

Evangelical Church and Theology in the Ethiopian Revolution

Colleagues,

In 1995 we were ELCA Global Mission Volunteers in Ethiopia. We stay in contact with a few folks there. Ethiopia is one of the world's unhappiest nations. That was also the case when we were there. There is renewed turmoil these days, though it's not front page news here in the West. Actually threefold turmoil. 1) near civil-war within the nation itself (e.g., 131 opposition members in the legislature jailed by the ruling party for "treason and genocide"), 2) renewed border dispute with Eritrea, the neighbor to the north, and 3) deadly Muslim-Christian conflict in at least one province. During our time there, Ethiopia had just survived a Marxist reign of terror, and the freedom-fighters who overthrew the oppressors were striving to make things right. They seem now to have assumed the oppressors' role. One of our colleagues at the Mekane Yesus Seminary in Addis Ababa in 1995 was Paul E. Hoffman. Paul and I have been friends since seminary days—he in the (old) LCA and I in the LCMS. Our paths have criss-crossed frequently during the ensuing half-century. He's a rostered ELCA pastor (retired), spent most of his pastoral calling outside the USA, is now retired in Berlin, Germany. He was THERE when the Marxist takeover occurred. So there's no better candidate for this feature-length review than PEH.

We'll post it to you in two segments. Part 2 next time.

Herewith a request for the listserv receivers. Were you, or anyone you know, at Luther Seminary in St. Paul MN [1963-66] when Gudina Tumsa (whom you'll learn about below) was a student there? If so, both Paul and I would cherish conversation with

“eye-and-ear-witnesses” who knew him then.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Paul E. Hoffman:
Evangelical Church and Theology in the Ethiopian Revolution

A Book Review – and Documentary Comment on the Stance of Rev. Gudina Tumsa, General Secretary of the Mekane Yesus Church during the Revolution

Ed Schroeder has asked me to review a very important book, which I am very glad to do. Documentary Comment follows on the ecclesiastical and theological stance of the Mekane Yesus Church whose General Secretary was executed extra-judicially at the end of July 1979. How are we to understand and react to his legacy? [Fn. 1]

BOOK REVIEW

Øyvind M. Eide: Revolution & Religion in Ethiopia. The Growth & Persecution of the Mekane Yesus Church 1974-1985. With a Foreword by Carl Fr. Hallencreutz. James Currey, Oxford; Ohio University Press, Athens; Addis Ababa University Press, Addis Ababa. 2000. 300 pp incl. appendices, bibliography and index

Øyvind Eide is Theological Director of the School of Mission & Theology in Stavanger, Norway. In this subsequent revision of the doctoral dissertation he submitted to the Theological Faculty of the University of Uppsala and its School of the

Study of Mission (1996), Eide gives an account and analysis of the impact of events in the Ethiopian Revolution (which broke out in February 1974) on the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY). It is also an account of the reaction of this fast-growing folk church among peoples of southern and western Ethiopia (in particular, among the Oromo, the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia) – in other words, the reaction of peoples on the “periphery” of power – to what became the Marxist-Leninist military dictatorship of Mengistu Haile Mariam (which fell to the forces of ethnic and regional liberation movements in May of 1991). Eide himself, sent by the Norwegian Missionary Society (NMS), was a parish pastor of the Western Synod of the Mekane Yesus Church from 1973-76 and a teacher at Mekane Yesus Seminary in Addis Ababa from 1980-82.

At the time, as a clergyman of the Lutheran Church in America (now of the ELCA) who was serving as Associate Director of the Department of Studies of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) in Geneva, I was called by the Mekane Yesus Church to be a teacher (chiefly of Church History) at Mekane Yesus Seminary (MYS) beginning in September 1973 and sent by the German Hermannsburg Mission, now the Ev.-Lutherisches Missionswerk in Niedersachsen (ELM). I served at Mekane Yesus Seminary until the summer of 1978 when I became Near East Secretary of the Berliner Missionswerk. Eide and I, in other words, had each been only several months in the country when the Revolution started.

