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(61) CHRISTIANITY IN ERITREA[1]

Tewelde Beyene

Religion	Pop 2010	Pct 2010	Pop 2025	Pct 2025	Gr Pct 1970 2025
Christians	2,162,000	46.1%	3,050,000	46.3%	2.3%
Independents	18,800	0.4%	32,000	0.5%	3.6%
African initiated	18,800	0.4%			
Orthodox	1,953,000	41.6%	2,781,000	42.2%	2.4%
Oriental Orthodox	1,950,000	41.6%			
Protestants	52,800	1.1%	95,000	1.4%	4.0%
Lutheran	42,800	0.9%			
Roman Catholics	154,000	3.3%	185,000	2.8%	1.2%
Pentecostals/Charismatics	123,000	2.6%	220,000	3.3%	3.9%
Evangelicals	31,500	0.7%	50,000	0.8%	3.1%
Muslims	2,411,000	51.4%	3,383,000	51.4%	2.3%
adherents of traditional African religions	35,500	0.8%	38,000	0.6%	0.5%
Baha'is	1,600	0.0%	2,400	0.0%	2.9%
Hindus	1,100	0.0%	1,600	0.0%	2.2%
people professing no religion	78,600	1.7%	111,000	1.7%	2.3%
Total population	**4,690,000**	**100.0%**	**6,585,000**	**100.0%**	**2.3%**

Source: Centre for the Study of World Christianity (CSGC), Boston, Gordon-Conwell TS

The Pre-Christian Context

Important for the understanding of Christianity in Eritrea are early historical relationships with Jewish traditions: According to these traditions, in pre-Christian Aksum, one group of people worshipped a serpent king *(Negus Arwye)*. Along with this went the cult of a host of good and evil spirits and genii, associated with trees, springs and mountain tops. Again, tradition has it that the other group of people followed Mosaic Law. Today, several historians – Ethiopian, Eritrean and others – question, or outrightly dismiss, the historicity of the traditions relating to the Queen of Sheba and her son Menelik,[2] allegedly born out of a relationship of the queen with King Solomon, as both the initiators of Judaism and the founders of a tri-millennial dynasty. Without delving into the details of the debate, suffice it to highlight the role of the Queen of Sheba lore as the foundation of a thought system that shaped the identity, culture and traditions of the people, forged centuries of history and determined the course of key events. The embodiment in

[1] This is a shortened version of a longer essay on Christianity in Eritrea which is contributed to this volume and can be seen in full length in the digital collection on African Christianity in> www.globethics.net/web/anthology-african-christianity.

[2] See, for example: Bahru Zewde, *A History of Ethiopia, 1855-1991,* Addis Ababa: Ohio University Press-Addis Ababa University Press, 2001, 7; Id., *A Short History of Ethiopia and the Horn*, Addis Ababa: Department of History, Addis Ababa University, 1998, 57.

Ethiopian and Eritrean Christianity of such Old Testament practices as circumcision, ritual purity, dietary laws, the observance of the Sabbath and such persistent traditions as the one revolving around the Ark of the Covenant, believed to have been abducted from Jerusalem and preserved in Aksum, the origin of the clergy from Aaron, and the genealogical connections of the Christian population with the twelve tribes of Israel, may not necessarily mean that as large a people as the 'the other half' were of Jewish religion. It is however indicative of significant relations with ancient Israel, from which those traditions may have developed in the course of centuries.[3]

If, in addition to the above, one adds Aksum's cultural and commercial contacts with the Mediterranean world and the civilizations across the Red Sea, the overall picture that emerges in the early centuries AD is one of an eclectic religious microcosm, whose pantheon was shared by both local and foreign – i.e. South Arabian, Jewish, Greek and other – components.

