

The Coptic Church and African Missions

by

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After the Constantinian Edict of Toleration, Christianity became the official religion in the Roman Empire, and Christians in the Orient and Occident were able to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ unmolested of government interference. The See of Alexandria was then the most important one in the whole Church. Indeed, Alexandria, until the rise of Constantinople, was the most powerful city in the East, for the prestige of its founder still clung to it. Even in the pagan parts of the Roman Empire, Egypt was still regarded as the ancient nurse of the religious mysteries. The Alexandrian Church was the only great seat of Christian learning, and the occupant of the Apostolic Throne of St. Mark was the only bishop of the time, who bore the name 'Pope'. After the Council of Nicaea, he became the 'Judge of the Universe' on account of his decisions pertaining to the fixing of the dates for the celebration of Easter, and the obedience paid to his judgment in all matters of learning, both secular and sacred, almost equalled that paid in later days to the ecclesiastical authority of the Popes in the West. As St. Gregory of Nazianzen said : « The head of the Church of Alexandria is the head of the world ».

During the patriarchate of Athanasius, the 20th Patriarch of Alexandria (328-373 A.D.), Frumentius, the son of Meropius, was consecrated Bishop of Aksûm and became the founder of the Church of Ethiopia. As it is well known, the consecration of Frumentius by Athanasius had lasting consequences, in so far as theologically and administratively the Church of Ethiopia became dependent upon the See of Alexandria. From the middle of the IVth century until the middle of the XXth century, the leaders of the Ethiopian Church, *i. e.* the Abûnâ and the bishops, were Egyptians.

Monasticism like Christianity was introduced into Ethiopia from Egypt. In 480 A.D., Aragawi, who is said to have received his monastic habit from St. Pachomius, founded the celebrated monastery of Debra Damo. With him came eight other monks from the Monastery of St. Antony, and together they are known as the « Nine Saints », who laid the foundations of the monastic life in Ethiopia.

During the first half of the VIth century, Theodora, the monophysitic wife of the Emperor Justinian, commissioned Julian the Presbyter to travel south of the first cataract to preach the Christian Faith to the Nubians. Some decades later, Theodosius I, the 33rd Patriarch of Alexandria (536-

567 A.D.), consecrated Longinus as Bishop of Nubia. From the VIth century until the XVth century, the Northern Kingdom adhered to the Christian Faith. The Southern Kingdom of Nubia retained the Christian Faith until the beginning of the XVIth century, when it succumbed to Islamic pressure.

From the VIIth century onwards, the Coptic Church decreased in numbers, power and prestige, so that the Copts were unable to engage in any significant missionary enterprise in Africa or elsewhere.

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In 1962, the Institute of Coptic Studies in Abbassiyah established a Department of African Studies for the training of Copts, who are to serve as missionaries of the Coptic Church. Ever since the VIIth century, this constitutes the first attempt to think in terms of mission, and for any student of Christian Missions this signifies an interesting development within the Coptic Church. As in all cases of Christian Missions, so far we must study motivations, the methods and the goals, and whereas no clear missionary strategies can be discerned, certain motivations become quite explicit through the public statements as they appeared in the Egyptian Press.

In a press release of July 20, 1962, His Holiness Pope Cyril VI declared « that final measures are now being taken to comply with the desire of the Christian inhabitants of Uganda, Kenya and Tanganyika to join the Coptic Church. The Africa project of the Coptic Church is given priority over any other projects, because the Coptic Church carries the banner of Orthodox Christian doctrine, and wherever Orthodox Christianity exists, full liberty and permanent peace prevail. For the Coptic Church throughout its long history has not given a chance to imperialism to dominate through religious teachings »¹.

