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CLASH OF IDEOLOGIES AND SURVIVAL OF EVANGELICAL MOVEMENT
IN ETHIOPIA

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Review of Tibebe Eshete, *Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia: Resistance and Resilience* (Waco Texas: Baylor University Press, 2009), xiii + 480 pp.

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In a preamble to our review it is essential that we portray the interplay between the political ideology and religion in Ethiopia. Ethiopia is known for quite a few things¹, and ideological plurality was not one of them until the fall of feudalism in 1974. Ethiopian feudalism, under the Solomonic Dynasty, was advocated by the exceptionalist political theology which portrayed its political leaders as the heirs of King Solomon, and the nation as a “new Israel”. This political ideology was initiated in the 14th century in *Kebre Negest* – a powerful book by an anonymous author – and was warmly embraced by both the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC) and the Ethiopian political leaders. By recounting the biblical story of King Solomon and The Queen of Sheba, the work tries to domesticate and redirect religion-state marriage in Jewish tradition to the Ethiopian soil. The historical context was inviting: the centralized governance in Ethiopia was crumbling, mainly due to the in-fighting among the provincial war lords. Therefore, national unity was at risk, and moreover, the political control was about to slip away from the ruling elites who considered themselves to be divinely ordained to rule. As history indicates, the book (KN) played a crucial role in terms of persuading the regional political leaders to put a stop to the domestic struggle and focus on national unity instead, lending political legitimization to the ruling group and creating an overarching national consciousness.

Accordingly, Edward Ullendorff, an eminent Ethiopianist, argues that KN “is not merely a literary work”. Rather, he adds, “[...] it is the repository of Ethiopian national and religious feeling”² – playing the same role as the Old Testament for the Hebrew and The Qur’an for the Arab societies. Needless to say, religion, viz., the EOC, is the main catalyst shaping the face of political ideology, as well as the national consciousness that transcends the ethnic, cultural and linguistic borders. Creating such a sweeping consciousness had a deeper agenda than keeping glued together a nation known for its mosaic of ethnicities, languages and cultures. While the political aspect was meant to control the public face of the national unity, religion and theology were used to existentially cement ideological hegemony in the consciousness of the society and leave no room for political dissent.

By then Ethiopia had become a religiously pluralist society. Islam was introduced to Ethiopia in early seventh century. The followers of Mohammed, in danger of persecution by the local authorities in Arabia, took refuge in the Axumite kingdom of the Ethiopian highlands. The refugees were provided safe haven in Ethiopia and granted the freedom to practice their religion. In response to the generosity of the Ethiopians sources indicate that Mohammed concluded that Ethiopia should not be a target for the Jihad.³ Despite claiming a substantial number of the Ethiopian population, Islam could not exert its influence on the political agenda. While over the years it gained the position of “honorary guest”, it nevertheless has been carefully prevented from construing a different

political ideology. In fact, Ethiopian Islam has never protested against the national identity and consciousness created by the EOC and the state.

Catholicism also tried to take roots in the Ethiopian soil. Despite managing to convert king Susenyos in the 17th century, its success was short lived and both Catholicism and the king who was converted to the *ferenj* (European) religion were ousted by the powerful EOC clergies who mobilized the people against them. Albeit using a diplomatic approach that helped Ethiopia defeat Ahmad Gragne's invasion of the Christian highland, the Catholic effort did not bear much fruit after the end of the war. This is precisely because for a people and nation that claimed their own version of Christianity, bringing a different one was regarded as ecclesiastical and ideological intrusion. Moreover, the introduction of another religious institution did not sit well with the clergy and Christian nobility, the mainstay of the political power.

Protestant encounter with this time-honored and theologically backed ideology can be traced back to the seventeenth century. Namely, in 1634-35 Peter Heyling, a German lay theologian, headed to Ethiopia with the intention of applying the "reformation" that supposedly worked very well in Europe.⁴ As part of a strategy for revitalizing the reform, Heyling translated the New Testament into Amharic, in order to make it accessible to all.⁵ Besides becoming an advisor to Emperor Fasil (1634-1667), Heyling also managed to gather some local priests around him, whom Tibebe considered to be "a community of believers with some kind of evangelical theological conditions"⁶. However, Donald Crummey observes that Heyling did not leave behind a lasting missionary legacy that would have managed to give birth to an alternative church.⁷ The main reason was that Heyling thought Ethiopia already had a viable church. Above all, due to the resistance of the Ethiopian Emperors (such as Tewodros, Yohannes IV, Menelik II) towards the foreign influx of religious values, the establishment of a Protestant church in Ethiopia was not possible until the 20th century.

