

Article

Discipleship in Oriental Orthodox and Evangelical Communities

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Abstract: In many countries with a strong Orthodox Christian presence there are tensions between Evangelicals and Orthodox Christians. These tensions are rooted in many theological, ecclesiological, and epistemological differences. In practice, one of the crucial causes of tension comes down to different practical understandings of what a Christian disciple looks like. This paper examines key aspects of discipleship as expressed in revival movements in Orthodox Churches Egypt, India and Ethiopia which are connected to the challenges presented by the huge expansion of Evangelical Protestant mission from the nineteenth century. Key aspects will be evaluated in comparison with aspects that are understood to characterize disciples in Evangelical expressions, including: differing understandings of the sacraments and their place in the life of a disciple; ways in which different traditions engage with the Bible and related literary works; contrasting outlooks on discipleship as an individual and a community way of life; and differing understanding of spiritual disciplines.

Keywords: discipleship; Orthodox Christian; Oriental Christian; Coptic; Egypt; Ethiopia; India



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1. Introduction

Evangelical Christianity and non-Chalcedonian or Oriental Orthodox Christianity have moved along very different historical trajectories. This divergence is marked by major events including the Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE, the Great Schism of 1054 CE then the Reformation in the sixteenth century with later divisions within Protestant Christianity. The non-Chalcedonian Orthodox Churches of Egypt, Ethiopia and India are embedded in diverse non-Western cultures which have passed by the specific religious challenges which the Enlightenment presented to Protestant and Catholic Christianity and have faced their own intellectual and practical challenges. This study explores important observed behaviors of those devoutly following Christ, that is 'disciples', and contrasts them with their Evangelical counterparts seeking to look at the reasons behind behaviors and tracing them to a historical understanding discipleship.

2. Historical Background

The Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE produced significant divisions in the Church. Its Christological definition has been understood as the definition of middle ground between a perceived splitting of humanity and divinity attributed to Nestorius that was condemned at Ephesus in 431 CE, and the teaching of Eutyches who was understood to argue that Christ was consubstantial only with the Father. This model does not serve well the Christology of Christian traditions that developed outside of the Roman Empire, exemplified by Severus of Antioch who presented a robust defense of the Oriental outlook and raised serious issues with the Chalcedonian definition (Chesnut 1976; Allen and Hayward 2004). Sebastian Brock, among others, has argued strongly for a distinction between Eutyches' 'monophysite' teaching and 'miaphysite' Christology which affirms full humanity and divinity in one nature of Christ without division or confusion, noting that terms like 'nature' and 'hypostasis' had several different understandings which became more ambiguous when translated into Syriac (Brock 1996). Similar problems may be found with other ancient languages, such as the Classical Ethiopic. The outcome of the Council of Chalcedon left a painful split in the church and significant efforts were made

to reconcile the sides. Emperor Zeno (474–5, 476–91CE) authorized what became known as the *Henoticon*, or ‘act of union,’ which avoided criticism of Leo’s Tome that had caused difficulty for the Alexandrians, but also rejected on one extreme Nestorianism, which the Egyptians, Palestinians and Syrians had felt was given too much concession at Chalcedon, and Eutyches and his monophysite teaching on the other, but also avoided the ‘two natures’ formula that the Alexandrians opposed strongly (Grillmeier 1987, pp. 247–317). The *Henoticon* failed as a compromise lacking clarity, and strong opposition endured in Egypt, Palestine and Syria (Grillmeier 1987, p. 257). There were concerted efforts to resolve the differences, although for the opposers of Chalcedon its outlook remained a concession to Nestorianism that they could not accept. A series of synods and documents aimed at clarifying and resolving differences, culminated in the 5th Ecumenical Council at Constantinople in 553 CE (noting that this Council is not accepted as ‘ecumenical’ by the Oriental Churches), which sought a Christological definition that was resolutely against Nestorianism, but all this was insufficient (Grillmeier 1995, pp. 443–61). The challenges of understanding Oriental Christology point to much broader challenges in understanding the beliefs and practices of these Christian expressions. Important developments were made in the 20th century and significant progress has been made in understanding the fundamental congruence between Chalcedonian and Oriental views (Chailot 2016) which must be understood as removing many perceived obstacles to good relations between these groups. Significant divergence in experience comes, however, from the very different histories of the three Oriental traditions in this study.

