

MEETING WITH THE COPTIC-ORTHODOX CHURCH



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1 THE COPTIC-ORTHODOX CHURCH AND THE ECUMENICAL COUNCILS OF NICEA AND CONSTANTINOPLE (325-381 AD)

1.1 The Five Patriarchates in Early Christianity

At the beginning of the fourth century AD, the Christian faith had important centers in those parts of the Roman Empire that would later be Arabized and Islamicized. On the northern coast of Africa, Christianity was very popular, especially in Alexandria (Egypt) and in Carthage (in present Tunisia) and its coastal environs.

In Egypt the faith was adopted by the Hellenized elites of the cities, but also by the Coptic peasants who formed the bulk of the population. The country had seen rather intense periods of persecution of Christians, especially during the years of 281-311 when the anti-Christian policies of Emperor Diocletian were notorious. His persecutions should be seen as part of his efforts to restore the unity of the Roman state, whose cohesion was considered under threat from the fast growth of the Christian faith. Even the imperial city of Rome developed as an important center of the Christian faith.¹

It seems that in North Africa west of Egypt, Christianity was to a large extent the religion of the Roman colonizers, who used Latin as their vernacular. The Donatist controversies suggest that there was also an indigenous Christian Church that used the local Amazigh languages, but not much is known about these churches.²

¹ M. Forlin Patrucco, 'Diocletian', in Angelo Di Berardino (ed), *Encyclopedia of the Early Church* Vol. I (Cambridge, 1992), p. 236.

² Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity* Vol. 1: *The First Five Centuries; to 500 AD* (Grand Rapids, 1976, first edition 1956), pp. 87, 102-104. The Donatists are named after the Amazigh Christian Donatus Magnus. They lived in the Roman province of (North) Africa and flourished in the fourth and fifth centuries. The primary disagreement between Donatists and the rest of the early Christian church was over the treatment of those who renounced their faith during the persecution of Roman emperor Diocletian (303-305). The rest of the Church was far more forgiving of these people than the Donatists were. The Donatists refused to accept the sacraments and spiritual authority of the priests and bishops who had fallen away from the faith during the persecution. Many church leaders had gone so far as to turn Christians over to Roman authorities and had handed over sacred religious texts to authorities to be publicly burned. Many North-african towns were divided between Donatist and non-Donatist congregations. Constantine, as emperor, began to get involved in the dispute, and in 314 he called a Council at Arles; the issue was debated and the decision went against the Donatists. The Donatists refused to accept the decision of the council; their distaste for bishops who had collaborated with Rome came out of their broader view of the Roman Empire, it seems. In particular, the birth of the Donatist

Antioch, the present Turkish city of Antakia, was another important center of Christianity. From there, the faith radiated out across the rest of Syria. Antioch was a Greek city, but its *hinterland* in Syria had large numbers of Syriac-speaking Christians who looked mostly to Edessa, a center of Syriac Christianity outside the Roman Empire, for religious leadership.³ Edessa, presently the city of Urfa in southeastern Turkey, fell formally under the ecclesiastical rule of Antioch. It played an important role in disseminating the Christian faith in Mesopotamia, the Semitic western part of the Persian Empire. Christians were found throughout this realm although their number was not as large as in the Roman Empire.⁴

In the year 312, Emperor Constantine, one in a tetrarchy, conquered the city of Rome in order to unify the Roman Empire under his single command; he tied his imperial ambitions to worship of the God of the Christians. Constantine seems to have believed that this worship would strengthen him as well as the unity of the Roman Empire. In line with the beliefs of the pagan emperors before him, he and his Christian successors believed that in order to ensure that God would protect the Empire's borders and unity, they were obliged to protect the unity of God's worship. Therefore the Roman state came to play an important role in the life of the Church.⁵ This development led eventually to Christianity being made into the religion of the state in 380, to persecution of adherents of other religions, and also to the interference of emperors in theological and juridical disputes within the Church.⁶

