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## Coptic Culture: Christian Teachings and Thought, Part II

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Wednesday, 08 April 2009

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Christian teachings and thought have greatly influenced Coptic culture, norms, and values. They enhanced and invigorated some of the ancient Egyptian traditions, modified and changed some others. In the previous article, the writer outlined some of the fundamental differences between ancient Egyptian and Christian beliefs. The genesis of Judeo-Christian beliefs is divine revelation, whereas ancient Egyptian beliefs came about through human observations, reflections and suppositions

Judeo-Christianity is a monotheistic religion, which worships the ONE God who created all that is seen and unseen, whereas ancient Egyptian beliefs accorded worship to a multiplicity of gods and goddesses for most of the recorded history. The recognition of the sinful nature of man and his need for God's salvation are core tenets of the Christian beliefs, whereas the notion of sin is essentially absent in the ancient Egyptian beliefs.

Christian beliefs are grounded in the love of the ONE Triune God of all that is seen and unseen, for his creation, and his promise to redeem man from sin. In the fullness of time God sent his only begotten son Jesus Christ our Lord to save all mankind from sin and the power of death.

Perhaps no other ancient Egyptian custom has attracted the fancy of our modern popular culture as the mummy. The custom to mummify or preserve the bodies of the dead was grounded in ancient Egyptian beliefs. It was a well-established custom- first practiced to preserve the bodies of the kings and subsequently extended to the rest of the population- from the dawn of the ancient Egyptian civilization to the 4th century A.D. The amount of effort and treasure, which the ancient

Egyptians expended on building pyramids and tombs, equipping the dead with what they believed the dead would need in their journey to eternity, and the mummification of the dead, were enormous by any extent of the imagination. Christian teachings and thought had a major influence on this long-established custom.

After the ancient Egyptians embraced the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ, many of them continued, very much like their ancestors, to mummify the bodies of the dead. This age-old practice was disapproved of by the Coptic Church, and looked upon as a vestige of pagan beliefs. It took several decades however, for Christian teachings to persuade the ancient Egyptian Christian converts to abandon the custom of their forefathers. The custom was gradually abandoned, as more and more ancient Egyptians embraced the Christian faith and over time were persuaded to stop the practice. This gradual process was further aided, by the edicts to proscribe pagan religions and practices, issued by emperor Theodosius I (347-395 A.D.) in the 380s-390s A.D. One of the Christian teachings influencing the 3rd century A.D. Christians, including the Copts, is "The Life of Antony" written by Saint Athanasius (293-373 A.D.). Saint Athanasius originally wrote his book "The Life of Anthony" in Greek, shortly after the death of Saint Anthony the Great in 356 A.D. The book was then translated into Coptic, Latin, Syriac, and subsequently other languages.

Saint Athanasius (1) notes in his book that saint Anthony rebuked the Egyptians for their burial practices and that many obeyed him. He states "When the brothers importuned him, wishing to make him stay with them until his perfection (i.e. his death) he <refused>, for he would not allow this one practice in particular: The Egyptians love to prepare for burial the bodies of the eminent people who have died&hellip;they

warp them in linen but do not bury them in the earth&hellip;But Anthony spoke with the bishops, asking them about this practice, so they would provide direction to the people about it. Furthermore, he would reproach the people and rebuke the women, saying, this is not right&hellip; Many obeyed him, therefore, and hid their dead in the earth.&rdquo; Saint Athanasius further writes about Saint Anthony&rsquo;s final words regarding the custom of mummifying the bodies of the dead &ldquo;You know that I always rebuke those who are doing this and exhort them to stop practices of this sort. Therefore, you bury my body in the earth and follow my instructions so that no one knows the place where my body is except you alone. For I will receive it back imperishable on the day of the Lord.&rdquo; The teachings of Saint Athanasius the Apostolic and the words of Saint Anthony the Great are grounded in the truth of the Holy Bible. Thus saint Paul, the Apostle, indicates &ldquo;For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures&hellip;For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive&hellip;For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable nature must put on the imperishable, and this mortal nature must put on immortality&hellip;thanks be to god, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.&rdquo; 1 Cor 15.3-5, 22, 52-54, 57.

The Life of Anthony provides a good example of Christian teachings and thought, which influenced Coptic culture, norms and values. The Christian teachings and thought helped persuade the ancient Egyptian Christians of the 3rd century A.D. to change some of their inherited and long cherished norms and values. Abandonment of the mummification of the dead was also aided by the edicts of Theodosius I in the late 4th century A.D.

The peace of the Lord be with you all. Irene Passe.

References:

(1) The Life of Antony by Athanasius of Alexandria, The Coptic Life and The Greek Life, translated by Tim Vivian and Apostolos N. Athanassakis with Rowan A. Greer, Cistercian Publications, Kalamazoo, Michigan, 2003.

Acknowledgement: The writer would like to acknowledge and thank the staff of the Library of Congress, Washington, DC, for their assistance with research for background material for this article.

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