

Evangelical Church and Theology in the Ethiopian Revolution, Part II

Colleagues,

Here's Part II of Paul E. Hoffman's own memoirs of Gudina Tumsa occasioned by his review of Øyvind M. Eide: Revolution & Religion in Ethiopia. The Growth & Persecution of the Mekane Yesus Church 1974-1985. Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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"Christianity and Socialism" – Conflict or Accommodation?

Revolutionary events took a bloody turn in late November 1974 when a split occurred in the military and opponents of the dominant faction and some of the previous persons in power were executed. One of those killed was General Aman Andom. Emmanuel Abraham, lay President of the [Mekane Yesus] church, was still under detention. In early December "Ethiopia Tikdem!" ("Ethiopia First!") became the call of the revolutionaries and a new military campaign against the Eritrean rebels was announced. "Socialism" (without further definition) was declared the goal of the Revolution. We on the faculty of the Seminary had been given the task (since the summer of 1974) by the General Secretary [Gudina Tumsa] to work with the LWF

Department of Studies and himself on plans for a new consultation on Christian Social Responsibility. [12] Gudina immediately set the new title for the planned consultation as "Christianity and Socialism", which was held at Mekane Yesus Seminary in February 1975. [13] I immediately set out to trace the historical origins of the idea of "socialism" and was given the task of working out a course on Christianity and "ideologies" to be taught to the students. We were all asking ourselves: What role, if any, should the Mekane Yesus Church have, or should it seek, or be prepared for, in the Ethiopian Revolution?

The Mekane Yesus Church in the Revolution – a "Pastoral Letter"

An initial answer to this question was hammered out immediately following the first "Christianity and Socialism" Seminar at Mekane Yesus Seminary, February 20-25: A "Pastoral Letter" with the sub-title: "The Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus in the Ethiopian Revolution" [14] was produced. As I reported in the "Introductory Note" (prefaced to its inclusion in Witness and Discipleship) : "Gudina Tumsa invited a number of the persons who had participated in the Seminar to go with him, on the weekend after the Seminar, to Ghion/Wollisso. After a wide-ranging discussion in which all participated, including (and especially) Gudina, Rev. Paul E. Hoffman, a teacher at Mekane Yesus Seminary, was asked to draft a possible word or statement to be adopted by the ECMY in the new political situation in the country, which, with the assistance of Dr. Gunnar Hasselblatt, he did – till far in the night. The next morning, what was drafted was presented, discussed and revised, Gudina, as General Secretary of the ECMY, and the one to carry the matter further within the ECMY, having the last word on the wording. The matter was brought by Gudina to the Church Officers, who decided to wait for discussions in the Executive Committee before issuing what became the "Pastoral Letter." [15]

It is a pastoral AND highly political document which deserves in this connection to be quoted in full:

- 1. Ethiopia finds itself in transition. The old regime has gone. Ethiopian Socialism has been proclaimed. New economic policies have been announced. Hopes and expectation have been awakened. However, as the structures of the old society have not been fully replaced, confusion, uncertainty and hesitation are widespread.*
- 2. The Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus is part of the body of Christ in the world. It is a Church which proclaims the Gospel in its full sense and is sustained by the Sacraments. Deriving from the poor, the Church rededicates itself to living for others, serving the whole person, meeting his spiritual and physical needs. ... It sees its continuing task to be the full liberation of the whole man. It welcomes the opportunities which the new situation provides for building a more just society.*
...
- 3. The Church has been called into being as an instrument of proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and for service. Because of this calling, the Church differs from other institutions. It is a society for witness to the Gospel of Christ and service to our fellow men, not a company set up for profit. Its employment policy is of necessity determined by this its particular character.*
- 4. The institutions of the ECMY (hospitals, schools, development projects) are not aimed at the self-preservation and prestige of the Church. ... The Government has indicated its intention to take care of all the educational, medical and development needs of the people. The Church welcomes this move of the Government and plans to hand over these institutions. This has been the*

expectation of the Church from the start. The ECMY envisages that opportunities for development and service programmes will be found in which it will be possible to cooperate with [local] communities in the future [the envisioned "peasant associations" and "urban dwellers' associations" are meant], thus continuing to contribute to the development of the new Ethiopian society.

