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Transforming Conflict – Experiences from Ethiopia

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“Our life and death is with our neighbor. If we gain our brother, we have gained God, but if we scandalise our brother, we have sinned against Christ.”

– Abba Anthony the Great – *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*

I. Introduction

It is a great privilege to be part of this historic Lausanne–Orthodox Initiative. I found the panel topic of “Conflict Transformation” both extremely important and challenging. It is important due to the urgency of transforming conflicts, and it is challenging because attempts at dialogue and conflict transformation have been inadequate and/or unsuccessful. The enduring problems of religious mutual exclusivity, as well as disgust and fear of the other, have long been negatively affecting human relationships, spirituality, and our mission. Engaging in dialogue has been an uphill battle, and constructive conversation is long overdue.

My purpose is not merely to list the negative legacies of mutual exclusion; rather, I have chosen to briefly *describe* selected previous attempts and initiatives to achieve such exclusion. Then, in light of the current challenges and opportunities, I will suggest “*as prescriptions*” what *can* be done to heal the *ecumenical illness* among the Orthodox and Evangelical churches.

A. Biographical Notes

I was baptized as an infant and grew up in an orthodox family. Although I had a conversion experience and found a home membership in an Evangelical denomination (at the Mekane Yesus Church), my roots are in Orthodoxy and I am grateful for its rich heritage.¹ At an early age, I developed a sense of appreciation for the liturgy, sacraments, and iconography of the Orthodox Church. My paternal grandfather, a farmer and patriot, was a *debtera* — a lay theologian and a scribe. I remember him chanting the Psalter by heart, which is a common contemplative tradition of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC) not exclusive to monks and clergy. Reciting the Scripture by heart is a lost art most Evangelicals fail to appreciate. My mother was also an Orthodox devotee before she turned to Evangelical Christianity. My older sister was once a member of the EOC Sunday School movement called *Haymanot Abew*, and she came to the experience of conversion through reading the Scripture. Being socially ostracized compelled our family to move to another city (from Gondar to Addis Ababa); so I lived in the tension and conflict that exist between Orthodoxy and Evangelicalism. In short, the problem of mutual religious exclusivism in Ethiopia predates my generation and is an enduring problem.

¹ See for example what a Catholic historian and theologian wrote in appreciation of Orthodoxy as a theological resource. Brian E. Daley, “Some Reflections on Orthodoxy as a Theological Resource,” *Pro Ecclesia* VI, 4 (DATE): 400–405. My master’s thesis explores the Orthodox theology of icons. See also Andrew Louth, “What is Theology? What is Orthodox Theology?” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 51, 4 (2007): 435–44. He wrote, “Is an Orthodox theologian a theologian who is Orthodox? Or are there theologians who are Orthodox whose theology is scarcely Orthodox? (Or even: are there theologians who are not Orthodox, but whose theology is?...)” 438–9. See also Fr. John Anthony McGuckin, *Harp of Glory: Enzra Sebat* (An Alphabetical Hymn of Praise for the Ever-Blessed Virgin Mary from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (Popular Patristic Series Number 39, New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2010). He rightly and fittingly said the unknown riches of the Ethiopian church as “ecumenical sadness.”

B. My Mentor

Here I would like to acknowledge the inspiration and contagious desire of Dr. Bradley Nassif from North Park University in Chicago, Illinois, which prompted me to engage with the long journey of ecumenical dialogue. Dr. Nassif is the founder of the U.S.-based *Society for the Study of Eastern Orthodoxy and Evangelicalism*. He taught me about the Orthodox Theological Tradition and Desert Spirituality. He was my second reader for my master's thesis. He also imparted to me a lifetime burden for and scholarship on Orthodox-Evangelical dialogue.

C. Religious Demography

Orthodoxy has a very long (over 1,600 years) history in Ethiopia, whereas the “aged” Evangelicalism is not more than a century old.² Numerically, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church remains the dominant religion in the country. According to the most recent census (conducted in 2007), the total population of the nation is 73,750,932. And the religious demography is Orthodox 32,092,182; Protestant 13,661,588; Catholic 532,187; Islam 25,037,646; Traditional 1,956,647; and Other 470,682.³

Ethiopian Christianity is significant both in terms of its ancient history and its current growth by numbers. Philip Jenkins predicted that, “By 2050 Ethiopia may have 100 million Christians, making it the home of one of the largest Christian communities.”⁴ Despite the legacy and growth of Christianity, the failure to transform conflicts has negative implications. What initiatives have been taken in the past to create dialogue and transform conflict?

