The Coptic Liturgy and Its Medieval Symbolic Tradition: A Reading Against the Backdrop of Schmemann's Liturgical Theology*

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Notwithstanding the ecumenical appeal of the Liturgical Theology articulated and promoted by Fr Alexander Schmemann throughout his scholarly and pastoral career, it is self-evident that Schmemann's engagement with Christian liturgy was undertaken almost exclusively from the vantage point of the Byzantine Rite, the ritual system and tradition that he knew and lived throughout his long and fruitful life as an Orthodox priest and professor of Liturgy. Yet perhaps few readers within the Coptic Orthodox world—and fewer still outside it—recall that Schmemann did indeed come into contact briefly with Coptic Christianity and with Coptic liturgy specifically in the late 1970s. Visiting Egypt in February of 1978, he acknowledged in his *Journals* first of all that the world of Coptic Christianity was, "totally

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unknown to [him]". He then proceeds to speak very highly, first of the late Coptic Pope Shenouda III, who impressed him as a hierarch of genuine life and spiritual openness, the monastic establishments of the Egyptian desert, where in his words, "real monks" dwell, and of Coptic Christianity in general, which he saw as "revived and alive!"[1]

But it was on Sunday, February 12, 1978, that Fr Alexander seems to have attended his first Coptic liturgy, in an unnamed medieval church in Old Cairo. Commenting on this experience, Fr Alexander penned the following interesting, albeit somewhat unclear remark: "The impression [by which, I take it, *his* impression of the experience] is somewhat confused. On the one hand, it is undoubtedly Alexandrian—everything is under cover, seen only through covers. Tiny royal doors, and there, at the altar, the priest performs something belonging to another world. He performs very slowly, accompanied by one very long, inimitable, prayerful melody. On the other hand, a refreshing absence of any Byzantinism."[2] As can be expected of such a personal literary genre as the private journal, Schmemann does not elaborate on what exactly he regards as confusing, why a notable prominence of veiling (in church architecture and liturgical performance) is necessarily Alexandrian, or why the expected absence of Byzantinism is particularly refreshing, especially when such emphasis on veiling and unveiling is a common motif in the liturgical piety and practice of the Byzantine Rite as well. One can suspect however that behind Schmemann's impression of Coptic worship lies some of the fundamental features of his liturgical theology common throughout his works. Without feigning expertise in the thought and language of Schmemann's theology, one frequently encounters in his works a tension between an archaic, authentic, eschatologically oriented, and unencumbered experience of the Eucharist event on

1 Juliana Schmemann (trans.), *The Journals of Father Alexander Schmemann, 1973–1983*, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY 2000, 188-189.

2 Ibid., 189.

the one hand, and what he regarded as secondary accretions impeding this original simplicity, whether in the form of diverse practices of veiling (seen in church architecture, physical posture, or even the use of ancient languages), or in the form of excessively complicated and arbitrary mystagogical symbolism, linking each action and movement in the Byzantine liturgy to specific events in the life of Christ. Perhaps this is precisely what was confusing to Schmemann in his experience of Coptic liturgy in one of its most medieval iterations in Old Cairo, that a tradition can at once be so similarly given over to such veiling practices, while lacking any apparent connection to Byzantium and its liturgy.

Much has been written throughout the twentieth century and until now evaluating the theology of Alexander Schmemann, what Robert Taft aptly called "the Schmemann phenomenon",[3] and assessing its positive impact, its potential exaggerations, and even most recently, suggesting horizons for liturgical theology after Schmemann.[4] My goal here is not to enter into this diverse and often conflicting scholarly genre, which stands quite at a distance from my own work as a historian of Coptic liturgy, a field in which I believe we have much work to do just to get the facts right before we can presume to divine what a "Coptic Liturgical Theology" might be, or how a truly authentic Coptic liturgical culture may or may not distinguish itself from more well-known worship traditions in Byzantium or elsewhere. Yet the fact of the matter is that the so-called "Schmemann phenomenon" remains influential at least within North American Orthodoxy. In this regard, Coptic Orthodox are no exception. As relative-newcomers on the American Orthodox scene, many faithful

3 Robert F. Taft, "The Liturgical Enterprise Twenty-Five Years after Alexander Schmemann (1921-1983): The Man and His Heritage", in *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 53/2-3 (2009), 139-163.

4 On the last one especially, see Brian A. Butcher, *Liturgical Theology After Schmemann: An Orthodox Reading of Paul Ricoeur*, Orthodox Christianity and Contemporary Thought, Fordham University Press, New York 2018 [doi: https://doi.org/10.1515/9780823278299].

and clergy have already noted the dearth of sophisticated English-language treatments of Orthodox liturgy, its theology, and meaning in the contemporary context. While theological educational programs are on the rise throughout the continent in several Coptic Dioceses, liturgical education in these programs remains largely stuck with old-fashioned approaches to liturgy, ranging from the simple exposition of rubrical details to a naïve emphasis on allegorical symbolism devoid of any regard to the historical evolution and cultural context that gave rise to Coptic liturgy as we know it. In this general state of affairs, it is natural that the writings of Fr Alexander Schmemann would receive significant attention as much more nuanced and theological, indeed managing in the broadest sense to refocus the attention on the larger questions such as what the Church is, what the Liturgy is, and what happens when the former celebrates the latter.[5]

But I return once again to the topic of liturgical mystagogy and symbolism, a literary tradition so often criticized in Schmemann's writings. From my own vantage point as a Coptic liturgiologist, what is lost in the course of this Coptic share in "the Schmemann phenomenon" is lack of awareness of the Copts' own tradition of liturgical mystagogy. Part of this is understandable. Until recently, medieval Arabic commentaries on the Coptic liturgy have remained esoteric texts, accessible only to those who know of their manuscripts and/or outdated editions, able to read them in their often amusing and confusing Middle Arabic, or alternatively fluent in French, Italian, or even Latin. I have in mind of course the three most-famous of these

5 That the works of Fr Alexander Schmemann have significant currency also within North American Coptic theology, see as but one example the recent work: Albair Mikhail, *Coptic Orthodox Liturgical History: Uncovering the Origins, Development, and Contemporary Implications of Coptic Rites and Traditions in Worship of God*, vol. 1, *Regular Days: Offering of Incense, Liturgies, and Vigil*, St Mary & St Moses Abbey Press, Sandia, TX 2022, where the author cites four famous works of Schmemann's: *Introduction to Liturgical Theology*, *Liturgy and Tradition, Liturgy and Life, and The Eucharist*. By comparison, the author seems mostly unaware of the many works of Robert F. Taft or even those of the Coptic liturgiologist and Benedictine monk Ugo Zanetti Chevetogne, citing two by the former and one by the latter.