Orthodox Tewahedo Christianity

History highlights

Authoritative historians believe that the eunuch referred to in the Acts of the Apostles (8:26-40), was not an Aksumite, as he was a servant of Candace, this being the name of a series of Meroìtic queens.[4] Nonetheless, when the Syrian young man Frumentius introduced Christianity to the court of King Ezana in the later 330s, small Christian enclaves were already present among the foreign traders and some of their native partners in Adulis and other coastal centres as well as in the towns along the caravan routes leading across the Eritrean plateau, into Aksum. Adulis, the main seaport of the kingdom, was soon to become one of the few suffragan dioceses under the metropolitan see of Aksum. Owing to St Frumentius' episcopal consecration by St Athanasius, Aksum became an ecclesiastical province of the Alexandrian patriarchate and followed in its footsteps in rejecting the Council of Chalcedon.[5] Some time later (in the eighth or ninth century?) a pseudo-canon, attributed to Nicaea, was formulated, stipulating that the metropolitan bishop had to be permanently an Egyptian by birth.[6] Between the fifth and sixth centuries, groups of Syrian missionary monks established monastic centres and carried out extensive evangelistic activities in various parts of both Tigray and Eritrea.

At the beginning of the eighth century, following the rise of Islam, Aksum lost its Eritrean coastal and maritime possessions to the Arabs and, under the pressure of the Beja, northern populations sweeping across Eritrea, the political fulcrum shifted southwards in the direction of today's central Ethiopia. Here the ancient rulers of Aksumite origin were replaced by a local dynasty of the Cushitic stock, the Zagwe, who ruled over the country from 1150 up to 1270, when the Amhara, speakers of a tongue of the Semitic cluster, established a dynasty that claimed its origin from King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. The 'Solomonic dynasty' would maintain power, through various vicissitudes, up to the fall of emperor Haile Selassie in 1974.

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[3] Cf. Edward Ullendorff, *Ethiopia and the Bible*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968, 73-118, 131-145.
[4] Cf. Carlo Conti Rossini, *Storia d' Etiopia*, Bergamo: Instituto italiano d'arti grafiche, 1928, 145; Belaynesh Michael, "Candace," in Belaynesh Michael, Stanislas Chojnacki, Richard Pankhrust, eds., *The Dictionary of Ethiopian Biography*, Addis Ababa: Institute of Ethiopian Studies, 1975, 43.
[5] The Ethio-Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church adheres to the Cyrillian formula, *"The one incarnated nature of God the Word,*" rejecting the term *monophysis* and preferring instead *miaphysis.* Cf. Aymro Wondemagegnehu-Joachim Motuvu*, The Ethiopian Orthodox Church,* Addis Ababa: Ethiopian Orthodox Mission, 1970, 98-99.
[6] Cf. Stuart Munro Hay, *Ethiopia and Alexandria. The Metropolitan Episcopacy of Ethiopia*, Warszawa-Wiesbaden: Bibliotheca Nubica et Aethiopica, 1997, 14-18.

The establishment of important Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Christian monasteries such as Debre Libanos in Shimezana and Debre Sina, near Keren, is attributed to members of Syrian missionary groups. It was at this time and in such Eritrean and Tigrean monastic centres that Christianity was first enculturated, the translation of the Bible, of patristic, theological, liturgical and monastic texts being the first most remarkable achievements in that connection.[7]

Territorial expansion in Ethiopia, through lengthy and bloody conflicts with Muslim and pagan forces, was systematically accompanied by the evangelization of new territories under the leadership of two powerful monastic leaders – Iyesus-Mo'a (ca. 1214-1293) and Tekle-Haymanot (ca. 1215-1313). The third great monastic leader, Ewstathewos (ca. 1273-1352) and his disciples expanded Christianity further in Tigray and today's Eritrea.[8] No less than 20 of the 22 monasteries still existing in the latter country were established by them. Though ostracized for over one hundred years for their strict observance of the Sabbath (in addition to Sunday), a practice that was condemned by both the Ethiopian court and the Egyptian metropolitans, the Ewstathean monasteries in Tigray and Eritrea made a substantial contribution to the liturgical, theological and literary movements which marked Christian history, particularly in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Among other factors, it was through the heroic endurance of Filipos, the founder of Debre Bizen, the most important monastery in Eritrea established in 1373-1374, that the observance of the Sabbath received official ratification by King Zer'a-Ya'iqob at the Council of Debre Metmaq in 1451. Extensive land grants bestowed by the monarchs upon many monasteries in Eritrea, as elsewhere, enhanced their religious, social and political influence in society.