By the time Constantine made Christianity into the preferred religion of the Roman Empire, in the year 313, the Church had a well-developed organizational structure. Most important was that the churches in the

movement came out of opposition to the appointment of Caecilianus as bishop of Carthage in 312, because of his pro-government stance. In 317 Constantine sent troops to deal with the Donatists in Carthage, for the first time Christian persecuting Christian. It resulted in banishments, but failed to quench the movement. Constantine had to withdraw and cancel the persecutions in 321. Donatism survived the Vandal occupation and the Byzantine reconquest under Justinian I. It is unknown how long this belief persisted into the Muslim period, but some Christian historians believe the Donatist schism and the discord it caused in the Christian community made the military takeover of the region by Islam easier.

³ Syriac (Suryâyâ) is an Eastern Aramaic language that was once used across the Middle East as a major literary language from the second to the eighth century. At its broadest definition, Syriac is used to refer to all Eastern Aramaic languages spoken by various Christian groups; more specifically, it refers to the classical language of Edessa, which became the liturgical language of Syriac Christianity.

⁴ Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity* Vol. 1, pp. 91-93.

⁵ See e.g. J. Roldanus, 'Ontwikkeling van het christendom in het oostelijk Middellandse Zeegebied tot aan het Concilie van Chalcedon', in Herman Teule and Anton Wessels (eds), *Oosterse Christenen binnen de wereld van de islam* (Kampen, 1997), pp. 3-5.

⁶ Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity* Vol. 1, p. 181.

metropolitan cities of Alexandria, Antioch, Rome and Constantinople each had one presiding bishop, with jurisdiction over all churches in those cities and their *hinterland*. These metropolitan bishops, with the bishops and other clergy under them, avoided interfering in each other's territories.⁷

As Constantine wanted to unify the churches and force them to solve their conflict over the extent of the divinity of Jesus Christ, he called the patriarchs and their bishops from all over the Empire to Nicea, close to Constantinople, in 325. At what would come to be called the *First Ecumenical Council of Nicea*, more than 250 bishops gathered from all over the Christian world, but mostly from the East. With regard to Church polity, they agreed to the following:

Let the ancient customs in Egypt, Libya and Pentapolis prevail, that the bishop of Alexandria have jurisdiction in all these, since the like is customary for the bishop of Rome also. Likewise in Antioch and the other provinces, let the Churches retain their privileges.⁸

The same Council also agreed that 'custom and ancient tradition have prevailed that the bishop of Aelia [Jerusalem] should be honoured [and] have the next place of honour.'⁹

1.2 Theological and Christological Definitions and Disputes as discussed by the Ecumenical Councils of Nicea and Constantinople

The main theological disputes during the fourth and fifth century were about the relationship between God the Father, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, as well as about how the divine and the human nature of Christ were related to each other. These theological differences were often aggravated because of the different languages used in theology and in the liturgy. Churches used Greek, Latin, Coptic, and Syriac for their Church worship. This linguistic difference went along with a sense of uniqueness attached to that language and to a shared past.

The Emperors played an important role in how theological orthodoxy was defined. At the First Ecumenical Council in Nicea, the Church re-

⁷ These metropolitan bishops were called patriarch or popes.

⁸ Canon VI of the First Ecumenical Council at Nicea, in Henry R. Percival, *The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church: Their Canons and Dogmatic Decrees* (Edinburgh, Grand Rapids, 1988, first edition 1899), p. 15. This is Vol. XIV of Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (eds), *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Second Series (Grand Rapids, Edinburgh, 1988, first edition 1899).

