

Coptic Liturgy; Past, Present, and Future

Hany N. Takla*

“Coptic Liturgy” is used here to broadly refer to all ecclesiastical services performed within the Coptic Orthodox Church throughout its many centuries of existence. The definition includes the services themselves as well as the reading books used for them. These services, in essence, are designed to regulate man’s interface with God in all aspects of his life on earth. They are built on a solid Biblical foundation in intent as well as content. They are simply a collection of appropriate biblical quotations mixed with writings of the fathers of the Church and presented in a mostly Egyptian shell of language and music. This description applies not only to the prayers and to the hymns but to the readings as well. Unfortunately much of these services have lost their Egyptian definition in today’s usage for a variety of reasons.

The literary heritage of the Coptic Church has suffered greatly as a result of the oppressive attitude that its members experienced since the Moslem Arabs wrested control of Egypt from its Byzantine rulers in the seventh century AD. However liturgical services continued to thrive. As a result manuscripts of that type were produced in far greater numbers than any other literary element of the Coptic Heritage. This became the attention-grabber of the travelers that passed through Egypt during the Renaissance era. Eventually this became the focus of their early study of the Coptic Church.

This paper will survey the important work done in the field since the 14th century AD, as well as discusses in broad terms what is needed to be done in the future. The periods discussed will be as follows:

1. 14th-15th century AD (primary sources)
2. 16th century - 1860's AD (Europe)
3. 1860's-1930 AD
4. 1930-Present
5. The Future

1. The 14th-15th Century

During this period the Coptic Church was on the verge of experiencing its worst declining trend across all aspects of its heritage. Manuscripts production in that period were mostly of a liturgical nature. There were three monumental works related to the liturgical heritage that came from that period. The first was the 14th century medieval encyclopedia of Ibn Kabar. It was titled, *Misbah al-Zulmah fi Idah al-Khidma*, or *The Lamp of Darkness for the Explanation of the Service*. The second is a work by Youhanna ibn Sabaa, titled, *al-jawhara al-Nafisa fi 'eloum al-Kanisa*, or *the Precious Jewel in Ecclesiastical Sciences*. The third, and most important, is a work by the Coptic Patriarch Gabriel V (1409-27), intended to regulate and reform the liturgical practices of the time. This work was titled simply, *al-Tartib al-Taqsi*, or *the Ritual Order*. The Arabic text of these works was published in our modern era with translations in numerous languages. However, none of them are available in an English translation.

2. The 16th Century - 1860's

As early as the 16th century, the European travelers brought some of these liturgical manuscripts to the Vatican, as is seen from early catalogues of manuscripts in the Vatican Apostolic Library. In the following century, the English Lord Huntington brought several manuscripts of this type to

* Mr. Takla is President of the *St. Shenouda the Archimandrite Coptic Society*, Director of the Coptic Center in Los Angeles, and the Coptic Language instructor at the Los Angeles Coptic Theological Seminary.

the Bodleian Library in Oxford. In the 17th century, Fr. Vansleb commissioned the copying of many of these Coptic liturgical manuscripts and deposited them in the Royal French Library (now part of the National Library of France) upon his return.

The exotic published accounts of these travelers generated interest in the Coptic Church. The presence of these liturgical manuscripts directed the early studies of the Europeans to the services of the Church. Many of these early works were devoted to text editions with Latin translations of the Euchologion (al-Khulagi). The works of Scialach (1604), Renaudot (1716), Assemani (1749-66), and others typify that trend.

In the first half of the 18th century, the short-lived French Expedition of Napoleon opened the cultural door of Egypt to Europe. Later in that century, the Vatican made a concerted effort to preach Christianity among the Moslems of Egypt. This attempt of course failed due to the obvious opposition of the Moslem authorities in Egypt to such an activity. So the Vatican redirected their effort toward converting the Coptic Orthodox Christians of Egypt. This also was met by failure, except for the nominal conversion of a few influential Egyptian families, who did it to preserve the peace of the church at the time. As these early missionaries made their way back home, they took with them three young Copts to be trained at the Vatican.

The most notable of them was a youth by the name of Raphael al-Tukhi. This young man eventually was ordained a bishop over Al-Minya, but never made his way back to Egypt. He occupied his time with the editions of the Coptic liturgical books in Coptic and Arabic, among other things. His editions were made on the basis of the multitude of liturgical manuscripts that were brought to the Vatican by that time. They were not intended to be critical editions of such texts but rather liturgical manuals to be used by the soon-to-be-established Coptic Catholic Church. They were modified to present the dogmatic differences that the Roman Catholic Church had with the Coptic Church. Otherwise they were replicas of those in use in the Coptic Orthodox Church.

