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Miscellanea

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Miscellanea

Church Conditions in Egypt and Palestine

Having spent months in the Near East as a member of the Church-Craft photographic mission, it may not be amiss for me to submit to the readers of this journal some of the impressions I received and some of the information I gathered on the work the Christian Church at the present time is doing in the countries mentioned. It would be absurd of me, of course, to pose as an authority on matters pertaining to the Eastern Mediterranean countries, because my stay, after all, was rather brief. But the average traveler is bound to take away with him from the country he traverses various new insights, and so I do not hesitate to put down some jottings on the subject announced in the title of this article.

I

Our party spent about three weeks in the famous land of the Pharaohs. The name Pharaoh is still a term to conjure with; on the voyage to the Orient a woman introduced herself to me as a daughter of the Pharaohs. She claimed membership in an old Egyptian family; in her church connections she was a Copt. In this land, which now numbers about 18 million inhabitants and which, as of old, is a long narrow strip of land located on both sides of the Nile, broadening out merely in the northern part, the delta section, the Christian Church entered at an early date. Eusebius relates (*Church History*, II, 16) that Mark the Evangelist went to Egypt and that he was the first to found Christian congregations in Alexandria. In this city a Christian theological school soon came into existence and developed into a remarkable center of Christian scholarship. In the second century, Pantaeus was its head. He was followed by his pupil Clement († ca. 220), and this renowned teacher and author had as his successor his still more famous pupil Origen, the greatest scholar of the early Christian Church († 254). In the fourth century, Alexandria was the episcopal see of Athanasius, the sturdy, faithful champion of orthodoxy. Later on, when the heresy of Monophysitism had risen, it found a stronghold in Egypt and has remained there throughout the centuries to the present time. The Coptic Church, which is a continuation of the old Christian Church in Egypt, still holds that form of teaching.

At present the number of Christians is said to be about 1,400,000; most of these are Copts. The Mohammedans, we are told, constitute 91.4 per cent of the population, the Jews 0.4 per cent, the Christians 8.19 per cent. All these figures, I must not fail to mention, are based on estimates and must be accepted with reserve. My sources of information are, chiefly, the *World Almanac* of 1947

and Dr. Quay of the Y. M. C. A. in Cairo. Besides the Coptic Church, of which I shall have to speak more at length afterwards, the Roman Catholic Church, the Greek Orthodox Church, the Greek Catholic Church (which is in fellowship with Rome), the Armenian Church, the Syrian Church (Jacobites, likewise Monophysites), and the Syrian Maronites (who are in fellowship with Rome) are represented in Egypt. Of Protestants the Anglicans, the United Presbyterians, the Scotch Presbyterians, the Seventh-Day Adventists, the Plymouth Brethren, and various other, mostly small, bodies are working in that country.

II

The Coptic Church has priests and congregations in practically all the towns and larger villages of the country. The name Copt is explained as derived from the word Egypt. Another explanation is that the name must be traced back to Coptos, the present Kobt, a city of Egypt. The Coptic Church strikes one as a weak, anemic, lifeless organism. It has a hierarchy which perpetuates itself. A patriarch, whose seat is in Cairo, is at the head; under him twelve bishops preside over the various dioceses. The priests who serve individual parishes are said to be often woefully ignorant men, not able to understand the old Coptic tongue which they employ in the ritual. The Coptic Church is like the Roman Catholic Church in this respect that it has its sacred language, which is used in the regular church services. The Coptic language has become as dead as Latin, if not more so; it is no longer spoken, the official language in Egypt being Arabic, and whoever among the Egyptians wishes to learn Coptic has to take special courses. Nowadays, at least at some places, Arabic is granted a minor place beside the old Coptic in the church ritual. There is hardly any preaching in the Coptic churches; the liturgy is "performed," the prescribed lessons and prayers are read, and then the service is concluded. If most of this is done in a tongue entirely unknown to the people, it is small wonder that they are not instructed and advanced in Christian knowledge through church attendance. Much emphasis is placed on fasting at stipulated times; Baptism is performed through immersion; the Lord's Supper ritual is very similar to that of the Greek Orthodox Church. The church buildings are without pews; people come there not to hear but to see. One can understand that in such a soil monasticism can and does flourish. As in the old days, there are many convents in Egypt, most of them belonging to the Coptic Church, and the monks and nuns are said to lead a life of strict asceticism.