In the wake of Portuguese military intervention, a Roman Catholic mission was entrusted to the Jesuits (1555-1632). However, the conversion of Emperor Sesenyos (rl. 1607-1632), the forced imposition of Roman Catholicism as the state religion, and the 'Latinization' of the liturgy and of the whole Christian traditional system, triggered a chain of violent reaction by the entire Orthodox Tewahedo community and led to the final debacle of the 'Catholic Latin experiment'.[9] The Eritrean monasteries, along with the rest of Ethiopia, were in the forefront in the struggle for the defence of their Christian cultural identity and tradition.

During the colonial 'Scramble for Africa', while Ethiopia retained its sovereignty through Menelik II's (1844-1913) resounding victory over the Italians at the battle of Adwa in 1896, Eritrea was given over to the latter as a colony. In the early 1930s, the Italian colonial government undertook unsuccessful attempts to separate the Eritrean Orthodox community from Ethiopia, with an Eritrean metropolitan bishop directly dependent on the Coptic patriarchate in Egypt. This attempt having failed, following the occupation of Ethiopia in 1935, Italian efforts concentrated on severing Ethiopia's jurisdictional ties with the Coptic patriarchate. A synod was thus convened in Addis Ababa in 1937 by Marshal Rodolfo Graziani, in which the Ethiopian abbot Abune Abraham was appointed metropolitan bishop. Five bishops were also selected and consecrated, and for the first time Eritrea had its own bishop in the person of Abune Marqos, abbot of Debre Bizen. The Coptic patriarchate from Cairo excommunicated the new archbishop, the five bishops and all the clergy consecrated by them. After Haile Selassie's return from exile in 1941, relations with Egypt were restored and the excommunicated prelates and clergy pardoned and reinstated.[10] In the following years, by the emperor's own initiative, and in continuity with the appointment of the first

[7] Cf. Tewelde Beyene, "Evangelization and Inculturation in the History of Ethiopian Christianity," *Ethiopian Review of Cultures,* no. 6/7/ (1996-97), 5-20.
[8] After the fall of Aksum, before it was made a political entity by the Italians in the late nineteenth century, the area was called subsequently: *Ma'ekele-Bahr*, *Medre-Bahr*, *Mereb-Mellash*, with some other variations.
[9] Cf. Tewelde Beyene, "Hanno riconsacrato i nostri *Tabot*. Conflitti fra inculturazione e latinizzazione nella storia missionaria in Etiopia ed Eritrea", *Ad Gentes: Teologia e Antropologia della Missione*, no.17/2 (1913),148-177.
[10] Cf. Cesare Marongiu Bonaiuti*, Politica e religioni nel colonialismo italiano, 1882-1941*, Varese: Giuffrè, 1982, 72-90, 151-199; Paolo Borruso, *L' ultimo impero cristiano,* Milano: Guerini e Associati, 2002, 83-252.

legitimate Ethiopian bishops back in 1929, negotiations were resumed, leading to full autocephaly. In 1959, Abune Basylios, abbot of Debre Libanos in Shewa, was elected the first patriarch of Ethiopia-Eritrea.[11]

All through the revolutionary period (1974-1991), despite its atheistic orientation, the Marxist regime chose a policy of dictatorial-revolutionary control over, rather than the suppression of, the church in Ethiopia, as much as in Eritrea. The church's life, organization and activities were thus put under severe strain as a consequence of the regime's heavy-handed interference.

