

Christianity in northern Ethiopia: Missiological Observations following a visit

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Abstract

A visit to Ethiopia revealed that enlightenment derived from travel is worth while. This article illustrates this by introducing the reader to the people and ancient Christian tradition of the northern highlands of Ethiopia. There is much in the history of this area, and the monuments of this tradition, but also in the present church life that are thought provoking.

Keywords Northern Ethiopia, African Church History, Ethiopian Orthodox Church, Mission

Introduction

I would like to start off with a few quotes which may go some way to explain why I offer this article as a contribution to the theme of the Celebration Issue honouring Klippiess Kritzinger.

“Experience, travel – these are as education in themselves”

Euripides, 5th century BC

“Voyage, travel, and change of place impart vigour”

Seneca, 1st century AD

“The world is a book, and those who do not travel read only a page”

St Augustine, 5th century AD

When I add two more modern quotes, the reader will understand what an educational encounter my recent visit to Ethiopia turned out to be. Benjamin Disraeli, 19th century British Prime Minister, said: “Travel teaches toleration”, and the American author Mark Twain adds: “Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness...”. That was indeed my experience¹.

* Dons Kritzinger, a somewhat distant relative of the jubilant, has retired from the University of Pretoria as professor of Missiology (dons.kritzinger@gmail.com). It goes without saying that people were often confusing the two missiologists, the one JJ (Dons) and the other JNJ (Klippiess) Kritzinger, from Pretoria. My (Dons’) standard response to an unknown person’s enquiry was: “If you have something complimentary to say, or if it is a controversial issue, you probably want to speak to Klippiess”.

¹ I want to thank especially Martin Pauw (also retired professor of Missiology) and Faure Louw (pastor and past missionary) who as friends and colleagues shared the Ethiopian experience. Their stimulating and insightful discussions along the way, but also their comments on the text were valuable.

Ethiopia

Ethiopia is a unique land in Africa. It is neither north nor south of the Sahara, its population is neither simply Arabic nor Bantu. It doesn't belong to one of the blocks which show its colonisation by either Britain, France, Germany or Portugal, because Ethiopia never had European colonial masters. It is unique as an ancient independent country². That is one of the reasons why its mere name – Ethiopia³ – became a symbol for an Africa wishing to be more than just "the dark continent".

Portugal wanted to establish an influence in the sixteenth century AD, but it didn't work out⁴. Italy had a longstanding interest in the Horn of Africa, but was decisively expelled from Ethiopia in the famous battle of Adowa in 1896 where the soldiers of Menelik II routed the Italians. At the time of Mussolini they tried again, but this time the British also had a hand in defending the country against Italy's aspirations.

The country was basically non-aligned during its long independent history, except from 1977 to 1991 when a doctrinaire Communist government took over from a long line of emperors, the last being the famous Haile Selassie. But also this era came to an end. Today there is a democratically elected government in place, and stability has once again returned to the country.

It is not the intention of this article to give an overview of the socio-economic situation of the country. Neither does it deal with the whole of this large country. It is meant as an introduction to the religious – and especially Christian – tradition of the north of the country. But in general we can say that Ethiopia is a poor country. A large majority of its people are subsistence agriculturalists who are very dependent on the weather. Recurring droughts, together with an ever greater population pressure on the scarce resources⁵, lead to periods of real suffering. But in the area we visited during October 2008 we did not see anything of this – the rains had come in time and the people were busy bringing in the harvests.

Let me declare myself. Our group only visited the far northern part of Ethiopia, the area where the ancient Christian traditions are tangible. It is

² Ethiopia, alone among African countries, has developed its own script for the ancient language Ge'ez. It furthermore has its own unique calendar which differs from every other, not only in the counting of years, but also months and days (see Merahi 2007:27ff).

³ According to Merahi (1999:17) the name Ethiopia was used since classical Greek times (Homer) for "darkskinned people". The "Cush" of the Hebrew Old Testament was translated with "Ethiopia" in the Greek Septuaginta.

⁴ The only remaining signs of this period are the royal palaces in Gondar. There Fasilidas (1632-1667) and his successors built majestic stone buildings which give indications of Portuguese architectural influence.

⁵ Even in the lovely Simien mountains – a National Park – we saw people ploughing steep slopes where this shouldn't happen. The population pressure is just too great.

especially these traditions, and the questions they pose to a representative of quite another Christian tradition (Southern African Protestant) which will be addressed in this article. Our visit was also too short. Although using every opportunity to ask questions and gain greater clarity on various issues, there will almost certainly be a lack of depth in interpretations. However, I cannot but give voice to the almost indescribable impact experienced. It is as Andrew Walls (2002:91) puts it so well:

Ethiopian stands for Africa indigenously Christian, Africa *primordially* Christian; for a Christianity that was established in Africa not only before the white people came, but before Islam came; for a Christianity that has been continuously in Africa for far longer than it has in Scotland, and infinitely longer than it has been in the United States [and – I may add – South Africa!]. African Christians today can assert their right to the *whole* history of Christianity in Africa, stretching back almost to the apostolic age.

I start off the article with a modest historical overview of this Christian tradition, which will include its interaction with Judaism, Islam and Catholicism. This will be the longest section. Thereafter a short description will be given of the present church life and its relationship with the rest of world Christianity. And then we will wrestle with some missiological issues related to this part of Africa.

Historical overview

The Jewish Connection

Although the Christian tradition of Northern Ethiopia is ancient it must be remembered that the connection with the lands of the Bible is much older. To start with: the Amharic people of the north have definite physical characteristics which indicate a link with the Semitic world. [It is also interesting that a first look at the Ethiopian national flag gives the impression that it is a prominent blue Star of David that appears prominently in the middle of the yellow band. It is only by looking closer that you realise that it is in reality a five point star.]

Archeological evidence concurs with oral and ancient written traditions indicating that the people of Axum⁶, the northern kingdom, over the years mixed with and intermarried the Sabaeans and other inhabitants of the south of Arabia (the present Yemen). This is more than possible, because only the narrow Red Sea divides this part of Africa from the Semitic world.

