

Christian-Muslim Relations in Ethiopia: A Checkered Past, a Challenging Future

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When one thinks of the religious landscape of Ethiopia, what usually comes to mind is the historic and colorful Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC). The EOC originated in the fourth century in the ancient kingdom of Abyssinia, which coincides today with the northwest region of Ethiopia. Having quickly come under the influence of Athanasius of Alexandria (293-373), the church became ecclesiastically dependent on the Coptic Church of Egypt, and soon aligned itself theologically with the so-called Monophysite group of eastern churches. With the exception of this link with the Egyptian church (which appointed EOC's patriarch until as late as 1959), the EOC was relatively isolated from the rest of Christendom. This was due largely to the geographical seclusion of Abyssinia on a mountainous plateau, which later became nearly surrounded by Muslim regimes. A variety of unique features resulted, most notably EOC's distinctive Jewish character, which is reflected in practices such as circumcision and the observance of the Sabbath along with Sunday. In addition, the church has its own canon of scripture, incorporating apocryphal works into both testaments, and its own liturgical language, Ge'ez (generally called "Ethiopic" among western scholars). From Ge'ez the modern official language of Amharic derives. A number of sacred legends connected with Israel also arose, especially the belief that the biblical Queen of Sheba was the monarch of Abyssinia, and that during her visit to Jerusalem King Solomon tricked her into a sexual union that produced a son, Menelik I. When the crafty son came of age and visited his father, he managed to abscond with the Ark of the Covenant to Abyssinia, where it is still said to reside in the ancient capital of Axum. Menelik subsequently became the progenitor of Abyssinia's ruling dynasty, bequeathing to it a divine sanction that was reinforced by the country's acceptance of Christianity. Church and state were thus inexorably connected until the fall of emperor Haile Selasie in 1974, and this political-religious marriage has almost always played a central role in Christian-Muslim relations.

Christianity in Ethiopia has also been represented in more recent centuries by a very small Roman Catholic presence, forming less than 2% of the current population, and by a large number of Protestant denominations, which together represent 10-15% of the population. The largest of these include the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus, built on the work of several European and American Lutheran missions, and the Ethiopian Kale Heywet Church, initiated by the interdenominational mission agency SIM. Smaller denominations have developed from the presence of various Baptist, Mennonite and Pentecostal mission agencies.

Yet together, the number of Christians in Ethiopia is no more than 60% of the people, and it is more likely that only half the population, which now numbers more than 70

million, considers itself to be Christian. While accurate statistics are notoriously elusive, the other 40-50% is primarily Muslim – a fact that is generally overlooked in contemporary surveys of the Muslim world. In addition, Ethiopia's contact with Islam began earlier than that of any other country. The coming of Islam to Abyssinia and the convoluted relations between Muslims and Christians in this small corner of the world is a complex story to which I can scarcely do justice here. Yet it is a story that deserves to be told since it bears a striking resemblance to that of Christian-Muslim relations in many parts of the world. Furthermore, the challenges now facing Ethiopia with regard to Christian-Muslim relations are very similar to those confronting Christians and Muslims elsewhere. It is my hope that this brief study of both the past and the future of Christian-Muslim relations in Ethiopia will lead to valuable lessons for us all in an increasingly globalized society.

The Past: A Pendulum between Concord and Conflict

Foreigners across the Red Sea

Abyssinia was already politically and militarily involved in southwest Arabia during the centuries prior to the rise of Islam. Although most of Arabia was pagan, both Christians and Jews were also present. The city of Najran in the southwest interior was a Christian (Monophysite) stronghold when a neighboring king converted to Judaism in the early sixth century and proceeded to persecute the Christians. So great was their distress that they appealed to the Byzantine emperor Justinian for help. Despite theological differences, Byzantium was on good terms with Abyssinia. Consequently, Justinian prodded their king, who ruled from Axum in what is now the far north of Ethiopia, to send an army against the Arab Jewish king and his forces. The Abyssinian expedition was a success, but one of its leaders, Abraha, subsequently rebelled against Axum and established his own city-state in Sana. There he built a cathedral which, according to later Muslim sources, was intended to lure pagan Arab pilgrims to Sana along with their lucrative trading. Instead, the sanctuary in Mecca to the north, known as the Ka'bah (then in pagan hands) continued to attract most of the pilgrimage business, prompting Abraha to lead an attack on Mecca sometime after 540. Abraha's far superior forces, which included elephants, suffered a defeat which Muslims later attributed to divine intervention, as depicted in *Sûrah* 105 of the *Qur'ân* entitled "The Elephant." Muslims also claim that the year of Muḥammad's birth around 570 coincided with this event, for which reason they call it the "Year of the Elephant." This chronology, however, does not agree with other sources.

By the time Muḥammad was a boy, the Persians had conquered southwest Arabia, expelling the Abyssinians for good. Nevertheless, individual Abyssinian Christians remained throughout Arabia, including Mecca. In fact, Muḥammad's nurse was an Abyssinian slave girl named Barakah Umm Ayman, who continued to look after the young boy following the death of his mother in his sixth year (his father had died prior

to his birth). As Muḥammad grew first in his grandfather's home and then, following his grandfather's death at age eight, the home of his uncle, he was undoubtedly influenced by the stable presence of this Christian foreigner (who, however, later converted to Islam). Muslim tradition also refers to an Abyssinian slave in Mecca named Jabr who would sit at his booth reading aloud from the Bible (presumably in Ge'ez). The young Muḥammad would sometimes stop and listen, and his later enemies accused him of falling under Jabr's influence. Yet another Abyssinian slave in Mecca named Bilâl became one of the earliest and most committed Muslims. Later in Medina Muḥammad chose him as the first person to give the public call to prayer (*mu'adhḥin*) due to his melodious voice.

