

A HISTORY
OF THE
CHURCH IN AFRICA



BENGT SUNDKLER
AND
CHRISTOPHER STEED

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The maps only include place names and ethnic groups referred to in the text.

I



THE BEGINNINGS

EGYPT

The Holy Refugees

It was as refugees, according to St Matthew, that the Holy Family came from Bethlehem to Egypt. In later Coptic tradition the pious story has followed the pilgrimage of the Holy Family from the Nile Delta all along the river to Asyut and back again, altogether a period of some three and a half years. Great miracles occurred during the passage. At place after place in a dry land, as the Divine Child stretched out his hand, fresh water wells would spring up and the trees would bow their heads; yes, the very palm tree to which the Mother held her hand during her birth-pangs gave the family shadow from the heat of the sun. (This has a Mediterranean background – *Leto*.) The sick were healed and the dead were raised again. South of Asyut – later to be one of the great centres of the Coptic Church – the Holy Family, having passed ruins of rock-temples and other holy buildings, found refuge in large rock-tombs from the early dynasties of Egyptian history.

This vivid tradition has more to say about the local Church – which has loved to narrate it – than about historical fact. It has been retold by generations and helped to make Egypt a ‘holy land’, *because* Jesus the Child and Mary, the Mother of God, by their holy presence, had made it so.¹

The first chapter and the rest of the book

Twentieth-century literature devoted to the first thousand years of Church history of Egypt, Nubia, Ethiopia and North Africa is immense. Finds of sources have added to our understanding of the forces which shaped the spirituality in the Church in those centuries. Archaeological excavations have brought to light invaluable documents and a fascinating world of

Christian art. The UNESCO campaign in the 1960s to save the culture hidden in the sands of Nubia has produced sensational results, and even now, innocent-looking mounds in the sands of the desert may hide buildings, ruins and documents which could change our entire outlook on certain periods of this history.

Scholarly congresses on Coptic Studies, Nubian Studies and Ethiopian Studies gather together scholars from around the world in order to report on and discuss new discoveries of material and perspectives. In view of all this truly impressive richness, the following brief pages attempt a rapid survey based on the volumes published by scholars and experts in this field.

This chapter on the first 1,500 years has a function of its own, related to the book as a whole. This part was written towards the end of the total enterprise. Here as elsewhere, but more so, selection was necessary, and we found *our* selective principle for this first chapter in the great themes which have been worked out for the following centuries. The survey of the first 1,000 years will be related to the general Church history of Africa, with its great themes such as Church and State, Church and indigenous culture, the city and rural population movements, theology and spirituality. Some of these themes, writ large for more recent centuries, will be found as it were, anticipated in those early centuries.

The Jewish Diaspora and the Beginnings of the Church

The first beginnings of the Church's history in the Nile Delta must be understood as closely related to the life of the Jewish Diaspora on the Mediterranean coastline. About the first 100 years of Christian beginnings in the Nile Delta, the fundamental fact of the relationship to, and dependence on, the Jewish community in the city stands out as of primary importance. The Jews represented a highly significant minority in Alexandria with a population of hundreds of thousands. In all of Egypt there were, at the time of Christ, about 1 million Jews, thus representing the largest Jewish community outside Palestine. Two of the five sections of the city into which Alexandria was divided were dominated by the Jews, their synagogues and their culture.

A leading spokesman for the Jewish Diaspora in Alexandria was Philo, philosopher and Bible expositor, international and cosmopolitan Jewish scholar, deeply influenced by Hellenistic culture and concerned with establishing areas of contact and understanding between Hellenism and Judaism. Alongside Philo and his assimilationist teaching there also appeared the more conservative schools of Jewish thought, less given to allegorical

interpretation of the Scripture. It was here in Jewish Alexandria, that the Septuaginta translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek was created.

In this Jewish world, marked by the Torah and the Prophets, the Sabbath and the feasts, the first Christian groups from Judaea appeared as missionaries, refugees and traders. While at first possibly seeking refuge in the synagogue they were soon prepared to proclaim their astounding and necessarily divisive message, that the Messiah, the Saviour and the Lord had indeed come, in Jesus of Nazareth. Scholars are at present attempting to identify the very place in the city of Alexandria where the first Christians congregated for worship, agape and eucharist, in an area of the Jewish neighbourhood, later known, from the fourth century on, as Boukolou.²

A far-reaching generalization can be made at the outset: this religion of the Messiah, proclaimed by Jewish individuals, families and groups, came into Egypt and Africa from the East. It was an Eastern religion, and whatever changes it has since undergone because of its missionary outreach and consequent identification with many cultures, it retains its fundamental consanguinity with its Eastern origins, with Abraham from Ur of the Chaldees, and with those 'homeless wandering Charismatics' who, in the Holy Land, as the disciples of Jesus had been the first to preach the Christian message. 'It was a coincidence for Christianity that it became Westernized' according to Cardinal Jean Daniélou,³ and the West African scholar E. J. Penoukou adds: 'Likewise it remains a coincidence for the Church in Africa that it received Christianity in a Western form'.⁴ Ancient tradition referred to by the learned Eusebius of Caesarea (?265--?340) – 'the Father of Church history writing' – suggests that the see of Alexandria was founded by St Mark the Evangelist, martyred AD 68.

