Schism between the Coptic and Eastern Orthodox churches

Whether it be the ordination of women, marriage of the clergy, or the date of Easter, the Christian Church has always been in dissension, and never more so than in the early centuries when the principal sees of Christendom were competing to define orthodoxy and impose it upon wayward Christian communities in the shadow of a paranoid empire.

Christianity first had to clarify its relationship to Judaism. It did so by declaring a new covenant with God and a mission to the gentiles. The Jewish Christian Church of Jerusalem was put on the defensive: circumcision, the sign of Abraham’s covenant with the Jews, was held to be an irrelevance to redemption (although still practiced by the Coptic Church). In the second century, Gnostic sects flourished throughout the Roman empire in which the teachings of Jesus were fused with pagan mystery cults, neo-Platonism and Eastern mysticism to create a sort of elitist New Age wackiness, savagely denounced by the Church fathers, Irenaeus and Tertullian. By the fifth century, Gnostic texts were being guiltily secreted away, not to be discovered until the 20th century when the largest cache was uncovered from the Egyptian sands near Nag Hammadi. But none of the disputes of early Christianity could equal in ferocity those resulting from the logical conundrums of a monotheistic religion in which God becomes man by being born of a woman.

Arius, a demagogic presbyter of Alexandria, preached that God alone was God and therefore Jesus was only part of His creation and not co-eternal with Him. This diminishing of the divine nature of Christ was too much for Alexander, Bishop of Alexandria, who called a local council of the Church and had Arius anathematized and banished. The rival dioceses of Asia Minor, however, came out in support of Arius and the dispute rumbled into the purlieus of the Imperial court. Exasperated by his fractious prelates, Constantine called the first Ecumenical Council of the Church in 325 at Nicea to force some consensus. Arius’ lobby found themselves outplayed by Alexander, and the Nicene creed was formulated: “We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten from the Father, only-begotten, that is, from the being of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, one in being with the Father.”

But all was not lost for the Arians who continued to agitate. Their influence in Constantinople grew after the death of Constantine, and when Ulfilas started his missionary work amongst the Goths, he went as an Arian, a step which was to have incalculable consequences for the Western empire when the Goths eventually seized control.

The bishop of Alexandria was now Athanasius. As successor to the Apostle Mark, Spiritual Head of the principal see of the Eastern Church, heir to Clement and Origen, he felt empowered to stand up to the Imperial Bishop of Constantinople in his presumptuous, new diocese, founded only a few years before. Fluent in both Greek and the Egyptian dialect, he travelled througout Egypt, drumming up support for Nicene orthodoxy from the new monastic settlements that were springing up throughout the country. When intrigue amongst the Arians in Constantinople had him dispossessed of his see, he continued to fire off vitriolic essays from exile in Trier and Rome. And when forced into hiding amongst the desert monks, he wrote the Life of St Anthony which trumpeted the new Egyptian monasticism while binding it to the orthodox theology of Alexandria. This collusion between Bishop and Monk was to define Egyptian Christianity: the Egyptian Church was sinking its roots deep into the desert sands.

 By the death of Athansius, Arianism had lost ground and disputes now shifted to scuffles with pagans. But the Christological battle was soon to resurface. In 428, Nestorius was elected Bishop of Constantinople and once again the see of Alexandria found itself in contention with the Imperial capital. If the debate with the Arians had been about Christ’s divinity, the debate with Nestorius was about his humanity. Nestorius was emphatic in distinguishing between Christ’s human and divine natures, and therefore anathematized those who called Mary, Theotokos, mother of God, insisting that Mary could only be the mother of the man, Anthropotokos. Cyril, the combative Bishop of Alexandria, contended that while we may talk of Christ’s divine and human natures, they remained “one” in some ineffable and mystical sense: Mary was therefore mother to both the man and the God. Cyril was not above supporting his ineffable theology with robust physical action and when the issue was debated at the Council of Ephesus, he arrived with fifty Egyptian bishops and a gang of monks from Sohag led by the charismatic Shenoute of the White Monastery. When Nestorius arrived with only sixteen bishops, Cyril called the council to order and exploited a delay in the arrival of the delegation from Antioch to push through the Alexandrian agenda. Nestorius was condemned and deposed. Belated appeals to the Emperor from the angry bishops of Antioch were of no avail.

Tension continued between the rival sees until John of Antioch managed to persuade Cyril to accept a Formula of Reunion which acknowledged Mary as Theotokos and recognized the person of Christ as “one”, but affirmed his dual nature in a masterfully eirenic statement, defining Christ as “one-in-being with the Father as to his divinity, and one-in-being with us as to his humanity”, and so satisfied the Nestorians.

But Cyril’s successor, Dioscorus, was of a less irenic (seeking religious conciliation) temperament. He stirred up hostility to the compromises and had John’s Formula of Reunion thrown out at a second council of Ephesus. Like his predecessor, Dioscorus was not averse to manipulating the assembly and neglected to read out Pope Leo’s learned contribution to the debate, the Tome. The Pope was furious, dubbed the council a den of robbers and pushed for further action. In 451, the largest council in the early history of the Church was convened at Chalcedon. John’s Formulaand Leo’s Tomewere discussed and carried the day. In a further slap to Alexandrian prestige, the see of Constantinople was given precedence over that of Alexandria and declared equal to that of Rome. Dioscuros was utterly defeated and banished. His successor, Proterius, was imposed upon Alexandria by the force of Imperial troops. Within three years, he was dead, strung up in the Caesarion by local mobs. The Egyptian Church refused to accept Chalcedon and now stood in opposition to both the Emperor of Constantinople and his Bishop – while in the desert, the monasteries prepared to shelter the rebels.

Chalcedon resulted in a permanent schism in the Church. Chalcedonian and Anti-Chalcedonian  patriarchs competed for the see of Alexandria until the Arab invasion when the Coptic patriarch entered into an accommodation with the new overlords and the Greek patriarch fled into exile, not to return until the 19th Century.

That the dispute had involved splitting the finest theological hairs with quarrelsome obduracy was finally recognized in the 1990’s when the churches accepted that “fundamentally and essentially both sides have preserved the same faith in Our Lord Jesus Christ in spite of diverse formulations and controversies.” They also accepted the mutual efficacy of the sacraments of baptism and marriage and thus entered into partial communion with each other. They continue, however, to remain separated by liturgical practice and pastoral constituency. Local and historical loyalties continue to determine sectarian identity.

Rome has also accepted the Christological position of the Orthodox and Coptic Churches but continues to disagree on marriage of the clergy, purgatory, the immaculate conception of Mary, and the date of Easter – amongst other matters!