



ALEXANDRIA AND CHRISTIAN DOGMAS



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**DOGMAS
AND
CHURCH LIFE**

Dogmas, to the Coptic Orthodox Church, are not merely theological concepts concerning God, man, church, eternal life, heavenly creatures, demons etc., to be discussed among clergymen, scholars and laymen, but are, in essence, daily experiences each member of the church has to live. In other words, dogmas representing our faith in God through various aspects have one message, i.e., our communion with God the Father in Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word of God, by His Holy Spirit. Thus, we conceive of our redemption, our membership in the church, a deep understanding of the Holy bible, an acceptance of the Kingdom of God within our souls, communion with the heavenly creatures and the experience of eternal life. St. John the Evangelist and Theologian, declared Christ's Godhead in order that we "have life in His name" John 20, 31.

The early Alexandrian Fathers were more capable than others in defining theological terms and in expounding their concepts, especially in Greek, through their famous school which was established by St. Mark¹. This school rivaled the greatest philosophical school in the East, the “Museum,” and attracted some of its philosophers to be converted and to become church leaders. In fact, the universal church is indebted to the Alexandrians for setting in theological terms, soteriological thoughts, i.e. connected with our redemption. Sellers states: “The teaching of Athanasius and later representatives of the School of Alexandria come before us as a striking example of the dependence of Christological on soteriological thoughts. Consequently, if we are to appreciate their doctrine of the Person of Jesus Christ, we must first briefly consider their doctrine of His Work as Saviour².”

ALEXANDRIA AND THE CHRISTIAN DOGMAS

Before discussing the Christian dogmas of the Coptic Orthodox Church and the Alexandrian Fathers, I would like to observe that Alexandria, the great cosmopolitan city, was the most suitable place for the gospel of Christ to be adopted and for its divine truth to be declared in theological teaching and terms.

In the first century when St. Mark the Evangelist visited Alexandria there were three communities : the Egyptian, the Jewish and the Greek; each had its own culture.

It is well known that the ancient Egyptians were religiously minded by nature and upbringing, since early times³. The famous historian Herodotus stated that (the Egyptians are religious to excess, far beyond any other race of men). Their religious curiosity led to the revelation of many basic ideas of faith and prepared their minds for the acceptance of the Christian dogmas without a great deal of difficulty. The “oneness of Godhead” was not novel to the Egyptian mind, for their philosophers believed in One Supreme Being. The best example was king Ikhnaton (1383- 1365 B.C.) who believed in One God and struggled to preach this idea throughout Egypt. At the same time every major town recognized some kind of triad, not too different from the “Holy Trinity”. Also they believed in the world to return and in the resurrection etc...⁴

The Jews had their own schools not only in Alexandria but in many other countries Judaism, the cradle in which Christianity was nurtured⁵, flourished in Alexandria. In the early days it had produced the Septuagint version of the old Testament, where Jewish theology was integrated with Hellenist philosophy. Perhaps the most notable exponent of this philosophy was the Alexandrian Jew Philo (c 30 B.C. - c 45 A.D.), who was drawn to the Greek philosophers, but maintained that all their best ideas had been anticipated in the Jewish scripture. Two aspects of his thought are of special interest in studying Christian doctrine⁶:

- (a) The method of allegorizing scripture: He compares⁷ the literal sense of scripture to the shadow which the body casts, finding its authentic, profounder truth in the spiritual meaning which it symbolizes.

He neither depreciates nor abolishes the literal meaning, but looks at it as the body to the soul, so the plain historical (literal) sense merits the fullest respect⁸.

(b) His concept of the Logos or the Word: He adopted some philosophical ideas of the Logos as God's agent in creation⁹ and the means by which the mind apprehends God¹⁰. No doubt he was helped by the fact that in the Bible he read that God created the world by His Word (Logos) and that it was by His Word that He revealed Himself to the prophets; and He was acquainted with the "Wisdom" theology which personifies it and assigns its creative functions (Job 28:12f.; Prov. 8: 22f.; Wis. 7:22f.; Eccles. 24:1). In fact Philo's teaching about the Logos is ambiguous and even inconsistent. When He speaks of the Logos in personal terms as "First-born Son¹¹," the personification is not to be taken seriously.

