

Reflections on the Misguided Stance of Neutrality held by Some Diaspora EOTCs: A Critique of Professor Getachew Haile's Recent Posting on *Ethiomedia.com*

by
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Introduction

This is yet another small contribution, among others that this author has made in the most recent past, to the dialogue that has shaped the latest postings on issues concerning the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC). Thought-provoking analyses have appeared on the Diaspora Ethiopian websites immediately following the recent fiasco of the peace and unity meetings between the representatives of the two Holy Synods--- the Exiled and the home-based--- in the United States. For many keen observers and supporters of reconciliation, the final blow came, of course, with the arbitrary decision of the Holy Synod in Ethiopia---under duress from the regime--- to go forward with the installment of the sixth Patriarch in spite of the peace talks that could have resulted in the return of the exiled Patriarch, His Holiness Abune Merkorios, to his rightful throne. Once again, the Ethiopian regime's obsession with imposing its will illegally on the selection of the next Patriarch was clearly and unambiguously on display, as a small group of the Synod's members in Addis Ababa successfully put into action the government's bidding in a dramatic show of force, supported by the mighty hand of regime operatives. Many other colleagues have written insightful pieces on this very subject, providing critical but timely analyses.

At the same time, two latest postings, one written by the Holy Synod-in-Exile, and the other one appearing initially on *Ethiomedia.com* and having a possible impact on any future attempts of bringing unity among all Diaspora EOTCs, have particularly prompted this writing. The Synod's posting was a statement of declaration explaining the reasons why the recent peace talks with the Addis Ababa Synod failed, including the course of action it will take to strengthen its presence in the Diaspora from hereon; the decision of the Home Synod to reject the proposed return of the exiled Patriarch to his throne precipitated this declaration. The other posting came from no other than **Dr. Getachew Haile**, a renowned scholar of Philology but a controversial one. In effect, the latter advances a stance of continuing the neutrality of non-affiliated Diaspora EOTCs, thus preemptively striking against the recent call made by the Exiled Synod for unity and rapprochement between the churches under its jurisdiction and those that have stayed on neutral grounds since the official split of the Holy Synod more than two decades ago. In the view of this writer, however, continuing the neutrality stance would be tantamount to supporting the latest complicity of the regime in Addis Ababa, which in effect highjacked the process of selecting a new Patriarch to simply anoint a person of its choice. It would also inadvertently appear to be championing the existing divide that has beleaguered the Diaspora Orthodox community for so long. Further elucidation of this point will follow the introduction.

The Regime's Latest Action and its Consequences for the Diaspora EOTCs

Indeed, characterizing the sadness felt by many followers of the EOTC throughout the Diaspora about the failure of the peace talks as devastating would not be an exaggeration; the talks, if they had been

conducted in good faith and without regime treachery, would have brought back the Church to its pre-1991 era. For all its worth, that period was a time of relative tranquility, when the sanctity of the EOTC was faithfully maintained and the Church enjoyed, by and large, a respectable measure of stability and unity of purpose. This, of course, would change with the regime's coming to power in 1991 and the subsequent installment of the late Abune Paulos while the reigning Patriarch Abune Merkorios was still alive--- a violation of the Church's canon law. The divide that ensued within the Church in the aftermath has been at the root cause of discord within the Ethiopian Diaspora Orthodox community, compelling the faithful to choose sides while also making it problematic for them to forge a united front to impact positive changes at home. Still, many wishfully thought that the latest action of the government, that is, thwarting the desires of the esteemed Fathers of the two rival Synods for reconciliation and unity, would automatically translate into bringing together Ethiopians of different political and social persuasions against the regime. For the most part, many also felt it would restore the illusive unity that had been missing within the Diaspora in general and among the divided EOTCs in North America and elsewhere in particular. On its face value, the latest action of the Tigrean People's Liberation Front (TPLF)-dominated government in Addis Ababa should unequivocally prove even to many non-politically savvy members of our community the extent to which the regime's culpability has become never-ending, as it continues its unrestrained authoritarian rule over more than 86 million Ethiopians. Nothing is more revealing of this phenomenon than the regime's guiltiness in effecting both the dethronement of Patriarch Abune Merkorios 21 years ago and, most recently, the stage-management of the installment of the sixth Patriarch of the EOTC, which is expected to take place in the coming days.