commentaries, written in chronological order by Abū-l-Barakāt ibn Kabar (d. 1320),[6] Yūḥannā ibn Sabbā‘ (14th c.),[7] and Pope Gabriel V (AD 1411),[8] the latter constituting a quasi-official *diataxis* and commentary on the Coptic eucharistic liturgy, whose ritual details echo to this day in printed service books and actual practice. Recently, I was fortunate to publish English translations of these three authors' commentaries on the Coptic eucharistic liturgy in a single monograph.[9] A fourth, lesser-known text with mystagogical commentary is the thirteenth-century *The Guide to the Beginners and the Disciplining of the Laity*, by Ps.-Cyril III ibn Laqlaq (AD 1235-1243), which shows that some of the common liturgical symbols found in later authors go back at

6 The oldest extant manuscript of *The Lamp of Darkness* (*Miṣbāḥ al-ẓulmah*) is *Paris, BnF Ar. 203* (AD 1363–1369). See the following literature for other manuscripts. On Ibn Kabar's life and works, see Samir Khalil Samir, *L'Encyclopédie liturgique d'Ibn Kabar († 1324) et son apologie d'usages coptes*, in Hans-Jürgen Feulner – Elena Velkovska – Robert F. Taft (eds.), *Crossroad of Cultures: Studies in Liturgy and Patristics in Honor of Gabriele Winkler*, Orientalia Christiana Analecta 26, Pontificio Istituto Orientale, Rome 2000, 619-655; Georg Graf, *Geschichte der christlichen arabischen Literatur*, vol. 2, *Die Schriftsteller biz zur Mitte des 15. Jahrhundert*, Studi e Testi 133, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vatican City 1947, 438-445. Cf. Wadī‘ Awaḍ, *Al-Shams ibn Kabar*, in David Thomas – Alex Mallett (eds.), *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History*, vol. 4, *(1200–1350)*, History of Christian-Muslim Relations 17, Brill, Leiden 2012, 762-766 [doi: https://doi.org/10.1163/1877-8054_cmri_com_25657]. No complete edition of *The Lamp* exists, but see the French translation of Chapter 17 on the eucharistic liturgy: Louis Villecourt, "Les observances liturgiques et la discipline du jeûne dans l'Eglise copte", in *Le Muséon* 37 (1924), 201-280.

7 The oldest manuscript of Ibn Sabbā‘'s *Precious Jewel* (*Al-jawharah al-nafīsah*) is *Paris, BnF Ar. 207* (14th c.). Edition: Vincentio Mistrīḥ, *Yūḥannā ibn Abī Zakarīā ibn Sibā‘, Pretiosa margarita de scientiis ecclesiasticis*, Studia Orientalia Christiana, Aegyptiaca, Centrum Franciscanum Studiorum Orientalium Christianorum, Cairo 1966. For more information on Ibn Sabbā‘, see G. Graf, *Geschichte*, vol. 2, 448-449; Mark N. Swanson, *Ibn Sabbā‘*, in *Christian-Muslim Relations*, vol. 4, 918-923 [doi: https://doi.org/10.1163/1877-8054_cmr_com_25553]; Milad Sidky Zakhary, *De la Trinité à la Trinité: La christologie liturgique d'Ibn Sabbā', auteur copte du XIIIe siècle*, Bibliotheca Ephemerides Liturgicae, Subsidia 140, Edizioni Liturgiche, Rome 2007, 98-130.

8 The single manuscript of *The Ritual Order* (*Al-tartīb al-ṭaqsī*) is *Paris, BnF Ar. 98* (17th c.). Edition: Alfonso ‘Abdallah, *L'ordinamento liturgico di Gabriele V, 88° Patriarca Copto (1409-1427)*, Studia Orientalia Christiana, Aegyptiaca, Edizioni del Centro Francescano di Studi Orientali Cristiani, Cairo 1962.

9 Arsenius Mikhail (ed.), *Guides to the Eucharist in Medieval Egypt: Three Commentaries on the Coptic Liturgy*, Christian Arabic Texts in Translation 2, Fordham University Press, New York 2022 [doi: https://doi.org/10.5422/fordham/9780823298310.001.0001]. See especially the summary of scholarship on the lives and works of these three medieval authors on pages 2-19.

least to the thirteenth century. To date, this important text is available only in German translation by Georg Graf,[10] besides a recent edition of the Arabic text by Misael al-Baramūsī.[11] With most of these texts now available to a wider English readership, it is time that we begin to engage with the Coptic mystagogical tradition on its own terms, rather than merely recycling the often-inspired theological reflections of Alexander Schmemann, reflections that he based primarily on his own—often limited—historical knowledge of a rather different liturgical tradition. Thus, in this article I read the Coptic mystagogical tradition against the backdrop of Schmemann's views of mystagogy and symbolism to reflect on whether these views are truly informed by the Coptic worship experience in its historical context.

1. Schmemann on Symbolism and Mystagogy

The first task however is to attempt to summarize Schmemann's views and criticisms of Byzantine liturgical commentaries and their mystagogical symbolism. This is of course no simple task, since his writing style was hardly well-organized into a cohesive system, often given over as he was to occasional hyperbole and repetitiveness.[12] Nonetheless, the topics of symbols, symbolism, and mystagogy recur time and again in Schmemann's writings, beginning with his 1959 doctoral dissertation, later translated and published as the classic *Introduction to Liturgical Theology*,[13] all the way to his crowning achievement *The Eucharist: Sacrament of the Kingdom*, posthumously

10 Georg Graf, "Liturgische Anweisungen des koptischen Patriarchen Kyrillos ibn Laklak", in *Jahrbuch für Liturgiewissenschaft* 4 (1924), 119-134.

11 Mīṣā'īl al-Baramūsī, دلال المبتدئين وتهذيب العلمانيين: أقدم دلال طقسي للكنيسة القبطية [The guide to the beginners and the disciplining of the laity: The oldest ritual guide of the Coptic Church], Madrasat al-iskandariyyah, Cairo 2021.

12 R. Taft, "The Liturgical Enterprise Twenty-Five Years after Alexander Schmemann", 169.

13 Alexander Schmemann, *Introduction to Liturgical Theology*, trans. Ashleigh E. Moorhouse, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY 1986.

published in 1987.[14] In addition to these two prominent works bookending his prolific career, Fr Alexander dedicated a chapter to this topic, titled "Sacrament and Symbol", which was published initially in 1970 in a book titled *Evangelium und Sakrament* and subsequently included in his classic monograph on sacramental theology, *For the Life of the World*.[15] A final work on this topic is an article titled "Symbols and Symbolism in the Byzantine Liturgy", published in 1981 in a Festschrift for Archbishop Iakovos,[16] and later re-printed in the collected essays titled *Liturgy and Tradition*.[17]

It is with this last article that I would like to begin to summarize Schmemann's views on liturgical symbolism. There, he posits that while there is an organic continuity throughout history in the liturgy itself—i.e. the meaning apparent in its order, structure, and ritual as it developed historically—there is a certain discontinuity, a break, in how the liturgy is perceived, understood, and experienced on a deep level by the community.[18] The nature of this break is referenced in a more historical fashion in his *Introduction to Liturgical Theology*, where he claims rather emphatically, "It is quite evident historically that the early Church knew nothing about the later «symbolical» explanation of her ceremonies of worship."[19] He continues to explain that while baptism in the early Church was of course understood as the likeness (ὁμοίωμα) of the death and resurrection of Christ (Rom 6:5)—a connection we now know was not the only baptismal paradigm

14 Alexander Schmemann, *The Eucharist: Sacrament of the Kingdom*, trans. Paul Kachu, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY 2003.

