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# Matthew the Poor: Towards Modern Birth Control Methods in the Coptic Orthodox Church

## Abstract

*The paper is focused on the Matta el-Meskeen (Matthew the Poor) and his reflection of selected bioethical issue: birth control. The paper deals with the forming stages of the bioethical discussions within the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt. The research is based on Matthew the Poor's articles and books. The first part presents his teachings about theosis as an key concept of his theology in general and bioethics in particular. The second part brings analysis of his birth control reflections and presents his observations about the role of the Church and the state in the decision making process of Christian believers.*

*Keywords: Matta el-Meskeen, Matthew the Poor, bioethics, theology, the Coptic Orthodox Church, state, Egypt, deification, birth control.*

## Introduction

The Coptic Orthodox Church is the largest Christian community within the realm of contemporary Islam. Egyptian Christians had produced in the first four centuries of Christ Era (CE) the most influential theological schools written in Greek language. After the so-called Chalcedonian crisis the church became more national oriented and was focused on production of theological literature written in Coptic language. However, due to the influence of Islam, from the second half of the seventh century, Egyptian Christians were motivated to develop specific theological tradition written in Arabic. (Rubenson 1996)

In a contemporary Egyptian society Christian believers have been coping with the dynamically developing modern science. One of the most influential

fields of research is medicine. The paper deals with the non-European Christian tradition and has a specific aim to present the theological argumentation concerning birth control in the Coptic Orthodox Church from the early phases. Besides, the paper brings an inspiration for the European Christian theologians who predominantly discuss ethical issues in the context of so-called secular ethics. Larger background research for the purpose of the paper is out of the format of the text, nevertheless, basing on the published literature we assume that as far as for the Coptic Christians the main partner in bioethical discussions is the Muslim religious scholar, for the European Christian theologians, on the other hand, it is a non-religious or secular scholar. In other words, we are trying to present that Coptic Orthodox Christians in Egypt live in the predominantly Muslim society and for that reason they might share selected facets of the Islamic ethical system based on Islamic religious principles. (Author 2018b, 5-18)

The Coptic Orthodox Church published her first official statement concerning the bioethical issues in general and birth control in particular in the late 80s. The bishop responsible for dealing with bioethical issues was in those times bishop Gregorios. He was appointed to be an assistant bishop of the Coptic Orthodox Patriarchate by the Alexandrian patriarch Shenouda III (1971-2012). His competence covered the theological studies, Coptic culture and scientific research. (Magdi 2011, 198) The first comments on bioethics are known from 1987, when he presented his conference paper and later published its extended version. (Serour 1991). The main reason the paper was published was a call from the non-Christian part of the Egyptian society. Bishop Gregorios was invited to take part in the conference dealing with the *in vitro* assisted reproduction and ethical issues related to embryo transfer. The conference was organized by Mohamed Abou el-Ghar. (Serour 1991)

However, long before the first official statement was published there was already a discussion in progress. (Shenouda 1993, 73) The Coptic monk and spiritual father known as Matthew the Poor (Matta el-Meskeen, 1919-2006 CE) elaborated his first reflections of bioethical issues in early 60s. He was born in Banha city, later graduated as a pharmacist in Cairo and in 1948 entered monastic life. He was a member and a spiritual father to monks in three different monasteries: the Monastery of St. Samuel the Confessor, the Monastery of Syrians and the Monastery of St. Macarius in the Egyptian Western Desert. He was nominated twice to the office of the Alexandrian patriarch but he was never elected. He was a man of erudition and deep spiritual life as well as a man of conflict and a theological nonconformist. He published many books, his lectures and booklets are counted in hundreds. Catalogues were published by his

pupils (Rahbana 2008) including the list of his audio-recordings (Dar maglat Markos 2006) and also translations from Arabic to other languages. (Mutbaat 2004; Dotti 2017, 299-311)

Nevertheless, his books dedicated to the bioethical issues are only *ad hoc* reflections without any fundamental bioethics. We may presume that his bioethical observations are based on the theological paradigm of *gr. theosis*. (Author 2018a, 73-94; conf. Russel 2006) In other words, his bioethical observations are deeply rooted in his theological anthropology.

For Matthew the Poor contemporary pastoral issues are an opportunity to apply the theological concept of *theosis*, or in other words, the aim of the *theosis* is the restoration of dignity of man. The idea of human deification is not just a theory or a hypothesis, it is an integral part of human life even while dealing with bioethics.

