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Review article

ØYVIND EIDE, *Revolution and Religion in Ethiopia. The Growth and Persecution of the Mekane Yesus Church.*

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Tamar Zewi's "Energicus in Saadya Gaon's Translation of the Pentateuch" tries to make a case that the *energicus* in the Saadya Gaon St. Petersburg manuscript (dated to 1009 A.D.) reflects Saadya Gaon's spoken vernacular ("yet unspoiled by later vulgar influences", p. 224) (pp. 223–230). In my view, it is conceivable that this form was used as a higher stylistic device and is not reflectant of the author's spoken language. Since the *energicus* does not occur in medieval Christian Arabic nor in the papyri studied by Simon Hopkins (*Studies in the Grammar of Early Arabic*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), nor does it occur in "most modern dialects of Arabic" (p. 223, fn. 1), it seems more than likely that this was a diglossic feature in Saadya Gaon's translation reflecting acrolectic (high) Arabic. How can one prove the following contention of the author, who asserts: "[The appearance of the *energicus*] in Ms. St. Petersburg and its echoes in the two printed editions of Derenbourg and Ḥasīd prove that the use of the *energicus* was an early one truly reflecting a feature of Saadya Gaon's own language" (p. 228)?

Let me point out that something is missing, I believe, in the Koranic translation quoted by the author (p. 227): "We shall reward those who were patient their wage, according to the best of what they did". Furthermore, there are two typographical errors in the name Yusuf ʿAli (p. 227, fn. 10, and p. 230).

Let me conclude by stating that an index of languages, forms, and authors would have contributed greatly to the utilitarian value of these offerings for future researchers.

ØYVIND EIDE, *Revolution and Religion in Ethiopia. The Growth and Persecution of The Mekane Yesus Church. 1974–1985*. Athens: James Currey. Addis Ababa University. Ohio University Press, 2000. 300 pages. Price: US\$ 49,95/US\$ 22,95. ISBN: 0–8214–1365–1 (cloth); 0–8214–1366–X (paperback). Reviewed by

EZRA GEBREMEDHIN

Introduction

As someone born, brought up and educated in Ethiopia, and as one who has served in various capacities within the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY), I have greatly enjoyed and benefited from reading Eide's book. The book is written with an impressive amount of knowledge of

both the details and the broader sweeps of the life of the church during the crucial years, 1974–1985. Eide plumbs into the theology of the EECMY, not only in its relations to the evangelical Lutheran missions which gave rise to it but also to the Christologies of the Church Fathers (Athanasius, Cyril of Alexandria) which have influenced Lutheran Christology and Eucharistic theology (pp. 79–80). A notable son of the EECMY, Gudina Tumsa, is likened to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a son of the Confessing Church of the days of Hitler's Germany (p. 177).

Here is a Norwegian scholar, a former missionary to the EECMY and the head of an institute, of Pastoral Counselling, writing about the fate of an African Evangelical Lutheran church on the Horn of Africa. This church, which grew out of a conservative, feudal agrarian society, was suddenly cast into the throes of an erratic and violent Marxist revolution. Eide uses oral and written sources of Ethiopian, Swedish, Norwegian, German, Danish, Finnish, American, British provenance in building up a narrative of the vicissitudes of a church trying to find its identity and its way in the context of a very fast moving socio-political development (see pp. 3–8). He admits his debt of gratitude to Gustav Arén, the late, renowned recorder of the history of the EECMY. Having worked among the Oromo, Eide moves most freely in his writing on this particular segment of the population of Ethiopia that also happens to be the largest section of the membership of the church.

Some Key Actors and Organisations

The reader meets an impressive gallery of names of actors in the drama of the turbulent years covered by the author, names of key personalities in both church and state. Among these are Emmanuel Abraham (President of the EECMY 1963–1985), Gudina Tumsa, 1932–1979 (General Secretary, theologian, teacher, pastor and martyr), Tasgara Hirpo (President of the Western Synod during the crucial years from 1971 to 1981), and Francis Stephanos (President of the EECMY 1985–1993).

