Coptic Culture in The Byzantine World: Nationalism and Religious Independence

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COPTIC CULTURE, ESPECIALLY AS IT IS KNOWN to most of us, through its art and its surviving literature, seems so remote, and so limited in its significance for the present time, that to many modern students it does not appear to have a very real place in either the history of Christianity or the history of the Byzantine Empire.[1] The Coptic language is not widely

[1] In the preparation of a general study such as this I have necessarily made use of the work of others, and I am indebted to the researches of a number of scholars, though I believe that the point of view adopted in this paper, and the conclusions, are my own. The best guide to the subject is the study of E. R. Hardy, *Christian Egypt: Church and People: Christianity and Nationalism in the Patriarchate of Alexandria* (New York, 1952), and I am greatly indebted to this book. Other valuable works are H. I. Bell, *Cults and Creeds in Graeco-Roman Egypt* (Liverpool, 1953), W. H. Worrell, *A Short Account of the Copts* (Ann Arbor, 1945), and *Coptic Egypt*, containing the papers read at a symposium under the auspices of New York University and the Brooklyn Museum held at the Brooklyn Museum in 1941 and published by the Museum in 1944. With books such as these available, it has not seemed necessary to give full bibliographic references for all the statements made in the present study, especially when so many of them are matters of common knowledge. References are given for direct quotations and points which are of special interest for the argument.

studied, and the literature, so far as it is available in translation, has had only a limited circulation. To some students the Coptic world seems to have its natural connections with Ethiopia rather than with Byzantium. Nevertheless, an examination of the antecedents of Coptic culture, and an effort to trace the development of the characteristics which distinguished it in the world of its day, will show us how the Copts and their religion and art and literature constitute a natural phenomenon, in the environment in which they developed, and will suggest the lessons which we may draw from the observation of the influences which went to build up the Coptic world. The development is, like all such evolutions, a unique one, but the principles which it illustrates are basic both to Christianity and to the political and intellectual heritage of the Graeco-Roman world and its continuation, the Byzantine state; and an analysis of the factors involved (which so far as the present writer knows has not hitherto been undertaken along the lines followed in this study) will give us a new view both of the Copts and of the Empire in which they lived.

The Byzantine Empire, as the continuation and natural development of the Roman Empire in the eastern Mediterranean area, shows us how a centralized imperial government, based upon an ancient tradition of power, and of success, can hold together a wide-spread territory containing a variety of quite distinct nationalities, differing in ethnic origin, language and religion—and this was a very large empire, if we compare the relatively slow and difficult means of travel and communication of those times with the methods of communication employed in the present day.

A considerable part of the value and interest of Byzantine history lies in the way in which we can see what the elements were which kept this empire together and gave it its strength—elements such as the Roman experience in administration, the Græco-Roman intellectual tradition as a unifying force in society and politics, and the new and powerful action of Christianity in transforming personal and social life and binding together the whole state. We can observe the interaction of all these elements in the various sections of the Em-

pire—in Anatolia, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, North Africa—and we can study the differing relationships of the government and the church with what some Byzantine historians actually did call "the natives." There were, of course, failures as well as successes, though the people in responsible positions in those days would not always view their shortcomings in the same way that we see them.

As one would expect, each of the major divisions of the Empire had its own special characteristics, and Egypt had an individuality which was in some ways more marked than those of Anatolia, Syria or Palestine, for example. Not the least important peculiarity was the dry climate which has meant that written material and other archaeological remains have been preserved in Egypt in larger quantity and in better condition than in other parts of the ancient world. This gives us a singularly favorable opportunity to observe how the diffusion of Greek culture and of Christianity affected one of the most individual of the more ancient cultures, that is, the old Egyptian civilization, which continued to carry on its own existence, on its own terms, within the Roman and Byzantine Empires, almost as far away from the Byzantine capital, Constantinople, as it was possible to get and still be in the Empire.