For this reason, we are going to present in brief his concept of *theosis* and human dignity and then, his answers to the issues of birth control.

### *Theosis* and human dignity

Matthew the Poor's bioethics is built on the theological concept that grows from the liturgical paradigm widespread through the monastic life in Coptic monasteries. Due to a lack of academic theological formation his main source of theological and bioethical reflection was a Coptic liturgy. Besides, it was also an English collection of sayings of ancient church fathers known under the English title *Some Aspects about Orthodox Prayer* (El-Ab Matta el-Meskeen 1990, 9-10, 670; Watson 2006, 71-73) he was strongly influenced by. The basic structure of the Coptic orthodox worship could be presented in following paradigm: creation – original sin – incarnation – redemption – salvation – deification.

It needs to be noted that while speaking about contemporary Christian believers he emphasizes that the whole mankind is in between two acts of creation and both of them guarantee the dynamic growth of man to perfection and thus to full dignity.

The first creation is described in first chapters of the Book of Genesis (Gen. 1:27-31; 2:7). It is the beginning of existence and also the beginning of a distinction between man and woman. Both of them deserve and possess the fullness of humanity because both of them are created according to the image of God. (El-Ab Matta el-Meskeen 1982, 20-21)

According to his interpretations the second creation is anticipated in Christ's dialogue with Nicodemus (John 3:3-6) and also realized for the first

time in the history in life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He presents a paradox of Christian teaching where due to the second creation there are no longer differences between sexes although due to the first creation the differences still exist. (El-Ab Matta el-Meskeenn 1982, 20-23) The second creation guarantees a dynamic change or more precisely a renewal of human abilities and goals.

In his anthropological and also bioethical texts we can find a description of a process leading toward a radical transformation of human life. The process is anticipated in everyday life and will be fulfilled in the eschatological perspective. The dynamic of the second creation growing from the first one is reflected also in his bioethics. Man is a being that cannot be defined by finite terms and definitions because of his infinite goals and abilities. If the process of deification of man is a dynamic process, then dignity of man in the context of bioethical issues is a dynamic process as well. In other words: man grows to his/her perfection and his/her dignity.

The final goal of the second creation is above all the unification of man with God, or in other words it is the deification of man by the grace of God. In his text we can find Greek terminology gr. Θεία ένωσις, θεοποίησις or Arabic equivalent ar. *تأليه الإنسان*. (El-Ab Matta el-Meskeenn 1990, 191-207; Matta el-Maskîne 1998, 151-166; conf. Athanase d'Alexandrie 1973) Especially in his opus magnum *Hayat el-salat el-orthodoxia* [=Orthodox prayer life] published for first time in 1952. (El-Ab Matta el-Meskeenn 1952, 194-195) To support the provoking idea, which is quite rare in the contemporary Coptic theology, he abundantly quotes the Church Fathers. Among them there are classics: St. Irenaeus and his *Against Heresies*, texts by Athanasius of Alexandria, Basil the Great, Clement of Alexandria on the one hand and also western theologians of Latin tradition such as St. Augustine from Hippo on the other hand. (El-Ab Matta el-Meskeenn 1990, 649-668)

In the light of the ancient Church Fathers he interprets the unity of man with God in the way that a man is able to live in a full communion with God again. The communion is so deep that it seems to be the unity of both of the beings. In order to keep his teachings in the framework of Christian orthodoxy he emphasizes that the deification of man is not achieved through a change of the human nature into the divine one. Matthew the Poor always presents Biblical God as the one who is holy - literary translated it means the separate one, heb. *שׁוֹרֵק* (Isa 40:25). In the same way man stays separated from God because he is forever completely different from God, i.e. he is God's creation.