The first direct contact between Christian Abyssinia and Islam came during Muḥammad's early preaching career in Mecca. Following his initial experience of revelation in 610, Muḥammad shared his new convictions about God's unity and justice with family and friends in mostly private conversations. But after a few years of this ministry he began preaching publicly, incurring disfavor from fellow members of his Quraysh tribe. They were not prepared to change their traditional pagan beliefs and practices, and the tribal elite especially ridiculed his call to get rid of their idols and to reform unjust business practices. In accordance with tribal custom, Muḥammad himself was under the protection of his uncle Abû Ṭālib who, as a clan leader, graciously provided a measure of security to his resolute nephew, even though he never accepted the message Muḥammad preached. However, other Muslim converts, especially those from the lower echelons of society, were targets of harassment by the Quraysh establishment. During a period of intense persecution around 615, Muḥammad felt that the fledgling community of believers could not survive in Mecca, and he sought for them a place of refuge until their hardship subsided. Despite Mecca's negative history with the Abyssinian Abraha, it was apparently Muḥammad's positive experience with individual Abyssinian Christians which led him to look across the Red Sea and to send most of his followers to the king in Axum.

Abyssinian chronicles for this period are sketchy and make no mention of this incident. However, several reputable Muslim sources relate how the group of Muslims (numbering 40 in some sources, more than 80 in others) came to the Abyssinian king, often referred to by the Ge'ez term Negus or the Arabic al-Najâshî. Following their somewhat secret departure from Mecca, however, the Quraysh leaders also sent two envoys to convince the king that he should send the Muslims back where their own people could deal with them. The king is portrayed as a man of fair judgment who held an open hearing inviting the Muslims to offer their defense. Their spokesman, Muḥammad's cousin Ja'far, described their pagan background and how they began serving the one true God after being convinced of Muḥammad's preaching. Asked by the king for a quotation from their scripture, Ja'far related the story of the annunciation and birth of Jesus from *Sûrah* 19 (Maryam). Having wept upon hearing this, the king exclaimed, "This and what Jesus brought have come from the same niche" and he

offered them refuge. But the Meccan envoys did not give up; they privately told the king that the Muslims believed Jesus to be only a creature. So the king held a second session the next day, at which Ja'far conveyed teaching Muhàmmad's about Jesus, that he was God's slave, apostle, spirit and word, which God implanted into the virgin Mary. The king picked up a stick and exclaimed, "Jesus does not exceed what you said by the length of this stick" and he sent the envoys away empty handed.

Later Muslim historians referred to this event as the "First Hijrah" in contrast to *the* Hijrah of 622 when Muhàmmad and most of his followers migrated to Medina. The Muslim contingent remained in Abyssinia for several years. Most returned to Mecca when it seemed to be sufficiently safe, while others waited and moved to Medina where local persecution was no longer an issue. Arab sources indicate that only one of the emigrants, 'Ubayd Allàh bin Jahḥh, remained in Abyssinia following his conversion to Christianity. Today, however, a group of Muslims in the far north of Ethiopia claim direct descent from some of those who came on the First Hijrah, although there is no record of this assertion. Meanwhile, Muslims have naturally tended to hold the Abyssinian king, whose identity is not certain, in high regard. A few traditions even claim that he later converted to Islam; although most Muslims accept this idea, it is disputed by most non-Muslim scholars. In any case, Abyssinia remained a solidly Christian nation while Islam spread quickly into other regions beyond Arabia.

Neighbors in the Horn of Africa

In the years following Muhàmmad's death, the predominant Muslim attitude towards Abyssinia was one of conciliation and restraint. As the early Muslim armies swept across Syria, Persia, Egypt and North Africa, not a single offensive was made against Abyssinia. Most scholars (both Muslim and otherwise) attribute this sparing of Abyssinia to Muhàmmad's legacy of appreciation for his Christian neighbor across the Red Sea. This is evident in a fascinating statement attributed to Muhàmmad in a *hadîth* (an account of something Muhàmmad said or did): "Leave the Abyssinians alone as long as they leave you alone." Although this statement is not found in what Muslims consider to be the most reliable *hadîth* collections, and so its authenticity cannot be fully attested, it nevertheless represents the primary Muslim stance during the classical Muslim era. Furthermore, Abyssinia was treated as a special case with regard to the typical Muslim division of the world into two spheres: the "Realm of Islam" (*dâr al-islâm*) and the "Realm of War" (*dâr al-harb*). Belonging to neither of these regions, Abyssinia alone was assigned its own domain, the "Realm of Neutrality" (*dâr al-hiyâd*).

