

The Transmission of a Religious Heritage to Younger Members of Small Ethnic Communities in a Pluralist Society: The Perceptions of Young Australian Copts

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Contemporary Australia has clearly become a multi-faith and multi-cultural society. Even within the mainstream Christian religions there are many new arrivals whose countries of origin are non Euro-centric, and they have brought with them a wide variety of cultural practices that are different from the Anglo-Saxon/Celtic culture that has dominated Christian practice in this country. Consequently, the 'face' of Australian Christians has been slowly changing. In particular, young Australians have been exposed to a wide range of cultural and religious practices through both community interaction and a highly influential media. Within this framework, the Copts are a small growing ethnic community who are focused on handing on their cultural and religious heritage to their younger members. This paper will explore the transmission of the Coptic religious heritage, and discuss what some school-going Copts say about the various influences on their religiosity and spirituality.

Aspects of Religion and Spirituality in Contemporary Australian Society

The dominant culture in Australia today is Eurocentric and it has been largely influenced by an Anglo-Celtic and Anglo-Saxon heritage:

With the exception of a small but significant Lutheran population of Germanic descent, Australian society in 1901 was predominantly Anglo-Celtic, with 40% of the population being Church of England, 23% Catholic, and 34% other Christian and about 1% professing non-Christian religions (cited in J. Healey, 2004:1).

Certainly, for many of these early settlers, their spirituality was closely linked to their religious culture and practice which derived from this Anglo-Celtic/Saxon Christianity since religions are a distinct part of Australian culture (Habel, 1992:13). Things began to change in the seventies when Australia developed policies on multiculturalism and more migrants began to arrive from a variety of non-Eurocentric Christian backgrounds. One outcome was that the 'Christian' face of Australia began to be transformed. Another outcome was that a broader tolerance of different cultures was promoted (Habel, 1992:13).

However, there have been further influences that have impacted on Australian religious institutions and religious practices through the latter part of the twentieth century. Bouma (1999) suggested that there had been an 'assumption by many that by the end of the 20th century the force of religion would have dissipated through the unstoppable advances of secularisation (Bouma, 1999:9) and research into contemporary religious affiliation and practice would appear to support this. For instance, while the 2001 Census (cited in J. Healey, 2004:2) showed that 67.3% of the population still indicated that they were Christians, the religious practices of many Christians have changed (Hughes, 2002; Bellamy, Black, Castle, Hughes & Kaldor, 2002) so that most church congregations have experienced dwindling numbers (Bellamy et al, 2002:5).

In particular, the number of young people who attend mainstream Christian churches have greatly declined (National Church Life Survey, 2001) but many young people regard themselves as spiritual people and they are searching along alternative paths to find answers to their Big questions (Eckersley, 1997; Tacey, 2003; Mackay, 2000). For instance, Richard Eckersley's (1997) research into young Australian's perceptions of the future found that:

their dreams for Australia were of a society that placed less emphasis on the individual, competition, material wealth and enjoying 'the good life', and more on community and family, cooperation and the environment. Some expressed their wishes in terms of a greater recognition of the 'natural', 'human' or 'spiritual' aspects of life' (Eckersley, 1997:247).

Tacey (2003) teaches courses in spirituality at an Australian university and discusses the spirituality of his students as a search for the sacred in the everyday. He says:

Many young people are finding themselves drawn to 'ecospirituality' ... the spirituality of nature...such encounters change lives and expose young people to the mystery and presence of the sacred within themselves, even as they are moved by the sacred in nature (Tacey, 2003:181).

Yet again, Hugh Mackay (2000) also speaks about young people and the search for a new framework to help them make sense of life in an uncertain world:

For some the new framework is spiritual. For others, it is based on the desire to reconnect with 'the herd', so that individuals obtain a stronger sense of identity and of emotional security from re-creating communal connections that simulate the 'village life' to which so many Australians aspire (Mackay, 2000:5).