Modern scholarship moves carefully with regard to this Marcan tradition. 'The historicity of this tradition, though unprovable, should not be ruled out . . . Indeed the tradition of the preaching of Mark in Alexandria may predate the acceptance of the canonical Gospel of Mark in the Alexandrian Church.'⁵ This St Mark tradition has had a resounding echo in modern times. In 1968 the new St Mark's Cathedral was consecrated by Patriarch Cyrillos VI, in the presence of President Nasser, Vice-President Sadat and Haile Selassie I, the Emperor of Ethiopia. On the same occasion the relics of St Mark, seized in 828 by the Venetians, were returned to Egypt by Pope Paul VI in Rome. The relics were thus brought from one cathedral of St Mark to another. (It should be added, perhaps, that another Mediterranean city church – Venice – also counts St Mark as its founder.)

The coastal city and rural inland

For an understanding of the fundamental tensions in Egyptian Church history one has to distinguish between the city of Alexandria and the rest of the country. On the one hand, there was the international Greek-speaking city on the coast with its cosmopolitan culture and Greek Church, turned to the North and to the Mediterranean world – *Alexandria ad Aegyptum* ('Alexandria beside Egypt') – although the city of Alexandria (Rakote in Coptic) also had a Coptic population. On the other, Upper Egypt, the rural region with its emerging Coptic language and culture, monasticism and church, turned away as much as possible from the cosmopolitan world of the bustling city on the coast. Here one was 'Coptic'-speaking, the word being an Arabic form for Egypt. The idea of 'the Egyptian' is a 'fundamental element in this religious community' and emphasizes its heritage from the ancient Egyptians of Pharaonic times.⁶ The Coptic language emerged from the second century. The first translations of Bible text were probably made in the third century, or possibly earlier.

From the vantage-point on the coast at Alexandria the spectator could survey the drama of ancient world politics enacted by succeeding regimes and affecting the fate of Egypt and of all Egyptians: the rise and fall of the Pharaohs, to whose political forms and cultural visions the pyramids, temples and ruins bore witness. The Greek era of the Ptolemies followed with its Hellenistic culture, Greek language and Greek pantheon and the intermixture of Egyptian and Greek gods, (particularly the role of the fertility-saviour goddess, Isis).

In the first century before Christ, the Ptolemies were followed by Roman emperors who began to exert their influence with Latin language and culture and with an insatiable demand for and ever-rising taxation of the wheat-lands of Egypt – the granary of Rome. This economic exploitation had been so harsh and sweeping that the narrow strip of arable land along the River Nile could no longer keep up with the demands. The burden of taxation of corn had from then onwards to be carried by North Africa (the present Maghreb). After the fall of Carthage in 146 BC, North Africa was a vanquished country and now had to keep the conqueror supplied by way of annual tribute, while in Egypt, a Roman colony under Mark Antony since 42 BC, impoverished peasants unable to pay their dues fled from their fields into the deserts.

Economic pressure and consequent local rebellions in the Delta led to mounting tensions between Rome and Egypt. In order to ensure obedience the Roman emperors demanded signs – sacrifice at first of a few grains of

incense, and later, the handing over of the Holy Scriptures – to prove submission to the Emperor. Those who refused this sacrifice were convicted as Christians and thus disloyal subjects: here was the root of the persecutions against the Christians, the worst of all coming under the Emperor Diocletian, from AD 303–05. The persecutions hit the young Church in Egypt as a traumatic blow, never to be forgotten, forever to be re-enacted in the collective memory of the Church, making the Coptic Church into ‘the martyr Church’.

The ‘era of the martyrs’, inaugurating Coptic Church history, begins with the accession of the dreaded Diocletian as Emperor, AD 284, and the Coptic calendar even today begins not with the Birth of Christ but with AD 284. The actual Diocletian persecution took place in the years 299–304. But in Egypt it lingered on and reached a climax in AD 311–12 under Maximinus. The bishop of Alexandria himself was executed; venerated as Peter Martyr he was the first Egyptian saint, also remembered in the Roman canon of the mass. The greatest tragedy took place in the Thebaid in Upper Egypt: day by day, fifty to a hundred of the ‘stubborn peasants’, the Coptic Christians were martyred. In Switzerland the Theban Legion, a unit in the Roman army showed the same stubborn resistance under its leader St Maurice and was decimated again and again, to the last man.

The theologians

Alexandria with its Greek and Jewish populations, its learning and international horizons, was the ideal place for theological debate and an acrimonious theological struggle. The Catechetical School, founded in the second century by the Greek theologian Titus Flavius Clemens (?150–?215), otherwise known as Clement of Alexandria, provided a basis for great theological systems. Clement’s thought was turned to the heavenly world with the ‘Church on High’ where ‘God’s philosophers assembled the Israelites, the pure in heart, in whom there is no guile’.⁷ Clement was succeeded in the Catechetical School by Origen (?185–?254), probably the most learned and possibly the most difficult of the theologians of his time. The study of the Bible was his great concern and he produced the *Hexapla*, an enormous volume where the Hebrew text, both in Hebraic and in Greek letters, was placed side by side with four Greek versions of the Scriptures. His allegorical interpretation of scripture follows a tradition going back to Philo and, before, to Alexandrian Judaism.

Various schools of thought soon competed for attention. Gnosticism was a complex religious movement with roots in the Old Testament and claiming

to possess certain secret knowledge – ‘*gnosis*’. Alexandria had these Gnostic systems. Collections of Gnostic manuscripts have been found in the so-called ‘Nag Hammadi’ texts discovered in 1945 in an old fortress in the desert in Upper Egypt. A young priest named Arius, felt that he could lean on Origen for his own doctrine. In order to extol the person of the Father in the Trinity, to safeguard the unity of God, he made the position of the Word (*Logos*) – the Son – secondary and subordinate. Arius had an uncanny, almost modern gift of propagating his views and ideas. He wrote songs for sailors and millers, for traders and travellers to be sung in the streets and in the harbour. He attracted the masses. All the more St Athanasius, as patriarch, and deeply convinced of the orthodoxy of his position, insisted on the ‘consubstantiality’ of the Son with the Father. (The term *homousios* was first used by the Gnostics!)

