

What is Coptic Christianity, and what do Coptic Christians believe?

“Coptic” means “Egyptian,” and Christians living in Egypt identify themselves as Coptic Christians. They originated in Alexandria, Egypt. Proudly, the Coptic Christians acknowledge and herald John Mark, (author of the Gospel of Mark), as their founder and first bishop sometime between A.D. 42 - A.D. 62. The Coptic Church was involved in the very first major split in the Church, well before there was such a thing as "Roman" Catholicism, and it was also well before the East/West split.

Prior to the “Great” East/West Schism of A.D. 1054, the Coptics were separated from the rest by the Council of Chalcedon in A.D. 451. The council met to discuss the Incarnation of Christ and declared that Christ was "one hypostasis in two natures" (i.e., one person who shares two distinct natures). This became standard orthodoxy for Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant churches from then on. The Coptic understanding is that Christ is one nature from two natures: "the Logos Incarnate"- Christ is from, not in, two natures: full humanity and full divinity. Some in the Coptic Orthodox Church believe that their position was misunderstood at the Council of Chalcedon and take great pains to ensure that they are not seen as Monophysitic (denying the two natures of Christ), but rather "Miaphysitic" (believing in one composite/conjoined nature from two). Some believe that perhaps the council understood the church correctly, but wanted to exile the church for its refusal to take part in politics or due to the rivalry between the bishops of Alexandria and Rome.

The tradition says that when John Mark arrived on a missionary journey to Egypt, the Coptic form of religion of that day was god-centered worship, but focused upon the pyramids. However, John Mark and the Gospel message were well received by the Coptic people as they also believed in “eternal life.” The Coptic people, under Roman rule and societal influence, consisted of Greeks, Jews, and Egyptians; therefore, Christianity had to take into account the different cultural, language, and religious backgrounds when evangelizing and in establishing its church. The Coptic Christians were originally well founded in theology, and other churches in cities throughout the Roman Empire looked up to them with great admiration and respect, willingly following their lead in doctrinal like-mindedness and unity.

When the Coptics were under the rule of the Roman Empire, they suffered severe persecution and death for their steadfast faith and beliefs in Christ while refusing to worship emperors. However, by A.D. 641, yet another tribulation began when the Arab conquest took place, overthrowing the Romans’ rule in Egypt and, at first, relieving the Coptic Church from persecution. What appeared to be their liberty and freedom became yet again bondage. The societal strength and control of the Arabs caused the Coptics to endure a major language and culture change as well as confront the Islamic faith. Unfortunately, over the centuries, Christianity lost foothold and most Coptics converted to Islam.

Today, there is a small population of Coptic Christians remaining in Alexandria. Estimates of the current population of the Coptic Church range from 10 million to 60 million members worldwide. Theologically, Coptic Christianity is very similar to Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy. They profess to be genuine followers of Jesus Christ and a part of His worldwide Church. But, as with Catholicism, they tend to emphasize meritorious works in salvation along with liturgical ritual rather than salvation through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

<http://www.gotquestions.org/Coptic-Christianity.html>