A number of expatriates make up the 'cast' in the drama of the interaction between 'centre' and 'periphery' during the years of revolutionary change in Ethiopia. Among these, we have Manfred Lundgren, Swedish missionary and Director of the Radio Voice of the Gospel (RVOG) at the time of its nationalisation in March 1977. Christian Krause, one time head of the Evangelical *Kirchentag* in Germany, now bishop, came to the aid of Gudina and his family through his international contacts, particularly after Gudina's second arrest in 1979. Bishop Josiah Kibira, a Tanzanian and a President of the Lutheran World Federation from 1977 to 1984, approached President Julius Nyerere on behalf of Gudina when he was arrested a sec-

ond time in 1979. Julius Nyerere pleaded with Ethiopian government officials on behalf of Gudina on a stopover in Addis Ababa in connection with a trip to Sudan in 1979 (pp. 175–178).

Among Ethiopian actors, Mengistu Haile-Mariam, the Marxist Head of State, who had come to power in 1974 but gained undisputed authority in 1977, occupies a central place. Felleke Gedle Giorgis, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, was a key person as far as contacts with the leadership of the EECMY and with representatives of Ecumenical and diplomatic organisations were concerned. Negusse Fanta, the Provincial Chairman of the Commission for the Organization of the Ethiopian Workers' Party (COPWE) in Wallagga, is remembered by the faithful for his notoriety. Fissiha Desta (Vice-Chairman of the council of Ministers and COPWE) was another important contact person. Dawit Wolde-Giorgis (Head of the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission [RCC], and author of the book *Red Tears*) was among the most important actors on the political scene, as far as relations to the relief efforts of the EECMY were concerned.

Eide provides the reader with the names of geographical, administrative and ecclesiastical regions. He introduces us to political groupings and fractions, notably the All-Ethiopia Socialist Movement MEISON – that had strong adherents among the Oromo – as well as to key departmental units like the Provisional Office for Mass Organization [POMOA]). The book is a veritable lexicon of geographical, political, sociological, cultural concepts in Ethiopia for the years during which the revolution held sway.

A Look at some Key Concepts

Revolution and Religion in Ethiopia 1974–1985 is the main title of the book. It is to be assumed that the main components of the title are the words “Revolution” and “Religion”. The scene is Ethiopia. The war of liberation in Eritrea continued to cast its shadow on developments in the country as a whole (pp. 104–106). The Soviet Union is the most important ‘external’ actor in the development of the events of the ten odd years under study (p. 103, 110).

Can one easily identify the main ‘plot’ of the study? I think the goal of the book is given in quite straight forward language. Eide writes, “As an analytical tool I refer to the dialectic between centre and periphery and the dynamic relationship between these entities [...]. I should, however, at this point emphasize that centre and periphery are not static categories. Powerful dynamics have been seen both in the centre, due to the processes of centralization and modernization, and in the periphery, partly due to the activity of missions and the Evangelical churches” (p. 8). The concept of revolu-

tion as employed by the author is both the *result* and the *catalyst* of the tension that characterised the relationship between centre and periphery in the author's understanding of the dynamics of Ethiopian society.

The author has used the concepts of centre and periphery as tools for the collection, classification and analysis of facts on the Ethiopian Revolution, fully aware of the risk of simplifying issues by simplifying working methods. The revolution was born out of the interaction of internal disaffection (the tension between a 'feudal' and autocratic centre and a marginalized and disenfranchised periphery) and external ideological tools and paradigms (Marxist ideology made available by an educated elite). This revolution shook and finally destroyed the uneasy equilibrium, which an old feudal power structure had managed to keep in place with the help of a national language (Amharic) and a nationally favoured religion – the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC). This at least is the scene that constitutes the background to Eide's study (pp. 25–34).

