

# THE MONOPHYSITES

— Part Two —

by

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A remarkable article concerning the Monophysites appeared recently in the periodical, *Road to Emmaus* (Vol. X, No. 3 [#38]). This article is written by an Egyptian Christian, Dr. George Bebawi, who graduated from the Coptic Orthodox [*sic*] Theological College in Cairo, and also attended Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Protestant universities in England, Europe, the United States and the Middle East. He has now joined the Orthodox Church.

Dr. Bebawi frankly admits that there is a vast ignorance of the Church's patristic literature among the Copts. He writes:

The new generation of Copts who now study in Greece are my hope. There are about seventeen of them at the moment, but they will not be allowed to teach at the Coptic seminary in Egypt, nor will they be given any kind of ministry or service in the Coptic Church. None. (p. 22)

When asked why the Coptic students study in Greece, Dr. Bebawi answered:

Because it is the only way to learn Patristics — you need to be fluent in Greek. Without Greek you cannot have a good knowledge of the Fathers. The English translation is a good guide, but it is only a guide. You need to get into the exact words used by the Fathers of the Church. Because Greek was abandoned in Egypt and because we never studied the Fathers in Greek, some Orthodox theological concepts are still problems for the Copts, and I don't think they will be sorted out in my lifetime.

It was Patriarch Kyrillos VI [of the Coptic Church] who told me, "You need to read the liturgical books of the Greek Church." When I did, it set my heart on fire because all of the Orthodox liturgical books are fantastic. I first obtained a copy of the Pentecostarion more than twenty-

five years ago, and read it in the library of the Coptic Patriarchate. Then I read the Festal Menaion and the Lenten Triodion, and I kept saying to myself, "My goodness, this is wonderful." There was a depth of Christianity there that I had not encountered before. (p. 22)

Again, when asked how the new generation of Copts came to know about the Church Fathers, Dr. Bebawi responded:

In about 1950, the original Oxford 38-volume set of the writings of the Church Fathers, edited by Cardinal Newman and others who were part of the Oxford Movement, reached us in Egypt. Before then, we Copts had no knowledge of the Orthodox Church Fathers whatsoever. We had only the Homilies of St. John Chrysostom translated in the 13th century from Syriac and some extracts of Cyril of Alexandria, but none of the writings of St. Athanasius of Alexandria or the Macarian homilies, nothing else. I'd managed to read the writings of 12-13th-century Syrian monks in Arabic, and the collection of the desert fathers that was published later by Budge in English as *The Paradise of the Fathers*, but our knowledge before that of Church history, Patristics, and the ascetic writings was zero. (p. 23)

When another Orthodox book, *The Orthodox Life of Prayer*, became available to the Copts in 1955, Dr. Bebawi writes, "We were shaken by its depth and knowledge. It opened our eyes that there was a treasure called the 'Fathers of the Church' about which we knew nothing."

Then:

The appearance of the 38-volume Oxford English edition of the Fathers of the Church created a wave of spirituality and theology that was completely alien to the main current of the Coptic Church. The Coptic Church had only just emerged from the Middle Ages, so badly bruised and wounded by the Ottoman occupation of Egypt that it could hardly organize itself. Those of us Copts who were discovering the richness of the Church Fathers, moved

towards what you might call Byzantine theology. . . . I cannot imagine where the Coptic Church would have been today if we had not read the Orthodox books. (p. 24)

He continues:

I was the first person to translate St. Cyril of Alexandria from Greek into Arabic. His commentary on St. John was completely unknown in Egypt. I also translated Cyril's five books against Nestorius, his book on the Incarnation, and then some of his letters, which came to us from two sources: the English translation that was published by the Catholic University of America and the Greek text published by the *Apostoliki Diakonia* in Greece. (p. 24)

Dr. Bebawi also admits that the Coptic liturgical books contain teachings of the Fourth Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon!

I would even say that the main body of Orthodox teaching is enshrined in the Coptic services, but not in the later developments in Coptic Church history. I know for certain that even though the Copts don't accept it, there are decisions of the Council of Chalcedon quoted in the Coptic liturgical books. I've counted twenty-six quotations from the decrees of the Council of Chalcedon (451) in the Coptic liturgical books, and I can say with authority, "These quotes are not from Cyril of Alexandria, but from the Council of Chalcedon". In the prayers to the Mother of God in Sunday Matins there is a text from Chalcedon that is amazing — it speaks of Christ's Divinity being consubstantial with the Father and His humanity being consubstantial with us. That is Chalcedon. The entire Easter service is identical to that of the Byzantine Greek usage, and the main prayers of the baptismal service are identical to the Orthodox. (p. 25)

Rather astounding revelations!

He admits: "Dioscuros of Alexandria who rejected the Council of Chalcedon (451) made a huge mistake and I don't know how we can correct it" (p. 27).

Another odd thing is that some Copts accept several post-Chalcedon Orthodox saints, such as St. John of Damascus! All in all, there seems to be considerable theological confusion among the ranks of the Monophysites.

What conclusions can we draw from all this?

Although the Monophysites that we have met are pious, warm, friendly and very devout, and although they have suffered from their fanatical Muslim oppressors, and although many of them have realized now that Orthodox Christians are not Nestorians, and they feel very much akin to the Orthodox in many ways, there are still some serious problems.

As we noted in an earlier article ("I Am A Man Under Authority — Part 3"), they still do not acknowledge the last four Ecumenical Councils; they still do not acknowledge the Orthodox Saints that were glorified in the times after the Fourth Ecumenical Council, although, as we noted above, there are a few exceptions to that; as their Pope Shenouda has firmly declared, they are most definitely Monothelites; their theology is also very Apollinarian; they still acknowledge Dioscuros and Severus as saints, although they are condemned in the decrees of the Ecumenical Councils; and finally, they are sorely divided among themselves as regards their opinions about the Orthodox: one party is extremely pro-Orthodox, another faction is indifferent, and a third is virulently anti-Chalcedonian, and therefore anti-Orthodox.

So, until all these issues are settled, there can be no communion in the Holy Mysteries with them.

But "hope springs eternal in the human breast!"

(For more valuable information on the Copts, one should see the website: [www.pravmir.com](http://www.pravmir.com))