15 First published in Günther Gaßmann (ed.), *Evangelium und Sakrament*, Oecumenica 5, Mohn, Gütersloh 1970. See Alexander Schmemann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy*, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY 1973, 135-151.

16 Demetrios J. Constantelos (ed.), *Orthodox Theology and Diakonia: Trends and Prospects: Essays in Honor of His Eminence Archbishop Iakovos on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday*, Hellenic College Press, Brookline, MA 1981, 91-102.

17 Thomas Fisch (ed.), *Liturgy and Tradition: Theological Reflections of Alexander Schmemann*, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY 1990, 115-128.

18 A. Schmemann, "Symbols and Symbolism", 121.

19 A. Schmemann, *Introduction to Liturgical Theology*, 108.

in early Christianity[20]—he prefers to describe the ritual differently as the likeness of the death and resurrection of the believer, and not of Christ per se. Yes, the entire mystery is based upon the saving acts of Christ's death and resurrection, yet Schmemann does not see in this generalized "early Church baptism" a symbolic representation of these saving events, which to him would imply Christ's dying and rising again in every ceremony, but in the baptized Christian "actualizing his/her faith in Christ and the Church", through this ritual gesture of immersion in and rising from the baptismal font.[21]

Schmemann is well known for attributing this change in ritual understanding to the Church's historical transition before and after Constantine. In the same *Introduction to Liturgical Theology*, he expresses this idea very clearly in the third chapter, dedicated to the changes undergone by Christian worship during the fourth and fifth centuries. Among many such undesired developments, Schmemann notes a shift from a predominantly ecclesiological understanding of the Eucharist to one that emphasized illustrative symbolism, which he termed "mysteriological" representation of Christ's life.[22] This shift he sees as a gradual result of a change in liturgical piety to be explained

20 For a thorough analysis of the sources and scholarly debates on pre-Nicene baptismal practice and theology, see Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation: Their Evolution and Interpretation*, revised expanded ed., Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN 2007, 41-82. Based on extensive work by Gabriele Winkler on the Syriac and Armenian sources, it has become clear that the baptismal theology prevalent in pre-Nicene sources was based on Christ's baptism in the Jordan rather than on the death and life with Christ of Romans 6, common in later periods and seen in the East beginning only with Origen. For this debate especially, see Ibid., 58-59, 72; Gabriele Winkler, *The Original Meaning of the Prebaptismal Anointing and Its Implications*, in Maxwell E. Johnson (ed.), *Living Water, Sealing Spirit: Readings on Christian Initiation*, Pueblo, Collegeville, MN 1995, 58-81; Gabriele Winkler, *Das armenische Initiationsrituale: Entwicklungsgeschichtliche und liturgievergleichende Untersuchung der Quellen des 3. bis 10. Jahrhunderts*, Orientalia Christiana Analecta 217, Pontificium Institutum Studiorum Orientalium, Rome 1982; Paul F. Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship: Sources and Methods for the Study of Early Liturgy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2002², 149-151 [doi: https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780195217322.001.0001].

21 A. Schmemann, *Introduction to Liturgical Theology*, 109.

22 Ibid., 128-129.

in the context of the increased number of nominal Christians after the peace of Constantine. The claim is that now Christian ceremonies for the first time come to be perceived as sacred actions in themselves, mysteries performed for the sanctification of those participating, that is, to purify them and set them apart from the profane world outside.[23] This is seen in turn to have led to the growth of clerical separation from the laity, leading eventually to a whole host of practices like physical barriers within the church building, emphasis on the dreadful character of the mysteries, the silent recitation of the eucharistic prayer, and last but not least a shift away from the ecclesial or corporate nature of the eucharistic liturgy as a whole.[24]

As a result, the very idea of symbol according to Schmemann undergoes a harmful distortion in meaning. In his *Eucharist: Sacrament of the Kingdom*, he expresses this issue early on, stating that today's current understanding of the term symbol is that of representation or illustration of a past event, an understanding that he insists is in fact a distortion of the Christian conception of worship and a cause of its decline.[25] The core issue as expressed there is that by reducing symbol to mere representation, it becomes radically distinct from and opposed to what is real. Thus, for example, the Eucharist itself is conceived of as *either* symbolic or real, but not both. A procession of the Gospel book (the Byzantine Little Entrance) symbolizes Christ's coming to earth, precisely because Christ's Advent is no longer a present reality. In the final analysis, Schmemann continues, worship is reduced to mere didactic dramatization, the acting out of past events for the superficial purpose of teaching the participants and refreshing their memory.[26] Earlier in his article "Symbols and Symbolism", Schmemann points to another issue with illustrative symbolism, namely, the discrepancy

23 Ibid., 127.
24 Ibid., 127-128.
25 A. Schmemann, *The Eucharist*, 30.
26 Ibid., 30-31.

between the immediate meaning and sense of the liturgical prayers and the complex dramatic representation attributed to the rite as a secondary and artificial layer by various commentators.[27]

Byzantine liturgical commentaries constitute a rich and venerable literary genre, most famously studied by René Bornert.[28] For his part, Schmemann was consistently critical of such literature throughout his writing career. Early on in *Introduction to Liturgical Theology*, Schmemann seems to single out the commentary by Symeon of Thessalonica as particularly representative of the overgrown late Byzantine penchant for illustrative dramatization and arbitrary symbolism, though he is careful to state that this liturgical theology can be seen already at work in fourth-century writings such as the *Catecheses* of Cyril/John of Jerusalem, and even in Egeria's *Itinerarium* of her visit to the holy city.[29] Although he highlights Symeon as an example of the culmination of this interpretative mystagogy, he stresses elsewhere that even earlier commentaries (e.g. Maximus Confessor, Ps.-Dionysius), all suffer from being rooted in theological theory superimposed upon the liturgy, rather than deriving meaning from the liturgical event and prayers themselves.[30] Perhaps nothing captures Schmemann's negative view of Byzantine commentaries than his own unfiltered journal entry for May 11, 1979, when he delivered the same talk, "Symbols and Symbolism", at Dumbarton Oaks Research Library at a symposium, where before him Robert Taft, the prominent historian of Byzantine liturgy, "had praised a horrible commentary of Germanus of Constantinople".[31] In the same journal entry, he

27 A. Schmemann, "Symbols and Symbolism", 117-119.

28 René Bornert, *Les commentaires byzantins de la Divine Liturgie du VIIe au XVe siècle*, Archives de l'Orient Chrétien 9, Institut français d'études byzantines, Paris 1966.

29 Steven Hawkes-Teeples (ed.), *St. Symeon of Thessalonika: The Liturgical Commentaries*, Studies and Texts 168, Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, Toronto 2011 [doi: https://doi.org/10.1515/9781771102421]; A. Schmemann, *Introduction to Liturgical Theology*, 170-171.