As an immediate result of the independence of Eritrea in 1991, the Eritrean Orthodox community also became ecclesiastically autonomous, seeking a formal legitimization of its status, not from Ethiopia but directly from the Patriarchate of Alexandria. Subsequent to the consecration of the first five Eritrean bishops, Abune Filipos, former abbot of Debre Bizen, was appointed the first Patriarch of the Eritrean church in May 1998.

Some aspects of Eritrea's Christian heritage

The depth of Christianity's impact on Ethiopian-Eritrean society has its roots in the ability to integrate local cultures with a variety of influences and to mould them into a harmonious blend leading, in turn, to a unique model of the Christian faith. As an illustration of this process, I select five areas of the Christian life and heritage common to both countries.

MONASTIC LIFE

Through a constant supply of evangelists, writers, theologians and saints, monasticism has, throughout the centuries, wielded an influence whose range extended to virtually all aspects of life. Until the rise of modern schools in the twentieth century, monasteries were the only educational centres offering a learning corpus that was essentially spiritual and ecclesiastical in content, with excursions into such subjects as computation and astronomy. Its completion may take a period of much more than a decade. As a function of monasticism's pivotal role in the church, Christian spirituality as such displays a vivid monastic imprint in its forms of private and public prayer, ascetic practices and religious expression. Monastic life exists in both the anchoretic and coenobitic forms, for both men and women. Introduced into Eritrea and Tigray by Syrian monks in the sixth century, coenobitism is rooted in the rule of St Pachomius as the main guideline, with Egyptian and Syrian hagiographic and ascetic sources as the basis of its spirituality.[12] The *Gedl*, or hagiography of the founder of the monastery and of other saints, composed by local monastic writers, is the literary *locus* where oriental Christian spirituality and local inspiration meet and blend to carve out the model of the indigenous monastic holy person.

After its thorough indigenization in the long post-Aksumite era, monasticism developed in two branches, or houses: the house of Ewstathewos in the north, i.e. mostly Tigray and today's Eritrea, and the house of Tekle-Haymanot in the south. The co-existence of the two houses were not always peaceful. Differences in theological issues, and claims for monastic seniority and regional rivalries were behind protracted tensions. In terms of monastic ideals, the difference between the two houses is one of emphasis on particular elements of spirituality, ascetic practice and organization. Common to both traditions are the *fuga mundi*, leading to the establishment of monastic settlements on inaccessible mountaintops and wooded heights, strict enclosure, private and common liturgical prayer, long and rigorous fastings, hospitality, study and manual work. In the vicinities of all monasteries, hermit monks (*bahtawyan*) live in simple huts

[11] Paolo *Borruso, L'ultimo impero Cristiano,* 253-262.

[12] Among the sources of monastic spirituality, the following may be mentioned: the *Collectio Monastica*, the *Patericon Aethiopice*, the *Asceticon*, the *Gerenticon*, normative and ritual rules *(ser'ate menqwesenna)* such as those of Pacomius and Anthony, and the three Syrian authors known as *Filkesyos*, *Mar Yes'haq* and *Menfesawi Aregawy*.

and caves, totally devoted to prayer and penance after the great traditions of St Paul of Thebes and St Anthony the Great. Among the hermits are found the *Nazrawyan* – easily recognized by their long and rough hair, the leather cloak they dress, and the long cruciform iron stick they carry – who, from time to time, leave their seclusion to preach penance to the people,. The history and the presence of female monasticism, comprehensive of both cloistered and non-cloistered nuns, is not less remarkable. Most probably as ancient as male monasticism, it grew under the aegis of, and in dependence upon, the former. This however did not prevent female monasticism from enlisting the leadership or the membership of nuns who left a lasting imprint on the spiritual and political history. At present, Ethiopia and Eritrea have more monks and nuns, monasteries and convents, than all the non-Chalcedonian and Orthodox churches put together. Far more numerous are the secular clergy, consisting of married priests, and therefore ineligible for episcopacy or second marriage in case of widowhood. Theologically less trained, but fully integrated into the economic and social life of the peasantry, these secular priests offer a highly relevant pastoral service.

