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Review

STUART C. MUNRO-HAY, *Ethiopia and Alexandria: The Metropolitan Episcopacy of Ethiopia*

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STUART C. MUNRO-HAY, *Ethiopia and Alexandria: The Metropolitan Episcopacy of Ethiopia*. PIOTR O. SCHOLZ (Hrsg.), Bibliotheca nubica et aethiopica. Schriftenreihe zur Kulturgeschichte des Raumes um das Rote Meer, Bd. 5. Warszawa – Wiesbaden 1997. xii + 240 pages, paperback. ISBN 83–901809–3–6.

Christianity has been very much associated with the Ethiopian state now for about seventeen centuries. The two institutions have in fact been identical (at least until the revolution of 1974) so that any external threat aimed at the one was also regarded as a menace of the same degree against the other. The church dignitaries were for all intents and purposes an integral part of the state mechanism fully participating in the raising of rulers to power, the making of decisions of state matters, the administration of territories, the dispensation of justice, etc. Through its close connection with the See of Alexandria, the church also played an historic role in maintaining Ethiopian relations with the outside world, particularly with Egypt, Palestine, Syria and to some extent Europe.

Until the mid-twentieth century, the metropolitan — the spiritual head of the Ethiopian church — was a foreigner selected and consecrated by the Alexandrian patriarch, a unique situation which evokes numerous historical questions. The monograph under consideration is concerned, as its title clearly shows, with the history of a particular period of the Ethiopian church's relations with the Coptic church. In the words of the author himself, "This study is a survey of the information available about the metropolitan bishops of Ethiopia, and the setting in which they lived, from c. A.D. 330 until just after the 'Solomonic' restoration of around 1270" (p. 2). This is approximately the first half of the historical period of the relations between the two churches, and perhaps the more difficult one from the point of view of historical evidence. The decline and downfall of the Aksumite kingdom unfortunately also meant the destruction of a great deal of historical evidence. The Coptic side did not apparently keep detailed records about the metropolitans sent to Ethiopia and about the Ethiopian delegations that fetched them. The historical reconstruction has thus to be pieced together from the scanty Coptic and Arabic records, remnant Ethiopian inscriptions and chronicles, as well as from the accounts of Byzantine and Arab travellers. In this respect, the author (a well known specialist on the Aksumite period) has done a splendid job. The text is fluent, the arguments transparent and the deflections well documented.

The book is nonetheless not without shortcomings. One cannot discuss them all in such a short review nor is there any justification for such an attempt. But mentioning one or two examples may be of interest to the reader as well as to the author himself.

First of all, for whom is the book intended? The author was evidently conscious of this question when preparing his work for publication and has answered it in the preface: "In writing this book, the aim has been to make its information available to as wide a circle of readers as possible" (p. 2). This argument, however, pertains primarily to technical matters such as transliteration and the latinisation of names. Now, if the said wide "circle of readers" includes the general reader, then the monograph is too technical for anyone not versed in the history of the middle-eastern region. Substantially, it consists of a chain of minute historical questions, hypotheses and documentary evidences which the ordinary reader can hardly comprehend. For a wider circle than that of the Éthiopisants and the Egyptologists, it is doubtful if a more technical monograph than *The Church of Ethiopia: A Panorama of History and Spiritual Life* by TADDÄSÄ TAMƎRAT and others can serve the purpose. If on the other hand the desired readership aimed at is the non-historian scholars, then its major merit is that it is published very recently. Neither the sources used nor the arguments forwarded are new: C. CONTI ROSSINI, SERGEW HABLA SELLASE, L. TEDESCHI, H. BRAKMANN among others have surveyed the period before.

Another difficulty that may puzzle the reader is the categorical use of some controversial conceptual terms. It is strange that the Coptic Alexandrian church should, for instance, be referred to (p. 10) as "Jacobite". The standard works ascribe this appellation to the church of James Baradaeus, i.e. the Syrian Orthodox church (cf. Coptic Encyclopedia), but scarcely to the Alexandrian one. The Ethiopian Orthodox Täwaḥdo church, too, may scoff at its being referred to throughout the book as "monophysite". The perplexing thing is that the author himself indicates that there has not been a consensus among scholars in this respect: "Not all authorities have agreed on the nature of the church in Ethiopia and Nubia" (p. 19). Interestingly enough, there is a section (cf. pp. 11-14) dealing with the various nomenclatures pertaining to the Ethiopian state, but hardly any for such relevant terms as 'monophysitism'. It is doubtful if the Ethiopian church upholds the so-called monophysite doctrine that "the incarnate Christ is one person and has one divine nature". To protect itself precisely against such labelling, the Ethiopian Orthodox church insists on being called 'Täwaḥdo', a term believed to incorporate St. Cyril's definition of Christ's Nature: "The two natures of Christ were united at the Incarnation in such a way that the one Christ was essentially divine, although he assumed from the Virgin THEOTOKOS the flesh and attributes of a man". In such a theological and christological complexity, the position of the historian is by no means to be envied, and the author has done well in avoiding such an imbroglio. All would have been congenial had he also called the respective churches with the names of their choice.

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