

*Letters*



**ORTHODOXY**  
*and*  
**The**  
**Coptic**  
**Orthodox**  
**Church**



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*FR. Tadros Y. Malaty*

# ORTHODOXY AND THE COPTIC ORTHODOX CHURCH

Dear in Christ

I have received your letter dated 22nd of August 2000, and deeply I thank you for sending it, as I felt that you have a deep theological knowledge about the concept of the Church of Christ, and sincerely you are seeking for enjoining the real church life. I feel you are very zeal to Orthodoxy, and you hope every one to have the real experience for it.

You spoke about some positive sides in the Coptic Orthodox Church, especially in the first five centuries. But as you said you have found negative sides that make you ask in doubt about the orthodoxy of the Coptic Church. It is a good chance for me to answer your questions, not only to reveal the real richness and Orthodoxy of our Coptic Church, but also to encourage every man to practice the real Orthodoxy in its depth.

Your letter encourages me to have teamwork together in the following aspects:

1. Satisfying our brethren in the land of immigration in answering the questions concerning church life and theology.
2. Publishing our church theology among the new generation, especially the children and youth.
3. Witnessing our church theology among the English tongue non-believers. Later on, this can be translated to other languages.
4. Translating some theologian books and bibliographies of the great Coptic thinkers and theologians who appeared after the Council of Chalcedon.

## TOPICS UNDER DISCUSSION

We can summarize the points, which you brought in your letter for the glory of the Lord and the edification of the Church in the following topics:

- ❖ **Christology and The Ecumenical Church.**
- ❖ **Christology According To the Coptic Church.**
- ❖ **The Leadership of the Church Of Alexandria; *Past, Present & Future.***
- ❖ **The Coptic Orthodox Church And The Unity With Other Orthodox Churches**
- ❖ **Is The Coptic Church Orthodox?**
- ❖ **What Are Our Roles In Shaping The Future Of The Coptic Church?**

### **Christology and the Ecumenical Church**

History witnesses that the one nature-two natures of Jesus Christ dispute caused a tremendous schism in the whole church from the fifth century till the twentieth century. Many serious and sincere theologians of the two orthodox families, and even in the Catholic Church feel sorrow for this schism.

Here we would like to refer to many oriental orthodox books and essays that clarify our Christology based on Cyrillian and traditional theme. We thankfully refer to some theologians from the Eastern Orthodox Churches who defended our terminology such as Methodios Fouyas, Archbishop of Theateira and Great Britain in his publications and Fr. Romanides in our mutual dialogue. Here we give some examples of contemporary writings from our side:

- a. V. C. Samuel: the council of Chalcedon re-examined, Madras, 1977.
- b. Fr. Tadros Malaty, The Terms Physis & Hypostasis in the Early Church, September 1987.
- c. The Coptic Orthodox Church as a Church of Erudition & Theology, 1986.
- d. Christology according to the Non- Chalcedonian churches, 1986.
- e. H.H. Pope Shenouda III, The Nature of Christ.

## **Christology according to the Coptic Church**

St. Cyril used, after St. Athanasius, the term: “one incarnate nature of God the Logos”, as a tool to conserve the church’s faith in the Person of Jesus Christ, especially against Nestorianism.

1. St. Cyril’s term “mia-physis” differs from Eutyche’s one nature “mono-physis”. St. Cyril affirms the united nature “out of two natures” (St. Cyril’s Homilies 45:19, 22, 28) without confusion, while Eutyche believed in the absorption of Christ’s manhood which had been totally lost.
2. The term “mia-physis” was used recently by the Coptic Church during the meetings between the two Orthodox families. These meetings concluded the mutual understanding of the Christological theology despite of the difference in the theological terms used. The two families condemn and anathematize Nestorianism, Apollinarianism and Eutychianism.
3. It was obvious that the 15 centuries of isolation between the churches have negatively impacted the understanding of each of the Orthodox families towards the other. I am sure that both families realized the impact of isolation and the future will bring the two families closer to each other.
4. In our books and dialogues, we do not ignore that this problem surfaced through those who misunderstood the two theological schools of Alexandria and Antioch. I clarified this point in details in my several publications in this area.

It is worthy to note that in every dialogue from the early centuries till now, we find extremists in both sides who assume insincerity in the other side.