The search for meaning amongst many in contemporary society was reflected in an earlier report from the Christian Research Association in Australia which showed that people identified with a particular Christian denomination but did not

attend church services (Hughes, Thompson, Pryor & Bouma, 1995:9-10). It concluded that while people still had a belief in God and in aspects of Christian teaching, they had tended to individualize their belief and practice:

Through the 1980s and increasingly in the 1990s Australians are expressing their spirituality and meeting needs for meaning through a wide range of organizational affiliations, practices as diverse as astrology, new age crystal wearing, various forms of meditation and involvement in traditional religious organizations (Hughes et al., 1995:10).

The findings of a project *Young People and the Future: Consultation (Australian Episcopal Conference, 1998)*, conducted by the Australian Bishops' Committee for Justice, Development and Peace, also identified a level of scepticism and distrust amongst young people towards the institutional Church. Indeed, de Souza (1999, 2001) found that certain aspects of institutional churches created a stumbling block for the nurturing of young people's faith and spirituality because, in general, many shared a perception that the hierarchical structures were filled with clergy who had little understanding of the world of youth, or of their needs and their problems. There was clearly a perception shared by many students of a 'them' and 'us' relationship between the clergy and the rest of the faith community (de Souza, 2001:83).

Certainly, it would appear that the relationship of many young people with religious organizations has been affected by the pluralist dimension of today's society, and by the many different beliefs and practices to which they are exposed through the media. Such influences are a concern for smaller Orthodox Christian communities in Australia who are seeking ways whereby they can transmit their religious and cultural heritage to their young people. A particular issue is how they can motivate their young people to embrace orthodoxy and carry it into their adult lives. In the secular environment of modern Australia, where religious groups often attract unfavourable publicity, and many young people remain distrustful of traditional institutions, this is indeed a challenge. One Orthodox Christian group that has developed a distinct religious identity in Australia is the Coptic community.

Coptic Orthodox Church

There are estimated to be approximately at least six million Copts living in Egypt as well as over a million in a long-standing Diaspora (Wakin, 2000:23). The Copts (the name is derived from the ancient term for the indigenous inhabitants of Egypt) claim St Mark the evangelist, the first Bishop of Alexandria, as their patron (Malaty, 1987:11). The early history of the Coptic Church is marked by a number of important and influential figures who had a lasting impact on Christian thought and practice. Among this group can be included Sts Athanasius, Anthony of the Desert and Cyril of Alexandria. The Copts of Egypt were leading figures in defining orthodox Christian belief against the heterodox teachings of both Arius and Nestorius and this sense of being defenders of Orthodox belief remains an

important feature of Coptic Orthodox religious identity. The first major split in the Christian Church occurred at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD when the Copts, and others, refused to accept its Christological definitions (Prokurat et al, 1996:22).

The Research Study

Given the secular and pluralistic context of Australian society, and the relationship many young Australians have with mainstream religious traditions, as discussed earlier, this research study was interested to investigate the perceptions of the younger members of a small ethnic community in Australia of their religious heritage. Therefore, this research project focused specifically on the Melbourne Coptic community where the first Australian Coptic bishop was appointed in the late nineties. Arguably, such an appointment has had a significant impact on the further development of the identity and structure of the Coptic community in Australia, and particularly in Melbourne. In addition, the first Coptic school was established in Melbourne in 1991. Currently there is a second school in Melbourne and three in Sydney. The establishment of the schools has been an important step in maintaining the special and unique identity of the Coptic Orthodox community and one way of avoiding the assimilation that has threatened other Christian groups, especially those that were not part of the Catholic or Protestant mainstream. Therefore, this research study sought to explore young Copts' perceptions of their own religiosity and spirituality and their links to their tradition.

Since the participants in the project were students who attended the two Coptic schools in Melbourne the findings of this study will be pertinent to this particular group. In addition, it is acknowledged that there could be a possibility of a certain bias in the students' responses since their involvement with the school may have stemmed from the close links their families had with the religious community. Further, by containing the study within these two schools, the number of participants was small, a total of 109 students. However, it needs to be noted that the participants did comprise the total number of Years Six, Nine and Eleven students who were enrolled at the two schools, and who were in attendance on the day that the questionnaire was administered. Finally, despite the questionnaires offering participants certain anonymity, the fact that they were asked to complete the questionnaires during class time may have led to some participants providing what they saw as 'correct' responses.