5. We welcome the prospect of participation by the people at all levels of decision making, where the power of the people is channelled from bottom to top. We aspire for justice, respect for human rights and the rule of law. Ideologies cannot be considered as absolute. Complete allegiance is due to God and God alone. We recognize the urgent need of making the people aware of unjust practices. ...
6. In the revolutionary situation in which the country finds itself, internal tensions and animosities must be overcome if Ethiopia is to achieve justice for all. It is the duty of Christians, as individuals and in congregations, to pray and work for peace and reconciliation. As the body of Christ in the world, the Church itself is made up of many people and various classes. In claiming the name of Christ, we must overcome differences of opinion by dialogue, suspicion by trust, and hatred by love. Such dialogue, trust and love must be extended to those outside our particular fellowship, to Christians of different confession and to persons of other faiths and ideologies. Our fellowmen are brothers created by God and redeemed by Christ. Special prayer should be made for our sister Church in Eritrea and for peace in that Province.
7. In its proclamation and prayer, the Church interprets the situation in which it lives and finds in Scripture an understanding of God's dealing with men. Through His

Spirit, the Lord Jesus Christ calls for repentance and announces the coming of the Kingdom of God. It is this Kingdom which we must seek above all else. In order to liberate man from the power of sin, selfishness, death and the evil one Jesus Christ died upon the Cross. God is the God of all creation, the God of history. He has called into being a people to serve Him in the world. He liberates this people from oppression, brings them into the judgement, defeat and exile, and restores them time and again. God's final judgement and victory will only come after a time of distress and upheaval. The people of God have been called to discipleship, pilgrimage, even suffering in this world, because true life is found only through suffering and death. The Church is challenged to find itself by giving itself for the true liberation of the whole man. In this, its witness to the Gospel of Christ and its service to man, it teaches that salvation as wrought by Christ must be experienced in this life, but that fullness of life is to be realized at the Second Coming of our Lord and Saviour. Addis Ababa, February 1975

Gudina's "handwriting" can be recognized in this Pastoral Letter, which was addressed to the synods, congregations and membership of the EECMY, but which was formulated so as to be taken note of also by the revolutionary government and the wider public. He succeeded, I believe, in getting us who worked on it, and the leadership of his church in agreeing to adopt it, to accept his understanding of the specific situation of his church in that particular moment of the Ethiopian Revolution, and at the same time to interpret that situation in the light of the Gospel, discipleship of Christ, and the reality and promise of the Kingdom of God.

"Co-operation of the Churches" in Ethiopia

Three more seminars on “Christianity and Socialism” were held in 1975 and 1976.[16] In the second Seminar participants were specifically invited from other churches. Out of the seminar came the proposal for a “Christian Council” or Ethiopian “Council of Churches”. The difficulty was to get the Ethiopian Orthodox Church to accept and participate in such an organization. After discussion, I was asked by Gudina Tumsa, who spoke strongly in favour of such an idea in the current situation in the country, to draft a proposal for what became (only for a brief initial period) an organization headed by Gudina himself, who lobbied the various churches seeking their commitment to join such an organization: the “Council of the Churches’ Co-operation in Ethiopia”. At the General Assembly of the EECMY in January 1978 Gudina put forth his understanding of the challenge of ecumenism in Ethiopia in a paper entitled “The Responsibility of the EECMY towards Ecumenical Harmony.”[17] Refusal, on principle, by the Orthodox Patriarchate to allow official Orthodox Church membership in such an organization doomed the project. Church and government pressure forced Orthodox informal, unofficial participants in the initial planning for the organization to withdraw. The result, instead, was simply creation of an all-Evangelical “Fellowship”. Practical cooperation in disaster relief and a certain amount of coordination with respect to development projects did develop with Orthodox and Catholics out of the initiative of the Mekane Yesus Church – without, however, ecclesiastical or “ecclesial” significance being attached by the Orthodox (and Catholics) to such practical cooperation and coordination.

