



The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Cathedral

## PERSECUTION AND RELIGIOUS CONTROVERSIES

*Professor Tadesse Tamerat*

After the reign of Zar'a Ya'iqob (1434-68) and his immediate successor Ba'ida-Maryam (1468-1478), the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia had a series of minor kings who were too young to take the affairs of state in their own hands. This brought some of the more ambitious royal officials into temporary prominence as guardians of the Crown but these officials had numerous rivals for power, and the whole kingdom entered into a period of political conflicts and civil war: which lasted for about fifty years. The end result of this was the gradual weakening of the Christian army and the slackening of the frontier defense system. In the long struggle with the Muslim kingdom of Adal, this brought about a sudden change in the balance of power between the Church and Islam.

### **The Wars of Ahmad Gragn**

With the Ottoman conquest of the whole Near and Middle East, Islam was given a special impetus in the Red Sea area; and in the Horn, The Muslim communities of the Ethiopian region began to be more and more aggressive particularly in their relations with the Christian Empire. Many Turkish and Arab mercenaries came over from across the Red Sea, better equipped with the superior arms of the Ottoman Empire. The Muslim invasion of the Ethiopian highlands in the beginning of the sixteenth century was thus a tremendous success. The leader of the Muslim forces during this conflict was Imam Ahmad Ibn Ibrahim or Gragn, as he is known in Ethiopian Chronicles. His Chronicle, entitled Futuh al-Habasha meaning ("The Conquest of the Abyssinians"), relates how the Muslim invasion was particularly aimed at destroying the Church in the Ethiopian highlands. As the center of the mediaeval Christian culture of Ethiopia and as the place where the kings also kept their fabulous treasures, the Church was attacked by the Muslim forces with particular fury. Dazzled by the riches of the churches and monasteries, the Muslim troops burnt and looted for a period of about fifteen years, and almost completely destroyed the mediaeval heritage of Christian Ethiopia. The following passage is a vivid description of how the island monastery of Hayq was sacked, and it characterizes the attitude of the Muslim army throughout the period of their success between 1531 and 1543:

"They carried off the gold... there were crucifixes of gold in great quantity, books with cases and bindings of gold, and countless idols of gold; each Muslim took 300 ounces; each man had sufficient gold plate to satisfy three men. They also took a vast quantity of cloth and silk... The next morning (the Muslim chief) sent the Imam three rafts loaded with gold, silver and silk; there were only five men on board, two in front and three at the back, the rest of the raft being covered with riches though it could have carried 150 persons. The cargo was unloaded in front of the Imam who marveled at it and forgot the treasure which he had seen before. The rafts returned to the island and were a second time loaded with riches. They came three times, on each occasion loaded; they then returned to the island and the men went on board to return to the mainland. On the following day Ahmad partitioned the spoil; he gave one part to the Arabs and ... one to the troops who had gone on the water; the rest he divided among the Muslims".

it was in this way that the material and spiritual heritage of Mediaeval Ethiopia was destroyed during the wars of Ahmad Gragn. Many of the inhabitants in the Muslim-occupied areas were forced to renounce the Church and adopt Islam. Although some chose to die for their faith, the large majority of the Christian peasants acquiesced to at least a nominal acceptance of Islam.

### **The Dilemma in Ethiopian Relations with Europe**

The Ethiopian kingdom was later restored after the death of Ahmad Gragn (1543) and after the defeat of his army by Emperor Galawdewos (1540-59) who was given effective military assistance by the Portuguese. Relations with the Portuguese had already started towards the end of the fifteenth century, and reciprocal envoys had been exchanged;

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between Lisbon and the Ethiopian court. The Ethiopians were impressed by reports of the technical advances in Europe and wanted to share in this material civilization. From the earliest stages of their contacts with Europe the Ethiopians expressed their desire to receive European technicians and artisans, and the kings were especially interested in firearms. Already in the fifteenth century some isolated European adventures had reached Ethiopia even before the Portuguese, and they had been employed by the kings as masons, craftsmen, and amateur painters. When official relations were later initiated with the Portuguese, it was precisely their interest in the material civilization of Europe which preoccupied the minds of the Ethiopians. Emperor Libna-Dingil requested artists, builders, craftsmen, and men who could make guns for him. He also desired to establish a strong military alliance with the Portuguese. But outside these cultural and diplomatic contacts, a completely different interest preoccupied the Europeans in their self-sufficiency of Ethiopia and the extent of its commitment to the Church of ST Mark. Thus, almost completely ignorant of the history and the spiritual heritage of the Ethiopian Church, the Portuguese sought to act as the agents of the See of Rome. This caused a lot of unnecessary bloodshed in the first part of the seventeenth century, and led to the expulsion of the Jesuit mission by Emperor Fasiladas in 1632.