The term 'religiosity' is defined in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* (1964, 1976, 1982: 1015) as 'being religious' and was used in this context to refer to the behaviour and attitude associated with a level of commitment to the beliefs and practices of a faith tradition. 'Spirituality' referred to a deep sense of connectedness to the human and non-human world that is evident in the relationship an individual has with self, other, the world, and the mystery of a Divine Presence, a Transcendent Other (Harris & Moran, 1998:46). Hay & Nye (1998) have also identified this relational aspect:

Children's awareness of being in an 'I-Others', I-Self, I-World' and I-God' relationship was indicated from what they said and there was a special sense of this relationship adding value to their ordinary or everyday perspective... In this 'relational consciousness' seems to lie the rudimentary core of children's spirituality, out of which can arise meaningful aesthetic experience, religious experience, personal and traditional responses to mystery and being, and mystical and moral insight (Hay & Nye, 1998:114).

A questionnaire was sent to the two schools and was administered by their staff. It included mostly closed items which required the students to choose a response such as 'sometimes...often...never'. This was done in consideration of the fact that, for some of the younger students, language may have been a barrier to their capacity to answer open ended items. There were a few items which invited open-ended responses for the students but few availed themselves of this opportunity.

The design of the questionnaire was informed by the literature (for instance, Harris & Moran, 1998; Hay and Nye, 1998) and the findings of a previous research project which investigated the perceptions of middle school students in Catholic schools of their religiosity and spirituality (Engebretson, de Souza & Salpietro, 2001). From this, a relational dimension of spirituality was identified which was relationship to self, to others, to the world and to God or a Divine presence.

The questionnaire was divided into two sections. The first focused on the background of the participant in relation to gender, family, and cultural and religious practices. The second drew on the relational dimension of spirituality that had been identified from the literature, and items were constructed that focused on the following four aspects:

- Mystery of the existence of God or a Supreme Being – the focus was on a sense of a transcendent dimension in life, a sense that each person has a reason for being, prayer.
- Inner lives and sense of self – items related to an awareness of one's own identity, the need for quiet, reflective times, and the act of creating as an expression of the inner spirit.
- Others and the world – items included aspects of values and justice, relationships and influences.
- Influence of a religious tradition on spirituality – items related to the role of family and individual religious practice, links to Church, priests and other members of the hierarchy.

Thus, the items in the second section of the questionnaire were grouped according to these four categories. The overall findings of the two sections of the questionnaire are presented below.

Responses Part 1: Background of the students

On the day that the questionnaires were administered, there were 109 students in attendance in the three targeted areas: Years Six, Nine and Eleven. There was a fairly even spread in respect to gender (50 males to 59 females) but the numbers declined from younger to older students so that there were 48 students in the 11-13 age group, 32 students between 15 and 16 years and 23 students between 16 and 17 years. Six students did not give their age. Nearly two thirds of the students (62) were born in Australia and approximately one third (39) were born in Egypt. However, 90 students indicated their mothers and 98 indicated their fathers were born in Egypt. This is pertinent to later observations related to students' cultural and ethnic identity.

Religious practice

There were several items in the questionnaire that related to religious and cultural practices such as, the display of religious icons, praying by oneself and with one's family, reading the Bible by oneself or with one's family, and finally attendance at Divine Liturgy by oneself or with one's family. Table 1 shows the frequencies for these items.

Table 1: Aspects of individual and family religious and cultural practice

	Frequency	%
Religious icons on display in the home	106	92%
Praying daily on one's own	79	73%
Praying daily with one's family	16	15%
Daily reading of the Bible on one's own	34	31%
Daily reading of the Bible with one's family	11	10%
Weekly reading of the Bible on one's own	37	34%
Weekly reading of the Bible with one's family	18	17%
Weekly attendance at Divine Liturgy with one's family	89	82%

The responses in the area of religious and cultural practices were very positive and, on the one hand, suggested that most students had experienced quite strong family religious influences in relation to the display of religious icons in the home and to attendance at Divine Liturgy (92% and 82% respectively). On the other hand, there was quite a significant difference between the experience of individual prayer and family prayer (73% and 15% respectively). A few students responded that daily Bible reading was more an individual activity than a family activity with the figure rising slightly when students were asked about weekly Bible readings (34% individually and 17% with family).