During the centuries following Muhàmmad's death, Islam instead entered the Horn of Africa by peaceful means, primarily through trade and intermarriage. Historical documentation for this early period is sparse and derives mostly from inferences in both Arab and Abyssinian records. One early incident proved to be of consequence, when in 702, in response to an attack on Jiddah by Abyssinian pirates, the Muslims

established a prison colony on the Dahlak Islands off the coast of what is now Eritrea. Muslim traders soon followed, establishing settlements there and at other locations along the Horn's coast, especially the port of Zayla, which today is in the far northwest region of Somalia. From there the traders gradually penetrated inland to areas east and south of the Abyssinian plateau, and eventually many settled within the Christian kingdom itself. The non-violent nature of this early expansion in the Horn was marred by a growing demand in the Muslim empire for slaves. Muslim traders responded by supplying African captives to the coastal trading centers of the Horn.

Since initially these areas were under the control of Abyssinia, the settlers paid tribute to its king, and the two communities achieved a relatively peaceful coexistence. But Axum suffered a decline in the late 11th and early 12th centuries, primarily due to its growing isolation from its Christian allies in Egypt and Byzantium and to increasing pressure from the dominating Muslim empire in the north. The Christian kingdom experienced two major dynasty changes whose kings progressively relocated south along the Abyssinian plateau. This instability allowed the Muslims to establish themselves into several sultanates along the southeastern rim of Abyssinia. Among these was the city-state of Harar, destined to become one of the most influential cultural and political centers of Islam in the region. The Christian kingdom regained its former power in the late 13th century, and the kings re-established their claim to Solomonic heritage, taking on the title of "emperor." But by this time, Abyssinia was on a collision course with the Muslim states on its border. The constant skirmishes that ensued stemmed from each region's desire for political and economic control, but religion inevitably played a role. The lack of unity among the Muslim sultanates generally allowed Abyssinia to gain the upper hand; its rulers frequently invaded Muslim territories, setting up puppet governors and exacting tribute. Sometimes the Muslims launched counterattacks into Abyssinian territory, but any success was short-lived. Abyssinia's domination over the Muslims peaked in the mid-15th century. Subsequent decades witnessed a gradual decline in control by the Christian kingdom as regional governors sought to exert their own local influence at the expense of loyalty to the emperor. Meanwhile, in the Muslim sultanate of Adal east of Abyssinia, an authoritarian style of leadership arose which combined strict Islamic rule with a call for *jihād* against the Christian kingdom. One of these rulers was Ahḡmad bin Ibrāhīm, called by his Abyssinian enemies Ahḡmad Grañ (the "left-handed," sometimes spelled Granj or Gragh). He began by consolidating power over Adal in 1526, establishing the city of Harar as his base. He then considered it to be his divinely appointed mission to unite the Muslim sultanates against Abyssinia and to lead a *jihād* that would subdue the Christian kingdom forever. Grañ's vigorous and charismatic personality enabled him to succeed almost completely in his task. After unifying the neighboring Muslim states under his direction, he incorporated into his growing army the eastern nomadic Somali and Afar tribes, which had also converted to Islam. In 1529 he embarked on his conquest of Abyssinian territory, repeatedly victorious over a weakened kingdom. In the process he destroyed a great number of churches and monasteries and forced the

masses to convert to Islam. The emperor was compelled to hide among mountain strongholds until in desperation he appealed for help to the Portuguese, who were quite happy to respond, seeking a foothold in the Horn as part of their own quest for control of the region. Their intervention turned the tide of the invasion. In 1542, Grañ was killed by a Portuguese bullet, and his army quickly disintegrated and fled the troublesome highlands for their more familiar homes in the southeast.

Abyssinia was left devastated, its political structure fractured and its people demoralized. Yet the monarchy had not surrendered and the ruling line continued. The church hierarchy had not given in to Grañ and made it possible for large segments of the population to return to the Christian fold. Meanwhile, the Muslims were in disarray at the loss of their charismatic leader. Their attempts to recover political unity and to resume their attacks on Abyssinia failed. Furthermore, the Muslim region was soon overrun by the mass migration of the huge Oromo tribes from the southeast area of the Horn. This people gained full control of the Muslim areas by the end of the 16th century. They integrated with the local population and mostly converted to Islam, but made no attempts to expand into Christian territory, and the threat of militant Islam against Abyssinia ceased.

The pendulum swung back and another period of relatively peaceful coexistence followed. In Abyssinia, Roman Catholicism made a brief incursion in the early 17th century, when Jesuit priests, who had entered following the Portuguese intervention, enticed emperor Susenyos to convert. But his son Fasiladas was so alarmed at this encroachment of western Christianity that he collaborated with the Muslims to expel or kill all European foreigners. Fasiladas' policy allowed Islam to become more established in the Muslim areas. Sufi preachers traveled throughout the region, allowing traditional religious customs to become integrated with "official" Islam. Harar was established as an influential Islamic cultural and religious center. Islam even spread into areas of Abyssinia, which soon caused the local Christian population to react.

In the late 17th century, Fasiladas' son, Yohannes I, took steps to prevent this renewed threat of Islam. His decree of religious discrimination forced Muslims in Abyssinia to live in segregated ghettos, where they were often treated with contempt by the Christians. An officially sanctioned attitude of Muslim repression developed; what some have called the "Ahmad Grañ syndrome," was meant to ensure that never again would Muslims triumph over the Christian establishment. Subsequent emperors more or less continued this policy right up to modern times. Thus, for example, the erratic reign of Tewodros II (1855-67) was primarily characterized by his obsession with eliminating Islam from his Christian empire. His attempts to carry out this objective were limited, however, by the threat of Muslim incursion on the borders of Abyssinia from Egyptian and Ottoman forces. His successor Yohannes IV, after succeeding in keeping the foreigners at bay, embarked on a zealous campaign to Christianize the entire country. His Edict of Boru Meda, issued in 1878, required all Muslim subjects to

convert to Christianity or be killed. Most Muslims complied outwardly for the time being but were extremely resentful, and by the time Yohannes' successor Menelik II reversed the edict more than a decade later, Islamic identity in opposition to Christian supremacy was even more entrenched, both within and outside of Abyssinia.