II. Past Attempts/Initiatives

Previous attempts/initiatives toward dialogue between Orthodox and Evangelical churches of Ethiopia combine the role of institutes, leaders, and individuals. Without going into detail or offering an exhaustive list, I would like to mention the major attempts.⁵

A. Council for Cooperation of Churches in Ethiopia

The Council for Cooperation of Churches in Ethiopia is one of the earliest initiatives that originated in the early 1970s. Though promising, it was short-lived. Not every church collaborated, with the EOC notably abstaining. The tragic murder/martyrdom of the Council's initiator, Rev. Godin Tumsa (president of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus), by the military junta played a primary role in the cessation of this initiative.

B. The Bible Society Initiative - Trinitarian Forum

The Bible Society embraces all of the Trinitarian Churches, i.e., Orthodox, Catholic, and Evangelical. To this day, all of the churches continue to work together.

C. Joint Social Projects and Individuals' Initiatives

This category includes projects such as social and health-related initiatives. These endeavors are usually prompted by existing needs and external funding agencies. Such initiatives are short-lived and do not involve theological dialogue or debate. The suffering and persecution of Christians at the hands of individuals and institutions draw Orthodox and Evangelical believers closer.

² For a brief introduction to the history of Orthodoxy in Ethiopia, see Tekle Belachew, “From Abba Salama to King Lalibela” *Christian History* magazine 105 (2013): 18-21. This is also available both on Christian History magazine website as well as LOI. <http://www.loimission.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/From-Abba-Salama-To-Lalibela.pdf>

³ See *The 2007 Population and Housing Census of Ethiopia: Results for Country Level Statistical Report*. By Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia Population Census Commission Central Statistical Agency (Addis Ababa: Brana Printing Enterprise, 2010): 109.

⁴ Philip Jenkins. “A Second Jerusalem,” *Christian Century* (2009): 45.

⁵ See Seleshi Kebede.

Speaking of the role of individuals, Evangelical theology students began taking interest in researching/studying Orthodoxy, — completing, for example, master’s theses and doctoral dissertations. Though the interest itself is encouraging, the quality of research and its representation within the EOC is debatable.⁶

III. Current Challenges and Opportunities

In Ethiopia, with the present government’s constitution that declares religious freedom, Orthodox and Evangelicals relationship are on better terms. However, there are places and times where hostility and conflict rise up.⁷ The problem of denominationalism and the proliferation of denominations are prevalent issues among Evangelicals. The abuse of freedom manifests itself in the form of denominationalism or the proliferation of denominations (as well as in the proliferation of theological schools). The alarming disunity and frequent church splits have created more than one-thousand denominations in the last two decades, hampering initiatives to foster dialogue.

A. Deformed Prisms – Fear and Ignorance of the Other

Though there have been encouraging attempts at dialogue between Orthodoxy and Evangelicals, a gulf of mutual misunderstanding, ignorance, stereotyping, and conflict remains. Sadly, there have been occasions of Christians persecuting Christians, socially ostracizing each other, and misrepresenting each other through pulpits, publications, and other mediums. The political history of Ethiopia also shapes the religious conflicts and antagonistic outlooks.⁸

Most Evangelical missionaries who came to Ethiopia, as well as Ethiopian Evangelicals following in the footsteps of missionaries, lack adequate knowledge about the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, its history, liturgy, theological method, and spirituality. Dr. Nassif rightly laments this ignorance in the context of Eastern Europe. I found his description quite striking for its similarity to Ethiopia:

Walls of tension and hostility between Orthodox and evangelicals are rising in pockets of formerly communist countries in Eastern Europe. A staggering number of approximately seven hundred Western Christian agencies have been documented as presently at work in Russia and Eastern Europe. But very few missionaries seem to operate with even a basic grasp of Orthodox history and theology, let alone an appreciation for the rich cultural impact it has made on these countries. As a result, Orthodox leaders have shown increasingly strong resentment toward missionaries who have attempted to convert or proselytize their parishioners.⁹