Coptic Christianity was formed in the very earliest years of the Christian Church. Coptic Christians celebrate the Holy Family fleeing to Egypt from Herod’s slaughter of the innocents, and the foundation of their church by St Mark, believed to have been martyred in Alexandria perhaps in 68 CE (Pearson 2006, pp. 336–37). Alexandria became one of the most important Christian intellectual centers, and Egypt was an early and influential center for the development of monasticism (Pearson 2006). It was the strong influence of the Egyptian countryside rather than its more Hellenized cities that drove opposition to Chalcedon, rejection of which partly contributed to the waning of Alexandrian theological influence within the Roman Empire (Gillman and Klimkeit 1999, p. 16). Since the seventh century Arab invasions of North Africa, and then later Ottoman Islamic culture the Coptic Church has lived under Islamic rule (Pearson 2006; O’Mahony 2006), and Islamic presence has strongly influenced the development of its Christian reflection.

Ethiopian Orthodoxy flourished early. The Ethiopians look to their Christian origins in the baptism of the Ethiopian Eunuch by Peter in Acts 8, even though this figure almost certainly served in the Meroitic Kingdom in Nubia (Ullendorff [1968] 2006, p. 1), but they have identified the Candace as the Queen of Sheba (Lee 2017b, p. 2). Furthermore, the Ethiopians appeal to Kāsāte Bərhan Abbā Sālāmā, their ‘revealer of light, father of peace’ St Frumentius (d. c.383), a Syrian Christian who was ordained as Ethiopia’s first bishop possibly in 328 CE by St Athanasius. This connection is attested by Rufinus (Migne 1849, cols. 478–80; Amidon 1997, pp. 18–20), but most convincingly in a letter by Athanasius (1892). The Bible and liturgy were translated into Ethiopia’s classical language by the fifth century, then growing independently and somewhat isolated because of the Arab invasions. Ethiopian Christianity has developed a remarkable presence in even the nation’s most isolated mountainous regions, and although it was subject for centuries to the Patriarch in Alexandria, until 1959, its use of the vernacular saw the development of a distinctive expression of Christianity, with its own strong liturgical and intellectual traditions (Isaac 2012, pp. 1–26; Crummey 2006; Binns 2017).

Indian Christianity has a complex past with a very early Christian expression formed under the strong influence of a dominant Hindu culture. The Indian Orthodox link their Christian foundations to the Apostle Thomas, narrated in oral history in Malayalam songs such as ‘Margam Kali Puttu,’ ‘Song of the Way,’ and scholars are increasingly persuaded of this claim (Gillman and Klimkeit 1999, pp. 159–66). A connection with Persia emerged probably from the fourth century, accounting for the Indian adoption of Syriac as its

liturgical language (Gillman and Klimkeit 1999, pp. 166–77). Persian links remained strong until the Church was subject to harsh dominance by the Roman Catholic church with the severe and destructive Synod of Diamper in 1599 CE at which many of its cultural outlooks were anathematized, and later emerging through alliances with the Syrian Church bringing it into the non-Chalcedonian group of churches (Gillman and Klimkeit 1999, pp. 155–202; O'Mahony and Angold 2006).

These Orthodox expressions are strongly embedded within their cultures, leading to censure by Western Christians rooted in poor understanding of their non-Chalcedonian but also non-Eutychian Christology: the Egyptians have adopted the Arabic language and culture of their historical rulers becoming a significant force in shaping the development of Egyptian culture over many centuries, but have been criticized by Western Christians for neglecting the call to Evangelize their Muslim compatriots (Cragg 1992, pp. 13–30, etc.); the Ethiopian Church has a strong claim to being the primary force shaping and forming its national culture since the fourth century CE, but has been criticized for its 'Judaic' customs, without carefully considering how they are understood within the Church (Lee 2017a; Ullendorff [1968] 2006); and accusations of syncretism have been made against the Indian Orthodox because of their outward conformity to Hindu culture, which may also be viewed as contextualization par excellence (Gillman and Klimkeit 1999, pp. 177–202). An exception to this critical western outlook were Anglican missionaries who viewed these Christians as potential partners in mission: in the nineteenth century the Church Mission Society (CMS) specifically aimed at keeping the Coptic Church as the national church of Egypt (Sharkey 2008, pp. 33–34); around 1815 the English considered the Syrian Christians of India as potential evangelists for of Asia and supported the establishment of a seminary in Kerala (Varghese 2010, p. 227); and in from the earliest days of CMS in Ethiopia their missionaries sought to build a good relationship with the head of the Ethiopian Church and eschewed planting churches (Hastings 1996, p. 224).