Residents of the Same Country

Menelik's approach was only slightly more conciliatory than that of Yohannes. It was he who expanded the kingdom's borders in the late 19th century to incorporate most of what is now Ethiopia. Large Muslim regions thus came under his direct rule, sometimes in the face of fierce Muslim opposition. He set up governors in each area and built churches to cater to administrative officials. He also allowed a degree of local autonomy, including the freedom for Muslims to practice their own religion. Nevertheless, Islam became a permanent major feature of the Ethiopian kingdom, and for decades Muslims would be considered at best second-class citizens. Their situation is somewhat comparable to the *dhimmî* status accorded to Christians and Jews under Muslim rule during the medieval period. Those communities were allowed relative freedom of religious expression even as they had to submit to a number of social and political restrictions. Thus, as long as the Muslims of Ethiopia acquiesced to Christian supremacy, they were allowed to live in peace. Any resistance, however, was quickly suppressed.

During the 20th century, three brief episodes gave hope to Muslim aspirations in Ethiopia, but each was short-lived. The first of these was the unusual reign of Lij Iyâsu (1909-17) who adopted Islamic dress and customs in an apparently genuine conversion to Islam. In any case, he raised the fortunes of the Muslims by building mosques, arming local Muslim militias, and making an alliance with Turkey. His actions naturally caused an uproar among both church officials and the Christian populace, and he was deposed and exiled.

The Italian occupation of Ethiopia (1935-41) was the next promising episode for Muslims. When Italy finally sought for a share in the colonial partitioning of Africa, there was little left outside of Ethiopia. Menelik had successfully kept the Italians at bay in Eritrea, but eventually Italy found the opportunity to invade Ethiopia and occupy the entire country until Allied forces managed to push them out and re-install Emperor Haile Selassie. A major part of Italy's policy of domination over Ethiopia's church-state establishment was to support the oppressed Muslim population who welcomed the Italians as liberators. Mosques were again built, Arabic was introduced in schools, and Islam was given official recognition. At the end of the occupation, however, the Muslim community again found itself the object of discrimination and repression by the restored Christian regime, partly as a punishment for their cooperation with the Italians.

Haile Selassie's few concessions to the Muslims, such as the establishment of Islamic courts to settle family disputes, did little to dispel Muslim feelings of victimization. The third brief episode of opportunity came in 1974 when Haile Selassie, who increasingly alienated himself from the problems of the people, was deposed by the military, which in turn ran the country through their "Committee" or "Derg." Muslims had formed a major contingent in the demonstrations that led to the coup, and they were initially rewarded with added rights and a recognition of equality with other Ethiopian citizens. However, the Derg's increasingly socialist agenda led to the severe repression of all expressions of religion during the dark period of 1977-91.

With the downfall of the Derg in 1991 and the establishment of a federal republic officially detached from the church, Ethiopian Muslims finally achieved a sense of equality unparalleled in their previous history. The constitution of 1994 granted equal status to all citizens and to all forms of religious expression. Muslims gained many new freedoms, including the official recognition of Muslim festivals, Islamic education, and travel outside the country (e.g., to Mecca for the Hajj). Several Muslim organizations were established and Islamic literature began to be published openly. Ethiopian Muslims began to participate in both local and national governments, although they have been careful to deny any intention of establishing an Islamic state. Contacts with neighboring Muslim countries have increased, allowing for the influx of funds (primarily through informal rather than official channels) for the building of mosques and Qur'anic schools. Scholarships are provided for Ethiopian Muslims to study in Saudi Arabia, etc., whereby those educated can return to help establish and reform Islam in their home communities.

This latter feature has led to some dissension among Muslims in certain areas, since those trained abroad often return with a more conservative orientation to Islamic belief and practice which is sometimes stylized as "Wahhâbism" (after the dominant strain of Islam in Saudi Arabia). Traditional Muslim communities, which have often incorporated a number of practices stemming from local religious customs or from a Sufi orientation, have sometimes resisted the reforming agenda of foreign-trained "experts." Muslims are also frequently divided along ethnic lines (as are Ethiopian Christians), making a national Muslim consensus on certain issues difficult to attain. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the Muslims of Ethiopia have become more visible and more active since 1991. Some would say that they have also become more numerous, yet this claim cannot be substantiated. Although many conversions to Islam (from either traditional belief or from Christianity) are reported, many conversions *from* Islam (to evangelical Christianity) are also reported. It is more likely that those among the 40-50% of the population who have been Muslims since Menelik II expanded the borders to incorporate the Muslim regions are simply expressing their faith more openly than was the case during the decades of repression.