But while the ignorance of the Coptic clergy and the church members in matters of religion is appalling, the Copts generally enjoy a reputation for intelligence, and many of them occupy important clerical positions in the government and in business. It is recognized that the average Copt is better equipped and qualified for work requiring mental effort and involving responsi-

bilities than the average Mohammedan. It should be mentioned, too, that societies have been formed within the Coptic Church which seek to lift from it the dead hand of the past and infuse new life.

III

What of the other churches in Egypt? Do they display a rich activity? Are they mission-minded? The larger bodies, like the Roman Catholic and the Greek Orthodox Churches, do not seem to take a great interest in mission work; they are content with serving their own members and with conducting schools for their own children and convents, where one can shake off, so it is mistakenly thought, the dust of the world. The United Presbyterian Church of America seems intent on taking the Gospel to the Mohammedans. It has schools and hospitals through which it seeks to obtain an entrance to the hearts of the followers of Islam; it appears to be alive to its missionary obligations. There are other Protestant bodies which earnestly seek to acquaint the Mohammedans with the teachings of the New Testament; but I did not become acquainted with their work. The Y. M. C. A. and the Y. W. C. A. organizations are quite active.

IV

The work among the Mohammedans is almost incredibly difficult. The Mohammedan who leaves his religion is still regarded as a renegade that should be killed; and the threat of death for those who embrace Christianity is altogether real. And if the community in which such a convert lives does not see to it that he is dispatched, it will in all likelihood employ some form of ostracism against him; he may find that his well has been polluted, that his ox or donkey has been poisoned, that his house will be set on fire, and that his business is ruined. For this reason but few Mohammedans are won for the Christian religion. Dr. Quay, whom I referred to above, stated that the last year (presumably 1946) eleven mission societies, or churches, made only 74 converts. This he contrasted with the sad fact that of late every year, owing to government and social and economic pressure, about one thousand Copts become Mohammedans. The Egyptian King Faruk is an adherent of Islam; so are all the high government officials and politicians; and whoever nurtures aspirations of attaining eminence in the State, society, or business, will fail unless he is a member of that religion. The Egyptian who becomes a disciple of Jesus must deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow the Master. On paper there is religious liberty in Egypt; but it does not mean the same thing for the Egyptian government as for ours. For one thing, it is strictly forbidden to talk to Mohammedan minors about the Christian religion. Furthermore, when Christian churches are to be erected, government officials find innumerable obstacles with which to oppose the project. All attempts to carry on a propaganda for the Christian religion are frowned upon.

"But the Protestant churches that have been founded in Egypt have grown," it will be stated by someone, to offset the above gloomy remarks. Yes, they have grown, but not to an appreciable degree through converts from Islam, but through accessions from the Coptic Church. Many of the intelligent members of this Church are dissatisfied with the mummery of their own religious services and join a church body where, instead of being given empty pageantry, they will be led to worship God in spirit and in truth.

I should here not fail to state that a young and highly intelligent Copt with whom I had an opportunity of discussing religious conditions in Egypt did not take quite the pessimistic view which is at the basis of the above picture. He urged me not to overlook the fact that many thoughtful Mohammedans are deeply affected by the Christian message and that while they do not publicly profess Christianity, nevertheless at heart they accept it, resembling Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly, for fear of the Jews (John 19:38). He maintained that among his Mohammedan acquaintances there were a number of people of this nature. It must be stated, too, that many Mohammedans are of that religion merely on paper and in reality are entirely indifferent in their attitude toward Islam, but that these people would constitute fertile soil for the Christian message may well be doubted.