Egypt had been an ancient and powerful land with a highly developed civilization when Greece and Rome were in their infancy. There were many factors which tended to make this civilization conservative, such as the regularity and dependability of the weather—exemplified by the annual flooding of the Nile, on which all Egypt depended—the comparative ease with which one could make a bare living, the uniformity of the landscape and of living conditions, the comparative isolation from the rest of the world. These conditions may have fitted in naturally with what seems to have been a conservatism innate in the temperament of the Egyptians.

This nation achieved advances in government, art and science which gave it a commanding position in the ancient world; but after a long period of leadership and prosperity, Egypt was finally conquered by the Persians under Cambyses, in 525 B.C., and from that date to modern times, the

native Egyptians were the subjects of foreign conquerors or of foreign dynasties which had come to be more or less Egyptianized, such as the Ptolemies. These Egyptians were "the natives" and they kept up as much as they could of their language and their religion, all the while conscious that the land was theirs and that it was being ruled by outsiders.

The outsiders who concern us in this study were, first, the Greeks, and then the Romans. Greek civilization was planted in Egypt by Alexander the Great and his successors, the Ptolemies, in the latter part of the fourth century B.C. The new rulers produced a magnificent Greek capital, Alexandria, but this was a façade, not characteristic of the rest of Egypt. Greek naturally began to be used everywhere for administration and business, and Greek education spread through the country, but it was for the benefit of the Greeks, and was organized in forms which set them apart from the Egyptians.[2] The natives were by no means completely Hellenized. They continued to use their own language, even if they learned Greek, and the ancient religion was kept up so far as possible. For the lowest classes of the country people, the change in regime doubtless meant very little. Their lives were spent in an endless round of labor. The children could not be sent to school but had to be put to work as soon as possible. Most or all of these people were illiterate and this was a natural state of affairs in the Greek and Roman world at that time. The mind of a person in servile circumstances was regarded as being stunted and warped by the circumstances in which this person was fated to live, and so education was not considered either appropriate or feasible for the people who were born to be ruled by the people who were born to rule.[3]

[2] H. I. Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity*, transl. by George Lamb (New York, 1956), 109.

[3] On the educational problems and points of view of the times, see the studies by the present writer, "Education and Public Problems as Seen by Themistius," *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, 86 (1955), 291–307; "Education in the Christian Roman Empire: Christian and Pagan Theories under Constantine and his Successors," *Speculum*, 32 (1957), 48–61; "Ancient Education," *Classical Journal*, 52 (1957), 337–345.

When the Emperor Augustus annexed Egypt in 30 B.C., the land was transformed into a Roman dependency different in status and function from the other Roman colonies. Egypt was looked upon as suited only to provide food and taxes for the use of the Roman state. Intellectually and spiritually Rome had no appreciable influence on Egypt, though Egypt exported its own religion to a certain extent, not always to the liking of the Roman authorities. As we might expect, the peasants continued to live in their daily grind.

These were the terms on which the Egyptians lived during the years of the Roman Empire, while Christianity was beginning to spread through the Greek and Roman world. At the beginning of the fourth century of our era, that is, at the time when we start to see the development of the Roman Empire into the Byzantine Empire, we can observe different kinds of changes taking place. Christianity had been, first, officially recognized, and then officially approved. The authoritarian state was established by the Emperors Diocletian and Constantine the Great, between the years 284 and 337, as a means of saving the Empire from the political and military dangers which had threatened to destroy it during the third century. The new capital, Constantinople, was to be the seat of the now strongly centralized and militarized government of the Christian Roman Empire.

It is at this point that we can begin to observe the various factors which give Coptic culture its significance in history. The Later Roman Empire, as has been mentioned, was made up to a considerable extent of a number of originally separate nationalities whose land had been occupied either by Alexander the Great, or later by the Romans. These nationalities, in Anatolia, Syria, Egypt, North Africa, Gaul, Spain, Britain, were held together by Roman administration and law and by the use of the official languages, Latin and Greek, but of course the culture and the languages only penetrated to a limited depth. There was no universal free education, with state supported schools and universities, such as we are accustomed to today, and there were many regions where the old languages, cultures and religions were still very much alive. Sometimes the natives learned Latin or Greek, more

or less, often they did not. Even in a great capital like Antioch in Syria many of the working people spoke only Syriac, and in many parts of the country districts of Syria, Greek was little known. It was the same in Egypt. A man might know Greek if he were engaged in business, but his natural speech, at home and among his fellows, and in church, was the native Egyptian tongue.