30 A. Schmemann, "Symbols and Symbolism", 124.

31 A. Schmemann, *The Journals*, 220.

elaborates further that to him, "down deep they [liturgical symbols] are a substitute for «life in abundance»".[32]

Yet for all his negative assessment of illustrative symbolism, Schmemann also wrote extensively on what he considered the authentic (read: pre-Constantinian) and orthodox meaning of symbols. In the same talk I just mentioned, "Symbols and Symbolism", Schmemann takes a step back to state that the idea of symbol—properly understood—is subordinated to and is the mode of action of the mystery of Christ. That is, Christ's saving ministry, his incarnation, and redemption, in short, the content of the faith, are communicated and experienced as a reality within the Church by way of symbol. Understood this way, symbol becomes the way in which the mystery of Christ is made *present* in the Church, rather than represented *in absentia*.[33] To be sure, this re-positioning of the idea of the symbol proposed by Schmemann privileges a holistic view of salvation history rather than particular salvific events. Thus, he is quick to clarify that symbol here is, "not of this or that particular event or person, but precisely of the whole *mysterion* as its revelation and saving grace".[34] To him, this is a stark qualitative difference in how symbolism functions in liturgy; between symbol-as-presence and symbol-as-absence, and between what he sees as a consistent liturgical theology of a Maximus Confessor, and the arbitrary and fragmented symbolism of a Symeon of Thessalonica.

But if Schmemann problematizes even earlier commentaries as imposing their own external "theologies" onto the liturgical data, he goes on to suggest what he believes to be the authentic vision of the liturgy, the true character of its symbolic language, which he terms, "eschatological symbolism".[35] This vision he further unpacks as the revelation of God's kingdom by the saving acts of Christ, and the

32 Ibid., 221.
33 A. Schmemann, "Symbols and Symbolism", 122-123.
34 Ibid., 123.
35 Ibid., 125.

experience by those who believe in him of this "age to come" already in this world. This experience is lived foremost in the Eucharist, by which the Church ascends to Christ's table in his kingdom. Seen through this eschatological lens then, the Little Entrance is not strictly speaking Christ's entry into the world, but the Church's own entry into heaven at the beginning of the eucharistic assembly.[36] In general terms, this distinction between symbol properly understood as eschatological, or perhaps I could term it "holistic", and later illustrative symbolism is made in a few other places within Schmemann's works, such as his chapter "Sacrament and Symbol" (1970) and his *Eucharist: Sacrament of the Kingdom*.[37] In the latter work, he adds the nuance that this mode of presence of spiritual reality in symbol is only partial and that no symbol can fully embody the spiritual reality it communicates, "For our knowledge is imperfect and our prophecy is imperfect" (1Cor 13:9).[38] Thus in the final analysis, Schmemann concedes that symbolism itself is the only mode available to us in this present age to experience the life of the kingdom and the divine mysteries.

2. *Critiques of Schmemann's Theology*

But for all its profound vision and rootedness in the liturgical tradition itself, several critiques have been advanced—I believe rightly—of Schmemann's thought and epistemological presuppositions. In his recent treatment of this topic, Brian Butcher summarizes some of these philosophical issues quite well, relying in part on previous works by Peter Galadza[39] and Stig Frøyshov.[40] One of the first such issues is

36 Ibid., 126-127.

37 See respectively: A. Schmemann, *For the Life of the World*, 135-151; A. Schmemann, *The Eucharist*, 38-40.

38 A. Schmemann, *The Eucharist*, 39.

39 Peter Galadza, "Schmemann between Fagerberg and Reality: Towards an Agenda for Byzantine Christian Pastoral Liturgy", in *Bollettino della Badia Greca di Grottaferrata*, terza serie 4 (2007), 7-32.

40 Stig Simeon R. Frøyshov, *Symbole et symbolisme liturgiques chez Alexandre Schmemann*, in André Lossky – Cyrille Sollogoub – Daniel Struv (eds.), *La joie du royaume: Actes du colloque international "L'héritage du Père Alexandre Schmemann" (Paris 11-14 décembre 2008)*, YMCA Press, Paris 2012, 157-184.

Schmemann's apparent privileging of perceived archaic strata of the liturgical tradition, in other words, the age-old familiar syndrome of the older is better.[41] First, of course, this presupposition is itself subjective, since at least sometimes liturgical rites can indeed acquire new developments that may be appropriate adaptations to current circumstances and evolving worldviews, or as Brian Butcher puts it, "we must [not] consider liturgical change as resulting only in net losses".[42] But even more concretely from the perspective of a historian, the very notion of definitively identifying what is primary and what is secondary in a given ritual practice is itself subject to change, as new evidence or new ways of re-reading the evidence can adjust our understanding in many cases. Thus, the attempt to "rediscover" a single monolithic liturgical theology behind this or that practice can easily resemble trying to hang one's hat on a constantly moving hat rack. But what is even more problematic, as Frøyshov shows, Schmemann himself can be criticized for reading *his own* meaning into the liturgical facts, rather than merely "discovering" what he portrays as self-evident objective meaning.[43]

Finally, the consistent tendency to expound a liturgical theology based on archaic practices and the earliest strata of liturgical history consequently fails to give proper credit to the liturgical performance as it exists today. For example, one is forced to theologize the Byzantine Little Entrance as the entrance of the assembled church to heaven,[44] while this liturgical practice in its present-day form—and indeed for centuries already—does not resemble an entrance in the least but is rather the exit of the clergy from the sanctuary carrying the Gospel book. As Peter Galadza puts it, "The fact that for centuries in the past the Byzantine Eucharist began with a real entrance of the clergy and faithful into the

41 B. A. Butcher, *Theology After Schmemann*, 11.
42 Ibid., 14.
43 S. S. R. Frøyshov, "Symbole et symbolisme", 179, n. 96.
44 A. Schmemann, "Symbols and Symbolism", 127.

church does not mean that one should be allowed to theologize on the basis of this «archaeology».”[45] Similar examples exist also in the Coptic tradition, especially in the prothesis rite.[46] For example, one can indeed insist on a theology of joyful sacrifice in the act of placing the gifts on the altar during the Coptic prothesis rite. Certainly, this theology can be supported historically by a consistent tradition of a joyous Alleluia chant providing the musical background to most of the prothesis rite at least until the fifteenth-century *diataxis* known as the *Ritual Order* of Pope Gabriel V.[47] Yet, to do so without qualification would be to ignore the Coptic worship reality as it is today, in which the selection of the offering during the prothesis is usually accompanied by the petitionary chanting of 41 *Kyrie eleison*, an encroachment from the prayers of the hours preceding the prothesis no doubt, but nonetheless giving the prothesis rite *today* a rather different vibe.[48]

Acknowledging the reality of worship today is an important issue. Equally important is acknowledging the enduring influence of allegorical interpretation of liturgical rituals throughout centuries of Byzantine—and as I discuss later, Coptic—commentary tradition. This is of course where another important voice comes into play, namely, the more historically sensitive and nuanced analysis of Robert Taft. In his classic treatment of this topic, titled “The Liturgy of the Great Church”, Taft begins immediately by stating a hard truth, “Only at the risk of one’s credibility as an objective student of cultural history

45 P. Galadza, “Schmemann between Fagerberg and Reality”, 16-17.

46 Cf. Ramez Mikhail, *The Presentation of the Lamb: The Prothesis and Preparatory Rites of the Coptic Liturgy*, Studies in Eastern Christian Liturgies 2, Aschendorff, Münster 2020.

