

Ecumenical Dialogue in the Rapidly Changing Ethiopia: A Reappraisal in the Postmodern world

Berga, Petros S. Addis Ababa: Masterprint, 2014, 322 pages + Bibliography

Doctoral Dissertation, Pontificia Università Gregoriana, Rome, 2010

With an Orthodox Christian heritage lost in the mists of time, but dating back at least to St Frumentius and the arrival of the 'nine saints' in the 4th century, a failed Jesuit attempt to Catholicise the country in the 17th century, and the explosion of Evangelical denominations in the 20th century, Ethiopia provides a unique context for an exploration of the dynamics of contemporary ecumenical relations. Add to this the growing 21st-century influx of postmodernity and you have the canvas on which Berga paints his challenging picture. Berga is an Ethiopian Roman Catholic priest who fulfilled a fifteen-year pastoral ministry in the Netherlands, one of Europe's most secular states. He gained his doctorate from the prestigious Pontificia Università Gregoriana in Rome, and now leads an ecumenical research community in Addis Ababa. As a Roman Catholic, and therefore a member of a minority Christian community in Ethiopia, he approaches his subject from a particular perspective.

At the heart of this dissertation is the philosophy of the Soviet linguist, theologian and philosopher, Mikhail Bakhtin, and it is Bakhtin's dialogical methodology, especially his concept of 'dialogism', that Berga adopts in his attempt to propose a route out of contemporary impasses in Ethiopian ecumenical relations. He comments, "Bakhtin offered an alternative vision of free creative activity within a relationship, involving both dialogue and 'polyphonization' of individuals. He provides an alternative to power-centred reading, just as his advocacy of self-reliant, personally negotiated, and apolitical values captured the imagination" (69).

In his second chapter, Berga examines briefly the theological foundations of Bakhtin's dialogical philosophy. I found this chapter slightly dissatisfying because he does not enter as deeply as he might have done into the classical Eastern Orthodox theology in which Bakhtin was contextually rooted in early 20th-century Russia. Reminding us that Bakhtin "postulates an intersubjective world, connected with the Patristic term '*perichoresis*'" (92), Berga quotes from Bakhtin's *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1984): "In Christ we find the synthesis of a unique death, the synthesis of ethical solipsism (man's infinite severity towards himself) with ethical-aesthetic kindness towards the other. ... What I must be for the other, God is for me. What the other surmounts and repudiates within himself as an unworthy given, I accept in him and that with loving mercy as the other's cherished flesh." It is this accepting of the other within myself that Berga finds so attractive as an ecumenical methodology for contemporary Ethiopia.

Berga's first chapter presents the contemporary ecumenical context in Ethiopia and sets this within a wider introduction to Ethiopian traditional cosmology, secularisation, ethnic division and globalisation. This chapter includes an important exposition of the importance in the Ethiopian mindset of "The pattern of a charged centre surrounded by concentric circles of decreasing significance" (47, quoting D. Levine). In fact, Berga adopts this pattern for his own work (48).

After the chapter on Bakhtin, in his third chapter Berga presents the theology of the different Churches of Ethiopia. It is at this point that the deepest weakness of the book becomes most evident. Despite the fact that Evangelical and Pentecostal Churches now represent the second largest ecclesial family in the country after the Orthodox, they receive scant reference in this chapter, as at other crucial points in the discussion. Of course it is natural for Berga, a Roman Catholic, to provide a focus on the relationship of the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches, and this is well done both historically and in terms to contemporary understanding, but the near invisibility of Evangelical ecclesial communities (Kale Heywet, Mekane Yesus, Mulu Wongel, Meserete Kristos, etc.) and the need to explore how the proposed model of intersubjective dialogue might (or might not) resonate with Evangelical theology call for further exploration. This gap, however, does not detract from the intrinsic value of the current work.

In the cyclical nature of the book, the fourth chapter returns to a “re-thinking” of ecumenism in Ethiopia with important principles which would also be applicable in many other contexts. Here Berga brings together the important insights of Bakhtin, Jürgen Habermas and Emmanuel Levinas on the topic of ‘otherness’ or what he rather awkwardly calls the “architectonics of otherness”. He writes,

In an ecumenical dialogue, the concept of ‘extopy’ or “outsidedness” facilitates an ‘excess of seeing’, as it represents not the dialectical “either-or” but the dialogical “both-and”. The inherent transgression in the position of the Churches and ecclesial communities facilitates recognizing fruitfully the strengths and riches of their various traditions. A Christian “Other” can see elements of the “Other” in space and time, inaccessible to himself, since his perspective denies him full vision of all moments. The Christian Other reaches out to the other in order to come back with a new self, enlightened by “sympathetic co-experiencing”. This creative understanding is a dialogical response based on the irreducibility of both partners thus solving the problem of incommunicability. (178-9)

Continuing around the concentric circles, Berga then, in chapter six considers the possibilities of dialogue in “lived Christian life”, an important chapter which points to many opportunities for an ecumenical conversation of lives through art and architecture, culture, aesthetics, music, liturgy and sacred celebration. Key cultural ‘icons’ addressed here are the Holy Cross (as a symbol of unity and hope), the Virgin Mary, monastic life and the Tabot. It is at this point that there is real opportunity for others to add to Berga’s excellent work by expanding our understanding of how Evangelical Ethiopian communities might engage with this ecumenical journey.

Taking Berga’s main foci in chapter six, we might explore how an Evangelical theology of the cross and the sacrificial death of Christ relate to the Orthodox veneration of the Holy Cross and what the centrality of the Tabot in Orthodox liturgy and identity has to offer to the Evangelical interpretation of the Jewish Ark of the Covenant, the mercy seat, as a precursor to the advocatory role of the risen Christ who pleads the case of sinful humanity before the throne of God. More challenging, but equally important, conversations can be anticipated around the role of monastic life and the veneration of the Virgin Mary, although even here there are conversations to be had about the corporate life of ecclesial communities and the place of ‘Evangelical saints’ (Paul, Luther, Carmichael, Slessor, Graham, etc.) in Evangelical spirituality. A consideration of Mary could also open up conversations about the role of women in the Church which would be pertinent to both traditions.

The final chapter, serving as a conclusion, walks us again through the concentric circles of this ecumenical vision. After preliminary comments on methods, tactics and difference, we begin with the Trinity and move outwards from the ‘sacred centre’ to internal church dialogue, inter-church dialogue, inter-religious dialogue, civil society, ecology and a future shaped within Spirit-filled eschatological hope. In the closing pages, Berga returns to Emmanuel Levinas and his call “for a fundamental shift from each person, assertively defending one’s own perceived rights in completion with the other’s. Instead, [Levinas] prioritized the need to attend to and act upon one’s own specific responsibilities revealed in the ‘face’ of the other. Only in this way can the closed logic of competitive assertion and defence be translated by an imaginative and dynamic overcoming of stasis and an opening up fresh possibilities.” (318-19)

This is an important book for Ethiopian Churches as they seek a common way forward in the face of rising globalised postmodernity (and fundamentalist Islam) but also a book which can provide signposts to an ecumenical future based on dialogical kenosis in many different contexts.

Mark Oxbrow
Oxford Centre for Mission Studies
October 2020