The Mekane Yesus Church (with a membership of 20,000) was officially constituted in 1959 with the cooperation and support of Lutheran foreign missions from Scandinavia and Germany and from the former American Lutheran Church. The Lutheran World Federation, with strong cooperation from the EECMY, began its international radio ministry, “Radio Voice of the Gospel” (RVOG), from Addis Ababa in 1963. In the spring of 1974, synods which had grown out of the foreign mission work of the

Presbyterian Church (USA) joined the EECMY. Today, the church – one of the fastest growing churches of Africa – has a baptised membership of well over 4,000,000.

Eide's general subject matter is the nature and character of the modern Ethiopian state and its relation to religion (Orthodox, Catholic, Evangelical, and Muslim) and how the various religions/churches fared during the revolutionary upheaval. After World War I, Protestant missions had gradually been allowed into the country and Evangelical churches had taken root under the protection of the ruler of the country who had proclaimed himself Emperor Haile Selassie I in 1930. He was deposed by the revolutionary military in September 1974.

The focus of Eide's study is on what happened to the EECMY during the various phases of the Revolution, headquartered at the "center" (in the capital, Addis Ababa), and what was happening at the western "periphery" – in particular in the Western Synod of the EECMY (at the time the largest of the regional synods of the church and the synod in which Eide himself had served) which experienced, beginning in 1978, a major thrust of religious persecution during the Revolution.

Eide begins by setting forth his "Focus & Methodology" and what he explains as "The Dynamics of Centre & Periphery" in the social, ethnic and political structure of modern Ethiopia (earlier referred to as "Abyssinia"), which under (Orthodox Christian) Amharic rule in the late 19th century had expanded its power to the south and west to incorporate non-Christian (Muslim and pagan) peoples and ethnic groups which had not been up to then within its borders. The largest ethnic group within Ethiopia were and are the Oromo, who, like the other southern peoples, are linguistically and culturally distinct from the Abyssinian (Orthodox Christian) rulers from the north.

Apart from a small but significant Evangelical (Lutheran) Church in Eritrea (the formerly Italian colony not incorporated into Ethiopia until 1961) (a church which grew out of the Swedish Evangelical Mission on the Red Sea coast), it was among the Oromo in the west of Ethiopia that the Gospel in Evangelical/Lutheran form had taken strongest root and been given specific ecclesiastical shape. Eide goes on to delineate in Part One, "Church & Politics on the Eve of Revolution" (up to February 1974), the relation of the EECMY to the Ethiopian state. The close relation of the EECMY to the Ethiopian state under Emperor Haile Selassie can be seen from the significant fact that a member of the Mekane Yesus Church was a minister in the Imperial cabinet and became the voluntary, spare-time lay President of the church.

Parts Two and Three deal with the time-focus of Eide's specific research: "Revolution" (February 1974-March 1978) (pp. 95-148) and "Persecution" (March 1978-January 1985) (pp. 149-234). That research included, of course, published works on Ethiopian history, the Revolution and the history of the Evangelical movement in the country, but also unpublished sources and interviews in Ethiopia, Germany and Scandinavia. An "Epilogue" (pp. 235-248) gives an account of the period after January 1985 and up to the overthrow of the Mengistu regime in May 1991.

Eide expounds the attitudes and policies of the central leadership of the church on the eve of revolution and then during the revolutionary period, not least the stance taken by Rev. Gudina Tumsa (Guddinaa Tumssa), General Secretary of the EECMY from 1966, a stance which led to his death at the hands of the central government on July 28, 1979. Eide dedicates his book "To the memory of Gudinaa Tumssa and all those who suffered during the persecution". Four documents included in the appendices derive in whole or in part from Gudina's hand: the (pre -revolutionary) influential paper of the EECMY "On the

Inter-relationship Between Proclamation of the Gospel and Human Development" (1972); the Pastoral Letter on "The Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus in the Ethiopian Revolution" (February/March 1975); Gudina's pertinent and controversial "Memorandum ... Re: Some Issues requiring Discussions and Decisions" (July 1975); and what I have called his "last will and testament", "The Role of a Christian in a Given Society" (July 1979) written on the eve of his extra-judicial execution by the Marxist military. The latter cannot be understood without reference to Dietrich Bonhoeffer's "The Cost of Discipleship".