The Jesuit experience was very bitter for the Ethiopian Church, and it naturally led to the creation of very strong antipathies towards anything European for a long time. During their short sojourn in Ethiopia, the Jesuits had done a great deal of damage and they had seriously disturbed the spiritual stability of the Ethiopian Church. Thus, immediately after the official expulsion of the Jesuit mission, there was a very long period of intensive doctrinal controversies within the Church which lasted for over two centuries. When these controversies are seen in the right historical perspective, it is very clear that they arose from the need to re-examine the doctrinal positions of the Church and to purify the Church from possible external influences still lingering even after the expulsion of the missionaries. The end result of all this was an intensive movement of literary and intellectual revival in the kingdom of Gondar. What is most impressive is that, despite the decline of the monarchy and the disintegration of the State into a number of regional entities during the so-called Era of the Princes, the Ethiopian Church preserved its basic unity. And from the middle of the nineteenth century, when the monarchy started to revive once again, the Church resumed its historic role as the most important unifying factor in Christian Ethiopia.

## THE PERIOD OF REORGANIZATION

*Professor Sergew Hable Selassl*

### **Tewodros and his religious policy 1855-1868**

After the death of Abuna Qerillos about 1828, Ethiopia remained without a bishop until the appointment of Abuna Salama in 1841. The new bishop was a young, energetic man who had attended a Protestant college in Cairo. In Ethiopia, many problems awaited the young prelate, the chief among them being the political instability of the country, widespread doctrinal controversies within the Church and the activities of foreign missionaries. Abuna Salama demonstrated ability as an administrator of Church affairs and considerable political skill during a very trying period, while endeavoring to solve as many of the problems as he could with caution and wisdom.

His arrival in Ethiopia occurred during the period of Ethiopian history known as the Era of the Princes, when strong central government had broken down and the Emperors were puppets in the hands of ambitious nobles vying for power. During this difficult time, when the various provinces of the Empire were ruled by different local lords, the Orthodox Church had remained one of the few unifying forces in the country. Unfortunately the Church herself was divided by a doctrinal controversy over the Nature of Christ, which flourished throughout the Alexandrian teaching on this matter and to persuade Church scholars to accept it and renounce erroneous beliefs. With regard to the problems posed by foreign missionaries, he assigned to them certain spheres of influences where they could teach but not baptize; he required new converts to be baptized by Orthodox priests.

Abuna Salama was, of course, unable to restore political unity to Ethiopia; this was the task undertaken by the Emperor Tewodros II. His reign inaugurated a new era in the history of Ethiopia, in both a political and a religious sense. After his coronation by Abuna Salama in 1855, he set out to reunite the divided Kingdom and to restore Ethiopia to her ancient glory. A fundamental aim of his policy was to put an end to religious controversy in the Empire and to consolidate the Orthodox Faith. To this end, in 1855, he imposed the Tewahido doctrine, propagated by Abuna Salama, as the sole doctrine to be allowed in Ethiopia.

At that time there existed three groups of doctrinal affinities which had been inherited from the past. The Tewahido doctrine was and remains the official teaching of the Church of Ethiopia. It confesses the unity of two natures, divine and;

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human, in the person of Christ, without confusion and without separation: ~ hence the name Tewahido which means "unity". The second group was called Qebat, signifying "unction", because it laid stress upon the anointing of Christ and not upon the incarnation of the Son. The third group was known as Tsegga Lej (Son of Grace) and supported the teaching of the "Three Births": eternal birth of the Son from the Father, genetic birth of the Son from the Virgin Mary and birth; from the Holy Ghost after the incarnation of Jesus. The Emperor Tewodros forbade the teachings of the Qebat and Tsegga Lej sects and all Christians were called upon to profess the Tewahido teaching. Any who failed to abide by this decree were severely punished, thus his order was generally accepted and theological disputation gradually died out.

At the beginning of his reign, Tewodros showed deep religious faith and strict adherence to Christian moral standards. He and his wife received Holy Communion and in his conduct he became an example to all the Christians in the Empire. Many followed his example and began to lead a good Christian life. In the sphere of missionaries' work, Tewodros strongly supported the monks who devoted their lives to evangelizing the pagan inhabitants of the country. Many people including numerous Moslems, became voluntary converts to Christianity.

Tewodros maintained a good relation with the Church until he initiated certain innovations in church organization. In order to carry out his far-reaching policies of modernization and reform, Tewodros desperately needed finance. He planned to raise money from the church by restricting the number of clergy allowed to serve in each church to two priests and three deacons. The remaining clergy would have to work and pay taxes like other people and some church lands would be given to ordinary farmers, who would pay taxes on them. This proposal was unacceptable to the clergy and these and other actions exposed Tewodros to harsh criticism, so much so that the people in general supported the clergy against him. In the latter part of his reign, Tewodros' personality and conduct changed radically; he lost the high moral standards which had characterized the early part of his reign and grew harsh and bitter. Finally he became completely alienated from both the clergy and the ordinary people and Abuna Salama himself was imprisoned at Maqdala, where he died in 1867.