V

Palestine, which at present still is a British mandate, in the *World Almanac* of 1947 is credited with an area of 10,429 square miles and an estimated population of 1,739,624. This territory does not include Transjordan, on the east side of the Jordan, which in the Old Testament days belonged to the land of Israel. There must be at least 100,000 Christians in Palestine. At this figure I arrive on the basis of the statement of the *World Almanac* that from 1922 to 1944 there was an estimated increase of 64,083 Christians. It is evident that the total number of Christians can hardly be lower than 100,000 and may be somewhat higher. In Egypt the ratio of the non-Christian population to the Christian is about 12 to 1; in Palestine it may be about 16 to 1. A factor, which in Egypt was negligible, is the number of Jews, which in the last twenty-five years has increased stupendously; roughly, there are about 1,100,000 Mohammedans and 550,000 Jews in Palestine.

VI

The large Christian denominations are represented in this country. At the top, as the strongest body, we put the Greek Orthodox Church. On account of the geographical location of Palestine its churches naturally had more contact with Antioch and Constantinople than with Rome. The congregations are in many instances the lineal descendants of the first Christian communities in the country, and the members probably can be regarded as the twentieth-century sons and daughters of the early

Palestinian Christians. I met a guide in Jerusalem, a member of the Greek Orthodox Church, who maintained that he came of old Christian stock and could trace his family back to the fifth century.

It must not be thought that these old Greek Orthodox congregations are Greek speaking. The old families have in the main discarded and forgotten the Greek; their native tongue is Arabic. In the church services the Greek is used for the liturgy; there are no sermons. Since Greek is still a living language, although modern Greek in its grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation differs somewhat from the classical Greek, the clergy and some of the parishioners still know the meaning of what is read and sung in the church services. But here, too, as in the other churches of the Orient, and likewise in the Roman Catholic churches of Italy, people do not come to the church services to learn and to be edified by the Word, but to participate in some ceremonies and thereby, if they are sincere and intelligent, to express their devotion to the Lord and to receive an emotional uplift and thrill.

As to the clergy, many are said to be ignorant and not qualified to be the spiritual shepherds of a flock. My own contacts with them were few. At the head of the hierarchy is the Patriarch of Jerusalem, who is referred to as His Beatitude and whose residence is outside Jerusalem on the Mount of Olives. I met the present incumbent at his home and found him a cultured gentleman who hailed from the Island of Samos in the Aegean Sea and had studied at Oxford. Since he was not well, his place in the Easter ceremonies had to be taken by a substitute, the Archbishop of Sebastieh (the old Samaria). There were several other members of the clergy whom I had contact with and found to be well educated, as far as a brief conversation could ascertain.

Palestine has a large number of Greek Orthodox monasteries, some of which are extremely old. The monastery of St. George, picturesquely situated high above the valley in a steep hillside in the Wady El Kelt near Jericho, where in summer one's body comes close to being fried by the heat, is one of them; its origin dates back to the fifth century. The most renowned of them is probably that of Mar Saba, located in the same general territory; that is, in the wilderness of Judea. It lies nine miles to the southeast of Jerusalem toward the Dead Sea. At the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem a Greek Orthodox monastery is located; it contains the Jerusalem headquarters of the Church, and its inmates conduct the Greek Orthodox services in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. In the deserts one is shown caverns and dens where monks and hermits either did or still live. Here they carry on the warfare with the devil and the flesh; the world they think they have eliminated.