Eide's study has broken new ground and is a major contribution to Ethiopian history as well as to African church history. It amounts to a case study in missiology: how a "mission church" dealt with the challenges thrown up by the socio-political events of what became a Marxist revolution.

[EHS: In a separate note Paul asks me to include this explanation of the frequently-used term "evangelical" in this posting.]

** "Evangelical" is a self-designation. "Evangelical" in Gudina Tumsa's writings, in Øyvind Eide's book and in my Documentary Commentary is used in the way it is employed in the official name of the Mekane Yesus Church (EECMY: Ethiopian Evangelical Church – Mekane Yesus) and in the particular way it is used by the (Lutheran, pietist) "Swedish Evangelical Mission" (SEM) in Eritrea and Ethiopia out of which the EECMY arose.*

"Evangelical" refers not only to the (Lutheran, but also, in part Presbyterian in background) Mekane Yesus Church, but also designates a family of churches of otherwise divergent confessional and ecclesiological persuasion (Mekane Yesus, Baptist, Mennonite, Pentecostal) comprised in the "Evangelical

Fellowship” which has come into being in Ethiopia. It describes these churches in contrast to the Orthodox and Catholic churches. It is used in the sense employed when historians refer to the “Evangelical Awakenings” of the 18th and 19th centuries in both Europe and North America.

During the decade 1968-1978 the EECMY was legally prohibited from using the word “Ethiopian” in its name, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church having argued that it alone was truly “Ethiopian”, the other Christian groups coming from abroad being foreign. Documents from this period refer to the Mekane Yesus Church as “EC-MY” or “ECMY”. There is in the former capital, Gondar, an Orthodox Church named “Mekane Yesus” (“Place of Jesus”). The (Lutheran) Evangelicals in Addis Ababa 100 years ago chose the name “Mekane Yesus” for the congregation they formed, which is understood to be the “mother church” of the EECMY.

THE STANCE OF GUDINA TUMSA IN THE REVOLUTION

“Crossings” readers who, after tackling Øyvind Eide’s book, would want to follow up by reading further in the life and thought of Gudina Tumsa – who was influenced not only by Swedish Evangelical/ Lutheran pietism but by his studies at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, MN, and by the political activism he encountered in the US during his stay at Luther from 1963-66 – are directed to two small paperback volumes that have subsequently appeared from the “Gudina Tumsa Foundation” (GTF) in Addis Ababa. These are:

The Life and Ministry of Rev. Gudina Tumsa, General Secretary of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY). Report Volume & Lectures of the Missiological Seminar Sponsored by the GTF at Mekane Yesus Theological Seminary, Mekanissa,

April 18-21, 2001 (Addis Ababa, 2003)

and

Witness and Discipleship. Leadership of the Church in Multi-Ethnic Ethiopia in a Time of Revolution. The Essential Writings of Gudina Tumsa, General Secretary of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (1929-1979). GTF, Addis Ababa, 2003.

Eide, in his lecture at the seminar on Gudina Tumsa's Life and Ministry in 2001, pointed out that Gudina in discussing with him in 1975 the "two kingdoms' doctrine of Lutheran theology", "maintained that this model of relating the church to society was inappropriate to Ethiopian reality"! [2] I don't ever myself recall such a statement from Gudina, though I worked closely with him in a number of contexts from 1974 until a year before his death in July 1979. But I must admit that I am not surprised by his having made such a remark. Let me explain somewhat at length.

The Stance of the Church – Responding to Challenges

I became involved in intense discussions in Addis Ababa (at the "center", to use Eide's terminology) as to how the Revolution (which began in February 1974 as a "Creeping Revolution") was to be understood, and how the Mekane Yesus Church should/could/might, if at all, respond ad intra and ad extra to the Revolution. The discussions centered on Evangelism and the nature of faith, on Christianity and Socialism (Christianity and Marxism), on the Identity of the Mekane Yesus Church and its dependence on foreign personnel and finances, on the church's Social and Development Institutions in the revolution, and on Ecumenism and a structure for inter-church cooperation in the Ethiopian context. On all these points Gudina Tumsa as General Secretary of the EECMY was the initiator and chief participant of the discussions. Subsequently (after retirement in 1994), as an advisor to the Gudina Tumsa Foundation (GTF)

for the editing of Gudina's papers, I have also been privileged to see and appreciate how contextual Gudina's thinking over an extensive period actually was.

