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 Acknowledgments | Works Cited | Contact

An Introduction to the Oriental Orthodox Churches

The Armenian, Coptic, Ethiopian, Eritrean, Syriac, and Indian Orthodox Churches--collectively referred to as the Oriental Orthodox Churches--are heirs to some of the richest and most ancient traditions in the Christian world. Today they are estimated to have as many as 50 million members worldwide, including significant diaspora populations (Roberson). Nonetheless, they remain relatively unknown in the West, where the study of church history has traditionally focused on Protestantism and Roman Catholicism, and to a lesser degree Eastern Orthodoxy.

Each of the six churches traces its origins to apostolic missions of the first century. Saints Thaddeus and Bartholomew are believed to have been martyred in Armenia; St. Mark is referred to as the first bishop of Alexandria; St. Philip is said to have baptized an Ethiopian pilgrim, who returned home to spread the faith in African lands south of Egypt; Antioch is mentioned in the book of Acts as the place where the term "Christian" was first used; and St. Thomas is believed to have been martyred in South India. While some of these claims are debated by scholars, the establishment of Christianity in these lands certainly dates to the earliest centuries of the Christian era.

The Oriental Orthodox Churches were united with Rome and Byzantium in a common profession of faith until the fifth century, when the Council of Chalcedon (451) proclaimed Christ to have two distinct natures--human and divine--united in one person. While the Roman and Byzantine Churches came to accept Chalcedon as the Fourth Ecumenical Council, the Oriental Orthodox Churches acknowledge only the first three. Their theology, which closely follows the teaching of St. Cyril of Alexandria, holds that Christ has only one nature, at once human and divine.

These churches have been variously referred to as "non-Chalcedonian," "pre-Chalcedonian," and "lesser Eastern" churches. Today the standard designation is Oriental Orthodox; while the use of the term "Oriental" is not ideal, it is officially accepted by the churches themselves. Geographically, the Christian "Orient" comprises those regions of Africa and Asia that fell outside the boundaries of the Byzantine-Roman Empire. Some of these lands were never part of Byzantium, while others were cut off as a result of the spread of Islam in the seventh century (Guillaumont 9). Although the six churches are closely linked in matters of faith and are today in full communion with one another, they are hierarchically independent; moreover, since their earliest days they have developed their own forms of liturgy, art, and literature.

The pages that follow are intended as an introduction to the history and heritage of these ancient but neglected churches. For each of the churches, an overview of distinctive traditions has been provided, including sections on language and culture, iconography, and music. Special attention has been given to the history of the churches in the United States, where they have grown remarkably since the second half of the twentieth century. As an instance of this growth, profiles of five Oriental Orthodox communities in Atlanta, Georgia, have been included, based on fieldwork I conducted during the summer of 2004. In the early 1970s there were no Oriental Orthodox churches in Atlanta; today the five communities I profiled have more than two thousand members. The churches continue to grow every year, both in Atlanta and in the United States at large, marking a new and unprecedented stage in the diasporic life of the Oriental Orthodox Churches.

Links

General

The Eastern Christian Churches: A Brief Survey, by Ronald Roberson, CSP
—An excellent introduction to the Oriental Orthodox, Eastern Orthodox, and Catholic Eastern Churches, with historical overviews, contact information, and membership estimates for each church.

"Oriental Orthodox Churches"
—A brief sketch of the six churches from the 1991 *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement,* published by the World Council of Churches.

Orthodox Unity
—Includes documents and articles on recent dialogue between the Oriental Orthodox and Eastern Orthodox Churches. A useful source for ecumenical perspectives on Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian theology.

Armenian

The See of Holy Etchmiadzin (official website)

The Armenian Catholicosate of Cilicia (official website)

Diocese of the Armenian Church of America (Eastern) (official website)

Western Diocese of the Armenian Church of North America (official website)

The Armenian Prelacy: Armenian Apostolic Church of America (official website of the Eastern Prelacy)

Western Prelacy of the Armenian Apostolic Church of America (official website)

"The Arts of Armenia" (Armenian Studies Program, California State University, Fresno)
—Features three hundred color slides, including many examples of church architecture and iconography.

"Music of the Divine Liturgy"
—Two audio samples, from the website of the Eastern Diocese of the Armenian Church of America.

Association of Armenian Church Choirs of America (AACCA)
—Includes musical notation for many Armenian hymns.

Coptic

Coptic Orthodox Patriarchate (official website)

Archdiocese of North America (official website)

Diocese of the Southern United States (official website)

Diocese of Los Angeles, Southern California, and Hawaii (official website)

The Coptic Network
—Includes links to sites on Coptic history, music, and art.

Coptic Orthodox Church Network
—Administered by the Coptic Orthodox Church of St. Mark in Jersey City, NJ.

Coptic Icons
—Includes a full gallery of icons painted by Dr. Isaac Fanous at the Holy Virgin Mary Coptic Orthodox Church in Los Angeles.

Coptichymns.net
—Features an extensive collection of audio files.

Ethiopian

The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church Faith and Order
— A good introductory site, with information on church history, doctrine, liturgy, music, and more.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC)
— Another useful introductory site.

The *Kebra Nagast*
—Full text of the influential medieval work on the sacred history of early Ethiopia.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church: Icons

"Ethiopian Icons: Faith and Science"
—An exhibition from the National Museum of African Art in Washington, D.C.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church Faith and Order: Church Music
—Audio samples of several Ethiopian hymns and spiritual songs.

Tewahedo Songs and Records
—Includes an extensive collection of audio files.

Eritrean

Eritrean Orthodox Church, Diocese of North America (official website)

Syriac

Archdiocese of the Eastern United States (official website)

Archdiocese of the Western United States (official website)

Syriac Orthodox Resources
—Includes excellent material on Syriac history, liturgy, and music, as well as profiles of churches and monasteries,

lives of saints, and more. Highly recommended.

Beth Mardutho: The Syriac Institute

Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies

The *Beth Gazo*
—Digital version of the 1960 recording sung by His Holiness Patriarch Jacob III.

Syriacmusic.com
—Includes texts and audio recordings of Syriac hymns (registration required).

Indian

Syrian Orthodox Archdiocese of Greater India (official website)

Malankara Archdiocese of the Syrian Orthodox Church in North America (official website)

Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church (official website)

Indian Orthodox Church, American Diocese (official website)

Malankara Syriac Christian Resources
—Includes a valuable overview of Malankara church history.

Syrian Orthodox Archdiocese of Greater India: Music Corner
—Includes a few audio samples of liturgical hymns in Malayalam.

The Armenian Apostolic Church

Focus on Atlanta

The Armenian Church of Atlanta, founded in 1992, is a mission parish of the Armenian Church of America, under the Holy See of Etchmiadzin. It began when a group of local families came together and petitioned the Eastern Diocese in New York to form a mission parish. The community does not yet have its own priest; at present Bishop Vicken Aykazian of Washington, D.C., travels once a month to Atlanta to celebrate liturgy for the mission. These services are held at a local Byzantine Catholic church on Sunday afternoons, once the Catholic congregation finishes their mass. Although the turnout for the monthly Armenian liturgies is relatively modest--from twenty-five to seventy people--the church ministers to hundreds of Armenian families living in the Atlanta area. It is also deeply involved with the local Armenian Cultural Association. In 2001 and 2004 the church purchased lands on which it plans to construct its own sanctuary and parish hall in the coming years.

For more detailed information on the Armenian Church of Atlanta, see the Pluralism Project profile, or visit the church website.

The Armenian Apostolic Church

Iconography

Although instances of monumental wall painting are not entirely unknown in Armenia, this kind of iconography never took root the way it did in many other Orthodox countries. The use of individual panel paintings is likewise relatively restricted. Armenian churches are usually adorned with a single image placed over the altar. This icon is always of the Virgin and Child, though on special feast days it can be replaced by thematically appropriate images (Ormanian 144).