In broad terms, this is the background of the ethnic composition of the Byzantine Empire, and these are the ingredients of many of the religious, social, political and economic problems that we find in the history of the world at that time. The national regions, taken all together, contributed a very characteristic stamp, and the Byzantine Empire was at this time an ecumenical state, absorbing and transforming various traditions, though the roots of these traditions continued their separate existence, and were quite visible, as roots. At the same time, as one might expect, each region, with its own history and its own geography, presented individual aspects. A few comparisons will show what was involved. Egypt resembled Syria in that each had a native stock which continued to speak its own language, but the two regions differed in their more ancient history. Save for a brief period under the Hittites, Syria had never been the seat of an indigenous and highly sophisticated and successful civilization, as Egypt had been. Instead, Syria had been a major highway for both commerce and conquest originating outside its borders. Egypt had never been a highway or melting pot like Syria; but it still possessed and kept up, so far as it could, its own original and ancient civilization, including the language, although it was under foreign domination. Palestine, again, differed from both Syria and Egypt, for the ancient Hebrew nation had left Palestine, and for a long time it had been only one of the poorer and more backward Roman provinces.

So, just as there were two kinds of people in Egypt, Greeks and natives, there were inevitably two forms of Christianity. According to legend, the church at Alexandria had been founded by St. Mark. The evidence for this is not good, but we can be reasonably sure that a city such as Alexandria

would have received a Greek-speaking Christian mission fairly early, just as there was a Greek-speaking mission at Antioch in early times. An eminent scholar[4] has written that " . . . no city has affected the development of the Christian religion more profoundly than has Alexandria. . . ." There is much to justify this statement. The Alexandrian scholars, Clement and Origen, made a contribution of the first importance toward the absorption of the Greek intellectual tradition into Christian theology, and when Arianism, early in the fourth century, raised the question of how the true nature of Christ was to be defined in terms of humanity and divinity, and co-existence with the Father, it was Athanasius of Alexandria who led the defense of the orthodox faith. Continuing the ancient learned tradition of the great Museum or library established at Alexandria in the Ptolemaic period, and also the tradition of Hellenistic Jewish scholarship represented by Philo Judaeus, the Alexandrian theological school was one of the two best known centers of Greek Christian scholarship, the other being the school of Antioch. Between them, these two centers represented the two types of exegesis, the allegorical method and the literal method, which at that time represented the two points of view in scientific theology.

The Coptic Christian tradition in the early period we know less about, but its history is still characteristic. No specific indication has been preserved of how early the Church began its work among the native, non-Greek-speaking Egyptians. All that we know is that the Church was using the Coptic language by the latter part of the third century, and that the Scriptures had been translated into the two chief dialects, Sahidic and Bohairic, which represented what is rather loosely called the Coptic language. In reality, of course, Coptic was simply the old Egyptian vernacular written in Greek letters, with some Egyptian characters added to represent sounds not present in Greek. Coptic was still a developing language, being in somewhat the same relation to ancient Egyptian as Middle English is to Anglo-Saxon. The use of

[4] J. M. Creed in *The Legacy of Egypt*, ed. by S. R. K. Glanville (Oxford, 1942), 300.

Coptic for Christian writings had an important effect on the language—as it did in the case of other languages outside the Roman Empire—in enlarging and improving both the vocabulary and the means for the expression of ideas; and as was natural, a good bit of the new vocabulary was taken over from Greek.

Thanks to the preservation of the papyri and other documents, we are well informed as to the special characteristics of Coptic Christianity. The Copts were a deeply religious people in a very straightforward and simple fashion. Theological speculation in the Greek manner was not a prime interest of country people who were often illiterate or poorly educated and had to work hard for a living, nor could philosophical theology be a leading concern of priests who themselves came from the same origin. It is characteristic that the commonest personal names were taken from the Old Testament—Abraham, Jacob, Aaron, Samuel and so on. We get a very strong impression of the popular religion from a number of sources. One of the recent very interesting discoveries is the Prayer-Book of Bishop Serapion, a collection of prayers dating about 350.[5] As the editors point out,[6] the prayers are extremely pious and scriptural in both language and contents. They do not show a very wide circle of ideas, but they are natural and direct.

