

ERITREA: A COUNTRY OF EARLY CHRISTIANITY

By Emnetu Tesfay

Coptic Orthodox christianity was not until recently only the official religion of the nation, but also the most profound expression of the national identity of the Eritreans. In its peculiar localized form, pervaded with strong archaic semitic elements, Eritrean christianity had for centuries been the store-house of the cultural, political and social life of the people. By far the most important factor in the life of the people of Eritreas highland country is their church. There is a church on almost every hill of the inhabited area. Besides, there are numerous monasteries which have for centuries been used as hideouts for people who chose to devote all their life to work for righteousness.

The Coming of Christianity

Long before many in Europe had heard of Jesus of Nazareth, Eritreans were devout christians. We are christians of the Coptic, or Monophysite branch which originated in Egypt and is supposed to have reached Eritrea in the middle of the 4th century. That was more than 1500 years ago when christianity flowed over desert roads into the land. During this period, the schism in the ranks of christians regarding the conflicting views of the nature of Christ had erupted. The church of Alexandria which championed the doctrine that Christ had only one (mono) nature (physite), the divine one, in opposition to the creed of the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches which holds that Christ had two natures, one human and the other divine, was condemned by the Council of Chalcedon and some of its followers fled southward to Arabia, Eritrea and the Axumite empire of Ethiopia where they translated the bible into Geez, founded monasteries, built churches and undertook extensive missionary work.

The conversion of the region to christianity is bound to have been slow in time and geographically sporadic. However the infiltration by the monophysite fugitives contributed very notably to the spread of christianity throughout the region and the fanatical adherence of the church in Eritrea and Ethiopia to the monophysite doctrine. As a matter of fact, from the fourth century until 1950, the highest ecclesiastical authority in the region, with few exceptions, was an Egyptian archbishop nominated and sent by the patriarch of Alexandria, who administered the affairs of the church from a monastery in the Ethiopian side of the border. In the 7th century, however, the lines of communication with Alexandria were cut as islam's shadow fell over Arabia and many lands south of the Mediterranean Sea.

In 1540 after centuries of stalemate between the forces of the two religions, a powerful moslem chief, Mohammed Gran " the left handed" had marched southward to make the whole region a moslem land. He had wiped out the christian Eritrean chiefs army which was heavily outnumbered, slaughtered the christian population, and burned the churches. It was to check Mohammed Gran and to aid the christian population that young Christovio da Gama, the fourth son of Vasco da Gama, together with 400 of his Portugese warriors, marched under incredible hardships from the Red Sea shores of Massaua to the high plateau. Though da Gama was captured and put to death and most of his faithful followers fell in battle, through their sacrifice a rare old culture was saved to the world. Today the 3.5 million people of Eritrea are evenly divided between the Coptic orthodox and Islamic faiths. All the other religions together constitute about 1% of the entire population.

Ingredients of the faith

In addition to the bible, the canon of the scriptures of the Coptic Orthodox church, comprises a number of apocryphal or detrocanonical books. Equal authority is attributed to the prescriptions of the Old Testament as to those of the New Testament. The translation of the bible comprises all canonical plus apocryphal books that were accepted as genuine by the church. Among these are the Ascension of Isaiah, Jubilees and Enoch. The numerous Hymns and Laudations of the Coptic church vary in size from a few lines to compositions of considerable length and are devoted, first and foremost, to the Virgin Mary, but also to Christ, the angels and saints. The "Laudation of Christ" is modelled on the "Laudation of the Virgin" and both books are ordered according to the day of the week. Books of countless miracles of angels and saints, of Jesus and above all of the Virgin Mary are every copt's spiritual mainstay. There are several other books of an apocalyptic character, chief among them is the one containing ten visions describing the ultimate rewards for the good and the punishments for the evil.

All christians in Eritrea, both men and women, wear a small cross of silver, iron or bras, suspended from a card around the neck. It is worn from infancy, being placed around the body's neck as part of the ceremony of baptism. In every day life Eritreans frequently mention religious concepts. It would be difficult to converse normally and politely without referring explicitly or implicitly to God, the saints, or the church, although this may be as much a culture as a religious manifestation. The Mosaic distinction between clean and unclean meat was stricktely observed. Flesh of animal that do not chew the cud and cleave the hoof or have been torn or strangled are prohibited from serving.

A boy is baptised in church, by three-fold immersion, when the mother's period of impurity is over on the 40th day after birth and gets a baptismal father. A girl is baptised on the 80th day and gets a baptismal mother. Names used by the christian poplation are evident for their devotion to the religion and link to a particular saint. To mention some of the typical names: Habte-Micael (gift of Michael), Gebre-Jesus (servant to Jesus), and Amete-Mariam (maid of Mary). In addition, the christian population use secular names with strong meanings reflecting the fears or hopes of the family. Circumcision is a purely social custom in Eritrea, celebrated by no religios ritual. Of the seven sacraments, confirmation and extreme unction, have fallen into disuse. Confession is made usually only during grave illness. Marriage is celebrated by long hours of procession in the presence of a priest, while divorce is admissible only in the event of adultery.

