which was based on precise rules. These rules governed all aspects of monastic life: monks lived together in houses, each with a steward assigned special duties. Offices rotated every three weeks. There were set times for prayer, Mass, work, meals, and sleep. Pachomius ruled over nine monasteries for men and two for women. In 404 St. Jerome rendered the Pachomian Rule into Latin from an intermediate Greek translation of the Coptic original. Thus Pachomius's rule would influence the Western monastic rules of St. Basil (ca. 330-379) and St. Benedict of Nursia (ca. 480-550). After John Cassian visited Egypt in the late fourth century, he founded the monasteries of St. Victor for men and St. Salvador for women in Marseilles. The Western monastic tradition, in particular the Benedictine order, owes much to Coptic monastic traditions.

Another center of fourth-century monastic life was in the region west of the Delta. Here in Scetis (Wadi al-Natrun), Nitria, and Kellia, many colonies of monks gathered to live in communities surrounding an elder monastic. Literary sources tell of Amun, Macarius the Great, and many other hermits. Around 330 Amun went to the inner mountain of Nitria,

about 100 kilometers south of Alexandria. Disciples gathered around Amun and a form of semi-anchorism flourished. Monks lived alone in independent cells five days a week and on Saturday and Sunday came together in the church, where they participated in the eucharistic liturgy and took part in a common meal (agape). Within a few years Nitria became too crowded, and Amun and St. Antony together founded Kellia, or the Cells, about sixteen kilometers south of Nitria. Hundreds of monk cells with interesting architecture and wall paintings have been discovered in Kellia. Unfortunately, these were nearly obliterated by the encroachment of modern cultivation, except for a number of wall paintings and some fine examples of pottery that are preserved in Cairo's Coptic Museum.

St. Macarius (ca. 300-390) founded a colony of monks in Wadi al-Natrun around 330. By the time of his death there were four flourishing monasteries there: the monastery of the Romans (al-Baramus), Pshoi, Macarius, and John the Little. The latter ceased to exist in the fifteenth century, but the three other monasteries have been continuously occupied since the fourth century. The monastery of the Syrians was built in the sixth century. When security deteriorated in the ninth century, all four monasteries had to be protected by enclosure walls, which are still visible today.

Many monasteries and hermitages were built in Upper Egypt. Two of the most important monasteries are those of St. Shenute and St. Pshoi, known as the White and Red monasteries near Sohag in Upper Egypt. One of the greatest figures of monasticism is Shenute, who was the Abbot of the White Monastery between 385 and 465. He was also a great preacher who struggled against paganism in the region of Panopolis. An indication of his importance as a leader of orthodoxy is the fact that he accompanied Patriarch Cyril to the Council of Ephesus in 431. Shenute was an authoritarian, a zealot, and a philanthropist whose monastery received thousands of refugees in hard times.

According to Palladius (ca. 363-431), monk, bishop, and historian, there were 5,000 monks in Nitria and 600 in [Kellia](#) toward 390. At the beginning of the fifth century, St. Jerome reported that 50,000 Pachomian monks attended the annual meeting. We are told that 2,200 monks and 1,800 nuns were under Shenute in the region of the White Monastery. Before the Arab conquest of Egypt in 641, hundreds of monasteries and colonies of [hermits](#) were established and flourished all over Egypt. Many of them began to decline and gradually deteriorated or were abandoned after 705, when a poll tax was imposed on the monks for the first time.

The monks played an important role in the history of Christianity in Egypt. Patriarch [Athanasius](#) was the first to encourage Egyptian monks to be ordained bishops, and many of the patriarchs and bishops of the Coptic Church were chosen from among the monks. Indeed, since the eighth century, most of the patriarchs of the Alexandrian See have been elected from among the monks of Wadi al-Natrun. In addition to providing ecclesiastic authority, monasteries have actively preserved Christian history. Monastic libraries throughout Egypt contain valuable Greek, Old Nubian, Ethiopian, Syriac, Armenian, Coptic, and even Arabic manuscripts. They bear witness to the multiethnic character of some of Egypt's monastic communities. The artistic heritage of these monasteries is beyond estimation.

The last ten years of Byzantine rule in Egypt were among the fullest in Egyptian history. Byzantine authorities attempted to reconcile the Copts after the ten-year Persian occupation ended in 629, but their efforts failed and the situation deteriorated. In 631 Emperor [Heraclius](#) sent Cyrus—known also as al-Muqawqas—to Alexandria as an imperial prefect to control Egypt and continue as a loyal patriarch to the Empire. When he could not persuade the Copts to deny their doctrine, Cyrus chased the Coptic Patriarch Benjamin into exile in Upper Egypt between 631 and 644, and even attacked monasteries in his hunt for the leaders of the Coptic Church.