Perhaps in compensation for the restriction of monumental painting, Armenian artists developed one of the finest traditions of illumination and miniature painting. Gospel books, lectionaries, and other ecclesiastical manuscripts are the real treasuries of Armenian iconography. Works by Cilician masters of the thirteenth century, in particular, are valued as masterpieces of Christian miniature painting. In 2004, several medieval Armenian manuscripts were featured as part of the New York Metropolitan Museum's "Byzantium: Faith and Power (1261-1557)," one of the largest ever exhibitions of Eastern Christian art.

The Armenian Apostolic Church in America

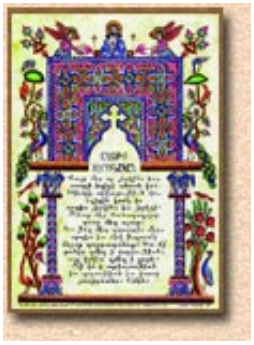
The Armenian Church was the first of the Oriental Orthodox Churches to be established in the United States. Contact between Armenia and America reaches back to colonial times: in the early 1600s, John Smith invited a certain Mardiros, or Martin, to Jamestown as an authority on tobacco farming, and tombstones with Armenian lettering can still be seen in the Jamestown cemetery. As early as the 1800s, Armenian students from Constantinople were attending Princeton and Yale, and lists of soldiers who fought in the American Civil War include Armenian names. Beginning in the 1880s, many Armenians came to America fleeing persecution under the Ottoman sultan in Turkey. By the late nineteenth century there were several Armenian communities in New England, including a 1200-strong population in Worcester, Massachusetts. (Archbishop Ashjian 13-15)

The community at Worcester eventually petitioned the Armenian Patriarch of Constantinople to form a parish, and the patriarch responded by sending Father Hovsep Sarajian to be their priest. The sanctuary of the Church of Our Savior, the first parish of the Armenian Apostolic Church in America, was consecrated in Worcester in 1891. In 1898 Fr. Sarajian was ordained a bishop, and a separate American diocese of the Armenian Church was established.

The number of Armenians living in America increased markedly in the twentieth century, beginning with a mass exodus of refugees fleeing the Turkish Massacres of World War I. By the 1950s, there were around 200,000 Armenians in the United States. Twenty years later, the number had more than doubled, and today there are as many as one million Armenians and nearly one hundred missions and parishes throughout the country. The administration of these churches is divided into two dioceses under the jurisdiction of the Catholicosate of Etchmiadzin and two prelacies under the jurisdiction of the Catholicosate of Cilicia.

The Armenian Apostolic Church

Language and Culture



The language of the liturgy is classical Armenian, an Indo-European language with strong Greek and Persian influences. In the early days of the Armenian Church, the liturgy was conducted in Greek and Syriac. The invention of the Armenian alphabet, derived in part from Greek and Phoenician characters, is attributed to the work of St. Mesrop in the early fifth century; later sources speak of the alphabet as divinely revealed. The new alphabet paved the way for a translation of the Bible, the liturgy, and works of Greek theology into Armenian, which in turn made possible the development of a distinctively Armenian Christian heritage, including an independent liturgy and literature.

Modern Armenian has two dialects: Eastern Armenian, centered in Armenia proper, and Western Armenian, spoken in Istanbul, Lebanon, Egypt, and other parts of the diaspora (*UCLA Language Materials Project*). The two dialects differ significantly from one another, as well as from the classical form of the language.

The Armenian Apostolic Church

Music

Traditional Armenian chant is monophonic, consisting of melodies alone sung without harmonies. Like Byzantine and Gregorian chant, it is based on a system of eight modes, though the Armenian modes are quite distinct from their Greek and Latin counterparts; there are, moreover, significant variants within the eight modes. The modal melodies are sung to rich and often irregular rhythms. Armenian music attests to the influence of pre-Christian folk melodies, as well as to the compositional creativity of several musician-saints. St. Mesrop, the inventor of the Armenian alphabet, was one of the first such composers.

As a result of Western influence, Armenian composers in the nineteenth century began setting church hymns to four-part harmony. Rhythms were adapted to fit a regular beat, subtle tonal qualities were abandoned in favor of equal temperament, and, in some churches, organ accompaniment was added. Some of the more important modern composers of Armenian sacred music include Komitas Vartabed (1869-1935), who is sometimes referred to as "the father of Armenian music," and Magar Yegmalian (1857-1905).

For audio samples of Armenian church music, see the Links page.

The Armenian Apostolic Church

According to church tradition, Christianity was introduced to Armenia by Saints Thaddeus and Bartholomew, two of the twelve disciples of Christ. The early kings of Armenia were largely hostile to the new religion: the martyrdom of Thaddeus and then Bartholomew in the years 66 and 68 marked the first of several state-sponsored persecutions. Around the beginning of the fourth century, however, a young nobleman named Gregory succeeded in converting the king, and Armenia became a Christian country--the first Christian state in history. Hagiography records that St. Gregory, henceforth known as “the Illuminator” or “the Enlightener,” was instructed by Christ in a dream to build a great cathedral in the capital city of Vagharshapat, not far from Mount Ararat. In commemoration of this vision, the cathedral and the city both became known as Etchmiadzin, or the place where the “Only-Begotten” (Christ) “descended.” The Holy See of Etchmiadzin remains to this day the spiritual center of the Armenian Church.

Armenia has endured an unsettled and often violent history, with periods of foreign domination at the hands of Persian, Arab, Greek, Turkish, and Soviet invaders. Following Arab and Byzantine invasions in the tenth and eleventh centuries, the traditional kingdom of Armenia was more or less abandoned, and a new Armenian kingdom, known as Cilician Armenia, was established further west, at the eastern edge of Asia Minor. The Catholicosate, or central authority of the church, was likewise transferred from Etchmiadzin to Cilicia. The Cilician kingdom fell about three hundred years later, and the See of Etchmiadzin was restored in 1441; nonetheless, there remain to this day two Catholicosates within the Armenian Church: Etchmiadzin retains a primacy of honor, but the Catholicosate of Cilicia (presently centered in Antelias, Lebanon) is fully independent in administration. There are also two Patriarchates, one in Jerusalem and the other in Constantinople, both of which are under the authority of Etchmiadzin.

The darkest period in the history of the Armenian church and people was that of the Turkish massacres of 1915-1920, sometimes referred to as “the Armenian Genocide.” According to some estimates, around 1.5 million Armenians were killed and many more exiled; the clergy of the Armenian church were not spared, dropping in number from approximately 5,000 in 1915 to around 400 just eight years later (Arten Ashjian 4-5). In 1920 Armenia was invaded by the Soviets and soon after incorporated into the Soviet Union. In 1991 the Republic of Armenia declared its independence from the U.S.S.R., opening the door to a revival of Armenian Orthodoxy in its traditional homeland.

For centuries the Armenian Apostolic Church has had a large diaspora population. Today its faithful are spread throughout the world, including Turkey, the Middle East, Europe, Australia, and America. As of 2004, the number of Armenian Orthodox worldwide is estimated at six million (Roberson).

The Coptic Orthodox Church

Focus on Atlanta

St. Mary Coptic Orthodox Church in Roswell, Georgia, is an excellent example of growth within the Coptic Church in the United States in the past few decades. When the community was founded in the 1970s, it had no more than four or five families; today, it numbers around three hundred families and continues to grow. The main church, consecrated by Pope Shenouda in 1996, holds Sunday liturgy in Coptic and English; a smaller chapel downstairs is used for services in Coptic and Arabic. St. Mary Church has in recent years become the mother church for small missions in Birmingham, Chattanooga, Augusta, and Savannah. These missions currently have about fifteen to twenty families each, but it is quite possible that they, too, may one day grow to the size of the Coptic Church in Roswell.

For more detailed information on St. Mary Coptic Orthodox Church, see the Pluralism Project profile, or visit the church website.