The same impression, on wider terms, comes from the biography of St. Antony, the great ascetic leader, written in Greek by St. Athanasius of Alexandria, who had known Antony and other fathers who had retired to the desert to live lives of holiness, devoting themselves to prayer, fasting and manual labor.[7] But Antony and the others kept in touch with the world, and they were looked upon by their lay brethren with admiration, pride and affection, and throngs of people, knowing Antony's piety and good sense, visited him to seek his

[5] *Bishop Serapion's Prayer Book*, ed. by John Wordsworth (London, 1899).

[6] *Op. cit.*, 25.

[7] Athanasius' *Life of St. Antony* is now available in a translation by Robert T. Meyer, with excellent introduction and commentary, in the series "Ancient Christian Writers," 10 (Westminster, Maryland, 1950). The quotations from the biography given here are taken, with grateful acknowledgement, from Professor Meyer's version.

blessing or to be cured of ailments, physical or mental, or to get his advice in their personal difficulties (including business disputes). Antony, Athanasius writes, was illiterate and knew only Coptic, though he came of a well-to-do family which owned a large farm and lived in comfortable circumstances. Athanasius writes that Antony preached a very simple form of faith, based on an intimate knowledge of the Bible, and that he taught a steady belief in the teaching of the Gospels. Athanasius (§ 16) quotes Antony as saying that "the Scriptures are really sufficient for our instruction." Greek-speaking priests and monks came from Alexandria to visit Antony and to discuss theology with him—and perhaps to impress him with their learning—but he silenced them, Athanasius says, by declaring that he thought that the main thing was to follow the teachings of Christ. Antony stood out as the representative of the simple faith of the uneducated Copts as contrasted with what these Copts would have thought of as the sophisticated religion of the Platonizing scholars of Alexandria. Athanasius, himself a highly educated scholar in the Greek tradition, makes Antony say to his visitors from Alexandria (§ 78), "We Christians [i.e., we Coptic Christians] . . . possess religious truth, not on the basis of Greek philosophical reasoning, but founded on the power of a faith vouchsafed us by God through Jesus Christ." Writing this in 357, after many years of struggle against Arianism, Athanasius must have really admired what he found in Antony and the other desert fathers, even though he knew that this type of faith would not answer the needs of people outside the Coptic area who had been accustomed to think in terms of Greek philosophy.

At the same time Antony, as we have seen him in Athanasius' biography, exemplified another characteristic aspect of Coptic Christianity, the lively belief in demons and the supernatural. We are told that on occasion Antony found it necessary to fight off whole swarms of demons and evil spirits who contrived the most ingenious and alluring forms of temptation. The saint was always successful, and his triumphs, recorded gravely by the great theologian Athanasius, gave courage and confidence to all Coptic Egypt. For these people, demons really existed and they attacked not only Antony but

everybody else, lay and clerical. The struggle against them—the very need to struggle against them—would among other things tend to develop, as a regular part of the Coptic character, a certain toughness and independence, and a concentration of purpose, which some other peoples perhaps would not have occasion to acquire.

It seems, indeed, to have been this awareness of the need for the individual to exercise himself against the active forces of evil, coupled with a willingness and even eagerness to lead a hard life, which was responsible for the early appearance of asceticism in Egypt. The Copts took the lead in this form of Christian living, and provided examples of both solitary withdrawal and life in ascetic communities which were copied throughout the Christian world. As a race inured to hardship, the Copts looked upon ascetic discipline as a natural means of achieving a special degree of holiness, and in some cases at least the regime was healthy; St. Antony lived to be a hundred and five. The form of devotion is a little difficult for some people to understand now, and it was one of the features of Christianity which was most ridiculed by the pagans. But the plain people admired and revered these athletes of Christ, as they were called, and looked upon their achievement as bringing blessing and strength to the whole body of Christians. This is a characteristic and instructive example of the sense of community, of membership in the body of Christ, and the sharing with others, which was characteristic of the early church.

