

Church and State in Ethiopia  
The Pros and Cons of Disestablishment  
(Paul Verghese)

The new draft constitution has given rise to many questions, but few so thorny as the place of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in the new constitutional monarchy.

Some would simply do away altogether with Crown and Church as far as the political structure is concerned. Their model is always the secular, liberal democratic state as it has evolved in the west. Advocates for such a model often forget the fact that the model itself has a history which is quite different from the history of Ethiopia.

In Europe of the Middle Ages, the papal claim that all civil power is derived from the Pope was widely believed. All princes and kings were supposed to believe that they could occupy their thrones only at the suffrance of the Pope. The Pope, as head of the Church and Vicar of Christ, wore his triple tiara (the three-tiered crown), symbolizing his authority over all princes and civil rulers. Even the Protestant Reformation did not achieve a complete break with this pattern, and went on to affirm the principle of non-separation of Church and State. Cuius regio, eius religio (whatever the king's religion, the same religion for the people) was the Protestant-Catholic agreement in many regions.

Only the French Revolution broke the link and sought to create a secular state, completely free from all ecclesiastical control. In fact the French Revolution developed an anti-clerical, anti-ecclesiastical spirit which has now become an integral part of the liberal as well as the Marxist ideologies. The U.S.A. then clearly enunciated the principle of Separation of Church and State but the practice, even there, is far from the theory.

Ethiopian history is different. Ethiopia's national identity in the last 1650 years has been integrally related more to the history of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church than to the Ethiopian Imperial Crown. The Crown has undergone many vicissitudes, many abrupt changes of line, sustained many continuities and interruptions. During all these periods it was the Church that provided continuity. The Church was there in victory and defeat, in victory to bring the praises of the people before God, in defeat to nurse the wounds and bruises of the people.

One cannot even say that the Church was always identified with the rich ruling class. It is true that the nobleman and the feudal lord could occupy a place of special honour in the Church, but the Church had its own means and did not need to depend completely on the rich. Priests often cow-towed to the feudal aristocracy, but that was what the ordinary people also did. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church was always a people's church. Feudal aristocracy often misappropriated Church property to make themselves richer, but that did not mean that the Church was their instrument.

Most of the culture of Ethiopia is inseparable from the history of the Church. The alphabet, all the literature, the music, the arts, the architecture, - everything owes its origin to the Church. The fact that the Church in recent times has not done much in any of these fields does not detract from the eminent and unparalleled significance of the Church's contribution to this unique Sub-sahara civilization with a written history. This was the virtual creation of the Ethiopian Church, and Ethiopians should not be ungrateful to the Orthodox Church just because it has failed to meet the challenge of modern civilization. This failure of the last 50 years cannot undo the unique achievements of the 1600 years before the beginning of the modern period in Ethiopia. You cannot wipe off

Lalibela and Axum from the historical face of Ethiopia. They are not on the same level even as Notre Dame de Paris or even Westminster Abbey. Axum is the source-spring of Ethiopian nationhood, and Lalibela bears witness to the heroic martyrdoms of the people in defending Church and State together.

But what does this mean today in terms of the new constitution? Should the Ethiopian Orthodox Church continue to have all the privileges it had in the previous one?

Let us compare the place of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and its faith in the old constitution of 1955 and the new draft. The new draft does two things. First, it makes a distinction between the Ethiopian Orthodox Church as an institution and its faith. It provides a place for the faith, but not for the institutional Church. Secondly, it links the faith with the Imperial Family, but not with the government. It takes away the place of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church as the Established Church of the nation. It also removes the clauses that the Throne shall defend and the State shall support the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and its faith. The new draft does not provide for the anointing and crowning of the Emperor in accordance with Ethiopian Orthodox rite and at the hands of the Patriarch. Nor does it provide for the Patriarch to be a member of the Regency Council and to administer the oath to members of that Council. The Patriarch and other prelates are given no place at all in the legislative or administrative machinery.

What criterion should we use to determine whether all these changes are equally necessary or useful for the welfare of the Ethiopian people?

One criterion that has been used is the principle of Separation of Church and State. We have shown how this principle itself has a particular historical origin in the reactions against ecclesiastical domination in medieval Europe. It seems unwise, at this stage of

Ethiopia's evolution, to apply such a principle without regard to Ethiopia's own historical particularities.