I did not observe that this church body, in spite of its claim to be the Church that has been in Palestine since the founding of Christianity, is a missionary factor. It conducts schools for its own children, and probably Moslem children would not be rejected if the parents sought to have them enrolled, but I did not hear of

any efforts of this Church to bring the Gospel to Jews or to Mohammedans. It seems to be satisfied with continuing its existence by growth from within. That intellectual life is still asserting itself cannot be denied. I had the opportunity of visiting the library of the convent at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and found it a most interesting place. It is rich in old treasures; it possesses, for instance, the only manuscript of the *didachee* that has reached us from the days of antiquity, the copy found by Bryennios in Constantinople in 1883. The librarian, a kindly gentleman, once upon a time priest of a church in Salt Lake City, handed it to me for inspection. He furthermore showed me unpublished manuscripts of some of the great Greek church fathers. Everything was in excellent order. But whether the library is put to much use, I am unable to say. In one of the convents near Jerusalem, that of the Cross, lying to the west of the city, is said to be a theological seminary which does excellent work. How one wishes and prays that with intellectual life spiritual life might come, that the ceremonials might be vitalized, and the Word of redemption might be brought more purely and more effectively to the people!

VII

Next in size is the Roman Catholic Church. When Jerusalem was captured by the Crusaders in 1099, Latin Christianity was given a prominent place in Palestine; and to some extent it has managed to maintain itself. During the occupancy of Jerusalem by the Crusaders, the Latin, that is, the Roman Catholic, Patriarchate of Jerusalem was founded. When the city was again captured by the Mohammedans, this institution lapsed. It was refounded in 1848 and has continued ever since. From this date forward Roman Catholicism has progressed in Palestine by leaps and bounds. After the Franciscan order had been founded and gotten under way, it was by the Pope entrusted with the custody of the sacred places in the *Terra Sancta*, the Holy Land. In the sixteenth century King Francis I of France was appointed to act as special protector of the Christian interests in Palestine, and his successors, too, were considered as possessing this honor. Until recent years the French Government looked upon itself as entrusted in Palestine with special responsibilities toward the defense of Christian rights and privileges.

Of all members of the Catholic orders the Franciscans are still the ones whom one meets most frequently. The commission which was assigned them to guard the holy places they have endeavored to carry out. There is a monastery of theirs at the place where, according to one tradition, Jesus was scourged and condemned, at the beginning of the *Via Dolorosa*. Forming a part of the complex of buildings known as the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, another Franciscan monastery is found. From some time in the thirteenth century representatives of the order have lived there, guarding the Latin rights pertaining to this chief Christian sanctuary. At Gethsemane they have a convent, and to their credit

it must be said that they have made this sacred garden a place of rest and quiet beauty. At Bethlehem, adjoining the Church of the Nativity, they have a monastery with inviting gardens. A large and prominent monastery of theirs is located in Nazareth, erected near the Church of St. Joseph, which is built over the grottoes having to do, as some people believe, with the history of Mary, Joseph, and the Boy Jesus. At the site of Capernaum, too, they have erected a monastery, and the excavation and restoration work carried on at that place under their direction entitles them to our gratitude. These brief notes give a hint of the prominence that the Franciscans have achieved in Palestine.

Of other Catholic orders the Dominicans must be mentioned on account of the theological school, *École Biblique*, which they have founded in their monastery outside Jerusalem near the Damascus Gate—a school which is equipped with an amazingly rich library of archaeological and theological works and which for a number of years in our century had at its head the famous Bible scholar Lagrange, known throughout the theological world for his New Testament commentaries. The work is done chiefly in French; students of all denominations may attend.

Does the Roman Catholic Church win people from the non-Christian ranks for Christianity? It seems so. It has established good-sized congregations at several places, and the members cannot have come exclusively from other Christian denominations. Through its many schools, which enjoy a good reputation, its hospitals, and hospices it has become a strong force. That its church services with their Latin ritual cannot advance the parishioners much in religious knowledge is, of course, only too true.

Not much space need be devoted to the consideration of the activities of the other old Oriental churches. The Armenian Church has a patriarch residing in Jerusalem, a graduate of Oxford, a highly cultured and amiable gentleman. It possesses a beautiful church and monastery in the southwestern section of the city. The Copts participate officially in the services of the Holy Sepulchre. The Syriac Church, the Jacobites, have a large church and school in Jerusalem. Outside the capital all these churches do not play a significant role.