Looking at the impressive *stellae* (obelisks) erected in Axum in the pre-Christian era it is clear that this was a mighty kingdom, with amazing technology. It also suggests early contacts with the Egyptian civilizations.

⁶ Like the case with other towns (Gonder, Gondar) the names are variously spelt. Axum can also be Aksum.

How many workers (free or slaves) would have been necessary to carve these immense blocks of granite (the biggest one weighed 500 tons), transport them several kilometers, and then erect them? The Axumite kingdom indeed must have had an influence far wider than the present Ethiopia.

Something like a Jewish connection is therefore possible, but there is even more to it. The Ethiopian version has it that the legendary biblical Queen of Sheba travelled from these parts to visit the Jewish King Solomon in Jerusalem. According to 1 Kings 10 this woman was exceedingly impressed by Solomon's might and his wisdom. And she gave him presents... "Never again were so many spices brought in as those the queen of Sheba gave to King Solomon" (verse 10). From his side the king "gave the queen of Sheba all she desired and asked for, besides what he had given her out of his royal bounty" (verse 13). It seems as if one of the things he has given her – such is the belief in Ethiopia – is a son with the name of Menelik who was subsequently born in Axum⁷.

This son – fifty percent Jewish – would be the first in a long succession of Solomonic kings of Ethiopia. As a matter of fact, in 1974 the deposed and murdered emperor Haile Selassie was regarded by some as the last in a line of 331 such rulers (Merahi 1999:37) who almost continuously occupied the throne of David.

Legend has it that the young Menelik, about 20 years old, went to visit his ageing father Solomon in Jerusalem. The king and the young man – his eldest son – immediately took to each other. Solomon wanted him as successor on the throne of Jerusalem, but Menelik declined because, said he, he promised his mother that he will succeed her as ruler in Axum. It is said that, after about a year, when Menelik wanted to travel back home, Solomon sent a bodyguard with him consisting of young leaders from all the twelve tribes of Israel, but not before the young prince was anointed by Zadok the Priest and given the name David. Ranger (2007:27) continues the story: Solomon blessed his son and told him that the Ark of Zion will be his guide (unaware that the young men chosen to accompany the son were already contriving to steal the Ark and carry it with them).

Which brings us to the Ark of the Covenant. This was the most holy of all objects in the Israelite religion. The main reason for the building of the temple in Jerusalem was to provide a house for the Ark, because it was regarded as the dwelling place of Jahweh. However, some time after Solomon this holy object disappeared from the radar screen... the Jewish

⁷ "Although archaeologists have located the kingdom of Saba or Sheba somewhere in Arabia, Ethiopians claim Makeda as their queen; they have a tradition that she bore a son to Solomon, named Menelik, who later became king, thus establishing what they regard as the true dynasty of David for their country..." (Ranger 2007:27).

Scriptures (the historical books of the Old Testament) fell silent about the Ark. Why? It is quite a mystery: What happened to the Ark? This does not baffle the Ethiopians... they know that it resides in Axum, in a special building next to the original church building, guarded by a chosen priest who, for the rest of his life, is set apart for this awesome duty. To the members of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church this presence of the Ark is not negotiable. In the middle of every church building of this Church there is a holy enclosure into which only a priest may enter, and in it resides a replica of the Ark (called the *tabot*). It is this *tabot* that constitutes a building as a church.

But how did the Ark arrive in Axum? The *Kebra Nagast*, the ancient text in the Ge'ez language, purporting to be the official history of old Ethiopia, relates more or less the following. The young fellows accompanying Menelik from Jerusalem had (for reasons unknown) decided to take the Ark with them. They indeed succeeded to slip out the holy object from the temple of Solomon. It was only after many days on the journey back to Axum that they broke the news to the young prince. Understandably there was much debate about this breach of security. Shouldn't they take the Ark back to Jerusalem? In the end it was decided to continue on their journey: there is no way Jahweh would have allowed the young men to smuggle it out of the temple if it was not his will! After this, so Ranger (2007:27) reports, the young David (Menelik) "jumped and skipped like a lamb or a kid that has been fed on the milk of its mother, just as his grandfather David has danced before the Ark". He brought the Ark to Axum.

It is extremely unlikely that this story is authentic. Axum only later became a powerful centre, and it was thus not a safe place to keep such a relic. In any case, the centre of the empire shifted regularly from place to place. There are legends which link a monastery on an island in Lake Tana to the Ark. Rumours also have it that the Trinity Church in Gonder (16th century) was built to house it. The present church building in Axum, especially built for "the Ark" is scarcely a century old. Where was it kept over the best part of the last three millennia?⁸

⁸ The first question is whether there is truth in Axum's claim that the original Ark resides there. This mystery is the stuff of much controversy. Hollywood even made a film on this issue: "Raiders of the Lost Ark". An investigative reporter, Graham Hancock, wrote a 600 page tome on the question: *The Sign and the Seal. A Quest for the Lost Ark of the Covenant* (London: Arrow Books, 1992). Although Hancock also was not allowed to see the Ark, he did come to the conclusion that no other locality had a stronger case for its presence. After he painstakingly traced the journey of the Ark. He sums up the results of his quest as follows (1997:514-515):

From there [Jerusalem], some three hundred years later [ca 650 BC] it was removed by faithful priests who sought to preserve it from pollution at the hands of the sinner Manasseh and who bore it away to safety on the far-off Egyptian island of

The Jewish connection goes further. Ethiopian Jews, known as *Falasha* or *Beta Israel* (House of Israel), claim to be the descendents of the bodyguard provided by King Solomon for his son's journey from Jerusalem (Ranger 2007:25). Whether this is so, or Hancock's theory (1992:514) on the route of the Ark from Jerusalem to Ethiopia is correct, the fact seems to be that there were Jews in Ethiopia long before the Christian era. Certain traits in the Falasha Judaism indicate that their beliefs stem from a time before the second temple (the one built after the Babylonian captivity of the Jews, in the sixth century BC), so they were isolated very early on from the later developments.

