THE EVANGELICAL MOVEMENT IN ETHIOPIA

Resistance and Resilience

Tibebe Eshete

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Acknowledgments

From the outset, I would like to state that undertaking this work was a challenging exercise, yet it was also a rewarding experience. The book began as a dissertation in 1999, and along the way I have received invaluable help from several people. First and foremost, I must acknowledge the contribution of the late Professor Harold Marcus, my mentor, friend, and advisor who has inspired and challenged me to embark on a subject that appears to be quaint and untouchable to many. When I made my decision to make a shift in my research project from the political history of the Ogaden to the study of the history of the evangelical movement in Ethiopia, Professor Marcus gave his blessing to me by saying, "It is a blessed project." Whatever his understanding of the term *blessing*, out of the great respect I had for him, the term gave an added meaning to the work and a new layer of significance for me and reinforced my commitment to study seriously a religious movement on which thorough scholarly research is lacking. As a perceptive scholar who could distinctly see and appreciate historical events from the longer and larger perspective, he keenly recognized the value of the study and encouraged me to rise to the challenge of writing a dissertation on a difficult yet very important topic. Professor Marcus was very quick to notice the Pentecostal movement of the 1960s in light of cultural changes and social transformation and indicated to me that it was the religious side of the radicalism of the student movement. One of the most important leads he gave me was to see the Pentecostal movement in Ethiopia beyond its religious dimension at the starting point of my project. Professor Marcus, who knew my background

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If I have missed people or institutions deserving mention in my acknowledgment, I hope they will forgive me for my sins of omission.

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Abbreviations

AESM	All-Ethiopian Socialist Movement
BCMS	Bible Churchmen's Missionary Society (Reformed Anglican)
CCCE	Council for Cooperation of Churches in Ethiopia (*Yemetebaber Gubae*)
CECE	Council for the Evangelical Christians in Ethiopia
CMS	Church Missionary Society (Anglican)
COPWE	Commission to Organize the Party of the Working People of Ethiopia
Crocs	Shortened term for Crocodiles: a semi-clandestine radical student group purported to have spread Marxist ideals among the students of Haile Sellassie I University
ECFE	Evangelical Church Fellowship of Ethiopia
EECMY	Ethiopian Evangelical Church of Mekane Yesus
EOC	Ethiopian Orthodox Church
EPRP	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party
FPM	Finland Pentecostal Mission
EUS	Ethiopian University Service
Eva SUE	Evangelical Student Union of Ethiopia
HSCF	High School Christian Fellowship
HIS	Haile Sellassie I
HSIU	Haile Sellassie I University
LWF	Lutheran World Fellowship
Menno	Mennonite book shop

MKC	Meserete Kristos Church
MWC	Mulu Wengel Church
MYC	Mekane Yesus Church
NRM	New Religious Movements
OAU	Organization of African Unity (now AU, African Union)
OLF	Oromo Liberation Front
PMAC	Provisional Military Administrative Council
QHC	Qale Heywet Church
REWA	Revolutionary Ethiopia Women's Association
REYA	Revolutionary Ethiopia Youth Association
RVOG	Radio Voice of the Gospel
SEM	Swedish Evangelical Mission (Lutheran)
SIM	Sudan Interior Mission (interdenominational, later "the Society of International Mission" and now "Serving In Mission")
SPC	Swedish Philadelphia Church
SPM	Swedish Philadelphia Mission
USCF	University Students Christian Fellowship
WPE	Workers Party of Ethiopia

Introduction

Religion has always constituted a vital part of Ethiopian society. Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religions have invariably shaped the culture, value systems, and social organizations of diverse communities in Ethiopia. Yet religious studies is a field of investigation that has received limited attention by Ethiopian and expatriate scholars alike. Scholars who have been publishing their views on Ethiopia have failed to give serious consideration to religious developments, one of the most crucial determinants of the character of Ethiopian society. As a result, studies of religious movements are left out of the principal currents of social studies thinking. The few scholarly studies we have on the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and Islam can hardly deserve to be considered substantial historical works, given the two religions' long-running history and their enduring impacts. This book is partly intended to redress this historiographic imbalance by studying the history of the evangelical movement, which forms the foundational force behind contemporary charismatic movements in Ethiopia.

This observation is even truer of faith-related movements that lie outside the ambit of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, the established church in Ethiopia. A typical example is the prophetic movement led by Sheik Zakaria, a Muslim cleric who brought thousands of Muslims into the Christian faith in the early twentieth century. Despite the availability of numerous materials in various local and external sources, resulting from the attention the movement drew as an intriguing religious phenomenon, virtually no scholarly work has been written on the subject, only

Donald Crummey's reference in a brief article in the *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* in 1972.

Ethiopia has experienced a notable upsurge of religious innovations in its recent history. Evangelical Christians, who constituted less than 1 percent of the Ethiopian population in the early 1960s, have grown rapidly to number in the millions over the last three decades alone. The 1994 government census records the number of evangelical Christians as being close to 6 million.[1] Mission agencies, which base their data on figures obtained from various local denominations, estimate the number of evangelical Christians to be over 12 million, constituting 19.7 percent of the Ethiopian population.[2] The exponential growth of evangelical Christianity is largely hidden from the purviews of Ethiopian scholars. New religious movements are also becoming increasingly conspicuous in most urban areas and are increasingly attracting urban youth. Despite their public notoriety and sociological and demographic significance, virtually no serious scholarship has attempted to understand them critically and put them in historical perspective. Accordingly, there is still very little information available to scholars and various interested readers on the nature of evangelicalism in Ethiopia.

Overall, new religious movements have largely remained outside the purview of academic research. No wonder, then, that we have very little grasp of the fate of these religious movements in a non-Western society, the causes of their unfolding, the dynamics of their expansion, their social and religious significance, and the varieties of organizational expressions they have assumed. This problem is equally true of the evangelical and Pentecostal movement that preceded the new religious movements and the conditions allowing their proliferation in bewildering varieties. We know very little about the evangelical Christian faith and the various local vocabularies and nuances it has taken in Ethiopia because of the absence of a comprehensive contextual examination elucidating its rise and development.

The history of the evangelical movement in Ethiopia, as presented here, has not been attempted before. This book is the first comprehensive treatment of the subject and the first attempt to use the term *evangelical* as a unit of analysis and study. So far there has been no study that directly deals with the evangelical movement in Ethiopia that seeks to situate its spectacular expansion in the sociocultural, socioeconomic, and political contexts of Ethiopia from an indigenous perspective. There have been works that deal with certain aspects of the Protestant missionary enter-

prise in Ethiopia, mainly those written by former missionaries, but they tend to concentrate on certain regions or people groups and present their materials based on the framework of the mission organization from which they came. Moreover, most of them focus on issues of theology, missiology, and denominational or local church history, with a lesser emphasis on macro-historical contexts. Students of various seminaries have also produced a significant amount of literature on the different dimensions of the evangelical movement in Ethiopia, mainly through their studies of the history of local churches. No doubt, these studies form the building blocks of the larger picture of the evangelical movement in Ethiopia. They suffer, however, from a lack of in-depth research and an inclusive perspective that place the religious phenomenon in the wider sociocultural national setting.

Enjoying relative respite from the historic challenge of persecution, some evangelical churches are now seizing this unprecedented opportunity to engage in writing their history; as a result, a number of works have come into existence over the last few years. These works are not written by historians but by members of their respective churches out of personal interest or commissioned by the church leadership. The fact that they are written by Ethiopians is significant in that they present a native perspective to the material. A major limitation concerning their wider use and readership is that they are all written in Amharic, the official language of Ethiopia.

With respect to the Pentecostal movement in Ethiopia, the only documents that we have are a preliminary study produced in 1975 by a Norwegian missionary from the Lutheran Mekane Yesus Church and a senior essay that came a year later in Haile Sellassie I University (now Addis Ababa University). The *Mulu Wengel* Church, the first indigenous Pentecostal church in Ethiopia that had a remarkable influence over the spread of Pentecostalism, has never published solid material on its history, except the daring initiatives of Bekele Wolde Mariam, who recently wrote an insightful book outlining the broader contours of the Pentecostal movement in Ethiopia.

Given the domestic situation of the historiography of Christianity, it is no wonder that standard works dealing with African Christianity are mute concerning the evangelical and Pentecostal movements in Ethiopia. The Ethiopian experience is conspicuous by its absence even in the burgeoning literature on the New Religious Movements (NRM) in Africa.

