

# *The Church in Egypt*

J. DONALD BOWEN

MY FAMILY AND I recently spent three years in Cairo where we were much involved in cooperative education programs with Egyptian counterparts. We became aware of how serious the official attitude toward an outside religion was when a young Egyptian student returned to Egypt as a Mormon convert after studying in the United States. He had embraced the Church and had asked for baptism shortly before returning to his family in Cairo. Even though he had left explicit instructions on how his baptismal certificate should be sent to Egypt, a careless clerk sent it through international mail where it was intercepted by postal authorities in Cairo and turned over to the internal security people. The young man was then picked up and subjected to hours-long interrogations over a period of three days. He was forced to reveal the names of all the Mormons in Egypt along with their reasons for being there. He was finally released with a strict warning that he would be in serious trouble if he were to spend any time with Mormons in Egypt. He dared not ignore these instructions because he knew this would only aggravate his status as a "renegade." (His situation was complicated by the fact that before his travel abroad, he had been involved in a student protest against the government and was therefore identified as an agitator in police records.)

It is natural for Mormons to think in terms of potential missionary activity in any part of the world. With the black revelation granting the priesthood to all worthy male members, interest in missionary work surely will be increased

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as traditional boundaries and distinctions are erased. As a result of missionary work, it is likely that there will be more and more emphasis on the Church as an international institution.

One of the areas where church activities can expect to find opposition is the Islamic world. The Muslims are, in general, a devout people, active in proselyting in non-Muslim parts of the world but quite unwilling to permit reciprocity. Thus an article praising progress in carrying the message of Islam to the Western World will appear in the English-language press in Cairo, but an article on overt missionary work by "foreign agents" will probably not be allowed.

The Egyptian constitution in a vague way guarantees freedom of religion, but this is largely an empty gesture, since proselyting activities (other than efforts to strengthen Islam) are forbidden. The WAQFS (Egyptian Government Ministry for Islamic Religious Affairs) has very strict control over the religious lives of Egyptian Muslims, and it would not willingly tolerate foreigners entering the country to place temptations before the faithful. This is especially true when Egyptian governments feel weak or vulnerable and therefore in need of a broader base of support. At such times there is a tendency to acquiesce to the desire of the "Islamic Establishment" (in particular the Ministry of WAQFS and El Azhar University) to coax the Egyptian government away from secular legal codes toward a genuine "Islamic State" based on the Koran and other sources of Islamic law. (A recent ban on alcohol shows Sadat's regime's indulgence of the Islamic Establishment as he perceives his need for political support from other Islamic nations.)

Overt proselyting would not now be tolerated for a variety of political, historical and cultural reasons. Strong pressures are placed on Egyptian Christians to convert to Islam: a special tax on non-Muslims, unfavorable inheritance laws when mixed marriages are involved, rights of child custody, etc. This, of course, leads to "paper conversions" of convenience, along with much hypocrisy and resentment. Perhaps it is a cleansing process, by which the lukewarm Christians drift to Islam without any real commitment. Until there is a basic change in government policy, and perhaps in the psychological make-up of the man on the street, any proselyting in Egypt must be strictly informal and must not attract attention.

Most Egyptians old enough to remember the colonial rule imposed by the British (1882-1952) have not forgotten the aggressive efforts by Christian missionaries during that time. Egyptian nationalists, with their demands for full independence, frequently attacked Protestant churches and mission schools as well as the British Embassy. Egyptian Muslims (and many Egyptian Christians) still resent proselyting by foreign Christians, regarding it as kind of "cultural imperialism." These feelings, associated as they are with highly emotional attitudes, persist even though the objectionable activities are largely a thing of the past.

Shortly after the incident involving the Egyptian convert mentioned above, two of my Mormon colleagues and I, all members of the academic staff of the American University in Cairo, were called into the dean of faculty's office. The Egyptian security police had paid a visit to the dean to find out

what these possibly subversive faculty members were doing, specifically asking if we were involved in proselyting. The dean had assured them that we were not (and later received our unequivocal statement that this was correct). The dean told us that the Egyptian government had been known to expel foreigners from the country without notice if it felt that Egyptian hospitality was being abused. In other words, we were warned that the government would tolerate no religious activity that extended visibly beyond the confines of our small expatriate group. One of the Mormon professors was particularly concerned, since he had no institutional base in the United States where he could go if deported from Egypt. The other two could return to our home universities, though we might lose part of a year's salary. Of course, if *any* of us were deported, our professional lives and projects in Egypt would automatically be aborted, a result we understandably wanted to avoid.