It is a wonder that the Coptic Church survived the many waves of persecution. It not only survived, but has had a direct influence on other churches in Africa. For example, in 362 Patriarch [Athanasius](#) sent a bishop to Philae in Nubia. We know that these two churches enjoyed good relations until at least the time of Patriarch Gabriel IV (1370-1380), who consecrated a bishop for the Nubians. And beginning in the fourth century it was established tradition that an Egyptian monk be sent to head the Ethiopian Church—a tradition that was abandoned only in 1948.

The Byzantine wave of persecution did not last long. The Arab conquest of Egypt in 641 had far-reaching consequences for Egypt's history in general and for the Coptic Church in particular. The attitude of the Muslims toward the 'People of the Book,' or dhimmis, ensured the protection of the Copts' possessions and churches, but the building of new churches was prohibited. Non-Muslims were not allowed to bear arms and were obliged to pay an additional tax known as the jizya, or poll tax. The principal concern of Islamic rule was the smooth levy of taxation irrespective of any consideration. Therefore, the Arabs did not make any sectarian distinction between 'Monophysite' and 'Melkite' Christians, and the Copts enjoyed doctrinal freedom. During the first few decades of the Arab occupation, educated Copts filled most of the high administrative positions in the country, but in later centuries higher office was restricted only to Muslims.

The succeeding centuries witnessed a sometimes radically exploitative policy by the Arab occupants toward the Egyptian Christian population. When the taxation became unbearable, Copts revolted. Sources refer to nine revolts against Arab authorities between 696 and 832, all of which were suppressed. It seems that the ferocious repression of the last one, known as the Bashmurite revolt, resulted in the conversion of a considerable part of the Coptic population. It is therefore not surprising that not long after the crushing of the Bashmurite rebellion in 832 the Copts had to obey the orders of the Abbasid caliph al-Mutawakkil (847-861). He required for the first time that all Copts wear distinctive

dress and be forbidden to ride horses.

In addition to the poll tax and arbitrary financial burdens, a number of factors played a significant role in the Islamization of Egypt. First, a number of Arab tribes settled in various regions of Egypt, especially in the Delta. Second, despite employing Copts in posts of authority during the early decades of Arab rule, the government's administration began to employ only Arabs and Muslims. Third, the Church's economy and institutions, especially the monasteries, were systematically weakened. Fourth, the social status of the Copts was deliberately lowered. Monks and clergy were humiliated, and even bishops and patriarchs were sometimes imprisoned and shackled.

The Tulunids (869-905), the Ikhshids (935-969), and the Fatimids (969-1171) were in general tolerant Muslim rulers. Under the Shi'a Fatimid caliphs, the Copts were employed in the most important positions and allowed to carry the highest honors. The only exception was Caliph al-Hakim (996-1021) who ordered the destruction of monasteries and churches and the dismissal of the Copts from government office. Copts were compelled to wear wooden crosses suspended from their necks, each weighing at least five pounds, and other distinctive dress.

Patriarch Christodoulus (1047-1077) moved the patriarchal seat from Alexandria to al-Mu'allafa Church in Old Cairo to be near the government. The advent of the Crusades brought new problems for the Christians in the region. Crusaders did not distinguish between the 'Monophysites' and the Muslims in Egypt and considered the Copts heretics. Syrian Christians fled to join their coreligionists in Egypt. Crusader victories resulted in reprisals against the Copts, for Muslim rulers did not distinguish between the two groups of Christians.

When Salah al-Din (Saladin) came to power, he dismissed the Copts from government office and reinforced the distinctive dress code of the Christians. The famous St. Mark Cathedral in Alexandria was pulled down

on the pretext that the Crusaders might fortify it should they seize Alexandria. With his victory over the Crusaders and the capture of Jerusalem in 1187, Salah al-Din changed his intolerant attitude toward the Copts. The Ayyubid sultans (1171-1250) were also relatively tolerant. The Mamluks, or slave dynasty, ruled Egypt from 1250 to 1517. They were slaves of a special kind, brought mainly from the region of the Caspian and Black seas, sold as young boys, converted to Islam, and trained as soldiers in Egypt.

During the Mamluk period, the status and number of Copts continued to decline, and by the time of the Ottoman conquest of Egypt their situation was very precarious. They were often dismissed from government office and frequently had to wear distinctive and demeaning dress. On one day in 1321, fanatic groups looted, destroyed, and burned over sixty of the main churches and monasteries throughout Egypt. Apparently, the churches were attacked simultaneously after the Friday prayer, and the authorities were taken by surprise. The Arab historian al-Maqrizi (1364-1442) reported that in the year 1321, "the attacks of the Muslims against Christians increased to the extent that Christians ceased to walk in the streets and many of them converted to Islam. Jews were spared during this period. If a Christian wanted to leave his home he had to borrow the yellow turban of a Jew and wear it in order to be safe from the mob in the streets." In 1517 the Ottomans wrested control from Mamluks, but the Mamluk leaders continued as provincial beys under Ottoman governors into the early nineteenth century. The Ottoman sultans in Istanbul were interested only in Egypt's revenues. The impoverishment of the entire population of Egypt, Christians and Muslims alike, reached previously unparalleled levels during that dark period. The life of the Copts was less miserable, however, during Ottoman times than under the Mamluks. One of the reasons behind the sustained existence of the Copts is their success in financial administration. Ibn Khaldun (1322-1406), a great medieval Islamic scholar, says: "It is a custom of [the Turks] that the Wazir be appointed from among the Copts in charge of the office of

bookkeeping and tax collection, because in Egypt they have been familiar with these matters since ancient times.”