Nevertheless, both of them are part of the communion. and the unity consists of both of them because otherwise it is uncompleted. As a theologian from the Coptic and Alexandrian tradition he is focused on Christological issues. Jesus

Christ's life story is the prototype of the process. It is widely accepted by Christians that humanity and divinity have been united in the Incarnation without mingling, confusion, separation or division of both of the natures. (Erminio 1978, 2498-2507; Grillmeier 1975) In his own words he brings a comment to the St. Athanasius of Alexandria:

He explains and highlights at every occasion the essential link between the incarnation of God and the deification of man. (Matthew the Poor 2003, 196; El-Ab Matta el-Meskeen 1990, 107)

And later he presents his own thesis:

So the mystery of union between mankind and Christ is the ultimate aim of the incarnation, the crucifixion, the resurrection—nay, of creation in full. (Matthew the Poor 2003, 195-197; El-Ab Matta el-Meskeen 1990, 108)

However, his theology has a significant characteristic. It is a communal theology and it means that according to his interpretation the deification of man as well as dignity of man takes place exclusively in a community of the whole mankind. He particularly refers to the 46<sup>th</sup> homily of St. Macarius the Great (300–391 CE). With reference to ancient texts he claims that the unity between man and God is the main source of creation and also the main source of the Church's existence. The mission and the purpose of the Church is to call the mankind to dynamically grow towards its mystical unity and dignity. (El-Ab Matta el-Meskeen 1990, 108)

The Coptic theological tradition had been significantly formed by the Chalcedonian conflict where the Hellenistic terminology was one of the main theological tools used during the dispute. (Grillmeier 1986, 3-50) In order to avoid the exclusive terminology (i.e. nature, person) Mathew the Poor tends to use the Old Testament terminology. For this reason he defines the process of deification in non-conflicting words: the unity between God and man manifests itself in the unity of the kingdom of Christ and the kingdom of the saints or the communion of the saints. Here we can unveil the inspiration from homilies of St. Macarius the Great. Matthew the Poor claims that both of the kingdoms are *blended* together and they live in each other. Eschatological images of the new heavenly Jerusalem, the Body of Christ, and the portrait of man living with God depicted in Macarius's 46<sup>th</sup> homily (especially in verses 3-6) is one of the most influential texts in his theology. And in the context of the bioethical reasoning he argues

that man can achieve his/her dignity only by unity with God in a communion of the whole mankind. In other words, he excludes no one from it:

In Christianity, the custom of doing good to the poor is worth more than kingly awards, for it raises the vagabond to the level of royalty. (El-Ab Matta el-Meskeen 2000, 24)

His interpretation of the first and the second creation is focused on the deification of man as a dynamic historical phenomenon with the eschatological perspective. Consequently, dignity of man is also historically realized as a dynamic phenomenon. In that framework he tries to avoid speaking about spiritual life of Christians based only on manuals, regulations and fulfilling duties. For him it is clear that spirituality based on manuals leads directly to legalism and moral excesses. (El-Ab Matta el-Meskeen 1974, 20)

Especially in his historical monograph *El-mar'a* [=Women] (El-Ab Matta el-Meskeenn 1982a, 20; El-Ab Matta el-Meskeen 1990) he describes human dignity as a continually evolving process anticipated in life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ which will be fulfilled in the eschatological perspective. Though the book in some parts look like a classical manual of moral theology it is everything but. It deals with dignity of women as it is reflected in the New Testament and writings of Alexandrian theologians Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Cyril of Alexandria and so on. However, the list of to do and not to do activities does not end up in the legalistic emphasis on obedience to the ancient tradition. According to his interpretation the ancient tradition is more or less the source of inspiration. The role of the tradition itself is to present a model of decision-making process and to inspire those who adhere to the tradition.

The reader will have realized that we have restricted ourselves, in considering the rights and duties of women, to the principles laid down by the church in the early days of the formation of a Christian society. This is not with the aim of making these texts the last word on the subject of women, but in the belief that they are the correct starting point from which her position may be advanced with the progress of time, in differing societies and various circumstances.

These early texts came through the word of God and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to pious men, and we are confident that if the spirit they contain is maintained in any action, decision or claim made now or in the future, woman will attain her rightful

equality with man in the realm of social justice, where the Spirit rules. (El-Ab Matta el-Meskeenn 1982a, 88; El-Ab Matta el-Meskeen 1990, 81)

For that reason we can observe a certain level of continuity as well as discontinuity of the tradition if the tradition and Bible are interpreted in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. (El-Ab Matta el-Meskeen 1994)

In order to conclude the introduction to Mathew's anthropology we could sum up the theses: Human dignity is designed by God and anticipated in life of Jesus Christ. Still, the precise interpretation in accordance to the authentic Christian faith in contemporary society needs to be done in regard to the specific circumstances and authentic interpretation of the Holy Scripture and the tradition of Church Fathers. That could be presented as an axiom of his theological reflection on birth control.