The Concrete Reality of Jesus as Lord

Almost three years before the Revolution broke out, Gudina Tumsa had presented a "Report on Church Growth in Ethiopia" [3] at a consultation (in Tokyo in May 1971) of the newly-formed Commission on Church Cooperation of the LWF. Gudina takes note in his "Report" of "complex social factors" contributing to what appeared to be a growing mass movement among the peoples of the south and the west to the Evangelical form of Christianity. The mass movement can be seen from various "angles". The following quote from this "Report" indicates that not the concept of Two Kingdoms, but the assertion of the Lordship of Christ was the way Gudina Tumsa saw and "appropriately" interpreted church and society and God at work in "Ethiopian reality" (to use Gudina's term as reported by Eide):

"Central to the proclamation and witness of the [new Evangelical] believers is the idea that Jesus saves. This is repeated very often, and one can never miss it in one form or another. There is no distinction between curing from malaria, pneumonia, or saving from sin. "Jesus Christ saves" means that He literally cures from physical diseases, as well as from the burden of sin. The simple preaching of the Gospel was very often accompanied by healing, exorcism, or by some other signs which were interpreted to be the new God demonstrating His power. ... Looking at the mass movements from a political angle, it cannot be denied that people who have been under landowners have found strength in turning to Christianity. They understand their true humanity in a new way. Of course, they are limited – but they are strong enough to make the best of what can be done

under the present system: in fighting for their rights. It made a great impression on the people of the Konso area in Gamu Gofa when the Evangelical Christians united and, through one of their leaders, filed a case against a certain official who had taken a large portion of their land. They fought to the High Court and won the case. Politically, this is but the beginning (Matthew 24:8). It is no wonder that their revival songs are hymns of praise to God who made it possible for them to get back their land.”[4]

Commitment to the Priority of Evangelism

There can be no doubt about Gudina Tumsa’s personal faith and confession of Jesus Christ as Lord. With his coming to personal Christian faith and confession as a lad, a “burden” had been laid upon him to preach the Gospel to others. Gudina had been a voluntary evangelist even after becoming a “dresser” (a nurse), and he continued to be an evangelistic preacher during his two-year theological course under the Swedish Evangelical Mission (SEM) and his service as a pastor of the Central Synod of the EECMY in Nekempt, capital of the Oromo-speaking province of Wollega to the west of Shoa. His subsequent work for the EECMY outside his own ethnic area (in Kambatta in southern Shoa) and then his studies at Luther Seminary in Minnesota broadened his vision and understanding without crimping his zeal. Though he wished at times that he had had more time and opportunity for further theological study, it was not out of a desire to become a theological academic, but better to relate the Gospel to the challenges he faced as the General Secretary and as a leader of his church. I can testify to his continuing concern for Evangelism and outreach. In June 1974, I was asked by Gudina (who had just been elected President of the newly- formed Addis Ababa Synod of the EECMY, in addition to his being General Secretary of the church) to sit on the Evangelism Committee of the Synod, which dealt with coordinating the outreach work of

the Synod and of its congregations and the planting and nurture of new congregations and preaching places. I took part in the deliberations of this committee until my family and I left Ethiopia in mid-1978. His zeal for the Gospel of Christ never abated. Whatever else came into play, his faith and confession of Jesus as Lord led him to make his final confession before organs of the Revolutionary state – and to his death – at the end of July the following year.