When the king and empire became Christian in the fourth century AD the Falasha resisted the pressures to convert to the new religion, and rather migrated south to the Lake Tana area and Gonder. It is estimated that there may have been as many as half a million Jews in Ethiopia before the Emperor Susenyos (encouraged by Portuguese Jesuits) launched a pogrom in the seventeenth century, when thousands were killed and their children sold as slaves. By 1984 they numbered fewer than thirty thousand, and in the famine year 1985 some seven thousand Falashas (Black Jews) were airlifted to Israel in the controversial 'Operation Moses'. "Today, there may be more Falasha living unhappily in Israel than remain in Ethiopia", says Ranger (2007:25).

The few Falasha that are left concentrate around Gonder. Although ethnically they are not distinguishable from their neighbours they clearly follow the Jewish religion, be it in a form quite distinct from Jews elsewhere. Everywhere the "Star of David" is prominent.

The establishment of the Church

Acts 8 relates how the evangelist Philip, one of the first Christians, was instrumental in the conversion and baptism of "an important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians" (verse 27). There is very little (if any) historical evidence that this led to the

Elephantine. There a new temple was built to house it, a temple in which it remained for two further centuries.

When the temple was destroyed, however, its restless wanderings resumed again and it was carried southward into Ethiopia... Having come from one island it was taken to another – to green and verdant Tana Kirkos – where it was installed in a simple tabernacle and worshipped by simple folk. For the eight hundred years that followed it stood at the centre of a large and idiosyncratic Judaic cult, a cult whose members were the ancestors of all Ethiopian Jews today.

Then the Christians came, preaching a new religion, and – after converting the king – they were able to seize the Ark for themselves. They took it to Axum and placed it in the great church that they had built there, a church dedicated to St Mary the Mother of Christ.

establishment of the Christian faith in that kingdom. Neither is it clear who this Candace could have been, and where this "Ethiopian" kingdom was⁹.

What is well-known, however, is that some four centuries later – early in the fourth century AD – a shipwreck took place in the Red Sea, on the coast of Africa. Two Syrian Christian brothers from Tyre, Aedesius and Frumentius, were saved from drowning, but taken as slaves to the palace of king Ezana at Axum. Here they eventually won the favour of the king, were used as officials (Frumentius seemed to have been the scribe of the king), and, through their diligence and positive witness converted king Ezana to Christianity. In time also other Christians arrived from Egypt, and the Church started to grow.

Eventually Aedesius was allowed to go back to Tyre, but Frumentius was sent by Ezana to the Christian centre Alexandria with a request for a bishop. The church father Athanasius, the Patriarch of Alexandria, listened to the story of Frumentius and promptly consecrated him as bishop and sent him back with the words: "Who could be found more suitable than yourself?" This seems to have been in the year 341 (Neill 1986:46-47. Other sources – like Groves – give the year as 356). Frumentius served until his death as the head of the Ethiopian Church. He is still known as *Abba Salama, Kesaté Birhan* ("Father of Peace, Revealer of Light")¹⁰. Thus came into being one of the first Christian kingdoms. King Ezana's stone inscription makes reference to Christ, and his famous coins bear the Christian cross – the world's first to do so (Lonely Planet 2006: 28)¹¹.

The end of the 5th century AD brought the famous Nine Saints, a group of Greek speaking missionaries who established well-known monasteries in the north of the country, including Debra Damo, the famous place which can still only be reached by being hoisted up by the priests with a rope¹². At

⁹ It is however interesting that the Ethiopic version of this verse 27 reads "Hendeke" in stead of "Kandake / Candace". Queen Gersamot Hendeke VII was the Queen of Ethiopia from ca. 42 to 52. This official is thus regarded by the Ethiopian Church as the first person to be baptised after the apostles, and Ethiopia the first place after Jerusalem to be christianised (Merahi 1999:32).

¹⁰ In the museum next to the modern church building in Axum the apostolic crown of Frumentius can still be seen. Till the 20th century the Coptic Church of Egypt would provide the head of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

¹¹ To put this into perspective it should be remembered that it was only a handful of years earlier that the Roman emperor Constantine started the process of elevating the Christian faith to the preferred – and later official – religion of the Roman Empire. In contrast to secular Europe, where Christianity is today not much more than the cultural background of civilization, the Christian church in Ethiopia is still deeply inbedded in every day life.

¹² The saints (Abba Pantelewon, Abba Gerima, Abba Aftse, Abba Guba, Abba Alef, Abba Yem'ata, Abba Liqanos, and Abba Sehma), fled persecution by the Byzantine Emperor after the Council of Chalcedon (451). They, as the majority of Orthodox, didn't accept the Council's ruling on the two natures of Christ.

this time the Bible was first translated from Greek into Ge'ez (Lonely Planet 2006:28).

The foundations of this Ethiopian Orthodox Church (formally known as the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church) must have been built on solid rock, because it persevered all through the ages - for most of the millennium and a half of its existence in utter isolation. It should not be forgotten that in the 7th century AD the Islamic movement expanded all over the northern parts of Africa, overran the Christian civilization in those parts, and all but cut off any links Ethiopia had with the Christian north. The Church in Ethiopia had to find its own way. Not only did it evolve many unique indigenous rituals and beliefs, but it prospered. It became an integral part of the psyche of the Ethiopians, helped on by the fact that many of their kings were also priests at heart and led the people in commitment.