Another principle that has been advanced is the equality of all religions before the State. The argument in this case would be that whatever privilege is given to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church will have to be given also to other major religions like Islam. The fact of the matter, however, is that the role played by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church both politically and culturally cannot be compared to that of Islam or the minority religions like Roman Catholicism and the various Protestant churches and sects.

While all citizens of Ethiopia should have complete freedom to profess and practice the religion of their choice, and while no Ethiopian should be discriminated against because of his adherence to any particular religion or no religion at all, it does not automatically follow that the Ethiopian Orthodox Church as a religious institution should be treated on a par with all other religions.

A case can probably be made to assert that the tax-payer's money should not be used to support any one particular religious institution. If disestablishment means simply withdrawal of financial support from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, this could be worked out only after sufficient warning has been given and the Church is given sufficient time to revamp its administrative structure and make it independent of State support. In the long run, this may turn out to be <sup>to</sup> the advantage of the Church. As she is forced to depend on voluntary contributions for the upkeep of the Church, her leadership may become more responsive to the spiritual and material needs of the people.

Disestablishment means, however, much more than the withdrawal of financial support. It means the disappearance of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church from all public ceremonial. Temqat or Tensaye will never be the same again. A symbol that has been an integral part of

the identity of the Ethiopian Nation would have been excised from the national consciousness.

This writer does not think that it would be wise to dispense with this age-old symbol of national unity and freedom. Ethiopia should not necessarily be a religious state, where any one religious institution holds great power over the state. The State should be free from any political interference on the part of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church or any other religious institution. But the presence of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in public ceremonial seems to be of a different order.

The unity and freedom of the Ethiopian nation in the future is not so well assured. It may not be possible for the Ethiopian Orthodox Church to play in future her historic role as the focus of unity and freedom when the Crown is not there to fulfill that function. But she would still have a positive role to play in unifying the nation and keeping her free. In order to play this role effectively she would have to begin now to prepare herself.

She has now made plans, one hears, to better fulfill her role as the Servant of Ethiopia. There is a master-plan to train hundreds of priests with their families, to become leaders in national community development and adult education. This plan is to be financed, as one understands, by the World Bank. Whether it will be efficiently executed, remains to be seen. But it is, even at this late date, one step in the right direction. If the Church had more creative leadership, it could have played a greater role in the Wollo relief operations, and in the development of the whole country. It is a dormant force, which if awakened, can mean much to the nation, for ill or for good. If it has once again secured the support of the masses in the villages, it can become a force to reckon with, a force which it will be unwise to antagonize.

All this boils down to a vote against dis-establish

But the form of establishment will have to be different from before. The following main principles would provide a guide-line:

- a) The new Constitution should make it clear that the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, in view of her unique historical and cultural role in Ethiopian identity, is recognized as the Established Church of the Ethiopian Nation.
- b) The place of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in Public Ceremonial should be defined by law, and not necessarily in the Constitution.
- c) The crowning and enthronement of the Emperor as symbol of national unity and constitutional monarch, should be according to the Ethiopian Orthodox rite and at the hands of the Ethiopian Patriarch. This should be constitutionally provided, since the new draft Constitution requires that the Emperor be of the Orthodox Faith.
- d) The Crown and the Regency Council now having become symbols of national unity and identity, it would be wise to restore to the constitution the provisions about the Patriarch being a member of the Regency Council and being entitled to administer the oath to the Regency Council.
- e) The financial support of the State for the Church would have to be progressively reduced, so that the Church leadership gets time to approach the people and ask them to compensate for the reduction of income by their voluntary contributions.
- f) As the Church engages in new projects to meet the spiritual, cultural, and material developmental needs of the people, special funds could be made available for the support of such projects.

An established Church does not necessarily mean a religious state. Britain has an established Church, but it is not by any means a Christian or an Anglican State. Wisdom in Ethiopia demands the continuation of the established Church for the immediate future, but with less financial support. The Church must be shaken up

but not thrown out. The attempt to throw it out by disestablishment may lead to chaos and even impede the progress of the nation. Wisdom demands both that Ethiopia acknowledges her historical debt to the Church, and that she keeps the symbol of her national identity throughout the ages.