The Department of African Studies is administered by two African specialists, Abûnâ Youssef Abdou Youssef, B.A., M.A., Th.M., and Dr. Zaher Riad. The plan is « to recruit university graduates and distinguished members of the clergy to join the department and to prepare them for missionary service ». Moreover, it was planned to enrol the youth belonging to the African Churches in the Coptic Orthodox Theological Seminary and the Institute of Coptic Studies in a bid to choose from among them the nucleus of the African Coptic clergy in their countries and to establish schools and hospitals. In a statement of January 5, 1964, His Holiness Pope Cyril VI expressed his keen interest in a plan aimed at consolidating the mission work of Qummuš Ishaq al-Bishoî in Johannesburg, South Africa, after having learned that there were several African Christian communities, that wished to cut relations with Western Churches and establish independent

¹ *Middle East News Agency*, July 20, 1962.

African Churches»². According to a statement by His Holiness Pope Cyril VI, four hundred families had joined the Coptic Orthodox Church in South Africa since 1950³. In the meantime, preparations for the establishment of Coptic religious study centres in Africa were made « with a view to combat imperialist preaching in these countries ». The report includes that a number of physicians, university graduates and clergymen are engaged in the African studies project of the Coptic Church⁴. A week later, the Pope announced that the larger part of the funds of the Coptic waqfs (religious endowments) would be devoted to the building of churches, schools and hospitals in Africa « so that we may fulfil our mission of liberating the African people from imperialist doctrines, which were introduced in Africa under the guise of religion »⁵. In the beginning of 1965, a significant addition to the official ecclesiastical title of Cyril VI was adopted, and in the local and international press he is being referred to as « His Holiness Patriarch Cyril VI, Pope of Alexandria and of All Africa »⁶. In May 1965, Pope Cyril VI announced that the Government of the United Arab Republic had agreed to contribute LE 100.000 towards the cost of building « one of the largest and most modern cathedrals in the world »⁷. This contribution was also a token of appreciation of the role of the Coptic Church in Africa. Moreover, Pope Cyril VI announced that President Gamal Abd al-Nasser informed him of his support of the Message of the Coptic Church with respect to Africa. « The appreciation of the President of the task of the Church of St. Mark in Africa will have an important effect and echo on the execution of this task, especially as the President, who is the carrier of the flag of political liberty in the African continent, has a deep faith in the fact that the men of the National Church are capable of strengthening such a liberty »⁸.

In September 1965, the Christian Peace Conference sponsored by the Christian Churches of Eastern Europe convened the first African Christian Peace Conference in Freetown, Sierra Leone. Abûnâ Yussef Abdou Yussef of the African Desk of the Coptic Patriarchate represented Cyril VI, Pope of Alexandria and All Africa. A few weeks later, Abûnâ Yussef Abdou Yussef participated in the Dar as-Salaam Conference on African Studies, where he read a paper on the « Role of Religion in African History ». According to the Egyptian press report, the resolutions of the Conference « con-

² *Ibid.*, Jan. 6, 1964.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, February 12, 1964.

⁵ *Ibid.*, February 19, 1964.

⁶ The Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Alexandria has used this title for a long time.

⁷ *Middle East News Agency*, May 13, 1965.

⁸ *Ibid.*

sidered the Church of Alexandria as the Church of Africa with a glorious history in the annals of Christianity». Moreover, it was pointed out at the Conference «that all African people were looking to the Apostolic See of St. Mark to help them establish African churches free from the influence of imperialist missionaries»⁹.

In terms of her service to Africa, the Coptic Orthodox Church has offered several scholarships to Ethiopian theological students to study at the Coptic Theological Seminary in Abbassiyah. In 1966, four Ethiopians were studying at the Seminary. In addition, since January 1966, the Coptic Orthodox Church has established the Patriarchal Centre for Evangelism in Cossika south of Maadi, where sixteen Sudanese students receive theological training. The rector of the Centre is Abûnâ Antûnîûs as-Suriânî, the former librarian of the Monastery of the Syrians in the Wâdî 'n-Naṭrûn. The teaching is offered in English and in Arabic, since 50% of the students are English speaking. The instructors for this program are appointed by the Pope and include Bishop Samuel, Dr. Hakîm Amîn, Dr. Zaher Riad and Abûnâ Yussef Abdou Yussef. The hope is expressed that within a short time, the first Coptic evangelistic, medical and agricultural missionaries will be sent into Africa to take the place of the American and European missionaries.

⁹ *Ibid.*, November 30, 1965.