To the Greeks, Christianity was a divine call addressed to the whole world. It declared the Gospel, God's word, in the Gentiles' language and terms. The Alexandrian church leaders thus used the Greek terms to change the Greeks, especially the philosophers. In other words, the Alexandrians did not use Greek philosophy as a source of their dogma and doctrines but as a tool for explaining the biblical truth within man's culture.

DOGMA AND INTEGRAL CHURCH LIFE

The Christian Church is not merely a school involved in researching and teaching dogmas, but an institution which worships God and serves mankind. It works for the transformation and the renewal of this world and hopefully awaits the world to come. Truly, the Christian Church would not be the church as we know it without Christian dogmas¹². Dogmas interpret our whole philosophy of the church through repeated practice of our faith in the holy tradition (the holy scriptures, worship, behavior and preaching). All these elements represent different aspects of the one inseparable church life.

If we look at the relationship of the dogmas to the holy scriptures, we observe that they are not only based on the holy scriptures but that any dogma which has no base in them is invalid. Dogmas in fact are mirrors of the holy scriptures. They explain them and attract men to enjoy their spirit.

As well, we can say that dogmas are the way in which believers are guided to worship God in truth and in spirit. True worship reveals our dogmas in simplicity.

Dogmas correlate to our ascetic attitude. As mentioned¹³ before the early Alexandrian theologians and clergymen were true ascetics and as a result asceticism still strongly affect our theology. This is not by denying our bodies, as some scholars charge, but by insisting on the soteriological aspect: The early Coptic ascetics were involved in enjoying the redeeming deeds of the Holy Trinity, i.e. in enjoying the sanctification of the soul, mind, body and gifts etc... through communion with the Father in His Son through His Holy Spirit.

Early Egyptian asceticism was biblical. It neither hated the body, its senses and capacities nor did it deny the human free- will, or despise earthly life and all its properties. Coptic ascetic in its essence was not an isolation from men but rather enjoyed unity with God. This attitude affected our theology and dogmas, through concentration on the "deification," i.e. the return of man to the original image of God by restoring his soul, mind, and body etc., in preparation for Paradise.

Concerning the relationship between dogmas and behavior or practical faith we have to distinguish between church dogmas and the demons, for as St. James says: “even the demons believe” Jam. 2:19.

Concerning the relationship between dogmas or theology as a whole and practical religious life, we can quote Richardson: “Religious people very often feel that theology leaves a cold dead abstraction in the place of what was once a warm and living faith. Theology, like any other study can become dry and academic... The fact is that religion without theology is as unthinkable and incomplete as theology without religion: the two are as complementary to one another as theory and practice¹⁴.”

The close relationship between dogmas and preaching is evident through the ordination of the majority of the early deans of the School of Alexandria as Popes or Bishops of this see. Those men were well-educated in theology i.e. dogmas are not separated from the ability to preach and practice pastoral care.

Finally, in conclusion it can be said that the true theologian is not a man merely involved in discussing or teaching dogmas but also one who accepts the dogmas of the church of which he is a member. Therefore Origin calls him “a man of the church¹⁵.” He is not only a preacher of the church, but he practices its life.

Dogma is what is believed, taught, confessed, and practiced.

DOGMAS AND KNOWLEDGE

One of the very important characteristics of the church of Alexandria was its broad-mindedness and openness of heart towards philosophers. While leaders of the church in other countries looked at philosophy as an enemy of faith (like St. Justine and Tertullian), our Fathers embraced philosophers with love, looking at them as children in need of the church to help them grow, through faith, into manhood. Thus the Alexandrians saw faith not as opposite to mind and knowledge, but as a satisfaction of mind and an elevation of thought through which one could enjoy divine knowledge. This knowledge thus was superior to philosophical knowledge. God grants faith to men who are His rational creatures, and He would not destroy the minds which He created.

During the second century, St. Clement of Alexandria, a theologian of great piety, wide reading and classical scholarship, believed that the spiritual believer was a gnostic, giving the word “gnosis” (knowledge) a Christian meaning, instead of the common meaning -of that time- which signified “heresy.” He says: “Gnosis is the principle and author of every action conforming to the Logos¹⁶,” “The grace of gnosis comes from the Father through the Son¹⁷.”

Faith, in our concept, embraces all human nature, it signifies not only our souls and hearts, but also our minds and thinking.