The Coptic Orthodox Church

Iconography

Early Coptic iconography shows signs of inspiration from several sources, including pre-Christian Egypt, classical Rome, and Byzantium. Although thematically quite similar to Byzantine art, Coptic iconography may be distinguished in general by a more austere, simple style, perhaps reflecting a monastic influence. One of the most identifiable features of the Coptic style is the use of wide, round eyes, which seem to gaze at the viewer from another world.

The fourth to seventh centuries are regarded as the golden age of Coptic iconography. The art seems to have undergone a decline sometime after the Arab invasion of Egypt in the seventh century. It enjoyed a revival in the Fatimid period (tenth to twelfth centuries) but by the nineteenth century was on the verge of disappearance. ("Coptic Iconography") This situation changed entirely in the twentieth century thanks to Dr. Isaac Fanous, founder of the "Contemporary" or "Neo-Coptic" school of iconography. The skilled and prolific work of Dr. Fanous and his students have led to a true renaissance in the art.

The Neo-Coptic school is marked by simplicity and luminous clarity of style, vibrant but harmonious use of color, and, in keeping with traditional precedent, a preference for idealism over naturalism. In a 1999 interview Dr. Fanous explained: "Dans le style traditionnel grec, il y a plus de détails, et c'est l'imitation de la nature qui est mise en avant, alors que nous, les Egyptiens, nous utilisons l'abstraction pour exprimer notre vision d'éternité, d'immortalité" (Boncourt and Sadek). (In the traditional Greek style, there are more details, and it is the imitation of nature that comes first, whereas we, the Egyptians, use abstraction to express our vision of eternity, of immortality.)

Traditionally, icons are hand-painted, but in modern times the use of mounted, photographic reproductions has grown in popularity, and inexpensive icons in the contemporary style are readily available. The faithful typically keep at least one icon in a corner of their homes where they perform their daily prayers. The tradition of hand-painting also continues strong, and many churches both in Egypt and abroad are adorned with original icons in the Neo-Coptic style.

The Coptic Orthodox Church in America

The establishment of the Coptic Church in North America began in 1964, when Pope Kyrillos ordained Father Marcos A. Marcos to minister to Coptic immigrants living in Canada. St. Mark's Coptic Orthodox Church, the first Coptic parish in North America, was founded in Toronto the same year; at the time, the community comprised thirty-six families, all of them first-generation immigrants. The following year, the church in Toronto became the center of a new Diocese of North America. In the early days of the diocese, Fr. Marcos served monthly liturgies in Montreal and New York, with less frequent visits to Coptic communities elsewhere in the United States and Canada. (Marcos)

The growth of the church within the United States proper began with the reform of U.S. immigration laws in 1965, which eliminated the old nation-quota system and allowed for unprecedented numbers of immigrants from Africa and Asia. Early concentrations of Coptic immigrants were in Los Angeles on the West Coast and in New York and New Jersey on the East Coast. By 1969 there were about two hundred Coptic families living in California, and Pope Kyrillos agreed to send Fr. Bishoy Kamel of Alexandria, Egypt, to help them establish a church. St. Mark Coptic Orthodox Church in Los Angeles, the first Coptic parish in the United States, was founded the same year, followed soon after by St. Mark Coptic Orthodox Church in Jersey City, New Jersey.

The naming of these churches after St. Mark, the first bishop of Alexandria, underscores the close connection the American churches have with the church in Egypt. In the early days of the North American diocese, the pope himself served as bishop. Today there are three dioceses, each with its own bishop: the Diocese of the Southern United States, centered in Dallas; the Diocese of Los Angeles, Southern California, and Hawaii; and the Coptic Orthodox Archdiocese of North America, currently based in New York-New Jersey. The present head of the Coptic Church, Pope Shenouda, has worked hard to encourage the growth of churches abroad, and with great success: as of 2004 there are two seminaries and more than 85 parishes in the United States and Canada, as well as a Coptic Orthodox monastery in Barstow, California.

The Coptic Orthodox Church

Language and Culture

The Copts are believed to be the descendants of the ancient Egyptians, a heritage partially preserved in their art and music. Coptic, an Afro-Asiatic language with an alphabet derived from Greek, is no longer spoken but is still used in the liturgy. Few lay people understand it, however, as the Copts have spoken Arabic for centuries.

The Coptic Church has enjoyed a significant revival beginning in the twentieth century, and with this revival there has arisen a new interest in various aspects of Coptic culture. Institutes dedicated to the study of Coptic history, language, and literature have been established both in Egypt and abroad, and the church has made great efforts to educate its youth in the traditions of Coptic Orthodoxy. The twentieth century also witnessed a major renaissance of Coptic iconography.

The Coptic Orthodox Church

Music

Coptic chant is widely believed to bear the influence of ancient Egyptian music. It is difficult to know exactly how far such influence reached, however, since for much of its history Coptic music was transmitted orally; only in modern times have the traditional melodies been committed to writing. Coptic chant consists of improvisation on relatively fixed melodic patterns within a given mode. One of the most renowned teachers of church music in recent times was Mu'allim Mikhail Girgis El Batanouny, who conducted the first ever audio recording of Coptic hymns (Mikhail).

Like other traditional forms of Christian chant, Coptic chant is monophonic, that is, it uses melodies alone, without harmonies. The Coptic Church does make use of two percussion instruments: triangles and medium-sized hand-cymbals are played during special parts of the service, providing a lively rhythmic accompaniment to the otherwise a cappella chants. The origin of these instruments' use in the liturgy is uncertain, though some have asserted that this, too, is a relic of ancient Egyptian tradition.

For audio samples of Coptic church music, see the Links page.

The Coptic Orthodox Church

The term "Coptic" is derived from the Greek word *aigyptios,* meaning Egyptian. Today it is used to distinguish the Christian inhabitants of Egypt from the majority Arab Muslim population. The Coptic Church is presently centered in Cairo, though it is traditionally associated with Alexandria, one of the five patriarchal thrones of early Christendom (along with Jerusalem, Antioch, Rome, and Constantinople). St. Mark the Apostle, who is believed to have brought the faith to Egypt in the first century, is reckoned as the first bishop of Alexandria; Pope Shenouda III, the current Coptic patriarch, holds the title "117th Pope of Alexandria and Patriarch of the See of St. Mark."

Prior to the legalization of Christianity in 313, the church in Egypt suffered frequent persecutions under the pagan Roman emperors. The most severe was under Diocletian (284-305), who in a series of edicts ordered churches to be destroyed, copies of scripture to be burned, and clergy and laity alike to be imprisoned, tortured, and killed. To this day the Coptic Church follows a special calendar in commemoration of all who died rather than renounce their faith; years are counted not from the birth of Christ but from the beginning of Diocletian's reign in 284, which corresponds to 1 "*Anno Martyrum*" (A.M.), or "In the Year of the Martyrs."

One of the greatest legacies of the Coptic Church is the monastic tradition, described by Coptic scholar Aziz Atiya as "the gift of Egypt to Christendom" (59). As early as the second or third century, Christians desiring to devote themselves entirely to a life of prayer and fasting began to retreat to the solitude of the Egyptian desert. St. Antony the Great is generally regarded as the father of monasticism, though it was his younger contemporary St. Pachomius who first organized a formal, communal style of monastic life. From Egypt, the monastic movement spread throughout the Christian world. Coptic monasticism began to experience a revival in the late twentieth century, and today there are several hundred monks and nuns both in Egypt and abroad.

Many of the early church fathers flourished in Christian Egypt. Notable among them were Clement of Alexandria and his successor Origen, who headed the Catechetical School at Alexandria, one of the most famous institutions of learning in antiquity. Other towering figures were St. Athanasius the Great, a defender of orthodoxy at the First Ecumenical Council (325), and St. Cyril of Alexandria, the most influential voice at the Third Ecumenical Council (431). The works of St. Cyril, who vehemently rejected Nestorius's apparent separation of Christ's humanity from his divinity, are often cited by Oriental Orthodox theologians as a foundation for the rejection of the Council of Chalcedon (451).