Despite this increased visibility and activity of Ethiopian Muslims – or perhaps because of it – Christian-Muslim relations in Ethiopia have, for the most part, returned to a state of concord. At least it can be said that the intense conflict and subjugation of past generations is not present today. Rather, Ethiopian Muslims and Christians live and work side by side, and are often represented in the same family or neighborhood. Both communities have the opportunity to propagate their faith, a freedom which both exercise regularly. Muslims are gaining access to the political process in many regions, and business and educational opportunities are available to all regardless of religious affiliation. On the other hand, the predominance in many areas of one religious community often leaves the other group to experience alienation and sometimes discrimination. Clashes between Christians and Muslims in particular localities have erupted on several occasions in recent years, resulting in the destruction of houses of worship and a number of injuries and deaths. Efforts by both Muslims and Christians to win converts are frequently met by mistrust or hostility.

Many (both Muslims and Christians) have therefore seen the need for improved relations between the religious communities. Yet little has been done practically from either side, other than occasional meetings among local leaders from both groups to seek for peace at a time of instability in a particular region. Formal programs aiming to provide education about or cooperation with the other group have been virtually non-existent within the Muslim community and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The situation is somewhat better among the Protestant churches, where a few staff persons and educational institutions have been conducting workshops and offering courses to help Christians better understand Islam and to engage in evangelism which is appropriately respectful. This has especially been the case with the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY), which has intentionally sought to provide leadership and training in Christian-Muslim relations since 1969. Progress was rather limited due to the small number of personnel able to devote time to this endeavor, as well as to the difficult situation facing the Ethiopian churches during the Derg period. In 2003, however, the Mekane Yesus Seminary of EECMY initiated its Program in Christian-Muslim Relations, which continues to provide a specialized two-year course of study integrated into the seminary's Bachelor of Theology curriculum. Although the number of students involved in this program has so far been small, interest in this kind of in-depth training has been growing within EECMY and also among other Protestant churches. Ethiopian Christians are finally beginning to realize that the time is long past when the world of Islam was a foreign entity from which they could keep their distance, although Christian acknowledgment that Muslims now form an integral part of Ethiopian society is still developing.

Meanwhile, the year 2006 witnessed the flare-up of three major clashes between large groups Muslims and Christians in quite separate regions of the country. In each case, property was destroyed (especially churches and mosques) and a number of deaths and injuries occurred before local police could mobilize to quell the unrest. Reasons for this

apparent increase in acute sectarian violence are still not fully clear. Many believe that individuals from neighboring countries (especially Sudan and Somalia) who adhere to and preach a more radical and militant form of Islam have entered Ethiopia, traveled to these areas, and stirred up local animosity towards Christians. On the other hand, it seems that Christians in these areas have sometimes engaged in vigorous proselytism which has given rise to a number of Muslim conversions to Christianity, leading to strong resentment from the local Muslim communities. As a result, tensions have increased between the two groups, not only at the local level in these areas but also nationally. This has been intensified by Ethiopia's military involvement in Somalia at the beginning of 2007. Muslim and Christian leaders (both locally and nationally) are making some effort to meet together and discuss their concerns so as to defuse hostilities. But there is a long road ahead before mutual trust, respect and cooperation between Muslims and Christians in Ethiopia are fully realized.

The Future: Challenges for Both Muslims and Christians

It is clear from this historical survey that relations between Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia have suffered many setbacks since the initial positive experience during Muhammad's lifetime. Overall, the frequency, length, and intensity of periods of conflict have without doubt outweighed periods of concord. Although the present situation, built on the changes that have occurred since 1991, presents many opportunities for promoting peaceful coexistence, Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia, both independently and together, face numerous challenges if they are to overcome the hostilities of the past and to maintain a positive relationship in the country of which they are both citizens. The following are some of the more important points that I believe must be addressed in order to achieve this goal.

1. *Both Muslims and Christians must strive to overcome barriers of cultural division, misunderstanding, and attitudes of antagonism.* In some areas of Ethiopia, Muslims and Christians have lived together for decades, even centuries, in harmony and cooperation. But in other parts of the country, divisions run deep, communities are separated, and feelings of fear and suspicion dominate relationships between the groups. Christians and Muslims will often refuse to eat meat slaughtered by the other group or to enter the others' restaurants or shops. Villages may be divided along religious lines or else inhabited by one group with the clear message that the other group is not welcome. Much of this ill-feeling and maltreatment is based on a lack of knowledge about what the other group believes and how they live out their faith. Both Muslims and Christians, then, must learn about the actual religious life of one another. Community religious leaders should take the initiative to gain first-hand knowledge and then to pass this on to those who look to them for spiritual guidance. Educational courses and programs should especially be developed in training institutions where leaders can be exposed to the real facts rather than hearsay. Members of the other group should be invited to explain the faith and practice of their own community. People should then be

encouraged to become true neighbors to those around them who are of the other faith, sharing everyday life experiences, visiting them on religious holidays, and helping them in times of need. Both communities should strive to develop this approach of neighborliness *first*, before attempting to convince the other of the validity of their version of faith and practice. Evangelism, whether Muslim or Christian, that is not based on mutually respectful relationships usually leads to defensive attitudes that will produce antagonism rather than honest dialogue and reflection.