The CMS outlook needs a full examination which is beyond the scope of this article, but it points to what this article seeks to explore: what might we observe in these Christian communities that indicates their commitment to discipleship? Enduring extended harsh treatment, facing strong cultural challenges, and strengthening in the face of strong Protestant and Catholic missionary efforts from the nineteenth century are compelling signs. From the nineteenth century these churches have seen a revival of spiritual life expressed in church attendance, and in the flourishing of aspects of spiritual life that characterize the life of Christian disciples. As the historical and cultural discontinuity between non-Chalcedonian and Evangelical Christians is wide, some aspects of Orthodox discipleship may be unclear to Evangelicals and vice versa. This study explores important observed behaviors of those devoutly following Christ and contrasts them with their Evangelical counterparts seeking to look at the reasons behind behaviors and tracing them to historical discipleship.

3. Defining and Discerning Discipleship

Discipleship is living out of the imitation of Christ in the life of a Christian believer, following the pattern of Jesus' first followers, or 'disciples.' The Greek μαθητής, 'disciple', in the New Testament, is found only in the Gospels and Acts and is associated with one who formally and informally learns spiritual practice from another (Bauer et al. 2000, p. 609). It may relate to developing Christian character that will produce certain behaviors, summarized well in a passage like Gal 5:22–23 (NRSV) 'the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.' It also involves developing new ways of thinking in line with God's revelation, again expected to bring about a change in behavior, as expressed in Rom 12:2 (NRSV), 'Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.'

The Navigators, an Evangelical Christian organization with a strong focus on practical discipleship, has articulated what it seeks to do develop in Christian disciples referring

to things such as: the passion to know, love and become like Jesus Christ; believing in the truth and sufficiency of the Scriptures for the whole of life; the transforming power of the Gospel; the leading and empowering of the Holy Spirit; living with expectant faith and persevering prayer rooted in the promises of God; the dignity and value of every person's love and grace expressed among us in community; forming families and relational networks that seek to make disciples in many nations ([The Navigators UK 2017](#)). This is not intended to be a complete definition of discipleship, but it seeks to go beyond outward conforming with a focus on the Bible, life changing experience, and sharing that experience with others as lying at the very center of Christian discipleship and is perhaps a good starting point for understanding discipleship in Evangelical expressions.

These brief examples from Paul, and also the Navigators' definition point to a concern for the transforming nature of Christian faith. Outward and measurable signs in Evangelical communities might include practices such as regular Bible reading, perhaps memorizing motivating or comforting verses from the Bible, prayer, sharing faith with those who are not Christians, etc. Christians from diverse expressions would share much of this outlook but for others this individualistic approach may be found wanting. For Evangelical traditions with a stronger liturgical emphasis, and for the Catholic and Orthodox communities, there are some obvious omissions: The Church is not mentioned, 'tradition' is also omitted, and the place in discipleship of sacraments is overlooked. In considering how this outlook might be developed for Orthodox Christians the author, with other representatives of the Navigators sought to reword the definition to address these deficiencies with wording such as: the truth and sufficiency of God's revelation, given through His body, the Church, for the whole of life. Following this, some observable characteristics of Orthodox disciples need to be defined.

4. Characteristics of Spiritual Revival and Discipleship in Orthodox Communities

After centuries of oppression and serious limitations on daily life under Islamic rule, in the early nineteenth century the Coptic Church found many of its members and clergy with little understanding of their Christian faith ([Miyokawa 2017](#)). Coincidentally Protestant and Catholic missions began to gain influence, primarily through education, stimulating strong reflection within the Coptic Church on the life of its members, and so catalyzing significant spiritual revival through into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In observing the outward signs of this revival, Anthony O'Mahony has articulated a list of characteristics that provide a basis for assessing aspects of discipleship in Orthodox communities:

'A major characteristic of the Coptic revival is a renewed emphasis on the monastic and ecclesial traditions. This is realized in more frequent celebrations of the Eucharist, stress on the church's identity as an Apostolic church, renewed emphasis on the study of the Coptic language, commemoration of the glorious past, on Egypt as the homeland of monasticism, reading of the Church Fathers, and upholding martyrdom, even in the present day. At the same time, the church has attempted to restore the practice of certain sacraments which were beginning to fall into oblivion, such as the sacrament of reconciliation, or fasting, particularly honored in the Coptic religious tradition.' ([O'Mahony 2006](#), p. 506).