The supporters of Chalcedon had on their side the Byzantine civil authorities, and as a result the non-Chalcedonians in Egypt faced harsh persecutions. The Coptic patriarch of Alexandria was deposed and exiled, leading to the permanent establishment of a dual partriarchate: one of the Greek Byzantine Church, the other of the Coptic Church. In the two hundred years after Chalcedon, attempts at reunion were made, though without success; these efforts came to an end in the seventh century, when Egypt was cut off from Byzantium by Arab Muslim conquest.

In the centuries-long history of Arab rule in Egypt, the treatment of Coptic Christians has varied widely. At times there were persecutions, especially after the Crusades, which though initiated in Europe

nonetheless tended to antagonize Muslim rulers against Christians in general. During other periods, however, the Copts enjoyed a remarkable degree of tolerance and respect. In recent times, the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Egypt has heightened tensions between the Christian and Muslim communities, and Copts have faced discrimination and sometimes even attacks at the hands of extremists. Nonetheless, relations between the patriarch and the Egyptian president are reportedly good, and there have been signs that the government is working to improve the situation (Saleh).

With the elevation of the saintly Pope Kyrillos VI to the patriarchate in 1959, "there began a renaissance in all aspects of church life that is still continuing strongly under the present Pope Shenouda III" (Abdelsayed 10). Ancient monasteries have once again begun to flourish, interest in Coptic studies has grown, Sunday School programs are strong, and churches have been established in North America, Europe, and Australia. Today the membership of the Coptic Church worldwide is estimated at roughly nine million (Roberson).

The Eritrean Orthodox Tewahdo Church

Focus on Atlanta

Medhanealem ("Savior of the World") Eritrean Orthodox Church in Lithonia, Georgia, is currently home to around 270 Eritrean families living in the greater Atlanta area. The church was founded in the late 1990s, after a local group of Eritrean Christians petitioned the synod of bishops in Eritrea to send them a priest. Following the arrival of Father G. Michael Yohannes in 1999, the community began celebrating liturgy at a Lutheran church in Tucker, Georgia; they moved to their present building in Lithonia in late 2002. Atlanta is also the administrative center of the Diocese of the United States and Canada. Archpriest Yohannes heads the diocese, and for the past few years his parish has hosted the annual diocesan conferences.

For more detailed information on Medhanealem Eritrean Orthodox Church, see the Pluralism Project profile, or visit the church website.

The Eritrean Orthodox Tewahdo Church

Iconography

The Eritrean and Ethiopian Orthodox Churches are heirs to a common iconographic tradition, originally inspired by Byzantine themes but distinctively African in style. Painting takes the form of murals, wooden panel paintings (often in diptychs or triptychs), and also illuminated manuscripts. The almost 650-year-old monastery of Debre Bizen, one of the great centers of Eritrean spirituality, is said to house a library of more than one thousand such precious manuscripts. Later Eritrean iconography often shows the influence of European religious art.

The Eritrean Orthodox Tewahdo Church in America

The Eritrean Church is the youngest of the six Oriental Orthodox Churches in America. Until the church received its independence in 1993, and even for some years afterward, most Eritreans in the United States were attending Ethiopian churches. The outbreak of a bloody war between Ethiopia and Eritrea in 1998, however, led to tensions between the two immigrant communities in the West, with many Eritreans dissatisfied with the Ethiopian Church's unwillingness to condemn the war. The first priest sent to the United States to establish separate Eritrean parishes was Father G. Michael Yohannes, who arrived in 1999.

The Diocese of the Eritrean Orthodox Church in the United States and Canada was founded the following year, with the blessing of the patriarch of Eritrea, His Holiness Philipos I. Administration is currently centered in Atlanta, Georgia, and is headed by Fr. Yohannes, though in the near future the diocese will have its own bishop. As of 2004, there are two parishes in Canada and seventeen in the United States, with four more in planning.

The Eritrean Orthodox Tewahdo Church

Language and Culture

In addition to the traditional liturgical language of Ge'ez, some Eritrean churches conduct parts of their services in Tigrinya, a widely-spoken vernacular. Tigrinya, which features a distinctive script with more than two hundred characters, is descended from Ge'ez and is closely related to the modern Ethiopian language of Amharic.

Today there are nine ethnic groups and as many languages in Eritrea. According to the U.S. State Department, Bureau of African Affairs, approximately fifty percent of Eritrea's population is Christian, predominantly Orthodox. The Orthodox Christians of Eritrea share a common heritage with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, including Ge'ez works of poetry and theology, a centuries-old system of chant, liturgical dance and drumming, a distinctive style of iconography, and a strong monastic tradition.

The Eritrean Orthodox Tewahdo Church

Music

It is difficult to know what music in Eritrea was like in the early days of the church. According to tradition, the three modes of *Geez, Ezel,* and *Ararai*—which form the basis of the system of chant still in use today—were developed in the sixth century by the musician-saint Yared. St. Yared is also said to have composed a vast body of hymns in Ge'ez, which remains the official language of the church. These hymns were organized according to the four seasons of the year and collected in a great work known as the *Degua* (Giday). The melodies of the hymns are sung without harmonies, though the Eritrean Church does allow for limited instrumental accompaniment: indeed, Ethiopia and Eritrea are unique among Orthodox churches in their use of drums and sistrums in processions and in special hymns sung after the Divine Liturgy. The two churches are also noted for their incorporation of liturgical dances.

The Eritrean Orthodox Tewahdo Church

The history of the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahdo Church is closely tied to that of its neighbor, the Ethiopian Church. Until the twentieth century, both churches were under the jurisdiction of the Coptic patriarch in Egypt: the Ethiopian Church received full independence only in 1959, the Eritrean Church in 1993. Relations between the two churches have often been tense, owing to war and subsequent border disputes between Ethiopia and Eritrea. Nonetheless, they remain in full communion with one another, as with the other Oriental Orthodox Churches, and indeed share a common heritage of liturgy and art stretching back at least fifteen hundred years.

In former times Eritrea was part of the Axumite Empire, the rulers of which traced their lineage to the legendary Menelik I, son of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. Although Christianity may have been introduced in Eritrea in the apostolic age, the earliest undisputed records of its existence date to the fourth century, when the king of Axum proclaimed it the state religion. The faith was further spread in the late fifth and sixth centuries by the Nine Saints, a group of exiles fleeing theological persecution in the Byzantine Empire. These saints established churches and monasteries throughout Eritrea and Ethiopia, many of which may still be seen today. As a result of their labors, as well as of the traditional connection of Axum with the Coptic patriarchate in Alexandria, Orthodox Christians in Eritrea have always sided with non-Chalcedonian christology, which teaches that Christ has but one, undivided nature, at once human and divine. In celebration of this doctrine, the Eritrean Church also refers to itself as the *Tewahdo,* or "Unity / Made One," Church.

Situated along the southwest coast of the Red Sea, Eritrea was home to several important trading ports. With the spread of Islam in the seventh and eighth centuries, however, its ports fell into foreign hands, and as Axum began to decline, the Christians of Eritrea entered a long period of relative isolation. In the sixteenth century the Ottomans seized the port city of Massawa, whence their influence soon spread inland. Eritrea was also ruled by Egypt during the nineteenth century, then by Italy, which in 1890 proclaimed Eritrea a colony; the name "Eritrea" itself comes from an Italian version of the Latin *mare erythraeum,* the old Roman name for the Red Sea.

During World War II, Italy lost power, and Eritrea was claimed by the British. In 1949 Britain agreed to administer the region as a trust territory for the United Nations; three years later, in accordance with a UN decision, Eritrea was declared an autonomous unit within a federated Ethiopia. In 1962 Ethiopia dissolved the federation and annexed Eritrea as a province, sparking a prolonged and violent conflict between Eritrean rebels and Ethiopian forces. The rebels won a decisive victory in 1991, and in a referendum held two years later, Eritreans voted overwhelmingly in favor of independence. Although Ethiopia recognized Eritrea's independence, fighting broke out again in 1998 as a result of a border dispute. A peace agreement was signed in December 2000, but as of 2004 the final demarcation of the border is still unsettled, and relations between the two countries remain tense.