“Integration” of the Mission Institutions and “Wholistic Ministry”

Gudina Tumsa had become Executive, then General Secretary of the EECMY in 1966, just as the EECMY and its synods were preparing to take over responsibility for the educational, social (including medical), and development institutions and programs initiated and financed by the missions and international development agencies. These institutions and programs were to be “integrated” into structures created by the EECMY and its synods, but with continuing financing from overseas. Gudina as General Secretary was in the forefront of pressing for and administering this process of “integration.”[5] It was in this context that the Church Officers of the EECMY, with decisive input from Gudina, had developed the concept of “Wholistic Ministry” as explicated in a position paper (“Document”; “Letter”) addressed to the Lutheran World Federation in May 1972, “On the Interrelation of Proclamation of the Gospel and Human Development.”[6].

The argumentation was aimed at overseas “donor agencies”, some of whom, if not questioning the legitimacy of church involvement in sponsoring development projects, were nevertheless understood to be demanding a complete separation of Christian proclamation from programs of economic development (considered to be a completely secular process). Over against

this, the Mekane Yesus position paper asserts “an integral” “understanding of man and his needs”, to which the proclamation of the Gospel is a fundamental part of the response of the church which cannot be allowed to be missing. The paper was intended as a theological statement as well as a policy statement by the church.

Assertion of an African View of Reality

A letter of Gudina’s from November 1972[7] gives further insight into his thinking. He does not reaffirm the Lutheran doctrine of the Two Kingdoms in the context of Ethiopia or Africa, but asserts “that an African view assumes the totality of man which is not in line with the Western ways of thinking”: He goes on to say:

“It is, in my opinion, just time to raise such questions [as were raised by the Mekane Yesus Church in its position paper] by the African churches. I believe that an African theology will be developed along the line that has been defined in the Mekane Yesus Document. ... In my opinion, reconsideration of criteria and review of policies by the Western churches require a theological re-thinking ... In Africa there are some thinkers who are interested neither in the Western nor in the Eastern ways of thinking. The one divides one man into various parts, while the other denies the reality of the religious dimension of human existence. In Africa we are not interested in this. We have, if we are to develop healthy societies, [to] look at life as a total unit and try to cater to its needs.”[8]

“Contextual Interpretation”

Gudina Tumsa had a decisive part in formulating an address prepared by the Church Officers of the EECMY and presented by Gudina in person to a Special Consultation which was conducted by the LWF in Nairobi, October 1974, to discuss in a wider

forum the issues raised by the EECMY in its position paper of 1972. It was entitled "Serving the Whole Man: A Responsible Church Ministry and a Flexible International Aid Relationship"[9]. This address asks: "What is a responsible ministry of the Christian church in today's world and in a given cultural, social and political situation?" The explosive Ethiopian context at the time of this Special Consultation should be borne in mind: The military had effectively disempowered the Emperor by the end of February 1974. At the end of April the members of the Imperial cabinet that had resigned were taken into custody, including the spare-time lay President of the Mekane Yesus Church, who had been Minister of Mines, His Excellency Emmanuel Abraham. He was not released till the end of the year. About the time of his detention the EECMY had sent a letter to the new government welcoming the proposed revision of the constitution, asserting that "complete religious freedom can be realised only by establishing a secular state, guaranteeing equal freedom to all religious groupings." [10] In September 1974 the Emperor was deposed and a 106-member military committee or "Derg" declared itself to be the power in control of the country, the "Provisional Military Administrative Council" (led by a member of the Addis Ababa Mekane Yesus congregation, Lt. General Aman Andom, an Eritrean). Just prior to the deposition of the Emperor, Gudina Tumsa had participated in a discussion over the local radio program of the LWF's "Radio Voice of the Gospel" expressing his personal preference for a future constitutional monarchy with social democracy along Scandinavian lines as a model. In this situation Gudina Tumsa states the position of the Mekane Yesus Church. Because of its significance I quote at length:

"In our opinion, there is no universal and simple answer to the question what constitutes a responsible church ministry. We believe that the Gospel itself when faithfully proclaimed and

faithfully lived gives the necessary guidelines for a responsible church ministry. A true theological definition of a responsible church must always grow out of an “actual situation”, or, to go even one step further, true biblical and evangelical Theology must always allow for a contextual interpretation of the Gospel and the action strategy of the church, and priorities must be decided upon in faithfulness to this interpretation (emphasis PEH).