O'Mahony's description usefully highlights aspects of Orthodox discipleship that contrast somewhat with Evangelical practice. For Evangelicals more individualistic practices such as personal bible reading, or individual elements of Christian character come more to the fore, whereas within the Orthodox outlook much of the drive for discipleship will come directly through the ministry of the Church. The Scriptures are at the heart of Orthodox discipleship but will be accompanied by reading the Church Fathers and other ancient Christian literature. Such literature underpins Orthodox understanding of Scripture, but this may be obscured from Evangelical eyes. An emphasis on the monastic tradition is also something that, seen through Evangelical eyes, may seem a diversion, but from an Orthodox perspective discipleship will engage closely with the monastic community for

teaching, spiritual guidance. Monastics will frequently have the role of Spiritual Fathers in a mentoring relationship that lies at the heart of Orthodox discipleship.

4.1. Sunday School Movements

Teaching is an important feature of discipleship across the traditions, and Egyptian, Ethiopian, and Indian Orthodox churches have all responded to challenges through establishing Sunday School organizations focused on giving spiritual instruction, especially to young people. These have partly been responses to Protestant and Catholic proselytism but have developed far beyond this to be at the core of discipleship and spiritual revival. These Sunday School movements have many similarities to Evangelical organizations like The Navigators, Agape, or YWAM, organizing conferences for spiritual teaching, organizing pilgrimages, fostering close relationships that allow formal and informal teaching, etc. The crucial difference, however, is that they remain under the authority of the Church which they seek to serve.

In 1918 a layman, Ḥabib Jirjis, founded the Coptic Sunday School Movement to encourage Orthodox youth to respond to Catholic and Protestant presentations of Christian faith, and later to resist the fundamentalism of the Muslim Brotherhood (Hassan 2003, pp. 71–84). In the 1930s Coptic students at Fouad, later Cairo, University began to train educated leaders as agents of reform, and by the 1940s the movement had broad impact with around 42,000 students involved nationally with a common curriculum. The movement trained important leaders, including the charismatic and influential Pope Shenouda III (1971–2012), who led vigorous responses to the Islamic Brotherhood and negotiated on behalf of the Coptic community, but also others with spiritual but less public influence such as Father Matthew the Poor whose writings have been influential in the movement (Hassan 2003, pp. 74–81; Musa 1991).

Indian Orthodox students were mobilized to nurture commitment to Orthodox spiritual life in the face of modern challenges, and to train influential academic leaders, leading to the foundation of the Syrian Students Conference in 1907, which in 1956 ultimately became the Mar Gregorios Orthodox Christian Student Movement (MGOCSM), aiming ‘to bring together our students in various colleges and high schools with a view to deepening their spiritual life and to create in them a livelier sense of fellowship,’ including arranging liturgical services for Indian students outside Kerala where there is no Orthodox parish. Currently there are about 40,000 members, and four of its former General Secretaries have been consecrated bishops of the Malankara Orthodox Church, including the current Catholicos of the East and Malankara Metropolitan Baselios Marthoma Paulose II, also known as Bishop Paulose Mar Miletios (Varghese 2010; *The Malankara Orthodox Church* 2015). There is scant published information about this group, but the author has had personal communication with Fr Abraham Thomas, from the Theology College in Kottayam regarding these details.

Much later, stalled by Ethiopia’s Communist experiment from 1974–1991, the Ethiopian Orthodox Maḥbārā Qəddusan, ‘Association of Saints’, was founded on 9 May 1991. Facing overthrow by rebel forces in late 1990 and early 1991 the in February 1991 government obliged all students in higher education to join military training in the town of Blate, in southern Ethiopia. The Communist regime was overthrown before their training was complete but moving so many students to one location had a significant impact on student religious groups. Around 2000 Orthodox students from diverse campuses found great encouragement in meeting together, and these associations, each dedicated to a different saint, amalgamated into a single Maḥbārā Qəddusan, ‘Association of Saints’, subsequently formally organized under the Sunday School Department of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church (EOTC) (Kidusan 2017; Binns 2017, p. 242). The Maḥbārā Qəddusan has grown rapidly in size and influence and now dominates the spiritual activities of Orthodox Christian students on university campuses, with a significant research department, and a vision to mobilize the professional skills of its members to serve the

church. The early activities of this group were encouraged by Coptic and Indian clergy and laity, and interaction between the three Sunday School groups continues.

4.2. Connection with Monastic Life

Revival is associated with increased commitment to the monastic life, and a closer engagement of laity with the monastic communities. Revival in Egypt and Ethiopia has seen increased numbers of monastics (Schroeder 2017; Chaillot 2002, pp. 152–94; Binns 2017, pp. 227–52; Guirguis and Doorn-Harder 2011, pp. 127–54). The situation in India has been more challenging, as there were no monastic communities at the beginning of the 20th century, but a small, active community has grown, with only 160 monks and about 250 female monastics a decade ago, so currently their impact on the laity is limited (Varghese 2010, pp. 240–41).