LITURGICAL WORSHIP

It is believed that Frumentius, after his consecration in Alexandria, introduced the Coptic liturgy, which, before being translated into Ge'ez, was celebrated in Greek in the Aksumite churches and chapels. Subsequently, liturgy underwent an intensive local elaboration, to the extent that, today, the Ge'ez and the Coptic rites make up two autonomous branches of the Alexandrian liturgical family. Though difficult to assess with any degree of certainty as to when and how it took place, the embodiment of Old Testament Hebraic elements – such as the presence of the *Sancta Sanctorm* within the internal three-centric structural arrangement of the churches, the observance of the Sabbath, and several other practices – is impressive. It is much easier to explain the influence of the Syrian liturgy, since Frumentius and most of the missionary monks who came to the country several decades after him were Syrian in origin and culture. More input came from various oriental liturgies through the contacts that the monks had with the Christian communities in Jerusalem, since at least the early thirteenth century. The first half of the second millennium saw the confluence of a twofold movement: an inflow of numerous texts of the Coptic Church in Arabic translated into Ge'ez on the one hand and the contribution of local theologians composers of treatises and liturgical texts, on the other. The convergence between external influences and local input came to its height with the emergence of a distinctively Ethiopian-Eritrean liturgy. While in terms of contents and structure, the Mass shares much in the tradition of the Alexandrian and other eastern liturgies, unique to the Ethio-Eritrean tradition is instead the Divine Office. The cathedral services, steered by the *debtera*,[13] are solemnly celebrated in cathedrals or major churches on Sundays and major feasts. They include the *Waziema* or solemn Vigil Vespers that last four to five hours, the *Meweddes,* or office of the night, and the *Sebhate Negh*, corresponding to the Latin matins or lauds, directly connected with the *Meweddes*. They are then followed by the Eucharistic celebration. All such services consist of hymns, prayers, intercessions, psalms and antiphons. The *Tabot*,[14] on which the Eucharist is celebrated, is the focal

[13] A lay specialist in ecclesiastical subjects, holding an intermediate position between the clergy and the laity, with the main task of guiding the liturgical chant.

[14] The term *Tabot* derives from the Aramaic *tebuta* and, in Ge'ez as well as in other Semitic languages, means chest, case, coffer. By extension it came to indicate also ark, temple, sanctuary. The *Tabot* as such is a small rectangular tab of wood or, less frequently, of stone, corresponding to the sacred stone used by the Latins for the Eucharistic celebration. The average *Tabot* slab is approximately 3 to 5 cm. thick and 0,50 x 0,30cm. wide. Its surface and various sides are engraved with legends and symbols indicating the names of the Trinity, of Mary and the particular saint to whom a given church is dedicated. Consecrated by the bishop with solemn rituals, and placed in the innermost section of the church, it cannot be seen by any lay person. On particular occasions it is carried out for procession, enveloped in precious clothes, with cantors and *debteras* performing liturgical songs and dances before it. The most solemn of such