These findings raise some pertinent points in relation to young Copts as a group different from youth in mainstream religious traditions. While the responses related to various family religious practices were in the minority, a significant

majority of the research sample attended Divine Liturgy regularly with their families. A very different finding emerged from the National Church Life Survey conducted in 2001 which confirmed that there was a clear trend among young Christians from mainstream traditions towards less-traditional worship (NCLS, 2001).

It was discovered in a follow-up interview with the Coptic Bishop (Melbourne, 15 April, 2002) that approximately 200 Copts in their early twenties regularly attend youth meetings each Sunday to hear their Bishop speak to them on spiritual and other matters. This was one way in which the faith community was attempting to maintain links with young Coptic adults.

Following the above, there were two items that sought information regarding the importance of religion and the importance of being a member of the Coptic Orthodox Church. In general, gender and age appeared to have little effect on the very positive responses about the importance of religion. With reference to the importance of being a member of the Coptic Orthodox Church, there was an overwhelmingly positive response from male students of all age groups (100%). However, there was a very slight difference in the responses from female students with 27 out of 30 students (90%) in the 11-13 age group, 12 out of 16 students (75%) in the 14-15 age group and 12 out of 13 students (92%) in the 16-17 age group responded positively. While the small number of students in the sample made this result inconclusive, it is a factor that may yield useful results if researched further. For instance, whether the relatively equal status of women in other spheres of Australian society have inspired any aspirations amongst young Coptic women in a male dominated religious tradition.

Responses Part 2: The relational dimension of spirituality

The following section will present some of the findings that related to the four relational aspects of spirituality: to God or a Divine Presence, to family and to the religious tradition.

Mystery of the existence of God, responding to beauty and social justice

The first three items focused on the belief in God, God's care and action in the world:

- I believe in God;
- I believe that God takes care of the world;
- I believe that God is active in the world.

There was one male student in the 16-17 age group and one female student in the 11-13 age group both of whom provided a negative response regarding their respective beliefs in God. All others responded positively. However, slight differences came to light in relation to different aspects of belief where three male students and one female were undecided about whether God cared for the world or

actively interacted with the world. In general, then, it would seem that most of the students who participated in this study had a belief in God or a Supreme Being.

Following on from this, students responded to items that asked about their relationship with God:

- I like sharing all things with God.

Thirty-nine male students and 51 female students were positive about sharing with God the things that had happened to them while 9 male and 6 female students remained undecided about this. Only 2 male students and 1 female student responded negatively. From these results it would seem that more female students were inclined to turn to God in the course of their daily lives.

The next set of responses provided some indication of students' perceptions of the mystery and wonder of life. Three items called for perceptions of 'who am I?' and 'where am I going?', a response to the beauty of nature and the world, and a wonder about an afterlife.

Again, there were 40 male students and 47 female students who agreed that they reflected on the Big questions: 'Who am I?' and 'Where am I going?' Three male students and 2 female students indicated that they did not spend time pondering these questions. Similarly, 47 male and 50 female students did wonder about an afterlife, while 2 male and 3 female students indicated that they were not interested (Table 2).

Table 2: Age * Times I wonder who I am/where I am going * Gender Crosstabulation

Gender		Times I wonder who I am/where I am going					Total
		SD	D	U	A	SA	
Male	Age 11-13		1	2	9	6	18
	14-15	1	1	3	4	7	16
	16-17			1	2	7	10
	Missing						6
	Total	1	2	7	19	21	50
Female	Age 11-13		2	4	17	7	30
	14-15			5	5	6	16
	16-17			1	4	8	13
	Total		2	10	26	21	59

Key:

- SD – Strongly Disagree
- D – Disagree
- U – Undecided
- A – Agree
- SA – Strongly Agree

With the next item which asked about responses to beauty, 38 male and 49 female students expressed feelings of wonder at the world, while 3 male and 5 female students provided negative responses (Table 3). It is not clear, however, whether students saw a connection between natural beauty and a Divine Presence, and a further exploration of this aspect could be illuminating.