Without a doubt, the regime in Ethiopia has proven once again its unwavering stance of neither making compromises with its opponents in the Diaspora and at home, nor of giving in to reconciliation efforts to bring a lasting peace in that country. In light of these facts, critical questions such as these readily come to mind: ***How and what exactly does neutrality serve the independent EOTCs in the Diaspora and for how long will the divide within the Ethiopian Orthodox Church be allowed to continue? On what rational, pragmatic and even canonical grounds can the ill-advised stance of neutrality be defended? Why would neutral EOTCs at this very juncture even wish to continue their neutrality as opposed to affiliation with their sister churches of the Exiled Synod, when considering the recent events that clearly exposed that the Holy Synod in Addis Ababa is only a political entity and/or an extension of the government in Ethiopia and thus lacking legitimacy? What benefit would it be to the neutral churches to cling to the notion that a Holy Synod cannot be run from exile in the face of evidence proving that the Home Synod is illegally controlled by a small cadre of clergymen who take their orders from the regime in power?*** We will decipher these issues next.

Rationale for the Existence of the EOTC Holy Synod in Exile

Neither Orthodox canonical law nor the dogma of the EOTC precludes the Holy Synod from launching a legitimate Patriarchate in exile and carrying out the teachings of the Lord. A Holy Synod, by dogma as well as practice, is a gathering of high-level clergymen who meet regularly and make religious decrees that are enforceable on member churches. The Patriarch and a few or more clergymen above the rank of Bishop together can legitimately create a Holy Synod. Under Orthodox canon law, a living Patriarch cannot be replaced with another without an abdication by the former of his position, or without the

collective action of the Holy Synod of the Church to remove him. Otherwise, it would be a violation of the canon law of Orthodoxy.

In the Ethiopian case, the canon law was violated in 1991, and the Patriarch, who was dethroned by the order of the regime, was forced into exile along with several Archbishops, thereby giving him the legitimacy to establish the Holy Synod in exile. For years, many of the faithful that make up largest segment of the membership within the neutral EOTCs had held the erroneous belief, grounded in the regime's disinformation propaganda, that Patriarch Abune Merkorios abdicated his position voluntarily. That has now been proven beyond a reasonable doubt that it was part of the regime's ploy to place someone of their choosing as the Head of the EOTC, which in this case was the late Abune Paulos. At the same time, recent events associated with the pending selection of the sixth Patriarch have also made it clear that the Synod in Ethiopia cannot be legitimate even more so now than ever before, because the government's dictate on the anointment of a Patriarch of its choosing is openly implemented by a minority group of Archbishops without any fear of retribution from the majority members of the Synod, whose members are being subjected to intimidation and threat against any deviation from the dictates of the regime. This fact alone must be good enough to accept the Holy Synod in exile as the legitimate body by all Diaspora EOTCs. Indeed, it is the exiled Synod that follows strictly the tradition and practices of the Church devoid of any governmental interference and pressure, unlike the Mother Church in Ethiopia.

Indefensibility of Neutrality under Oriental Orthodoxy

Looking at critically, the position of neutrality held by several Diaspora EOTCs can neither be rationalized on the canon law and religious dogma of Oriental Orthodoxy, nor can it be justified on any historical precedents established by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. It is rather a lame excuse to run an Ethiopian Orthodox Church devoid of a hierarchical order on the pretext that no two Holy Synods can exist at the same time. In effect, neutrality among several Diaspora EOTCs these days has taken the characteristics of the congregational model of church administration, which is typical of those found under the domain of Protestantism. Neutral EOTCs, for all practical purposes, have become more like Methodist, Baptist, Lutheran, Anglican and Presbyterian denominations in their ecclesiastical arrangement or church administration, but not necessarily in their practices and beliefs. These Western congregation-led church organizations operate independently, and thus do not prescribe to a higher ecclesiastical body in the same way as the Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox churches do. In this regard, the neutral EOTCs have fallen prey to the former group not necessarily because of shared principles of faith but because of their stubbornness to amend past wrongs. Their position at this very point simply defies logic to say the least, as well as trivializes our conviction on the collective sense of unity, as Orthodox believers.