Evangelical missionaries show little respect for the oldest form of Christianity in Ethiopia. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church for its part fails to investigate whether

⁶ For example at the Ethiopian Graduate School of Theology (EGST), in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, there are master’s thesis related to Orthodox Christology, Soteriology, Mission and Evangelism. This graduate school also offers a special lecture series called the Frumentius Lectures, which are named after St. Frumentius. These lectures address different topics ranging from a lecture by an Orthodox scholar to one on an Ethiopic text. Consideration of the particular topic of Orthodoxy is very much limited, and publications on the subject of Orthodox-Evangelical dialogue are wholly lacking. An Evangelical pastor, Dr. Seleshi Kebede, kindly shared with me his D. Min. dissertation entitled “The Cooperation of Trinitarian Churches in the Mission and Transformation of Ethiopia.” (2008)⁶ He worked with the Bible Society and now serves with the Evangelical Churches Fellowship of Ethiopia.

⁷ For example, an Evangelical girl who died in a car accident near Lalibela last month was denied a burial place. Nevertheless, the current governments establishment of religious freedom has resulted in better conditions overall.

⁸ In the 14th century, there was a failed attempt Portuguese Catholics tried to catholicize the Orthodox. They were successful converting the emperor, but with the disastrous consequence of civil war. A year after “the Scramble for Africa,” – the Italian army was defeated by Ethiopians in the Battle of Adwa in 1886. After forty years, the Italian Fascist army returned to avenge their defeat; Mussolini sent his troops with the blessing of the pope. Even if the Fascist army defeated by Ethiopians, the brutality done on the people of Ethiopia how it used religion is still alive in the memory of many Ethiopians. A notable example is the killing of Abune Petros of Ethiopia by Fascist power.

⁹ Bradley Nassif, “New Dimensions in Eastern Orthodox Theology” in *New Dimensions in Evangelical Thought*, edited by David S. Dockery (Downers Grove: IVP, 1998), 98.

truth resides in the beliefs of Evangelicals. I assume that distorted historical lenses and miseducation accounts for the nature of this relationship. In other words, historically deformed prisms are evoking mutual misrepresentations and disgust, rather than respect. They have also blurred our vision of unity and the mission of God. Additionally, they make our approach to human relations and evangelism offensive.

B. Offensive Approach

Offensive approaches to evangelism and missions emanate from ignorance, fear, and historically deformed prisms. Such approaches often stereotype the ecclesial other. Pulpits and other church medias have been abused to promote mutual exclusivity. A number of clergy both in the Orthodox and Evangelical circles have been known to fuel hate, disgust, and inhospitality. Often they deny the Christian and ecclesial identity of the other, utterly generalizing him or her as nominal or heretical. Beyond misrepresentation of the other, the different religious clichés and theological jargons erect Babel-like confusion. For example, many Evangelicals often use terms and clichés that are offensive and alienating both in daily conversation, evangelism, and sermons. Such offensive terminology has resulted in serious conflict among the churches.

I am not suggesting that similarity is the solution for conflict and exclusion; but “wars” have been waged in vain due to the lack of genuine dialogue, and the similar failure to listen attentively and generously. To put it differently, though sameness is not the remedy for conflict, imagined rather than real differences have often created unnecessary discord and huge clefts of misunderstanding. There is thus an urgent need for theological dialogue in clarifying similarities and differences. Suggestions for future dialogue are also urgently needed.

IV. Suggestions for Future Dialogue

When I returned to Ethiopia a few months ago after studying in the U.S., I was very much encouraged by the fervent preaching of the gospel by the Orthodox Church and to find an Orthodox person and priest who is interested in creating dialogue. I had a conversation with an Orthodox priest, Qes Solomon, who also kindly shared his unpublished paper with an Evangelical audience at the Mekane Yesus Seminary.¹⁰ In his compelling paper, Qes. Solomon identified some of the major causes of conflict and re-presented the EOC to an Evangelical audience in order to clarify misunderstandings. Both his knowledge of the Orthodox and Evangelical world and his attempt to bridge relationships is admirable. Personally, I found him to be a reliable person. Faithful to his Orthodox tradition and knowledgeable about Evangelicalism, he also has a heart for genuine dialogue.