There was another element in the Coptic world which has not been given as much prominence by scholars as it should have, namely the high degree of illiteracy. This is a factor in ancient history which all students are aware of, though we sometimes take it for granted and do not stop to think of all the consequences which it brought with it. Perhaps, also, we do not always think what the causes of illiteracy were, and what they tell us about a world in which it was taken for granted that a sometimes substantial portion of the population was unlettered.[8]

[8] See my paper in the *Classical Journal*, cited above, n. 3.

In the case of Egypt in the Roman and Christian era, we have ample evidence, in the papyri and ostraka, of the widespread lack of education. The Coptic clergy and monks came from the common people, and to begin with, at least, we would expect the clergy to be not much more literate than their neighbors. The original ascetic groups and monasteries were in fact made up of laymen. The illiteracy of St. Antony has already been mentioned. Other evidence is characteristic. The church historian Socrates[9] describes an argument over a typical Christological point between the Patriarch Theophilus of Alexandria, who held office from 385 to 412, and the monks of the desert. Socrates remarks quite casually that most of the monks were illiterate, and points out the effect of this upon the way in which the Patriarch was able to conduct his side of the controversy. There is no need to go into detail about the advantage which the literate Patriarch would have over the ignorant monks, though the monks had their own special weapon in the form of a mass invasion of Alexandria, in which they put their side of the controversy into the form of mob action.[10]

In addition, we possess special evidence as to the type of education, or lack of it, among some of the clergy. This comes from a number of ostraka, or bits of broken pottery, which were used as writing material by the poorest people, those who were so poor that they could not afford papyrus. A collection of ostraka written in Coptic have been recovered which once belonged to the correspondence files of Bishop Abraham of Hermonthis, who lived in the latter part of the sixth century.[11] Bishop Abraham was accustomed to receive, from candidates for holy orders, written statements of the amount of preparation which the candidates undertook to offer for examination before being ordained. One reason why the bishop had to be

[9] *Eccl. hist.*, 6, 7.

[10] Charles Kingsley's historical novel *Hypatia*, which follows the ancient sources faithfully, gives an excellent picture of the life of the Christian community at Alexandria in this period.

[11] On the ostraka discussed here, and on the ancient accomplishments in memorizing the Bible or parts of it, see A. Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, English translation (London, 1911), 210–215.

sure of this, apparently, was that the candidates might very well be illiterate. Some could perhaps read a little, but numbers of the ordinands mentioned in these humble memoranda could not write, and had to get someone to write for them. One ostrakon is addressed to the bishop by three candidates, Samuel, Jacob and Aaron, who have requested ordination as deacons. They state they are ready to observe the commands and the canons and to be obedient, and to learn the Gospel of John by the end of Pentecost. If they do not learn it by heart, they agree that they will not be ordained. Each candidate is vouched for by two or three guarantors, and one of these, the priest Patermute, states that it was he who wrote the ostrakon, on request of the candidates.

Other ostraka in the bishop's files show that he had set other candidates to learn by heart the Gospel of Matthew, or that of Mark, or other gospels, while one literate candidate was required to write out the Gospel of John, the theory being, evidently, that if he did this he would become fairly familiar with it. It looks as though the bishop set different tasks to different candidates in order to spread out the knowledge of the Scriptures among his clergy.

Bishop Aphu of Oxyrhyncus once required a candidate for deacon's orders to learn twenty-five Psalms, two Epistles of St. Paul, and a portion of a gospel, actually not a heavy task if we remember that it was not uncommon for monks to know all the Psalms by heart, and that there is credible evidence that some people learned the whole Bible by heart and would recite it. All this, of course, was at a time when memorizing was much more practised than it is now. Naturally this illiteracy of the clergy would have been greater in the outlying districts and the little villages than in the large centers, but it is quite characteristic of the state of the people as a whole, and it gives us a rather striking picture of the Coptic Church.