An integrated national state as a goal and 'centralism', understood as an expression of this goal, constitute the backdrop to this study. Mengistu Haile-Mariam strove to pull down the centralised structure that Emperor Haile Selassie had built up. In the end he used his much-vaunted 'nationalism' to build up an even more autocratic and dictatorial regime.

Marxism and Religion in Ethiopia

A word about the religious picture in the country and the way it was regarded by the authorities. We have the churches or religious groups in general and the EOC in particular. The new ideology was no friend of religion.

In the case of feudal Ethiopia, religion (and especially the EOC) was both the ally and the mark of Ethiopia's centre, one of the marks of traditional, national identity. During the revolution however, with the disestablishment of the monarchy, religion as represented by the EOC did not have any longer the aura that it possessed during the more than a thousand years of its ascendancy. For the Marxists, religion was not a partner but a tool, despised but used whenever possible, not least to cement the newly created ideological superstructure, the new 'centre'.

The non-orthodox religions in Ethiopia were regarded, at the worst, as nuisances and, at the best, as possible sources of benefit. They were regarded as nuisances not only on ideological grounds (religion was an illusion and the result of wishful thinking) but also as potential security risks for the country, since they were results of missionary ventures originating in western, capitalistic, Christian nations. In Ethiopia the mission churches were designated as 'imported religions', a derogatory label in the views of

those who prided themselves as adherents of a truly indigenous, Ethiopian religion (pp. 200–203).

These ‘imported’ religions were however useful in one respect. They functioned as channels for much needed aid into a country plagued by severe drought and famine. The Marxist authorities were not oblivious of this fact. This fact seems to have introduced ambivalence into the official attitude to churches like the EECMY, especially in times of pressing humanitarian needs requiring large-scale assistance (p. 217).

Focus on the Oromo of Western Wallagga

The EECMY is a national church, with synods in almost all parts of the country. After giving an adequate picture of the church in its national dimensions, Eide chooses to concentrate on the experiences of the church in the western part of the country, among the Oromo, who constitute the largest segment of the membership of the EECMY. This he does without neglecting the other synods of the EECMY, particularly those in the southern part of the country, which easily fit into the centre-periphery scheme of his description and analysis of the events under study (pp. 194–197).

Eide pays attention to some of the most important non-Lutheran Protestant churches, notably the Qalä Həywät Church (QHC) and the Mäsärätä Krəstos Church (MKC). The experiences of these churches during the years of persecution confirm, according to Eide, the pattern of responses, reactions and counteractions of non-orthodox religious constellations faced by an oppressive ‘centre’. Note should be made of the one interesting qualification, namely that the EOC seems to have taken the lead in persecuting these churches and synods of the southern parts of Ethiopia, most likely at the instigation of the Marxist officials, according to Eide (pp. 168–174).

As a scholar convinced of the special relevance of the Oromo material for his main thesis, the author focuses on the Oromo of Western Ethiopia (pp. 71–84). The stirrings of revolt and self-assertion among the Oromo go back to imperial days, to the time of ‘Amhara’ and Orthodox hegemony, understood in a broad sense. But the preaching of the Gospel also fuelled the flames of change both inward, against one’s own tradition, and outward against the trappings of an oppressive feudal system. In short the centre-periphery scheme operated on different levels in Wallagga itself. On the ‘plus’ side of the relationship of the Gospel to Oromo culture Eide writes, “The vernacular Bible laid the foundation for an indigenous interpretation of the Gospel. Scarcely any other external factor has had the same impact on Oromo ethnic consciousness or religious experience [...]”. On the ‘minus’ side of this issue Eide writes, “There were numerous witnesses to the con-

flict between the traditional Oromo world-view and the Christian, which is most clearly demonstrated in the power struggle between the Evangelical preachers, on the one hand, and traditional *qaalluu* on the other” (p. 72).²

At the same time, Eide maintains that there were numerous accounts of the continuity between Oromo thought patterns and Christianity (p. 74). It appears that the Evangelical Christians in Wallagga used their tradition selectively, out of a combination of conservatism and an innovative spirit. Thus the word for God, *Waaqa*, as well as the word for sin, *cubbuu*, found their way into the Oromo Bible and the language of worship among evangelical Christians in Wallagga.