## Birth control

Mathew's very first text published in a form of a study and then a book about the birth control *Ray fi tahdid el-nasl* was released the same year the Bishop of Rome Paul VI published his *Humanae vitae*. (Paul VI 1968) The book was later published also in English as *A Viewpoint on Birth control* plus two other reprints in 1994 and 2002. (Father Matta el-Maeskeen 1981) It was published first time in Arabic on 7<sup>th</sup> of August 1968 in a journal *Morkos* and later reprinted. We are using here the Arabic edition published in 1982. (El-Ab Matta el-Meskeen 1982)

It is worthy to say that in the year 1968 Mathew the Poor was still in his solitary in the Wadi el-Rayan (ar. وادي الريان) and his contacts to the civilized world were strictly limited. Nevertheless, the cultural atmosphere in Cairo during 50s and 60s had a touch of liberal feelings spreading there from Europe and North America. Besides, the fertility rates in the whole country were reaching the highest numbers. From 1955 to 1965 the fertility rate in Egypt was 6,75 per woman. (Worldmeters.info 2019) Unprecedented changes of the population rates every year were among the most pressing issues to deal with. And the call for dealing with bioethical issues reached also the religious authorities and theologians of the Coptic Orthodox Church.

Matthew the Poor was not the only spiritual father who paid attention to the issue (El-Ab Matta el-Meskeen 1982, 6; Shenouda 1993, 64; Author 2018, 143-145) but his work is exceptional because he presents the issue from the perspective of the complex theological paradigm and reflects the reality of life of lower as

well as higher classes. Here we would like to emphasize that he reacts to contemporary issues and therefore he presents answers to them only. (El-Ab Matta el-Meskeen 1982, 6)

For the first time in his publication career he brings comments on bioethical issues also together with his political comments concerning the relationship between the church and the state. Mathew the Poor, on the contrary to the Alexandrian patriarch of the Coptic tradition the Pope Shenouda III, was convinced that both of the institutions have different missions and different functions in the society and above all both of them are not allowed to deal with each other's internal affairs. Rigorous separation of the church and the state is significant for him especially while theologically dealing with a human decision-making process. We are going to distinct and present his primary bioethical observations, however, his political remarks are hardly to be separated from the first one. (El-Ab Matta el-Meskeen 2009)

Still, because the Holy Scripture and the tradition are the main sources of inspiration for him, he starts his essay in nearly liberal formulation in spite of the fact that the liberalism is strange to him:

„Sexual questions, in general, are not put forward by the Bible for general discussions, nor are they settled in it by rules. One of the sayings of Christ which brim with inspiration and freedom is His view regarding the choice between celibacy and marriage: Whosoever can accept let him accept. (Matt. 19:12; El-Ab Matta el-Meskeen 1982, 3)

While saying that he also emphasizes the non-legalistic approach to the interpretation of the bioethical issues connected to the sexuality and birth control. Based on the sources of the inspiration he opens a discussion to critical discernment of contemporary issues based on the classical theological sources. His method is a progressive and unique approach within the theological tradition of the Coptic Orthodox Church. He is ready to accept as sources of theological discernment also the *sensus fidei* or as would the Catholics say also *reading of signs of the times* beside the classical sources of faith, Bible, and the Tradition.

Nevertheless, his liberal approach might lead to the relativity of the supposed decisions which could be undesirable in matters of moral evaluation of human behavior. He himself explains his reasons for this theological attitude. The partial relativity leaves a room for freedom of conscience that takes priority over completely necessary moral teaching or theological manual literature. For that reason, he underlines above mentioned New Testament words by a short commentary:

Here He does not treat the issue of sexual life, with respect to the Kingdom of God, as an issue which is absolutely related to faith, but presents ability (can) as an essential element with it. St. Paul also elucidates this point by shedding further light in saying: Nevertheless he who stands steadfast in his heart, having no necessity, but has power over his own will, and has so determined in his heart that he will keep his virgin, does well. (El-Ab Matta el-Meskeen 1982, 3)

Matthew the Poor describes man as God's creation according to God's image which grows to the fullness of the image. Therefore, the human fertility is considered to be one of the direct echoes of God's creativity. The call to the fertility is one of the basic duties of man to fulfill. On the other hand, the creativity and life-giving abilities are not denied by choosing a celibate way of life. For him the real life-giver is not he/she who procreates in sexual way. The real motherhood and fatherhood grow from the relationship between persons only when he/she leads the others (i.e. children) to life. It means life in the spiritual way: to baptize the child, to provide the education and existential means.