DOGMA BASES ON TRUTH AND LOVE

Dogmas, as we have seen, are the interpretation of our experience of God, in the Crucified and Risen Jesus Christ. This experience through the ages does not alter, for Jesus Christ remains the same yesterday, today and for ever (Heb. 13:8). The disciples and apostles (and bishops afterwards) did not sit around a table and agree to teach new dogmas, but rather they preached their

Christian experience. As St. John says, “That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you” 1 John 1:3. Thus all Christian dogmas produced are the church’s experience of the Crucified and Risen Christ. “Truth” and “Love” at the same time. We receive these dogmas as the unchangeable truth that we must hold fast, with “love.”

The Alexandrian Popes (Bishops) as theologians and pastors at the same time looked to dogma as an expression of evangelic truth correlated to love. They were very zealous in defending the orthodox faith and dogma against any heresy, not only in Egypt but in all Christendom, offering their lives as sacrifices on behalf of the church. They were very firm and strict concerning the faith they had received (2 Tim. 1:12, 14), and some historians described them with violence, but in fact they were truly loving and kind men. St. Cyril wrote to Nestorius telling him that he would never find a person who loved him like Cyril, but never would this love be at the expense of his faith¹⁸. He hated heresy and error but loved the soul of the heretic and desired his salvation.

DOGMA AND THEOLOGICAL TERMS

The Alexandrian Fathers used theological terms to explain the divine truths and their deep meanings to defend the Orthodox faith against heresies, but they were not enslaved to the terms themselves. St. Athanasius who devoted his life to defending Christ’s Godhead stated that disputes merely about words must not be suffered to divide those who think alike¹⁹.

DOGMA AND RENEWAL

It was the duty of the early church to offer the Christian faith in Greek terms for the Hellenist world. Today some theologians believe that the church has to express its faith not in Greek terms but in simple words that modern man can accept. Leslie Dewart, a Canadian Roman Catholic philosopher, aims to achieve a “dehellenization” of the Christian faith in God. He feels it is time that the Christian faith took on a form in keeping with the experience of modern man. To do so, it must get rid itself of the philosophical categories of Greek philosophy, as that philosophy belongs to a bygone past. He states that we have to exclude three terms: “<MI>Ousia (essence), <MI>Trias (Trinity) and<MI> Hypostasis (Person).”

1. Concerning the term “ousia” (essence), he says that God is beyond this term. We feel God as “presence,” and not as “Supreme Being.”
2. Concerning Trias, he says, that it could lead to “Tritheism.”
3. He suggests abolishing the term “<MI>Hypostasis “ in dealing with the Holy Trinity.

The Coptic Orthodox Church is well known as a conservative church, especially in dogma and doctrines. At the same time, it developed not by embracing new doctrines or new “articles of faith,” but by explaining the same faith “once given to the saints” (Jude 3) in a contemporary language. In more details we can summarize our view of the dogmas with the following points:

1. We have to differentiate between the development or the renewal of dogmas from the development of explaining them. The Orthodox Church refuses to embrace new dogmas or doctrines but accept to declare the divine traditional dogmas in a contemporary language (provided that they are explained in accurate terms without any deviation from the truth).

Prof. Maximos Agiorghoussis, Bishop of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania²⁰, asks: “Is there a possibility of so called “development of doctrine” in the Orthodox Christian tradition ?” He adds: “The west has by and large endorsed a “development of doctrine,” embracing along with it new doctrines or articles of faith, whilst the east opposes such a proliferation. The “<MI>depositum fide i” is always the same. Faith and truth as revealed to the saints and the faith of the saints in it, is essentially forever the same. The only possibility of change is in the formulation of it. But an interpretation of it is preferable for men of all times... Faith is always “contemporary,” answering the spiritual needs of people of all epochs.” He also says: “Let it not be forgotten, however, that the faith cannot always be fully harmonized with the “experience” of each epoch, notably if this “experience” is completely secularized and is atheistic or anti- atheistic. The Christian duty does not lie in conforming itself to the “fallen” world, but in conforming its intelligence to the “mind of Christ” 1 Corn 2:16, and thereby transforming the world and saving it in Christ. The Christian message will always be a “stumbling-block” to the Jews and Judaizers (1 Corn 1:23) of yesterday, today and tomorrow, just as it will be for all saved, both Greeks and Jews, “the strength of God and the wisdom of God” 1 Corn 1:24.