Copts rendered their services to the Mamluk beys and some of them occupied significant positions in the administration, such as Ibrahim al-Guhari (d. 1795), who was a finance minister. His influence was so great that he was able to restore many [Coptic monasteries](#) and churches, and to construct new churches as well.

The French expedition under Napoleon, despite its brevity (1798-1801), is considered a turning point in Egypt’s modernization. Muhammad ‘Ali (1805-1849) and most of his descendants were relatively tolerant toward the Copts. During the nineteenth century, the Ottomans revoked the traditional poll tax, the jizya, imposed on the dhimmis in 1855, and the Coptic population began to flourish. This revival of Coptic Christianity was visible in the cultural movement within the Coptic Church under the pontificate of Patriarch Cyril IV the Reformer (1854-1861).

The multicultural character of Christianity, which is deeply rooted in Egypt, is reflected in many ways. For example, some monasteries and monastic colonies in the Egyptian deserts received European, Syrian, Armenian, Nubian, and Ethiopian monks and visitors in Byzantine and medieval times. A considerable number of the saints commemorated in the Arabic synaxarion of the Copts are not Egyptians. Many Coptic churches are dedicated to nonEgyptian saints such as Mercurius (Abu Sayfayn), Sergius, George, and Barbara. In 1219 St. Francis of Assisi met the Ayyubid sultan al-Malik al-Kamil (1218-1238) near the city of Damietta during one of the Crusades. He preached the message of Christ to the sultan, but without success. The existence of European traders and missionaries in Alexandria in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries increased interest in more contact between Rome and the Copts. The efforts to reunite the Copts with Rome during the Council of Ferrara-Florence (1438-1445) and its acceptance by the Coptic Patriarch John XI was rejected by the majority of Copts and therefore failed. Other attempts

were made during the pontificate of the Coptic Patriarchs Gabriel VII (1559-1565), John XIV (1570-1585), Gabriel VIII (1586-1601), Matthew IV (1660-1675), and John XVI to attract the Coptic Church to Roman obedience, but without success. Apparently, the Copts preferred a union in love and rejected a strict legal subjection to Rome.

The advent of the Catholic missions in the Ottoman period led to the establishment of mission schools that offered some young Copts a European education long before the modern reform or the Coptic Renaissance under Patriarch Cyril IV (1854-1861). In 1824 Pope Leo XII of Rome consecrated Abraham Khashur as bishop for the Catholic Copts, and a Catholic patriarchate was established in Alexandria in 1895. Its establishment contributed greatly to the growth of the Coptic Catholic Church in Egypt, which comprises a variety of Catholic communities. The largest of these are the Coptic Catholics, joined by the Greek Melkites, the Armenian Catholics, the Syrian Catholics, the Chaldeans, the Maronites, and the Latins.

Protestant missionary activities eventually began in Egypt through the efforts of the Presbyterian Church of North America in 1854. In 1863 the Egyptian Presbytery founded a theological school to prepare the national Evangelical pastors, and in 1926 a new building for the theological seminary of the Evangelical Coptic Church was founded in Cairo. In the late 1980s there were 340 pastors serving the Evangelical churches all over Egypt that belong to the Synod of the Nile. It is to be noted that foreign missionaries, both Catholic and Protestant, came to Egypt to bring the Gospel to Muslims, but they ended up proselytizing the Orthodox Copts through modern education, humanitarian efforts, and medical work. The newly formed Catholic and Protestant minorities contributed to some extent to the awakening of the Coptic Orthodox Church from centuries of sluggishness under Mamluk and Ottoman rule.

In 1973 Pope Shenouda III visited Rome, where he issued with [Pope Paul IV](#) a joint statement of Christology. Five years later, Pope Shenouda

organized a meeting, at the Monastery of St. Pshoi in Wadi al-Natrun, with the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Alexandria, the Syrian Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch, the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch, and the Armenian Catholicon. They confirmed their Christological agreement: “We confirm our right understanding of the Person of Christ, who is God from God, the only Son of the Father, who became truly man and has fully accepted our human nature, and made it one with His divinity without mingling, nor confusion, nor alternation. His divinity never departed from His humanity, even for a single moment nor the twinkling of an eye.”

In 1988 there was a meeting between the Coptic Evangelical Community Council and Coptic Orthodox theologians upon the invitation of Pope Shenouda, which led to theological dialogue between the two churches.

Egyptian Christianity is as old as Christianity itself. Its contributions to world civilization in general and Christian heritage in particular are beyond estimation.

**Gawdat Gabra**

Tags: [History](#)