In times of grief and disaster, the question of guilt and punishment from God often arises. God is seen as interfering in human affairs very directly, and a bad harvest comes because God is angry. Other misfortunes such as ill health were ascribed to the neglect of religious duty, although it may not be known to the person what this sin consists of. Upon death, the belief reiterates, punisbments are accorded to the people commensurate with the evil they have perepetrated, so that there are degrees of suffering in hell. Conversely, God rewards the humble with wealth and high position. God is seen as the cause of success. God's final reward is received in heaven. The reward the pious can expect is also graded according to the amount of rightchousness they have accumulated.

The psalms was the most influential book in Eritrean society and have formed the people's mentality and outlook more than any other single source. It is used both as a textbook in church schools, in religious services, especially at funerals where many of the 150 psalms may be read,

and as a book of private prayer and devotion. Usually it is beautifully bound and decorated as a great treasure. Prayer is important in public and private life. As such prayers are repetitions of written prayers such as the psalms, and very frequently the lords prayer. People pray for the living and the dead. A special form of prayer consists of giving a pledge to render a service or gift to a saint in return for the granting of request. Almost anything can be promised as a gift if one's wish is granted, but most commonly things of use to the church, such as incense, candles or umbrellas.

Mary and the Saints

Coptic Orthodox theology prescribes divine invocations to the virgin Mary, the saints and angels alike. This is in recognition to their role as "Go-between" or "Mediators" between man, the sinner and his creator God. Much of the oaths are taken in Mary's name. Many days in the church calendar are celebrated in her memory: her birth, her re-entry into the temple, her conception, and her death among others. Many churches are dedicated to her. She is often depicted in religious paintings, and mostly referred to as "our mother" or "covenant of mercy". Mary is a special helper for women giving birth.

Vows are also made to St. George, St. John, Michael and Gabriel, the archangels. Eritrean saints, holy ones, include the angels. Prayers are directed to them, and they are thanked for help given. Each church or village have developed a strong attachment to a particular saint in which that church is named after him. To a member of a church, his favourite saint comes easily to his mind, when making vows, or when he is in need of heavenly witness, he would say: "Michael is my witness". Saints are admired for their holiness and their ability to work miracles. The importance of saints in the daily lives of the people is best illustrated by the fact that saints days are more commonly used in the countryside for dating than actual dates of the calendar month. The main saints do not only have a yearly festival in their honor but are remembered monthly, and some times on several days each month under different designations.

Fast and feast

There is enormous number of feasts in the Eritrean Coptic church. Among these one might mention new year, feast of the cross, X-mas, circumcision of Christ, baptism, easter, ascension, and very many others. There are 33 days annually in honour of the Virgin Mary alone. Fasting, feasting and worship play major roles in the life of the people. Religious feasts and fasts go hand in hand, the bigger feasts usually being preceded by days of fasting. Fast is defined as "obeying God's law" to abstain from food, meat, milk, butter in order to tire the body and attain restraint and self-control.

The most common fast is the weekly fast of wednesdays and fridays observed most of the year and the 40 consecutive days of fasting before easter. The easter fast reaches climax when beginning good-friday nothing is eaten until saturday midnight. Easter is the most celebrated holiday in the country. Massive food and drink is lavishly served, even by the most humble, to visitors, neighbours or even passers-by and people congratulate each other for the occasion.

Another important festival is the Meskel or Feast of the Cross. On the 27th of September, christians celebrate the finding of the true cross. The central feature of the Meskel ceremonies is the great pyramid of wood that is erected in every town and village and set ablaze. The green branches of juniper and eucalyptus trees ensure that there will be plenty of smoke with

the fire. This is important because a smok signal plays a significant part on two different occassions in the ancient legend. When Helena, mother of the emperor Constantine, who made the Roman empire christian, went to Jerusalem to look for the cross on which Christ had been crucified, she lit some incense and prayed for divine guidance. Smok from the burning incense rose up into the sky and then curled back again toward the earth, pointing to the ground at the spot where the cross lay buried. The cross was then unearthed and Helena went to the top of the nearest hill and lit a signal fire to announce her success to the emperor. So the signal fires continue to this day.

Church Outlook

Eritrea is a country of churches. The churches are usually large, circular, surrounded by a wall with two gates, one opposite the other. All places of worship are much alike throughout the country. They are usually built upon high hills, surrounded by gigantic cedars. There is a small square room in the center, a sort of "holy of holies", in which the " Ark of Covenant." and sacred objects are kept. The most important part is the box with the tablets made in immitation of the "tablets of the law", and dedicted to a saint. Only priests have access to this room.

A broad, gallery like room encircles the holy place, where the congregation mills about and prays. The outer walls of the inner sanctuary are decorated with crude drawings representing biblical scenes. Among common paintings are early christian martyrs, saints, devils and dragons. Christian people are drawn full-faced, while devils and evil persons are shown in profile only. Hundreds of byzantine paintings decorate inner rooms of these huge churches. Most of them are centuries old.

