

The History of Religion in Egypt

Teacher's Notes – Ms. Scott – World History & Geography

I. Ancient Egyptian Religion

- a. It had its roots in Egypt's prehistory, and lasted for more than 3,000 years.
 - i. Details of religious belief changed over time as the importance of particular gods rose and declined, and their intricate relationships shifted.
 - ii. At various times certain gods became preeminent over the others, including the sun god Ra (sometimes known as Amun Ra) and the mother goddess Isis.
 - iii. For a brief period, in the aberrant theology promulgated by the pharaoh Akhenaten, a single god, the Aten, replaced the traditional pantheon.
- b. It was a complex system of beliefs and rituals integral to ancient Egyptian society.
 - i. It centered on the Egyptians' interaction with a multitude of deities who were believed to be present in, and in control of, the forces and elements of nature.
 - ii. The myths about these gods were meant to explain the origins and behavior of the forces they represented.
 - iii. The practices of Egyptian religion were efforts to provide for the gods and gain their favor.
- c. Role of the Pharaoh
 - i. Formal religious practice centered on the pharaoh, who was believed to possess a divine power by virtue of his kingship.
 - ii. The pharaoh acted as an intermediary between his people and the gods, and he was obligated to sustain the gods through rituals and offerings so that they could maintain order in the universe.
 1. Therefore, the state dedicated enormous resources to the performance of these rituals and to the construction of temples where they were carried out.
- d. Individual Egyptians
 - i. Individuals could interact with the gods for their own purposes, appealing for their help through prayer or compelling the gods to act through magic.
 - ii. These popular religious practices were distinct from, but closely linked with, the formal rituals and institutions.
 - iii. The popular aspect of religious tradition grew more prominent throughout Egyptian history as the status of the pharaoh declined.
- e. Funerary Practices
 - i. The Egyptians made great efforts to ensure the survival of their souls after death.
 1. They provided tombs, grave goods, and offerings in an effort to preserve the bodies (through mummification) and spirits of the deceased, and provide them with material comforts in the afterlife.
- f. Legacy
 - i. The overall Egyptian system of religion endured, even through several periods of foreign rule, until the coming of Christianity in the early centuries C.E.
 - ii. Egyptian religion left behind numerous religious monuments and writings, as well as significant influence on cultures both ancient and modern.

II. Coptic Christianity

a. History

- i. The Copts claim direct descent from ancient Egyptians; the word copt is derived from the Arabic word *qubt* (“Egyptian”)
- ii. Egypt was Christianized during the first century C.E., when the country was part of the Roman Empire.
 1. According to Coptic tradition, Mark, disciple of Christ, established the first patriarchates in Alexandria in 42 C.E., and the line of patriarchal (authority) succession has been unbroken since then.
- iii. Egyptian Christianity developed distinct dogmas and practices during the more than two centuries that the religion was illegal under Roman law.
- iv. By the 4th century C.E., when Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire, Coptic traditions were sufficiently different from those in Rome and Constantinople to cause major religious conflicts.
- v. Dissension would persist for 150 years, until most Copts seceded from the main body of Christianity because of the decision of the Council of Chalcedon that Christ had a dual nature, human and divine.
 1. Copts maintain that Christ has one single, divine nature (monophysitism)
- vi. The Coptic Church developed separately from other Eastern Churches.
 1. The Coptic Church’s clerical hierarchy had evolved by the sixth century.
 2. A patriarch, referred to as the pope, heads the church, and is traditionally based in Alexandria.
 3. A synod or council of senior priests is responsible for electing or removing popes.

b. Copts in Islamic Egypt

- i. After 647 C.E., all of Egypt was under Islamic rule. Christians and Jews were protected, but did have to pay a tax to the Muslim government.
- ii. Most Coptic Christians converted to Islam, and within 200 years, Coptic Christians were a minority.
- iii. By the 10th century, the Arabic language had replaced Coptic as the primary spoken language.
- iv. Today, this indigenous Christian sect. ranges from 3-10 million.

III. Islam

- a. Early Islam was intensely expansionist. Religious fervor, as well as economic and social factors, fueled this expansionism.
 - i. Conquering armies and migrating tribes swept out of Arabia and spread Islam.
 - ii. By the end of the Islam’s first century, Islamic armies had reached far into North Africa and eastward and northward into Asia.
 - iii. Among the first countries to come under their control was Egypt, which Arab forces invaded in 640 C.E.
- b. Amr ibn al As, an Islamic convert and contemporary of the Prophet Muhammad, would be the military commander in charge of the conquest of Egypt.
 - i. By 641 C.E., he had conquered Cairo and renamed the city Al Fustat.

- ii. By 647 C.E., after the surrender of Alexandria, the entire country was under Islamic rule.
- c. Islamic Rule
 - i. Amr allowed Coptic Christians and Jews to continue their beliefs as protected people.
 - 1. Jews and Christians in Muslim territories could live according to their own religious laws as *dhimmi*s (tolerated subject peoples) but would have to give up certain political rights and pay a special tax.
 - ii. By the 9th century C.E., most Egyptians had converted to Islam
 - iii. A Shi'ah dynasty, the Fatimids, conquered Egypt in 969 C.E. and ruled the country for 200 years.
 - 1. Although the Fatimids endowed numerous mosques, shrines, and theological schools, they did not firmly establish their faith (Ismailia Shi'ah Islam) in Egypt.
 - 2. Numerous sectarian conflicts among Fatimid Ismailis after 1050 may have been a factor in Egyptian Muslim acceptance of Saladin's (Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn Yūsuf ibn Ayyūb), of the Kurdish Ayyubids, reestablishment of Sunni Islam as the state religion in 1171.
 - iv. Al Azhar University was established as one of first universities in the world by the Fatimids, and Saladin will keep it but change it from Shi'ah theological orthodoxy to Sunni.
 - v. The Mamluks, the former slaves and bodyguards of the Ayyubids, will establish their own empire in Egypt until the Ottoman's make Egypt part of their empire in 1517.

*Source: Sacred Destinations. Uploaded 10/15/2010.