point of the whole liturgical service. The cathedral service, just as the Mass, is chanted entirely with the help of a notation (*meleket*) to remind the singers of the music to which each piece should be sung. The whole divine office is performed in the standing position, with the support of a long prayer stick (*meqwemiya*). Two musical instruments are used: the sistrum (*tzenatzel*) and the drum (*kebero*). Stick, drum and sistrum are all involved when, at regular intervals, chant is accompanied by holy dance. Tradition attributes the invention, by divine inspiration, of the liturgical music and dance to St Yared, a sixth-century priest. However, it has been realistically suggested that Old Testament Hebraic sources, pre-Christian and Christian Egypt, and the Eastern Christian world must have had a share in their origin. Yet, Yared may very well have had a central role in the re-elaboration, initial indigenization and development of a nucleus of the liturgical musical corpus. Beside the cathedral service, the *Office of the Hours* or *Monastic Hours* or *Horologion*, is celebrated not only in the monasteries or parish churches, but also privately by numerous pious Christians, cleric and lay alike. Besides the Missal (*Metzhafe Qeddassie*) and the ritual of the Sacraments, other liturgical books include the *Senkesar* or Sinaxary, the *Degwa* or antiphonary, the *Mewas'et* or collection of responsorials, the *Me'eraf* or hymnary, and the *Metzhafe Getzawye* or liturgical calendar. The latter, consistently with the Julian calendar, has a three-year cycle with 365 days and one leap year with 366 days. Due to the difference in computing the date of creation and of Christ' s birth, the calendar is seven years and eight months behind the common Christian era. The year consists of thirteen months, i. e. twelve with thirty days, and one (*Pagumen*) with five to six days.

LITERATURE

Until the nineteenth century, literature was religious and mainly Christian in content, with Ge'ez as the only literary language. Ge'ez script, originating from the *Sabaic* and developing with its own distinct characteristics, appeared in the north in the immediate pre-Christian Aksumite time in the form of epigraphy. Its development as a full-fledged literary language started with the introduction of Christianity, through the translation, from the Greek, of the Bible (the Septuagint for the Old Testament and the Syriac Lucianic for the New Testament) and of various patristic, liturgical and monastic texts. Along with the biblical books shared as canonical by the other Christian churches, there are other texts that are considered divinely inspired.[15] After an extended gap following the decline of Aksum, the thirteenth century ushered in a second most fertile literary period, reaching its peak in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Among

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celebrations is that of *Temqet*, the feast of Jesus' baptism. On the eve of the feast, the *Tabot* is taken to a riverside where the entire night is spent in prayers, hymns and liturgical dance, in an atmosphere strongly reminiscent of the place and the veneration enjoyed by the Old Testament Ark of the Covenant. In fact, the *Tabot,* venerated in every church, is a representation or, more accurately, a replica of the Ark of the Covenant containing the tables of the Law believed to be preserved in the mother Church of Aksum, the second Zion, since when, according to the *Kibre Neghest*, Menelik I, son of king Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, abducted it from Jerusalem. Being the centrepiece of the liturgical service, the basis of the claim to being the chosen people of God and the emblem of the community's spiritual and social unity, the *Tabot* is, with the Cross, the most treasured and venerated symbolic object in Ethiopia and Eritrea. Cf. Edward Ullendorff, *Ethiopia and the Bible*, Oxford: The British Academy, 1968, 77, 82-89, 122; Agostinos Tedla da Hebo, "Il Tabot: la sua importanza religiosa e giuridico-cultuale nella Chiesa Etiopica," ed. Habtemichael Kidane, *Orientalia Christiana Periodica*, 60 (1994), 131-157.

[15] There is no official statement of the Ethio-Eritrean Orthodox Churches concerning the canonicity of the Scriptures, but only references to authoritative biblical books. Today a distinction is made between *broader* and *narrower* canon. Due to a different method of counting, both of them have 81 books. The *narrower canon*, apparently influenced by western Churches, does not include the books whose authority is doubted by other Christian traditions. The *broader canon* has in addition a number of apocryphal and deutero-canonical books such as Enoch, Jubilees, the "Shepherd" of Hermas, Judit, Tobit, Ecclesiasticus. Cf. P. Brandt, "Bible Canon", in *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica,* I, pp. 371-373. Books such as Enoch and Jubilees are of paramount importance in biblical studies today, for their texts have survived in their entirety only in their Ge'ez version.