In St Athanasius (?296–373), Bishop of Alexandria 328–73, the Church in Egypt saw its greatest patriarch. Unbending in all his convictions, he had a violent temper and would flog some of his younger priests and imprison or expel bishops. His struggles identified him with the great doctrinal proclamations, the ‘creeds’, of the Church. Against Arianism and other dangers he safeguarded the great formula about the Trinity which has followed the Church ever since: ‘consubstantial (of one being with) the Father ...’ etc. One of the three Ecumenical creeds, the ‘Athanasian’ (*Quicumque vult*), is named after him. He was himself exiled from his Alexandria see by the Emperor no less than five times, altogether for a period of some twenty years. (In those international times he was once banished, during the years 335–37, to Trier in Germany.) His friend and colleague was the liturgically creative Serapion of Thmuis.

In this book we are not likely to forget that it was St Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, who consecrated Frumentius as Bishop of Aksum, thus establishing the links between the Church in Egypt and the Church in Ethiopia which were to last for 1,600 years. For the future of the Church in Egypt it was particularly important that St Athanasius, himself an ascetic, identified with the rising monastic movement: through his influence, hierarchy and monks were to be closely united.

St Athanasius’ teachings and ecclesiastical intentions were followed up by St Cyril (380–444) – ‘the super-Athanasian’,⁸ Patriarch of Alexandria 412–44. St Cyril’s influence was felt far beyond Alexandria. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church regards him as ‘her teacher *par excellence*’. Its most important doctrinal manual, with translations in Ge’ez of St Cyril’s main works, bears the name Qerillos (Cyril).⁹ This is another indication of the close affinity between the two Churches of Egypt and Ethiopia.

The Desert Fathers and the monks

There were long lines of connection to the Desert Fathers from the earliest generations of the Christian Church in Palestine and in the East generally. Through these first centuries there was a pull from the desert, leading to an opposition movement to ordinary established society and thus altogether different from the Greek world of business, learning and philosophy. One recent interpretation sees the Desert Fathers as a continuation of the Jewish–Palestinian world of travelling preachers and prophets.¹⁰ For generations these men had been looking for radical change, establishing a counter-society of their own with a totally radical way of life, where they could live out their faith in total poverty and withdrawal from ordinary society. They preferred to disappear into the desert mountains for long periods of time. At first it was a question of individuals who, as hermits, withdrew for a life of prayer and meditation finding their abode in a grotto or perhaps an abandoned grave.

In the desert grottoes they found opportunity for prayer, for a life of the Spirit and a realization of the mighty presence of God. The maxims of the Desert Fathers take the reader to a distant, foreign world. St Antony is obviously one of the leaders among the desert hermits but he cannot unreservedly be regarded as the founder of the movement: he built on an older tradition with which he associated himself.

The majority of these desert *abbas* were men of peasant stock, simple men of faith but with unflinching knowledge (by heart) of Bible passages upon which they could feed the spirit. They were distinguished by ‘visions, miracles, prediction of events and insight into occurrences in far-away places’.¹¹ To some of these men, withdrawal to the desert was a reaction against outrages of the State. Torture, persecution, economic exploitation and hunger had combined to exert a horror in the minds of the people, and some of these anachorets became hermits for economic reasons. From the State’s point of view the Desert Fathers were nothing but a bunch of objectors to military service and tax-evaders.

St Antony (c. 251–356) went into the desert to fight against the demons and to live with God. Renowned for his piety he attracted other men as his disciples. He had to find out ‘whether they were Egyptians or men of Jerusalem’: only to the latter would he give of his time to discuss spiritual matters with them.¹² His life can be studied in valuable primary sources from the late fourth century. Among the best known is *The Life of Saint Antony* by the Patriarch Athanasius, an expression of the veneration that the great church leader and theologian felt for the ascetics in the desert. Later in

the history of the Church monks were to write the lives of bishops. In this early Egyptian case, the Bishop and Patriarch wrote the life of the monk, shortly after St Antony's death.

While a distinction between Alexandria and the rest of Egypt has to be made on economic, linguistic and cultural grounds this difference should on the other hand not be over-emphasized. A recent learned study, entitled *The Letters of St Antony* by Dr Samuel Rubenson, shows that at the time of the late third and early fourth centuries – the period of St Antony and his followers – there was in fact 'a much more extensive contact between Alexandria and the towns of Upper Egypt than hitherto supposed'. There was a cultural movement in both directions between city and countryside. Egypt had its share of scholars, philosophers, poets and bibliophiles and was clearly no less literate than the other parts of the Graeco-Roman world. Dr Rubenson makes the point that 'it is unlikely that Christianity was not heard of in the towns of Upper Egypt before the end of the second century'. The literary papyri give a picture of third-century Egyptian Christianity as strongly Biblical and much less Gnostic than has been suggested. In this context St Antony the hermit was deeply influenced by Origen's theology and there he developed his teaching. The spiritual teacher was the father of monasticism, a monastic *abba*.¹³

A somewhat different picture of St Antony and his colleagues is presented in the charming collection of impressions and short maxims of the Desert Fathers, *Apophthegmata*, 'a gallery of monastic icons'.¹⁴ St Athanasius' study cannot be taken at face value. It does, however, give an impression of St Athanasius' own view of a model Christian and of the ascetic in the desert cell. It also shows the monk as having the power to prophesy future events, even if cautious in the use of this gift.