Maybe nowhere else is this commitment so tangible than in Lalibela. In this town, named after the first king of the Zagwe dynasty (1137-1270) the most astonishing rock-hewn churches can be seen. This wonderful heritage (sometimes called the eighth wonder of the ancient world) has an impact that is indescribable. Lalibela felt called to build an African Zion. The almost impossible pilgrimage to Jerusalem would have become unnecessary. Out of solid hillside rock impressive church buildings were hewn. The builders dug down 10 or more meters into the solid *tufa* rock for a ditch to surround a massive block up to 20 meters in diameter. Then the outside of an impressive church was chiselled out, whether in cross or basilica form, with all its detail of (blind) windows, decorations and symbols. The builders then proceeded to cut through the doors at the bottom and worked their way up on the inside, again according to an architectural plan, with colonnades, cloisters, decorations and the rest. Each one of the 11 church buildings in Lalibela is unique. Some of them are huge, and clearly meant for large gatherings, while others are small and intimate. Most of them are connected, sometimes deep down, by passageways and even tunnels. The inside of the churches are adorned with many works of art painted on the walls or on cotton cloth. The purpose of these works of art is adoration, but also visual communication of the gospel and tradition. They visualise, in a characteristic Ethiopian style, the biblical and extra-biblical stories and interpretations. The angels and the many saints are important, but especially the Mother Mary and the Trinity. The floors are covered with carpets. Curtains conceal the most holy area in the center. And in every building there is a priest on duty, willing to share their knowledge and insights. The buildings are not mere monuments (like so many European cathedrals!) but are clearly still in use.

It is impossible to calculate what these projects cost the state of those days in terms of manpower and energy (and there are many more such

church buildings in the Tigray area). Where did the know-how come from? Who were the builders? How long did they take? Tradition has it that they were all built during the 37 year reign of Lalibela, but it doesn't seem possible. No, is the answer, it would not have been possible if the angels did not take their shifts during the nights!¹³

Church and State

For more than sixteen hundred years Ethiopia (earlier called Abyssinia) was a virtual *corpus Christianum*. Church and state were not separable. Often the emperor was a priest, and the priest became emperor. In Europe this relationship was never so intimate, and the arrangement came to an end much sooner. In Ethiopia it was only in 1974, when the emperor Haile Selassie was dethroned, that this ancient "Christian state" was terminated.

Some more recent history may be relevant. In 1948 an agreement was reached between the Coptic and Ethiopian Churches that eventually led to *autocephaly* (autonomy) of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church. Five bishops were immediately consecrated and empowered to elect a new Patriarch for their Church, who would in turn have the power to consecrate new bishops. This development was completed when Coptic Orthodox Pope Joseph II consecrated an Ethiopian-born Archbishop, Abuna Basilios, on 14 January 1951. Then, in 1959, Pope Cyril VI of Alexandria crowned Abuna Basilios as the first Patriarch of Ethiopia. When Patriarch Abuna Basilios died in 1971 he was succeeded by Patriarch Abune Tewophilos.

The Marxist-Leninist government which took over from Haile Selassie in 1974 tried their best to dismantle the *corpus Christianum* tradition, although even they realised that it would be futile to try and convert the country to atheism. They rather tried to gain control of the Orthodox Church by putting in place their "own" bishops, and removing others. In spite of all the pressure put on the church they realised that they had to offer a degree of respect for the ancient institution (Neill 1986:460).

The government however disestablished the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church as the state church. The property (including land) owned by the Church was also nationalised. Patriarch Abune Tewophilos was arrested in 1976 by the Marxist Derg military junta, and secretly executed in

¹³ Hancock (1997:chapter 5) very interestingly argues for a theory that the Knights of the Templar, a mediaeval Order which specialised in building churches (an Order which was subsequently banned by the Pope, but made its re-appearance in the form of the Freemasons) had something to do with this. This is at the very least a most interesting and intriguing theory, more so because in the ancient texts there are mention of "white people" who assisted with the building process! However, Gobezie (2004:107-115) convincingly shows how this technology and tradition was not foreign to the Ethiopia of those years. In the late 12th century this art form seemingly reached its apex.

1979. The government ordered the church to elect a new Patriarch, and Abune Takle Haymanot was enthroned¹⁴.

Patriarch Abune Tekle Haymanot proved to be much less accommodating to the Derg regime than it had expected, and so when the Patriarch died in 1988, a new Patriarch with closer ties to the regime was sought. The Archbishop of Gonder, a member of the Parliament, was elected and enthroned as Patriarch Abune Merkorios. Following the fall of the Derg regime in 1991, and the coming to power of the EPRDF government, Patriarch Abune Merkorios abdicated under public and governmental pressure, and left the country. The Church then elected a new Patriarch, Abune Paulos, who was also recognised by the Coptic Orthodox Pope of Alexandria¹⁵.

What the Marxist government failed to accomplish was to sever the bond between the people and their church, and break the deep veneration that the people exhibit towards their priests. The people continued to very visibly worship in the churches. The religious feasts are *the* days of festivity throughout the country. When we enquired about this it was universally declared that modernism and secularism – and even the more than a decade long communist era – did not succeed to weaken the bond between the Ethiopian population and the Orthodox Church (at least not in the northern highlands).

Whether this is really so we couldn't investigate in depth, but on the surface, as far as we could see, this seems to be the case. And if so, it is astounding.

Ethiopia and Islam

Less than 300 years after Frumentius was consecrated as bishop by Patriarch Athanasius the strong Christian centre of Alexandria – and practically the whole of Christianity in North Africa – was obliterated by the Muslim waves from the east. Very little remained of the erstwhile Roman church in those parts. But the Ethiopian Orthodox Church seemed to remain

¹⁴ Consequently, the Coptic Orthodox Church refused to recognise the election and enthronement of Abune Tekle Haymanot. Their view was that the Synod of the Ethiopian Church had not removed Abune Tewophilos, and that the government had not publicly acknowledged his death, so he was thus still the legitimate Patriarch of Ethiopia. Formal relations between the two churches were halted as a result of this, and could only be resumed in 2007.

¹⁵ This was not the end of the political unrest in the Church. The former Patriarch Abune Merkorios announced from exile that his abdication had been made under duress and thus he was still the legitimate Patriarch of Ethiopia. Several bishops also went into exile and formed a break-away alternative synod. This exile synod is recognised by some Ethiopian Churches in North America and Europe.

unaffected, and could continue with its life and ministry. How did that happen?