## **The Leadership of the Church of Alexandria; *Past, Present & Future***

### ***A) The Past***

#### ***i) The School of Alexandria:***

St. Jerome records that St. Mark himself founded the Christian School of Alexandria<sup>1</sup>. Dom. D. Rees states, “The most renowned intellectual institution in the early Christian world was undoubtedly the Catechetical School (*Didascaleion*) of Alexandria<sup>2</sup>.” In a true ecumenical spirit, the School of Alexandria attracted students from other nations, many of them became leaders and bishops in their churches.

#### ***ii) The Ecumenical Councils:***

Scholars, who study the first Ecumenical Councils, get to know the Alexandrian theologians as leaders and pioneers of the Christian faith and thought on an ecumenical level. Their prominence was not based on any political power, because Alexandria was under the Roman Empire and subsequently was ruled by the Byzantines, until the Arab conquest of Egypt. Their strength was based on their deep spiritual, pious, theological and biblical thought and studies<sup>3</sup>.

#### ***iii) Prominent Coptic Figures over the History:***

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<sup>1</sup> *De Viris Illustrations* 36.

<sup>2</sup> *Nelson: Anew Catholic Commentary on the Holy Scripture*, 1969, p15.

<sup>3</sup> *For more details see Fr. T: Malaty: Introduction to the Coptic Orthodox Church, chapter 2.*

Beside the great theologians in the Early School of Alexandria we have many great theologians after the council of Chalcedon and even after the Arab Conquest

***The theology of the Coptic Church after the fifth century till now passed in three stages:***

**1. Before the Arab Conquest:** In the most of this era the Coptic Church was wounded by the hands of her brothers, as the Eastern Roman empire was involved in persecuting her to accept tome of Leo. Scholars such as J. Meyendorff declare that the Chalcedonian Church had no great theologians to face those of the non-Chalcedonian churches. SS. Severus of Antioch, Timothy I the Alexandrian Pope and the Philoxinus of Mobbag presented a very strong theology in explaining the church Christology.

**2. After the Arab Conquest:** As the Coptic Church faced Islam there was no room to be involved in the Greek theological terms, but to witness to her faith in Arabic terms, especially the following topics: The Holy Trinity, the incarnation of the Logos, the inspiration, prophecy, monogamy etc. The Copts are the largest Church in the Middle East that can acknowledge the religious mentality of the Moslems. In a conference held by MECC in Cypress concerning the Holy Trinity, the Catholic scholar and priest Dr. Samir Khalil who is interested in the Christian Arabic Literature said that ***almost half of the Arabic Christian manuscripts in the museums of the world are the Copt's***. He also said that even many of the other manuscripts in fact are affected by that which did the Cops wrote. He published some of these manuscripts.

The work of those Coptic theologians is very important to be studied today for the increasing movement of Islam. These manuscripts can help the world to gain the Moslems through their own religious mentality more than the Greek terminology.

Here we mention some of the great Coptic thinkers in this era such as Severus Ebn El-Mokafaa, Boulous El-Boushi and Ebn Makeen, etc.

**3. After the entrance of the Western missionaries:** Mohamed Ali Pasha opened the door to the missionaries to enter Egypt. And for political causes he made pressures on some Coptic families to accept Catholicism.

By adopting some aspects from the Catholics and the Protestants, our theology aspect has not been westernized, as some believe; here I want to clarify our situation:

It was the first time for our church to face ideas of some western churches; therefore we have to use their own language to face them. The early Fathers used the same way in facing the philosophers. As I have said, [Many scholars believe that Hellenic philosophy, especially Platonism, had its effect on the Alexandrians, and consider some leaders of the Alexandrian Christians as Platonist or Neo-Platonist. F. L. Cross states that beginnings of the interweaving Platonism with Christian thought go back to St. Clement of Alexandria and Origen<sup>4</sup>. Origen himself states that the use of philosophy by Christian leaders dates back to St. Pantaenus, the teacher of St. Clement. Even before St. Pantaenus, Athenagoras was a philosopher whose strong perseverance, in the School qualified him to become the dean of the theological School of Alexandria without undressing the pallium of philosophers. **Athenagoras** is considered the first known Christian who with his faith, carried a tendency towards philosophy.] [The School of Alexandria did not aim to separate believers, especially the leaders of the church, from contemporary cultures, as long as these cultures helped them progress in all or some aspects of life. Its interest in science and philosophy is very clear from its encyclopedic teachings. Studying philosophy and rhetoric were considered the two principal ways to a complete education at that time, and studying philosophy was less likely to offend Christians than the study of literature.