One more element in Coptic history needs to be taken into account. This concerns the situation which developed in Egypt as the monophysite controversy grew into a major political problem. Here we leave the Coptic part of the country and return to the world of imperial politics and

theological scholarship at Alexandria. We must summarize here very briefly a large and complex subject which is set out more fully in various modern studies.[12] As is well known, the debates over the understanding and proper statement of the nature of Christ, as composed in some way, difficult for humans to understand, of both divine and human elements, had occupied theologians for a long time. The question, of course, was whether our salvation is effected by a truly divine Christ, or by a Christ who was in reality human, in which case, of course, the value of the salvation would be perhaps open to question. The Council of Chalcedon in 451 had undertaken to find a definition of the Savior's nature which would be true and universally acceptable, but in order to try to assure the greatest acceptability, the definition was put in such terms that many earnest people could not subscribe to it. As a reaction, there grew up in both Egypt and Syria a Monophysite party, as it was called, which believed that the Divine Nature and the human nature of Christ coalesced, at the Incarnation, into one composite nature, instead of remaining in two natures, as the definition of Chalcedon had it, without confusion, without change, without division or separation. The controversy that followed Chalcedon stirred up the bitterest passions in Syria and Egypt, for the Monophysites felt that they were preserving and defending the belief in our Lord's true divinity. The imperial government, with the responsibility for bringing all its subjects to the true faith, employed force to put down the Monophysites and thereby inevitably provoked a hostility which grew from religious dissension to political opposition and then to agitation which inflamed the nationalism always latent in these regions. In Egypt, orthodoxy came to be synonymous with persecution by the imperial government, carried out through the instrumentality of the patriarchs who were arbitrarily sent to Alexandria and backed up by imperial troops. Monophysitism came to be a national creed, and every celebration of the Eucharist provided a chance for a demonstration of national solidarity. The government continued to use force, and when the Moslems

[12] One of the best treatments is that of E. L. Woodward, *Christianity and Nationalism in the Later Roman Empire* (London, 1916).

began their expansion in the seventh century, the Monophysites in Egypt and Syria welcomed them as better masters than the hated Constantinople government. Here again was a development which would turn the Copts in upon themselves and make them conscious of another barrier dividing them from the Empire. After the Council of Chalcedon, it has been pointed out, the Coptic documents use noticeably fewer Greek loan words.

With our wisdom as students of the past we can see the strength of national pride in the Greeks and Copts which by itself would have kept them apart linguistically, and we can also perceive the work of the Universal Church which overcame the language barrier. This seems to have been as far as any solution of the problem could have been carried in those times, and very likely it was not even thought of as a problem.

Our natural reaction, based on our own experience of the work of the Church and of the responsibilities of modern governments, would be to say that the imperial authorities at Constantinople, or their representatives at Alexandria, ought to have given top priority to a free universal educational system which would have brought to the Copts both the Greek language and cultural heritage, and the famous political tradition of the Roman state. It would seem to have been possible, in the light of our own experience, to add these traditions to the Coptic language and cultural tradition. We should also perhaps look for some effort by the Church itself in Egypt to raise the standard of education among the native Christians and to give them literacy in Coptic at least.

It looks as though no one in those days ever thought of attempting such things. Whether it would have been financially possible, from the point of view of that era, we cannot be sure, though it seems safe to say that if either the imperial government or the Church had thought the problem important enough, means would have been found. The situation as it actually developed suggests two conclusions, or perhaps one should say two questions. One point is that education, by itself, was not always thought of as a necessary instrument of social and political unification. Certainly there were in-

dividuals, such as Themistius, the pagan orator and philosopher of the fourth century after Christ, who saw clearly the need, and also the means, of turning the barbarians into useful citizens of the Roman Empire;[13] and the Emperor Justinian also had a glimpse of this;[14] but there is no indication in the sources (at least so far as the present writer knows) that this question was consciously formulated and consciously faced.