### **The expansion of the church (1872-1913)**

In the last years of the 19th century the church of Ethiopia was engaged in consolidation and missionary activities. In the work of consolidation the policy applied was the same as in the first part of Tewodros' reign. Doctrinal differences had once again become a subject of discussion in certain places. Now Emperor Yohannes and king Menelik of Shoa called a council at Boru Meda, in Wollo, in 1878 in which many learned scholars of the church participated. By coincidence there was no bishop in Ethiopia at the time, but this was not considered an impediment to the holding of the council. The Emperor Yohannes had already acquired a letter from the Patriarch of Alexandria in which the official teaching of the church formulated, and this was accepted as binding by the clergy. The Boru Meda council was the last of its kind. No such meeting has been held since. The three Births teaching which held sway in many places was rejected and condemned as a heretical teaching; the followers of this sect were called upon to embrace the decision of the council.

The council was summoned in order to promote harmony and peace within the church itself and thus to facilitate the missionary activities of the church. The attention of the church was concentrated on the Wollo region for historical reasons. The whole of Wollo had been a Christian centre with many historic churches and monasteries before the Sixteenth century. In that century, however, the population was Islamized by Ahmed Gragn. Later on, when the Christian religion was restored, the population remained predominantly Moslem. Both the Emperor Yohannes and Menelik II, then the king of Shoa, encouraged the church to carry on missionary work in this region. They themselves took an active role by becoming the godfathers of prominent Moslem rulers of Wollo. The Emperor Yohannes baptized Mohamed Ali of Ras, and king Menelik sponsored Abba Matthew, who later on was called Dejjazmach Hail-Mariam. The conversion of their leaders had far-reaching effects on the population of the region. Many followed the example of their leaders and embraced Christianity. Aleka Akale Wold, a well-known scholar, was selected to assist in the consolidation of the Christian church in Wollo. He founded a centre of learning at Boru Meda itself. Boru Meda Sellassie became renowned a centre of higher church education and students flocked there from all over the country.

In southern, western and eastern Ethiopia, missionary work was encouraged by Menelik II and many churches were built in different areas, which had become cut off from the Christian heartland of Ethiopia during the period of conflict. The re-integration into the empire of these regions by Menelik revealed the ruins of many churches in addition to numerous ecclesiastical objects, evidence that these regions were once Christian and therefore Menelik insisted that they should be evangelized. A number of witnesses have described the joy with which the arrival of fellow-Christians was received by scattered communities which had endeavoured to cling to Christianity, although without priests and without the sacraments, since their separation from the northern provinces.

### **Autonomy 1926-1951**

In order to strengthen the organization of the church and facilitate evangelistic activities, the Emperor Ybhanes succeeded in obtaining the appointment of four bishops from Alexandria. This was the first occasion that more than one bishop had been appointed to the Ethiopian church since the reign of Zar'a Ya'iqob (1434-1468), who had the privilege of acquiring no less than three bishops simultaneously. In 1881, the new bishops arrived in Ethiopia. They were Abuna Petros, the metropolitan, and Abuna Mattewos, Abuna Lukas and Abuna Yohannes. Abuna Petros remained close to the Emperor, while Abuna Mattewos was sent to Menelik II Shoa, Abuna Lukas to Gojjam and Abuna Yohannes to Simen Begemder, where his career was cut short by his untimely death.

At the dawn of the 20th century, a new wave of independence arose in the Ethiopian church. Ethiopians recognized the futility of the apocryphal canon which prevented them from being prelates in their own country. Moreover it was strongly felt that reform and modernization of the church could not be achieved by a foreign hierarchy out of touch with national life and problems. The common consensus was that the church must be freed from the hegemony of the Coptic Church. Matters came to a head in 1926 with the death of Abuna Mattewos, the last of four Bishops who had been appointed in 11881. The Ethiopian Church approached the Coptic Patriarch with a request that authority should be delegated to the new metropolitan to consecrate bishops. A lengthy exchange of views took place between officials of the Coptic Church and the Ethiopian Government. Finally in 1929, a new Coptic Abuna, Qerillos, was appointed and it was agreed that five Ethiopian monks should be consecrated as diocesan bishops. Five distinguished monks of irreproachable moral integrity were selected by a church assembly in Addis Ababa. They were Abraham, Isaac, Michael, Petros and Sawiros, who died shortly after his appointment.