The Call for Indigenous Theological Thinking

Under the pressure of revolutionary events in society – and within institutions of the EECMY – Gudina produced in July 1975 a “Memorandum. To: Ato Emmanuel Abraham, President, EECMY Re: Some Issues Requiring Discussions and Decisions.”[18] The

issues he proposed for discussion and decision in this "Memorandum" were in large measure already touched upon or hinted at in the "Pastoral Letter". Some of these issues were chronic problems whose urgency became apparent because of the direction the Revolution was taking. It was not at all clear to what extent missionaries would be allowed to continue to work in the country, or for the church to receive funds from abroad. There were those among the revolutionaries who were looking to China as a model for Ethiopia where foreign missionaries and funds from abroad and organizational ties to overseas churches and related bodies were prohibited. The points he raised show how Gudina Tumsa was attempting to guide the church and equip it to face challenges which lay ahead.

Among the points Gudina raises in this "Memorandum" was his understanding of theology. Under item 9., "Identity of the Church" he writes:

The sources of Christian theology are found in the Scriptures as well as in the Classical Confessions inherited from the Fathers and have come to us through the Church of Jesus Christ.

The Reformation tradition, as well as the traditions of the revival movements which took place during the 19th century (especially in Scandinavia: Rosenius and Hauge), out of which the Lutheran missions have grown and started work about the second quarter of this century in Ethiopia, are part of our Christian heritage.

An indigenous theology in the Ethiopian context may be defined as a translation of the Biblical sources, the various Confessions, and traditions transmitted to us throughout the history of the Christian church, to the patterns of the thought of our people, that they may feel at home with the Gospel of love as revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus

Christ. Contextual theology is making the message of the Gospel of the risen Lord meaningful and relevant to our life situation, economic life, political life and social life as a whole. In our case, theology must grow out of concrete daily experiences, from our dealing with the ordinary affairs of life as we experience them in our situation, in our cultural setting, in our economic life, in our political experience and in our social practice.

Has the ECMY any theological experience to share with her sister churches, a contribution to the church universal? The ECMY is in the process of developing an indigenous theology grown out of her experience in dealing with the Ethiopian situation, taking the spiritual and physical together in an inseparable manner (emphasis PEH). This theological position of the ECMY was communicated to the Lutheran World Federation and has attracted interest beyond expectation from ecumenical bodies around the world.

Gudina's position on contextual, situational theology is a challenge to all of us. The key element of the EECMY's "theological experience" was, as articulated by Gudina Tumsa, "taking the spiritual and physical together in an inseparable manner". Could it be that Gudina's rejection of "the Two Kingdoms' doctrine" as "inappropriate" in the Ethiopian and African context was because of this insight into and assertion of the inseparability of "the spiritual and the physical"?

"Moratorium", "Interdependence", "Self-Reliance"

At just this time (August 1975) Gudina Tumsa and I were asked by the Church Officers to debate before a meeting of the Executive Committee of the EECMY the issue of a "Moratorium" on requesting and receiving foreign financing and personnel for the work of the church,[19] a burning ecumenical issue and one

of the urgent issues at the time in Ethiopia raised in Gudina's "Memorandum". In the debate, Gudina spoke, from the theological perspective of the "church universal", for rejection of "moratorium", affirming the concept of the inter dependence of the body of Christ in the world, whereas I, sceptical of appeals for "interdependence", pressed for immediate and concrete steps for self-reliance in the revolutionary situation in which the Mekane Yesus Church found itself. The result of deliberations on this topic, in the Executive Committee and at the General Assembly of the church at Nedjo (Wollega) in April 1976, was the decision to achieve self-reliance in a deliberate and planned way within a period of 20 years (something which under prevailing circumstances, unfortunately, did not or could not take place).[20]

Gudina's Public Rejection of Materialist Ideology as "Unbelief"

For understanding Gudina Tumsa's open rejection of and opposition to materialism (and, by implication and in consequence, Marxism) it is important to digest the debate which took place between him and his brother Baro Tumsa, at the specific invitation of the Church Officers, at the Nedjo Assembly. Baro at the time was a member of the government politburo, an avowed Marxist who presented his views in a paper entitled "The Church and Ideologies." [21] Gudina's paper was entitled "Unbelief." [22]. The ensuing heated exchange in the Assembly between the two brothers set Gudina on a public confrontation with the military which had adopted Marxism as its ideology, and set the stage for the subsequent persecution of the EECMY "on the western periphery", in particular the Western Synod of the EECMY. [23]

"Mutual Christian Responsibility"

Both the overseas partners (the representatives of missions and

other donor agencies in partnership with the EECMY) and representatives of the EECMY and its synods found it essential in the revolutionary situation in Ethiopia to structure their consultative relationship. The missionary organizations in the country had been disbanded in the process of integration of the missions into the structure of the church, and foreign personnel, though paid from overseas, were serving on call of and under the authority of the EECMY.