One apparent reason for the neglect and a level of reticence on the part of Ethiopian historians is the continued public perception in

Ethiopia of evangelical Christianity as a fringe religious phenomenon professed by some marginal people somewhere in the peripheral lands and the association of its presence with foreign elements. Since the Orthodox Christian faith has been the established religion in Ethiopia with popular claims that trace its advent to apostolic times, any other affirmation of alternative forms of the Christian faith has not received an open welcome. From the point of view of the established Church, which considers itself as the surviving remnant of the classical model of Christianity, all other non-Orthodox variants of the faith are viewed as invasive species that threaten its existence. Another reason for the lack of serious historical studies is the recentness of the movement and the concentration of its quick and stealthy growth in the last couple of decades. A further important factor to consider is the lack of historical consciousness exhibited among Ethiopian evangelical Christians as reflected in the lack of interest to document their history. This is even more true of the Pentecostals, who, despite their high level of education, paid little attention to recording their movement's history, much less to interpreting and explaining it in academic terms.

Ethiopia offers a somewhat unique situation for the study of evangelical Christianity in Africa because of the absence of the colonial factor and the existence of a long-established indigenous church with state support. Unlike other African counties, wherein evangelical Christianity encountered primal religions, the encounter in Ethiopia was mainly between established forms of Christianity and the form introduced by Western missionaries. Consequently, the type of religion with which the Western variant of Christianity interfaced and interacted in other African societies is largely missing from the picture. Additionally, the conditions that gave occasion to the rise of the African Independent Churches are also largely absent in the Ethiopian situation. Studying the origin and dynamics of new religious movements in Ethiopia, especially those with radical sociopolitical messages and orientations, offers a new insight and dimension of African Independent Churches and contributes a page to the ongoing discussions of the independent faith movements.

One of the reasons I undertook this research project is the high degree of confusion and misunderstanding that prevails among the public and scholars alike regarding Ethiopian evangelicals and the faith they represent. Evangelical Christianity has always been viewed by mainline religious thinking as outlandish, and as a result it has never been under-

stood by what it is and for what it stands—hence its popular portrayal as anticulture, antinationalistic, and atypical. It is often regarded as cultic and anti-Mary when the characterization assumes a theological slant. Compounding the confusion and misconception is its association with externality, the assumption that it is a foreign religion introduced by foreigners. The pervasive notion of *mete haymanot*, a religion of alien import, has been used to relegate the evangelical faith to the shadows and push it out of public discourse. The Communist leaders, in particular, used this notion of mete to isolate and target evangelical Christians by linking them with the CIA and the West's calculated attack on Ethiopia's national identity. But this secularized version of religious thinking mainly stems from an old nationalistic paradigm strongly influenced by mainstream religious thinking. Evangelical Christians have not tried to counter this challenge through apologetics or other forms of expressive discourses. Rather, their putative response has been aggressive soul winning and multiplication, which only contributed to the heightened suspicion that someone else from the outside was behind them. Whatever circumstances have given rise to the misapprehensions, it is vitally important to have a critical study of the new dimension of Christianity in Ethiopia that seeks to situate its history in the larger Ethiopian socioreligious context to see its development from a local (national) perspective.

Several factors justify this research. For instance, the sheer growth of the evangelical movement and its spread across all regions and societies demand serious explanations. The evangelical Christian faith, in all its forms, presents one of the most extraordinary developments in modern Ethiopia. The growth of the evangelical faith in Ethiopia, a country widely considered as solidly Orthodox, is startlingly dramatic. Beginning from a relatively obscure origin, not only has it attracted millions of followers, but it has also become an influential religious and social phenomenon. This intriguing development in itself requires a critical investigation that takes the contexts into account and tries to explain the movement's dynamics and character. The evangelical movement has come to the fore by contesting the ground held by an already established national Church enjoying state support for the majority of its existence. The conditions in which the faith successfully withstood the challenges and the manner in which the faith has sustained itself require serious inquiry and documentation. Furthermore, there is the need to capture the various trends and trajectories the evangelical movement has taken, especially over the last four decades, in order to understand it more fully in all its

national dimensions. On the global level, Christianity has made a radical historical, geographical, and ideational shift as it moves from its Western Enlightenment-oriented matrix and unfolds in societies characterized by rapid changes and suffering arising from poverty and various forms of oppression. Undertaking such studies helps to capture the local idioms and articulations of a global movement.

In this study, I examine the major defining contours of the history of the evangelical movement in Ethiopia by paying special attention to the period of its rapid expansion and development. This book investigates the birth and the historical evolution of a religious movement that had its roots in the fringe communities but later grew into a large-scale movement that has now assumed a national magnitude. It is a faith movement that evolved from a religion of *yadar agar* (peripheral land) to the religion of *ye mahal agar* (the land of the center). As with all historical developments and traditions, evangelical Christianity has been shaped and refined to its present form by diverse historical events. How has the evangelical Christian movement, with an inconsequential number of followers in the early 1960s, risen to such national visibility, garnering members in the millions and thus becoming a significant element in the religious landscape of Ethiopian society? What are the dynamics and factors accounting for its remarkable expansion? What have been the crucial events, defining moments, shaping contexts, and key agents that played out in the growth processes? This book offers answers to these and other related questions by outlining the crucial features of the development of the evangelical faith as well as capturing in a continuum its key points of transition and transformation.

One limitation of the study results from the fact that evangelical Christians have lived in constant tension with the established National Church and hence suffered covert and overt persecution. The oppression was worst during the period of the Ethiopian Revolution, in which evangelical Christians were particularly harassed because of their alleged connections with the West, as their origins are linked with Protestant missionaries. As a result, the leadership of the various churches and their individual members have not been able to keep documents by way of records, memoirs, or diaries that could have been utilized for the purpose of this research. The available documents were destroyed when the military regime either demolished or confiscated church property and dumped files. The problem of documentation becomes a vital concern when it comes to substantive information regarding identification of membership profiles,

size of various churches, and numerical growth across time. In general, local churches in Ethiopia do not traditionally keep records of members, which creates a problem for documenting church growth. I have supplemented what data there is with additional sources such as oral information from church leaders and longtime participants; accounts, reports, and observations of missionaries and travelers; and, to a degree, government records.

Second, this work covers many domains because of the importance it gives in highlighting the main contours of the evangelical movement at the macro- and micro-historical level. My own approach of choosing to study the new dimension of Christianity as a movement from an ecumenical perspective, rather than focusing on a single denomination, has not allowed closer scrutiny into the sociopolitical contexts (sociological analysis), theological or missiological considerations (creeds, dogmas, etc.) of specific denominations, or to engage in the study of the institutional history of various churches.

Third, I have to mention the challenge of studying faith movements that have claims of supernatural or epiphanal experiences, which are difficult to authenticate, although such experiences constitute transforming moments for those claiming them as true. Although I have not sought to take a dismissive position on personal experiences attributed to religion, I take the view that putatively divine or sublime forces can only be communicated through cultural media, human agency, and situational contexts, and hence form part of the complex variables of human experience in a given historical context. Whatever constitutes religion, it expresses itself as a social and cultural phenomenon conveyed through human ideas, symbols, feelings, practices, movements, and organizations. These expressions are the products of social interactions, processes, and structures, and as such, they are historically traceable and can be investigated. The study of a religious phenomenon needs to take stock of the poly-contextual environment in which it has its being, moving and continuing to interact with other components of human existence.

In general, believers and nonbelievers approach religious experience differently. Nonbelievers or people with secular orientation tend to formulate diverse sociological, psychological, and existential theories to explain a religious situation. For them, the religious experience that believers claim might appear to be one of illusions or misrecognitions, or else perceived, not objective, truth. Believers, by contrast, have a different perception of religious experiences and how people conceive of events relating to a supernatural reality. For the latter, such happenings

constitute the primary element on which everything hinges and from which other things, such as social ties, services, institutions, and structures emanate. In short, believers assert that supernatural factors are at work in human drama that directly impact human affairs. Such claimed religious experiences have given passion, vision, commitment, zeal, and power to make consequential decisions affecting their lives and others. The claims also stir up strong convictions on the part of the believers to share their beliefs with others and to face daunting trials unflinchingly. Historians are limited by the lack of the methodological tools or the prerogative either to affirm or dismiss such claims.