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<sup>4</sup> F. L. Cross, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 1990, p. 1102.

Philip Schaff<sup>5</sup> states that the Alexandrians as well-educated persons made much freer use of the Greek philosophy. For **Origen** philosophy is the jewels, which the Israelites took with them from Egypt and turned into ornaments for their sanctuary, though they also wrought them into the golden calf. Philosophy is not necessarily an enemy to truth, but may and should be its handmaid, and neutralize the attacks against it.

In one of his letters, **St. Dionysius** encourages believers to read philosophical books, even the unorthodox ones. He states that God revealed Himself to him through his extensive readings, saying to him<sup>6</sup>: “*Study anything you lay your hand on; you are competent to examine and prove everything - this gift was from the start the cause of your faith.*” He accepted the vision and never abandoned the desire of reading. This enabled him to carry the attack into the enemy’s country.]

### ***B) The Present:***

Some writers think that our Church ignored the writings of the Fathers after the Arab Conquest to Egypt:

- ❖ The museums in the whole world witness to our Church interest in the writings of the Fathers. Some western scholars devote their efforts just to give an account of our manuscripts in the world museums, universities and libraries. Many of these manuscripts were written after the Arab Conquest to Egypt.
- ❖ As I mentioned before the world libraries preserve a lot of the Arabic manuscripts for the early and latter Fathers.
- ❖ As an example we have many commentaries on the Old and New Testaments, such as the series of “From the Contemplations and Commentaries of the Early Fathers.” Now some of these books are translated and published, and we hope that all the series will be translated and published.
- ❖ Many of our Arabic books of theology have a patristic spirit, and have lot of quotations from the writings of the Fathers.

The following are examples of the recent efforts in the field of Orthodox theology in the Coptic Church:

#### ***i) Committees to dialogue with the different churches***

- With the Eastern Churches
- With the Anglican Church
- With the Roman Catholic Church
- With the Assyrian (Nestorian) Church
- With the Reformed Churches

#### ***ii) Establishment of Seminaries***

- In New Jersey, New York, USA
- In Los Angeles, California, USA
- In Sydney, Australia
- In England

#### ***iii) Conferences and conventions***

- Annual Youth Conventions attended by H.G. Moussa, other bishops and theologians
- Annual St. Mark Fellowship, Washington DC, USA

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<sup>5</sup> Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 2, p. 353.

<sup>6</sup> The third letter on baptism addressed to Philemon the Roman Presbyter. Eusebius: *H. E.* 7:7:1-3.

**iv) Periodicals**

- Coptic Church Review (Quarterly), Society of Coptic Church Studies, Lebanon, Pennsylvania, USA
- The Monthly Book for Youth and Servants, The Orthodox Center of the Patrological Studies, Cairo, Egypt.

**v) Evangelization**

- In Africa, Diocese of Africa
- In Mexico (recently)

**vi) Patristic Fathers' Centers**

We mention to the interest of the church for Patrological studies and research. For example, we have many scholars who are interested in this branch: Dr. Joseph Faltas (the relation between the theology of Boulos El-Boushi and that of St Athanasius), Dr. Michel Badie (St Didymius the Blind), Dr. Wahib Kozman (the Grace in St. Athanasius) and Fr. Matthias Wahba (Santification of Marriage in St. Athanasius). These are examples of scholars who studied in the universities of Greece, West Germany, USA and Canada. More over there are many scholars are interested in the same area in Egypt (The Institution of Coptic Studies).

- Society of Coptic Church Studies, Lebanon, Pennsylvania, USA.
- The Orthodox Center of the Patrological Studies, Cairo, Egypt.
- Few individuals are involved in the Patristic studies for example late Deacon Youssef Habib, Fr. Tadros Malaty who has few Patristic and Church History publications.

**C) The Future:**

**i) Supreme Sunday-school Organization in the Land of Immigration**

- The benefit of such organization is the coordination of curriculums to include the Orthodox Dogma and Fathers' Writings.

**ii) Orthodoxy and Cultures**

- Focus on spreading Orthodoxy in many cultures without imposing the Coptic culture similar to the example of our churches in Africa.