In early 1976 Gudina Tumsa requested me, as I was about to leave for a visit to Europe, to give thought to the constitution of a cooperative partnership organization. I produced a first draft for such an organization, a "Committee on Christian Responsibility" (a name he suggested) to which I added "in Ethiopia" (basing it in general on the equivalent regulations for the "Tanzania Assistance Committee" and the South African "European Partners'" organization, and presented it to him on my return. I heard nothing further on the matter until mid-1978, just before my family and I were preparing to leave Ethiopia on a call to serve the Berliner Missionswerk. Gudina requested that I revise the draft I had previously made, saying that Emmanuel Abraham and he were convinced that the organization should be a committee of the EECMY, not of the overseas partners, a committee which the EECMY should convene, inviting the representatives of the missions and other donors to attend. He proposed that "mutual" be added to the title and that the matter of "Christian Responsibility" not be limited to Ethiopia. The organization was formed and bears the name: "Committee on Mutual Christian Responsibility" (CMCR) which meets once a year for mutual consultation on call of the EECMY and under the chairmanship of the President of the church.

The Lordship of Christ and an Ultimate Confession of Faith

Gudina Tumsa's basic theological stance he repeated as a

personal confession of faith in what I have called his “last will and testament”. He wrote this statement of faith on the eve of what he knew would probably be martyrdom, going into retreat by himself to do the writing. As far as I know, Gudina consulted no one while writing it.[24] In the last document from his hand, written in late July 1979, “The Role of a Christian in a Given Society”[25] from which I quote extensively, the “given society” he speaks of is, of course, Ethiopia under the clearly Marxist military dictatorship of Mengistu Haile Mariam. Gudina had twice been arrested and tortured. He had been released some days before under political pressure from abroad and had been allowed and been expected to leave the country, but he refused to do so. From what he wrote one can see that he believed that it was God’s will that he stay and witness to the truth, even if it should mean death.

Section I he devotes to “A Christian in a Society” which he concludes by describing what the Christian recalls and confesses when he/she participates in the Lord’s Supper:

Recollection of God’s mighty deeds in the past, experiencing forgiveness of sins today and expecting the Second Coming of the one who has shed his blood for us, is a way of being equipped for a life of witness in society.

He delineates his understanding of Christ’s Lordship for a Christian in his “given” society in Section II, “A Christian is Responsible to God and Man”. His Lutheran pietism is evident. His contact with the newly risen charismatic movement – in the United States and in Ethiopia – is equally apparent:

A Christian is a transformed person by believing the Gospel of Christ (justification), and is in constant process of being transformed (sanctification) by the power of the Third Person of the Holy Trinity, the Holy Spirit, who dwells in the

Christian. God has counted the believer as righteous without any contribution on his/her part, with the exception of accepting the gracious gift of God through the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Christian is made a citizen of the kingly rule of God. By belonging to the realm of that rule, the Christian is charged with the responsibility to proclaim: "The right time has come, the kingdom of God is near. Turn away from your sins and believe the Good News" [Mark 1:15]. In carrying out this assignment from heaven to be fulfilled on earth, the Christian is aware of two things. The first is that the risen Lord is ever present within, and secondly that the Christian is never alone. He has joined, as a companion of Jesus Christ, millions of Christians who have responded in obedience to the command of the Head of the Church and are engaged in working for the acceleration of the Day of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Creator and Redeemer of the Christian has total claim on the life of the one who confesses him as Lord and Saviour. When the Christian confesses that Christ is Lord, he proclaims that Jesus Christ is the King of Kings, the President of Presidents, the Chairman of Chairmen, the Ruler of Rulers, the Secretary of Secretaries, Leader of Leaders and the Head of the Heads of State. Christ is the Lord of the universe and the one who guides historical developments to their right fulfilment according to the purpose of the Creator. At the same time, he guides us both collectively and individually in such a way that the hairs of our heads are well known to him, so that we can relax in carrying out the Commission he has given to his church. This assignment has the first and top priority in the life of the believer.[26]