Conduct of Services

In their services the priests often encircle the church dancing, or dance before it, as was the custom of the Jews in biblical times. The priests are dressed in their most elaborate costumes. Church services often lasts throughout the night, accompanied by melodious tolling of bells, chanting of rituals, and dancing by the priests to the cadence of symbals, drums, and sistra. During services the priests perform ceremonies inside the inner structure within the church. The public is admitted only to the corridor which encircles it. The floor of the corridor is usually covered with a sweet-scented grass, fragrant even when dried. Lengthy chants are intoned in Geez, a dead language now used only in religious functions.

After, or as part of the mass, holy communion, is given in the middle section of the church to communicant members, mostly old people and small children i.e. those without an active sexual life. Those who have had sexual intercourse are regarded as impure for tbe following day, and are illigible for holy communion. Similarly, women under manustration period consider themselves impure and remain at home. Devout coptics normally communicate only 7 or 8 times a year, after careful preparation and confession. The eucharist is administered by the priest detaching the form of a cross from the fermented bread, he then dips it into the wine and offers it to the communicant. No food should be eaten before one takes communion. At mass, priests carry censers and crosses in a procession round the holy of holies, dressed in beautiful ecclesiastical attire, chanting the rituals in Geez. As a sign of humility, mass is listned to with lowered head. "Church kisser" is the most common way of refering to one who goes to church.

The Monk and the Nun

The life of a monk, segregated from the world, is regarded as ideal for the pursuit of holiness and serving God. When one "has had enough" of this world and wants to seek heaven and righteousness, one leaves "the things of the world" and withdraws from people. Monks and nuns live in monasteries in absolute seclusion from other people. Upon decision to be a monk the worldly name is dropped and are only known as "father", "mother", "brother" or "sister" depending on the age. A monk or a nun is recognized by his or her cap and prayer stick.

No specific duties or obligations are required of a monk, and they spend their years in a variety of ways. One extreme is feeding only on roots and herbs. Others have lived some what close to human society occasionally appearing in villages or making the pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

Other Christian Churches

Other branches of the christian faith that exist in Eritrea are the Catholic and Protestant churches. The Roman catholic church in Eritrea is, too, of long standing, but it has never been able to regain the prestige it possessed during the Portugese Jesuit interlude. Yet, since the 19th century the Roman church has been very active in both converting new members and in educational work. Naturally, the advent of the Italian colonial administration gave a notable boost to these activities. The catholics have learnt from earlier mistakes and failures when they attempted, rather obstinately, to address their religious propaganda to the coptics, once the moslem danger has been averted. The coptics demonstrated their determination to remain faithful to their historic religion and the special forms it had taken in the country. Today, the rite of the catholic church preserves much that is of particular significance to the traditional christianity in the region. An indigenous bishop attached to the Vatican City is in charge of some 20,000 Roman catholics in the country.

Relatively, the Lutheran church is very young. The first missionaries belonging to the Swedish Evangelical Mission disembarked in the Red Sea port of Massaua on march 1866. Their destination was the non-chrtistian Oromo region of south west Ethiopia. But being unable to proceed to this region because of political problems, during their long waiting period in Eritrea, a secondary goal developed namely to take part in the efforts to reform the Eritrean coptic orthodox church. The coptic church, fearfull that its position will be weakened and its authority undermined, resolutely resisted and propagated against the Lutherans. But the Swidish missionaries succeeded in calling a meeting of reform-minded individuals which laid the bases for its activity. Besides introducing protestant theology, the missionaries provided modern medicament and other useful tools which contributed to attracting followers. The propaganda campaign by the coptic clergymen was however so strong that a protestant in Eritrea is referred to as anti-Mary. The work of the mission was totally interrupted by the Italian colonial administration who in 1936 expelled all the missionaries out of the country. In 1941 the Italian rule came to an end and the Swedes returned to extensively expand their activities by building schools, churches and clinics. Today, the two denominations of the protestant church have a total of 8050 members.

In conclusion, it should be noted that the coptic orthodox religion, although impressive of its age and survival, finds itself isolated from the realities and needs of the ever-changing world. It is archaic and struggles to keep the tradition intact in its entirety. Far from recognizing changes in society the church defies change. Nevertheless the society, whom the church serves, has gone through various stages of development. As a result very many of the traditional religious practices have become incompatible with the needs of today`s society. Celebrating immense number of holidays,

fasting, distinction between clean and unclean food are but some of them. May be the most explicit manifestation of the religion's immunity to change is the fact that the church in its services uses a language that has been out of use centuries ago. The church, from its foundation up to now, has made no significant reformation. It can therefore be said that much of its beliefs and practices fit the ancient past rather than the present. For this reason, the church often finds itself in contradiction with the force of social, economic and the technical changes taking place in society.

In the coptic orthodox view, the social order is regarded as created by God. It is, therefore, the evil in rebellious human nature that wants to introduce changes in society. When new and strange things happen, it is a sign that the end of the world has come near. Because of all the changes that have taken place, traditionalists have a strong feeling that the end of the world is imminent which will be culminated by the second coming of Christ. This day, because of man's wickedness, is believed to be a day of wrath and disaster. A doomsday.

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