Thriving monasticism may be taken as one indicator of revival but its impact on discipleship is seen through engagement between laity and monastics. Monastics have always mentored the devout laity, and the relationship between a believer and their spiritual father is crucial in the development of discipleship. The Mahbārā Qəddusan, Association of Saints, organizes groups to visit monasteries for spiritual guidance with members reciprocating by offering their professional services to monasteries and the communities around them for no fee. Many monasteries have constructed simple guest accommodation to serve the increased number of visitors. This has resulted in the revival of some monastic communities and produces a strong dynamic interaction between laity and monks, and strong connections between urban and rural Orthodox communities (Binns 2017, p. 242). Similar dynamic relationships are found in Egypt, (Schroeder 2017; Hassan 2003, p. 81).

4.3. Participation in the Mysteries Expressing Discipleship

A full discussion of the understanding of sacraments or mysteries, their preferred title in Orthodox expressions, is beyond the scope of this article. Nevertheless, an appreciation of the unique ways in which sacraments are understood and practiced must be developed to understand their place in discipleship. Although Orthodox expressions affirm seven sacraments, baptism and the Eucharist, or Lord's Supper, are held to be sacraments in many Christian expressions and so provide a the most useful comparison across the expressions. In many Evangelical expressions, adult baptism is taken as an expression of devotion on the part of a believer, understood as taking adult responsibility for one's faith for someone raised in Christian faith, or as a clear expression of conversion and progress in discipleship by an adult, and the way in to taking the Lord's Supper (Gilbart-Smith 2012). Whilst baptism is understood as essential in Orthodox and sacramental Evangelical expressions, pedobaptism practiced in Orthodox and some Evangelical expressions means that its practice does not mark out the distinctive of the continued devotion of a disciple.

The regular celebration of the Eucharist is, however, a distinct marker of discipleship. Within Evangelical expressions, there is significant divergence in the significance attributed to this sacrament. In the Reformed tradition taking Lord's Supper regularly is understood as obedience to Christ, 'to symbolize the New Covenant, to point to the fellowship of a redeemed people gathered at his table, and to anticipate the messianic banquet yet to come' (Griffiths 2020), and so considered a core aspect of discipleship (McGrath 2016, pp. 383–404). In these expressions, Martin Luther's view is fundamental, where the Eucharist is taken as: affirming promises of grace and forgiveness; identifying those to whom the promises are made and proclaiming the death of the one who made those promises, affirming both individual corporate belonging (McGrath 2016, pp. 392, 394), and so is understood as a deeply significant part of Christian worship. There is, however, a trend amongst some Evangelicals away from liturgical and sacramental worship (Barna Group 2018) with some regarding it more as ordinance rather than a sacrament, and especially in some newly established Evangelical churches it may not be a focus at all (Galli 2019).

In Orthodox expressions the Church is a place of transformation through encounter with God in the liturgy and the mysteries, regular participation in which lies at the heart of discipleship, especially the Eucharist, ‘the sacrament of sacraments’ (Steenberg 2008, pp. 121–22). For Orthodox Christians, choosing to participate in the Eucharist is a strong indicator of the inner spiritual life of a believer. In line with all Orthodox expressions, Pope Shenouda III, Patriarch of the Egyptian Orthodox Church from 1971–2012, explains with simple biblical references that taking the Eucharist is commanded, that the bread and wine are the flesh and blood of Christ, although understood as a mystery, and that communion ‘grants eternal life, steadfastness in the Lord, and forgiveness of sins’ (Shenouda 1999, pp. 132–53), affirming the Orthodox understanding of the salvific function of the Eucharist. With this connection to salvation, taking Holy Communion is an essential component of Christian discipleship, without which spiritual life and growth to maturity are not possible. It is understood as the ‘participation in the divine nature’ spoken of in 2Pet 1:4 and an essential part of the life of repentance, leading to a personal experience of Christ himself (Steenberg 2008, p. 127).