These evangelical Christians asserted themselves against the oppressive measures of the *gabbar* (serf) system, the propagation of Amharic as the main language of communication and the EOC as an arm of the state in the creation of uniformity and subjugation to the ‘centre’ (pp. 76–79). Though basically respectful to a good part of their traditional heritage, the evangelical Christians in Wallagga were not prepared to be wooed or forced into a wholesale conformity to the non-Christian world-view which they had left behind, in the name of emancipation and the seeking of one’s identity.

A Dream Betrayed

At the initial stage of the revolution, the periphery and its representatives at the centre (e.g. the Church administration of the EECMY) were happy and optimistic. The slogans of the revolution were like breezes of fresh air. The flagship of the revolution, Land Reform, seemed to be a harbinger of good things to come. The EECMY gave its full support to the idea of land reform (p. 97).

The mission organisations, which had worked within the EECMY, had introduced a sense of unity, equality and mutual respect around the Lord’s Table, and in the daily walks of the Christian community. Men and women in these evangelical communities had been introduced to the rudiments of democratic ways of operating and arriving at decisions (pp. 81–84). What the revolution, originating at the country’s centre, now seemed to promise appeared to be a confirmation, a consolidation and broadening of what the Christian Gospel had given the faithful a taste of.

What went wrong? Why did the initial enthusiasm for the revolution evaporate? In the first place, too many instances of secondary loyalties seem to have emerged and poisoned the political arena (pp. 100–103). The masters

² The word *qaalluu* is a designation for a traditional ritual expert among the Oromo. The power of the *qaalluu* passes from father to son in patrilineal succession (pp. 47–48).

of the revolution, not sure of their position in the house they had recently occupied, started lashing out blindly and furiously in all directions. There were too many political interests that had awakened to life. Two of these movements, MEISON and ECHAAT (Ethiopian Oppressed Peoples' Revolutionary Struggle) appear to have had very close links with the Oromo. They were soon to be purged to the point of elimination (p. 102). Ideals, which had only newly come to life, were either smothered or highly compromised in the struggle and the manoeuvring for power. The peasantry (the periphery) soon saw that a new power constellation, a more ruthless 'centre' was drawing its suffocating arms around it. Among these peasants were many members of the EECMY in Wallagga.

Church people in the periphery had been given a chance to taste the first titbits of revolt and emancipation. Soon they were to have their new 'wings' clipped for them, their voices silenced, their humble Christian 'laboratories' for experimenting in the democratic process shut down. This was true of all religious groups (pp. 112–114).

The Fury of Persecution

Soon, the hard-handed methods of the men of power at the centre and their extended arms in the periphery [Negusse Fanta (pp. 193–195) was apparently the most notorious example in Wallagga], only helped to reinforce the ethnically motivated aspirations of the church members in the Oromo periphery. A revolutionary movement had exchanged an old oppressive 'centre' for a new and even more oppressive one. The fury of the persecution was to hit both the 'centre' and 'periphery' of the EECMY. Gudina Tumsa was arrested in October 1978 and June 1979. It later became known that he had been brutally executed the night after his second arrest. Two of the central institutions of the EECMY, including RVOG, had been confiscated in 1977. On November 10, 1981, the central office building, an edifice of seven stories, was confiscated.

In the outlying synods, persecution took the form of the closing of churches, the harassment of young people, the harassment of church workers, confiscation of church property, imprisonment and torture (pp. 183–199).

The decline and fall of the Marxist regime, the *Derg*, is a result of the attrition of a power structure, the gradual exhaustion of a power system which was paralysed by its insatiable eagerness to construct a secure and impregnable 'centre'. Eide writes, "...the peasants had been alienated from their lands and exposed to severe hardships by political cadres. The persecution of the Evangelical Christians in the west is a part of the story. [...] At the periphery, freedom, dignity and power in the end only lasted a few years before the

centre again took control of the peasants. [...] The cause of the people of the periphery and the whole revolution were betrayed.” (p. 161).