47 A. Mikhail (ed.), *Guides to the Eucharist*, 112.

48 On the chant accompanying the prothesis rite and this clear discrepancy between ancient and current practice, see R. Mikhail, *The Presentation of the Lamb*, 237-242, 389-390. See also Ramez Mikhail, *“We will Enter into his Dwelling Place”: Reconstructing the History of the Chants at the Transfer of Gifts in Egypt*, in Martin Lüstraeten – Brian Butcher – Steven Hawkes-Teeples (eds.), *Let Us Be Attentive! Proceedings of the Seventh International Congress of the Society of Oriental Liturgy, Prešov (Slovakia), 9-14 July 2018*, Studies in Eastern Christian Liturgies 1, Aschendorff, Münster 2020, 173-187.

could one summarily dismiss so resiliently durable a literary genre as the Byzantine liturgical commentary."[49] Taft's thesis on liturgical mystagogy seems grounded in the belief that meaning indeed can be in the eyes of the beholder, at least within certain traditional boundaries. Thus, he asserts later on that, like Scripture, liturgical rites await an exegesis to interpret and apply their multiple levels of meaning *in each age*.[50] Rather than dismissing that liturgical rites can point to the life of Christ as mere *historicism*, Taft points out the rootedness of this typically Antiochene approach in biblical typology and the mystery of Christ's incarnation. This "incarnational realism", as he calls it, is no coincidence, but a direct result of historical, theological circumstances. In the wake of iconoclasm, when the crux behind the theological defense of icons lay in the reality of the incarnation itself, Byzantine commentators naturally saw in the entire liturgical rite an ongoing symbol of Christ's incarnate life and ministry.[51] This interpretative key was encouraged by the already existing decline in Communion, which Taft interprets as occasioning an emphasis on Christ's "presence" in some form in the entire ritual, and not only in the eucharistic elements.[52]

However, lest it appear as though allegorical symbolism was a mere accident of history, what many today prefer to malign as a dark page out of the so-called Dark Ages, Taft steps back from the vicissitudes of Byzantine history to demonstrate the place of such allegory in biblical thought and the entire meaning of the Church's sacraments. The very premise of the eucharistic mystery is the NT command to repeat, "Do this in my memorial (εἰς τὴν ἐμὴν ἀνάμνησιν)" (1Cor 11:24-25). As such, liturgical symbolism *brings together*—as evoked by the etymology of the word symbol—multiple levels of the mystery of Christ into one action:

49 Robert F. Taft, "The Liturgy of the Great Church: An Initial Synthesis of Structure and Interpretation on the Eve of Iconoclasm", in *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 34/35 (1980/1981), 45-75. 45 [doi: https://doi.org/10.2307/1291448].

50 R. F. Taft, "The Liturgy of the Great Church", 59.

51 Ibid., 59.

52 Ibid., 68-69.

The salvific death and resurrection of Christ are prefigured in the Old Testament, foreshadowed in Christ's Last Supper, accomplished once and for all on the Cross and out of the empty tomb, eternally present before the throne of the Father, and most immediate for us now, is made present again and again in the sacramental-liturgical action of the Church.[53] Bringing it all back to historical contextualization of the liturgical commentary genre, Taft sees in precisely this past-future tension the fundamental antinomy that ritual and its meaning is meant to resolve, Christians of every age doing so in their own way.[54]

That is not to say of course that allegorical symbolism is without its potential pitfalls or extremes. For all his defense of the genre, Taft himself seems to inch closer towards Schmemann's criticisms of illustrative symbolism on some points. Thus, Taft maintains that it is the entire rite that properly communicates correspondence among the phases of salvation history (i.e. Christ's earthly ministry and present liturgical mystery), rather than each and every individual detail of liturgical rites.[55] In fact, he counters the common criticism that symbolic interpretation frequently attaches multiple meanings to the same liturgical action with that this is precisely what symbolism *should* do, holding together these various poles of past and future in dynamic equilibrium in the present. Thus, to break down this macrolevel symbolism into individual one-symbol-per-item explanations is "to turn ritual into drama, symbol into allegory, mystery into history".[56]

But perhaps more concretely, I have found more helpful the pitfalls and extremes of allegory outlined by another important liturgiologist of the twentieth century, those of Ioannes Phountoulis, Professor of Liturgy at the University of Thessaloniki from the 1970s to the mid-90s and an influential voice in Hellenophone liturgical studies on

53 Ibid., 67.
54 Ibid., 70.
55 Ibid., 55, n. 62.
56 Ibid., 73.

the academic and pastoral levels.[57] In a lecture titled, "The Symbolic Language of Divine Worship", delivered in a 1991 clerical assembly of the Diocese of Drama (Greece), Phountoulis maintains that the liturgical commentator does not have the intent to dogmatize his proposed associations between liturgical act and spiritual meaning, formulating in the process "eternal and unassailable truths of the faith".[58] While this is indeed true in theory, it is often precisely such *dogmatizing* tendencies of modern liturgical mystagogy that turn an edifying association into a quasi-dogmatic assertion, which in turn demands ritual rigidity in order to preserve seemingly unassailable symbolic meanings. Phountoulis' boldest and most salient issue with illustrative symbolism however has to do with its continued relevance across epochs, a problem that extends far beyond liturgy and into biblical exegesis and iconography to name a few. Many such symbols, he points out, while self-evident at some point in history, are today problematic or at least no longer meaningful. Such for example are the many symbols of Christian language taken from late-antique military experience, when we speak, for example, of walls, ramparts, shields, and crowns of victory. The same is also true of so much of our "symbolic lexicon". Oil is no longer immediately perceived as medicine, nor is bread the primary food of many modern cultures. The world is no longer understood as made up of four elements, nor is the earth conceived as having four corners.[59] The list can go on and on, and I do not wish in this limited space to address the thorny issue of our

57 Stefanos Alexopoulos, *The State of Modern Greek Liturgical Studies and Research: A Preliminary Survey*, in Bert Groen – Steven Hawkes-Teeples – Stefanos Alexopoulos (eds.), *Inquiries into Eastern Christian Worship: Selected Papers of the Second International Congress of the Society of Oriental Liturgy, Rome, 17-21 September 2008*, Eastern Christian Studies 12, Peeters, Leuven 2012, 375-392, esp. 380-381.