Such a high view of the Eucharist has led to an understanding that participating is only for the spiritually very pure with extended preparation required (Boylston 2018, pp. 5–12). The author has observed that until recently young adult Christians in Ethiopia have strong reservations about taking communion at all, fearing taking it in vain and suffering the most grievous consequences. Pope Shenouda III articulates the reasons behind this referring to 1Cor 11:27, where unworthy taking the bread and wine is deemed guilty of the body and blood of Christ. Consequently, serious self-examination is expected, again in line with 1Cor 11:28 (Shenouda 1999, pp. 132–53), a view reflected in the Ethiopian Church’s Fetha Nagast, (Tzadua and Strauss 2002, p. xv): ‘let a man examine himself first and make his soul good and saintly; then let him eat of that bread and drink from the chalice,’ (Tzadua and Strauss 2002, p. 86). In the early 1990s, an observer in an Ethiopian Orthodox Church would have seen only very young and elderly people lining up to take communion. Those under the age of seven may take communion without significant preparation, and the elderly were understood as less prone to fall into error. Failure to participate in the Eucharist regularly, however, has been as sign of serious shortfalls in the spiritual life of the Orthodox Churches, and with an increased focus in Ethiopia on Christian discipleship since the 1990s, younger adults have been increasingly willing to take communion regularly. Articles in the popular Orthodox Christian magazine, *Ḥamār*, ‘the Ship,’ in Ethiopia explain the necessity of taking holy communion even though it requires preparation (Kidusan 1988), with similar encouragement from Abuna Mathias, the Ethiopian Patriarch (Nigus 2017). Likewise, a return to regular participation in the Eucharist is characterized by O’Mahony as a sign of revival in the Coptic Church (O’Mahony’s 2006), with similar trends observed in India (Varghese 2010). Seen in this light participation in the Eucharist reflects regular practice of self-examination, and the discipline of repentance, leading to assurance that sins are forgiven.

The significance of the Eucharist in discipleship is emphasized further in Ethiopia with changes in the practice of Christian marriage. Civil or secular marriage has been widespread, but ‘spiritual’ marriage, a Church wedding which involves taking of communion, was until recently uncommon (Fritsch 2010). The author has observed, however, that confidence developed since the 1990s, has led to Church weddings becoming more common among the younger generation who have understood forgiveness, and are so prepared to take communion. Such marriage is indissoluble in Orthodox tradition, and so this trend is also a reflection of young people taking marriage very seriously, as a lifelong commitment, which may also be taken as reflecting Christian discipleship.

Fasting and almsgiving might also be included in the discussion of the discipline of repentance that leads believers to be prepared to take communion. Orthodox Christians fast, abstaining from dairy and meat products for half the year or sometimes more, and almsgiving is a strong commitment of many. In discipleship there are a strong affirmation of Mat. 4:4 that ‘one does not live on bread alone, but by every word that comes from the

mouth of God' (Chryssavgis 2008, p. 161) Nevertheless, in all the expressions considered there may be strong social pressure on people to practice these disciplines, and so they are not a distinctive mark of discipleship.

4.4. Commemoration of the Glorious Past, Apostolic Identity, and Ancient Languages

Developing O'Mahony's reflections on Coptic renewal, an awareness of and passion for the ancient roots and Apostolic connections of Christianity in each nation is important in discipleship with a connected passion for the study of their tradition's ancient language. Evangelicals frequently do have a strong sense of history, but some have been accused of historical amnesia (Boekestein 2018) and it is probably not to be considered a central element of discipleship. In contrast the Orthodox understanding of the Church and its history lies at the heart of Christian devotion and discipleship.

Among the most revered of saints in these traditions are those who first brought Christianity, as outlined in the historical background earlier. The issue is primarily one of identity, and even though details of accounts of Christian origins may be questioned by scholars they affirm something very powerful at the heart of Christian daily life in these Orthodox communities. Coptic Christians connections with the flight of the Holy Family and St Mark's martyrdom are strong. The Ethiopians identify strongly with the baptism of the Ethiopian Eunuch by Peter in Acts 8, and then appeal to their first bishops St Frumentius (d. c.383) and his ordination in 328 CE by St Athanasius. The Indian Orthodox derive strong identity from their connection to the Apostle Thomas, in a strong oral song tradition. Furthermore, each tradition has its own accounts of national saints who are honored, making a continuous connection with their roots. This is not simply an awareness of history, or asserting Apostolic connections, but it reflects the experience of the communion of the saints in Orthodox discipleship 'calling into the present experience of the human mind and heart—or nous—the reality of God's redeeming work' (Steenberg 2008, p. 128).

