

The Life of Egypt

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As someone raised in North America, I often find I have a very poor sense of history. I don't mean that I don't know about historical events and where they happened and who they changed and of course when they were. But I feel I lack that intuitive sense of antiquity, of the weight of centuries and millennia lying thick on ancient ground. I think in part this is because, as a North American, there is a big focus on trajectory and where the future is leading us; and of course there is the fact that so much of North America's deep past has been steamrolled by newer, larger forces.

There are other places in the world where new and large forces have also steamrolled right through, but often when they did make their mark, they only managed to do so in the shadow of some monolithic legacy that stretched out before them.

Here in Egypt, there are the marks of many mighty forces that have repeatedly washed over this region. Civilizations, religions, ideologies, and peoples have all swept through Egypt, leaving it a land remarkably dense with history and memory.

For thousands of years the ancient Egyptian pharaohs built up one of the most iconic civilizations of antiquity. This potent nation arguably had one of the most lasting and profound influences on the writers of the Old Testament. The massive temples, titanic pyramids, and unique language eventually became swept up in the Roman Empire. Egypt found itself close to the epicenter of the spread of Christianity; tradition says the gospel-writer Mark brought the faith to Alexandria.

In a few centuries, the Roman Empire was Christianized (and to some extent, Christianity Romanized) and Egypt became a significant voice for orthodoxy in the Western church until the year 451 when a theological dispute generated a major schism. Today the Roman Catholic and Coptic Orthodox churches remain the core outcome of this divide.

In the mid 7th century, a new and completely unexpected power emerged quite suddenly from the Arabian Peninsula. The Arab-Muslim conquests rapidly engulfed the Middle East and North Africa—Egypt was taken in just two years. Islam would not come to be the dominant religion in Egypt for centuries, but even today, perhaps 1 in 10 Egyptians hold to the thriving Coptic Orthodox tradition.

This is the oceanic context I stepped into last August when I arrived in Egypt.

I came here through an organization called Mennonite Central Committee. MCC does three main things: peace building, disaster relief, and development work. By far their main effort today is development work and to that end they rarely use international volunteers directly; instead they are placed in partner organizations that already operate in a given country. My position is with the Anglican Diocese of Egypt where I work closely with the archbishop of this province of the Anglican Communion, Bishop Mouneer Hanna Anis.

My job varies significantly from day to day, but I've had the chance to meet important religious leaders such as the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, and the Pope of the Coptic Orthodox Church. Typically, though, I find myself corresponding with international funding partners, helping the bishop with

writing and editing things in English, and doing whatever odd, unexpected tasks come up. The many ministries of the Diocese include healthcare, education, community development, holistic care of refugees, youth ministry, interfaith dialogue, and theological training.

I live and work in the center of Cairo on the island of Zamalek in the Nile. It is one of the wealthier locations in the city and where many international embassies are located. While I do my best to progress with my Arabic studies, so many people around me know English well enough that it unfortunately isn't enough of a necessity for me.

I return back to the U.S. later this summer, but I have known for some time that I will miss Egypt. I will miss the food, the wild traffic, the language, the culture, and the history. But what I will miss the most will be the friendships; the people.

Egypt is not a few chapters in a history textbook, nor is it a set of alarming headlines in the evening news.

Egypt is a home. Perhaps it is not mine or yours, but it is one for millions of wonderful people. People living and loving and laughing. People making art and food, music and dreams. And people who pray. For their neighbors, for their country, and for the world. And sometimes for you.