In the first place it must be understood in the light of the ancient bonds of blood and commerce between northern Ethiopia and the Arabian peninsula. We already touched on this in connection with the place and role of the Queen of Sheba. There clearly were many contacts and relations across the Red Sea. One interesting Muslim tradition has it that the prophet Mohammed was nursed by an Ethiopian woman.

It is an established fact that Mohammed, when he encountered serious opposition and persecution in Arabia during his early prophetic career in AD 615, sent some of his followers (amongst others also his sister) to Negash to avoid persecution. There they received hospitality under King Armah until the situation changed and they could return to Arabia (Lonely Planet 206:30). This friendship was never forgotten. So, when the Muslim *ji*had, the religious expansion, rolled over the northern parts of Africa Ethiopia was not invaded. These peaceful relations continued into the 15th century. That is also why Negash continues until today to be a crucial pilgrimage point for Ethiopia's Muslims.

Although the Ethiopian church was spared the serious conflicts with the Muslims it was practically isolated from the rest of Christianity to the north. In one way or another a thin link with the remnants of the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt could be retained, but the Ethiopian Church had to develop without the necessary interaction with the Christians elsewhere. Many unique features of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church should be understood as the result of this isolation of more than a thousand years.

These peaceful relations would continue for hundreds of years. It was not so much religious as political and economic factors that brought an end to this. Commercial and other competition around the horn of Africa built up since the thirteenth century. In 1490 a Muslim strongman Mahfuz from the present Somalia declared a war on Christian Ethiopia. He and his armies would do much damage... but the worst was yet to come. He would be followed by Ahmed Ibn Ibrahim al Ghazi (known as Ahmed Gragh the Left Handed) who continued the destruction with greater violence. He overpowered the army of the Christian Emperor in 1529, and vowed to put an end to the whole of the Christian empire. In 1535 the desperate Emperor Lebna Dengel called on the Portuguese, the other "Christian" power on the eastern seaboard of the region, to help save the Christian cause. Somewhat belatedly the Portuguese came to Dengel's help. It took them some time, but eventually the militant Muslims were pushed back. By the late sixteenth century the Christian state was intact again. Islam would never again be a serious contender for the soul of Ethiopia, although presently almost a third

of the population is Muslim¹⁶ - especially in the eastern districts bordering Eritrea and Somalia. In general the traditional relaxed relationships are continuing.

However, these religious wars left a train of serious destruction in their wake. The old Christian civilisation was almost wiped out. Large numbers of ancient church buildings with their immeasurable wealth of manuscripts and relics were razed to the ground, and many valuable artifacts were lost for good.

Orthodox and Catholic

Almost from the beginning of the Christian era doctrinal and cultic differences between the various local churches north and west of Jerusalem became visible. This is quite understandable if the wide variety of cultural, historic and political contexts is taken into account. This may be one of the main reasons why the early leaders (as recorded in the book of Acts and the letters of the apostles) put such a great emphasis on the unity between the various local churches, and the extent to which they even put their own safety on the line to safeguard this. The differences probably became more marked in the post-apostolic times. So, when the emperor Constantine declared Christianity to be the official state religion he soon decided to bring a semblance of unity, and to give structure to the movement.

One of the most difficult controversies to be solved was the conflicting views on the "two natures of Christ". In the 4th and 5th centuries no less than four Ecumenical Councils took place, starting with one in Nicea in 325. At this Council it was decided – against Arius who maintained that Christ was similar to God, but not the same – that Christ was God, and shared the same identity. When Nestorius afterwards taught that Christ had two separate natures, a divine and a human, he was in turn repudiated by the Council of Ephesus in 431. An influential monk with the name of Eutyches took the opposite view: The human and divine natures of Christ were fused into one new single (mono) nature... his human nature was "dissolved like a drop of honey in the sea". This position was called Monophysitism (from the Greek *monos* meaning 'one, alone' and *physis* meaning 'nature'). According to this view Christ has only one nature (a divine nature). The Ecumenical Council, held in Chalcedon, in 541, decided against this view and held that Christ indeed has two natures, one divine and one human, but that "both natures concur in one person and in one reality [*hypostasis*]"¹⁷.

¹⁶ *Operation World*, a dependable source, gives it as 31% (2001:244).

¹⁷ Here the "ecumenical" still included (almost) the whole Christian Church... both the "Catholic" and "Eastern Orthodox" branches. The full Chalcedon definition reads as follows:

Therefore, following the holy fathers, we all with one accord teach men to acknowledge one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, at once complete in Godhead and complete

A group of Churches – among them Alexandria (and Ethiopia) – did not accept this formulation. They (sometimes called the Oriental Orthodox Churches) believe that Christ is both divine and human but does not separate the two aspects. These theological differences remain until today. Although dialogue between the two families of Churches has led to a large measure of agreement, full normal relations are still not attained. The *Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church* (transliterated Amharic: Yäityop'ya ortodoks täwahedo bétäkrestyan) therefore belongs – with others such as the *Coptic Orthodox Church*, the *Armenian Apostolic Church*, the *Syriac Orthodox Church*, the *Malankara Orthodox Church* of India, and the *Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church* – to a group of Churches referred to as "Non-Chalcedonian", and, sometimes by outsiders as "*monophysite*" (meaning "One Single Nature", in reference to Christ). However, these Churches themselves describe their Christology as "*miaphysite*" (meaning "One United Nature"). Tewahedo is a *Ge'ez* word meaning "being made one" or "unified". The *Tewahedo* in the name therefore refers to the belief in the one single unified nature of Christ, as opposed to the "two Natures of Christ" belief (unmixed, but unseparated Divine and Human Natures, called the Hypostatic Union).

For the past 1500 years, therefore, the Ethiopian Orthodox (Tewahedo) Church went its own way, although the Pope of Alexandria, as Patriarch of All Africa, always named an Egyptian (a Copt) to be *Abuna* or Archbishop of the Ethiopian Church. In 1959 it was granted its own Patriarch (autocephaly) by Pope Cyril VI. The Ethiopian Church developed quite independently as Orthodox, and more specifically "Oriental Orthodox". It was never – except for a brief period which we will relate now – part of Catholic (in the sense of Western) Christianity.