## **THE COPTIC ORTHODOX CHURCH AND THE UNITY WITH OTHER ORTHODOX CHURCHES**

As I said in my lecture titled, "*Practical Steps Towards The Unity Of The Two Orthodox Families*" the problem of unity in Egypt is not in the same size as in other areas, for the following reasons:

- ❖ The Copts sincerely adopt the words of St. Athanasius and believe that when there is one thought, words and theological terms must not separate us.
- ❖ The Copts, after being isolated because of the Arab conquest in the 7th century, now long for the unity of the Church on the basis of oneness of faith and love. Therefore, with the exception of the *Synaxarium*, which mentions historical realities, ***there are no instances of any attacks against any Church. Our liturgies***

***strongly reveal the desire for unity. This situation is hardly found among other Orthodox churches.***

- ❖ Another factor that helps the Coptic Church to take practical steps towards this unity is the situation of the Orthodox Church in Egypt. There is no competition between us and the members of the Eastern (*Chalcedonian*) Orthodox Church in Egypt, but sincere love.
- ❖ There is a personal relationship between H.H. Pope Shenouda III, and Late H.H. Patriarch Parthenos and the recent Patriarch of the (Byzantine) Orthodox; as well as between H.H. Pope Shenouda III and the present Antiochene leaders in Lebanon and Syria.
  - The visits between H.H. Pope Shenouda III and the leaders of the Orthodox Churches have increased over the past years. In the presence of Late H.H. Patriarch Parthenos, the Coptic deacons sang the same hymns that are sung for the Coptic Patriarch, mentioning both names together.
  - The theological and spiritual Arabic books of the Eastern family and references are widespread in Egypt among the Copts, especially among the priests and teachers of Sunday School, perhaps more than among the Antiochenes themselves, especially those published by St. Vladimir's Seminary.
  - In Egypt, there is a movement of translating many stories of their saints and martyrs in Arabic for all levels, even for children.
- ❖ The Coptic Church sends scholars to the Universities of Athens and Thessalonica each year. And many Coptic scholars were admitted to St. Vladimir Seminary. For the first time some Coptic leaders have participated in the discussion and evaluation of Doctorate in theology and Patrology research work in Greece.
- ❖ In Athens, we have some deacons who have had their Coptic hymns revised as they have a Greek origin.

## **The Official Dialogue Between The Eastern And The Oriental Orthodox Families**

The most serious and sincere dialogue in the twentieth century is that which occurred between the two Orthodox families. It was pure theological one, and its aim was very clear. At the last meeting all were satisfied, and the last statement declared that theologically all problems were solved. We are just waiting the official decisions of the holy synods of all churches.

The relations between the two families are almost full of love. Now the two families have to work together for witnessing to Orthodoxy in the whole world.

Here I want to clarify the following points:

Many of the Eastern patriarchs are in Europe or in near of Europe, which give them the chance to write their history, theology and canons in English, French and Germany etc. For us we were isolated for many centuries, and for just many decades when a Coptic theologian or priest was chosen to share in a Christian conference or any other Christian activity outside Egypt he was accused as treachery of Egypt. Therefore, there was no room to write our theology, canons and history in these languages.

We cannot ignore that many of the members of the other Orthodox family immigrated to North America and Australia for more than 80 years. Through the revolution of communism many of the Russians escaped to North America, and they established bishoprics, churches, seminaries and schools. They translated and published many books of theology, liturgies hymns, history and canons. Before that

they have not the chance to reveal the richness of Orthodoxy in English. Our movement of immigration is considered very new.

## IS THE COPTIC CHURCH ORTHODOX?

Until some decades many of the Eastern Orthodox theologians were in doubt of our Orthodoxy. In the first section of the official *“Joint Commission of the Theological Dialogue between the Orthodox Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches”* in Geneva, Switzerland, we received the proposed program, I noticed the title. They called the Oriental Orthodox Churches “The Ancient Oriental churches,” while they called themselves “The Orthodox Church. The delegates of the Oriental Orthodox Churches asked for correcting the title by omitting the word “Ancient,” and admitting the word “Orthodox” to our family. It is not suitable now to mention to all what happened. But I just want to mention the following things:

1. At first, many delegates of the other family insisted not to call us “Orthodox.” And it was expected the failure of this dialogue. Many meetings for every family separated and mutual meeting between representatives from the two families have been held. At last the other family accepted the title.

2. This atmosphere had totally changed, and after some meetings we all felt as one family through oneness of theology, and love. In real and deep atmosphere of love once I mentioned to one of their great professors about what happened in the first session of the first official meeting. He said to me, “Theologically and practically we are very close to each other more than our relationship within the same family.”