In the 19th century many more liturgical manuscripts found their way out of Coptic depositories in Egypt and into European libraries and Museums. The most significant were the library of St. Bishoy Monastery that was acquired by the Göttingen Library in Germany; the collection of the English Archdeacon Henry Tattam which eventually was deposited in the John Rylands Library in Manchester, England; and the Wadi 'n-Natron manuscripts acquired by Lord Zouche which were eventually deposited in the British Library. These additions as well as the many that were already in Europe generated even more interest in this branch of Coptic Studies.

3. 1860's - 1930

This period witnessed a great reform movement in the Coptic Church. Pope Cyril IV shifted the course of the church to a more modern and educated direction. He elevated the ecclesiastical education to a level not achieved since the golden age of the church in 4th-5th centuries. This brought forth many that pursued the study of the different aspects of the Coptic Heritage, especially liturgical services and the language. He also brought a printing press for the first time into the church that made the service books more readily available. Arabic lectionaries seemed to be the first books to make it out of that press. Liturgical books with Coptic texts did not appear till a few decades later in the late 19th and early 20th century.

The earliest liturgical book editions were of the Diaconal (1887) by Hegomenus Philotheos who also published a Euchologion containing the liturgies of St. Basil and St. Gregory (1887) as well as the *Turuhat* (expositions) of the Pascha (1914). This was followed 15 years later by the Abd al-Masih Salib's edition of the entire Euchologion (1902). We also see an edition of the Coptic Office of Baptism (1896), the Synaxarium in 2 volumes (1894) by Youssef Habashi, and Coptic Hymns (1887, 1896). But we can not forget the contribution of Ekladius Labib who was the icon of that period. He edited the Psalms and Odes (1896), a 4-volume edition of the Coptic Lectionary (1900-2), the Coptic Office of the Funerals (1905), the Annual Psalmody (1908), the

Coptic Office of Unction (1909), and the Kiahk Psalmody (1911). Later in that period we also see an edition of the book of Doxologies or *Kitab al-Tamajid* (1922). These editions at times incorporated not only collated manuscripts but liturgical practices of the time. However they can not be considered true critical editions because they did not include the list of manuscripts used or what reading came from which manuscript. They did serve their intended purpose at the time which was to make available to the clergy the necessary manuals of ecclesiastical practices.

Meanwhile, the Coptic Catholics in Egypt established their own press and began to publish their own manuals of liturgical practices. These works were primarily reprints of the 18th century work of al-Tukhi. Worthy of mention is the edition of the Euchologion (1898), the Coptic Offices (1900), and Ecclesiastical or Ordination Rites (1900). These publications however did not match the print nor the binding quality of the original Vatican edition.

The West on the other hand was advancing and refining their work in the subject. This was aided by the continuous influx of Coptic manuscripts coming to Europe. Such works became the launching pad for the more advance work that is evident in the next period. In England, Malan was publishing his series titled, *Original Documents of the Coptic Church* in six parts (1872-5). This included English translations from Coptic of the Liturgies of St. Mark (St. Cyril) and St. Gregory, as well as listings of the readings and the commemorations of the saints found in the Coptic Church. Later we see the works of the Marquis de Bute in England on the Laqan (1901) and the Liturgy of St. Basil and the Horologion (1908). Other important works of that period are Wüstenfeld's (Germany) edition of the Synaxarium volume 1 (1879); Ermoni editions (France) of the Coptic texts of Ordination (1898-1900), and Baptism and Marriage (1900-2); Forget (Rome) critical edition of the Synaxarium (1905); Basset (France) edition of the Synaxarium with French translation from manuscripts in France; O'Leary's (England) work on the Coptic Theotokia and hymns (1911-24) and his 3-volume publication of the Coptic Difnar (1926-30), and Woolley's (England) translation of the Coptic Offices (1930). Then we encounter the monumental study of Brightman (1896) on the Eastern Liturgies which was a logical extension to the work done by al-Tukhi, Malan, and others. Worthy of mention also is a small work by the Jesuit father Badet in Egypt in two volumes at the turn of the century that dealt with transcribing the hymns of the Coptic liturgy of St. Basil into musical notes.

4. 1930 - Present time

In Europe and the US more emphasis has been placed on editing and studying the literature of the Copts rather than their liturgy. This was primarily due to the availability of the Hamouli collection in New York, the St. Mercurius' Edfu collection in London, the Bodmer collection in Geneva, and of course the renowned Nag Hammadi collection in Cairo. However, the relatively small percentage of work on the Coptic Liturgy was of higher quality than in the past. The first and foremost person during this period is Dr. Burmester who enriched this field over 50 years. His major accomplishments were the edition of the oldest Pascha lectionary (1933-39) with collations from over 20 manuscripts, edition of the Coptic Horologion (1973), and the description of the Coptic Church services. Three other works are of monumental importance to this field. The first is Dr. Hammerschmidt's critical edition of the Coptic Liturgy of St. Gregory (1957). The second is Fr. Quecke's study of the Coptic Agbeya and Psalmody (1970). And the third is Fr. Zanetti's study of the Coptic Annual cycle lectionary (1985).