Arsenius (360–440) was different from most of the Egyptian Desert Fathers in that he was a foreigner from Rome where he had held the rank of a Senator and had been tutor to the sons of the Emperor. In 394 he unexpectedly broke with this kind of life and left for Sketis in the Egyptian desert where he remained until his death in 440. While still 'in the palace' he prayed to God: 'Lord, show me the way how I can be saved'. A voice came to him: 'Arsenius, flee from men, then you will be saved'. Later somebody asked him how, with all his education, he could turn for help to illiterate peasants. His answer: 'Indeed I have received both Roman and Greek education, but the alphabet of this peasant I have not yet learned.' Arsenius placed himself under an *abbas*, the dwarf Johannes, and eventually had disciples of his own.

The Pachomian monastic movement

The hermits in their grottoes were followed by a new significant development, the Pachomian monastic movement. As a young soldier, St Pachomius (?290–346) had joined the Christian camp and decided to become a hermit, settling down first with the hermit Palamon and then establishing a community at Tabennesis. He developed his hermitage along creative lines, founding a community of men living together inside the walls of a centre, walls which now could become symbols not of seclusion but of fellowship. St Pachomius gave structure and programme to the movement. There was a rule of life with 194 articles to be strictly followed by the inmates, living in community with colleagues, subordinate to a superior who exercised the spiritual direction of the community.

Each monk had a little cell of his own which could not be locked. They lived together in ‘houses’, the head being a house-father, and three to four houses forming a group. Each house had to be concerned with its particular handicraft; making mats, weaving linen, or working as fuller or tailor. Three of the houses had more general duties, such as receiving guests or taking care of novices. There were two meals per day. Likewise there were two prayer sessions, early morning and late at night. For the morning session twelve psalms were read, in the evening this number was reduced to six, with prayers and two lessons. The Sunday morning Eucharist was taken by a priest from the community or, if one was not available, a priest from the neighbourhood. This was followed by a catechetical lecture by the *abbas*. In the houses on Wednesdays and Fridays the house-father gave catechetical teaching. In order not to feel sleepy during prayers, the monk had to work his spinning wheel, making thread for his mats; the prayers were thus accompanied by the soft humming of the wheels – perhaps unwittingly soporific. But the monastery was related to the world and, more acutely, within the secular community there were religious devotees: ‘the *Koinonia* did not enjoy a monopoly of the evangelical life.’¹⁵

At the time of St Pachomius’ death in 346, there were nine monasteries for men and two convents for women, one of these under the leadership of Pachomius’ sister, Mary. The rapid growth of the movement is seen in the fact that at Easter 390, no less than 50,000 monks congregated for the feast. This also explains the rural masses’ transition to Christianity in Upper Egypt. The monks were the missionaries of the Church. They were at the same time enthusiastic local leaders of a Coptic national movement about to emerge in the fifth century. They acted as catechists teaching young and old the stories of the Bible and the lives of the martyrs. As the persecutions

came to an end in the early years of the fourth century, the monks succeeded the martyrs as the great heroes of folk-piety in the village churches.

After Chalcedon

For Alexandria and Egypt, AD 451 meant the parting of the ways from the West as well as from the Greek Church. Until that time, Alexandria had, as a matter of course, been awarded a leading position in Orthodox Christendom. On behalf of both East and West, Bishop Athanasius had denounced his recalcitrant priest Arius and all his works and thereby played a central role in the post-Nicene period. As Bishop of Alexandria, the authoritarian St Cyril built on solid Athanasian foundations assisted by the enthusiastic support of thousands of monks. Yet, in his effort to suppress the influence of Arius and the related Nestorius, he was to be acclaimed as an authority in the emerging Unionite movement. This taught that in the person of the Incarnate Christ there was but a single, Divine-human nature, thus opposing the Orthodox 'Diophysite' teaching of a Double Nature – Divine and Human – after the Incarnation. The Egyptian monks firmly held to the Unionite position. From AD 452 the Patriarch of Alexandria, representing the Coptic Church, was a Unionite although he has been opposed by a Greek-Orthodox Patriarch till the present day.

After an especially agitated period of doctrinal debate in the West in the period 431–50, the synod of Chalcedon (near Constantinople), a supposedly ecumenical encounter, decided for the 'two natures' and against the Unionite position. Most significantly, its Patriarch, Dioscorus, was deposed. With this fateful decision the Church in Egypt had to orient itself in an altogether new direction. When the state authorities chose Proterius, 'a docile friend of Byzantine imperialism' to replace the deposed Patriarch, the Egyptians immediately chose their own Patriarch in the person of Timothy Aelurus. Unable to remove his imperial rival, the excited crowd of monks and other faithful eventually took their revenge. In 457 they invaded the Baptistry where Proterius was officiating at the Eucharist and slaughtered him, then dragged his body through the streets, burned it and delivered the ashes to the wind.

Very soon the Coptic Church could answer in kind, denouncing Constantinople and the Chalcedonians as 'Diophysites' and 'Melchites' (the Emperor's men), 'running dogs of the imperial regime'. This led to renewed persecutions hitting the Unionite community. On the other hand, this outrage helped to solidify Egyptian nationalism built on the Coptic language and tradition, the Unionite doctrine and enthusiastic monastic leadership.