For that we must return to the story about the Muslim-Christian wars. Since the late 15th century a series of Muslim leaders from the horn of Africa commenced a war against the Christian state. It was not only pressure from the Muslims from the east which worried the emperor... the weakened state also had to contend with a northward expansion of the

in manhood, truly God and truly man, consisting also of a reasonable soul and body; of one substance with the Father as regards his Godhead, and at the same time of one substance with us as regards his manhood; like us in all respects, apart from sin; as regards his Godhead, begotten of the Father before the ages, but yet as regards his manhood begotten, for us men and for our salvation, of Mary the Virgin, the God-bearer; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, recognised in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation; the distinction of natures being in no way annulled by the union, but rather the characteristics of each nature being preserved and coming together to form one person and subsistence, not as parted or separated into two persons, but one and the same Son and Only-begotten God the Word, Lord Jesus Christ; even as the prophets from earliest times spoke of him, and our Lord Jesus Christ himself taught us, and the creed of the fathers has handed down to us. (Reference in Historic Church Documents at Reformed.org)

animistic Oromos in the south. Already in 1507 Matthew, or Matheus, an Armenian, had been sent as an Ethiopian envoy to Portugal to ask for aid against the Adal Sultanate. In 1520 an embassy under Dom Rodrigo de Lima landed in Ethiopia (by which time Adal had been remobilised under Ahmed Gragn the Lefthanded). In the end the Portuguese successfully assisted the Ethiopians to defend their country.

It was just natural that as good Catholics the Portuguese then tried to woe the Ethiopians back into the Catholic fold. The Jesuits wished to take up the task of conversion, but were at first forbidden. The Pope then made overtures via the east. Later on the Jesuits did enter, and after repeated failures some measure of success was achieved. Emperor Za-Dengel and his successor Susenyos even embraced the Catholic faith. In 1624 the Emperor made formal submission to the Pope. Susenyos declared Roman Catholicism to be the official state religion, but was met with heavy resistance from his subjects. He eventually had to abdicate in 1632 to his son, Fasilidas, who promptly restored Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity as the state religion. In 1633 he expelled the Jesuits and in 1665 ordered that all Jesuit books be burned. This brought the Catholic period to an end.

An interesting result, however, of this Portuguese-Catholic interlude can today be viewed in Gonder, a town in the Ethiopian highlands. In contrast to his predecessors Emperor Fasilidas in 1636 started a tradition of establishing a permanent capital. This was done by erecting an imposing stone palace for himself. Today the royal enclosure in Gonder is the site not only of Fasilidas's palace, but also those of his five successors. It is often referred to as the Camelot of Africa, after the legendary palace complex of the English King Arthur. This Gonder complex is a fascinating blend of Africa... and Portugal.

History, myth, legend and faith

It should be clear from the historical section that much of the Ethiopian past is clouded in the mists of ancient myths and legends. Foremost among these traditions is the Solomonic connection with its implied Jewish roots and the presence of the original Ark of the Exodus. As Ranger says (Ranger 2007:28): "At Aksum the Ark (Tabot) containing the Old Law is identified with Mary of Zion who 'held the New Law in the person of Christ'... The Church of St Mary of Zion in Aksum has become the true Jerusalem (or Zion) for both Jews and Christians, with profound theological implications".

The investigative reporter Graham Hancock, in his fascinating study *The Sign and the Seal* (1992) sifted through facts and fiction, history and tradition, myth and reality. Without always coming to conclusive results he dug deep enough to prevent any sceptical reader from too easily dismissing the truth claims of the Ethiopians. He accepts that the Ark is in Aksum,

although no independent witness could be found who actually saw it. He also accepts the Solomonic link through the queen of Sheba as a tradition probably rooted in history. For the remarkable stone church building projects around Lalibela – the African Jerusalem – he also has his own (and maybe plausible) theory - he doesn't think that angels built them!

But, whatever can be said about the legends and myths, one thing that cannot be discounted is the vibrant faith of the Orthodox community. For them there are no apparent tensions between their faith and the uncertainties of the traditions... these are part and parcel of the substance of their faith.

Characteristics of the church

The *Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church* is one of only a few pre-colonial Christian churches in Sub-Saharan Africa. It has a membership of about 40 million people (45 million claimed by the Patriarch... more than half the population of the country), mainly in Ethiopia, but also in other countries where Ethiopians have migrated to. It is the largest of all Oriental Orthodox churches.

It is quite an experience for visitors from the south – where the churches are post-colonial – to be confronted with this Church which is at the same time ancient, but also vibrant and living. While the Christian churches in Europe – where our ancestors heard the gospel and became Christian – are experiencing an exodus of the people, this Church (as old or older than those Churches) is still in the hearts of the people (as it was often explained to us) and it is still giving direction to the mentality and actions of the people. It is clear that the average Ethiopian – at least in the northern highlands – cannot imagine for him/herself an existence without the Church.

To be confronted by such a pre-modern situation is a somewhat unnerving experience. We have grown used to the effects of modernism with its trust in science and technology, its secularism and relativism. Here it is different. Not only the traditions are tangible, but so also the physical presence of the Church.

In the museums you can see the coins of Ezana with the cross motive, the first of such in the world; you can also see the robes and crowns of the archbishops from the 4th century and onwards; likewise you can visit royal tombs from the 6th century decorated with clear Christian crosses. In the church buildings it is not only the illustrated ancient Ge'ez manuscripts of Bible and extra-biblical texts that can be seen, but also white clad worshippers. On Sundays and religious feasts large numbers of faithful can be seen where they walk to church, and also individual piety can be observed.