VIII

A word must be said about the Protestant churches. Unfortunately there is not much to report. The Anglican Church is probably the most prominent of the denominations in this category. In Jerusalem it has a bishop, several churches, and various flourishing schools. I recall having seen churches of this denomination in Haifa and Jaffa and have read of work done by it in Bethlehem. Undoubtedly there are other places where congregations belonging to it are located. The Scotch Presbyterians are likewise represented. They have a strong congregation in Jerusalem, possessing a beautiful house of worship and manse. In Haifa, too, there is

a church belonging to them and probably in other cities. In Nazareth our party unexpectedly came upon a small Baptist church.

The Evangelical Church of Germany, in Palestine usually referred to as the Lutheran Church (and hence I shall use that appellation), was taken to Palestine through the efforts of King Frederick William IV of Prussia, who, in 1840, in mistaken zeal endeavored to establish in Jerusalem a joint Episcopal See with the Anglicans. The project was due to failure from the start, but it was the means of bringing German Lutheran clergymen to the city. After a number of years a Lutheran church was built in the immediate vicinity of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, an imposing structure. The well-known Pastor Fliedner, when an epidemic was decimating the Jerusalem population, came over with a number of deaconesses, whose noble career in the Holy City was thus initiated. Ludwig Schneller in 1860 opened the Syrian orphanage, which has become a source of great blessings to all Palestine. Soon the Lutheran message was preached in the Arabic language, too; schools were opened, and churches were built at various other places. In Jerusalem and Bethlehem there are also some Swedish Lutheran educational and charitable institutions.

IX

Are the Protestant churches awake to their mission obligations? The larger Anglican and Scotch Presbyterian churches, as far as my observation extended, are mainly interested in ministering to the British people of their respective denomination who happen to sojourn in Palestine or have been transplanted there. However, the Anglican Church, through its Church Mission Society, is carrying on work among non-Christians. The numerous and excellent Anglican schools are a means of spreading Christianity. These people furthermore have founded hospitals; for instance, in the Mohammedan stronghold of Gaza, where Dr. Hargraves, the superintendent, through his efforts to bring not only medical but spiritual help to the benighted followers of Islam, won our sincere admiration. On a minor scale, Scotch Presbyterians, too, are working along these lines. Baptists are trying to carry on missionary activities, and several smaller denominations have workers in Palestine for that purpose. There is some Protestant work done in behalf of the conversion of Jews too.

It seems that the most effective method of promoting Christianity among the Moslem population is that of orphanages, schools, and hospitals. Bishop Gobat, an Anglican living in Jerusalem, when he observed his twenty-fifth anniversary, had founded twenty-five schools. The Syrian orphanage of the Schnellers has been mentioned; a branch of it has been established in Nazareth. Other Lutheran ventures were begun. Dr. Edwin Moll of the U. L. C. A. is in Palestine at present to guard the property of Lutheran mission societies. There are, so he states, five Lutheran missions in that country, whose properties are valued at 17 to 20

million dollars. When I think of the various Lutheran Arab whom I met in Jerusalem and elsewhere, people who actually are the salt of the earth in their particular circle, I must say that the work of Pastor Fliedner and of the Schnellers has borne beautiful fruit. While not great numbers of Mohammedans have been won, the gains have been considerable. Work among the Mohammedans in Palestine is only slightly less difficult than in Egypt. There is more culture in Palestine than in Egypt, and hence the intolerance of Mohammedans is not quite so fanatical in the former as in the latter country.

This sketchy presentation shows that in the land from where the Light of Salvation has spread to all the countries of the globe there is at present distressing darkness. May God speed the day when the blessed tidings of peace and forgiveness will be heard throughout Egypt and Palestine and many will turn to the Lord, their Helper!

W. ARNDT