58 Ὁ ἑρμηνευτής τοῦ συμβόλου δεν ἔχει πρόθεση να δογματίσει, διατυπώνοντας αἰώνιες καὶ ἀπαρασάλευτες ἀλήθειες πίστεως. Ioannes M. Phountoules, *Ἡ συμβολική γλώσσα τῆς θείας λατρείας*, in *Τελετουργικά Θέματα «Εὐσχημόνως καὶ κατά τάξιν»*, vol. 1, Λογική Λατρεία 12, Ἀποστολική Διακονία τῆς Ἑλλάδος, Athens 2009, 89-146. 101.

59 Ibid., 106-107.

outdated liturgical and religious metaphors. Yet, despite its potential weaknesses and pitfalls, Phountoulis too embraces the tradition of allegorical liturgical mystagogy overall. While maintaining that the practical origins of liturgical actions can provide a helpful corrective against the occasional exaggerations of allegory, he also maintains that "a parallel knowledge of symbolic interpretation [...] provides the rites with an exceptional spiritual dimension".[60]

It would appear then that rather than categorically refusing illustrative symbolism as such, a position implied often in Schmemann's familiar hyperbolic writings on the topic, it would be more helpful to keep in mind the biblical and historical underpinnings of this widely popular interpretative tradition, as well as the pitfalls and exaggerations that some mystagogies—medieval and modern—can fall into: the absence of a unified vision of the entire liturgy applied to its individual rites, the failure to hold together the two poles of past anamnesis and future eschatology, and a tendency to dogmatize particular symbolic associations that ultimately depend on very particular ways of executing liturgical actions and gestures, minutiae of worship that are themselves often in flux throughout history. What I intend to do in the remainder of this paper is to see how Coptic medieval commentaries approached these points in their own interpretation of liturgical rites, reading them against the backdrop of the various voices and perspectives on mystagogy I have tried to summarize so far.

3. Towards the Symbolic Tradition of Medieval Coptic Mystagogies

Considering now the group of Copto-Arabic liturgical commentaries that have come down to us, I would immediately note some significant differences from the world of Byzantine liturgical mystagogies. While the latter has a long trajectory beginning roughly

60 Ibid., 101.

with the fifth-century Ps.-Dionysian corpus, or if we prefer a more firmly dated beginning, the seventh-century *Mystagogia* of Maximus Confessor, the entire Coptic corpus consists of texts that were written between the thirteenth and early fifteenth centuries. It is no surprise then that similarities in symbolic interpretations and vision abound within this corpus, yet another testament to the gradually solidifying tradition of rite and interpretation by that late period of Coptic liturgical development. Although many of the Byzantine commentaries can be attributed to well-known ecclesiastical figures and hierarchs (e.g. Patriarch Germanus of Constantinople, Bishops Nicholas/Theodore of Andida, and Bishop Symeon of Thessalonica), this is often not the case in the Coptic corpus. The earliest of these texts, *The Guide to the Beginners*, is frequently attributed to Pope Cyril III in the manuscripts, though the recent editor has convincingly cast doubt on the authenticity of this attribution.[61] The fourteenth-century *Precious Jewel in the Ecclesiastical Sciences* authored by Yūḥannā ibn Sabbāʿ remains somewhat of an enigma, since hardly anything is known about this author, whose single work sometimes indicates he may have been an archdeacon of the papal entourage, and other times that he may have come from a different local liturgical tradition from the Coptic periphery.[62] Only the other two texts are more clearly understood with respect to authorship, namely, *The Lamp of Darkness* by the early fourteenth-century priest and scholar Abū-l-Barakāt ibn Kabar, who served as priest of the famous Church of the Virgin Mary in Old Cairo known as the Hanging Church (Al-Muʿallaqah), and the fifteenth-century final and official *diataxis* attributed to Pope Gabriel V (AD 1409-1427), though employing earlier material.

61 M. al-Baramūsī, دلال المبتدئين, 13-18.

62 For the former opinion, see M. S. Zakhary, *De la Trinité à la Trinité*, 98-130. The latter is an opinion expressed several times by Fr Athanasius al-Maqārī in his numerous studies on Coptic liturgical history. See, for example, Athanasius al-Maqārī, صلوات البخور في عشية وباكر [The prayers of the offering of incense in vespers and matins], Ṭuqūs asrār wa-ṣalawāt al-kanīsah 3.4, Dār nūbār, Cairo 2011², 523, n. 4.

Most significantly, as I highlighted elsewhere, the trio of Ibn Kabar, Ibn Sabbā‘, and Gabriel V are quite different in purpose and nature.[63] While Ibn Kabar's *Lamp* is written primarily for priests and deacons and is concerned foremost with rubrical details, Ibn Sabbā''s *Precious Jewel* seems written rather for a lay audience and takes interest in providing material for contemplative lay participation. Coming slightly after them in AD 1411, Gabriel's *Ritual Order* combines an interest in correct ritual performance with a more deliberate exposition of ritual meaning that in many ways mirrors material in the earliest *Guide to the Beginners*, while distinguishing itself from both Ibn Kabar and Ibn Sabbā‘ in its symbolic interpretation and by virtue of its official status within the Coptic patriarchate.

3.1. The Correspondence Between Texts and Interpretation

But turning to a closer analysis of the symbolic language of these texts, and while avoiding any claims at a comprehensive treatment of this subject, I would like to share the following preliminary remarks on some broad themes. First is the issue of the correspondence between liturgical text and symbolic interpretation, raised by Schmemann as a symptom of superimposing a theology foreign to the liturgical tradition itself. Overall, the Coptic medieval commentaries are guilty as charged. Most of the symbolic meditations attached to individual gestures in the Coptic liturgy lack any reference to the actual texts recited by the clergy during these moments. For example, when the celebrant prays the Prothesis Prayer then covers the eucharistic gifts on the altar with a large veil, all four commentaries make reference to the shrouding and burial of Christ in the tomb, a common idea elsewhere in the East.[64] Yet, the Prothesis Prayer of the Coptic liturgy

63 A. Mikhail, *Guides to the Eucharist*, 17-19.

64 A. Mikhail, *Guides to the Eucharist*, 39-40, 68, 117. See also M. al-Baramūsī, دلال المبتدئين, 79; G. Graf, "Liturgische Anweisungen", 120-121. The association between the prothesis rite in general and the theme of Christ's sufferings also became central in Byzantine mystagogy in the seventh century,

is an ancient Logos-epiclesis, making reference to Christ only as "the living bread which came down from heaven", and "the spotless lamb for the life of the world".[65] Absent is any reference to Christ's burial and the sealing of the tomb. The *Ritual Order* of Gabriel V is particularly noteworthy of this phenomenon. Thus, the priest's circuit around the altar and church with the censer, an act accompanied by praying for the peace of the Church, the hierarchs, and the safety of liturgical assemblies, is here an allegory of the Israelites' procession around the walls of Jericho under Joshua to tear down the walls of sin.[66] The handwashing, accompanied throughout the tradition with verses from LXX Psalm 50, "Sprinkle me with hyssop and I shall be made clean", which privilege the idea of personal cleansing of the priest before approaching the mysteries, is here followed by shaking his wet hands towards the people, a gesture signifying his innocence of the guilt of unworthy communicants reminiscent of Pontius Pilate, and one that persists to our own day in ritual practice.[67]