Some time earlier, an American LDS family moved to Egypt with plans to establish a business. They came on their own initiative, having no official appointment as representatives of the Church, but they acted on the church-wide assumption that every member is a missionary. They therefore came prepared to teach the gospel, including in their personal effects materials to assist in describing the Church: movies, film strips, books, pamphlets, etc. This family sought out opportunities for religious discussion among the Egyptian people they dealt with socially or in business. They quickly made friends among the local people and invited them to meetings where they could "learn more about the Mormons." It didn't take the Egyptian government long to become aware of these activities. Undercover agents attended their meetings and reported back to the security police. The husband was summoned and informed that proselyting among the Muslim population of Egypt would not be tolerated. He asked if there was any objection to his "talking about his religion" if he restricted his contacts to the Christian segment of the population. He was assured that no one would object if he limited his activities to the Christians, but the government official who gave this assurance orally was unwilling to provide it in written form. This permission was later rescinded.

Theoretically the Christian community in Egypt can provide converts to Mormonism more easily than the Islamic community can, since Egyptian Christians are numerous, and they perhaps have less to learn than Muslims. Estimates on the size of Egypt's Christian community vary, running from about five to fifteen or even twenty per cent of the population, depending on who is counting and what purposes are served. Whatever its number, the Christian minority in Egypt feels persecuted—not without some justification. From discussions with them I have heard claims that no non-Muslim church building can be erected in the vicinity of a mosque. Since there are a thousand mosques in Cairo alone, one can appreciate what a restriction this is. On the other hand, it seems relatively easy to get a building permit for a new mosque in the area of a church.

The result is a certain resentment and a "siege mentality." A fifteen-story government building was alleged to have been designed and built so a

cathedral could not be seen from the most important public square in downtown Cairo. Nasser, before his demise, planned a new Nile bridge, located so that another large and impressive cathedral would have to be razed. (Sadat has modified the plan so that the building will remain, but the bridge approach road splits so that one elevated lane of traffic clings to and decorates each side of the church. The result is grotesque—it looks a little like a nutcracker poised to crush the cathedral.)

The two populations, Muslim and Christian, are not always on the best of terms. The Muslims might not object to missionary work among the Christians if they felt it would contribute to the problems of this vexatious minority. Apparently they were considered, by at least one government official, as fair game for foreign missionaries. There is, however, no easily available way to prove Islamic support for outside Christian proselyting efforts. In fact both Christians and Muslims have traditionally opposed foreign missionaries. Perhaps the Muslims want to preserve the Copts as their own exclusive targets for proselyting.

Somehow the Christian religious authorities found out that members of the Egyptian Orthodox (Coptic) Church were being courted by foreigners in Egypt. We presume that the Coptic authorities complained to the government and that their complaint provoked the stricter policy, forbidding proselyting among *any* Egyptians. We do know that the Egyptian government temporarily refused to renew the proselyting family's residence visas and almost deported them.

In a few cases an American or British Mormon girl has married an Egyptian boy, usually while he was abroad studying. With one exception these members had a very infrequent record of participation in the activities of our branch. It is simply taken for granted that the children of an Islamic husband, especially boys, would be raised as Muslims. If the husband dies or divorces his wife (not difficult in Muslim countries), the mother loses custody of her children, who are taken by the disaffected husband or by his surviving relatives.

The conversion of one Egyptian Christian, a respected professional, is especially interesting. While driving through the outskirts of Washington, D.C. on a business trip to the United States, he was deeply moved by the sight of the Washington Temple. He went to the temple and, on being informed that it was not open to visitors, requested information about the Church, soon asked to be taught the gospel, and within a week he was baptized. He returned to Cairo, and, perhaps because of his social stature or because he had been Christian, he was not treated like our Muslim student friend, although in both cases the conversion and baptism had taken place outside Egypt. Perhaps his conversion had not reached the attention of the right authorities, or perhaps they were winking at the indiscretion of an elderly public figure. Later he was asked to come in to supply information, but he refused, telling the authorities that they could come to his house if they wanted to talk to him.

Incidents like this suggest that the field is "white all ready to harvest," but

for the present it is unlikely that anyone will be allowed to thrust in a sickle. One can appreciate the difficulty of reaching other countries in the Islamic world with the message of the gospel when it is recalled that Egypt, next to Lebanon, is perhaps the most liberal member state of the Islamic world (and Lebanon seems determined to give up any claim to that title). It would be vastly more difficult to promote the work in countries like Saudi Arabia, Iraq or Libya, where there is virtually no distinction between religion and state.

The Book of Mormon has recently been translated into Arabic. When, where and how it can be used are difficult questions. Perhaps one day we'll be pleasantly surprised in the Middle East as we have been in Italy, Spain and Portugal. In the interest of our worldwide orientation to Church membership we hope it will be sooner rather than later. In the meantime a small group of expatriate Mormons will continue to meet in one of their homes, maintaining a modest program of Church activities.