A few examples illustrate my case. Dr. Samuel Ayana was a former officer from the Ethiopian Air Force who later became a prominent member of the Workers' Party of Ethiopia. He earned his Ph.D. from the University of Moscow, and his dissertation on strategies of inculcating secular philosophy (communism) in the thoughts of religious-minded Ethiopians appeared under the title "Factors That Form Scientific World Outlook." He worked as a chief propagandist for the Marxist regime in Ethiopia. Following the collapse of the regime, he took flight to Kenya and became a refugee. At some point in his life, he became a convert to the evangelical Christian faith. He came back to Ethiopia, worked for a company, managed to save money, and opened a successful business called "EL SAM Impex." Samuel became an itinerant evangelist relying on his personal resources. Not only that, he established his own organization to provide financial backing for many evangelists who could work as rural missionaries in Ethiopia. His religious experience transformed his life and also brought social conversion, as well as reorientation of his life's commitment and purpose.

The other example concerns a medical doctor, Tibebu Haile Sellassie, who was a convert from the Orthodox Church into the evangelical faith. Dr. Tibebu chose to serve as a medical doctor in the predominantly Somali-inhabited area of the Ogaden in order to have the chance to communicate his faith to the local people. While serving as a medical doctor, Dr. Tibebu was taken by the Somali forces from the Ogaden during the 1977 Ethio-Somali War, together with thousands of other Ethiopians, and thrown into a Hawe prison camp in Somalia, where he was kept for eleven years. During his prison life, he was engaged in teaching, helping the sick, doing other merciful works, and witnessing his faith to hundreds. He was released from prison and found a job in an international organization, and he is still involved in sharing with many Ethiopians at home and

abroad how his faith helped him to endure pain and difficulties and keep on doing good works.

There are also ordinary people without titles—people like Mehari Chorka, a farmer from Wolayta, southern Ethiopia, who was converted to the evangelical Christian faith and chose to be an evangelist in order to share his testimony and what he believed was the good news to others by traveling across all regions of southern Ethiopia beginning in the 1940s and continuing to this day, even in his old age. Mehari suffered imprisonment several times under the imperial and the military regimes, and he is still willing to endure more. There is also the story of Tesfaye Gabiso, a young man from Yirgalem who embraced the evangelical faith in the late 1960s and became a renowned gospel singer. His gospel songs, especially the ones he composed during the Marxist regime, were heard by millions of Ethiopians. He was imprisoned for seven years because he refused to renounce his faith and declined the invitation presented by the local cadres to join their ranks. These people and others like them emphasize the conviction shared by many evangelical Christians in Ethiopia, whose faith journey has been guided by the motto, "Reason takes you to the shore and faith takes you across."

Historicizing individuals' faith-based actions is a difficult task, but I try to acknowledge it as part of the informing milieu of people without discounting the diversity of human motives and the rational and pragmatic choices people make. The vocation of the historian is to write about what actually happened, and historical excursions seek to provide causative explanations to concrete happenings in publicly accessible terms. Impacts of religious experiences as reflected in people's attitudinal changes and actions are accessible data, not subjectively interiorized phenomena. Whatever language seems to represent the views of the evangelicals, I present as theirs. Since I am studying the history of people who take their faith seriously and who order their life experiences based on that faith, I cannot avoid using religious terms and other forms of expressions of their faith in discussing their experiences and their encounters. I put what they consider to be authentic experiences in quotes.

Admittedly, I am somewhat limited in presenting the arena of faith as it relates to the individuals experiencing it and to those embracing the faith and those contributing to its expansion by paraphrasing their narratives to fit the study of history. My approach, as a student of history, is to write about a faith-related subject as objectively as possible. Religious studies examine the various media by which people make, find, and

improvise religious idioms in their varied existential contexts. I have chosen to study religious phenomena as part of a popular movement across time and in changing contexts, rather than focusing on specific instances or cases. I have not adopted the theological elements as a frame of reference to a movement that claims to be Christian. I surmise that this, too, presents its own limitation in fully grasping the deeper spiritual aspects of the evangelical movement in Ethiopia.

The selected cases are indicative of the questionability of the assumption that when choosing religious affiliation and commitment, people simply weigh rewards against costs and try to get the most for their investment. The above stories, to a degree, highlight the problematic nature of assigning functionalist character to religious experiences. Such a cost-benefit approach does not seem to be a beneficial model to apply to the Ethiopian situation without ruling out the instrumental role religion plays. The early Pentecostals were members of a promising elite, and today most of the pioneers of the movement have distinguished careers while actively pursuing their faith. In their youth, however, they accepted suffering, ostracization from society, and brutal treatment from some officials of Haile Sellassie's government and during the military regime. They paid a dear price to keep the faith. None of those I have interviewed attributed their endurance to their own strength and commitment. Instead, they insisted that the power of God through prayer enabled them to carry on and overcome difficult challenges. After interviewing and interacting with hundreds of informants, I do not consider the faith appropriated by evangelical Christians as a mere interstitial force with fleeting importance, serving only the moment. It is something deep-seated, investing people with enduring convictions and ideals that form bedrocks of their beliefs and commitments from which flow resolute actions. Cost-benefit analysis can hardly explain their situation, even if one allows for the presence of other variables and acknowledges the complex nature of human motives.

Fourth, a study that seeks to outline the historical evolution of a faith movement by tracking its locus, significant moments, and key players in various arenas also misses a lot in terms of capturing important aspects of the faith it studies. For instance, one could focus more on the interaction between evangelical Christianity and local culture, particularly in relation to the rural population. This encounter has not been investigated, and likewise, the differential dynamic of the faith in rural and urban settings has not been studied explicitly and analytically.

The last aspect of the limitation that I seek to point out is the issue of proximity, that is, proximity of the unfolding of the story to the present. This is particularly true of the new faith movements and charismatic renewals within and outside of the mainline churches whose stories are still occurring. Except for providing lead ideas and general remarks, I have avoided making conclusive statements. I do, however, raise questions for future research in the conclusion.

My own background has, to a great extent, helped me to establish an even balance in the treatment of the subject under review. I was born and raised in an Orthodox Christian family. I turned to Marxism and left behind my parents' faith when I became deeply involved in the radicalism of the student movement in the 1970s in the former Haile Sellassie I University. Like most of my generation who sought to be agents of change and committed their lives to the cause of the people, I was crushed by the failed socialist experience and the social disasters brought about by a brutal military rule. Later in my life I embraced the evangelical faith following a curious encounter with a colleague at Addis Ababa University. In 1987, I became a member of a local Baptist church in Addis Ababa. My involvement in leadership positions both in my local church and at the national level, under the larger umbrella of the Fellowship of Ethiopian Evangelical Christians, gave me the opportunity to understand the faith better and to establish connections with some of the key people who have played active roles in the growth of the evangelical movement. My previous contacts with many influential evangelists and church leaders provided open venues to identify my informants from various denominations and to create good rapport with them during interview sessions, an added advantage that enabled me to interact with them in an atmosphere of cordiality and mutual trust. I acknowledge the possible danger of my relative position of being an insider. Nevertheless, I equally recognize the advantages of being a participant-observer. I view myself as an insider invested with the benefit of past/lived experience and hindsight that place on me some sort of reality checks and balances, cautioning against the excess of an emic approach to my study. I believe that the emic approach is extremely valuable, for it adds insights and perspectives that become relatively more available and accessible as a participant. Nonetheless, the emic position does not grant a privileged position for the researcher to hold unqualified knowledge, substituting subjectivity for evidential objective statements. Etic concerns, considering things from the outside as an outsider, are also crucial, but I am in favor of recognizing a continuum of concerns that embraces both

the "insiders'" and the "outsiders'" points of view as epistemologically and phenomenologically beneficial. Accordingly, my approach combines both methodological positions.

Though Protestant missionaries introduced evangelical Christianity to Ethiopia from the West, its growth and expansion result mainly from contributions of native agencies, given the legal and cultural restrictions under which the Western Protestant missionaries operated and granted that the remarkable expansion of the movement occurred during the times of the Ethiopian Revolution in the conspicuous absence of the external agencies. This growth is notably linked to the rise of a radical Pentecostal movement in the 1960s. The growth of Pentecostalism, which is largely an independent initiative pioneered by young Ethiopians, occupies center stage in the expansion of the evangelical Christian movement. Pentecostalism in the Ethiopian context is a reappropriation and practical expression of new religious ideas in the vein of preexisting spiritual values and consciousness gaining newer emphasis and vitality occasioned by social and cultural changes. The Pentecostal movement, whose followers came mainly from an Ethiopian Orthodox background, provided strong impetus for the rise of a stalwart missionary project that has sustained itself because of its indigenous roots, voluntaristic nature, and enthusiastic embarkation on evangelization programs of national import.