The same professor also said to me, “I’m proud of my Coptic students in Greece.” I heard from one of his students that before the starting of the official dialogue he was attacking our church and its theology. Now he is speaking in a positive way and he usually praise the Coptic Church.” You can’t imagine **the mutual respect and real love that ruled among the theologians of the two families in the “Theological Sub-Committee.”**

In the seminar occurred in March 1997 arranged by St. Vladimir Seminary the same atmosphere of respect and love was spread among the theologians and the people who attended it. I started my lecture by saying, [I feel happy that after participating in the *“Joint Commission of the Theological Dialogue between the Orthodox Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches”* and in the *“Theological Sub-Committee,”* now I have the honor to share in discussing the *“Practical Steps Towards The Unity Of The Two Orthodox Families.”* Sincerely I feel hard to say two families, for we are one family, has the same faith.]

Dear brother in Christ, I want to emphasize that our relation with the theologians and leaders of the Eastern Churches is not based on social, pastoral or church politic principals, but at first on theological bases. And we have mutual respect and Christian love. Sometimes we spent a whole session to discuss one word theologically, and we discover the oneness of our inner faith and theology.

## IS THE COPTIC ORTHODOX CHURCH DEAD CORPSE?

Dear brother, I feel that you are proud of our Coptic Orthodox Church, and you are in sorrow for what is written by Philip Schaff, "The Coptic Church is a dead corpse hanging onto the body of Christ their people ripe for the picking by western missionaries."

I share with you the same feelings for in Los Angeles once a teacher of Sunday School said to me that her sister sent a letter to many manufacturers and organizations. I read the letter, in which she asked them to send donations for she



would travel to Egypt to preach the Copts. She mentioned to us, as nominal Christians, and spiritually all the Copts are dead!

We are proud of the grace of God that works in our Church through all ages:

1. They evaluated our Church as a dead corpse, while the Lord Himself evaluated her, saying, “Blessed my people Egypt.” Truly the divine evaluation is totally different than the human one.

2. In early eighties, delegates from the Episcopal Church of England visited Egypt to study and discuss the cause of the escape of the young people from the churches in Europe, while the Coptic churches are crowded with them. I never forget the words of the bishop who asked me to change the name of our church in Cleopatra, Alexandria from “Church of St. Mary and St. Cyril the Great” to the “Church of the Transfiguration.” When I asked him about the reason he told me because you have changed the garage into heaven.

3. In Cypress a conference was held between the EMEU (Evangelical for Middle East Understanding) and the national churches of the Middle East, arranged by MECC (Middle East Council of Churches). The western missionaries indirectly attacked the four national families in the Middle East (The Oriental Orthodox, the Eastern Orthodox, the Protestant and the Catholic families) as if all of them are dead. They spoke about the missionaries’ role in the renewal of the church. They didn’t give the Coptic Church a chance to explain her concept of **Renewal** in an orthodox way, considering what the other Orthodox churches say in that area is enough. I insisted to record our concept of Church Renewal. I witnessed to our living and contemporary theology. I focused on the following points:

- ❖ According to the Orthodox view, renewal is a constant movement and growth in this new life.
- ❖ Our Orthodox concept of renewal is concerned in the inner life that guides our will, thoughts, feelings, words, and deeds.
- ❖ They concentrate on individualism as a source of church renewal and of understanding the word of God, while in our orthodox life there is no separation between the personal relationship with God and the church life.
- ❖ The western missionaries concentrate on the charisma of the Holy Spirit, while our church life is based on the Holy Trinity.

A Catholic Bishop commented on my speech that it was the first time for him to discover that in his ministry he ignores the role of the Father. And one of the missionaries said to me that he felt that he was in need to make a revision to his concepts and ministry. He sent a letter to me from USA containing the same meaning.

### **What are our Roles in Shaping the Future of the Coptic Church?**

As we read your letter we felt you are a gifted person, and we hope that you share in revealing the richness and the spirituality of our church. Truly I felt you might have not received many of our theological, commentaries and historical books in English. And perhaps you cannot read the Arabic books. Therefore, we have to encourage those who translate the Arabic books, and to edit them or to rewrite them in an English tongue, to witness to the new life in our Lord Jesus Christ.

We are sure if you will start to work for the edification of the Church in the whole world you yourself will enjoy the richness of your church, regardless the weakness of some members, whatever their position in the church.

**FR. Tadros Malaty     Dr. Magdy Keriakos**