To access this heritage Orthodox disciples often develop a passion their traditions' ancient language. Theological colleges in Egypt, Ethiopia and India offer courses in Hebrew and Greek, but there is relatively little interest in text critical approaches. The primary interest is in languages in which Christianity was transmitted to and thrived within those cultures and the literature that connects them with their ancient heritage: Coptic for the Egyptians, Syriac for the Indians, and Gə'əz for the Ethiopians. Knowledge of these ancient languages gives these communities a deep connection with the roots of their Christian expression and access to its literary heritage. Furthermore, in each tradition the rich liturgical tradition, the related poetic hymns and the musical traditions associated with them are all part of the unique spiritual expression of these cultures. Even without knowledge of the language, believers will often appreciate their musical and chanting traditions.

Lying behind the historical connection are deeper issues of theology and epistemology that are often overlooked. J B Segal said of the seminal Syriac Christian writer, Ephrem, 'his work . . . shows little profundity or originality of thought and his metaphors are labored. His poems are turgid, humourless, and repetitive' (Segal 1970, p. 79), a comment more on a western scholar's poor connection with a tradition than a realistic appraisal of Ephrem's contribution. These outlooks have been challenged more recently, for instance with the seminal work of Sidney Griffith has opened the world of Arabic speaking Christianity, for example in *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque* (Griffith 2008). With some training, Christians from these expressions will find theology framed in ways that are particularly appropriate that are markedly different from post enlightenment western cultures.

Taking the example of Ethiopia, the chants emanating from churches throughout the night are sung in classical Gə'əz, the text and melodies having evolved from the sixth century and the original hymns of St Yared, whose tradition is discussed briefly, for instance, in *The Songs of Africa: The Ethiopian Canticles* (Lee 2017a, pp. 11–20). From their childhood Ethiopians will have heard these chants, and as faith awakens there is a strong

desire to understand these beautiful songs. Gə‘əz is still used in the creative extempore poetical tradition of qəne that weaves sophisticated double meanings and symbols to make theological connections conveying meaning (Binns 2017, pp. 175–8; Kidane 2007). These poems are best appreciated in Gə‘əz and so knowledge of the language and literary tradition becomes a part of the spiritual journey of many disciples.

Language and reception are more complex issues for the Indian Orthodox, since their textual heritage was almost completely destroyed following the Synod of Diamper in 1599 (Gillman and Klimkeit 1999, p. 200), but their later connection with the Syrian Church helped them draw on the Syriac heritage that undoubtedly underlies their expression of Christianity, and it was for this purpose that the St Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute was established (St. Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute 2018). A sound basis for understanding that Syriac Christian outlook has been established now by many scholars, most notably Sebastian Brock, masterfully summarized in *The Luminous Eye* (Brock 1992) a text enthusiastically studied by Indian scholars.

For the Egyptians this heritage is more complex, because early on Christianity grew in two connected ways, with Greek being the ancient lingua franca in the Hellenized city of Alexandria and perhaps in other centers, but with Coptic in the more rural areas. These were superseded eventually by Arabic in the centuries after the Arab invasions of the seventh century. Greek speaking Alexandrian Christian thought was very influential certainly up to the Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE, but even by the third century there were Coptic translations of biblical books and a significant body of patristic material (Pearson 2006, pp. 333, 349). Following the seventh century Arab invasion of Egypt Coptic was gradually replaced by Arabic, and by the thirteenth century Alexandria had become the intellectual center of Arabic Christianity, although the liturgy continued to be celebrated in Coptic (Griffith 2008, p. 64). The challenges of Protestant and Catholic mission in the nineteenth century and educational reforms meant that Coptic developed from a language understood by a few clergy to one of significant intellectual interest under the reforms of Pope Kyrillos IV (1854–1861) (Miyokawa 2017, pp. 151–52). It was a revived laity with a passion for discipleship in their tradition that developed an awareness of the pharaonic heritage and perhaps a sense of Egyptian identity that was not rooted in Islam, but that could provide a point of unity between Muslim and Christian Egyptians (van Doorn-Harder 2017, pp. 9–13; Iskander 2012, pp. 63–64). Additionally, Iqladiyus Labib articulated the strength of Coptic identity affirming it as a language of science, research, honor and glory that would keep the Egyptians from being ‘demons’ without a homeland or religion (Miyokawa 2017, pp. 153–54). Later movements also promoted the language, including the radical Coptic Nation, which was formed in response to the increasingly aggressive Muslim Brotherhood (Hassan 2003, p. 60). Others associated with the Church of St. Anthony in Cairo emerged with strong spiritual influence in the 1940s, with leaders stating that, ‘revitalization of the church depended on their digging for their spiritual roots, on looking backward and inward toward their own heritage,’ and they unearthed ancient hymns and chants, and rediscovered the stories of Egypt’s holy men and martyrs, even in library basements as far away as Oxford (Hassan 2003, pp. 76–77). The Sunday School Movement also stimulated broader secular interest with the establishment of The Coptic Institute in Cairo, aimed at the academic study of Coptic language and literature, church dogma and canon law, as well as art, archaeology and history (Hassan 2003, p. 88).