2. Both Muslims and Christians must learn to cooperate in matters of community interest.

Many of the problems that face Ethiopia as a nation affect all people without regard to religious affiliation. Poverty, weather-related famine, lack of local resources such as clean water, and the HIV-AIDS epidemic, to name just a few, are problems that strike both groups with equal intensity. Communities do themselves a disservice when only one religious group takes the initiative to deal with such issues and becomes the beneficiary of aid for any of these problems. One key to overcoming this kind of imbalance is to form local committees which incorporate leaders of all religious communities within that district, allowing all groups a sense of involvement and representation in tackling the problems that face their entire neighborhood. Such an endeavor can also be extremely effective for maintaining peace between religious groups in a given locality. Many of the destructive clashes that have occurred in recent years might well have been tempered or avoided altogether if leading members of each religious community had come together to air their grievances and search for mutually acceptable solutions. Such dialogue and cooperation at the national level is of course also important, but unless *local* communities likewise get involved, people at the grassroots level will fail to benefit.

3. Both Muslims and Christians must search for means to promote religious reform in their respective communities without succumbing to religious extremism. This would seem especially to be a concern for Ethiopian Muslims in the context of regional and global tendencies towards extremist expressions of Islamic religion. To their credit, Muslim leaders in Ethiopia have recognized that religious adherence among their people has often been diminished by over-accommodation to traditional beliefs and customs. Large segments of the Muslim population do not understand or observe even the basic tenets of their faith. One of the main reasons for this has been the restrictions imposed on Ethiopian Muslims in the past by the Christian imperial regime. It would be natural for the Muslim community to react to this fact by trying to impose a puritanical form of religion, retreating into a religious ghetto mentality that does not take into account the reality of the pluralistic context. Ethiopian Muslims must resist this temptation that has overtaken certain Muslim groups in other areas of the world if they are to fully exercise their new freedoms and take their place as full members of the social order. However, Ethiopian Christians have not been immune to this tendency. Due to the dominant role that the church has played for centuries in Ethiopian society, Orthodox Christians today often behave as if Ethiopian identity is inherently Christian, and that Muslims do not

really belong to their country. It is time for members of the EOC to strive for a church that allows biblical principles of hospitality to reform national tradition. Likewise, Protestant Christians who have disengaged themselves from the strictures of the EOC sometimes follow paths of extreme evangelical fervor which alienate relations with fellow Ethiopians, Muslim and Orthodox alike. People of religion in Ethiopia need to reform themselves along principles of religious moderation explicit in both Bible and Qur'ān, so that they can learn to find common ground as Ethiopian citizens while also respecting each other's religious differences.

4. *Both Muslims and Christians must help each other to become fully engaged in the political process without one dominating the other.* Ethiopian Christians especially must recognize the necessity as well as the difficulty of turning from centuries of Christian political control to a truly democratic society. For years the Ethiopian Muslim leadership has expressed rejection of any intention to establish an Ethiopian Islamic state, and it is time that Christians learn to work with their Muslim colleagues on the basis of this assertion rather than fueling fears of Muslim political supremacy. Ethiopian Muslims likewise must resist any pressure from Muslim-dominated countries in the region to turn their newly-found opportunities into one-sided political advantage. However problematic the past political hegemony might have been, and however complex the present political state of affairs may be, Ethiopians of all persuasions are generally committed to the ideal of equal representation and involvement in government at all levels. But this can be achieved only when all groups learn to trust each other and to allow – even assist – each other with regard to their role in the political process, mutually striving for a healthy balance. Only in this way can Ethiopia avoid the dissention that has beset so many nations around the world because one religious group chooses to impose their religious-political agenda on the country as a whole.

5. *Both Muslims and Christians must work together to address constructively the complex international issues involving neighboring countries.* The tensions that have often existed between Ethiopia and some of her neighbors, especially Eritrea, Somalia and Sudan, are well known. Although the reasons for such tensions are quite diverse, including regional ethnicity, political ideology and national pride, they also involve issues of religion, especially since all countries on Ethiopia's border except Kenya have populations where the significant majority are Muslims who often display fundamentalist inclinations. Both Christian and Muslim leaders in Ethiopia have expressed the need to keep radical forms of political Islam out of their country, recognizing that the presence of such elements would only lead to instability. Nevertheless, the Ethiopian Muslim community often feels that statements and actions by the government with regard to bordering nations, which are generally supported by the Christian community, are taken without due consideration for the complications involved concerning the religious aspirations of these countries. On the other hand, some Muslim communities have apparently been rather lenient with regard to the infiltration among their people of foreign radical preachers who have been partly

responsible for instigating local sectarian violence. Here is another area where both Muslims and Christians in Ethiopia must come together to wrestle through the complexities involved and search together for solutions that will serve the common interest of all.

6. *Both Muslims and Christians must find appropriate ways of expressing the unity of their respective communities.* Unity among Christians has been a perennial problem for the worldwide church, but in Ethiopia it is exacerbated by the nationalistic dimension of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in contrast to western characteristics found in most Protestant denominations. Since Protestant churches have drawn many of their members from Ethiopians of Orthodox background, relations between the two bodies have been reserved. The diversity of doctrinal background and practice among Protestants, as well as differing ethnic associations with most groups, have resulted in few churches working together on issues of mutual interest – despite the loose association of several denominations within the Evangelical Churches Fellowship of Ethiopia. One currently hears many calls for Christian unity, but unfortunately this is often invoked for the purpose of taking a joint stand of aggressive resistance *against* Islam. At the same time, Ethiopian Muslims are often divided along ethnic lines or according to their degree of association with reform movements. Calls for Muslim unity can likewise carry overtones of a unified opposition to Christian provocation. The search for religious unity among either Christians or Muslims must instead be induced by a desire to exercise tolerance in the face of disagreements, by an appreciation for common ground that is simultaneously respectful of genuine differences. It is when Christians learn to work together with other kinds of Christians, and Muslims with Muslims, that the two larger groups can begin to appreciate the need for tolerance and cooperation with each other along with consideration for where they diverge.