Part I

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church

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From the Early Church to Early Modernity

This chapter provides a brief history of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church by tracing its origin from the fourth century A.D. to the modern period. The chapter makes an effort to examine the church's contributions to laying the foundations of Christianity in Ethiopia and the rich fund of experience upon which the evangelical Christian faith advanced. This chapter also outlines the Church's evangelization endeavor in a multiethnic society; the methods and processes of expansion in vast geographical areas with due regard to areas of strength and shortcomings. The early influence of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church among the people of south and southwestern Ethiopia is discussed, especially the influence on their traditional belief systems, and how the weak presence of the institution in the later period led to the gradual waning of its influence and the emergence of a hybrid of religions that developed along its fault lines. The section makes an effort to assess the nature of state-church relations and how the Church's coalescence with the state has crippled its image among the nonhighland population of Ethiopia and reduced its capacity to evangelize effectively. In so doing the chapter makes the claim that the Church set the tone for the milieu of relative openness of the people to embrace an alternative form of Christianity introduced by Western missionaries. Overall, this chapter aims at broadly outlining the precontact base of spirituality with the view of highlighting the local contexts of the missionary enterprise in Ethiopia.

Early History

Ethiopia is one of the most ancient nations to embrace Christianity amid its preexisting dialogues with the Mediterranean world. When exactly Christianity was introduced in Ethiopia is hard to establish. Most scholars accept that the Aksumite kingdom adopted Christianity in the fourth decade of the fourth century A.D. Emperor Ezana left some relics of his conversion in stone inscriptions and in the coins he minted during his reign. The account he left on one of the inscriptions not only bears the cross, but also attributes his military exploits to the Christian God, the Lord of heaven and earth.[1] Ezana's conversion is usually associated with the fortuitous advent of Frumentius and Aedesius, Syrian brothers from Tyre. Tradition has it that, en route to India, their ship experienced difficulties and stopped at a Red Sea port. The local inhabitants rescued the young men and took them to the reigning monarch, in whose sight they found favor and were accepted as members of the royal court. The tradition also maintains the king offered the boys distinguished positions in his court, impressed by their manner and sagacity. Aedesius was made the cupbearer, and his elder, Frumentius, assumed the rank of a treasurer. The two had considerable influence upon Ezana, both when he was a minor and following his assumption of the throne upon the death of his father.

Though political pragmatism cannot be discounted, Ezana's conversion to Christianity was a result of his close associations with the Syrian brothers, particularly Frumentius, who later became the first bishop of Axum under the name of Abba Salama.[2] Frumentius was consecrated as the *Abuna* (Father) by the patriarch of Egypt, Bishop Athanasius, a tradition that was maintained for centuries until 1959, when the Ethiopian Orthodox Church decided to become autocephalous.[3] The conversion of Ezana into the Christian faith in the fourth century A.D. should by no means suggest that Christianity was introduced to Ethiopia during his reign. Because of Ethiopia's long-standing commercial and cultural contacts with the Greco-Roman world, there had been individual Christians who had come earlier by way of trade along the Red Sea. These Christian merchants transacted, settled, and commingled with the local people, thereby forming small communities of believers in major urban sites, such as Axum and Adulis.[4] The fourth century nonetheless marks a watershed. Because Ethiopian society was highly patriarchal, the king's official acceptance of Christianity had serious implications, for it greatly facilitated the expansion of the faith among the populace. Ezana collaborated with Frumentius in evangelizing the empire and its environs, so that by the

time of Ezana's death, Christianity began to assume the status of the official religion in Ethiopia and was taking deep root in the society.[5]

The model that the situation of Ethiopia presents, in this connection, is a reversal of that of the Roman Empire. Unlike the situation in the Roman Empire, Christianity in Ethiopia spread from top to bottom, from royal court to the people, albeit gradually. The Church in Ethiopia, therefore, did not experience persecution from the state, unlike in other countries. On the contrary, the support that the Church garnered from the state contributed to the expansion of its influence across culturally and geographically diverse areas.[6] The Church's close connection with the state, of course, has its own downside as far as its autonomy and free initiative is concerned. Shifting fortunes of the state, its strengths and weaknesses, its expansions and contractions, also affected the fate of the Church.

In the fifth century A.D., the country opened itself to monks, mostly from Syria, who fled their country facing persecution by the Romans because of their anti-Chalcedonian theological stance.[7] This persecution was a result of a major split that occurred between the Eastern churches and the Romans following the Council of Chalcedon of A.D. 451. The monks, called the "Nine Saints" in the Ethiopian tradition, engaged in vigorous evangelistic activities that took them to many parts of the empire; as a result, Christianity penetrated into major parts of northern Ethiopia. The monks translated large portions of the Scriptures into *Geez*,[8] the vernacular language at the time; planted churches and monasteries; and contributed to the development of the Ethiopic liturgy. Yared, who is remembered as the genius of Ethiopian Orthodox music for his lasting contributions of church hymns and liturgy, was a disciple of one of the Nine Saints.[9]

The monastic institutions that the Nine Saints established in various parts of the empire not only served as springboards to extend the sphere of the new religion, but also became the main infrastructure of Ethiopian Christianity. Their missionary enterprise was greatly assisted by grants of land from kings and the wealthy. This aid also established the tradition of the Church as a land-owning institution and its dependence upon the state, which in the long run seriously handicapped its spiritual mission.

One cannot be certain of the method of evangelization used and the conversion process it entailed. Existing sources are vague, or at best nonspecific, in their descriptions. What they offer us are generalized ideas concerning the founding of monasteries in certain locations, the eradication of local cults, and the destruction of "pagan" temples.[10] Whatever

the modality, it appears that the monks set the example for the forms of evangelization that the Ethiopian Orthodox Church adopted throughout the medieval period. Supported by the state, they recruited and trained monks and priests from the local population, where monasteries were set up, and made them carriers of a literary and liturgical movement which gave the emerging church its style and strength. Undoubtedly, one of the greatest influences of the Nine Saints was their widespread teaching of the non-Chalcedonian Christology that became the bedrock of the theological position of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.[11]

The convergence of the state and the Church seems to have been firmly secured from the start. The overlapping agenda of the two institutions has been the constant refrain of Ethiopian history. Though the process reached its height in the fifteenth century—specifically, during the reign of Zara Yaqob (1434–1468)—the foundation was laid at the times of Caleb (510–558). Caleb was a devout king who took personal interest in the expansion of Christianity in Ethiopia and the Red Sea littoral. It is also believed that during Caleb's reign the Church assumed its organizational structure, spreading over much of the northeastern part of Ethiopia and reaching some of the lowlands of Eritrea, portions of the islands of the Red Sea, and northern Somaliland. Today, except for some old relics pointing to the existence of Christian communities in the past, virtually no remnant is left in most of these areas. Instead, Islam has taken its place. Christianity also spread in the south and west, mainly along the trade routes and following the movement of some Christian families. Significantly, however, missionary activities were carried out through the monasteries and hermitages scattered around the northern regions.

The Expansion of Christianity: Church and State Relations in the Medieval Period

Despite the political confusion that arose with the decline of the Axumite kingdom, Christianity continued to expand. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when power shifted further south with the rise of the Zagwe Dynasty, the religion received a new impetus as the new rulers became intensely involved in constructing churches as part of the legitimizing activities of their regime. King Lalibela (ca. 1190–1225) is said to have been the key figure in the building of the rock-hewn churches at the site named after him, which remain monuments of the architectural achievements of Ethiopians. Among other things, it is said that the king was motivated to construct the magnificent churches to create an Ethiopian

version of Jerusalem to serve as a center of pilgrimage for Ethiopians, for whom the holy journey to the Holy City had become a risky venture.[12]

Overall, during the Axumite and Zagwe periods, areas deeply affected by the expansion of Christianity mostly lay in what is today Tigrai, the region of Lasta, Begemeder, and Shoa. This picture was to change dramatically during the two centuries following the rise of the Christian state under the Solomonic dynasty. The foundation of imperial authority in Ethiopia lay in the new ruler's claim of descent from the ancient line of the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon and the Jewish origin of the Ethiopian state. *Kebre Negest*, which appeared in the fourteenth century, is an important document that colorfully enshrines the story of the Jewish origin of the Ethiopian state and puts the kings as champions of the Christian faith. The work recounts the story of how the ark of the covenant was brought from Jerusalem to Ethiopia and lent a sense of mission and mandate to Ethiopian rulers to expand Christianity and jealously guard the faith. *Kebre Negest*, therefore, provided both the context and the ideological justifications for the politico-religious campaigns conducted by the rulers of the Solomonic dynasty into the areas of central and southern Ethiopia and today's Gojam, then inhabited by Kushitic-speaking Agaw people.[13] The military success of the Solomonic kings brought the Church into the newly conquered regions, where again, as in the past, the founding of monastic centers constituted the principal basis of evangelization.