Prior to political independence, the church in Eritrea was administered as a diocese within the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. In 1993, however, the local church, led by Archbishop Philipos of Asmara and supported by the Eritrean government, petitioned the Coptic Church for ecclesiastical independence. The request was granted on 28 September 1993; the following year, "the Ethiopian and Eritrean churches signed an agreement in Addis Ababa that reaffirmed the autocephalous status of both churches, and recognized a primacy of honor of the Coptic Church among the Oriental Orthodox churches in Africa" (Roberson). In 1998, Abuna Philipos was elevated to the rank of patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church. As of 2004, the church is led by Patriarch Antonios, who was elected following the death of Philipos's successor, Yacob. The church presently has around one and a half million members (ibid.).

The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church

Focus on Atlanta

Thousands of Ethiopian immigrants have settled in the greater Atlanta area, and the local church is actively involved in ministering to their needs. In addition to providing spiritual support, Kidist Mariam (St. Mary's) Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church sponsors several community service programs, including job training, youth education, family and financial counseling, and drug and gang prevention. Every Sunday the church also broadcasts a half-hour sermon in Amharic on a local AM radio station.

The church was founded in 1986, originally meeting in a Presbyterian church building in downtown Atlanta. It began with a devoted community of about fifty people; today, the church has its own building and more than 980 registered members. This unexpected growth has led the church to purchase five and a half acres of new land, on which it plans to begin work on a larger sanctuary and a community-service building in the near future.

For more detailed information on Kidist Mariam Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church, see the Pluralism Project profile.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church

Iconography

Ethiopia is heir to one of the richest painting traditions in Africa, though until recent times its art was largely unknown in the West. Icons have long been an important part of the devotional life of Ethiopian Orthodoxy, providing a direct, visual form to the stories and theological mysteries taught by the church. Archbishop Yesehaq, longtime head of the Ethiopian Church in the Western hemisphere, notes the early impression icons had on him: "The pictures on the walls are the young Ethiopians' storybook. . . . [A]s a child, I would ask my parents to take me to a church that was beautifully painted and decorated with many colors. This was before I was of school age, but I was able to learn much of the church life and this helped me to grow in a spiritual atmosphere" (*The Ethiopian Tewahedo Church* 151).

Thematically, Ethiopian iconography was strongly influenced by Byzantine models; later Ethiopian art also reveals the influence of Western religious painting. Nonetheless, the vibrancy and simplicity of Ethiopian iconography mark out a distinctive style in the history of Christian art. "Throughout the centuries," observes Stanislaw Chojnacki, "Ethiopian art responded to a variety of outside influences, yet substantially it remained based on the subconscious and timeless reflection of native African forms" (19).

The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church in America

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church first spread to the United States in 1959, the same year that Abuna Basilios was recognized as patriarch of the Ethiopian Church. The church was organized in New York by Abuna Theophilus, who was then archbishop of the Harar province in Ethiopia and who later succeeded Basilios as patriarch. Theophilus also served as the representative of the Ethiopian Church at the World Council of Churches and worked to establish churches for Ethiopian immigrants living in Latin America and the Caribbean. His efforts and the success of these churches led to the formation of the Diocese of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in the Western Hemisphere in 1972.

In 1992 Archbishop Yesehaq, who oversaw the churches in the West, broke communion with the Ethiopian synod, in protest over the controversy regarding the election of Patriarch Paulos. Archbishop Yesehaq refused to recognize the new patriarch, siding instead with Patriarch Merkorios and the emerging Holy Synod in Exile. The Patriarchal Church in Ethiopia responded by suspending Archbishop Yesehaq, ordaining a new bishop in his place, and dividing the Western Archdiocese into three separate regions: the United States and Canada, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Western Europe. As of 2004, the Patriarchal Church in Ethiopia and the Holy Synod in Exile remain in schism, though efforts at reconciliation are underway.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church

Language and Culture

The traditional language of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is Ge'ez, which was spoken in the days of the Axumite Empire. Ge'ez is a Semitic language, though unlike the related languages of Hebrew, Syriac, and Arabic, it is written from left to right, in a script derived from the ancient Sabean alphabet. Few lay people are able to understand Ge'ez, and in some churches parts of the services are now conducted in Amharic, the official language of modern Ethiopia.

Ethiopia is home to many ethnic groups and more than eighty languages; it would therefore be dangerous to draw too general conclusions about "Ethiopian" culture. Archbishop Yesehaq's statement that "[t]he Church was the creator of the nation's arts, crafts, literature, [*sic*] as well as of the secular and theological educational institutions" ("The Ethiopian Orthodox Church" 12) is doubtless an overstatement; but it does point to the important truth that much of Ethiopia's cultural and artistic heritage owes its inspiration to the Orthodox Church, even as the church was in turn influenced by pre-Christian, Jewish, Byzantine, and Catholic sources.

In its early days the Ethiopian Church grew under the influence of Coptic and Syriac Christianity. The Nine Saints helped lay the groundwork for a distinctively Ethiopian church culture in the sixth century with their translations into Ge'ez and their establishment of monasteries, many of which became great centers of art and learning. Following the Islamic conquest of Egypt and other parts of the Byzantine Empire, Ethiopia entered a period of relative isolation from other Christian churches. "Thus left to herself, with continuing Jewish and pagan influences, the Ethiopian Church developed a culture entirely foreign to the old Greek [Byzantine] culture," as Molnar notes (6). Today the Ethiopian Church is unique among Orthodox communities in several respects, including the use of drumming and liturgical dance and the continuance of Jewish practices such as circumcision, the observance of dietary restrictions, and the keeping of the Sabbath.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church

Music

According to tradition, the central body of hymns used in the Ethiopian liturgy was composed by the sixth-century musician Yared, who is venerated as one of the greatest saints of the Ethiopian Church. Hagiography records that Yared was inspired to compose his hymns after being led up to heaven and hearing the songs of angels. St. Yared is also credited with having invented a notational system, though scholars usually date the introduction of musical notation in Ethiopia to the sixteenth century.

Ethiopian chant consists of melodies alone, unembellished by harmonies. These melodies follow one of three modes, known as *Geez, Ezel,* and *Ararai*; the modes correspond respectively to "plain chant for ordinary days," "a more measured beat for funerals," and "a lighter, free mood for great festivals" (Giday). A skilled chanter will improvise on set melodies within these modes. In processions and in special hymns sung after the liturgy proper, drums and sistrums (a kind of rattle) are used for rhythmic accompaniment. Ethiopian church music is also remarkable for its incorporation of sacred dance, ranging from a rhythmic swaying of the choir with hands upturned in prayer to more elaborate dances performed with two choirs holding staffs and sistrums.

For audio samples of Ethiopian hymns, see the Links page.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church

The earliest contacts of Ethiopia with the Christian faith may have been in the first century: the New Testament records that an Ethiopian eunuch returning from a pilgrimage to Jerusalem met the apostle Philip on the road, receiving baptism at his hands (Acts 8:26-39). The eunuch was said to be an official in the court of the queen of Ethiopia, and tradition holds that upon his return he became the first to preach Christianity there. A separate tradition also records that the apostle Matthew himself visited Ethiopia in the course of his missionary travels. The great turning point in Ethiopian religious history, however, was not until the fourth century, when the king of Axum proclaimed Christianity the state religion.

The Axumite Empire was at that time a formidable kingdom stretching across present-day Eritrea, parts of present-day Ethiopia, and additional territories along the Red Sea (Molnar 2). According to legend, it had been founded in about 1000 B.C. by Menelik I, a son of King Solomon by the Queen of Sheba; indeed, down to the twentieth century emperors of Ethiopia continued to regard themselves as heirs to the throne of Solomon, Haile Selassie (reigned 1930-1974) being accounted 111th in the succession. The semi-historical *Kebra Nagast* (The Glory of the Kings), a medieval work usually cited as the textual source for this tradition, further records the intriguing legend that soon after Menelik's anointing the Ark of the Covenant was brought from Jerusalem to Ethiopia. There are many who believe the Ark is still there to this day, carefully guarded in a sanctuary near the Church of St. Mary of Zion in Axum.

