**History of Coptic Christianity**

**Rich Traditions Dating to the First Century**

By [Jack Zavada](http://christianity.about.com/od/singlesresources/p/biojackzavada.htm)

[Coptic Christianity](http://christianity.about.com/od/Coptic-Orthodoxy/a/JZ-Coptic-Church.htm) began in Egypt about 55 A.D., making it one of the five oldest Christian churches in the world. The others are the [Roman Catholic Church](http://christianity.about.com/od/denominations/p/catholicprofile.htm), Church of Athens ([Eastern Orthodox Church](http://christianity.about.com/od/easternorthodoxy/p/orthodoxprofile.htm)), Church of Jerusalem, and Church of Antioch.

Copts say their founder was [John Mark](http://christianity.about.com/od/newtestamentpeople/fl/John-Mark.htm), one of the 72 [apostles](http://christianity.about.com/od/glossary/a/Apostle.htm) sent forth by [Jesus Christ](http://christianity.about.com/od/newtestamentpeople/p/jesuschrist.htm) and author of the [Gospel of Mark](http://christianity.about.com/od/newtestamentbooks/qt/gospelmarkintro.htm). Mark accompanied [Paul](http://christianity.about.com/od/newtestamentpeople/a/Apostle-Paul.htm) and Mark's cousin Barnabas on their first missionary journey but left them and returned to Jerusalem. He later preached with Paul in Colosse and Rome. Mark [ordained](http://christianity.about.com/od/Coptic-Orthodoxy/a/JZ-Coptic-Christianity-History.htm) one bishop (Anianus) in Egypt and seven deacons, founded the school of Alexandria, and was martyred in Egypt in 68 A.D.

According to Coptic tradition, Mark was tied to a horse with a rope and dragged to death by a mob of pagans on [Easter](http://christianity.about.com/od/holidaytips/qt/whatiseaster.htm), 68 A.D., in Alexandria. Copts count him as the first of their chain of 118 patriarchs (popes).

**Spread of Coptic Christianity**

One of Mark's accomplishments was founding a school in Alexandria to teach orthodox Christianity. By 180 A.D., this school was an established center of secular learning but also taught theology and spirituality. It served as the cornerstone of Coptic teaching for four centuries. One of its leaders was Athanasius, who created the [Athanasian Creed](http://christianity.about.com/od/christiandoctrines/a/the-athanasian-creed.htm), still recited in Christian churches today.

In the third century, a Coptic [monk](http://christianity.about.com/od/Monasticism/a/JZ-Monasticism.htm) named Abba Antony established a tradition of [asceticism](http://christianity.about.com/od/Monasticism/a/JZ-Asceticism.htm), or physical denial, which is still strong in Coptic Christianity today. He became the first of the "desert fathers," a succession of hermits who practiced manual labor, fasting, and constant [prayer](http://christianity.about.com/od/Coptic-Orthodoxy/a/JZ-Coptic-Christianity-History.htm).

Abba Pacomius (292-346) is credited as founding the first cenobitic, or community monastery at Tabennesi in Egypt. He also wrote a set of rules for monks. By his death there were nine monasteries for men and two for women.

The Roman empire persecuted the Coptic Church during the third and fourth centuries. Around 302 A.D., Emperor Diocletian martyred 800,000 men, women and children in Egypt who followed Jesus Christ.

**Coptic Christianity's Schism from Catholicism**

At the Council of Chalcedon, in 451 A.D., Coptic Christians split from the Roman Catholic Church. Rome and Constantinople accused the Coptic Church of being "monophysite," or teaching only one nature of Christ. In truth, the Coptic Church is "miaphysite," meaning it recognizes both his human and divine natures "being joined inseparably in the 'One Nature of God the Logos Incarnate.' "

Politics also played a major role in the Chalcedon schism, as factions from Constantinople and Rome vied for supremacy, accusing the Coptic leader of [heresy](http://christianity.about.com/od/glossary/a/Heresy-Definition.htm).

The Coptic pope was exiled and a series of Byzantine emperors were installed in Alexandria. An estimated 30,000 Copts were killed in this [persecution](http://christianity.about.com/od/glossary/a/JZ-Persecution.htm).

**Arab Conquest Aids Coptic Christianity**

Arabs began their conquest of Egypt in 645 A.D., but [Muhammad](http://islam.about.com/od/muhammad/tp/ProphetMuhammadHub.htm) had told his followers to be kind to the Copts, so they were permitted to practice their religion provided they paid a "jizya" [tax](http://christianity.about.com/od/Coptic-Orthodoxy/a/JZ-Coptic-Christianity-History.htm) for protection.

Copts enjoyed relative peace until the Second Millennium, when further restrictions hindered their worship. Because of these strict laws, Copts began converting to [Islam](http://islam.about.com/od/basicbeliefs/p/intro.htm), until by the 12th century, Egypt was primarily a Muslim country.

In 1855 the jizya tax was lifted. Copts were allowed to serve in the Egyptian army. In a 1919 revolution, Egyptian Copts' rights to worship were recognized.

**Modern Coptic Christianity Thrives**

The church's theological school at Alexandria was restored in 1893. Since then, it has established campuses in Cairo, Sydney, Melbourne, London, New Jersey, and Los Angeles. There are more than 80 Coptic Orthodox churches in the United States and 21 in Canada.

Copts number about 12 million in Egypt today, with over one million in other countries, including Australia, France, Italy, Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Great Britain, Kenya, Zambia, Zaire, Zimbabwe, Namibia, and South Africa.

The Coptic Orthodox Church continues to hold talks with the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church on matters of theology and church unity.

(Sources: [Saint George Coptic Orthodox Church](http://www.suscopts.org/stgeorgedaytona/coptic_church.html), [Coptic Orthodox Church Diocese of Los Angeles](http://lacopts.org/orthodoxy/coptic-orthodox-church/history/the-copts-today/), and [Coptic Orthodox Church Network](http://lacopts.org/orthodoxy/coptic-orthodox-church/history/the-copts-today/))

*Jack Zavada, a career writer and contributor for About.com, is host to a Christian website for singles. Never married, Jack feels that the hard-won lessons he has learned may help other Christian singles make sense of their lives. His articles and ebooks offer great hope and encouragement. To contact him or for more information, visit* [*Jack's Bio Page*](http://christianity.about.com/od/singlesresources/p/biojackzavada.htm)*.*