Table 3: Age * Beauty on nature/world fills me with wonder * Gender Crosstabulation

Gender		Age *Beauty on nature/world fills me with wonder *Gender Crosstabulation					Total
		SD	D	U	A	SA	
Male	Age 11-13	1		2	9	6	18
	14-15		1	3	5	7	16
	16-17			3	4	3	10
	Missing						6
	Total	1	2	9	21	17	50
Female	Age 11-13			1	13	16	30
	14-15	2	2	3	5	4	16
	16-17		1	1	6	5	13
	Total	2	3	5	24	25	59

Key:

- SD – Strongly Disagree
- D – Disagree
- U – Undecided
- A – Agree
- SA – Strongly Agree

The importance of family and the religious tradition

Given the very positive responses indicating the influences of the family and the religious tradition on the students that came through the first part of the questionnaire, one aspect from the second part of the questionnaire is presented here: the perceptions of students of varying influences on their spirituality.

To begin with items that focused on the students' relationship to the world and other, people included statements that were indicative of students' values and their sense of social justice. A particular feature that came to light here was the perceptions of the different influences on the students' understanding of right and wrong. Specifically, 95% indicated the family as the biggest influence, 81% indicated their priest, 78% indicated their peers, 77% indicated their religious teachings, 76% indicated their teacher and 72% indicated television/media (Table 4).

Table 4: Influences on my understanding of right and wrong

Influences	Yes		No	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
Family	104	95%	5	5%
Priest	88	81%	21	19%
Peers	85	78%	24	22%
Religious teachings	84	77%	25	23%
Teacher	83	76%	26	24%
TV/Media	79	72.5%	30	27.5%

Consequently, for these students their families and their religious communities played a very important role in their lives. This conclusion was further supported by the findings that showed students' perceptions of the different influences on their thoughts and actions (Table 5).

Table 5: Influences on my thoughts and actions

	Frequencies and percentages									
	Parents		Friends		TV/Media		Confession Father		Bishop	
SA	47	43%	33	30%	20	18%	57	52%	44	41%
A	49	45%	39	36%	39	36%	33	30%	28	26%
U	10	9%	23	21%	24	22%	12	11%	21	19%
D			9	8%	15	14%	5	5%	7	6%
SD	3	3%	4	4%	11	10%	1	1%	8	7%
Missing			1	1%			1	1%	1	1%
Total	109	100%	109	100%	109	100%	109	100%	109	100%

In general, 96 (88%) students were positive about the influence their parents had on their thoughts and actions, 90 (82%) students responded that their Confession Father¹ influenced their thoughts and actions, 72 (66%) students agreed that their friends were influential and another 66% identified their Bishop. Fifty-nine (54%) students mentioned that they were influenced by TV/media. A small minority disagreed that their parents (3%) or their Father Confession (6%) had been influential while 13 students (12%) and 15 students (13%) were negative about the influence their friends and Bishop had on their thoughts and actions. Interestingly, the largest negative response (24%) which related to the influence of the TV/media is a distinguishing feature that sets this group of young Australians apart from others in their age group. Other research studies do indicate that most young people would agree that the TV and other media sources do impact on their lives (for instance, de Souza, 1999). Thus, these responses are a clear indication that the students' families and their religious links were strong factors in providing frameworks to nurture their religious identity and their moral values.

