

# **Africa: a Troubled Continent (9)**

## **Ethiopia: the oldest Independent Country in Africa (2)**

### **Italy's Rape of Ethiopia**

When Ethiopia entered the 20th century, it was still a largely feudal kingdom, ill-equipped to face the modern world. In 1930 Haile Selassie ascended the ancient throne and slowly moved the nation forward. But progress was abruptly halted when the fascist dictator Mussolini began the invasion of Ethiopia on 3 October 1935, not stopping to declare war and unconcerned that he was violating treaties. His aim was twofold. First, he wanted to take revenge. When Italy attempted to advance into Ethiopia in 1896 it was resoundingly defeated. Second, Mussolini had his own imperialistic ambitions. He viewed the invasion as a "war of civilization and liberation." The Italian Fascists believed in their own racial superiority. They called the Ethiopians "a horde of barbarian negroes." They said that the Ethiopians should know that fascist Italy was "the most intelligent among the nations," and "the mother of civilizations." When Italian armies invaded Ethiopia, sanctions were called for under the covenant of the League of Nations, but their applications were timorously ineffective. They only succeeded in angering Mussolini. The League of Nations "noted" and "deplored" the act of Fascist aggression, while Italian bombers sprayed mustard gas and fighters machine-gunned the fleeing survivors of the Ethiopian army. Emperor Haile Selassie went to Geneva to plead for help and justice. In a moving speech before the League of Nations he told the delegates that not only the very existence of the League was at stake, but "international morality" as well. His trip was in vain. Mussolini had achieved his empire. Now that the Italians had occupied Addis Ababa, the democracies hoped that Haile Selassie would resign to his fate. Italy's fascist regime launched a reign of terror. Many of the young intelligentsia were either deported or liquidated. By the time Ethiopian and British forces succeeded in liberating Ethiopia in 1941, the first generation of Ethiopian elementary-school teachers had been systematically exterminated and the development of the country set back for decades. The role of the Italian Roman Catholic Church during the years of Italian rule was less than noble. While technically neutral, it sought to take advantage of the 1935 invasion and hoped to bring the Church of Ethiopia into obedience to the Pope. After Mussolini's ambitious plans came to an inglorious end, Haile Selassie was restored to the throne. His successful defence of Ethiopia during its war with Italy furthered his program of modernization in church and state. His impact on the church was profound, leading ultimately to the independence of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church from the Coptic Church of Egypt in 1959, ending a dependency that began in 340 A.D.

### **Marxism**

In the 20th century Ethiopia struggled with the trauma of millions of deaths through war, oppression, and famine. Its calamitous history offers an open window to all the ideological and religious struggles which plagued Africa: colonialism, the clash between

Islam and Christianity, modernization versus traditional religions, and Marxism. Marxism became a new scourge for the Ethiopians. For centuries the Orthodox hierarchy, in its privileged position, remained silent while millions of Ethiopians suffered extreme poverty. I believe if the Orthodox church had remained true to its calling, then the history of Ethiopia could have taken a different course. The disastrous famine of 1973 led to economic chaos, industrial strikes, and mutiny among the armed forces. In 1974 Haile Selassie was overthrown by a group of army officers led by Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam. They swept away the feudal aristocracy and accepted a Marxist-Leninist ideology, with land reform policies and a political structure based partly on peasant associations. Mengistu's ideological Marxism meant the seizure of church property and the imprisonment of many church leaders. Although Haile Selassie and his family were accused of corruption, he never lost the reverence in which he is held by certain groups, notably the Rastafarians. This strange cult movement was founded in 1930 in Jamaica as a religious response to the coronation of Crown Prince Ras Tafari, as Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia. Some of its beliefs are: Haile Selassie is the living God, the black man is the reincarnation of Israel, and the black man will rule the world in the future. The movement has branches in other Caribbean islands, England, the United States, and Canada. Mengistu and his Marxist partners made many promises which proved to be cruel lies, as everywhere else in communist dictatorships. By the late 1980s, Ethiopia's economic problems had increased; collective farming had many shortcomings and the military regime under Mengistu had steered off its purist socialist course. It began large-scale privatization, but by then it was too late - Mengistu was overthrown in 1991. The experiment with Marxism left Ethiopia spiritually, economically and agriculturally bankrupt, and disintegrated. Unrest began in pockets all around the country. Religious freedom was restored under Prime Minister Meles Zenawi. On April 27, 1993, Eritrea declared independence after a referendum was passed by a landslide vote, ending years of bitter conflict with Ethiopia. In June 1994, Ethiopians went to the polls to elect a Constituent Assembly, whose members began the task of drafting a new constitution and preparing the country for multiparty election. Despite all the horrendous suffering the Orthodox church experienced over the centuries, it has survived. In *Next Christendom; the Coming of Global Christianity* Philip Jenkins points out that "even today, after lengthy conflicts with Muslims and, more recently, anti-clerical Marxists, the church claims some 25 million members." Although the Orthodox church has some beliefs and practices behind which we may rightly put a question mark, it is still a faith for which Ethiopian believers struggled and died for.

## **Evangelical Missions**

The post-World War II era saw the mushrooming growth of the evangelical Protestant churches. The largest Protestant ministry is the outgrowth of the work of the Sudan Interior Mission [SIM]. Back in 1928 the SIM had begun work in the Wallamo Province. By 1937, when the fascist Italians expelled the SIM missionaries, there were only 48 believers meeting in a handful of places. But these 48 people knew the Gospel message and had the Gospel of Mark in their language. Several of these Wallamo men diligently preached the Good News, with the result that many people believed. When the missionaries returned to Ethiopia in 1943, they met a miracle, which God had

performed during the Italian occupation. They found probably 10,000 believers in Wallamo. From 48 to 10,000 - an increase of 20,000% in just seven years! This denomination is known as the Kale Heywet Church (the Word of Life Evangelical Church.) Today it has approximately 2,500,000 baptized believers in 4,700 congregations. These evangelical believers have their own missions school and missionary outreach, ministries to human needs and development projects, Bible schools, theological colleges, women's and children's work, urban ministries program, and a literature center. Other evangelical denominations are also growing rapidly. They are all characterized by vision, sacrificial evangelism, and courageous witness. In 1960 Protestants were fewer than 200,000 and 0.8 % of the population. In 1990s they composed 14 percent of the population. But the rapid evangelical growth has drawn strong opposition from the Orthodox church. Although it had suffered intensely under the Marxist Mengistu regime, when Mengistu was overthrown it began to oppress possible competitors. Evangelical Protestants, especially, have been violently attacked. In other words, events have gone beyond discrimination and harassment to full-scale persecution. In his book *Their Blood Cries Out* Paul Marshall notes that the leadership of the Orthodox church in the post-Marxist era feels threatened by massive losses to more vigorous, younger evangelical churches, and there is rising opposition and localized persecution aimed at minimizing that growth. And he comments, "Real religious freedom will require the Orthodox churches to renounce their imperial pretensions. This doesn't mean that they should adopt some pallid imitation of Western liberalism or Protestant individualism, but it does mean openly facing a world where different religions will coexist in the same lands for the foreseeable future."

## **Conclusion**

Obviously, much more can be said about Ethiopia's fascinating and torturous history. But I can only say so much in two articles. I trust our readers will be moved to include this suffering country in their prayers. First, pray for Ethiopia's political leaders as their nation faces starvation, unrest, the threat of Islam, and secularization. Second, pray that Christians will use wisely the unprecedented opportunities for spreading the Gospel. Third, pray for the persecuted evangelical believers.

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