Surprisingly, in his essay the infertility might be also an imitation of God's actions. The choice of celibacy as well as the choice of methods of the birth control are considered to be ways of imitating God's actions. Beyond that, he also makes distinction between physical and spiritual fertility and infertility. He argues that for that reason God makes some from his creation physically fertile and other physically infertile. However, the whole mankind is called to the spiritual creativity and fertility. For Matthew the Poor man's infertility is part of God's will and man has the duty to reveal its meaning. He points out once again the word "to inspire":

By controlling birth in his decisive way which seems to be natural, God does not declare His helplessness in providing for mankind, but He means to inspire man with the feasibility of limiting the birth rate of children, the burden of which surpasses his capabilities, whether in bringing them up or in feeding them. Hence, in practicing birth control as such he is but following God's example if his intention is as good as God's. (El-Ab Matta el-Meskeen 1982, 6)

Thus it allows him to reflect the entire issue of birth control in quite liberal terms. It means that he is speaking about an inspiration made by God without anticipated answers: "Sexual questions, in general, are not put forward by

the Bible for general discussions, nor are they settled in it by rules". It leads us to twofold argumentation. The first one is the argument about the appropriateness of methods of birth control in marriage and it means exclusively in marriage. The second area is the involvement of external institutions into the decision-making process in marriage and family life; i.e. the institution of the Church and the state.

## Methods of birth control

Matthew the Poor presents four arguments in favor of birth control. With reference to the first letter to Corinthians (1Cor 7:3-5 and 1Cor 6:2) he discerns but not separates two goals of the sexual intercourse between the spouses. The first one is the physical need and satisfaction of the sexual desires and the second one is procreation. Since both of the goals are integral parts of the God's plan it is possible to separate them at least to certain extend. (El-Ab Matta el-Meskeen 1982, 7)

The second argument deals with changes of a woman's body before it gets ready for possible pregnancy or vice versa gets periodically infertile. He also mentions that the fact of the periodical fertility and infertility of woman was unknown until modern times. For him it is also an argument on the list of inspirations for using scientific means of birth control. (El-Ab Matta el-Meskeen 1982, 8)

The third argument grows from the second one. If we are ready to let the ovum die during periodical changes of woman's body we have also an implicate permission from God to utilize scientific means to imitate the natural process. In other words, if it is possible in a natural way, then a similar goal can be achieved with the assistance of a science, too. (El-Ab Matta el-Meskeen 1982, 8)

Therefore the fourth argument deals with the certainty of the methods. It seems to us that he was well informed about the behavioral methods of contraception also known as symptom-based or calendar-based methods that were developed mainly in European Catholic milieu and are until now days known as methods of natural family planning. And because he was not convinced about the reliability of the method and was also fully aware of the risk of unwanted pregnancy in poor Coptic families he concludes that to use other methods of birth control is "obligatory, especially for those who are uneducated or unable to control themselves." (El-Ab Matta el-Meskeen 1982, 8)

Therefore, he approaches to the practical application of his observations. According to his findings he is convinced that not just barrier contraceptives but also hormonal contraception is convincingly allowed for Christian couples:

Hence, if people – including the most religiously-minded – have resorted to science and medical treatment for reproduction, and increase of vigor without trusting exclusively to God or faith, how then could those people consider the usage of contraceptives contrary to faith? (El-Ab Matta el-Meskeen 1982, 10)

Let us also add that he takes into his theological consideration a question of using abortive or non-abortive contraception and obviously he encourages Christians to use only the non-abortive methods of contraception, it means in both the barrier and the hormonal form. (El-Ab Matta el-Meskeen 1982, 8)

To conclude this part of the text we need to present also his arguments for conditions which impose the reduction of birth rate. In general he speaks about two main reasons. The main one for the mandatory use of contraception is a health condition of mother, especially the life-threatening conditions. The second one is in Egypt widespread phenomenon of economic reasons that could threaten families on existential levels. (El-Ab Matta el-Meskeen 1982, 8) He concludes his observations by summing up:

Thus it is obvious that the problem of birth control is governed by three important factors none of which can be overlooked: faith, health, and economy. Faith in God induces us to bless marriage and childbearing, trusting that God is able to provide means of livelihood for all. Health considerations orient this faith towards due regard for the health of the wife and children. Economic calculate not only the expenses of food, drink or clothing, but all the obligations involved in the process of bringing up the children. (El-Ab Matta el-Meskeen 1982, 11)

Classical sources of the morality of human acts depend on the chosen object, the intention, and on the circumstances of the action. For Matthew the Poor all the three elements are here and all of them are positively discerned as acceptable from the Christian perspective. (El-Ab Matta el-Meskeen 1982, 9)

When he positively solves the question of birth control he also asks himself the question of the role of the state and the Church in family life in general and in the birth control in particular.

## The role of the church and the state

We are going to deal with the question of politics in the modern Egyptian state and within the religious realms of the Egyptian Christianity, i.e. the Coptic Orthodox Church. As soon as the last king of Egypt and Sudan Fuad II was toppled down an Egyptian renaissance (ar. نهضة, *nahda*) broke out and the nationalistic feelings started to lead the debate about the identity of Egyptians. Beyond that, Coptic Christians are constantly oppressed by the Muslim majority. Due to this, they are randomly calling publicly or in a clandestine way for the restoration of the Coptic religious and national identity. For example, Popes Shenouda's exile in early 80's was rationalized by a suspicion that he is working on splitting the nation and also the state into the Coptic one and the Muslim one – allegedly the capital city of a new state within the Egypt was Asyut. We need to keep in our minds that the unity of the Egyptian people had been among the most treasured values in the Egyptian society in 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The leading axiom of his church-state theological reflection was a total separation of the two. His book *El-kanisat wa 'l-dawlata* (El-Ab Matta el-Meskeen 2009) later published also in English version *The Church and the State* (Father Matta el-Maeskeen 2009a) is from its very beginning call appeal for the separation of both of them due to their different competencies. (El-Ab Matta el-Meskeen 1982, 8)

When presenting this axiom he makes a discernment between individual and social goods and also discerns competences entrusted not just to the Church and to the state but also to an individual. He sustains certain independence of individuals in the decision-making process within the Church structures and within the working system of the state by the reason that individuals including their families live in both of them simultaneously and must respect their demands. Consequently, an individual enjoys his freedoms and obligation to both forms of organization and at the same time he also enjoys his independence and freedoms.

Starting with the Church he clearly states that she must not interfere in the decision-making process within the families unless it is within its own competence, i.e. the salvation of souls. And while the question of the permissibility of birth control has been positively resolved from the theological point of view, then to make a decision or to choose means and tools of birth control depends on individuals:

The Church cannot propound a medical or economic opinion in the problem of birth control for this does not fall within her compe-

tence. Yet she can express her opinion concerning faith without ignoring medical and economical considerations. (...) In other words the Church cannot prohibit the means of contraception and enjoin upon people to reproduce without limit, while missing to provide for those unable to bring up children. (El-Ab Matta el-Meskeen 1982, 12)

On the contrary, the role of the state is different. On the one hand the role of the state is limited by nearly the similar arguments as in the ecclesiastical case. However, individuals and their families are also part of a state system and due to this they must respect the state and its demands at least on the level of the civil society. If the individual is also a Christian believer who lives his/her life in a harmony with God's will which is incarnated in the Church including her teaching and structures of organization, then he/she balances the intervention of the state by the two: the competences of the Church and freedom of his/her conscience. *Matthew the Poor* deals with the role of the state in birth control mainly from the economic point of view and from the healthcare role of the state.

Let us recall in brief the settings of the Egyptian society and the state. The political system in Egypt is traditionally tied for a long period of history to the Muslim religious law. Modern politics is based on republicanism. The system might be described as a semi-presidential system of government. Egyptian parliament is the only one who can impeach the President. Key document of the Egyptian jurisprudence is the Constitution. (Hulsman 2017) The Egyptian Constitution of 2014 in harmony to previous Constitutions says in preamble:

We are drafting a Constitution that affirms that the principles of Islamic Sharia are the principal source of legislation, and that the reference for the interpretation of such principles lies in the body of the Relevant Supreme Constitutional Court Rulings. (Sis.gov.eg. 2014a; Sis.gov.eg. 2014b)

While saying that the state can enter into the Christian family life and regulate the birth rates he supposes that it is the partly secular and partly the religion based state. *Matthew the Poor* is fully aware of non-Christian religious principles the state is based on. Consequently, he reduces the intervention of the state to the indirect influence on the family through tools of economical motivations and through health improving projects. And the Church is strongly motivated by *Matthew the Poor* to cooperate with the state and the government in it.