Further confirmation was provided from the responses that explored students' perceptions of the people who they may have turned to in times of need

or when they wanted to share some of their thoughts with someone (Table 6). Given the earlier indication that students had a positive relationship with their Confession Father, it was not surprising that 82 (76%) students indicated their Confession Father as the person with whom they were able to share thoughts and problems. However, while fewer students had been positive about the influences their peers had on their moral values and their thoughts and actions, 81 (74%) indicated that their friends as people with whom they were able to share their thoughts and problems. Other responses indicated parents (75 students – 69%), older relatives (61 students – 56%), and the Bishop (51 students – 47%). There were some students who were undecided about the people with whom they would share their thoughts and actions, and then there were those who provided negative responses. In descending order these were 27 (25%) in relation to older relatives, 25 (23%) to the Bishop, 20 (18%) to parents, 12 (11%) to their Confession Father, and 10 (9%) to their friends.

Table 6: Able to share thoughts and problems with ...

	Frequencies and percentages									
	Parents		Friends		Older relatives		Confession Father		Bishop	
SA	35	2%	47	43%	29	27%	54	50%	29	27%
A	40	7%	34	31%	32	29%	28	26%	22	20%
U	14	3%	18	17%	21	19%	14	13%	33	30%
D	11	0%	5	5%	14	13%	8	7%	10	9%
SD	9	%	5	4%	13	12%	4	4%	15	14%
Total	109	12%	109	100%	109	100%	109	100%	109	100%

The responses to yet another item continued the trend of strong positive family links for a large majority of students. Of the 109 students, 92% perceived that their family's love and support had helped to shape them into the people they were. Additionally, there were 90 students (82%) who responded positively about the importance to be accepted by their classmates. Certainly, a large majority of students appeared to have strong links to their peers so that they valued them and felt the need to be valued in turn (Table 7).

Table 7: Family love/support have shaped me

	Frequency	%
SA	74	68%
A	27	24%
U	3	3%

Influences of the religious tradition on spirituality

The final section of the questionnaire focused particularly on the perceived links between the religious tradition and the spirituality of the students. Thus, the first item aimed to discover if the religious tradition did offer students some answers to their Big questions. The earlier findings that indicated strong ties and influences between the students and their religious tradition were, once again, supported by the responses to this item. Accordingly, the results were overwhelmingly positive with 99 students (91%) agreeing or strongly agreeing that their religious tradition helped them to find answers to questions about the meaning of life (Table 8).

Table 8: Religion helps me answer questions about the meaning of life

	Frequency	%
SA	51	47%
A	48	44%
U	7	6%
D	1	1%
SD	1	1%
Missing	1	1%
Total	109	100%

The responses to the next two items also followed the pattern indicated earlier showing the positive influence of the religious tradition. In the first case 87 students (79%) agreed that they tried to base their life on the teachings of their religion. There were 17 students (16%) who were undecided but only 2 students (2%) disagreed (Table 9).

Table 9: I try to base my life on the teachings of my religion

	Frequency	%
SA	44	40%
A	43	39%
U	17	16%
D	1	1%
SD	1	1%
Missing	3	3%
Total	109	100%

In the second case, the results were similar. Of the 109 students, 94 (44%) agreed or strongly agreed that their church or their attendance at worship helped

them spiritually and while 9 (8%) were undecided only 3 (3%) disagreed (Table 10).

Table 10: My spirituality is helped when I go to church/worship

	Frequency	%
SA	48	44%
A	46	42%
U	9	8%
D	1	1%
SD	2	2%
Missing	3	3%
Total	109	100%

The final item in this section related to the impact the school community may have had on the spirituality of the students (Table 11). In this instance, while the responses were still positive, they did not indicate the same levels of influence as that of the family and the religious tradition. There were 79 students (72%) who were positive that their school community had helped their spiritual development with 15 students (14%) remaining undecided and 12 students (11%) who responded negatively.