“It is true that a contextual definition of a responsible church ministry is always a risky undertaking, because in every situation and in every event both divine and demonic elements are at work, and, as has rightly been said, one can easily be carried away with the wind of the times and allow the church to become a tool of other powers than the Lord. ...

“We would like to mention three basic objectives which in our opinion constitute the biblical mandate given to the church by its Lord. These objectives are inseparable, but emphasis on each one of them will have to be changed in accordance with the contextual interpretation of the Gospel. Any attempt to separate the three objectives will immediately have implications for the quality of the total ministry of the church.

“The church is first of all commissioned to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ to all nations (Matthew 28:19-20). This is the evangelistic outreach of the church and the missionary obligation which she can never withdraw from nor delegate. ...

“The other objective is the healing of brokenness and making man whole. The church has a healing ministry to carry out which is more than medical care for the physically ill. It has to do with restoration of man to liberty and wholeness. Here the church simply has to follow her Lord and Saviour, who during

his ministry here on earth cared for the whole man. ... The brokenness of man and of the world at large has its real root in the sinful nature of man. Sin is not only situational or an act which destroys the relationships between man and man and between man and God, but it is a reality itself within the individual. The healing of the brokenness in human life can therefore never be accomplished without the Gospel message of forgiveness which has in itself the power to liberate man from the most dehumanizing power in his own life and in his relationships with other men and God. ...

“The third objective of a responsible church ministry must be to engage in the betterment of human existence wherever needed. This includes any lawful activity, from being a prophetic voice in condemning injustice and oppression to involvement in social and community development.

“So much has been said about the social responsibility of the church that there is no need to say more about it in the context of this paper. We only want to repeat again that it is the prerogative of the local church to determine those activities in which it should be involved, and to what extent.”[11]

One can assume that Gudina Tumsa was here preparing the Mekane Yesus Church for a constructive, creative role in the changes that might be hoped for as a result of the change in Ethiopia that had come about thus far.

None of those of us who were teaching at Mekane Yesus Seminary at the time were involved in formulating this address. This basic theological stance was that which informed the leadership of the church at the onset of the Revolution and which in the end, however, carried Gudina Tumsa into conflict with the military dictatorship which was establishing itself in

Ethiopia.

[End of Part I. Next week's part II begins with: "Christianity and Socialism" – Conflict or Accommodation?]

Footnotes:

1. I have previously expressed myself on Gudina Tumsa's legacy in lectures at two seminars on Gudina's life and thought sponsored by the Gudina Tumsa Foundation and the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus at Mekane Yesus Theological Seminary in 2001 and 2003.
2. "Integral Human Development: Rev. Gudina Tumsa's Theology, with Special Reference to His Critique of Dominant Trends in Missiology and the Question of Human Rights" (with bibliography), in: *Life and Ministry*, pp. 37-75, here p. 37. See also my paper presented to the same seminar, "'Gudina Tumsa's Legacy: His Spirituality and Leadership" in: *ibid.*, pp. 13-23.
3. Doc. 11 in: *Witness and Discipleship, The Essential Writings of Gudina Tumsa*, pp. 125-135.
4. *ibid.*, pp. 131 and 132.
5. The process of integrating the educational, social, medical and development institutions and programs at the regional synod level meant at the same time, in the view of the Church Officers (and of Gudina in particular), a concentration of budgeting and policy-making as to finance; see his combative "Report at the Ethiopia Consultation" (Hanover, November 1973), Doc. 9 in: *Witness and Discipleship*, pp. 95-110.
6. Eide, Appendix I (pp. 263-268); Doc. 8 in: *Witness and Discipleship*, pp. 81-94.
7. to Dr. Carl-Johan Hellberg of the LWF Dept. of Church Cooperation in Geneva, dated Addis Ababa, December 12, 1972: see my Introductory Note to Doc. 10 in: *Witness and*

Discipleship, p.. 111f.

8. *ibid.*

9. *Doc. 10 in: Witness and Discipleship, pp. 111-123.*

10. *Eide, p. 115f.*

11. *ibid., pp. 115-118.*