Yet so frequent is this approach that one begins to question—in company with Schmemann's critics mentioned above—whether this multiplicity of layers is indeed a breakdown of authentic liturgical theology, or in fact a richness of meaning expressive of the persistent liturgical piety of medieval Coptic Christianity. In other words, can

not least because of the transfer of the relic of the "lance" from Jerusalem to Constantinople in AD 614. The effects of this event on Byzantine liturgical interpretation can be seen already in the *Historia ecclesiastica* of Germanus. See Paul Meyendorff, *St Germanus of Constantinople on the Divine Liturgy: The Greek Text with Translation, Introduction, and Commentary*, Popular Patristics Series 8, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY 1984, 60-61. On the broader topic of "passion symbolism" in Byzantine mystagogy of the prothesis see: Thomas Pott, *Byzantine Liturgical Reform: A Study of Liturgical Change in the Byzantine Tradition*, trans. Paul Meyendorff, The Orthodox Liturgy Series 2, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY 2010, 202-206. On the hermeneutics of Germanus generally, including the lance and the verse Isa 53:7 in the prothesis, see most recently: Georgios Keselopoulos, *Ἡ Πρόθεση: Μελέτη Λειτουργική, Ἱστορική - Θεολογική (8ος–15ος Αἰώνας)*, Κέντρο Μελετῶν Ἱερᾶς Μονῆς Κύκκου, Nicosia 2018, 365-373.

65 R. Mikhail, *The Presentation of the Lamb*, 407.

66 A. Mikhail, *Guides to the Eucharist*, 122.

67 Ibid., 125-126.

we summarily dismiss any meaning attributed to ritual on the grounds that it is not expressed in the received texts and rubrics of the Coptic medieval liturgy? I believe that to answer in the affirmative would betray a privileging of texts and rubrics as the only legitimate conveyor of meaning. While I do not wish here to defend this or that symbolic interpretation per se—and I do think the idea of a presider literally washing his hands of his people is problematic—I wish to push against the simplistic notion that whatever is not explicitly mediated in liturgical texts is necessarily an unwanted secondary accretion on a romanticized pristine original rite.

3.2. The Tension between Anamnesis and Eschatology

With regards to the healthy balance between the memorial of salvation history (*anamnesis*) and the eschatological outlook towards the kingdom, the tendency is rather lopsided. Surprisingly for a tradition that prides itself as the heir of the Alexandrian theological outlook, our medieval commentaries show a decided preference towards remembrance of salvation history through individual rites. This is the case in the entire symbolic program of Gabriel's *Ritual Order*, dependent in large part on associations made at least two centuries prior by the author of *The Guide to the Beginners*. The same is true in Ibn Kabar's *Lamp*, the most limited in its mystagogic content, but where all such content is concentrated in seeing the prothesis rite as a representation of Christ's death and burial.[68] The exception to this trend is Ibn Sabbā''s *Precious Jewel*, a work with a remarkable dependency on the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* of Ps.-Dionysius, seen in its consistent emphasis on hierarchical order and its reflection of heavenly worship.[69] Here is where we find several curious ways of manifesting this hierarchy in ritual, unattested elsewhere in the commentary

68 Ibid., 39-40, 45, 48.
69 Ibid., 10-11.

tradition. The bishop is the one that pronounces the final *ekphonesis* of each prayer as a sign of hierarchy reflecting that of heavenly order,[70] likewise assigning the first stanza of the Trisagion chant to the bishop for similar reasons.[71] Numbers receive a similar treatment, whether it is a nine-time pattern of incensing or a total of nine repetitions of the word *Holy* in the Trisagion, all are tied to the nine ranks of angels. Yet even here one questions whether this is true eschatological focus or merely a fascination with angelic beings and heavenly worship here and now, characteristic of Coptic piety and spirituality.[72]

By and large then, medieval Copto-Arabic literature had decidedly moved on from any presumed early Alexandrian focus on eschatology and had already embraced the anamnetic vision classically associated with Antiochene mystagogy. More specifically, especially in Gabriel V, this is an anamnesis that privileges one specific stage of salvation history, that of Christ's death, burial, and Resurrection, seeing expressions of this in the prothesis rite, but also in the uncovering of the gifts at the anaphora, in the very existence of veils, symbolic of Christ's invisibility after the Resurrection, and even of giving communion directly in the mouth, referred to Christ's words to Mary Magdalene, "Do not touch me."[73] Though the theological currents of iconoclasm and the orthodox reaction to them, linked by Taft to the eventual victory of "incarnational realism", did not exist as such in the Coptic context, perhaps one sees here the effects of general theological influence of the Antiochene tradition via later Syriac-Coptic relations in the medieval period and the eventual predominance of this anamnetic vision of ritual across various traditions. Yet there is another possible dimension to this phenomenon, namely that Christian communities existing in

70 Ibid., 71.
71 Ibid., 81.
72 C. Detlef G. Müller, *Die Engellehre der koptischen Kirche: Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der christlichen Frömmigkeit in Ägypten*, Otto Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden 1959.
73 A. Mikhail, *Guides to the Eucharist*, 139.

an Islamic cultural milieu may have also experienced their own, albeit external, iconoclastic pressure. In this context beyond the borders of Byzantium, the historicity of Christ's life re-presented and shared in ritual gesture may have served as a similar Christian response to a prevailing narrative opposed to divine representation.[74]

3.3. The Elusive Nuances of Context

This brings me to my final point towards a balanced appreciation of the genre of liturgical mystagogy. This point is about the elusive nuances of context, which are often missing from the vantage point of those past and present who engage monolithically with liturgical theology, without sufficiently appreciating that every message has a history, an audience, a context. This is where, I believe, my reflections