2. Fr. Lonergan, a critic of Dewart’s work, states that “today’s experience” is not as anti-Greek’s as Dewart would wish!. The cultural values and the philosophy of the ancient Greeks are still present in western civilization as one of its basic components. Prof. Agiorghoussis says: “In spite of this, we recognize the fact that the message of Christianity can and should be incarnated in all other “cultures” outside the Greek²¹.” The Coptic writers in the middle ages, in discussing their dogmas with the non-Christian used terms that could be understood by others.

It is note-worthy that there is as well a risk involved in changing the traditional terminology, for we must always be faithful to the faith “once given to the saints” proclaimed in the Creed which the fathers of the Ecumenical Councils gave the Church.

DOGMA AND CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGY

We have seen that dogmas are not separated from “life” itself, therefore before discussing the great Christian dogmas from the Alexandria point of view, we must look at the main current attitudes which affects contemporary theology even the dogmas themselves:

1. Theology and Marxism.
2. Theology and Existentialism.
3. The Charismatic movement of the Spirit.
4. The Feminist Theology.
5. The Black Theology.

Until today the Coptic Church has not truly faced these current attitudes for the following reasons:

- a. From the Arab conquest until the first half of this century the Coptic Church was not in contact with other churches, even with the Orthodox Churches. Egypt’s political circumstances - throughout the ages - obliged the Copts to be conservative, to hold fast the early church tradition

including the Holy Scripture without any deviation. The five above-mentioned attitudes haven't notable effect on Coptic theology. Rarely can you find a book -in Arabic - that deals with any of the above-mentioned attitudes for the majority of the clergymen, sunday-school teachers (the teachers of the church-education) and laity are not involved with these attitudes, but prefer to read biblical commentaries, spiritual books, dogma based on the Holy Bible and patristic quotations (the sayings of the early Fathers).

b. To understand why the Coptic Church has no room for adopting any of the above-mentioned attitudes we have to know the roots of these attitudes:

1. Marxism in fact was an opposite reaction to the interference of churchmen in politics. Marxists look to religion as an anesthetic of nations, because when churchmen loved authority and were involved not in the Kingdom of God but in the earthy kingdoms, the church lost her spiritual power and became a heavy burden to the statesmen, who looked at it not as spiritual refuge to those who were in trouble but as a trouble-maker to the state.

The Coptic Church from the first century till this day has no temporal authority and has never intruded in politics. Thus it preserved a comfortable refuge to those who felt troubled in the world, and looked to the church as an icon of heaven and a source of internal peace.

2. Existentialism, a call for individual freedom, is a natural product of struggle between two extreme attitudes; the literal church life that Europe practiced especially in the middle ages and the extreme literal church life that many western churches live today. In the literal church life the believer loses his personality, for the church community uses him as a tool. He is the subject to the church laws and practices worship without understanding, ignoring his personal relation with God. Through the liberal church life, every believer understands the holy Bible and practices worship individually, ignoring the church tradition, order and concepts. The Coptic Church believes in the moderate way and refuses the extremists ways. It is a conservative traditional church which holds fast the common church order and at the same time insists on the personal relationship with God. Orthodoxy refuses individualism but embraces "personalism" together with common attitudes, therefore believers feel spiritual freedom through the lovely bond of the community. Existentialism can find no place in the hearts of the true believers of the Coptic Church.

3. The main causes of the Charismatic movement are:

(I) The Western Church's interest in academic studies and criticism which involve minds but not hearts or spirits. The purpose of the Charismatic movement is to involve the hearts and spirits of the believers in the spiritual life instead of academic studies.

(II) The Western Church also, for a long time, stressed the Person of Jesus Christ as the Saviour and Friend of man, ignoring the Person of the Holy Spirit and His work in the church community and amongst believers. The Charismatic movement is a kind of a revival of the Church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, which is the Spirit of Christ Himself. It is an opposite reaction to "Christo-centricity" theology.

- (III) Change is very essential, not only in the life of Western people, but as well in their religious life; therefore many movements appears as a kind of renewal or change. Charismatism is one of these new and changeable movements.