Fifteen hundred years after Chalcedon, the Pope of Rome, Pius XII, by his encyclical *Sempiternus Rex Christus*, declared that the differences between the Churches were due above all to questions of vocabulary and to the fact that the accusation of Monophysitism was unjustified.

Favour of kings and queens

World politics together with their most personal, even intimate variations, could in certain cases determine the fate of national Churches, such as those of Egypt and Nubia. In Byzantine Constantinople, the ambitious law-giver, Justinian (Emperor 527–65) had, in his youth, shown Unionite sympathies. However, as Emperor he held firmly to that religious policy which was most likely to serve the unification of his vast empire, in this case, the Chalcedonian position. He saw himself as Emperor and priest in one. Church and State were to be totally integrated.

There was, however, an embarrassing hitch: his empress, Theodora (d. 548). A woman of humble background, she had ideas of her own. She was a Unionite at heart and in her political actions as far as she could go. This was to benefit the Unionite Churches in Egypt and in Nubia. Her influence could be seen in the impressive basilicas erected in her time, at her instigation. The lovely wall-paintings, both in Egypt and Nubia, were no doubt drawn after Byzantine models. This, however, could not affect the liturgy, the prayers and the devotions to Mary, Mother of God: which were all Unionite.

'Descendants of the Pharaohs'

On consideration of the fate of the Church in North Africa, submitted to recurrent onslaughts, and leading – albeit slowly – to virtual extinction, one begins to appreciate something of the stamina and adaptability of the Coptic Church in surviving over the centuries. The losses in membership and influence can be comprehended by counting the number of episcopal sees in the Coptic Church: in AD 600 these numbered one hundred, by AD 700 they were reduced to seventy, and by AD 1400 they had been further reduced to forty (and at present, twenty-five bishops and metropolitans in Egypt, two in Sudan and one in Jerusalem).

In the local congregations, however, particularly in Upper Egypt around Asyut, Church life continued, adding its special colour and rhythm to the life of the total community. More than that of any other country in Africa, Egyptian culture represented 'the long duration', to use F. Braudel's term.

Near the River Nile, the Sphinx and the Pharaonic pyramids watched over changes and developments: they had already been there for some 3,000 years when the first Christian preachers arrived in Alexandria. As the Coptic Church emerged, its members took pride in the idea that they were indeed 'descendants of the Pharaohs' and this claim to an ancient origin could, in a critical political situation, be held against even the most powerful invader.

The Copts could assimilate the new without discarding the old. They were inclusive rather than exclusive. This is seen in the fact that old quarries from Pharaonic times were used as Christian grotto-churches, with local settlements lasting for centuries. At Luxor, a pagan temple dedicated to the god Amon was adapted for use by the local congregation. Christian paintings and other symbols were plastered over the ancient pagan symbols, to signify that from now on this was to be a Christian temple. In the case of other pagan temples the Coptic priest and his artisans took wooden boards, placing them over previous pagan reliefs (thereby, incidentally, saving the pagan relief for posterity). Dendera, near Luxor, had in pagan times been a pilgrimage centre to which the sick could turn to be cured. Here a Christian church from about the fifth century was built with pagan mussel-shells also used as symbols in the Christian Church, thus testifying to unhampered survival of symbols. Here also the Egyptian cross took shape in the form of the beginnings of the 'TAU' cross devoted to the Victorious Christ. A century later this cross becomes the Life-Giving Tree, in the form of a cross with leaves.¹⁶

Some of the pre-Christian temples such as the one in Philae devoted to Isis, the goddess of fertility and salvation, were used for the new Christian religion until about AD 580. From that date, for a period of sixty years (580–640) Christian worship could, without pagan influences, develop its specific forms and expressions.

The Muslim invasion and beyond

By the seventh century the Coptic Church was well established with the Patriarch in Alexandria and bishops and monks and nuns in monasteries and convents. They were leading annual pilgrimages to the tombs of holy martyrs. Then came the Muslim Arab invasion.

Across the Red Sea, southern and northern Arabia had for centuries represented important trading areas. Mecca with its famous black meteorite, the *Ka'ba*, was such a centre. Yathrib (Medina) had three Jewish 'tribes', all concerned with trade and with their religion. Jewish colonies established themselves in various parts of the country and one of the Arab kings

accepted Judaism as his religion. Here also the Jewish Diaspora served as a bridge for transition to the Christian faith, in a Nestorian or Monophysite form, together with various Gnostic sects. It is realized of course that prior to Muhammad millions of Arabs had been catechized in the name of Allah the true God, and had learned the prayers, the fasts and the feasts in the schools of the missionaries and monks. At the beginning of the seventh century the majority of the Arabs of Mesopotamia and of Syria were Christians. Traditional Arab religion with its sacrifices and pilgrimages had obviously lost its hold on the people, who were looking for a comprehensive faith.

Muhammad, 570–632, came forward as the prophet of this faith, 'Islam', meaning total surrender [to God]. A successful trader, he had contacts with both Jews and Christians. He felt inspired to withdraw into the mountains near Mecca for meditations. He too was fascinated by the desert mountains, their peace and the presence of God. From about 610 he had a number of visions and auditions realized as the voice of God, given to him by the Archangel Gabriel: he knew that this was indeed the 'religion of Abraham'.

