

Relations with other Churches
and
Foreign Missions in Ethiopia

(Paul Veigher)

Relationships with other churches

has not been one of the strong points of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The reasons are understandable.

Suspicion of other churches and peoples has now become characteristic of the Ethiopian people. It was for good reasons that Emperor Haile Selassie wrote to the League of Nations in Geneva as early as 1926:

"Throughout their history the Ethiopians have seldom met with foreigners who did not desire to possess themselves of Ethiopian territory and to destroy their independence... For this reason prudence is needed when we have to convince our people that foreigners... are genuinely innocent of concealed political aims."

One of Haile Selassie's predecessors, ~~Emperor~~
Emperor Theodore (1855-68) had put it even more bluntly - "First the missionary, then the Conqueror, then the soldier".¹

1. J. Spencer Trimingham, The Christian Church and Missions in Ethiopia, World Dominion Press, 1953, p. 26.

2 Ibid.

There are of course some valid historical reasons behind this attitude. That history begins from the beginning of the establishment of Christianity in Ethiopia.

It was Athanasius of Alexandria who ^{in the 4th century} consecrated the first Ethiopian bishop Frumentius or Abba Salama. No sooner was he consecrated than the Byzantine Emperor, who had by that time ousted Athanasius and replaced him with George the Cappadocian, demanded from the Ethiopian Emperor that he Frumentius should go back to Alexandria to be re-consecrated by the Arian heretic and usurper, George. Of course the Ethiopians could see from the beginning that accepting a universal religion, especially if it happens to be the religion of some powerful nations, has inevitable political consequences. The Anti-Greek spirit was soon developed among Ethiopian Christians, which was made acute by the post-Chalcedonian Controversies.

Even today there is strong suspicion of the Greek Church among the Ethiopians, which has only been confirmed by the presence and activities of ~~a~~ ^{an} Greek Orthodox prelate who arrogantly styles himself Archbishop of Axum, as if he were the true head of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The present incumbent a slave, learned, polyglot, The Most Revd Dr. Metropolitan Fouyas, who lives in a

palace right near the residence of the Brown Prince has started an Association for Ethio-Hellenic Studies with the Brown Prince as Patron and Abuna Theophilos, the Acting Patriarch as chairman. The Association publishes a scholarly review called Abba Salama (the ecclesiastical name of its founder, the Ethiopian Church), which has a large number of Greek scholars on its editorial board, and publishes ~~new~~ articles which seek to show that the Ethiopians were strongly influenced by Greeks and owe a great debt to them. The Ethiopian Church naturally suspects all this to smack of a little bit of Byzantine imperialism, the time coming from the moribund Greek Orthodox patriarchate of Alexandria, which has practically no followers in Egypt today.

Nor are the Ethiopians able to trust the Egyptians fully. They were the ones who forged the Canon introduced into the Nicene Council forbidding an Ethiopian to be bishop in his own country. However much the present Coptic church may show graciousness and deference to the wishes of the Emperor, the old impression remains that there is a desire to dominate and sometimes even to look down upon, on the part of the mother church.

✓ The Ethiopian attitude towards the

Roman Catholic Church is perhaps the most politically conditioned. The experience that was decisive on the side of the Ethiopian nation and people was the contact with Portuguese and Spanish Jesuits in the 15th and 16th centuries. On the European side there was a genuine desire to establish contact with the famous Christian King Prester John of Africa, whom legend had described and popular belief had identified with the Emperor of Ethiopia. On the Ethiopian side, ravaged by continuous attacks from Muslim armies coming from the East, the foreigners with their superior weapons of warfare were a welcome ally.

But the encounter did not turn out ^{in the long} as wonderful as expected. The Jesuits were more interested in establishing papal supremacy in Ethiopia than in defending ^{that country} ~~from~~ ^{against the Muslims,} On 9th July 1541, the Portuguese sent a contingent of armed forces and weapons to assist the Ethiopians in fighting against the Muslim vizier Ahmed Grank. In the decisive battle of Amba Alagi (April 1542) it was the superior skill and techniques ^(8 cannons, 100 muskets, broadsides) of the Portuguese, ^{Emperor Islam Grank} that helped the Ethiopians to defeat the ~~from~~ the Muslims and wound Ahmed, and a few years later to beat him and finally shoot him dead.

60 years later, in 1613, the Jesuits managed

to get Emperor Szenyes to submit himself to the Pope and become a Roman Catholic. They kept the conversion secret for seven or eight years, fearing public reprimands. When it was known to the ~~public~~ people of Ethiopia, the whole country revolted against the Emperor and the Jesuits. This was helped by the total blindness & insensitivity of the Latin Patriarch Mender who wanted to use force to convert all of Ethiopia to Roman Catholicism, to rebaptize all Ethiopian Christians and to replace the Ethiopian liturgy by the Roman Mass.