other things, the *Kibre Neghest* (Glory of the Kings) was elaborated in the north with the definitive appropriation of the Queen of Sheba story, and the earliest known examples of *qene*, a peculiar form of religious poetry, beginning to appear. Behind much of that spirited literary season there was, among other factors, the need to define the central contents and forms of the Orthodox faith vis-à-vis such controversial issues as the observance of the Sabbath and the rise of heretical movements such as *Stephanism* in the north and *Michaelism* in the south. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Muslim onslaught on Christianity and the clash with the Jesuit missionaries gave new momentum to dialectical and apologetic theological compositions. Subsequently, the Anointing of Christ became the main focus of internal theological controversy, whereas the literary output increased its momentum in the fields of religious poetry and the translation of rituals and doctrinal treatises. In the nineteenth century, Ge'ez began to give way to Amharic in Ethiopia, and Tigrinya in Tigray and Eritrea, as literary languages. This development is in its full swing today – however, more in the secular than in the religious realm, for the Orthodox Church tends to rely heavily on the literary corpus accumulated in past centuries.

PAINTING

Born in the form of rock drawing, of which there exist numerous prehistoric exemplars in Eritrea, traditional pictorial art has been influenced to a lesser degree by African artistic traditions than by those deriving from the Christian Mediterranean and western Asian areas. The medieval definition of painting as the 'Bible of the illiterate' may be said to suit very well Eritrea's pictorial tradition. To instruct on the essential contents of faith, to convey the central tenets of theological truth, to arouse the urgency of asceticism as a means of purification towards an intimate union with God – here are the canons determining both the content and the style of traditional painting. This being the case, the artist is much more inclined to paint the content rather than the shape, 'to visualize dogmas and theological concepts, rather than offer a visual pleasure, to depict objective reality, more than to express personal impression'.[16] As a result, there is little concern for the interplay of colours, perspectives, and proportions. Instead, painting will be a display of essential traits, of the vividness of colours and flatness of background. The range of privileged themes is made up of biblical stories from both Testaments, the Trinity, Christology, the Eucharist, Mariology, Angelology and Hagiology, as well as great national sagas, with the ubiquitous Solomon and Saba cycles, and moments in the history of Christianity, and much more.

POPULAR RELIGION

In the several centuries of its history, Christianity has permeated not only the church's and the Christian kingdom's institutions and their intellectual culture, but also the daily life and the whole existence of the huge, largely illiterate and generally peasant, masses of people. The central role of religion in traditional rural society has its most significant symbol in the location of the church, with its *Tabot*, on the highest hill dominating the village. The authority and veneration paid to the spiritual father (*Abbat Nefs*: father of the soul) in every traditional family represents the link between the church and the individual members of the community. Circumcision, baptism, marriage and funerals are the major events in which official and popular religion meets to mark the various stages of the faithful's existence. There are 250 fasting days a year, and a prodigious number of feasts, extra-liturgical devotions, votive offerings, processions and pilgrimages to numerous local and national shrines making up the fabric of the daily life of the people. The policy of moulding Christianity into the local culture, so wisely adopted by the evangelizers since the earliest centuries, has inspired a sense of continuity rather than of rupture, with the pre-Christian, mainly

[16] Kristen Stoffergen Pedersen, *Gli Etiopi*, Roma: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1988, 144.