In Egypt, we found many of the Coptic, Coptic-Arabic, liturgical manuals being re-edited by both the Coptic Orthodox and the Coptic Catholics. Also a new trend in editing these manuals was put in place primarily by al-Mahaba Bookshop. This trend replaced the Coptic script with a transliteration in Arabic characters. These editions also tended to contain revisions based mostly on current use of such services without investigation of how sound these changes were. Nonetheless, liturgical books such as the Euchologion became common in the hand of the Copts, as well as prayer books such as the Arabic Agbeya (Horologion). The Coptic Agbeya was

published for the first time by the Coptic Catholics in 1930, and by the Coptic Orthodox in 1975. The Society for the Revival of the Churches (*Nahdat al-Kana'is*) in Cairo sponsored the publication of many liturgical books since 1940. Foremost among them are several editions of the Coptic Psalmodia which progressively added hymns to the original text of the 1908 Labib edition. Also the Diocese of Bani Sueif established itself as a leader in printing and reprinting the Coptic Liturgical manuals.

The most important contribution in the field during this period was by Rageb Muftah in 1930's. With his own funding, he espoused the cause of preserving and studying the Coptic ecclesiastical musical tradition. He invited the renowned English musicologist Dr. Ernest Newlandsmith to listen and record the Coptic hymns in musical notes. He did so in a ten-volume unpublished manuscript, preserved in Egypt. This work encouraged several other European and American scholars to further refine these notes. Dr. Marian Robertson of Utah is the last surviving scholar of the group. Muftah also employed a carefully selected choir of Coptic deacons at the Institute of Coptic Studies in Cairo to learn and record this rich heritage. The first major fruit of this work was the recording of the Coptic Liturgy of St. Basil on LP records. Eventually this and many more were done on Cassette tapes and distributed to the public over the past 20 years. Preserving that Heritage in Compact-Disk format started in the US. Most of the early work with recording of hymns and live recording of liturgies. Dr. Samy Farag of Los Angeles has contributed greatly toward that trend. The Coptic Diocese of Germany has recently made recordings of the Coptic Institute's Choir on CD. The recorded selections contained several hymns from the Feast of Nativity and the Holy Week services.

The Copts abroad have also contributed to this field. Their contribution is primarily the translation of the service manuals into European languages. The majority of this work was done in English because the greater number of them have settled in English-speaking countries; US, Canada, and Australia. St. Basil Liturgy and the Horologion were the ones to be translated first and often. Tens of editions have made their way to print. Most of them were based on the Arabic translation of these texts. On rare occasions the Coptic was used as a base text.

The first one was of the St. Basil liturgy in the early seventies by Prof. Fayek Ishak of Canada (translation only). The first one with parallel columns of Coptic-Arabic-English was done by St. Mark Coptic Church of Los Angeles in 1975. The first one with Arabic and Coptic transliterated in English characters was done by Prof. Ernest Abdel-Masih of Michigan, ca. 1978. St. Mark Coptic Church in Chicago introduced the first translations of selections from the Gregorian liturgy (19??). In 1990 Pope Shenouda III invited a group of Coptic Priests and other lay Copts from the US, Canada, and England to prepare a standard translation of the liturgy of St. Basil. The resulting work never received the support it was supposed to get. The latest revision of this work was published in 1995 by Fr. Matthias Wahba in San Francisco, where he revised some of the translation on the basis of the Coptic text as well as added other prayers from the Gregorian and the Cyrillian liturgies.

The second most popular translation project was that of the Agbeyia or the Horologion. By 1972 an English translation was made of the prayers of Morning, Vespers, and Compline. In 1975 the first complete edition was made by St. Mary Coptic Church in Los Angeles. There are two other editions that employed different approach. The first, by St. George Church in Brooklyn, utilized the Septuagint translation (as is) in the Psalms; and the second by St. Antonious Coptic Church in San Francisco, revised the translation of these psalms on the basis of the Coptic version.

Other editions of liturgical books also appeared, the Coptic Offices (198?), Ordination Rites (199?), Diaconal (Australia) (19??), the reading book of the Pascha Week (198?). All these publications employed Coptic and Arabic along with an English translation. Again all the translations were predominantly based on the Arabic text and not the Coptic.

5. *The Future*

The Coptic Church possesses a great number of liturgical texts. The majority of these texts have not been edited in a satisfactory manner, nor has their developmental history been studied. Future work should be directed toward that aim. In other words we need to have accurate critical editions of these texts and then proceed to translated them and chronicle their development. The material to do this work, i.e., the manuscripts, are available. All that is needed are trained and dedicated workers. These workers need to be from among our community, at least to prepare and translate these texts. Then it can be turned over to scholars, more competent in this field. It is fair for the people that stands to gain the most from the work, i.e. Copts, to do that work themselves rather than wait for someone else to do it for them.