During the period of Italian occupation (1935-1941) the Ethiopian Church went through a very difficult period. Italian policy was aimed at undermining the immense influence wielded by the church as a factor of Ethiopian unity. Abuna Petros and Abuna Michael paid with their lives for the steadfast patriotism and devotion to the church. The great monks of Debra Libanos were massacred in 1937 and other ecclesiastics suspected of sympathy with the national resistance movement were likewise martyred. The fascist government wished to isolate the Ethiopian Church by severing its ties with Alexandria. Abuna Qerillos refused to be party to this and was sent to Rome; he later retired to Cairo in self-imposed exile. Thus the Church of Ethiopia remained without a Metropolitan, adding a canonical crisis to the moral crisis already prevailing in the country. Taking advantage of this, the fascist regime forced the aged and ailing Bishop Abraham to take the place of Abuna Qerillos and declare the Ethiopian Church independence of Alexandria. The Patriarch of Alexandria then formally excommunicated Bishop Abraham and all who followed him.

Meanwhile the Church in exile was doing marvelous work abroad. The second highest-ranking ecclesiastical dignitary, the Etchege, who was late Patriarch of Ethiopia, Abuna Basilius, had his seat at Jerusalem and from there he dispatched priests to minister to the Christians in exile elsewhere and to convey to them messages of consolation and hope. With the Emperor, in exile in England, there was a sizable Ethiopian community. To them, Abuna Basilius sent five monks with the necessary sacred objects to administer the Holy Sacraments. He also used to send messages to the patriots of the Ethiopian resistance movement urging them to continue struggle. The qualities of moral authority and integrity evinced by the Etchege during this period helped to create a positive attitude of unity, enthusiasm and purpose among Christians in all walks of life and accelerated the movement towards the independence of the church.

After the liberation of Ethiopia in 1941, Abuna Qerillos returned to Addis Ababa and negotiations were resumed between the Ethiopian Church and the See of St. Mark. The Ethiopians requested the granting of autonomy and the lifting of the ban of excommunication imposed in the time of Bishop Abraham. After very lengthy negotiation, agreement was finally reached in 1948 when the Coptic Synod decreed that the Ethiopian monks might be appointed as bishops during the lifetime of the Metropolitan Qerillos and, upon his death, an Ethiopian Metropolitan might be consecrated. These concessions were accepted by the Ethiopian clergy as providing a solid basis for autonomy. Five learned monks were chosen by the church assembly to be bishops; among them were the late Patriarch of Ethiopia, Abuna Basilius and the Acting Patriarch, the Archbishop of Harar, Abuna Theophilos. Upon the death of Abuna Qerillos in 1951, Abuna Basilius was chosen as metropolitan of Ethiopia by clergy and laity and thus the full autonomy of the Ethiopian Church was established. The movement of the autonomy was fully supported by the Ethiopian government from 1926 onwards and His Imperial Majesty, Haile Selassie I, played an outstanding role in this matter.

### **Ecumenism**

The Ethiopian Church became a founding member of the world council of churches in 1948. In the assembly held in

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Amsterdam in the same year the Church was represented by Abuna Theophilos, Bishop of Harar and by Blattengeta Mersie-Hazen Wolde kirkos. Since then the Ethiopian Church has participated in all spheres of activity of the World Council, e.g. in the central committee, the faith and order commission, the All-Africa Conference of Churches and the Youth Movement. A special committee was set up and entrusted with relations between the World Council and the Ethiopian Church. Through this committee, the Church has been granted aid from the World Council of Churches for two important projects. The first of these is the Kunama project which has as its aim the evangelization of the predominantly pagan Kunama people of western Eritrea. The second project is the establishment of a special school at Zuway in Shoa where dedicated young people receives appropriate training to enable them to undertake missionary work in the countryside. The school is already functioning and has attracted many young people with a sound Christian background.

The Ethiopian Church participated as an observer in the Vatican council and was represented at all its sessions. This was the first occasions that the Ethiopian Church had opened at least indirect dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church. The Ethiopian Church was represented in the same manner at the Panorthodox Conference at Rhodes in 1961. A dialogue began between Chalcedonians and Anti-Chalcedonians in 1964 at Aarhus in Denmark and was continued in 1967 at Bristol in England. Though no immediate concrete results have been forth coming from these meetings, the establishment of personal contact and exchange of views is an important factor which may have far-reaching effects upon Relations between the two groups in the future.

Meanwhile the Ethiopian Church remains desirous of preserving and strengthening its relations with the Oriental Churches. When in 1965, the heads of the Oriental Orthodox Churches met together for the first time since the council of Ephesus in 431 A.D, a new era in Church history was inaugurated. A secretariat of Oriental Orthodox Churches has been established in Addis Ababa.

### Source

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