The result was Civil War. Thousands died.

Finally the Emperor abdicated, in a heroic ~~act~~ act of confessing the Roman Catholic faith but giving freedom to the people to choose their own traditional faith. His abdication declaration was most touching:

"Hear ye, Hear ye! We first gave you this faith believing that it was good. But innumerable people have been slain - Julius, Gabriel Takla Giorgis, Sarra Kristo, and now these peasants. For which reason we restore to you the faith of your forefathers. Let the former clergy return to the Churches, let them put back the altars, let them say their own liturgy. And do ye rejoice."

by E.
ADM James + Monroe A History of Ethiopia,
Oxford, 1960. p. 98

This experience left an indelible impression on Ethiopian national memory - the main reason why both Catholic and Protestant missions have been by and large unsuccessful in Ethiopia despite the pathetic state of the Orthodox Church. The missionary is generally regarded as one in the service of the imperialist interests of his nation, and to side with him is still regarded by many as betrayal of one's own country.

And yet western missions did get a foothold in Ethiopia, because the Bahar Negash, the Maritime Viceroy of the Region of Eritrea was often opposed to the Emperor of Ethiopia and ~~had~~ since the Eritreans had their own trading interests which sometimes took precedence over the national concern about the integrity of Ethiopia.

The Roman Catholic fathers de Jacobis and Mella came to Eritrea in the mid-nineteenth century and slowly built up a Catholic Church here.

Towards 1870, Swedish Lutheran Missionaries began

work among the pagans of Eritrea. In 1904 the ~~Swedish Lutherans~~ ^{Swedes} moved to get permission to move to Addis Ababa, and began laying the foundations of what is today the Mekane Yesus Evangelical Lutheran church. The ~~Swedes~~ had shown neither cultural arrogance nor political motivation, and were therefore more readily acceptable to

The Ethiopian Government and people.

In 1914 the Bible Society (British + Foreign) began operating. The present Emperor encouraged missionaries from the time when he was Regent. He takes a special interest in the Bible Society's work.

The American Southern Presbyterian Church had already opened three stations in Ethiopia by 1923, including a hospital in Addis Ababa. Doctor Lambie was a popular missionary doctor till the Italian occupation. A Finnish mission (Missionssällstaf)

Bibel-bröder Vaenner) which had started in Eritrea in 1914, moved into Ethiopia in 1921. In 1922 the Seventh Day Adventists started work in Atkai near Addis Ababa, as well as in Dessie, Wallega and

The Sudan Interior Mission - a "faith mission" started by fundamentalist preachers from America and Canada came in 1927, and had set up some 15 stations when they had to leave at the time of the Italian occupation. They left behind some 50 evangelical Christians, mostly pagan converts, when they left Ethiopia. They returned in 1942 to find that the small plant had grown enormously in their absence and without any assistance from outside. The evangelical church in the ^{Wollo} Kembatta region alone had grown to several thousands.

The Bible Churchman's Missionary Society came in 1934, with Alfred Buxton and a group of young missionaries. Their strategy was first to

infiltrate from within the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and change it from within. But their almost total incomprehension of the Orthodox tradition and their insensitivity to Ethiopian feelings led to several clashes with ecclesiastical authorities.

It is not without interest to the Ethiopians that the Italians ousted most of the Scandinavian missions as well as the Sudan Interior Mission, whereas the American Dr. Lambie and the British Mr. Buxton were allowed by the Italians to remain, at least in the beginning. By 1937 almost all non-Italian missions were expelled. Even the French Catholics had to leave, and be replaced by Italians.

The Germans of the Hermannsburg mission were allowed to remain, but were informed in 1941. Their work among the Gallas had also taken some root by then.

After the Italian occupation a large number of Evangelical missions began coming in. Only some of the names need be listed here - American Baptist General Conference Mission (1942), Norwegian Lutheran Mission (1948- mostly old China hands), Danish Ethiopian Mission (1949) American Lutheran Mission (1951), Church Mission to Jews (1948), Middle East Mission, Philadelphia Church Mission, Swedish Industrial Mission, Red Sea Mission, Baptist Fellowship Mission, American Faith Mission

Church of Christ Mission, Scripture Publishers to Every Nation, Eastern Mennonite Mission, Abrahamic Mission in Many Lands, Victory Baptist Mission, The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, and so on.