The Fathers of the Church taught the Orthodox Churches how to read and understand the scriptures, and though many devout Orthodox shy from independent reading and interpretation of the Scriptures, guided by Fathers accessed through the study of ancient language, spiritual revival and a life of discipleship is strongly associated with personal and corporate reading of the Scriptures, and early Christian texts—continuously appropriating past writings to enlighten the current age (Casiday 2008).

4.5. Upholding Martyrdom, Even in the Present Day

To lose one's life for the sake of belief in Christ remains one of the most honored acts in Orthodoxy and across diverse Christian expressions. In recent years, martyrdom has been a feature of the spiritual life of Christians in Egypt and Ethiopia, perhaps most memorably in Libya, where ISIS forces executed young Egyptians and Ethiopians recorded in infamous videos. Both churches have honored these dead as martyrs and saints. It perhaps shows the significance of martyrdom in these traditions most clearly that it seems likely that one of the Ethiopians was a Muslim who chose to die with his Christian compatriots—act of spiritual solidarity that means that he is honored along with those professing Christian faith (Kibriye 2019). Nevertheless, the Coptic Church has had persecution and martyrdom as one of its defining elements from its inception, through the great persecution of Diocletian which started in 284 CE. Subject to dhimmi status under Islamic rule following the Arab invasions in the seventh century and then under Ottoman rule and then facing the challenge of increasingly fundamentalist Islamic outlooks throughout the twentieth century, more recently hundreds of Copts have been martyred since the 'Arab Spring' of 2011 (Tawfik 2017). What marks this out as a feature of discipleship is the accounts that have shown individual willingness to die for their faith, and how communities have prayed for those who persecute them (Tawfik 2017).

5. Conclusions

Discipleship proves somewhat difficult to define precisely, but through observing changes associated with spiritual revival this study has identified strong trends in Orthodox Christian Egyptian, Ethiopian and Indian Orthodox Churches that evince approaches to discipleship that have allowed their communities to thrive in the modern world. With centuries of divergence between Evangelical and Oriental Orthodox communities we would expect strong differences in behavior that are understood to reflect inner transformation and motivation. The Sunday School movements reflect primarily a commitment to teaching and study that is shared across the traditions, with the primary difference being that perhaps with Evangelical churches such movements may exist outside any particular church jurisdiction. A more detailed examination of the teaching in Orthodox Sunday School movements compared with that found in Evangelical expressions would be revealing of any strong connection or divergence. Connection with the monastic life is probably unique to the Oriental traditions and other Orthodox expressions, although perhaps communities such as the L'Abri Fellowship and some others reflect a similar attraction to teaching communities within the broad Evangelical tradition. It would be a worthwhile study to examine what connections might exist between traditional monastic communities as centers of discipleship and such fellowships, or perhaps with the teaching and training of Evangelical organizations such as The Navigators, Agape, etc. Participation in the mysteries on the surface seems peculiar to the Orthodox, but what is reflected in, for instance, the deep understanding of the forgiveness of sins entailed in taking the Eucharist would also be reflected in Evangelical discipleship. Further research exploring the overlap between the convictions lying behind partaking of the mysteries and some Evangelical practice would be illuminating. 'Historical amnesia' may be a characteristic of some Evangelicals and perhaps the roots of Protestant Christianity in breaking with the past have contributed to this, and it would be valuable to explore how narratives of history have contributed to a sense of divergence between expressions, and how these narratives might be adjusted in Orthodox and Evangelical expressions to provide a greater sense of the worldwide movement of God in the Church. Martyrdom has sadly become a feature of the life of many Christians around the world, but again worthy of further investigation would be the underlying convictions that motivate Christians of all expressions to face death for their faith.

The overlap between Orthodox and similar Evangelical practice may be somewhat obscured from Western eyes as they are so strongly associated with the contextual development of Churches in diverse, non-western cultures where they have faced very different

challenges from those that have produced contemporary Evangelical movements, but this perhaps exposes the error of reading too much into the outward behavior rather than the underlying motivations. Exploring these underlying motivations may prove difficult and since ethnographies may not provide a wide enough range of data to draw broad conclusions, there is a significant need for methodological developments to further this research.

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