

Christian Ministry: Patterns And Functions Within The Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus

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Religion, politics and the dilemma of modernising Ethiopia



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Ethiopia is an old society often confronted with new ideas and foreign values. As a result, social changes and modernisation were important contentious points especially in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Some wanted change and progress at the expense of indigenous values, specifically cultural and political independence, while others opted for a more cautious approach. Inasmuch as Ethiopia's context was one in which the church and the state were accustomed to seeing themselves as two sides of the same coin, the discourse of modernisation had both a political and religious flavour to it. This article therefore aims to examine the volatile dynamics between religion (especially the Protestant churches of the 'southern peripheries') and the Marxist regime in modernising Ethiopia. Specifically, the article intends to explore how state-church relations transformed social thinking in Ethiopia. I begin by sketching the historical background and proceed to unravel the dilemma of modernisation. In the final part, I discuss how Protestantism contributed to modernising three aspects of social structure: the understanding of the human person, state-church relations and social organisation.

Introduction

Let me start with a brief sketch of the historical setting. Ethiopia is one of the ancient nations of Africa, with long political and ecclesiastical traditions. The country was governed for over a millennium and a half by Christian monarchs of northern descent. The rulers, for the most part, claimed patrilineal descent from the biblical King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC) was a crucial part of the system since its introduction in the 4th century. In 1974, a Marxist regime known as the Dergue brought an end to the feudal system and took power after overthrowing the last Solomonic monarch, Haile Selassie. Claiming that religion was the reason for Ethiopian 'backwardness', this regime created an environment that was hostile to religion. In 1991, the Marxist regime was defeated by an ethno-federalist group – the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front – which brought with it a political system that was based on linguistic and ethnic differences. The new political establishment introduced a policy of religions in the public arena where all religious groups could freely practise their faith.

Ethiopia has one of the most indigenised and change-resistant churches – the EOC. This church is a descendent of the Alexandrian tradition, even though along the way it managed to develop its own unique characteristics. As a powerful institution that, from early on, was promoted to the status of state religion, the EOC's worldview permeated the political, social and cultural fabric of the nation (Girma 2016). The theology and philosophy of the church take a cue from Greek Platonic dualism, which manifests itself in a local version of the 'wax and gold tradition' – a philosophy that favours spirituality and asceticism over seeking material gain (Girma 2012). The Alexandrian Church, which embraced Platonic philosophy as a conceptual tool to formulate its theology, was the mother church of the EOC. This connection was deepened not only by the fact that the *Abun* [the head of the church] was directly sent from Alexandria for almost 15 centuries, but also by the translation of Greek literature of both theological and philosophical nature into Ge'ez (Ference 1985). The most notable of such translations were *Angara Falasfa* (the book that includes the sayings of Greek philosophers including Socrates, Aristotle and Plato), *The Fasalguos* [Physiologus], *The Book of Wise Philosophers* and *The Life and Maxims of Silestus*, all having some Greek roots (Makumba 2007). From among these *Angara Falasfa*, needless to say, is one of the most important texts taught in *Ye Abenet Timheret Bet* (formerly known as *Ye Kolo Timheret Bet*) – traditional church schools. Note that *Ye Abenet Timheret Bet* is where Ethiopian literary experts, philosophers and theologians are trained and nurtured.

One of the ramifications of the impact of dualistic philosophy is that the spiritual is preferred over the material order. Spiritual holidays in which the believers are supposed to abstain from work

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