7. *Both Muslims and Christians must identify shared religious concepts by which they can establish constructive religious dialogue.* When it comes to matters of faith, both Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia often assume that members of the other group hold doctrines which are completely antithetical to what they believe. Of course, each group endorses certain teachings that are not shared by the other and which distinguish their own faith as unique. Some religious leaders, however, tend to accentuate those differences as if there were virtually nothing which the two religious communities have in common theologically. Both groups should recognize that there are important commonalities of belief between them as well as differences, and that these shared beliefs can become bridges of communication and understanding. Dialogue on such issues is not meant to minimize the distinctions, but to discover a shared foundation of similar doctrines such that points of divergence can then be meaningfully discussed. A clear example in this regard is the concept of God. Ethiopian Muslims tend to assume that the Christian Amharic word for God, *Egziabiher*, represents a deity which has nothing in common with Allāh. Ethiopian Christians likewise often imagine that the name Allāh refers to some pagan god or even a demonic being, unaware that Christian Arabs have always

used this term to refer to the God of the Bible. Both groups need to realize that their distinctive *terminology* for God does not mean complete disagreement with regard to their respective *beliefs* about God, and that in fact they share numerous ideas concerning God's unity, omnipotence, mercy and judgment, to name a few. Initial acknowledgement of shared beliefs can lead to a much greater understanding, even appreciation, of those beliefs that distinguish Islam and Christianity, even if the groups cannot concur fully about such matters.

8. *Both Muslims and Christians must conduct their evangelizing activities in accordance with honest dialogue and mutual respect.* Christians and Muslims alike in contemporary Ethiopia enjoy the freedom of inviting others to consider the claims of their particular beliefs and to convert from one religion to the other. Yet this freedom is often viewed with suspicion by one group toward the other. Indeed, the attempt by either Christians or Muslims to win converts from the other group is almost always seen by the "target" group as aggressive behavior intended to persuade individuals away from the truth and onto a path of error. Methods are often used that are considered to be coercive or deceptive, presenting the other faith in a manner involving exaggeration or caricature. Such approaches naturally arouse resistance rather than the intended curiosity or attraction. Muslims and Christians often engage in debates; yet despite the outcome of the argument, both parties tend to adopt defensive postures that close the door to genuine consideration of what the other has to say. Furthermore, Ethiopian culture (as many other non-western cultures) is characterized by strong family or tribal loyalties, and conversion from one religion to the other is frequently considered to be a betrayal of that allegiance. It is time for both Muslims and Christians to recognize the futility of an aggressive approach to evangelism and to appreciate that such methods in fact often bring about the opposite of the desired result. Some would say that it is better to refrain from conducting evangelism in any form. Instead, all should realize that both Christianity and Islam are by nature missionary religions; the desire and even obligation to bear witness to what one believes is for each group part of their religious identity. Christians and Muslims should thus approach each other as fellow seekers after God's truth; each other's convictions must be viewed as a personal choice that should not be abused. At the same time, each must recognize the right of the other, as many have said, "to convince and to be convinced." In Ethiopia, both groups have the right to persuade others that what they believe is true, and both groups have the right to change their minds about what they believe. Respect for these concepts, in the context of appreciation for Ethiopia's pluralistic society and of cooperation between religious communities, will help efforts of evangelism to be conducted without mutual animosity and to lead instead to constructive engagement about matters of faith.

Conclusion: Lessons for Us All

It should be fairly clear that both the past and the future of Christian-Muslim relations in Ethiopia in many ways parallel relations between Muslims and Christians in much of

the rest of the world. The image of a pendulum swinging between concord and conflict can be used to characterize the history of Christian-Muslim relations in many other regions. Of course, in only some of those situations has Christianity been the dominant religion; in much of the Middle East, North Africa, parts of South-East Asia, among other places, that role has been filled by Islam. In any case, there are numerous examples where peaceful relations have existed in Christian-majority areas as well as in Muslim-majority areas. And there are numerous examples where conflict has developed from Muslim aggression as well as Christian aggression. Furthermore, all these possible scenarios can be found in today's world as well as in that of the past.

It is thus incumbent on both Christians and Muslims around the world to develop attitudes and approaches towards the other group that will foster concord rather than conflict. The eight points outlined above which delineate the challenges facing Muslims and Christians in Ethiopia can apply, at least to some degree, to both groups in many if not in most other regions. Christians and Muslims together must acknowledge that it is in their best interest to apply principles of tolerance, moderation, and collaboration in the various types of relationships they have with each other, recognizing that what benefits the other group often benefits one's own group as well. The frequency and intensity of religious extremism in today's world (whether Muslim or Christian) means that the majority of adherents who seek to live together in peace must be proactive in preventing tragic incidents and in encouraging mutual contact and cooperative ventures. It may require a great deal of effort to put such principles into action; but the cost resulting from indifference or inactivity would be very high indeed.