Between the years 1270 and 1468, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church exerted considerable pressure on the non-Christian populations within the borders of the expanding empire. Gojam, Damot, Muger, and a significant portion of the central and southern regions felt the impact of the monastic movements. The process of conversion and integration of these predominantly Kushitic areas of the north proceeded at a slow and uneven pace.[14]

The precise manner in which Christianity spread into these regions is far from clear. It appears that, perhaps with the exception of Zara Yaqob, the leaders of the Church and the state did not develop a systematic program of mission and evangelization, and as a result, did not methodically pursue proselytizing.[15] Zara Yaqob adopted an aggressive policy of evangelization and advanced a number of measures that left a huge mark on the Church's theological positions and its praxis. For instance, he instituted rules for regular and ceremonial readings from the *Book of Miracles of Mary* in all churches and inaugurated a large number

of holidays dedicated to various aspects of her life. During his reign, the cross assumed centrality, both as a metaphor and as a powerfully effective symbol to fight evil spirits. He used such visual symbols as a pragmatic approach to address his illiterate, largely un-Christian subjects with Christian messages. The king deemed visual symbols able to transcend local rivalries and appeal to diverse people as a habitual nonverbal pattern of religion.[16] He was even reported to have imposed upon his Christian subjects as well as new converts the branding of their right arms with words like, "I deny the devil," or "I am the slave of Mary."[17] The custom of tattooing crosses on hands and over the foreheads also appears to have been inaugurated during his period. Zara Yaqob took steps toward the eradication of magical practices, though his motives may have been questionable.[18] The emperor was also instrumental in publishing numerous hagiographical works dealing with Mary and miracles of saints that have been incorporated into the theology of the Orthodox Church and which affected its ritual practices.[19] These measures taken by the monarch left indelible marks on the religious traditions and spirituality of the Ethiopian society.

Zara Yaqob made vigorous attempts to bolster the missionary enterprise of the Church. For instance, he consolidated the monastic institutions and placed them under the umbrella of the *Echega* to lend their evangelistic activities some kind of structure and centrality. The improvement enhanced the zest of the holy monks to venture out and proselytize. Despite his aggressive evangelization and the success of the monks in converting many Ethiopians, it appears that neither the emperor nor the monks developed an innovative approach of evangelization that took stock of the diversity of the Ethiopian people and the manner in which their arduous efforts could have sustained impacts. Overall, it appears that, apart from general frameworks and strong commitment to evangelize, the priests and monks did not have an elaborate philosophy of mission and conversion to guide their actions.[20]

Available information concerning the process of Christianization during this period simply highlights the exploits of monastic leaders who pioneered as missionaries, mostly following the footsteps and directions of the expanding state, and at time taking daring singular initiatives. Monastic figures undertook crusading evangelistic efforts by advancing in specific areas, often alone, driven, as they often claimed, by supernatural visions. The implications of such individualized missionary endeavors and the logistic constrictions they entailed are obvious. The heroic ven-

tures of disparate groups had amazing results in expanding the frontiers of the Christian faith among wide geographic and cultural areas. There were serious constraints, however, keeping the Christian faith from taking deep root in the lives and culture of the new converts.

Steven Kaplan captures the point when he states, "Frequently, we are reduced to describing the activities of an individual holy man largely isolated from its proper context."[21] Regarding the effects of the missionary activities of the holy men who accompanied the imperial march, Tadesse Tamrat remarks, "The conversion of the conquered people was always left for time to solve. As long as the military dominance of the Christians lasted, the inhabitants of the conquered areas were slowly and imperfectly absorbed into the new religious framework."[22] The picture of the role of frontier monasteries is very different. The monastic holy men scattered in wide areas, also limited in number, could have lasting impact only in the vicinity of the monastic centers they erected.[23]

Examples of such prominent monks who also were founders of famous monasteries include Iyasus Mo'a (ca. 1211–1292), Abune Tekle Haymanot (1215–1313), Ewostatewos (1273–1352), and a number of their disciples who later took up their mantles and ventured into different parts of Ethiopia.[24] Whatever their drawbacks, the establishment of such monastic centers constituted a major landmark in the Church's history, for it ushered in energetic missionary efforts in most parts of Ethiopia. One major situation that considerably impeded their evangelistic effort was the virtual absence of support from the bishops (*abunas*) who were foreign to the country and were often apprehensive of large-scale evangelization in general.[25] The bishops, who were appointees of the Coptic Church of Egypt, neither envisaged a national mission program nor took steps to augment local initiatives through training, ordination of evangelists and priests, or the provision of logistical and moral backing.[26]

Monastic establishment reached its zenith by the sixteenth century, as a series of monastic centers were founded from northern Hamasein[27] to Lake Zewai in the south, and from the eastern rim of the western plateau to Lake Tana. In the succeeding centuries, the monastic movements spread in other parts of the empire, speeding concurrently the process of "Christianization."[28]

Given the paucity of information, it is hard to have a clear insight as to what Christianization meant, what exactly people had to do and experience in order to become Christians, and what the process entailed in the context of the period. We also have no clear idea of what becoming

a Christian convert meant from the point of view of those converted. Overall, it seemed that acceptance of the Christian faith involved embracing the new faith on the basis of what had been communicated through the priests or the monks and much more so on the demonstrable display of power and efficacy.[29] On a personal level, the ritual that marks the transition begins with a verbalized expression of denials of previous allegiances and a public pronouncement of acceptance of the new faith. The pronouncement was something like, "I deny the power of Satan, I believe in the power of God." This could be followed by baptism and a change of names and the wearing of the *mateb* (baptismal chord), the silk thread tied around the neck of a child usually around baptism, as a means of marking the person as a Christian.[30] According to some sources, the practice of wearing the *mateb* dates back to the early phase of evangelization when monks involved in mission works found converts repeatedly coming back for baptism without knowing its spiritual significance. The monks found it necessary to mark the converts in order to distinguish those who had already gone through baptismal rites from those who had not.[31] By extension, the same was applied to new adult converts, baptisands who would normally take new names and wear the *mateb* to symbolize their new identity. In the past, the *mateb* served as a badge and function of distinguishing a Christian from a Muslim or follower of local traditional religions, and at no time in the course of one's life was the Christian to appear without it.[32]

Apart from embracing these symbolic representations of the faith, the new adherents were not required to make radical changes in their worldviews and daily lives. In other words, acceptance of Christianity did not necessarily demand an irreversible departure from their traditional religious convictions and practices.[33] For some of the evangelized people, Christian formulas and public rituals, like baptism in a river during the month of January, were absorbed within the matrix of the previously existing religious symbols and traditions. In some cases churches and monasteries were erected over preexisting shrines.[34] This was partly done to easily attract local people and lead them to conversion, and partly, in the cases involving conquest, to serve the purpose of power display, for it symbolically demonstrated the victor's position against the subdued.

Kaplan points out that there is no evidence gleaned from any of the *Gedelat* (books of miracles) of attempts made by the monastic missionaries to thoroughly reform the lifestyle and cultural practice of the people whom they converted to Christianity. He points out that neither polygamy nor

participation in traditional rites of passage appear to have been barriers to becoming members of the new Church. In an attempt to gain many "converts" among the local people, the priests and the monks made concessions to established ways of life. The new converts were generally not wrenched from their established patterns of social norms, and intriguingly enough, Christianity itself does not seem to be encumbered by the admixtures of the old and the new, whether they are expressed through dress, festivities, or behavioral patterns.[35] Harold Marcus also observes that the evangelists ignored for a time such folk practices as witchcraft, magic, or devotion to household spirits, and as a result, "Over the long term, the people became more conventional Christians and the conquest zones were absorbed to a greater or lesser extent into the Solomonic heartland."[36] This situation is not only true of the medieval period, but is also relevant to the later days of the expansion process. In fact, one can say that the patterns of evangelization of the medieval period presaged the trend in the modern phase of the expansion of Christianity.[37] According to Tadesse Tamrat, such accommodations trespassed into the more substantive tenets of Christian worship and faith, which in the long run undermined the basic foundations on which the Christian Church rests and deprived much of the Christian content of the Ethiopian Church.[38]

We also do not know much about the monks' preaching style, the content of their instruction, or their techniques of evangelization. Obviously, the claim of a supernatural calling in the case of monastic movements and the support of state power must have had considerable influence in the way they delivered the message and drew recruits from the local population. The monks were forceful and persuasive in using eschatological messages in pointing out that the doomsday was approaching and that people must steer away from false gods and submit their lives to the true God, if they wanted to avoid his wrath and eternal damnation. The monastic figures as well as priests confronted local diviners and demonstrated their impotence through a show of miraculous performance, which in today's parlance is called a "power encounter."[39] In the eyes of the converts, the monks possessed supernatural powers due to their demonstrated ability to exorcise demonic spirits, to destroy mediums of traditional deities, and to heal. Such cures seemed to have resulted not from the holy men's application of special medical knowledge or training, but rather from their use of religious techniques involving prayer, the cross, the Eucharist, monastic garb, and holy water. According to Sundkler, "This healing power was very efficacious in the monk's missionary activities, reaching out to the

un-reached peasant masses."[40] Healing miracles, confronting demonic powers, and the message of deliverance from satanic domination became powerful evangelistic tools, as is the case today among the Pentecostals, to win over people into the Christian faith.

