

# Religion and Revolution in Ethiopia

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The Ethiopian revolution was a communist one, but, contrary to communist theory, it was initially non-violent and the head of State was not removed. Although the planning of coups had been a national pastime for some years, the revolution when it came appeared to be a spontaneous uprising against the alleged exploitation, incompetence and callousness of Haile Selassie's administration, though the Emperor himself was widely respected at the time and it was some months before he was removed from office. The final event which triggered off the revolution was a strike by Addis Ababa taxi drivers in February 1974. The Emperor Haile Selassie was finally removed from office on 11 September 1975.

Although the revolution was initially non-violent, conflicts developed within the *Derg*, the ruling military junta (Provisional Military Administrative Council), and fighting broke out among various Marxist groups. Thousands were killed and their bodies left in the streets during the government's "Red Terror" campaign (1977-1978). Hundreds of thousands have died as a result of the violence and now there are about a million refugees in Somalia and the Sudan. There was however no systematic attempt to kill Christians as such, nor did evangelical believers form a faction in the political struggle.

A constant problem in Ethiopia, both before the revolution and after, has been the tension between central government and regional autonomy. When Haile Selassie was in power Ethiopia was described as an empire and consisted of a dominant group, the Amhara, which ruled the other 75 per cent of the population composed of various groups and tribes which between them spoke about a hundred languages and dialects. While the mountainous terrain had helped to resist invaders, it had also made communications difficult; today half of the country is still more than 20 miles from the nearest road. Such tenuous links have enabled strong local leaders to rebel, or at least to

pay scant attention to the laws and edicts of central government. Haile Selassie slowly strengthened the central government by improving the infrastructure and promoting people from non-Amhara groups, but he was unable to handle the revolt in Eritrea which proved a major factor in his downfall. Today there are reported to be no less than 11 movements actively opposed to the central government, and most of these are based either in particular regions or on tribal groupings rather than on political ideology. Some control large areas of the countryside, notably in Eritrea, Tigre and the Ogaden, and as a result government supplies to some main towns and military bases have had to be sent by air as convoys have had difficulty in getting through. All this strife, not to mention recent wars with the Sudan and Somalia, has strained the economy which has already been weakened by famine conditions reported during 1980 in nine of the 14 regions.

### *The Church in Ethiopia*

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church<sup>1</sup> believes that the evangelist Matthew and the "Ethiopian eunuch" mentioned in Acts 8 preached in Ethiopia, but attributes its real foundation to Frumentius who was consecrated bishop by Athanasius of Alexandria in the fourth century when the court accepted Christianity. Ethiopian monasticism was strengthened by a group of missionaries from Syria (known as the "nine saints") who founded monasteries and translated the scriptures in the fifth century. Thus the Amhara, and their Tigre cousins, have been Orthodox Christians for centuries, and in some areas the terms "Amhara" and "Christian" are virtually interchangeable. Over the years many tribal groups have been assimilated into the Amhara/Christian culture; in the 19th century, under the Emperor Menelik, many from the Oromo (Galla) tribes were forced to become Christian. Statistics on the religious composition of Ethiopia are difficult to obtain and mostly unreliable. One recent estimate<sup>2</sup> divides the population of 28 million as follows: Orthodox Church 46 per cent, Islam 35 per cent, African traditionalists (pagans) 14 per cent, Protestants 4 per cent, Roman Catholics 0.6 per cent. There is also a tribe of about 25,000 Jews known as Felashas. Much witchcraft and superstition is practised in both Orthodox and Muslim communities though the present regime is trying to eradicate this.

Since the Middle Ages missionaries have tried to work with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church but all except Anglicans have in the end formed their own denominations. Until his downfall Haile Selassie did much to open the way for missions, although he himself remained a staunch champion of the Orthodox Church. Roman Catholics were less successful in Ethiopia than in many other African countries owing to theological controversies and, more recently, to being linked with

the Italian invasion of 1935. Protestant missions have seen considerable advance in the last 50 years: today there are about 1,500 Lutheran and 2,500 Baptist churches; one group claims over 3,000 students in its country Bible schools and there is a Lutheran seminary near Addis Ababa. These churches are autonomous though there are still over 150 missionaries in supportive roles. Considerable funds are received from abroad which are concentrated on relief programmes, and the Orthodox Church receives large grants from the World Council of Churches. Pentecostal missions as such have not been as successful as other denominations, but there is a strong "charismatic" presence in many churches and also among students in Addis Ababa. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church has often viewed other religious groups as a threat, and communists have used this fear to provoke riots against evangelical Churches.

### *The Government's Attitude to Religion*

The *Derg* has declared that Ethiopia is a socialist and Marxist State but continues to make efforts to show that it is not hostile to religion, and indeed many heroes of the revolution have been buried according to the rites of the Church. In 1978 a calendar was published with a picture of Colonel Mengistu flanked by the Patriarch and the leading Sheikh. A few members of the *Derg* are known to be professing Christians; other members are openly hostile to religion, especially to "Pentecostals and Jehovah's Witnesses". A "Pentecostal" in government terminology is any evangelical Christian who will not shout the slogan "Above everything the revolution" and engage in ritual cursing of political enemies.

Sometimes the *Derg* has acted against religious institutions: for example; it unilaterally and illegally cancelled the contract with the Lutheran authorities by closing Radio Voice of the Gospel and taking over the station as Radio Voice of Socialist Ethiopia. On the other hand, the Bible is widely distributed and translation continues into some of the tribal languages, although little consideration or help in finding alternative accommodation was given to the Bible Society of Ethiopia when it was ejected from its premises to make way for the headquarters of the newly projected workers party (COPWE—Commission for the Organization of the Party of Workers of Ethiopia). As with the previous administration, nothing can be printed or imported without the approval of the Ministry of Information. However, provided manuscripts are confined to religious matters and do not stray into political or specific social areas, approval is usually given and a fair amount of Christian literature is being produced.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand in 1980 it was reported that a Christian magazine was under considerable pressure and might be closed.

