Egypt's Coptic Christians: Survival over centuries

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Christians persecuted in Iraq . . . Christian clergy murdered in Indonesia . . . churches destroyed in the Sudan. Around the world, stories of anti-Christian abuse and violence mount up, and are usually presented as irrefutable evidence of the violence of Islam. And somewhere in the accounts of persecution we are likely to hear more bad news out of Egypt—stories of Coptic Christians perishing in mob violence or falling victim to random assassinations by Islamist extremists.

There is no reason to question the truth of these ac counts, or to doubt the grave dangers facing Egypt's Chris tians. But before consigning Egypt's story to the general category of the Evils of Islam, it pays us to look more closely at the church that is under assault, and just how complex and subtle—and often how benevolent—have been its interactions with its Muslim neighbors. Egypt deserves far more attention than simply as just another item in a litany of horrors.

In the whole history of Christianity there may be no tale more astonishing than that of the Coptic Orthodox Church. It is one of the very oldest churches in existence, and one of the most influential. Some enterprising scholar could easily write a history of the first seven or eight centuries of Christianity entirely from an Egypt-centered perspective. No less amazing is its record of survival in the face of hostile regimes, from that of pagan Rome, to that of the Orthodox/Catholic Roman Empire that loathed its particular form of Christology to that of the Muslims who have ruled the country since the 640s. In 2,000 years, the Coptic Church has enjoyed government favor or sympathy for barely a century or two.

Despite this inferior status, the church has kept up its numbers amazingly well, because it has rooted itself so firmly in Egypt's traditional language, culture and landscape. Chris tians probably remained a major ity in Egypt at least through the 12th or 13th century, and even today they are a substantial minority. After nearly 1,400 years of Muslim rule, Copts still make up around 10 percent of

Egyptians—some 9 million people, not to mention another 2 million scattered in the Euro-American disapora. And throughout its history, the Coptic Church has experienced spiritual and cultural revivals. Most recent of these was the reformation that began in the 1950s and is known (over modestly) as the Sunday School Movement.

Of course, Copts have suffered persecution and discrimination. But the numbers show that this pressure must have been sporadic at worst. Not even the most heroic churches can survive more than a few decades of total war at the hands of a majority faith before they effectively vanish from the map. Instead of contemplating the gradual decline of the Coptic Church in recent decades, we should rather recognize its survival and continued strength over the centuries as the near-miracles they were.

Yes, we can cite any number of instances of anti-Christian violence, but no less impressive are the signs of Christian-Muslim cooperation. In the 1920s, Copts and Muslims united in the patriotic Wafd party, which laid the foundation for modern Egyptian nationhood. In the 1960s, following the nation's disastrous defeat at the hands of Israel, millions of Muslims and Christians were inspired by sensational visions of the Virgin Mary reported at a Coptic church at Zaytoun. As recently as 2003, the Egyptian government formally made a national holiday for Coptic Christmas, which falls on January 7.

To appreciate the bittersweet flavor of Muslim-Christian relations—and to destabilize most of what we think we know about that history—we might read the powerful novel Aunt Safiyya and the Monastery (1991), by leading Egyptian intellectual Bahaa' Taher. Aunt Safiyya is set in an Upper Egypt in which Chris tians and Muslims have coexisted for centuries and where life revolves around an ancient Christian Dayr, or monastery. Neither Copt or Muslim would dream of violating its holy boundaries, even when a local man fleeing a murder charge takes sanctuary there, provoking a political crisis. The novel contains a lovely moment when an elderly monk, trembling and terrified, realizes that the region's most fearsome Muslim bandit stands at the gate, demanding admission. As he enters, the desperado gruffly tells the monks that "I've come to help you!" In this instance at least, civilizations signally fail to clash. As Taher has said, "I wrote what I knew, that we [Copts and Muslims] loved each other and had no problems."

Taher himself has since lamented that the world he was describing has largely perished. The book appeared at a time of growing inter-communal violence in those

very regions of Upper Egypt. But that decline is historically very recent. The Egyptian experience shows that faiths can live together in relative harmony for many centuries. When we acknowledge the horrors inflicted on Egypt’s Christians today, we must also recognize what a catastrophic break these mark from the long older history.