Later on, however, Haile Selassie allowed missionaries to convert the "animists" in the Southern part of Ethiopia as a part of his effort of modernization and reform⁸. The protestant churches, especially *Mekane Yesus* (Lutheran church) and *Kale Hiwot* (Baptist church) flourished in the Western and Southern parts of Ethiopia. Even then, it is hard to tell what ideology Evangelical churches had adhered to. They, in fact, were rather ambiguous when it came to political ideology. That is, they are Ethiopians. However, because of their missionary origin, they were largely seen as a representation of what is foreign, and therefore, they were often treated as second-class citizens.

Moreover, much has been written on Ethiopian history – stories have been told and, at times, retold, reflections have been made by both native and foreign "Ethiopianists" on the "gloriously turbulent history", in John

Markakis' words⁹, of this nation. To mention but a few, substantial historical ground in Ethiopia was covered by scholars such as Bahru Zewdie, Tadesse Tamrat, Harold Marcus and Richard Pankhurst. They addressed a variety of issues pertaining to Ethiopian historiography from antiquity and ancient "myths" to the most recent developments in politics, religion, literature and many other aspects of the Ethiopian culture. Surprisingly enough, however, scholars, natives and foreign alike, have tended to leave the history and role of the Evangelical movement in Ethiopia unaccounted for, despite the fact that the Evangelical block claims a fair share of the population (18.6% according to the recent census), starting as early as the 16th century, and still is a briskly growing branch within the Ethiopian society. The reasons for leaving this part of the society underexplored are uncertain. However, there is less uncertainty when it comes to the notable need to give a scholarly account of the Evangelical movement in Ethiopia.

Then one could surmise, "Well, there are books on Ethiopian Evangelicalism. Examples are *Born at Midnight* (1973) by Peter Cottrell, *The Evangelical Pioneers in Ethiopia* (1978) by Gustav Aren, and *Revolution and Religion in Ethiopia* (2000) by Oyvid Eide".¹⁰ True, these books, especially the former two, were arguably the main references in the Protestant history in Ethiopia. However, firstly, these books were either written about one denomination, namely the *Kale Hiwot* and *Mekanye Yesus* churches, or they were documentations about a missionary experience in specific geographical areas. Secondly, their scope is limited, or rather played down by the denominational agendas, and therefore, the issues they are addressing are constricted to certain "evangelistic" matters. Thirdly, most of the books written by missionaries are based on the experience of their field work. Undoubtedly, the missionary insights on Ethiopian Evangelical experience do have their own unique merits. Nevertheless, cultural and linguistic gaps therein disclose their hermeneutical limitations with regards to interpreting the cultural dynamics and their fair representation.

Tibebe's *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia* fills up all of these gaps. In terms of the formal aspects, the book comprises four major parts. The first part deals with the EOC, the powerful institution that brought and kept together religion and politics for nearly two millennia, and lay the ground for the Protestant movement both as friend and foe. Tibebe here broadly depicts the EOC as the basis of spirituality which provided the framework for the local contexts of the missionary enterprise in Ethiopia. This includes EOC's role in providing foundations for Ethiopian Christianity, its influence on Southern ethnicities and their traditional belief systems.

The second part gives a brief history of the roots of the evangelical movement in Ethiopia. Tibebe discusses the works of the modern Protestant missionaries who gave rise to it. Taking into account the

religious and political context of the country, he situates the expansion of the evangelical faith in the southern and southwestern parts of Ethiopia. Equally vital, this part also discusses the missionary-state relationship starting from the reign of Emperor Tewodros to that of Emperor Haile Selassie.

The third major part deals with the Ethiopian Pentecostal Churches. Tracing their origins and development, conflating the religious and sociopolitical domains together so as to facilitate the understanding of the movement, and accounting for its encounters with diverse forces, especially the Marxist revolution, are the main focuses of this chapter. What makes this part even more special is that the analysis is based on extensive field research and personal accounts of personalities bearing first-hand experiences of the movement, persecution and resistance.

The fourth and final part discusses “the Ethiopian Revolution”, which ended up espousing the Marxist ideology. This chapter takes up a bulky part of the book probably because the Revolution provides a unique background for the development of the state-church relationship during this period. In order to do this, Tibebe takes a step back in time to the reign of Haile Selassie to explore the root cause of the Revolution. By doing so, he provides insights into the intellectual political culture of the rising intelligentsia, the history and the rise of Marxism in a deeply religious society. Tibebe also explains the reason why the socio-psychological contexts made the Ethiopian elites and high ranking military embrace Marxist ideology at the expense of the deep religiosity of the society. This part also highlights the crucial political developments in the early phase of the Marxist Revolution and their implication for the evangelical movement.