A. Establishing an Orthodox-Evangelical Society and Center

I already mentioned the growing number of Evangelical students learning about the EOC, which is commendable but the quality of education is lacking.¹¹ To address this problem, I am envisioning a Center for Orthodox and Evangelical Dialogue in Ethiopia. The center would be a place for research, as well as publication

¹⁰ መጋቢ ጥበብ ሰለሞን መኮንን (ቀሲስ)። የኦርቶዶክስ ተዋህዶ ቤተክርስቲያን በማወቅ ወንጌልዊያን አብያተክርስቲያን ከክርስቶስ ጋር ያለባቸውን ክፍተት በማጥበብ ማገልገል የሚችሉባቸውን መንገዶች ለመጠቀም የቀረበ ጥናት። ለመካከ ሊየሱስ ሴሚናሪዎችም ተማሪዎችና መምህራን የቀረቡ። 2002 ዓ.ም። Megabi Tibebe Solomon Mekonen (Kesis). This paper was presented to the Mekane Yesus Seminary students and instructor to enable help them serve better by understanding better Ethiopian Orthodox Church. He is a prolific author who published a lot in Amharic including a book an introduction book on orthodoxy . መጋቢ ጥበብ ሰለሞን፡ *ኦርቶዶክሳዊነት አንዲህ ነው!*

¹¹ Without going much to the details and list of theses and dissertations, I would like to point out a couple of representative works. The late Dr. Rev. Eshetu Abate for example did his Master’s thesis on the justification and deification debate and published an article.¹¹ Though his conclusion on the subject does not grant the possibility of compatibility on the subject, he touched a relevant topic that someone need to pick it up and further it with Orthodox response.

and translation of materials relevant to ecumenical dialogue. It would be vital to have knowledgeable people from both the Orthodox and Evangelical churches working together. Such a center would enable the facilitation of annual meetings and consultations on different theological themes that would stimulate discussion regarding learned agreements and disagreements.

B. Revisiting Theological Curricula

The only way to reverse the current mis-education is by revisiting theological curricula that introduces the Orthodox and the Evangelical to each other. The center would provide resources for courses, syllabi, teaching texts, and other materials for and by theological institutes.

But this can be done only if there is openness from both sides. Mutual exclusivity is reversed only by mutual embrace. Kenyan Anglican theologian John S. Mbiti, while writing on the need for theological mutuality and reciprocity between Africans and Western theologians, framed it this way:

We have eaten theology with you; we have drunk theology with you; we have dreamed theology with you. But it has all been one-sided; it has all been, in a sense, your theology (if we can for a moment go back to the agonizing dichotomy which is real and yet false). We know you theologically. The question is, do you know us theologically? Would you like to know us theologically? Can you know us theologically? And how can there be true theological reciprocity and mutuality, if only one side knows the other fairly well, while the other side does not know or does not want to know the first side?¹²

Do you want to know us theologically? This is also yearning for Orthodox-Evangelical dialogue. In order to establish a center and revisit the theological curricula that bridges the gap and educates for shalom, intellectual and spiritual virtues such as hospitality and humility must be regarded as being of utmost importance.

C. Humility and Hospitality

In order to create dialogue and foster the transformation of conflict, we must learn to repent of our past sins of mutual exclusivity, fear of the other, and misrepresentation. In the face of disastrous ignorance and epistemic arrogance, the only way to learn this is through the intellectual virtues, which are also the fruits of the Spirit: courage, carefulness, tenacity, fair-mindedness, curiosity, honesty, and, above all, humility.¹³ The weakness of the other should provide an opportunity to pray and search out one's own failures and weaknesses. Pride taken in any success indicates the immediacy of one's failure. Self-sufficiency is not true to the creation mandate; rather, it is the alienation of both the human other and the ultimate Other, God. To assume the role of teaching without also learning lacks Christian humility. Being in the learning mode saves one from being judgmental and creates a space for the other — a space of hospitality. *Is it possible to be generous enough to take our opponent's side when we argue?*¹⁴

Such reciprocity and mutuality suggests a very important Christian practice, hospitality. One needs to learn to be both guest and host, as well as embrace the "stranger" as his/her own. In the Amharic language of Ethiopia, particularly in the Orthodox tradition, there is a beautiful culture of hospitality that embraces the poor and the stranger. Especially in rural Ethiopia, foot washing is an ongoing practice. The poor person is called "*yene bête*," meaning "a person of my kind" or "a man of my

¹² John S. Mbiti, "Theological Impotence and the Universality of the Church." 259.