74 The first and most-hotly debated iconoclastic edict in the Islamic world is the edict of AD 731 by the Ummayad Caliph Yazīd II ibn ʿAbd al-Malik. For a recent discussion of this edict and its effects in material culture, see Christian C. Sahner, *Images and Iconoclasm in Islam, ca. 600-850*, in Mike Humphreys (ed.), *A Companion to Byzantine Iconoclasm*, Brill Companions to the Christian Tradition 99, Brill, Leiden 2021, 497-537 [doi: https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004462007_013]. While Yazīd's edict was unprecedented in its time even within Islamic legislation and theology, similar incidents took place in subsequent centuries, including in Egypt. For later Egyptian history, see Maged S. A. Mikhail, *From Byzantine to Islamic Egypt: Religion, Identity and Politics after the Arab Conquest*, I. B. Tauris, London 2014, 117, n. 77 [doi: https://doi.org/10.5040/9780755695256]; Ulrich Haarmann, "Regional Sentiments in Medieval Islamic Egypt", in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 43/1 (1980), 62-65. The defense of icons features in several Copto-Arabic theological works, which at least indicates a general cultural clash between Coptic Chrisitan and Islamic views in the late medieval period. See for example the mid-tenth century *A Brief Exposition of the Faith* (*Kitāb al-bayān al-mukhtaṣar*) by Sāwīrus ibn al-Muqaffaʿ, whose Chapter 6 on the veneration of icons remains unpublished; see G. Graf, *Geschichte*, vol. 2, 312; Mark N. Swanson, *Sāwīrus ibn al-Muqaffaʿ* [doi: https://doi.org/10.1163/1877-8054_cmri_com_24976], in *Christian-Muslim Relations*, vol. 2, 491-509. 505. See furthermore the thirteenth-century work *Antidote of the Minds* (*Tiryāq al-ʿuqūl*) by Al-Rashīd abū l-Khayr ibn al-Ṭayyib: G. Graf, *Geschichte*, vol. 2, 345-347; Wadīʿ Awaḍ, *Al-Rashīd abū l-Khayr ibn al-Ṭayyib* [https://doi.org/10.1163/1877-8054_cmri_com_24906], in *Christian-Muslim Relations*, vol. 4, 431-437. 433; Ugo Zanetti, "Abū l-Ḫayr ibn al-Ṭayyib: Sur les icônes et la croix", in *Parole de l'Orient* 28 (2003), 667-701; and the *Compendium of the Principles of Religion* (*Majmūʿ uṣūl al-dīn*), written between 1260 and 1265 by Al-Muʾtaman ibn al-ʿAssāl: G. Graf, *Geschichte*, vol. 2, 409-412; Wadīʿ Awaḍ, *Al-Muʾtaman ibn al-ʿAssāl*, in *Christian-Muslim Relations*, vol. 4, 530-537. 533; A. Wadi, *Al-Muʾtaman ibn al-ʿAssāl, Summa dei principi della Religione*, vol. 2: *Testo dei cap. 20-70 e della Conclusione*, Studia Orientalia Christiana Monographiae 7a, The Franciscan Centre of Christian Oriental Studies, Cairo 1999, 210-219.

in this article can be most useful for liturgiologists wishing to engage fairly with the tradition of Coptic liturgical symbolism. Throughout his works, Schmemann often referred to the entire genre of Byzantine liturgical commentaries as a simple whole. Certainly, he would often single out examples from Maximus Confessor or Symeon of Thessalonica, but he did so usually to highlight what he saw as overall problematic trends in the entire genre. This is indeed surprising from a scholar whose initial training was in Church History. For it is precisely as historians that we often repeat the slogan that "context is everything", or, as Robert Taft liked to phrase it, "all liturgy is local." As such, it is rather easy to criticize Schmemann's monolithic treatment of the nearly thousand-year Byzantine mystagogical tradition, or likewise those today that continue to dismiss the entire mystagogical approach as a deficient way to understand liturgy, without asking important questions of the context of each text.

I take for example Ibn Kabar's *Lamp*, where the bulk of mystagogical content is concentrated in the prothesis rite. One can easily dismiss this as an uneven aborted attempt at mystagogy by an author whose primary purpose at any rate was to document what he believed to be proper teleturgical practice for priests and deacons. But when considered along with the historical background of the evolution of the prothesis rite itself and its unique origins as a clerical preparatory rite until ca. eighth century, a different picture begins to emerge. With some historical context, it becomes possible then to posit that Ibn Kabar—as well as Ps.-Cyril's *Guide to the Beginners* before him—were preserving pre-existing symbols that developed in the realm of private priestly piety and that served to enrich their engagement with this practical act of covering the gifts on the prothesis table.[75] In other words, Ibn Kabar may not have intended at all to give the Church a timeless synthesis of *the* Liturgical Theology of the Coptic liturgy,

75 A. Mikhail, *The Presentation of the Lamb*, 344-345.

and to evaluate him as such would fail to grasp the author's intent, his audience, and the cultural tradition he had inherited.

A similar observation can be made about Ibn Sabbā''s *Precious Jewel*, a text in which often elaborate symbols are given to common liturgical gestures. The censer's physical shape becomes a tool to teach the Trinity, the doctrine of the *homoousion*, and the incarnation; incensing the nave becomes a reminder of the apostles' universal preaching, and so on. Yet again, taken along with the remainder of the text, which often provides explicit cues for lay participants on how to mentally engage with the prayers of the priest, a picture emerges of a text written at least in part to inform non-clerics on mindful participation. As such, *The Precious Jewel* has a deliberate interest in bringing lay readers into closer proximity especially to liturgical objects and actions which as laity they are not allowed to handle or perform themselves. While such elaborate gap-bridging may seem unnecessary today, where a Sunday School lesson, a catechism class, or indeed a YouTube video would suffice, one has to strive faithfully, indeed struggle, in order to appreciate the context and circumstances of a literary work and whether it succeeds in communicating the eternal message of the Gospel within the parameters, not of our, but of *that* context.

4. Conclusion

So where does that leave us? I would say that taking the Coptic mystagogical tradition as a case study, we are again confronted with the discrepancy between ideal conceptions of liturgical theology and the realities of the literary heritage that has expressed it at various times. Liturgical texts and interpretation often do not coincide, the latter *adding* layers of meaning rather than merely reiterating existent ones. A fine balance between anamnesis and eschatology would indeed be a welcome synthesis of the mystagogical tradition, but to expect any single work to do so would be unfair to the often-explicit purpose

of various commentaries. Historical circumstances have repeatedly resulted in adjusting the priorities of individual authors to produce highly specific works relevant for the needs of their audiences, be it lay or clergy, whose worldview was shaped and challenged by currents taking place outside the church's walls altogether.

In the final analysis, there is no denying the lasting influence of Alexander Schmemann's theological legacy and his deeply eucharistic and eschatological approach to the phenomenon of Christian liturgy, which has in so many ways shaped generations of faithful, clergy, and theologians. As a historian first and foremost indeed my goal is not to critique a liturgical theology that has been so transformative of liturgical life in so many communities, let alone to propose my own alternate theology based on theory or abstract thought. But to remain within the proverbial lane of my liturgiological craft, I would conclude on a final note that, while the inspiring and profound writings of Alexander Schmemann should and have indeed taken their rightful place in our curricula of oriental Liturgical Studies, they are best enjoyed responsibly along with a healthy dose of historical study of our respective traditions, their literary heritage, and the socio-cultural contexts that shaped them.

Abstract

By far the writings of Fr Alexander Schmemann, archpriest, liturgical theologian, and former dean of St Vladimir Theological Seminary, have been the most influential writings on liturgy in the English-speaking world for decades. This has been true not just among scholars, clergy, and faithful of the Byzantine tradition, but also in other eastern Christian communities, whose members are also in search of English-language theological engagement with liturgy and worship. Among those non-Byzantine eastern churches is the Coptic Orthodox

Church of Egypt, the largest Christian community of the Middle East, with numerous diverse communities throughout the English-speaking world flourishing since the 1970s. In this article, I discuss Schmemann's recurrent critiques of Byzantine liturgical symbolism against the backdrop of the Coptic tradition's own heritage of Arabic liturgical commentaries. I conclude by highlighting the discrepancy between idealistic conceptions of liturgical theology and the concrete realities of liturgical texts, practices, and their often-shifting meaning throughout history.