The interior of the church buildings give evidence of frequent use. The drums are there, and the church bells, the carpets and (some) seats. The *maquamia* (prayer stick) is an essential part of the priest's attire - evidence that he spends many hours in prayer. This, together with hand clapping, is used to mark time. Church music known as *aquaquam* resonates with the use of the drums, in particular the *kabaro*, as well as the *tsinatseil* (...a sophisticated rattle...). Percussion instruments are primarily used to mark the beat (Lonely Planet 2006:52). St Yared (6th century) is generally regarded as the father of Ethiopian church music. He composed many hymns which are still sung and performed. To quote Ranger again (2007:27-28):

Drumming and dancing have always been an important part of the worship in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The scholarly musicians and cantors (*däptāras*) claim to have inherited the role from the Levites of Jerusalem... *Däptāras* are more educated than village priests and are respected not only because they traditionally dance and sing at major feasts, but also because they have inherited the wisdom of Solomon and much of his magic powers. They inscribe parchment scrolls as talismans, which many Ethiopians wear...

Especially in the larger towns worship and Bible Study are not confined to Sundays, but almost daily there are opportunities for believers to attend meetings where the deacons and priests give teaching. The teaching seems to consist mostly in reiterating the contents of the Holy Books, and applying it. Sermons today are usually delivered in the local language.

Another striking aspect of the church buildings is the art work. It is clear that since early days the pictures – painted on the walls and ceilings, woodwork and pieces of cotton – were used as teaching tools, but Merahi (1999:104) maintains that it meant much more: it signified the holiness of the church. Although this tradition is not as old as that of the tablets and the crosses (Merahi 1999:92), he thinks that it also dates from the Byzantine period (7th to 9th century).

There are three “degrees of Holy Orders” (Merahi 1999:40): diaconate, priesthood and episcopate. Children who feel called to a life “in the Church” are from an early age taught Ge’ez by the deacons. Through patient reading and study such youth are eventually accepted as knowledgeable enough to be acknowledged as deacons. By continuing the pattern and moving around to study under more learned priests, the deacons also reach a stage where the Church acknowledges their insight and knowledge, and accepts them as priests, yet, that will still not be the end of the road on which they embarked. There clearly is a culture of learning embedded in the process, the priests never stop reading other ancient manuscripts to gain insight into the dealings of God with his people.

The Tewahedo Church Canon contains 81 books. This canon contains the books accepted by other Orthodox Christians. The *Narrower Canon* also contains Enoch, Jubilees, and three books of the Meqabyan; the *Broader Canon* includes all of the books found in the Narrower Canon, as well as the two Books of the Covenant, four Books of Sinodos, a Book of Clement, and Didaskalia.

It was originally the Septuagint Greek version of the Bible that was translated into Ge'ez, but later revisions show clear evidence of the use of Hebrew, Syriac, and Arabic sources. The first translation into a modern vernacular was done in the 19th century by a man who is usually known as Abu Rumi. Later, Haile Selassie sponsored Amharic translations of the Ge'ez Scriptures during his reign. The *Haile Selassie Version of the Bible*, which was published in 1962, contains the Narrower Canon.

The Ethiopian church places a heavier emphasis on Old Testament teachings than one might find in the Roman Catholic or Protestant churches, and its followers adhere to certain practices that one finds in Orthodox or Conservative Judaism, like the dietary rules that are similar to Jewish Kashrut, specifically with regard to how an animal is slaughtered. Similarly, pork is prohibited, though unlike Rabbinical Kashrut, Ethiopian cuisine does mix dairy products with meat. In the same way women are prohibited from entering the church during menses; they are also expected to cover their hair with a large scarf (or *shash*) while in church¹⁸. The Ethiopian church also has a practice of partial fasting, abstaining from meat and milk, during certain times of the year.

Throughout Ethiopia, Orthodox buildings are not considered churches until the local bishop gives them a *tabot*, a replica of the tablets in the original Ark of the Covenant. The tabot is at least six inches (15 cm) square and made from alabaster, marble, or acacia wood. It is always kept in ornate coverings to hide it from public view. In an elaborate procession, the tabot is carried around the outside of the church amid joyful song and dance on the feast day of that particular church's namesake, and also on the great *Feast of T'imkat*, known as Epiphany or Theophany in Europe (which commemorates the baptism of Jesus). The other general feast is *Meskel*, the feast of the finding of the cross, which is believed to date back to Helena, the mother of Constantine (Merahi 1999:76).

Ethiopian Orthodox worshippers remove their shoes when entering a church, in accordance with Exodus 3:5 (in which Moses, while viewing the

¹⁸ As with Orthodox synagogues, men and women are seated separately in the Ethiopian church, with men on the left and women on the right (when facing the altar). However, many of these traditions are common to some Oriental Orthodox, Eastern Orthodox and Catholic Churches, and is the general arrangement in most Protestant and other Churches in Africa... as also in Islam.

burning bush, is commanded to remove his shoes while standing on holy ground). Furthermore, both the Sabbath (Saturday), and the Lord's Day (Sunday) are observed as holy, although more emphasis, because of the Resurrection of Christ, is given to Sunday.

Mission in (Northern) Ethiopia

It is with great hesitation that a number of remarks from a missiological angle can be made. One should not sound too all knowing. In the first instance our visit was too short for an in-depth assessment. Furthermore, the encounter was so overwhelming that a measure of subjective wonder can colour the observations. I also realise only too well that we visited only the northern (Amharic and Tigrayan) areas of the country which are in many respects different from the rest of the country. I was there, and this is an attempt to simply reflect on indelible impressions. What follows will be more in the form of questions than statements!

The fact that it was an *African* experience is important. It was missiologically speaking, a unique experience to meet in Africa a Church which is not the product (fruit) of the modern (western) missionary movement, but one with an independent history that goes back to (almost) biblical times. This experience was in Africa, but I can imagine the same challenge awaits a Protestant or Evangelical when venturing into countries like Russia or Greece... or Italy where there is the same kind of entanglement of culture and an ancient Christian tradition. What does one make of it?