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.17. This is Canon VII.

sponded to teachings that were popularized by Arius, a priest from Alexandria. He preached that the divine Spirit that descended on the man Jesus had been created *in time* by God.¹⁰ Therefore, Jesus himself was not equal to God.¹¹ His main contender was Athanasius, an Egyptian monk who later became the patriarch of Alexandria. That city was the main center for learning in Christianity, which made the theological disputes immediately important for the whole Church. The bishops in Nicea took the side of Athanasius.¹² They agreed that Orthodox Christianity should confess:

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of all things visible and invisible; and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the only-begotten of his Father, of the substance of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father. By whom all things were made, both which be in heaven and in earth. Who for us men, and for our salvation, came down [from heaven], and was incarnate and was made man. He suffered and the third day He rose again, and ascended into heaven. And he shall come again to judge both the quick and the dead. And [we believe] in the Holy Ghost. And whosoever shall say that there was a time when the Son of God was not, or that before he was begotten he was not, or that he was made of things that were not, or that he is of a different substance or essence [from the Father] or that he is a creature, or subject to change or conversion, - all that so say, the Catholic and Apostolic Church anathematizes them.¹³

The disputes about Arianism continued with some of the emperors in Constantinople (the capital of the Roman Empire after 330) supporting the pro-Arian party. This turmoil was evident in Athanasius' fate in be-

¹⁰ Arius endorsed the following doctrines about the Son/the Word (Logos, referring to Jesus, see the Gospel of John chapter 1):

1. that the Word (Logos) and the Father were not of the same essence (ousia);
2. that the Son was a created being (ktisma or poisma); and
3. that the worlds were created through him, so he must have existed before them and before all time.
4. However, there was a 'once' when He did not exist, before he was begotten of the Father.

¹¹ Roldanus, 'Ontwikkeling van het christendom in het oostelijk Middellandse Zeegebied tot aan het Concilie van Chalcedon', p. 8.

¹² Aziz S. Atiya, *A History of Eastern Christianity* (Millwood, 1991, first edition 1967), pp. 39-45. M. Simonetti, 'Arius, Arians, Arianism', in Angelo Di Berardino (ed), *Encyclopedia of the Early Church* Vol. I (Cambridge, 1992), p. 77.

¹³ Found in the Acts of the Ecumenical Councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon, in the *Epistle of Eusebius of Caesarea* to his own Church, in the *Epistle of St. Athanasius* and elsewhere, with some minor variations. This version is given in Henry R. Percival, *The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church; Their Canons and Dogmatic Decrees*, p. 3.

ing exiled five times from his patriarchal See in Alexandria. One of the side effects during this time was that he introduced the monastic concept into Europe while exiled in Italy (339-346).¹⁴ The Arian issue was settled for good at the Second Ecumenical Council of Constantinople (381). There, the bishops affirmed the Athanasian Creed with some minor adaptations. They underlined that Christianity teaches that the Holy Spirit is, like the Son, of *one substance* with God the Father.¹⁵ The following Creed was agreed to:

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth and of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, begotten of his Father before all worlds, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten not made, being of one substance with the Father. By whom all things were made. Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost and the Virgin Mary, and was made man, and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate. He suffered and was buried and the third day He rose again according to the Scriptures, and ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the Right Hand of the Father. And he shall come again with glory to judge both the quick and the dead. Whose Kingdom shall have no end.

And [we believe] in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver-of-Life, who proceedeth from the Father, who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified, who spake by the prophets.

And [we believe] in one, holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. We acknowledge one Baptism for the remission of sins, [and] we look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Amen.¹⁶

The confessions of Nicea and Constantinople were adhered to by the vast majority of all Christians, both inside and outside the Roman Empire. This formally ended the period of disputes about Trinitarian matters, but discussion about the nature of Christ now became acute: If Jesus was truly God, how did that relate to his humanity?

¹⁴ Atiya, *A History of Eastern Christianity*, p. 45.

¹⁵ Roldanus, 'Ontwikkeling van het christendom in het oostelijk Middellandse Zeegebied tot aan het Concilie van Chalcedon', p. 10.

¹⁶ Parcial, *The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church*, p.163.