The deepest obstacle to the Christianization of the common man was language. There were numerous languages spoken in Ethiopia, and most of the people in the newly added territories in the south were speakers of non-Semitic languages. We do not for sure know what kind of language the itinerant monks and the priests who followed the rulers used. *Geez* being the language of liturgy for a long time and considered to be a sacred language to communicate the word of God to others, one might reasonably assume that it must have been the medium of transmission.[41] On top of all the logistic and other constraints, when the language factor is added, it becomes hard to gauge how the monks and priests conveyed their messages efficaciously in their crusading efforts and how their messages were understood by those on the receiving end. Linguistic and cultural diversity of the Ethiopian region and the extensive nature of the areas involved seem to have placed a considerable limitation on the effectiveness of the evangelizing mission of the monks and the priests.

The monastic model of the missionary enterprise seems to have declined in the succeeding years. For one thing, religious controversies that rocked the Church in the centuries after the Jesuit interlude sapped their energy, and second, the evangelistic zeal of many of the monastic centers abated as they started to receive land grants from kings and provincial chiefs.[42] The relative affluence obtained from this development weakened the passion for mission and evangelistic works. Disruptive influences such as wars and migration may also have contributed to the decline.

Indisputably, the monastic movement had in some ways weakened traditional religious structures in areas where their activities were intense. For the most part, they were engaged primarily in destroying key symbols of preexisting religious traditions—for instance, cutting down sacred groves and denouncing beliefs in the spirits, whatever the forms of expression, be it trees, snakes, or any other totemic object. Moreover, as a show of power, they built Christian churches on the sites of former sacred spaces. Their actions did not lead to stamping out the influence of primal religions. Rather, these limbo situations created a liminal zone that provided an important backdrop for the rise of fault line—and at times prophetic—movements across the centuries, as well as for the smooth penetration of the Western missionaries of the later period.

Wars, Migrations, and Controversies

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Christian state of the Solomonic dynasty experienced serious difficulties, mainly resulting from the traumatic wars of Ahmad Gragn (1527–1543) and, to a certain extent, the migration of the Oromo that accompanied it. The wars of Gragn affected almost the whole empire and led to the decline of the influence of the Church, especially in the recently conquered and Christianized regions of the central and southern regions of Ethiopia. The wars also prompted the Jesuit interlude. Portuguese soldiers came to the aid of the Ethiopian rulers during the wars; after the wars, Jesuit missionaries came to Ethiopia for the purpose of evangelization. The positive attitude and friendly reception accorded to the Portuguese missionaries by the kings gave them the opportunity to spread the Catholic faith, initially within the court circle and later among the populace. In fact, Emperor Susenyos officially espoused Catholicism and even tried to impose it by a decree he passed in 1622. This move precipitated a widespread civil war, resulting in the emperor's abdication of power and the Jesuits' expulsion from Ethiopia.

A major ramification of this episode was the development of a xenophobic attitude in Ethiopian society, rulers and people alike, especially toward missionaries. The event also had immediate repercussions isolating both the state and the Church from the outside world. Emperor Fasiledes and succeeding kings chose to seal off the country from any external influence. As a consequence of this radical isolation, the Church experienced centuries of exclusion from the outside world that led to its inward orientation and the further indigenization of its belief systems and practices.[43]

The Jesuit interlude also had the unanticipated outcome of rekindling the old theological controversy that arose at Chalcedon over the nature of Jesus. The hermits who were instrumental in the opposition to and, ultimately, the expulsion of the Jesuits could easily instigate the masses to revolt based on the Church's non-Chalcedonian tradition. The Catholics were also labeled as *tsere Mariam*—literally, anti-Mary—which has since then become a generic brand to categorize all non-Orthodox Christians and a powerful metaphoric symbol of the anthropological "other." The Jesuit fiasco left something in the national psyche. The branding of someone as turning Catholic, *koteleke*, became a generic tag conjuring up heterodoxy, or even worse, apostasy. It did not matter which of the Western forms of Christianity one joined, as long as one was assumed to be abandoning the Orthodox faith.[44]

The new theological strain engendered by the presence and teaching of the Jesuits revived doctrinal debates, some already in existence and others newly inspired. Mostly a reactive response to the challenges posed by the Catholic doctrinal influence, they gave occasion for the publication of numerous treatises. Essentially, the publications arose from the need to reexamine the doctrinal position of the Church and in due process purify and jealously guard the Church from possible external influences that might still be lingering after the expulsion of the Jesuit missionaries.[45]

The migration of the Oromo, which continued throughout the seventeenth century, also considerably weakened the position of the Church, particularly in the outlying regions. The migration caused disruptions in the linkage between local churches and Christian communities, and the ecclesiastical authority at the center. The situation was compounded by the disintegration of the central authority that became palpably evident as of the last quarter of the eighteenth century.

Ethiopia experienced political upheaval in an era locally known as *Zemene Mesafint* (1769–1855), the Era of the Princes, during which time both the monarchical and church authority lost their power and influence over regional affairs. Unsettled theological disputes took on new regional subtleties and vernacular nuances to advance disguised local interests. In fact, central authority had broken down to such an extent that kings were reduced to mere puppets, pawns in the hands of ambitious nobles jockeying for power. This situation considerably affected the position of the Church, for the decline of imperial authority left it without a single guardian institution. Yet, in spite of its weakness, it still continued to serve as the only unifying force for a large portion of the country.[46] More than any time in the country's history, Christianity held the nation together as it descended into chaos with the triumph of regional and local forces.[47]

Emperor Tewodros (1855–1868), the monarch who envisaged new ideas to alleviate the centuries-old socioeconomic malaise, gave serious attention to the affairs of the Church. His radical initiative toward reforming the Church, however, was greeted with some resistance. He wanted the Church to be more self-sufficient in terms of running its affairs, institutionally and financially. After his coronation in 1855, he set out to reunite the torn empire and restore, as he perceived, its former glory. A pivotal point of his policy was to put an end to religious controversies in the country. The strategy he adopted was to unite and strengthen the Church from within in order to forge the consolidation of imperial authority. To this end he officially decreed the *Tewahido* doctrine to be

the sole cardinal tenet of the Church in Ethiopia. *Tewahido*, which literally means indivisibly united or just "union," confesses the perfect unity of two natures, divine and human, in the person of Christ, without confusing and without separation.[48] The design of the emperor was to stamp out the various theological houses that had provided pretexts for some local rulers with a separatist agenda. Tewodros also sought to establish amicable relations with foreign missionaries on whom he placed the faith that he could effectively use their expertise and wider connections for his national project. High on his agenda was advancing his nation's progress and containing the threat of Egyptian expansion.[49]

Emperor Yohannes IV, who came to the throne after an intense power struggle in the brief interlude following the end of the short-lived but momentous reign of Tewodros, furthered the religious policy of his predecessor. He affirmed the *Tewahido* doctrine in 1878 at the Council of Boru Meda, in which many scholars of the Church participated. The council was summoned in order to promote harmony and peace within the Church and to put an end to the age-old theological and doctrinal controversies. It was also intended to boost the Christian missionary enterprise especially in the region of Wello, where Islam had been making considerable inroads mainly since the period of *Zemene Mesafint*. The Muslims from Wello had been actively converting many practitioners of traditional religion who lived in the peripheral regions of the empire, thus increasing the potential opposition to the Christian empire.[50]

Yohannes concentrated most of his missionary effort on Wello because the province had virtually become an Islamic state within the heartland of Ethiopia. Another important reason that Wello became the target of renewed evangelistic activity was its geographical location. The region of Wello served as a buffer zone between Tigrai, the emperor's bastion, and Shoa, the exclusive domain of Menelik, his rival. Both Yohannes IV and Menelik were personally involved in putting pressure on the Church to carry out intensified missionary work that was particularly focused on converting the chiefs. In fact, they themselves took active interests in becoming the godfathers of prominent Muslim rulers. Yohannes baptized Mohamed Ali (father of *Lij* Iyasu), christened him Mikael, and bestowed on him the highly esteemed title of *Ras*. Similarly, Menelik sponsored Aba Watew, who was christened as Haile Mariam, and subsequently granted the title of *Dejazmatch*.