The Ethnic Issue

According to Eide, the central administration of the EECMY and its leadership seem to have purposely abstained from cultivating or elevating ethnic concerns and interests or from encouraging ethnic enclaves in the different parts of the church. At its centre, the EECMY worked for an administration and a structure that would serve the entire church, without encouraging its outlying regions to develop into ethnic Christian fortresses. Eide quotes the following words of Ato Emmanuel Abraham: “We saw Ethiopia as Ethiopia. I know my people were oppressed. Time would deliver them. That is why I built schools. Education was necessary first. We had to abide our time. But the young couldn’t wait. They forced the issue upon us”(p. 59).

Eide ends his book before reaching our period in the life of the EECMY, although his book includes a long epilogue on the period up to 1991. He includes a section entitled Appendices, with four very important documents of the EECMY. He stops before reaching the present state of things in the EECMY, a state that seems to spell a tendency to proliferation along ethnic lines.

The present state of things in the EECMY, a church divided into two, appears to be a further development of the centre-periphery problem, with language and ethnicity contributing to the complexity of the conflict.

Concluding Remarks

The language and layout of the book are impressive. There are a couple of Latin expressions that are, as far as I can understand, wrongly spelt. The term *teologia crucis*, should, from what I understand, be spelt as *theologia crucis*. The term *teologia gloria* should be spelt *theologia gloriae*. The question of transliteration is not easy when one has to use two indigenous languages that have chosen different rules. I have not had a chance to go into this time-consuming question in detail. It may nevertheless be justified to ask how consistent the author has been, without prejudging the system he has used for both the Amharic and Oromo names. I would like to take only one example and simply ask a question. Does the transliteration of Ato *Meseret Sebhat Leab*’s surname and *Michael Hundeesaa*’s forename (p. 288) do justice to the *sounds* of their names?

I am impressed by Eide’s attempt to underline aspects of continuity in the ethos of the EECMY and its synods – a continuity with both the Christology of the Early Church, the Church of the Fathers, and a continu-

ity with the historical and ethnic and socio-cultural roots of these synods. All in all, a comprehensive, thorough and impressive history on mission and socio-political history at a crucial period in Ethiopia's evolution!

Here is someone with a rich and detailed knowledge of many aspects of Ethiopia's history in general and its short but almost cataclysmic Marxist revolution in particular. As far as the EECMY and its related mission organisations are concerned, Eide builds both on first hand experiences and on oral and written sources of a very impressive variety. He has almost vacuum-cleaned the material on mission, not only in Ethiopia but also in other parts of Africa.

This is a work written with empathy, with insight and personal engagement.

One shortcoming and perhaps a pedagogical impediment, in an otherwise highly successful pedagogical approach, is the abundance of literature and sources used in the study. There is something close to an 'overkill' in the wealth of his illustrative material and the criss-crossing of events and phenomena. The work could have benefited from a certain amount of streamlining. However, this is a purely personal impression, arising from the fact that I happen to be acquainted with much of the material. Another reader may only find reasons for rejoicing.

The instrument of analysis, 'centre and periphery', has been used well and discriminatingly. At the same time I have the uneasy feeling that this instrument has somehow overshadowed the more basic issue of the theological and socio-political content of the dynamic tension between centre and periphery. In short, I would have liked a wider discussion of the *motives*, and *catalysts* behind the protest against the oppressive 'centralising' tendencies among the faithful in the periphery. What did the concept of *Christus Victor* really mean to the faithful in Wallagga and the southern periphery? Were the members of Qalä Həywät Church more theologically motivated and less dependent on traditional, ethnic, impulses than were the members of the EECMY in Wallagga? In view of the accentuation of ethnic interests and the ascendancy of the periphery also in the EECMY nowadays, was Gudina Tumsa a lone star in his intensely theological concerns for Christian essentials?