Postscript: A Bibliographic Essay

I have chosen not to encumber this article with specific references to various sources. Its purpose has not been to prove a particular thesis that might be challenged by others, but to outline some historical essentials about one particular country (which can be substantiated in multiple books and articles), and to draw some common sense conclusions concerning our attitudes and behavior as people of faith. Disagreement with my approach here should be a matter of personal opinion rather than scientific argument. Naturally I hope that most readers will concur with my suggestions, but I recognize that the convictions and experiences of others may lead them to pursue a different path. I ask only that the reader seek to apply principles based upon what is found in scripture, whether the Bible or the Qur'ān; I am personally convinced that the general tenor of both support my proposals above.

Nevertheless, I hope that some readers will want to investigate the complex story of Christian-Muslim relations in Ethiopia more deeply, and for them I would like to supply the following annotations on a select list of printed resources in English. This list is by no means exhaustive; however, the number of scholarly works dealing specifically with this subject are not many. Most resources not mentioned here deal

with this subject in a broader context or are of a very specialized nature. Many of the authors cited have produced several worthwhile works on Islam in Ethiopia, but only the most representative ones are listed. My purpose here is to provide anyone wishing to explore this subject with information about the scholars and their primary works which will be most important as a starting point for investigating a more detailed aspect. The comments here will be followed by a list containing full bibliographic data for each work mentioned.

There are many resources which cover Ethiopian history in general and which can offer a framework for the study of Islam and its relations with the Christian state. The recently updated book by Marcus is both complete and concise, and is an excellent one to utilize for this purpose. Other works of a general historical nature give some attention to the role of Islam in Ethiopian history during certain broad periods. These include the unique work of Pankhurst who examines the geographical margins of Abyssinia including its Muslim neighbors; the two books by Abir, dealing with the 13th through the 17th and the 18th and 19th centuries respectively; and Erlich's perceptive studies of Ethiopia's often problematic relations with Muslim Egypt and Saudi Arabia, especially in the modern era.

Another category of books which provide a useful starting point are those which deal with Islam in Africa as a whole and which incorporate a chapter about Ethiopia (usually including the countries surrounding Ethiopia as well). The definitive work here is Kapteijns' extensive survey in Levtzion and Pouwels' substantial work on the history of Islam in the continent. Shorter but still very valuable treatments are given by Robinson and by Hiskett. Insoll provides considerable archeological data as well in his chapter which covers Ethiopia through the Grañ episode.

Works that are devoted specifically to the history of Islam and Christian-Muslim relations in Ethiopia almost always focus on a particular historical episode. Still the only book which is singularly dedicated to a complete account is Trimingham's *Islam in Ethiopia*. Despite the age of this book (originally written more than half a century ago) and the fact that more recent authors have occasionally revised certain of his conclusions, no serious student of the subject can bypass Trimingham's careful presentation and analysis.

Some of the more important works dealing with specific key episodes of Christian-Muslim relations in Ethiopian history must also be mentioned. Trimingham provides a detailed presentation of Abyssinia's involvement in pre-Islamic Arabia in a chapter of his *Christianity among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times*. The most important primary source on the First Hijrah to Axum can be found in the seminal biography of Muḥammad written in the eighth century by Ibn Ishāq and edited by Ibn Hishām some decades later. We are fortunate to have a fine English translation of this by Guillaume; the passages dealing with the First Hijrah are found on pp. 146-53. A contemporary

Muslim analysis of this event in the context of ancient Axum is given by one of Ethiopia's leading Muslim scholars, Hussein Ahmed. An English translation is also available for the most important primary (Arabic) source for another critical event: the 16th-century invasion of Abyssinia by Ahmad Grañ. The author of this work, called *Futūḥ al-Haḥḥāša*, was a Yemeni scholar who had accompanied Grañ named Šihāb al-Dīn Ahmad (note: the letter š given in that book is equivalent to the letter usually transliterated as "sh"). There are few materials for the modern period, but the situation for Muslims in the era surrounding the rule of the Derg (1973-1993) is described by Hussein Ahmed; and Østebø has aptly summarized and analyzed the development of Ethiopian Islam since the fall of the Derg in 1991. Meanwhile, published studies of contemporary Christian-Muslim relations from the side of the Ethiopian church are virtually non-existent; however, Klein has provided keen insights into the thought and activities of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus in his unpublished MA thesis (available at Mekane Yesus Seminary, Addis Ababa).

Finally, a few significant resources regarding Muslims in specific regions and/or among key people groups in Ethiopia can be given. Braukämper has conducted considerable research on the history and development of Islam in southern Ethiopia, and his book is a collection of several previously published articles. Hassan's book provides a comprehensive presentation of the Oromo migrations and settlement, as well as the role Islam has played within this largest of Ethiopian ethnic groups. His article on the adoption of Islam among the Oromos of Wallo (in northeastern Ethiopia) is a significant analysis of Islamic reaction to official Christian provocation. The larger picture of the development of Islam in Wallo is detailed in Hussein Ahmed's book. As was mentioned above, the ancient city of Harar has played a central role in Ethiopian Islam; while a historical survey is given in Trimmingham's *Islam in Ethiopia*, Waldron's article analyzes its historic and contemporary religious culture. Overviews of Islam among the two large pastoral tribes in eastern Ethiopia can be found in the article by Lewis (for the Somalis) and the chapter by Kalb (for the Afar).

Other helpful resources dealing with various aspects of Islam in Ethiopia can be found in the bibliographies of the works listed, especially those by Ahmed, Braukämper, Hassen, Kapteijns and Østebø.

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