

n ancient church faces new threats Coptic - St. Louis Post-Dispatch (MO) - September 8, 2012 - page A11

September 8, 2012 | St. Louis Post-Dispatch (MO) | FAITH PERSPECTIVES > By Mike TSICHLIS Tschlis is director of the St. Irenaeus Orthodox Theological Institute. This column first appeared on Civil Religion blog on STLtoday called "LIGHT FROM THE EAST: Ruminations on life, culture, and faith from an Orthodox Christian perspective." | Page A11

The Coptic Orthodox Church of Egypt is one of the oldest Christian ecclesiastical bodies in the world, claiming a lineage that dates to at least the second century after Christ. Indeed, tradition traces the founding of Christianity in Egypt to the time of Mark the evangelist, the named author of the second Gospel who traveled to the area as a missionary.

Christianity grew in Egypt as the faith spread throughout the Roman Empire. Many of the church's great early theologians came from there, including Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Cyril of Alexandria, and Athanasius, who during the fourth century steadfastly upheld what became the orthodox theological position that Christ the Son of God was of "one essence" and co-eternal with the God the Father, not merely a being created at one point in time. This view continues to be expressed in the near-universal Christian proclamation of faith known as the Nicene Creed.

In the fifth century, divisions occurred over the church's formulation of the humanity and divinity of Christ. These differences led to a schism after the fourth ecumenical council held in Chalcedon (in modern Turkey) in 451, giving rise to what became known as the "non-Chalcedonian" Orthodox churches, including the Coptic church of Egypt. Today, after nearly 50 years of ecumenical dialogue, many believe that both sides in the debate were trying to say the same thing, only using different terminologies.

Egypt eventually lost its predominantly Christian identity after the Arab conquest of North Africa in the seventh and eighth centuries. Remaining Christians dwindled to a minority, becoming second-class citizens under Muslim law, paying a required tax for the privilege known as the jizya.

The Coptic language, which was the vernacular tongue of the ancient Egyptians, was also lost, eventually replaced by Arabic. Today the use of Coptic survives only in Coptic Christian worship services and in specialized areas of academe. As part of a liturgical custom of their homeland, Copts take off their shoes before entering a church sanctuary in imitation of Moses' removing his shoes before he approached the vision of God as a burning bush on Mount Sinai.

Today, about 12 percent of Egypt's 82.5 million inhabitants, or about 10 million people, are Coptic Orthodox Christians. Put in context, that number is greater than the population of countries such as Austria and Switzerland. It's almost four times the size of the St. Louis metropolitan region.

Institutional discrimination against the Coptic Christian population of Egypt has been long-standing. Fawzy Abdelmalek, an engineer who immigrated to St. Louis from Egypt in the 1970s and with other local Copts helped found St. Mary and St. Avraam Coptic Orthodox Church in Maryland Heights, remembers those years. Upon graduating college, where he had many Muslim friends, Abdelmalek soon found that his religious identity was holding him back from job advancement and at that point decided to immigrate to the United States in pursuit of better opportunities.

But the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in his native land and its expression through Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated political parties has Abdelmalek especially concerned for the future of Egypt's Christian population. After the celebrated Arab Spring uprising last year, many Copts were hopeful that the turning point for democracy and freedom in Egypt had come.

Unfortunately, recent events in Egypt have not been encouraging. Coptic churches have been burned, and worshippers chased out. A Christian teenager was beaten and arrested for posting a cartoon of Muhammad on his Facebook page. For those familiar with American history, such attacks by members of a majority on a minority group might resemble the experience of African-Americans in the Jim Crow South.

Recent political changes in Egypt don't appear to favor the cause of religious freedom and tolerance.

In the weeks leading up to his election as the country's new president in June, Muslim Brotherhood candidate

Mohammed Morsi forcefully claimed that the Quran ought to be the foundation of the Egyptian constitution, a position slouching toward theocracy and the suppression of religious liberty. Several days ago, Morsi further solidified the power base of fundamentalists by appointing hardline Islamists to regional positions within the country.

Given such troubling shifts occurring in Egypt, the big question before Coptic Christians is an existential one: What will become of their people and their church, a great remnant of early Christianity whose worship life has been virtually unchanged for 17 centuries?

They need our prayers and support for what I fear will be a long and arduous struggle for survival.

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