The government officially welcomed the help of missions in education and health until such time as the government was able to take over all activity in these spheres. Despite this, many missions decided to close when the agitation of their Ethiopian employees, following what they thought was revolutionary policy, made attainment of mission objectives impossible.

Some leading men, such as the former ebullient Dean of Trinity Cathedral, were arrested early on as associates of Haile Selassie, but have never been brought to trial. They are still in prison and some may have been executed. The Patriarch of the Orthodox Church, Abuna Tewoflos, was arrested with several other bishops, and is presumed dead. The general secretary of the Lutheran Mekane Yesus Church was seized in 1979, presumably by government security agents, and the government, while admitting that he is under arrest, has refused to give information about him. The government has on occasion attacked Christians for allegedly being members of political opposition groups, and it has claimed that members of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (a Marxist group opposed to the government and composed mainly of students) have sheltered under the umbrella of church groups. Christians have been accused of corresponding with Christians in the "imperialist West" and of being CIA agents. But the real objection to Christians is that they have reservations about the revolution and insist on the sovereignty of God in the affairs of men.

#### *The Revolution at a Local Level*

The great cry of "Land to the ploughman" has been largely fulfilled through the nationalization of the land and compulsory collectivization. Minority groups have been recognized, for example the Felashas, and literacy and educational programmes have begun in tribal languages. Women have been emancipated and the people now play a part in the running of their local communities for the first time through local elected urban residents' committees (*kebele*) and Farmers Associations. These committees allocate land and housing, organize rationing of basic foods, handle local security and litigation, supervise literacy campaigns, raise taxes and the required quotas of men and women for the militia and government campaigns (*zemetcha*) of various kinds. They may decide whether a church would be better employed as a school, a community centre or a grain store. These committees have considerable autonomy and on occasion, it is reported, they have refused to accept government Cadres. The latter consist of people who have usually failed their university entrance exams and have instead enrolled at political schools. Here they have been trained to forward the revolution by force and through political indoctrination.

As a result of this local autonomy, the treatment of the Church has varied from region to region and even from *kebele* to *kebele*. Many Christians have been elected to serve on local committees, and often the associations have good relations with the churches. On the other hand, while it may be true to say that there is no official persecution, the political propaganda and the stance of the government is certainly favourable to those who wish to attack Christians. There are many reports of Bibles being torn up or burned, and of children being taken off to political meetings as they went to church with their parents. Much can depend on the administrator of a region. In one region Pentecostals, some leading Orthodox priests and members of an Orthodox youth movement were imprisoned and systematically flogged. In the next region, Pentecostals were arrested, but not tortured, and Cadres who attacked religion were openly rebuked. In another region over a hundred churches have been closed and Christians forbidden to meet, but in a neighbouring region Christian conventions with hundreds attending have been held quite openly with no official opposition. In some areas churches which were closed have been handed back to their congregations and services have been held again. In Addis Ababa some of the leading evangelical churches have been closed, though the Christians have quietly and quickly formed themselves into house churches or joined other churches. Sometimes when a church has been closed only the leaders have been arrested; in other cases, the church has been surrounded during a service and those under 30 have been imprisoned. Older members are usually not arrested so that they can feed those in prison (the authorities provide no food). Several churches are full to overflowing, and many young people have been converted. There are many reports of people being healed, and in one case revolutionary guards who had orders to arrest a Christian were not able to bring themselves to do this.

#### *The Special Problems of the Orthodox Church*

Abuna Tewoflos, the Patriarch, was removed from office after some agitation by disaffected elements within the Church, and Abuna Tekle Haymanot was elected Patriarch uncanonically, and many believe that the election was rigged. The bishops who were not imprisoned have been forced to retire on the grounds that they are too old or that they are not wanted by the faithful. The monks who have been elected and consecrated bishops in their place are better educated and would appear to have the good of the Church at heart, but their hands are tied. There is a quick turnover of officials in the Church. Cadres are often seen in the main church offices and some odd appointments are made. For example, the administrator of the main church office in one region had previously worked for a bus company. He organized a

petition which led to the retirement of the bishop, and also sought to close down the church youth organizations.

The Orthodox Church in general and some monasteries in particular were adversely affected by the nationalization of land. The government has given the Church a large budget, but through it the government is able to influence much of the Church's life. This budget is said now to be only temporary, and efforts are being made to introduce synodical government and to make the Church self-supporting. The Church is tolerated by the government provided that it does not criticize the revolution and supports the government's social policies. Many within the Church feel that they must accept the *status quo* in order to preserve the Church as an institution until there is a change for the better. And so they do not complain about the parades, political meetings and indoctrination sessions for youth which take place at the same time as church services. A few, however, speak out boldly and protest.

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The situation in Ethiopia is fluid and events are likely to continue to confound the predictions of experts. The pressure placed on Christians increases and decreases, but many Ethiopian Christians nevertheless believe that under the guidance of God's providence they still have much to contribute to their country and people.

<sup>1</sup>The Ethiopian Church is monophysite, i.e. it adheres to the doctrine that in Christ there was but a single composite divine-human nature as against the teaching that Christ had two natures, divine and human, after the Incarnation. *Ed.*

<sup>2</sup>*Operation World*, 2nd ed. 1979, published by "Send the Light Publications", P.O. Box 48, Bromley, Kent.

<sup>3</sup>The Bible, commentaries, Bible-study aids, two monthly Christian magazines and a fortnightly church newspaper are produced and distributed.