In 1962, the ^{evangelical} missions operated 138 schools and the Catholic missions 33. The evangelic had 705 foreign personnel, while the Catholics had 130. The Lutherans have organized themselves into an autonomous Ethiopian Church called the Mekane Yesus Church. See the vitality shown by this church or the other evangelical churches (the Free American Presbyterians organized the Bethel Evangelical Church, and the ~~S D A~~ Indian Interior Mission has its own evangelic church) ^{is not much greater than that of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.} Nor do the evangelical churches show much interest in each other. Their participation in the ecumenical movement is less than enthusiastic. The Seventh Day Adventists have about 10 stations and concentrate on medical and educational work. They have also a small Ethiopian Church.

The most important recent initiation of the evangelical Churches was the opening of a broadcasting station called the Radio Voice of the Gospel. This station which has been in operation since 1960 beams religious programmes and news summaries not only to Ethiopia and many parts of East Africa, but also to India and other East Asian lands. The technical staff are

mostly German or Scandinavian Lutherans, among
the chief is Ato Emmanuel Gabresellasse, a prominent
Ethiopian evangelical leader.

Roman Catholic growth has been
rather slow, except in Eritrea, where they have several
thousands of members. They have made some progress
in the Wollo and ~~Jesu~~^{Kaffa} areas. They had
less success in Tigrai and Harrar. Most of the
Catholics in Addis Ababa ~~are~~ are Eritreans. Their total
number of Roman Catholics in Ethiopia may be about
50,000, while the evangelicals number some 200,000.
The two groups together thus constitute about 1% of
the total population of Ethiopia.

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The Ethiopian Orthodox church
belongs to the family of Oriental Orthodox churches
which do not accept the Council of Chalcedon,
and hold to the Christology that affirms one
united divine-human nature in Christ, often
mistakenly called Monophysitism. They are thus
in communion with four other churches - the
~~Egyptian~~ Orthodox church, the Syrian Orthodox
church, the Armenian church, and the Syriac
Orthodox church of India. Their contacts with all
these churches except the last have been quite

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Tensions and uncertainty. Armenians have lived and served in Ethiopia for centuries, and ~~there were~~ several Armenian families immigrated to Ethiopia following the Armenian massacres in Turkey in the second half of the 19th century. Several Egyptian families have also found asylum in the country. Contacts with Syrians ~~are~~ have been quite limited in recent times. Indians have served with the Ethiopian Government since 1947, and the Dean of the Theological Seminary has been an Indian Orthodox priest ever since 1954 - (Rev Dr. K. M. Simon, Rev Dr. K. Joseph and Rev Dr. V. C. Samuel), though the first director was an Egyptian monk (Fr-Marcos David).

The relations between the five Oriental Orthodox Churches reached a new high with the Conference of the Heads of Oriental Orthodox Churches convened by the Emperor in Addis Ababa in January 1965, when all the five Patriarchs were present and made some very impressive decisions, ~~great quite~~ showing great awareness of the problems faced by the church in the contemporary world. But alas, the enthusiasm and wisdom shown at the meeting have not been matched by the ability to carry out the measures decided upon. Some progress has

A Standing Committee of the Oriental Orthodox Churches was established by the Patriarchs, with two members appointed by each Church. Some progress has been made on devising a Common Core curriculum for the instruction of children and youth in all the five churches.

Close relationships are also being built up between the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the Balkan Orthodox Churches which are in communion with the See of Constantinople.

The Emperor took the initiative in sending large numbers of Ethiopian students for theological education in the schools of Constantinople (Halki) and Greece (Athens and Saloniiki). Later they were sent also to the Russian and Rumanian Academies, as well as to theological faculties in Germany, Britain and America. It is a

sad fact that but few of these have returned to serve the church. The vast majority of them have failed to find openings for them in the church machinery and now work in Government ministries.

In recent times, there have been many official visits between the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the Balkan Orthodox Churches. The

most important of these was that of Patriarch Justinian of Romania in 1968. Bishops of the Ethiopian Church have visited Russia, Romania, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Greece etc.

Ethiopia has been a regular participant in the unofficial ~~Theological~~ conversations between theologians of the Oriental Orthodox and Eastern Orthodox Churches (Aarhus, 1964, Bonn 1967, Geneva 1970, and Addis Ababa 1971).

Relationships with western Churches have also been most cordial. Observers from Ethiopia participated in the Second Vatican Council. The Emperor had a personal conversation with the Pope in Geneva in 1970. Inter-church aid from German and American evangelical Churches have gone into some Sacred Ethiopian Orthodox Church projects. Church World Service in the U.S.A., Bread for the World in Germany and the Lutheran Church in Sweden have made several visits to the Ethiopian Church in connection with such inter-church aid.

The recent meeting of the Central Committee of the W.C.C. in Addis Ababa (January 1971) was another occasion for strengthening the ties between the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the western Churches which are represented on the Central Committee

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