Yet he did not feel accepted at Mecca and in 622 made his *hijra*, or, exile, to Yathrib, later renamed Medina, i.e. 'The City' (of the Prophet). There he found other exiles from Mecca, who became his devoted supporters. The visions and auditions were assembled into a Holy Book, the *Qur'an*. As the three Jewish tribes in Mecca could not accept his prophetic claims he chased them away from the city. Yet, the *Qur'an* always recognized that Jews and Christians were 'People of the Book', who should be treated with a certain degree of toleration.

In 632 the prophet died. Soon his followers went beyond the borders of Arabia with the mottoes: 'Allah Akbar', (God is Greater) and 'Muhammad is His Prophet'. Egypt was a neighbour and an obvious target for this campaign. After a certain number of military attempts the country was won for the Prophet in 641, nine years after Muhammad's death.

The attitude of the Copts towards this invasion was not unique. It was largely similar to that of Unionites in other countries such as Syria and Palestine. Byzantine Constantinople and its imperial regime had long been seen as the enemy, and in these eastern countries the Arabs were at first regarded as a possible ally against the Emperor. The ever-widening abyss to Constantinople and its Chalcedonian faith meant that the Arabs did not meet with any significant opposition, and could establish themselves as rulers of the country. The Arab Muslims also at first allowed free worship, on condition that the People of the Book paid individual head tax, *jizya*.

Over the following centuries, succeeding but different Arab regimes

presented the Church with varying degrees of political pressure, resulting at times in conversions to Islam, and other times – i.e. AD 868 to AD 1096 – in the closing of the Christian ranks. Coptic language, art and music flourished. The present city of Cairo was founded in 969 and eventually the Patriarch moved to the new metropolis.

The Copts and the Crusades

Increasingly the Copts were made to feel that they were now a religious minority in a Muslim world. The relationship between Coptic Church and Muslim State depended on variations in Arab regimes, with changes in the caliphates, and on certain local crises. The rulers of the Fatimid caliphate, AD 968–1171, were on the whole tolerant towards both Christians and Jews. Capable Copts were to be seen in high places in the administration, mainly in finance and in the banks. The Copts also had many famous physicians and writers. There were other Arab regimes where the Copts had to suffer serious hardships and heavy taxation, against which they sometimes revolted. Locally, incidents of arson could all too easily be blamed on the Copts and outrageous vengeance was taken: in the period AD 1279–1447 forty-four churches were reported to have been razed to the ground in Cairo alone, and Copts became subject to humiliations and confiscation of every kind.

Dramatic changes on the international scene could expose the Copts to serious pressures. From AD 1100 the Crusades from the West made the Coptic minority suspect. This was particularly so with the Fifth Crusade at the beginning of the thirteenth century. This crusade was no longer directed by kings and knights but by the Pope himself. From the other side of the Mediterranean the ill fortune of this crusade was watched with dismay by St Francis of Assisi. He decided to go himself to Egypt in 1219 to try to establish peace. He was given permission for this by the Cardinal Pelagius and arrived at the scene of warfare in the Damiette branch of the Nile Delta, moving unarmed between the armies in no man's land. The Moslem guards were suspicious at first but soon decided that anyone so simple, so gentle and so dirty must be mad and treated him with the respect due to a man who had been touched by God.¹⁷

The Sultan al-Kamil, who was also inclined to peace, listened patiently to this surprising intervention. In the long perspective of Church history, St Francis' daring mediation was to inspire Latin missions in Egypt at a much later date in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In the fifteenth century there followed new attempts at contacts between Rome and the Copts. In 1439 Pope Eugenius IV invited Patriarch John XI

to the ecumenical Council of Florence and the Patriarch sent the *abbas* of the St Anthony monastery. Later, however, political developments obliterated these attempts. From 1517 Egypt was occupied by the Ottoman Turks, and for a long time contacts between the Copts and the West ceased.

NORTH AFRICA

The Mediterranean over which St Paul sailed to Rome and, perhaps, to Spain, also served as a route for the Christian message to reach North Africa. This Church history will repeatedly emphasize the role of the waters in the propagation of the Gospel: the oceans, the lakes, the rivers. For the first Christian centuries, shipping over the Mediterranean and the Red Sea played a fundamental role. Here was an extensive system of international contact, supplying goods and mediating ideas.

The busy North Coast harbours of Carthage, Hippone, Hadremethum (now Sousse) and others saw foreigners arrive from afar, from Egypt, Greece, Sicily and Rome. From the middle of the second century, Rome could also impose imperial power over North Africa. Sailing ships could cover the distance Carthage–Rome in three to four days. The coastal cities had small Jewish communities with their synagogues and international cultural contacts. The large estates inland, under Roman landowners, had to supply corn by way of tribute to the metropolis. North Africa succeeded Egypt as the granary of Rome and was forced to keep the city inhabitants with the daily ration of wheat. On the estates inland there were Berbers and a Punic population together with large numbers of slaves.

It is not surprising, therefore, that when, towards the end of the second century, a Christian Church on the North Coast can first be identified, it had already reached certain dimensions. One is faced with local congregations of determined men and women prepared to give their lives for the faith. The first historical document of the Church relates to a group of Christians from Scillium in Numidia – at least two of the names seem Berber – who on the 1 August 180 were put to death and became martyrs. Twenty years later Perpetua and Felicitas went to their deaths, thrown to the lions.

Already by the middle of the third century paganism in North Africa saw decay and down-fall – the same period as for Egypt – and simultaneously mass conversion to Christianity occurred. At first, Greek was presumably the Church's language in Africa – even today one can see Greek texts on wall inscriptions and graves – but in the second century there was a definite change to the language of the Imperial power, Latin.