Cushitic, religious substratum at the level of popular religion as much as it did at the intellectual and institutional levels. In that context, the exceptional veneration of the Virgin Mary could be a remote legacy of the ancient worship of a pagan goddess, perhaps the earth mother,[17] just as certain feasts celebrated once a month may go back to the ancient Semitic lunar calendar. The mountaintops where churches are erected, the trees surrounding the same churches, the healing waters and springs to which people flow in large numbers to cure their illnesses, are apparently legacies of ancient pagan beliefs connecting such locations with the presence of spirits and genies. The *Damiera*, the big bonfire lit on *Mesqel* (the feast of the Finding of the Holy Cross) at the end of the rainy season, may trace its roots back to most ancient pagan rituals around the productive cycles of the earth, the meaning of which may have changed at the time of King Dawit II (d. 1413), who received a fragment of the true Cross from the Coptic patriarch. While the above aspects were thoroughly Christianized, the same process had a by-product in the survival of a whole body of superstitious beliefs and practices in popular religion. Amulets, magic scrolls *(lelafe-tzedq),* rituals, symbols against evil spirits, the evil eye and the like, are widespread. In history, there are instances showing attempts by kings and church authorities to purify Christianity from such survivals of the pre-Christian substratum. Nevertheless, even today, some priests and *debteras* are still to be found writing magic scrolls and combining Christian exorcism with formulas and symbols of an equivocal nature. In spite of everything, one could hardly overstate the value and the critical importance of popular religion. Christianity has survived against all the odds, thanks not only to warrior Christian kings, to monastic theologians and writers, but also to its ability to control and weave together the myriad of strands of the life of the people – in other words, popular religion, with all its values and flaws.

Other Christian Churches

After the demise of the Jesuit mission in the seventeenth century, the Roman Catholic Church undertook a new and more promising course under the leadership of St Justin De Jacobis and his Lazarist successors in the Apostolic Prefecture (1839-1847), later the Vicariate (1847-1894), of Abyssinia. Through the perusal of the Ge'ez rite, and the formation of the native clergy, fervent communities flourished, in the midst of mounting persecutions, in the Akele-Guzay and Bogos provinces of Eritrea and in northern Ethiopia. In 1894, following the creation of the Italian colony of Eritrea, the new political territory was separated from the Apostolic Vicariate of Abyssinia to become the Apostolic Prefecture (1894) and Apostolic Vicariate (1911) of Eritrea, under the responsibility of the Capuchin friars.

In 1866, the first Protestant missionaries landed at Massawa – Carl Johan Carlsson, Per Erik Kjellberg and Lars Johan Lange, all sent by the Swedish Evangelical Mission to work among the Oromo of south-west Ethiopia. Given the difficulties faced by other missionaries in Ethiopia under emperor Twodros II, they were advised by the French consul in Massawa, Werner Munzinger, to settle among the Kunama and the Nara. With the arrival of more missionaries, mission houses were opened at Tandare, Oganna and Kulluku. However, the killings of some of the missionaries, the natural death of others, the upheavals and the raids that involved the area in those years, drove the missionaries to abandon the region in 1870 and to move to Monkullo (Massawa) and, later on, to Gheleb. It was only in 1897 that the missionaries could resume work among the Kunama, where they devoted themselves to the study of the language, translating books, and to teaching and preaching.

In spite of their meagre numbers, the Roman Catholic and the Evangelical churches have significantly marked the history and the development of the country through the editions and translations of the Bible, the dissemination of literacy and the promotion of modern schools and clinics. The intellectual class formed in their schools, with such prestigious figures as Weldeab Weldemariam of the Evangelical Church,

[17] Carlo Conti Rossini, *Etiopia e genti di Etiopia,* Firenze: Remporad, 1937, 173.

one of the fathers of the Eritrean independence, came to prominence in the political arena in the 1940s and 1950s onwards.

In conclusion, one pertinent question can be asked: how well is Christianity faring today, at a time when changes in Eritrea are as revolutionary and sweeping as elsewhere? The 1974 Ethiopian revolution and its independence in 1991 have opened entirely new scenarios, with opportunities, problems and challenges for the churches in Eritrea to face and meet. My argument is that, because of their long tradition, their role in shaping the history and the culture of the Eritrean people and the moral authority they still enjoy, both the Christian churches and Islam have a fundamental role to play in the new society now emerging in Eritrea. This is on condition that differences of whatever nature are nurtured, not as factors of conflict, but as sources of reciprocal enrichment, and the Eritrean government on its part be truly disposed to appreciate and value whatever the churches and other religions have to offer outside the precincts of the sanctuary.

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