¹³ See Paul E. Dow, *Virtuous Minds: Intellectual Character Development*. (For Students, Educators and Parents) (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2013).

¹⁴ There is a wonderful story from the desert spirituals of the early church:

"Abba Paul the Barber and his brother Timothy lived in Scetis. They often used to argue. So Abba Paul said, 'How long shall we go on like this?' Abba Timothy said to him, 'I suggest you take my side of the argument and in my turn I will take your side when you oppose me.' They spent the rest of their days in this practice." *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 204.

equal.” African theologians, including another mentor of mine, Dr. Tite Tiénou, proposed Guest Christology as a helpful, Incarnational, and culturally relevant theological category.¹⁵ Can we extend such a superb culture of hospitality to the Orthodox and Evangelicals?

Hospitality as a celebration and enactment of the cross is all about the embrace of the other. Miroslav Volf, an Evangelical scholar who explores the Patristic and Orthodox theological idea of *perichoresis* (meaning “mutual indwelling,” “making room,” or “dancing around”), ascribes it to the holy Trinity and to God’s embrace of the human other on the cross as follows:

When God sets out to embrace the enemy, the result is the cross. On the cross the dancing circle of self-giving and mutually indwelling divine persons opens up for the enemy; in the agony of the passion the movement stops for a brief moment and a fissure appears so that sinful humanity can join in (see John 17:21). We, the others — we, the enemies — are embraced by the divine persons who love us with the same love with which they love each other and therefore make space for us within their own eternal embrace.¹⁶

The God who embraces us through the cross also calls us to participate in embracing others. This is hospitality, the “liturgy after liturgy.” Archbishop Anastasios said, “The Liturgy after the Liturgy” implies “Confessing Christ through the liturgical life of the Church.”¹⁷

Fear of the other is the problem of sin (John Zizioulas). It is only love that dispels fear, exclusion, and alienation. Hospitality in the deepest sense is recognition of the image of God in the human other. The famous African maxim on communitarianism known as *Ubuntu* (in the South African language) says: “I am, because We Are!” The mystery of humanity involves recognizing God’s image in the human other and affording to him or her respect and dignity, as if we are seeing the Lord Himself. Thus, the crux of conflict transformation is profound understanding, respect, recognition, love, and embrace of the mysterious human other.

- Are we willing to be reciprocally hospitable — to be both guest and host?
- Does our hospitality allow us to respect and dignify and recognize the other?
- Do we experience spiritual silence and stillness that also enhance our ability to listen and learn from others?
- Does our hospitality allow others in our worship services, classrooms, and theological institutes?

I would like to conclude with a quote that I opened my speech taken from Abba Anthony the Great, who said, “Our life and death is with our neighbor. If we gain our brother, we have gained God, but if we scandalize our brother, we have sinned against Christ.”¹⁸

Thank you!

¹⁵ Tite Tiénou, *Jesus as Guest: Christology Through African Eyes*. (Unpublished Paper presented at OMSC 5/9/1990. Also Tite Tiénou. *Hospitality: Applied Reconciliation*. A chapel sermon delivered at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School Chapel, Deerfield, Illinois, 2001.

¹⁶ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 129.

¹⁷ See Anastasios. “A Clarification on the Phrase: ‘The Liturgy after the Liturgy’ (1975)” *Mission in Christ’s Way* (Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2010), 94-96. Anastasios mentions he is the one who coined the term “the liturgy after the divine liturgy” in 1963.

¹⁸ Benedicta Ward, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection* (Kentucky: Cistercian Publications, 1975), 3.