The process of Christianization of the region of Wello as a whole followed the pattern described earlier. What makes it a bit unique is

the level of intensity and degree of involvement of the kings. Yohannes told the people, "We are your apostles. All this [Wello and the central highlands] used to be Christian land until Gragn ruined and misled it. Now let all, whether Muslim or Galla [Oromo], believe in the name of Jesus Christ. Be baptized! If you wish to live in peace preserving your belongings, become Christians."[51] The resolution of the Council of Boru Meda provided an ultimatum for the Wello chiefs and the inhabitants to be converted to the Christian faith. For the Christian heretics, the ultimatum gave them a maximum of two years to conform; for the Muslims, the time limit was three years; and those considered to be pagans had to submit within a time line of five years. Failure to comply with the stipulated ultimata would result in disfranchisement of land and property and loss of authority.[52] To facilitate the conversion of the Muslims, Yohannes sent some of the foremost priests of the Church to work in that area. He lived in the area both to oversee the progress and to personally influence the process of conversion by ordering the people to build churches and pay tithes to their parish priests.[53] We do not know what percentage of the people of Wello became Christians. According to Erlich, by the 1880s some fifty thousand *Jabarti* Muslims and five hundred thousand Oromos had been forced to renounce their faith and convert to Christianity.[54]

This imperial mission to convert people en masse, of course, was apparently driven by political imperatives rather than religious, and as a result, much was lacking in the package for the mass conversion to have a sustained effect on the religious and sociocultural spheres of those who went through this coercive process of Christianization. Considering the wider populace, the religious impact of this top-to-bottom approach seems to be insignificant, for whatever the number of the converts, they constituted a small minority. The conversion of the rulers and the masses was such a hasty process that neither the priests evangelizing nor the people evangelized had time to go through any serious instruction and discipleship process. The success of converting the ordinary Muslims of Wello to Christianity or the extent to which the people embraced the faith in such a fast-paced and massive form of conversion is difficult to assess. Richard Caulk cites the remark of a missionary who states that the people were "instructed to fast and to make confessions and observe the holidays. But they are still wed to pagan rituals which nobody disturbs; even the Christians, who live among them take part in these."[55] According to Hussein Ahmed, the emperor's coercive form of conversion is coun-

terintuitive, for it led to militant opposition from Muslim clerics that outlasted the reign of the monarch.[56]

Some religious movements developed along the fault lines of this coercive form of conversion. A typical example is the prophetic movement spearheaded by Sheik Zakaraya, a well-known Muslim cleric who, after some apparitions in 1892, converted from Islam to Christianity and was later baptized in the Orthodox Church. He pioneered a movement that led to the conversion of thousands of Muslims into the Christian faith.[57]

It may be difficult to make a discrete evaluation of the emperor's policy of forced conversion—that is, whether it essentially emanated from honest religious convictions or was intended to fortify political authority long in decline. In this connection, Caulk is right in stating, "One argues that lack of a secular ideology left him with the state's religion as the obvious means of rallying his subjects."[58] All things considered, however, the approach to bring unity under the guise of religion proved to be ill-suited and did not seem to have an enduring consequence. Certainly, Christianity as it was thus presented did not become a popular religion in Wello.[59]

What this development left behind in the religious culture of the people of Wello is the normative value attached to the shifting of allegiance from one set of religious beliefs to another. According to informants, even to this day, the region of Wello is known for taking both religion and politics pragmatically, unlike the neighboring regions of Tigrai and Begemeder, where people tend to form rigid, firmly maintained boundaries and strongly condemn sliding from one religion to another.[60] Perhaps, of all the places in Ethiopia, Wello provides the scene where the shared space between the two religions has given rise to a culture of religious tolerance and an openness that allows shifting of religious loyalty as politically appropriate and sociologically beneficial.

The religious policy of Emperor Yohannes, which aimed at uniformity and harmony under the banner of the Orthodox Church, also affected the embryonic missionary community, which was seen as a nuisance to the nation. The emperor told the few Western missionaries operating in northern Ethiopia to leave the country. Yohannes reasoned that his country was not in short supply of preachers of the gospel as long as the people preached about the same God.[61] For a pious monarch like Yohannes, the missionary presence in Ethiopia always raised the old suspicion and fear of the aftermath of Chalcedon. Accepting people with a Chalcedonian background is considered to be an offense to the

doctrinal edifice of the national Church, regarded by the Ethiopian clergy as the soul of the nation and the custodian of an authentic Christian faith. Hence, it is associated with one of the most destructive attacks on the Orthodox Church.

Christianity and State Expansion in the South

The rise of Emperor Menelik in Shoa significantly changed the history of Ethiopia. Menelik's strong desire to reunify Ethiopia and restore its glorious history led him to conduct extensive military and diplomatic campaigns into areas that had even remotely been connected with the central authority in the past. The result was the creation of a large empire that brought a motley collection of diverse ethnic and sociolinguistic groups under one state umbrella. As had been the case in the earlier period, the Church gave ideological and functional backing to Menelik in his expansionist endeavor. In the newly conquered territories, the Church became an indispensable political ally and institutional tool facilitating the pacification process and securing the allegiance of local rulers in their conveyance of loyalties to imperial power.[62] Following previous patterns, as was the case in both ancient and medieval times, the Church's missionary work involved converting key local elite, religious or secular; baptizing people; and building churches. For the priests involved in the evangelization process, their principal targets were those men who lived in the neighborhood of the "urban" centers. For the new converts, the process involved repentance and denial of former religious allegiance. In essence, to be converted meant to be a proselyte, and to be a proselyte meant to be baptized and christened, acquiring a new Christian name that marks the endpoint of the transition of becoming a Christian.

The convert would be expected to attend the Church, celebrate certain prescribed ritual cycles, and join one of the fellowships—bonds of laities organized under favored patron saints—but irreversible commitment was not required. The model one sees here is integrative as opposed to extractive. The converts were incorporated into an established socioreligious platform without strict demands being placed on them and without experiencing a significant level of disruptions and uprooting from their culture. The conversion process was also sociopolitical in nature, for becoming a Christian, in a way, involved becoming part of the community that has introduced the new faith by assuming the language and, to a degree, segments of their cultural and religious traditions. The absorption level of Christianity was so minimal that, in most cases, the new

faith merely formed a thin veneer over preexisting religious traditions and popular culture. Consequently, the previous primal values still had their hold on the converts. This time, however, there were more churches built than monasteries. These churches were spread mainly around the new garrison centers. The provincial rulers representing the imperial state, and the local chiefs, who were incorporated into the system, became chief patrons of the church by providing it with land grants and financial and logistical support.[63]

The Church in the newly conquered territories catered to the large number of soldiers, officials, and various state functionaries, locally known as *neftegnas*.[64] Several factors hampered the success of the Church drawing converts from the local population, particularly from the rural segments. These included the lack of an evangelization program that took local contexts into account, shortage of a rigorous system of theological training, financial limitations, incompetence in the use of the vernacular languages, and the negative image it gave to the local population due to its association with the new power elite.[65]

Menelik followed a somewhat liberal and gradualist religious policy compared to his predecessor.[66] Menelik epitomized this principle in what has later become rather a cliché, *Haymanot yegel new ager yegara new*, literally, "religion is a private matter but the nation is for all," which clearly was not just liberal but a very radical position for its time. That being said, however, Menelik was still a devout follower of the Orthodox Church and a strong advocate of its missionary activities. In fact, Menelik viewed his policy of territorial expansion as something religiously inspired. Menelik's expansion, no doubt, was motivated by economic and political imperatives. However, if not at the center, religion was also an important consideration. Ethiopian monarchs took religion both as a source of inspiration and justification for effecting territorial expansions. Menelik advocated a reinvigorated venture of territorial expansion that would bring forth spiritual reconnections and political reintegration.[67]

In Menelik's view, the Church had lost its influence in the outlying regions, evidence of which was the existence of ruined monastic sites and thinly scattered Christian communities standing as relics of past evangelistic endeavors. Remnants of mission work abounded in places like Zewai, Gurage lands, Welayta, Gofa, Negele, Goba (with vestiges of rock-hewn churches), and Arsi. Christianity in these areas had fallen into abeyance largely because of the country's political instability since the days of Gragn and the inability of the Church to maintain sustained contact with the

local Christian population through continued teachings and institutional support. As local congregations lost access to ecclesiastical instructions, the ordination of priesthood ebbed, and people developed various creative ways of reconfiguring their religious spaces.