Does this "culture Christianity" not inevitably lead to a lack of commitment? Is it not so superficial as to be of little real religious value? Have we not learnt through our own history to mistrust such an integration? Is this kind of Christian culture (like in northern Europe) not reduced to the visible monuments and some rituals with very little religious content and commitment? These are relevant missiological questions for Reformed (Evangelical, Protestant) Christians, for whom an expression of personal faith and commitment are important yet, exactly this, was for me, one of the most striking impressions in the north: the examples of personal piety and religious community I could witness everywhere. There were the large crowds of white clad faithful on their way to church, or the individuals in the church yard in deep prayer, or the young tour guide who would declare with sincerity that he just can't picture anyone turning his or her back on the orthodox faith when it is "so deep in your heart". The signs of commitment are many and cannot be missed. Add to that the remarkable history of faithfulness to the Christian tradition related above, and the visible signs of Christian influence through the crosses and other symbols, and it becomes evident that one cannot make light of and speak cynically of the faith of

these people. Something much more substantial and deep is playing a role here!

Be it as it may, is this good enough? Is it not true that the same kind of commitment and piety can be found among Muslims, Buddhists or Hindus in other parts of the world? Are these Ethiopians not merely being – as John Mbiti has said of Africans in general – "notoriously religious" in their mentality? Do we accept this Christianity? Can we with conviction tell our fellow missionaries of evangelical conviction: "hands off"?

Are we trying to question whether their version of Christianity is "acceptable"? Does anybody have the right to judge this? Can those who ask such a question claim that their position is the norm? We have very little to be proud of. Here is a tradition that is centuries older even than the Catholic tradition from which we derive. It is a tradition that is built on blood and tears, a faith with a staying power that is unparalleled. In Ethiopian Christianity we come face to face with centuries of cumulative wisdom and spirituality... and we say we do not really like it, that "they don't make it" according to our definitions!

Very well, we might answer, but do they know the truth? Have they not perhaps lost themselves in their many traditions? Are they really rooted in the infallible Word of God (*sola Scriptura*)? It is clear that they also use a great number of ancient extra-biblical books, and that the extra-biblical traditions accumulated as the centuries went by. Mother Mary understandably plays a key role, but also a bewildering number of saints... and angels. What about the mythic presence of the pre-Christian Ark of the Covenant, which became an essential element of their faith? Is Jesus really their only Saviour, or has his place been usurped? Without asking the cynical question of Pilate "What is truth?" one should at least admit that this Church confronts us with the truth claim. And I don't feel qualified to give the final answer to that.

Are these people "reached"? In evangelical circles this term is used to indicate the status of the gospel in a specific area: Have the people "heard" the gospel and what percentage of the population could reasonably speaking be said to "have heard" it? "Salvation comes through hearing", to paraphrase Romans 10:14. Technically this question is easy to answer: here (at least in the northern parts of Ethiopia) the gospel of Jesus Christ is well known. The Church is widely present... everywhere the typical church buildings are visible. This does not mean that every single individual has heard the gospel so clearly that he/she has made a conscious decision to follow Christ. The work of gospel preaching is never finished. We were in areas where even the church buildings were spread thinly. We also travelled on Sundays through areas where the people were busy ploughing and/or harvesting on their fields as if Sunday was no special day. Most certainly

not all people are equally involved with the Church. (Does that sound familiar?)

Should the call therefore go out to the mission industry to "come over and help us" (Acts 16:9)? Are the fields ripe for the harvest? Or should the continuation of mission (which is always unfinished!) be left to the Orthodox Church to fulfil? Do they deserve a monopoly?¹⁹ My opinion is that the involvement of outsiders should basically be in cooperation with the Orthodox Church, and not as opposition. Like in any Church also here there is room for renewal and for growth in love, faith and hope. Isolation is not the best growth strategy, but cooperation.

In the south various evangelical/protestant churches are already part of the landscape, but in the north there is very little to be seen of other Churches²⁰. We were told that there are no prohibitions on their entry into the north. As a matter of fact, we were told, it is quite acceptable to also experience other kinds of Christian spirituality. Ethiopian Christians can and will be enriched by such contacts. But there is clearly a hesitation to accept those groups that aggressively promote conversion out of the Old Church, come in without any sympathy and understanding, and who attack the deep seated feelings of solidarity the people have for the tradition. Confrontation and force go against the Ethiopian Christian ethos. This is not taken to kindly.

The kind of questions asked above – and others could be added – should be dealt with in humility. No one – and no Church – is perfect. The Lord of the church is still at work in his church. It is probably best to humbly accept the fellowship of our brothers and sisters and to take hands with our family. We are bound to learn from each other.

¹⁹ In the early days – when the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedu Church was still the state church – this was more or less the case. When the Church Missionary Society in 1818 sent missionaries to the Oromo they were denied entry (Neill 1986:256, one of these missionaries was the indefatigable Ludwig Krapf (:268)). The same happened to the Catholics in 1839.

²⁰ I am well aware that my observations are limited to the northern highlands. That is why *Northern Ethiopia* is prominent in the title of this essay. I did wonder whether I shouldn't – for the sake of balance and credibility – also give attention to the religious situation elsewhere in the country. There is quite a different mission and Christian history in the south and west of the country. According to the statistics of *Operation World* (2001:244) there are, for instance, at least two Protestant churches who number their adherents in the millions: the *Kale Heywet Church*, connected to the SIM mission (*Serving in Mission...* previously the *Sudan Interior Mission*) with 5 million, and the *Mekane Yesu Church* with 3,4 million adherents, deriving from different European and American 19th century Lutheran missions. The *United Pentecostal Church* also claim over one million adherents. However, I decided to limit my input to the area which I experienced personally. It will certainly be worthwhile and important to enquire further on the issue of inter-Christian relations within Ethiopia and wider afield.

Closing remarks

This article can serve an example of the kind of challenge and education travel can bring: an encounter with a foreign religious culture which poses questions that eventually enrich the traveller.

Although I cannot answer the questions, the process initiated by this kind of exercise is enriching. I only hope that the reader has also benefited by this introduction to an ancient Christian tradition.

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