This linguistic innovation was to exert long-range influences, positive and

negative, on the Christianization process in the country. The problem was how far could the impoverished masses on the estates and in the harbours identify with the Imperial language and make it their own? If they could not, there was a danger that the rapid Christianization might remain somewhat superficial and that this might show later under the impact of some sudden onslaught from abroad. A comparison with Egypt is revealing. There the Church acquired a national language of its own, Coptic, which became identified with as a symbol of their struggle for autonomy over the language and culture of the Imperialists, the 'Melkite' Greeks in Alexandria. In Northern Africa on the other hand, however much Latin became the proud possession of the intellectuals and the well-to-do, it never attained the same creative, symbolic role as did the Coptic language in Egypt.

Tertullian and Saint Cyprian

Tertullian (c. 160–c. 220) from Carthage is the first in the line of great theologians in North Africa: a vehement, uncompromising and irrepressible personality with great visions and a dedicated will. Having started as a lawyer and a rhetor he loved words and the play on words, a love which led to his creation of Ecclesiastical Latin. This form of Latin first emerged in North Africa, in and through Tertullian's disturbing writings, demonstrating to much later generations of the Church in Africa what it takes to form, curb and appropriate a language. In Tertullian's case the language emerged from a creative personality, dedicated to proclaiming an overwhelming message, and to reaching out to as many as possible.

There were connections between the two North Africans, Tertullian and St Cyprian (?200–58). Cyprian referred to Tertullian as his 'master'. Cyprian, like Tertullian, had a lawyer's training. When converted both held to a strictly ascetic interpretation of Christianity. Rome had worries with both men, although from different points of view. Tertullian's critical mind ultimately took him over to the Montanist camp. A presbyter himself, he found some bishops difficult to manage and his spirit yearned for a Spirit-dominated religion which the Montanists were supposed to represent. Montanism was 'an explosion of prophetism'.¹⁸ (There are surprising points of similarity between Montanism in the second century and some of the modern ecstatic African prophets and prophetesses in the twentieth century.)

St Cyprian, on the other hand, was involved in a controversy with Bishop Stephen in Rome over the matter of re-baptism of heretics. Here, Cyprian was uncompromising and insisted on re-baptism while Bishop Stephen pleaded for re-admitting heretics by the imposition of hands. There were

sharp arguments on both sides and the Bishop in Rome threatened the bishop in Carthage with excommunication. In this struggle of minds Cyprian elaborated his view of episcopacy. While emphasizing the unity of the Catholic Church, with deference to the successor of Peter – his great book was called *On the Unity of the Church* – he was nonetheless determined to uphold the rights of the local bishop and did so to such an extent that he came to be regarded as ‘the champion of episcopatism’. These were terrible times for faithful Christian confessors, their existence dominated by the fear of and longing for martyrdom – the ‘heavenly crown’. Long before Cyprian was beheaded he had a vivid dream experience. He saw a young man of extraordinary height who brought him to the proconsul’s court. The proconsul wrote something on a slab of wood and Cyprian could see his own death sentence. The young man in the dream extended and bent his fingers, one after the other, thereby indicating a respite with the execution of the punishment,¹⁹ but the bishop’s dream was followed by stark reality.

Bishop Cyprian’s martyrdom

On 14 September 258, Bishop Cyprian was called to appear before the proconsul Galerius Maximus who put to him the following questions:

‘You are Thascius Cyprian?’

‘Yes, that is me.’

‘You are the leader of these sacrilegious people?’

‘What then?’

‘The holy emperors have ordered that you sacrifice.’

‘No, I won’t do that.’

‘Consider it well.’

‘That I have already done. Do what you must.’

‘You have lived in sacrilege and have made yourself the enemy of the gods of Rome. Therefore your blood will be the sanction of the laws . . . We direct that Thascius Cyprian be put to death by the sword.’

Cyprian replied: ‘Thanks be to God.’

The crowd of Christians cried out: ‘Let our heads fall with his!’ The executioner arrived and the bishop ordered that this man receive twenty-five pieces of gold. While this was carried out, the faithful spread cloths and towels around the bishop in order to gather the precious blood of the martyr.

Then St Cyprian bound his own eyes. As he could not tie his own hands, the priest Julian, together with a deacon, offered him this service. In that posture Cyprian met death. The martyrdom was enacted by the bishop as a liturgy in which he was, as Christ on the Cross, both victim and priest.

Saint Augustine

St Augustine (354–430) is generally considered the universal genius, the truly Catholic churchman and theologian whose books have been of immense importance for Christian thought throughout the ages and this theology took form in the otherwise little known town of Hippo on the North African coast.

As a young man he was deeply involved in the thought-world of his generation – being a Manichaean for nine years – until he took the step to conversion and Christian baptism in 387. Five years later he found himself – much to his surprise and against his will – ordained and in 394 made bishop in Hippo, to which diocese he was to give thirty-six years of unique leadership and inspiration.

He has interpreted his own life in an autobiography, *Confessions*, in the form of a long prayer to God. It is a deeply personal literary document, intimate at times, with searching self-knowledge – ‘a manifesto of the inner world’.²⁰ These words come from the introduction to *Confessions*: ‘You have created us to yourself, and our heart cannot be quieted unless it finds rest in you’, *Fecisti nos ad te et inquietum est cor nostrum donec requiescat in te*.