Recent scholarly studies conducted in the southern and central parts of Ethiopia have revealed new findings concerning the works of early evangelization. Studies in the Kambata and Sidama areas of southern Ethiopia show that in the absence of sustained efforts resulting from either the regular presence of institutionalized cadres or the extension of ordained priests from neighboring monastic centers, the local converts reverted to their previous religious practices, or made a creative adaptation by fusing elements of the old and the new.[68] According to Ulric Baukamper, when contacts with the north were severed for prolonged periods, the southern priesthood tended to disappear or be absorbed into the local tradition. Religious practices such as fasts and feasts associated with holidays gradually lost their original meanings and mutated into something different with the interweaving of new elements and the revival of old ones.[69]

A good example of this is the well-preserved heritage of a fascinating mix of Christianity and traditional religion in the Gamo ethnic group where the *tabot*[70] and the veneration of saints like that of Saint Gabriel have been indigenized to produce an intriguing version of syncretistic folk religions. In some areas of southern Ethiopia, such as the deep Omo Sheleko area inhabited by the Tambaro ethnic groups, the saints have been transformed into local spirits with slightly corrupted names such as *Kitosa* (for Christ), *Gorgisa* (for Saint George), and *Maramo* (for Mary). Christian Oromo of northeastern Welega have similarly equated the goddess of fertility, *Atete*, with the Virgin Mary, hence the slightly corrupted naming, *Mariami*. Another good example would be the case of *Fandano/Fandicho*, a syncretistic fusion of traditional religion, Christianity, and Islam.[71] *Fandano*, which was widely practiced by the Hadyas and Kambatas, involved sacrifice, purification rites, fasting for extended periods, and prayers bearing the marks of the three religions. For instance, a slaughtering ceremony can be opened by a father saying *beseme ab* (in the name of the Father/God), followed by the father-in-law's pronouncement of *bismilahi* (in the name of Allah).[72]

Whether one sees these developments as degenerative religious practices or creative syncretism, what explains their evolution is the conspicuous absence of the Church, institutionally or otherwise, and the subsequent taming of Christianity by the local culture. Cut off from the

mainstream of the teachings of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, existing Christian practices easily merged with old patterns and the new influences mainly coming from the penetration of Islam.[73]

The effects of this energetically conducted process of Christianization that took place during Menelik's reign were not uniform throughout the newly incorporated regions of the southern, central, and southwestern regions of Ethiopia. One can say that in places like Harar, the Ogaden, and Jimma, where Islam had been the dominant religion, the level of penetration and influence of the Orthodox Church has been very low. In places such as the central and southern regions of Ethiopia, where the influence of the Church had been kept intact either in the form of memory or in modified syncretistic patterns, it appears that the level of success was relatively higher. In areas of the southwestern parts of Ethiopia, where the historic religious link is not vividly traceable in living memories, however, the Church's missionary efforts seem to have produced mixed results. In parts of Wellega where the traditional Oromo rulers saw the need to negotiate the political space following conquest by identifying with the ruling class, they not only adopted the new faith but also engaged in aggressively sponsoring the conversion of their subjects. Witness the case of Jote Tulu of Qelem *Awraja*, who submitted to Menelik's forces, anticipating the futility of resistance, and as a result obtained a semiautonomous status for his domain. After being converted, he insisted his subjects follow suit, and conversion took place en masse without being preceded with sound doctrinal instruction.[74] The ruler of Nekempte, *Aba* Moreda, and his son, Kumsa Moreda (who was later named *Dejazmatch* Gebre Egziabeher, servant of God, after his conversion) pursued more or less the same line.[75] In both cases it is hard to imagine that the local converts possessed significant familiarity with the complexities of their Christian faith.

The local rulers found it highly politic to embrace and promote the new faith. On balance, they saw the sociopolitical advantages of accepting Christianity and thus facilitated the conversion of their subjects, through purgation and political fiat and the sponsoring of the building of churches.[76] Pragmatism and expediency played out more than religious motivation; some local rulers embraced the new religion in order to get the king's protection from rival chiefs or else opted for it because they wanted to rid themselves of the strictures of primal religions. They entered into filial relations with the royalty or members of the local ruling class through baptism and the creation of the traditional godfather and

godson relations. The model presented here, at least in parts of Wellega, is the expansion of Christianity under the noble and princely patronage. Apparently, what is conspicuously lacking in the process is autonomous local initiative, the character of a popular movement, where the chief actors were ordinary men who could take the message to the wider populace volitionally. This had been demonstrated in the example of ex-slaves, such as Onesimos Nesib and social outcasts like Gidada Salon, father of the ex-president Negaso Gidada, who were instrumental in the expansion of evangelical Christianity in Wellega and Ilubabor.[77]

What can be said overall about the expansion of Christianity during the reign of Menelik is that the dominant form of its dissemination was a state-sponsored church planting with a religious elite recruited from the north to take charge of its activities. This fact is clearly demonstrated in the proclamation he introduced in 1907 emphasizing the view that church planting/construction was the foundation of Christian faith and urged his subjects to invest their resources to that end in order for them not to miss heavenly as well as earthly rewards.[78] With some reservation, I tend to describe this approach as the "garrison model," for the garrison centers were the radiating loci of the push for conversion and evangelization. The old top-to-bottom approach, which targeted the local rulers, seems to be the functional model and pattern of conversion. The exploitative political arrangement put in place in most conquered territories, as exemplified in the *Neftegna Gabbar* relationship, and the Church's association with the guardians of imperial authority that introduced intrusive political structures over the people, significantly limited its religious impact. The Ethiopian Church did not make a significant effort to promote the Christian faith among the native population, particularly among those living in the rural areas.[79] Its impact, as observed by many informants among the rural population, was limited. It did not encourage the participation of the local population to create a sense of ownership of the Christian faith through the production of a local cadre of clergy serving as deacons, *debteras*, and priests in the respective parishes.[80] This discussion is meant not to fault the national Church, but to set the record straight so that one can appreciate the conditions under which the Western missionary enterprise made considerable inroads in these areas of Ethiopia at a later point. The fissures and the gaps found here and there provided an important context for the attraction and notable spread of an alternative form of Christianity that the Protestant missionaries offered by revealing the secret of "the Book."[81] The association between the antipathy of con-

quered people toward the new overlords and the preference they showed to accepting other forms of religions has found some credence through recent scholarly works.[82] The issue nevertheless needs more critical studies and further debates for a balanced judgment.

The model of nation building by extension and, at times, imposition of a common religion with the demands it entails adopted by Ethiopian monarchs did not seem to serve its purpose in the long run. It left accumulated problems and pent-up resentments for future generations to solve. Members of these generations filled the gaps of the unmet religious needs in ways that appealed to their sensibilities.

Conclusion

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church is deeply rooted in the culture of Ethiopia. It was not only the official religion of the empire, but was considered to be the most profound expression of the national existence and the most important cultural force in the lives of many Ethiopians.[83] As Haggai Ehrlich has aptly summarized its role, the Church has become "the comprehensive prescription for the Ethiopian state, culture and lifestyle."[84] In essence, the Orthodox Christian faith in Ethiopia is a religion that embraces culture, politics, flag, identity, and nationalism, all put in one package. The role of the state as an agent of diffusion of the Christian faith together with the Church's has considerably tarnished its image, especially among the people of the peripheral areas incorporated into the empire mainly through conquest. Its close connections with the state not only ideologized its message, but also made it captive to its power structure, thus impairing its free initiatives.[85] As the Church moved out of its core highland base and began to reach out in diverse cultural situations it was forced to some level to follow an accommodative modus operandi, turning it into some kind of harmonial religion.[86] Its integrative approach presents a contrast to the newer forms of expressions of Christianity—Protestantism or Pentecostalism—which stressed personal salvation and separation/distinctiveness. Coexistence has definitely been important for mitigating the centrifugal elements, but it has also weakened the Church's spiritual mandate. Medieval forms of mission and evangelization, monastic and state-sponsored, did not seem to be effective in putting the Church and its community of believers on solid spiritual/biblical foundations. The cracks and pitfalls were easily filled when alternative forms of Christianity unfolded. It has to be noted that the Orthodox Church has, by intention or default, contributed to the weakening of preexisting matrixes as it