The fourth-century conversion of the Axumite king to Christianity is credited to St. Frumentius, a Phoenician-born bishop ordained by St. Athanasius of Alexandria to minister to the faithful in Axum. Since that time, the Ethiopian Church has been closely tied to the Coptic Church, with the Patriarch of Alexandria overseeing the appointment of bishops until recent times; only in 1959 did the church receive full independence. Occasionally the Christians of Ethiopia are still incorrectly referred to as "Coptic Christians," a label that belies not only the church's autocephaly but also its distinctive heritage.

Together with the Coptic and other Oriental Orthodox Churches, Ethiopia rejected the Council of Chalcedon (451), which proclaimed Christ to have two distinct natures, human and divine. Wishing to stress that Christ has only one, simultaneously human and divine nature, the Orthodox Church of Ethiopia also refers to itself as the *Tewahedo* (also spelled *tewahido*), or "Made One / Unity," Church. Non-Chalcedonian Christianity in Ethiopia was further strengthened in the late fifth century, when a group of exiles fleeing persecution under the Chalcedonian-leaning Byzantine Empire came to Ethiopia. These men, known as the "Nine Saints," translated the Bible and important works of theology into Ge'ez (the language of Ethiopia at the time), established monasteries, and worked to convert the remaining pagans in the land.

In the seventh century Islam began its rapid spread through North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. Ethiopia was exempted from *jihad,* perhaps at the order of the Prophet Muhammad, some of whose companions and relatives are said to have received shelter and religious protection from the king of Axum;

but the surrounding conquests left the Christians of Ethiopia relatively isolated. The church continued to be governed by Coptic bishops, though the dangers of the road from Egypt to Axum at times left the see unoccupied (ibid. 6). Beginning in the thirteenth century, Ethiopia faced intermittent conflicts with regional Muslim states, culminating with a devastating series of attacks led by the sixteenth-century ruler Ahmad ibn Ibrahim. With Portuguese assistance, Ethiopia eventually repelled Ahmad's armies, but only after years of violence in which many churches, along with some of Ethiopia's greatest artistic treasures, were destroyed.

The work of Jesuit missionaries during this period led to deep tensions within the church. In the early seventeenth century, Emperor Susneyos of Ethiopia converted to Catholicism, ordering the persecution of those who refused to accept Chalcedonian christology. A bloody rebellion followed, ending with the ascent to power of Susneyos's son Fasiladas, who expelled the Jesuits from the country and proclaimed the restoration of Orthodoxy; for the next two hundred years, further missionary efforts were strictly suppressed.

In the twentieth century, with political support from Haile Selassie, the Ethiopian Church began pushing for greater independence from the Coptic Church. In 1948, the Coptic Church agreed to consecrate an Ethiopian rather than a Copt as the next metropolitan of Ethiopia. The Egyptian-born metropolitan died in 1950, and the Ethiopian-born Archbishop Basilios succeeded him the following year. In 1959, the move was made complete, as Basilios was elevated to the rank of patriarch of the Ethiopian Church. Henceforth, Ethiopia was fully independent from the Coptic Church, although it continued to accord to Alexandria a primacy of honor. In 1993, after the political independence of Eritrea from Ethiopia, the Ethiopian Church was in turn to recognize the autocephaly of the Eritrean Church, which had previously been a province under the jurisdiction of the Ethiopian patriarch.

A Marxist revolution in 1974 led to the overthrow of Haile Selassie and the official separation of church and state. The years following the coup were marked by severe persecution of Christians: church properties were seized by the state, and as many as tens of thousands of Ethiopians were killed during a period known as the "Red Terror." The communist government of Ethiopia fell in 1991, and this in turn led to a schism within the church, with Patriarch Merkorios being accused of collaboration with the communists and forced to resign. In 1992 Patriarch Paulos was consecrated in his place, but Merkorios refused to recognize the election. Merkorios, taking refuge first in Kenya and then the United States, established the Holy Synod of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in Exile; as of 2004, the division between the followers of the Patriarchal church in Ethiopia and the Synod in Exile remains unhealed. Together, members of the two groups number approximately 30 million believers throughout the world (Roberson).

The Malankara (Indian) Orthodox Churches

Focus on Atlanta

There are three Malankara Orthodox churches serving the greater Atlanta area. Two belong to the Malankara Archdiocese of the Syrian Orthodox Church in North America, which is under the jurisdiction of the patriarch of Antioch. The churches are located in Winder and in Lilburn; both are dedicated to St. Mary, and each has approximately twenty to forty families. In Clarkston, Georgia, there is also St. Thomas Indian Orthodox Church, which belongs to the American Diocese of the Indian Orthodox Church. Although all three churches share a common heritage of faith and practice, at present the church in Clarkston is not in communion with the other two churches.

For more detailed information on St. Mary's Syrian Orthodox Church in Winder, see the Pluralism Project profile, or visit the church website.

The Malankara (Indian) Orthodox Churches in America

The growth of the Malankara churches in the United States may be traced to the revision of U.S. immigration laws in 1965. Although there were Indians living in the country before then, their number was highly restricted. The revised laws eliminated the old nation-quota system, "resulting in exponential growth in the number of Indian immigrants" (*American Immigration Law Foundation*), most of them looking for economic and educational opportunities. The new immigrants naturally brought their faith and culture with them, and over the next few decades the United States became home to many Indian churches, especially in urban centers such as New York, Houston, and Chicago.

As in India, the Malankara Orthodox Church in America is divided into two bodies, one acknowledging the patriarch of Antioch as its head, the other recognizing an independent Catholicos of the East. The former group is organized under the Malankara Archdiocese of the Syrian Orthodox Church in North America, founded in 1993; prior to that time, there was no separate jurisdiction for the Indian communities of the Syriac Orthodox Church in America. Today the archdiocese oversees around thirty-four churches.

The second group of churches is organized under the American Diocese of the Indian Orthodox Church, established in January 1979. Today there are sixty-six parishes and, according to diocesan estimates, approximately ten thousand Indian Orthodox Christians living in the United States.

The Malankara (Indian) Orthodox Churches

Language and Culture

Malayalam, the language spoken by most members of the Malankara Church, belongs to the Dravidian family of languages and is the principal language of the Indian state of Kerala. Orthodox seminaries in India offer rudimentary training in Syriac, since the church follows the liturgy of Antioch; indeed, prior to the twentieth century priests well-versed in Syriac would often translate the liturgy impromptu into Malayalam. Today, printed versions of the liturgy in Malayalam are readily available, though a large body of texts remains untranslated.

Although the church traces much of its heritage to the Syriac tradition, the influence of Indian culture is visible at many levels. The architecture of some early Orthodox churches in India is similar to that of Hindu temples; marriages and holiday celebrations bear a distinctly Indian character; and even in the West women can often be seen wearing sarees in church. Finally, the style of chant used in the Malankara Church, while based on Syriac chant, has also been influenced by local musical practices in recent years.

The Malankara (Indian) Orthodox Churches

Music

The music of the Malankara Church is based on traditional Syriac chant, which uses eight modes following a weekly liturgical cycle. Depending on the week and the particular hymn to be sung, chanters will improvise on melodies in a given mode. Within the Syriac church there are a variety of schools of chant. In India, melodies from more than one school are used, often reflecting the roots of influential Syriac bishops who trained Indian priests and chanters; the schools of Mardin and Mosul have been particularly influential. The influence of local secular music has also been increasingly evident since the 1970s, leading to a neglect of the traditional eight-mode system.

Syriac chant is monophonic, that is, it consists of melodies alone unembellished by harmonies or counterpoint. It is also to be performed without instrumental accompaniment, though in 1930 a Synod at Mosul permitted the use of an organ. In modern practice, however, a variety of musical instruments is freely used in Indian churches, and again, the influence of secular music is evident.