The other question that concerns us here is that of the role of the Greek-speaking Orthodox Church, which took such great pride, and found such great strength in the fact that it was the Church of the Greek-speaking and Greek-educated people, reading and teaching the New Testament in the language in which it had been written, and at the same time the heir of classical Greek literature and philosophy, as well as of the political tradition of Alexander the Great, for example, who had brought Greek culture to Egypt. The Church had attempted to bring Christianity to all the people of Egypt by giving them the Scriptures in Coptic as well as in Greek. To this extent the Copts had been given a bond with the Greek-speaking element in Egypt that they had not had before. But to go beyond that, and to train the Copts in the Greek language, and the Greek philosophical and literary heritage, was quite another thing. This would have brought the Copts to be partakers in the national pride which the Greek-speaking members of the Orthodox Church had in common. If the Egyptians had been forced, or induced, by Alexander the Great, or his successors, to accept the Greek language and culture, then, when the time came, they would have become Greek-speaking Christians, like the Cappadocians in Anatolia, for example, who gave the Church such great leaders in the fourth century. However, this sequence of events had not occurred, and the Church apparently did not visualize, in the terms in which we today see the situation, any need or desirability of Hellenizing the Copts.

[13] See my study of Themistius, cited above, n. 3.

[14] This subject was treated by me in an article, "Justinian's View of Christianity and the Greek Classics," *Anglican Theological Review*, 40, No. 1 (1958), 13–22.

But the Copts themselves might have had something to say. We cannot venture to say whether or not they would have been able or willing, if given the means, to become Hellenized. Some individuals very likely did, or at least they became bilingual in Coptic and Greek. As one looks at their very characteristic and individual art, which has a ruggedness and a concentrated strength and a special character all its own, one wonders whether the Copts may not really have preferred to keep to themselves.[15] If they had had any interest in reviving ancient Egyptian art forms, or in copying the Graeco-Roman style, one would think that even mediocre artists, with any desire to experiment and practice, could have produced imitations which would be recognizable as such. And there are certainly real technical achievements, in such things as friezes and architectural decorations, which indicate a skill among the Coptic artists which suggests that they were capable of copying the finest Hellenistic work. Apparently this art is what the Copts developed for themselves, and we can see in it not only the bright colors and hard outlines which would be needed to make the art stand up in the powerful sunlight of Egypt, but the mental toughness of the Egyptians at all periods.

If we try to think, finally, about the meaning of all these factors for Byzantine history—regardless, now, of how the Byzantines saw or did not see the questions—we can draw some characteristic lessons from Egypt. Given the conditions of the time and place, the arrival of Christianity had not been sufficient, by itself, to absorb or re-direct the feelings of national solidarity which any people like the Copts would inevitably have. The gap, apparently, could not be wholly closed by religion alone. But what really caused the gap is the important question, and here the lack of educational opportunity and effort may be the answer. It would seem that illiteracy must have been a major factor. Nationalism undoubtedly played a part, as many scholars have rightly insisted, and

[15] Convenient handbooks illustrating the art of the Copts are *Pagan and Christian Egypt*, ed. by J. D. Cooney, the catalogue of an exhibition held in the Brooklyn Museum in 1941; and *Late Egyptian and Coptic Art, An Introduction to the Collections in the Brooklyn Museum* (Brooklyn, 1943).

nationalism embraces the ethnic and linguistic factors which make for divisiveness. But illiteracy represents the factors which keep nationalism alive. It is the implications behind this situation which concern us in our study of the larger history of the times. Here we can see one of the strengths, as well as one of the weaknesses, of the Byzantine tradition. The strength, throughout the Empire's territory, and throughout its history, lay in the national pride based on the Greek culture and the Greek Church. The weakness stemmed from the ancient Greek view, still surviving, whether consciously or unconsciously, of the natural barrier between Greek and barbarian, which made it impossible to visualize the thorough Hellenisation of the Copts and other similar national groups which had always, in the Graeco-Roman view, been in inferior positions, sometimes almost in a state of serfdom. At the same time, there may be another source of strength, not always recognized today, in the presence of people such as the Copts within the Empire. It is true that their discontent, aggravated by the imperial government's policy in the Monophysite controversy, facilitated the Moslem occupation of Egypt, just as the similar tension in Syria operated in the same way. But the Copts did, for a very long time, make it possible to keep the agricultural economy of Egypt going, and so to keep up a food supply which was vitally necessary for the Empire as a whole.