For the Coptic Orthodox Church, the situation is different, for it is well-known that the Church's spirituality depends on a biblical, patristical and ascetic basis. Perhaps there was a lack of academic studies and criticism, but the Church is still very rich in spirituality, especially in worship.

Concerning the Holy Spirit, the Coptic Church is in fact Trinitarian in dogmas, worship and life. Jesus Christ is our Lord, the Beloved Bridegroom, whom we enjoy by the act of the Holy Spirit which dwells in the Church, guides the Church in worship and preachings, acts in the holy sacraments, exists in every liturgy and every believer's worship, in order to prepare all for attaining the Father's bosom.

Lastly, the Coptic Church believes in continuous renewal not through "change" but by the daily action of the Holy Spirit within the hearts and souls of the believers as members of the body of Christ and in the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit. The Church is not in need of changeable movements for renewal but accepts daily internal renewal in Jesus Christ.

4. The increasing attitude of "Feminist Theology" in the Western Church represents the struggle between believers in Church authority and clergymen and laymen, and also between men and women. I think this attitude is a natural fruit of the lack of "fatherhood" in the western churches, even in some traditional churches. Ministers become employees in the west, while in Egypt the ministers (clergymen) are truly fathers who do not seek authority but sacrifice on behalf of their spiritual children. The success of the Egyptian Church is due to its spiritual fatherhood. Every believer, even the child, feels the fatherhood of the clergyman, which cannot be taken away from the clergyman even on his death-bed.

Ministers or clergymen are not administrators or social workers, but truly they accept to be crucified with the Chief- Priest Jesus Christ on behalf of the people.

In Egypt, devoted women and girls are not struggling to become priests. Devout men and the young prefer monasticism rather than becoming ordained priests. In our church, the number of those who are admitted to monasteries is increasing from one year to another, especially amongst young women.

5. I think the majority of Coptic clergymen and laity have no idea of black theology, even though Egypt is one of the leading states in Africa. For the first time, the Coptic Church was represented in a meeting of the "Theologians of Africa", held in Cairo, in August 1985. I have as well published a booklet on "The Spiritual Life and Liberation in the Church of Africa with an introduction to Black Theology," both in English and Arabic.

The aim of Black Theology is to deliver every man - especially black men - from injustice. It concentrates on "Liberation" and adopts the "Feminist Theology" to deliver women from injustice. It is a reaction of black men against the Western Church which preached to them of Christianity, but for a long time gave them no room to receive leadership in their own

churches. I think the Coptic Church can play an essential role in the reconciliation between the black theologians and western churches, for although we are a part of Africa, we received the gospel early in the first century from St. Mark the Apostle and Evangelist, not from the hands of western missionaries.

I was astonished to note that the Theologians of Africa had no idea of the Coptic Orthodox culture and concepts.

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 2. The Council of Chalcedon, S.P.C.K., 1961, p.132.
 3. Atyia: History of Eastern Christianity, p.20.
 4. Fr. T.Malaty: The Coptic Church, Church of Alexandria, Melbourne, 1978, Ch. 1.
 5. J.N.D.Kelly: Early Christian Doctrines, 1978,p.6f.
 6. Ibid 8-11.
 7. De Confus. Ling, 190.
 8. De migrat. Abrah., 89-93.
 9. E.G. de Cherub, 125-7.
 10. E.G. de migrat. Abrah. 174 .
 11. De agric, 57.
 12. See Jaroslaw Pelikan: The Christian Tradition, vol. 1, 1973, p. 1.
 13. Fr. T.Malaty: The Terms Physis and Hypostasis in the Early Church, 1986, p. 19.
 14. Creeds in the Making, SCM, 1979,p.8.
 15. In Levit 1:1; In Jos. 9:8.
 16. Strom. 6:69:2.
 17. Ibid 5:71:5.
 18. A. Kerrigon:St. Cyril of Alex. Interpreter of the O.T. (Analecta Biblica2) Rome 1953,p.7.

 19. St. Athanasius: Tome to the people of Antioch.
Fr. T.Malaty: The Terms Physis and Hypostasis in the Early Church, 1986, p. 4.
 20. Continuity and Renewal: Understanding and Confessing today, whilst the sources, the doctrine of the Holy Trinity taught in the Creed, in the Churches with a Greco-Roman cultural and philosophical background, p. 505 f.
 21. Ibid p. 509.