For audio samples of Malankara church music, see the Links page.

The Malankara (Indian) Orthodox Churches

Christianity in India has a far longer history than some might suspect, with origins stretching back more than a thousand years before the arrival of Catholic and Protestant missionaries. Indeed, when the Portuguese began to colonize the southwest coast of India in the early sixteenth century, they were surprised to find there a Christian community tracing its roots all the way to the apostle Thomas. The Orthodox Church in India, the inheritor of this ancient tradition, is known as the "Malankara" Church, after an old name for the region where the church is centered, roughly equivalent to the modern state of Kerala. Since the early twentieth century, the church has been divided into two communities, both with historical ties to the Syriac tradition: the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church is a fully independent church, recognizing as its head the Catholicos of the East, whose office is in Kottayam, Kerala; the Malankara Syrian Orthodox Church remains under the jurisdiction of the Syriac Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch, although it is administered locally by a catholicos, with an office in Puthenkurishu, near Kochi, Kerala.

St. Thomas is said to have reached India in 52 A.D. According to tradition, he established several churches in Malankara and also spent time in what is today the state of Tamil Nadu; a small mount near Chennai (the capital of Tamil Nadu) is venerated as the site of his martyrdom and is a center of pilgrimage for Christians of many denominations in India. The history of the early "Thomas Christians," as the converts of the apostle became known, is obscure, and some modern scholars have questioned the account of Thomas's journey. What is certain, however, is that sea trade routes did exist between the Near East and the Malankara coast, and that Syrian and Persian merchants had contact with South India in the early centuries of the Christian era. A group of around 400 Syrians from Edessa is said to have arrived in 345, led by a merchant known as Thomas of Cana and accompanied by Mor Joseph, a Syrian bishop (Kottapparambil). Another wave of Syrian immigrants arrived in Malankara in the ninth century.

Beginning in the fifth century, the Syriac community in the Near East came to be divided between the Assyrian Church of the East, which accepted the doctrines of the theologian Nestorius, and the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch, which regarded Nestorianism as a heresy. Although the influence of Syriac Christianity in India is uncontested, it is difficult to know which tradition was more influential, and at what periods. Many scholars have asserted the jurisdiction of the Assyrian Church of the East in Malankara from an early period; others have argued for a continuous Orthodox tradition until 1490, when it is well documented that the church began receiving Nestorian bishops from Persia (ibid.). The period of Assyrian bishops continued until 1599, when Roman Catholics took control of churches in the region.

The Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama had reached India in 1498, and the following century marked the beginning of European colonization and missionary work there. Indian and European Christians seem to have enjoyed cordial relations at first, but by the end of the sixteenth century the situation had completely deteriorated: while the Malankara Christians were content to acknowledge separate apostolic traditions, stemming respectively from St. Thomas and St. Peter, Catholic missionaries sought to bring the Indian Church under the administration of Rome. The culmination of their efforts was the Synod of Diamper (1599), which proclaimed the Malankara Church a part of the Roman Catholic Church. Although canonical irregularities meant that Rome never accepted the synod, its conveners nonetheless enrolled the support of

the local government and began enforcing use of a Latinized rite.

On 3 January 1653, Malankara Christians finally rebelled: thousands gathered before the Coonan ("leaning") Cross in Mattancherry, taking an oath no longer to submit to the Roman Church. They attempted to re-establish communion with the Assyrian Church of the East but were unsuccessful (Roberson); finally, they reached an agreement with the Syriac Patriarch of Antioch, by which they would renounce Nestorianism and adhere to Orthodox faith and practice. The restored church thus became an autonomous part of the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch.

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries gave rise to two schisms within the Malankara community. The Malabar Independent Syrian Church of Thozhiyur was founded in around 1774, following the disputed appointment of a local bishop; today this church has fewer than ten thousand members (ibid.). Another split took place the following century, when Anglican-inspired reformers within the Malankara Church broke away to form the Mar Thoma Syrian Church of Malabar; today the Mar Thoma Church has approximately 700,000 members and is in communion with the Church of England (ibid.).

The most significant schism for the Orthodox community of Malankara took place in the early twentieth century, when a large group of the faithful, pointing to the founding of the church by the apostle Thomas, urged the formation of an independent Indian Orthodox Church. Although the Malankara Church was already an autonomous, or self-governed, part of the Syriac Orthodox Church, the new faction desired autocephaly, or its own head rather than reliance on the patriarch of Antioch. The autocephalous church, established in 1912, became known as the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, while the church that remained under the patriarchate became known as the Malankara Syrian Orthodox Church. Despite repeated efforts at reconciliation, relations between the two groups remain tense. As of 2004, each of the two churches has around 1,250,000 members.

The Malankara (Indian) Orthodox Churches

Iconography

Unlike the other Oriental Orthodox Churches, the Malankara Church does not seem to have developed a distinctive style of iconography, perhaps in part because it never had direct ties with Byzantium, the art of which so influenced painters in Egypt, Ethiopia, Armenia, and Syria. It is also important to note that iconography has never had the importance in Syriac and Indian churches that it does in Eastern Orthodox Churches, where icons are venerated and not simply used for illustration.

Wall paintings in a Syriac style are preserved in certain early Malankara churches. In modern times, however, the influence of Western religious art has been far greater than that of the Syriac tradition. Churches are commonly decorated with mass-produced portraits of Christ, or of the Madonna and Child, in a modern Western style. Portraits of Mor Gregorios Gheevarghese (1848-1902), the most famous of Malankara saints, are also quite common.

The Syriac Orthodox Church

Focus on Atlanta

As of 2004 there is not yet a full-fledged Syriac-language parish in Atlanta, but moves to establish a mission are well underway. In 2000, several families living in the greater Atlanta area contacted the Archdiocese of the Eastern United States about organizing a church. Over the next four years, as more families moved to the area, local residents kept in touch with the archdiocese, and on 19 September 2004, His Eminence Archbishop Mor Cyril Aphrem celebrated the first Syriac liturgy in Atlanta, with more than fifty people in attendance. A second liturgy was held the following month, and the community hopes to hold regular services in the future.

There are also two Malayalam-speaking parishes in Georgia, both of which belong to the Malankara Archdiocese of the Syrian Orthodox Church in North America. For more information on these churches, see the section on Indian Orthodoxy.

The Syriac Orthodox Church

Iconography

The iconography of the Syriac Church was strongly influenced by the art of Byzantium, though individual panel paintings have never played the role in Syriac churches that they do in Eastern Orthodox churches. Wall painting was apparently more common, though today only a few monuments have survived. The painting in these churches, mostly found in present-day Syria and Lebanon, has been described as "a provincial version of Middle Byzantine art" (Brock II: 216-7).

The greatest treasuries of Syriac Christian painting are illuminated manuscripts, the oldest and most famous being the "Rabbula Gospels," presently held in the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana in Florence. Executed at the monastery of St. John in Beth Zagba in 586, the Rabbula Gospels are generally recognized as a masterpiece of early Christian art.

The Syriac Orthodox Church in America

Syriac Christians began moving to the United States in the late nineteenth century, chiefly to escape persecution in Ottoman Turkey. Early waves of immigrants, many of them weavers and silk-workers, settled in New Jersey, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island (Meno 20). Immigration continued into the twentieth century, especially after the Turkish massacres of 1915, sometimes referred to as *Sayfo,* "The Year of the Sword." In 1907, Hanna Koorie was ordained a priest and sent to serve the communities in America. The first Syriac churches in the United States were consecrated about twenty years later (Aydin).