As bishop he had a biblical message to convey. When he found himself suddenly chosen as bishop, he insisted that he take ample time for a retreat so as to read the Bible. He had an extraordinary memory and was able, while preaching, to recall examples and stories from the Old and New Testaments. The Bible was ‘the medicine to his soul’.²¹ This helped him to formulate his memorable sentences: ‘This man who, whenever he says anything, seems to be saying it for the first time.’²²

He was greatly influenced by his mother, Monica. Dr E. Mashingaidze of Zimbabwe has made an observation of relevance to the Church in Africa: ‘It is the mother who encourages her son to accept new ideas.’²³ This was definitely the case with the devout Christian mother of St Augustine (the medieval Church was to call her St Monica). She was from Thagaste in Berber-dominated South Numidia and thus her son the bishop was ‘most probably’ of mixed Berber background.²⁴ ‘Augustine’s Berber descent shows itself in numerous small ways’.²⁵ It was this heritage, perhaps, which induced Monica to have visions from time to time by which she could advise her son.²⁶ It was Monica who persuaded him to abandon his Manichaean faith, to which he, as a young man, had adhered.

In his conversion crisis, in 387, St Augustine’s Christian mother was his support. She was a truly great woman who had received elementary education and Augustine enjoyed discussions with her, referring to her as a

philosopher whose disciple he loved to be. 'She can dismiss a whole philosophical school in a single vulgar word', says Peter Brown, and Professor Ragnar Holte, of Uppsala, writing on 'Monica the Philosopher', says of the dialogue between mother and son: 'There is a most touching and enchanting mutual respect and acknowledgement, or even humility, an ardent wish from either side to be instructed, inspired and elevated by the other's experience and insights.'²⁷

As bishop, St Augustine was existentially engaged in the struggle against what he regarded as the three great adversary systems of his generation, Manichaeism, Donatism and Pelagianism. The study of St Paul and of the Bible as a whole made him discover divine grace (*gratia*) as the fundamental power for the religious and moral life of the individual and of the Church. This emphasis on divine grace helped him overcome what he saw as a dangerously and narrowly moralistic tendency in earlier and contemporary theology.

He could try out his thoughts in continuous and daily encounter with the enquiring minds of the young priests in his monastery, and he would generalize and simplify his ideas in weekly sermons to a responsive crowd of people from very different intellectual and theological backgrounds. Add to this something about his complex personality, his freshness and freedom of mind, his immense courage in taking and defending a standpoint – and one has an idea of how he could produce a great and enduring theological message.

St Augustine is the greatest theologian that Africa has produced. Not all theologians are at the same time inspiring preachers and bishops, but St Augustine was. Seated in his cathedral he sometimes preached to as many as 2,000 people, all standing before him as the custom was at the time. 'Augustine bore neither cross nor ring. His figure was slight, his features somewhat sharp, his head shaven. He was usually wrapped in a cloak or *birrus* (probably dark in colour), open in front.' He held his congregation spell-bound and they responded vivaciously to his message. 'This unusual liveliness, presumably a heritage of Berber blood, was fortunately displayed as much in spiritual matters as in the people's outward bearing.'²⁸ In his sermons in the city basilica he would not forget the poor labouring Berbers. He had seen them working in the fields and heard them sing as they laboured (*maxime jubilant qui in agris*), anticipating humming and hymn-singing of people at work in the fields of Africa some 1,500 years later.

As a Bishop preaching to his congregations, St Augustine was aware of the linguistic problems in the Hippo diocese. Both he and his Donatist opponents recognized there were two languages to worry about, Latin and

Punic, the latter a Semitic language closely related to Hebrew. Because of this affinity of Punic to Hebrew, Augustine used Punic words when he wished to explain biblical words. As a bishop Augustine felt the need of having a clergy skilled in Punic for his diocese. While some of the cultured Latin-speaking class looked down upon Punic as inferior, Augustine insisted on Punic as an honourable part of their native heritage. Even if he did not himself preach in the language and had to use interpreters when necessary, he would, by this reference to Punic words and proverbs, gain the good will of the audience and increase the cheerfulness of the congregation as well as, no doubt, that of his own good humour.²⁹

As a preacher St Augustine had none of the pomposity characteristic of some bishops. He had a liveliness which was part of his great communicative charisma. He was the opposite of the pious recluse. He loved to be surrounded by people, the more the merrier, although he felt the burden of his episcopal office. The Bishop's house in Hippo was turned into a monastic chapter and establishment where his young priests were living with their bishop and taught the Bible by him. Sometimes a bad sleeper, he would dictate chapters of his books to his young scribes and co-workers during the night. At least five of these young men trained by Augustine were later to become bishops themselves.³⁰

Donatism

As bishop and theologian, St Augustine acted as a polemicist, and from the point of view of North Africa the struggle with the Donatists was of particular importance. While the Catholics were particularly strong in the Romanized cities on the coast, the Donatists dominated the inland plains in Numidia and among the Berber-speaking labourers on the inland estates.

In modern terms one would characterize the Donatists as a 'holiness' movement. According to them the true Church consists of holy members. They felt that they could rely on Tertullian's and Cyprian's authority for their standpoint. Particularly abhorrent in their eyes were the *traditores*, such Catholic bishops who had, in times of persecution, 'handed over' the Holy Scriptures to be burned in order to placate the demands of the pagan state. The Donatists were likely to identify their Catholic adversaries with such *traditores*. In this struggle the Donatists, according to Augustine, represented a 'heresy' and through his long struggle on this front Augustine managed to stamp them with this mark.

African Church history, in later centuries, was to face the fatal power of denominationalism with its notoriously divisive and weakening influence. In