Table 11: My school community has helped my spirituality

	Frequency	%
SA	37	34%
A	42	38%
U	15	14%
D	6	5.5%
SD	6	5.5%
Missing	3	3%
Total	109	100%

Summary of Findings

In general, the students responded positively to items that indicated strong bonds between themselves, their families and their religious tradition. Coptic resilience can be contrasted with other Eastern Christian groups whose identity is severely challenged both in the Middle East and in the lands that they have emigrated (Clark, 2000: 407). The role of the Confession Father was obviously an important one and, it appeared that all students had regular contact with their Confession Fathers. This was a distinguishing feature in the relationship young Copts have with their priests when compared to young people in mainstream

Christian traditions (see earlier discussion). It should be acknowledged, here, that the priest in the Coptic tradition has a complex role that further ties him to his community. The priest can, for example, act as a conduit between the community and various government agencies or assisting new migrant with a host of practical problems. Even allowing for a certain positive bias in the responses of students interviewed within a Coptic Orthodox school setting, the findings suggest that there was little to distinguish between the religious and cultural identities of these young Copts, that is, their religious identity appeared to be closely aligned to the cultural identity that had been formed in their homeland, Egypt.

One of the factors that may have led to the development of the close ties that appeared to have been established within the family and religious community could be their size. Amidst the wide diversity that is an essential feature of modern Australian society, there is, possibly, strong motivation for members of small communities to gather together, share their stories and learn from each others' experiences thereby drawing strength from one another. Such interaction has the potential to promote not only the cultural identity of individuals, but also, their emotional and spiritual wellbeing.

Another factor which may be important in explaining the high rate of religious cohesion shown amongst here is the historical experience of Copts. The Copts have always placed great emphasis on the importance of retaining their cultural identity as expressed in their religious traditions and beliefs (Watson, 2000). This is, in part, a consequence of their history of persecution and the tenacity with which they have had to defend their beliefs and practices. The Coptic Orthodox calendar, for example, begins with the day in 284CE that Diocletian was elected Emperor. This heralded a fierce persecution of the Church of Alexandria and for this reason the calendar is called the Year of Martyrs. The calendar is one constant reminder of what is involved in expressing Coptic identity.

Further, the fact that over 90% of both parents were born in Egypt is also significant since their identity would be strongly linked to the cultural and religious identity of their homeland. In addition, these older Copts would know well the history of persecution that has afflicted their people for centuries, and they themselves may have had personal experiences of people suffering for their religious beliefs. It is possible that these memories could act as a spur to strengthen their resolve to maintain their particular religious heritage in the face of a secular, pluralistic Australian society. It is quite possible that a longitudinal study involving second and third generation Copts would yield rather different results.

A particularly interesting result was the role of the Bishop within the community. Clearly, many of the students had experienced personal communications with the Bishop and looked to him for guidance and direction. Arguably, such accessibility to their community's spiritual leader may be an unusual experience for most young people from other religious groups. Thus, having a bishop or spiritual leader who makes him/herself accessible to young

people and who provides them with opportunities for dialogue may be a most effective strategy in the nurturing of the young within a religious community. While in general, gender and age did not appear to have a significant impact on the responses, questions may arise with second-generation Coptic women. For instance, as they experience the fairly liberated role of women in the wider society, will their perceptions and expectations of their own roles within a male dominated Church change?

Finally, the different attitudes these Coptic students had to television/media compared to their peers in the wider society also served to make them a distinctive group. It raises the question about whether this could put them out of step and provide a gap in their communications with their peers in wider society. This question is pertinent when children from the same age range and from a variety of religious and cultural backgrounds who attended Catholic schools indicated that the media had a significant influence on their attitudes and behaviour (Engebretson *et al*, 2001). Indeed, the findings of this study highlight an important challenge for Australian Copts which is the need to explore ways whereby they can retain their cultural and religious identity while, at the same time, encourage the integration of their community into mainstream Australian society.

In general, the results of this study were most favourable, indicating that the students have positive links with and experiences of their religious and cultural community. However, the small number of participants and, indeed, their attendance at the two Coptic schools which implies a close connection to the community means that no generalizations can be drawn from the data presented here. Instead, this study raises some interesting points related to the nature of small ethnic groups that exist in a contemporary pluralist society, and the strategies that such groups might implement to hand on their cultural heritage and to nurture the spirituality of their youth. These are factors that could be worthy of further investigation.

Endnote

¹. The priest or Confession Father is closely connected to the family both in their religious practice and also in helping new arrivals to settle and become familiar with social mores.

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