Another wave of Syriac Christians left Palestine in the late 1940s and early 1950s, after the creation of an Israeli state. Among their number was Mor Athanasius Yeshue Samuel, Archbishop of Jerusalem, who came to New Jersey in January 1949 (Brock II:71). Appointed Patriarchal Vicar in 1952 and Archbishop of the United States and Canada in 1957, Mor Athanasius Samuel led the church in America for more than forty years. By the time of his death in 1995, the Syriac Archdiocese of North America had grown considerably, and the Syriac Holy Synod decided to divide it into three jurisdictions, corresponding to the Eastern United States, the Western United States, and Canada. A separate archdiocese was also formed in 1993 for the Indian parishes of the church in America. Today there are more than 35,000 Syriac Orthodox Christians living in the United States and Canada (ibid. II:103).

The Syriac Orthodox Church

Language and Culture

Syriac, the official language of the church, is a dialect of ancient Aramaic, which scholars believe may have been the language Jesus and his disciples spoke on a daily basis. A Semitic language, Syriac is written from right to left and is related to Hebrew and Arabic. It is preserved as a spoken language by Christian communities in parts of Turkey and the Middle East, and as the liturgical language in Syriac churches throughout the world, though the church also allows translation into local languages such as Arabic, Turkish, English, and Malayalam.

The Syriac Church is heir to an ancient and beautiful liturgical tradition, drawn largely from the works of its many poet-saints; to accompany these hymns the church also developed a rich tradition of sacred music. In literature, Syriac writers produced a vast body of works ranging in topic from theology and philosophy to astronomy and medicine; the greater part of their activities was centered at monastic schools in Syria and Mesopotamia (*Beth Mardutho*). It is possible that Syriac scholarship even played a role in the European Renaissance, for much of the Greek learning that Muslim thinkers helped re-introduce in the West was known to them through the work of Syriac translators.

In recent years several valuable resources on the Syriac tradition have become available to English readers. In 1998, the Syriac institute Beth Mardutho began publishing an online journal (*Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies*). In 2001, *The Hidden Pearl,* an excellent three-volume introduction to the church and its Aramaic heritage, was published. Finally, the website *Syriac Orthodox Resources* offers a wealth of information on various aspects of the Syriac tradition.

The Syriac Orthodox Church

Music

The Syriac Church possesses one of the richest musical traditions in the Christian world. As early as the fourth century, saint-hymnographers began composing liturgical poetry of high literary quality and theological depth. The best-known of early Syriac poets, St. Ephraim, is alone credited with having written thousands of hymns (Lahdo and Zazi). Other major figures in the early history of Syriac music include St. Ignatius of Antioch, who is believed to have introduced the practice of antiphonal singing (alternating between two choirs), and the scholar Jacob of Edessa, who made many important contributions to the liturgy.

Traditional Syriac chant is monophonic, without harmonic or instrumental accompaniment, although in 1930 the church allowed for the use of an organ. There are several schools of Syriac chant, each associated with a different geographical region; notable among them are the schools of Mardin, Edessa, Tur Abdin, and Kharput (*Syriac Orthodox Resources*). The whole of Syriac music is founded on the same basic eight modes, though there exist within these modes countless variations and possibilities for embellishment.

The hymns of the church are collected in a vast work known as the *Beth Gazo,* or "Treasury of Chants." The original work included hymns to be sung to thousands of different melodies; because the melodies were transmitted orally, without musical notation , many of them have been lost, and today only about seven hundred are preserved. In 1960 His Holiness Patriarch Jacob III, one of the most accomplished chanters of modern times, made an unprecedented audio recording of the *Beth Gazo* after the school of Mardin. As of 1997, the recording has been available online, at *Syriac Orthodox Resources*.

The Syriac Orthodox Church

The Syriac Orthodox Church, one of the oldest churches in the world, had its origins in the city of Antioch in the Roman province of Syria; according to the New Testament, it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called Christians (Acts 11:26). Church tradition records that St. Peter served as the first bishop of the city, before his journey to Rome; the famous martyr Ignatius of Antioch, also known as St. Ignatius the Illuminator, is said to have been Peter's second successor. Together with the patriarchates of Jerusalem, Constantinople, Rome, and Alexandria, Antioch became one of the five great centers of early Christendom. The city of Edessa, to the northeast of Antioch, was also an important center for the church, especially in the development of a distinctively Syriac heritage. The Syriac language itself originated as an Edessene dialect of Aramaic.

As Latin was the *lingua franca* for the Roman Church and Greek for the Byzantine Church, the Syriac language united Christians across a wide geographical region. The patriarchate of Antioch originally included under its jurisdiction all the lands from the Mediterranean Sea to the Persian Gulf (Meno 17), and at its height extended even as far east as Afghanistan (Roberson). In English the church was formerly known as the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch, but in 2000 the Holy Synod decided to adopt the term "Syriac" instead, to avoid confusion with the modern nation of Syria.

Antioch was an important center of theology, and its students and teachers were deeply involved in the christological debates of the early Ecumenical Councils. The third of these councils, held in Ephesus in 431, led to a schism within the Syriac-speaking community, with followers of the condemned theologian Nestorius eventually establishing a separate church in Persia, known today as the Assyrian Church of the East. The next major council was held at Chalcedon in 451, and its decision, too, proved divisive. The Syriac Church rejected the proclamation of the council that Christ has two distinct natures, maintaining instead a single nature, at once human and divine. The schism between the opponents and supporters of Chalcedon eventually led to the emergence of separate patriarchates in Antioch, which continue to this day: the Syriac Orthodox patriarchate belongs to the communion of churches known as Oriental Orthodox, while the other patriarchate is a member of the Eastern Orthodox communion.

At the time of the council, Antioch was part of the Byzantine Empire, and the Syriac Orthodox Church was frequently persecuted by Chalcedonian-leaning emperors. Many of its bishops were exiled, and by the mid sixth century the church was in great decline. But revival was soon to follow, through the labors of Jacob Baradaeus, who in around 544 was ordained bishop of Edessa. Jacob, who is commemorated as one of the greatest saints of the church, traveled extensively in an effort to renew the faith, ordaining twenty-seven bishops and hundreds of priests and deacons (*Syriac Orthodox Resources*). So successful was his undertaking that outsiders sometimes refer to the Syriac Church as "Jacobite," though the church itself rejects the appellation.

With the Arab conquest of the Near East in the seventh century, the church was delivered from the threat of further Byzantine suppression. Syriac Christians and Muslims generally enjoyed good relations: "The early years of Muslim occupation were characterized by religious tolerance and justice," writes Chorepiscopus John Meno, "and Syrian Orthodox enjoyed positions of great influence and prestige under the Caliphs" (18). Relations deteriorated to some degree after the Crusades, which stoked anti-Christian sentiments among many Muslim rulers. Nonetheless, the seventh to thirteenth centuries in general mark a prosperous era for the church, with some of the finest outputs of literature and scholarship.

In the fourteenth century the Mongols entered Syria, destroying countless monasteries and churches. These invasions marked the beginning of a period of oppression and decline from which the church has only in recent times emerged. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the church suffered a particularly fierce persecution under the Turks, and "[b]y the beginning of the 20th century, Syriac Orthodox Christianity was confined mostly to mountainous rural areas, such as Tur Abdin, and various towns in the Ottoman Empire" (*Syriac Orthodox Resources*). The greatest tragedy befell the church in 1915, remembered as *Sayfo* ("The Year of the Sword"), when tens of thousands of Syriac Christians were massacred by the Ottomans. Many of the survivors fled Turkey, resettling in North America and in the newly emerging nations of the Middle East.

As a result of the difficult and often violent history the church has had to endure, the office of the patriarch has shifted several times over the centuries. The most recent move was to Damascus, where church administration has been centered since 1959. Over the past several decades, the church has enjoyed a period of revival—sometimes referred to as a modern renaissance—much of it taking place in the new diaspora. Today Syriac churches exist throughout the Middle East, as well as in Turkey, North America, Europe, Australia, and especially in India, where the church has long had an important presence. (For more information on the Syriac Church in India, see the section on Indian Orthodoxy.)

As of 2004, the Syriac Orthodox Church is estimated to have around 1,700,000 members worldwide, including approximately 1,200,000 faithful in India (Roberson).

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