Tibebe’s *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia* is one of a kind. This is not just another book on Evangelical church history. Rather, it is a fairly lucid depiction of the struggle, resilience, and the survival of this movement in a tempestuous socio-political situation. Thus, rather than discussing its “history” the author focuses on the “movement”. Tibebe’s other reason apart from giving an overall narration of the Ethiopian evangelicalism was to unravel the clash of several ideologies in Ethiopia. That is, on the one hand, there was the EOC with a long history of undiminished ideological influence on the society. On the other hand, Marxism was emerging as a new ideology often using violence and terror to demystify political, but also largely public, space from religious ascriptions. The Ethiopian evangelicals greeted Marxism with mixed feelings. On the one hand, they saw the value in the Marxist move to abolish class system precisely because they belonged to socially marginalized minorities. On the other hand, however, the relentless pressure to embrace scientific evolution as a way of understanding Nature, and Marxism as a way of organizing society did not sit very well with their theological commitment.¹¹

That is where the story of persecution and survival starts to unfold. The churches were confiscated, people who opposed the scientific evolution were imprisoned and even those who tried to make sense of the political and historical situation vis-à-vis their Christian faith (such as Gudina Tumsa) were assassinated. To top it all, as Tibebe writes, “The absence of the tradition of social and political activism, on the part the evangelical faith groups, was a major limitation that incapacitated them to converse with the new situation created by the revolution”. The question therefore is: where does the mystery of survival lie? In a recent article in *The Review of Faith and International Affairs* (2010) he states, in the face of Marxist revolution, “The church neither withdrew nor rebelled; it reloaded itself as committed leaders prompted believers to engage in nonviolent resistance by locating themselves in the hidden arena of the underground home cells and expanding aggressively to reach out to others”.¹² Furthermore, Evangelical churches combated Marxist ideology and presented their own through nonviolent approaches such as by creating a counter-culture community, and by discursively challenging its ideological legitimacy through protest-oriented gospel songs.¹³

This book is a mammoth achievement. Firstly, the focus of this book surpasses denominational fault-lines without overlooking them. To achieve this the author cogently weaves the “mini-narratives” of every missionary and the indigenous churches into one sweeping story. While using the overriding issues to bring them together, he also leaves room for the denominations to be identified by their own unique features. Secondly, Tibebe’s intriguing and versatile personal background has made the book even richer. Journalist and former staunch supporter of Marxism, Tibebe is now a professor and a deeply religious man. What that means in relation to this book is that he has the narrating skill of the journalist, the eye of a Marxist to social issues, the teaching ability of a professor and the dedication of the religious person to redemption.

The author has done a remarkable job in weaving together elements of time-honored religious tradition, old feudalistic political system and a new Revolution in order to tell the story of a Protestant movement which exhibited a tremendous resistance and grew amid persecution and repression. An original work based on the first-hand accounts of the people who saw and did it all, this book will be an invaluable resource not only for the Ethiopian scholars who aspire to further explore this movement, but also for non-Ethiopian entities who are in need of a better grasp of the Ethiopian society.

Notes:

¹ Ethiopia is known, positively, for its independence, being the only non-colonized African nation and having its own civilization capitalized by unique alphabet, numbers, art, literary systems, as well as negatively, for its internal political struggle, poverty, war and famine.

² Edward Ullendorff, *Ethiopia and the Bible*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 144.

³ David H. Shinn, et.al, *Historical Dictionary of Ethiopia*, (Oxford, Scarecrow Press, 2004), 225.

⁴ Tibebe Eshete, *Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia: Resistance and Resilience*, (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2009), 48.

⁵ Note that Ethiopian churches have had Biblical writings, along some non-canonical books, in Ge'ez - an ancient and the liturgical language of the EOC to this day. However, Ge'ez is no more in use except in liturgy and sacred writings, and therefore, the ordinary people could not understand the Bible. Heyling understandably thought that making the New Testament available for public consumption would trigger the reform.

⁶ Tibebe, 48.

⁷ Donald Crummey, *Priests and Politicians: Protestant and Catholic Missions in Orthodox Ethiopia, 1830-1868*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), 10.

⁸ Tibebe, 75-82.

⁹ John Markakis, *Ethiopia: Anatomy of Traditional Polity*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), 13.

¹⁰ Gustav Arén, *The Evangelical Pioneers in Ethiopia: The Origins of the Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus* (Stockholm: EFS Förlaget, 1978); Peter Cottrell, *Born at Midnight* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1973); Oyvind M Eide, *Revolution and Religion in Ethiopia: The Growth and Persecution of Mekane Yesus Church 1974-85*, (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press, 2000).

¹¹ Tibebe, 223-230.

¹² Tibebe Eshete, "Evangelical Christians and Indirect Resistance to the Religious Persecution in Ethiopia", *The Review of Faith and International Affairs*, vol.8, No.1 (Spring 2010): 13.

¹³ Tibebe Eshete, "Evangelical Christians and Indirect Resistance to the Religious Persecution in Ethiopia", 13.