The state legislation on birth control can reduce the birth rates by financial methods but cannot touch the faith of the Church. Only in case of economic weakness of the system, the state can indirectly start to press on the citizens by three possible ways: withholding from social and economic contribution to education and to health services and withholding from aids to large families. Then, the richest of the families could have as many children as they would afford.

The second area of argumentation are health issues associated with child-bearing. First, he emphasizes that the same way the Church also the state “has no power over marriage and birth control” (El-Ab Matta el-Meskeen 1982, 13). However, he also deals with the risk of certain diseases in the process of procreation. He specifically mentions eugenics arguments and continues that it is up to state to oversee a purity of the human race genetics:

While the state has played a great role in improving health in many fields. (...) The state should take into consideration, for instance, the extent of the serious damage incurred by the country and the family in allowing lunacy to contaminate a health progeny. (El-Ab Matta el-Meskeen 1982, 14)

His words could potentially lead to abusing authority and power by the state over the family in the birth control area. Because Matthew the Poor is fully aware of it he continues that in spite of logical arguments:

So far, neither the Church nor the state has banned marriage of reproduction to those infected with serious venereal diseases which ruins family life and blight the health of offspring. (El-Ab Matta el-Meskeen 1982, 13)

To conclude his theological observations he emphasizes that the legislative of the state has only indirect influence on the family planning and it should promote the prevention program over the repressive legislation. He counts some of the preventive instruments and among them are education, popularization of the scientific discoveries, intellectual and spiritual formation before marriage, and, above all, the medical and spiritual supervision of the existing marriage. That is the only way to achieve morally acceptable results on birth control. The mission of the Church is to cooperate with state authorities:

The Church authorities should faithfully and strongly bolster those efforts which ultimately contribute to the welfare of the family and

consequently to the benefit of the Church. (El-Ab Matta el-Meskeen 1982, 13)

## Conclusion

We have presented Matthew the Poor as an exceptional theologian of the Coptic tradition interested in the concept of the deification of man who had focused also on the issues of family planning and birth control. Historical context of his theology proves that he was facing the rapidly rising number of the Egyptian population. Therefore, his observations must also be understood in the cultural context of 50's and 60's of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He was not the first one who was dealing with the question of birth control, however, in the tradition of the Coptic Orthodox Church he was the first one presenting concise reflection with considering settings of the contemporary society and with profound theological arguments. The official declaration of the Coptic Orthodox Church appeared almost two decades later.

Matthew the Poor frames his bioethics into his theologically-anthropological thesis that the human existence is inseparably linked to the Word incarnated, to His death and resurrection, and the determination of the human existence to the eschatological unity with God called deification. God himself, even in the bioethical issues, thus guarantees human dignity. Therefore, dignity of man is the reality that is guaranteed by a transcendent God.

He leaves the final decision on birth control upon the spouses with strong support from the Church as well from the state. For that reason the role of the state is in his books the role of the authority that is called to intervene in birth control, but he limits its powers to indirect control.

Among the most inspiring parts of his work belongs his tendency toward the non-conflicting way of discussion and also communal pattern of his theological and bioethical reflection. Thus, we can conclude the paper with summing up that his bioethical reasoning is leading to the non-conflicting and communal bioethics inspired by Bible and the Christian Tradition with opened limits to the continuity and discontinuity of the tradition.

Many questions were left aside. Among the most important ones belong the role of the Muslim religious scholars and their legal opinions (ar. fatwas) in the formation of the Christian theological thought. Another pressing question is the discussion concerning the consciousness within the Egyptian Christian community, the Egyptian society in general and in the legal system of the state. The

term is unknown to the Muslim religious tradition and thus also to the Egyptian jurisprudence, culture, etc. The third and the last question on our short list is the influence of foreign scholars on the Matthew the Poor. Despite the fact that the formulated conclusion about his specific approach to the bioethics might be at least an inspiration to contemporary discussion concerning the bioethics in general and birth control in particular.

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