Gudina goes at length into the obligations which any Christian, as he sees it, has toward Government.[27] "In my opinion a

Christian has to make a choice [God or Man] only when he is faced with the demand not to confess Christ as Lord, and when he/she is denied the right to teach in his name (Acts 4:16-20).”[28]

The “Conclusion” (Section III) I quote in full:

It must be crystal clear to the Christian that he/she has a double purpose to live for:

- a. As someone has said, when a person is called to follow Christ, that person is called to die. It means a redirection of the purpose of life, that is death to one’s own wishes and personal desires and finding the greatest satisfaction to living for and serving the one who died for us and was raised from death (2 Corinthians 5:13-14). In other words, the Christian has been crucified with Christ and has no life which he claims to be his own. The life the believer leads is a life of faith, and the risen Lord lives in him (Galatians 2:19). It is a life set free from the power of sin, and it is beyond the capacity of death to destroy it. Because it has its source in the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, that resurrection life is at work in the life of the believer. Being in Christ the Christian is already the possessor of eternal life by being placed in a new order of existence, where the law of life is the love of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:13). And where the power of the resurrection of the Lord is at work, the life of the Christian is a life of witness to the risen Lord.*
- b. It has been stated [above] that a Christian is a citizen of a given country and as such under the laws and policies of that country. Because he is under the laws of the country of which he is a citizen, it is his duty to pray for the peace of that country and cooperate with his*

fellow-citizens for its well-being. The only limitation to his cooperation or obedience to the laws of this country is if he is commanded to act contrary to the law of God (Acts 5:29). [29]

In this his final theological reflection there is no reference to the Two Kingdoms, neither in affirmation, nor in rejection.

He wished that the confession he was making be made known (his written testimony was formulated in July 1979 for presentation at the next General Assembly of the church [January 1980]). He did not seek martyrdom, nor when the prospect appeared did he flee from it. He saw the legitimacy of going into exile, becoming a refugee, though he refused exile, refugee status and emigration for himself. He did not claim that making the ultimate sacrifice was every believer's call. Nor did he claim that any of his insights should be authoritative or normative in other circumstances. All theology, in his view (as has previously been said), should be understood as situational, contextual. His witness in the context of the leadership role he came to play, and the situation he found himself in, should be taken seriously and judged in the light of that context and that situation.

He paid for the stance he was led to take with his life.

Berlin, December 2005

Footnotes:

- 12. A previous consultation on "Christian Social Responsibility" was held by the EECMY, in cooperation with the LWF Dept. of Studies, in Addis Ababa in May 1973.*
- 13. See the lecture by Gerd Decke, "The Role of Gudina Tumsa in a Critical Dialogue between Marxism/ Socialism and*

- Christianity*", in: *Life and Ministry* , pp. 101ff.
14. Doc. 7 with Introductory Note in: *Witness and Discipleship*, pp. 77-80.
 15. *Ibid.*, p. 77. See also Eide, p. 117f.
 16. April and November 1975 and October 1976.
 17. Doc. 2 in: *Witness and Discipleship*, pp. 13-23.
 18. Doc. 6 in: *ibid.*, pp. 55-76.
 19. Gudina Tumsa & Paul E. Hoffman, "The Moritorium Debate and the ECMY", Doc 5 in: *Witness and Discipleship*, pp. 45-54.
 20. see Eide, pp. 123ff.
 21. Doc. 4 in: *Witness and Discipleship*, pp. 35-44.
 22. Doc. 3 in: *ibid.*, pp. 25-33.
 23. see Eide, pp. 127ff.
 24. My family and I had left Ethiopia (I on call of the Berliner Missionswerk to be its Secretary for the Near East) the year before.
 25. Doc. 1 in: *Witness and Discipleship*, pp. 1-12; Eide, Appendix IV, pp. 280-284.
 26. Doc. 1 in: *Witness and Discipleship*, p. 5f; Eide, Appendix IV, p. 282.
 27. *ibid.*, pp. 2ff and 280ff respectively.
 28. (emphasis Gudina's) *ibid.*, pp. 8 and 283 respectively.
 29. *ibid.*, pp. 11f and 284 respectively.