While many of the neutral EOTCs may no longer have the pretexts that they have used in the past to remain neutral, a few still intend to do so dogmatically and without just cause. Mostly, two lame excuses were used in the past by those arguing for the neutral stand. The first and foremost defense used by them was that the Patriarch of the Exiled Synod gave up his position due to illness, and that he never uttered a word to dispel the rumors of his self-induced abdication of his throne while in exile for more

than a decade and a half. But this pretext has now run its course, as His Holiness has made a public speech just recently explaining the fact that he has over the years made it known, both in his public action and privately, that he would have liked to reclaim his position in Ethiopia as the legitimate Patriarch of the EOTC, had he been allowed to do so. During the last 17 years of exile, his public activities should have given some clue to those questioning his official department that he has been in charge and that his fellow Brothers within the Synod have been his staunchest supporters and advocates of his wishes as the symbol of the Patriarchate in exile. *For instance, he has presided over every one of the 34 biannual conferences of the Holy Synod held during the same period. Moreover, he has conscripted 13 new Bishops and charged his clergymen with expanding their missionary work across the globe where the Diaspora Orthodox communities live and work. What further evidence is needed to prove that he has been actively engaged during his tenure as the Head of the Exiled Synod?*

The second and commonly used pretext by advocates of neutralism was that so long as the EOTC Holy Synod was split into two, neutrality would be the preferred stand that they would prefer, adding that the return of the Patriarch to the throne through reconciliation would make them embrace the Synod once again. However, whatever optimism or hope that there was a few months ago about the return of the Patriarch to Ethiopia and about the possibility of reconciliation for a lasting peace and unity within the Church has practically evaporated under the force of the regime. The illegality of the Home Synod must be evident to many by now since the government has become the driving force behind the decision to reconcile or not reconcile; and a Synod that is subject to regime manipulations cannot be legitimate, nor can it be regarded as one having the integrity and the will to speak for the faithful or uphold the values that advance the national interest, as viewed by the great majority of Orthodox believers. This fact begs neutral ETOCs to rethink their misguided position for the betterment of the whole, and for sake of unity from which the collective strength of our community can be marshaled to make a difference in all aspects of societal engagements.

Statement of Declaration from the Exiled Synod

The Synod-in-Exile held a special meeting recently in Los Angeles and issued a public declaration that outlines several points, ranging from the failure of the peace talks with the Home Synod to the proposed activities that it wishes to engage in, since the return of the Patriarch to Ethiopia and peace and reconciliation efforts have reached a dead end. The official communiqué in and by itself is a well-thought out document that has the potential of appealing to the many segments of the Diaspora community, including neutral churches. In the view of this author, the esteemed Fathers of the Exiled Synod now are in a better position to make their case for acceptance by the great majority of the faithful in the Diaspora because much of the confusion emanating from unsubstantiated information on the Patriarch and the rest of membership of the Synod has been completely extricated, if not debunked entirely.

In essence, what the outcome of the peace talks and the events that followed have done for the Exiled Synod is that it made the argument for a stronger Exiled Synod more palatable; it has placed the Synod in a much stronger position vis a vis the Holy Synod in Ethiopia. The talks also revealed that the Exiled Synod presented itself as an entity that had force behind its talking points while conducting the

reconciliation meeting in good faith. In contrast, the representatives of the Home Synod were under constant pressure from regime operatives in Ethiopia and seemed to be lacking independence in their bargaining positions on the resolution of the issues brought on the table. Of course, the whole scenario began to unravel upon their return, as the government highjacked the course of action that the representatives would have favored to take; it is no secret that they would have liked the Patriarch to return home for the sake of uniting the divided Church. It was in the context of this backdrop that the Exiled Synod sought to reach out through its communiqué to the neutral EOTCs to position itself in a way that will help augment its role throughout the Diaspora Orthodox communities. This is to include expanding its missionary work as well as serving the Diaspora faithful in their spiritual needs, among others. The communiqué, both for its conciliatory tone and plan of action, should make all past detractors of the Exiled Synod to rethink rationally and join the esteemed Fathers in exile in their new endeavor to expand the Church's missionary work as well religious services throughout the Diaspora.

Cynical Retort from Professor Getachew Haile to the Synod's Communiqué

In what appeared to be a derisive response to the Synod's statement of declaration, Dr. Getachew wrote a piece that was unbecoming of a scholarly figure, whose renowned public stature is widely recognized particularly in Ethiopian intellectual circles. In many respects, however, Dr. Getachew is also a divisive force, although this may sound too harsh on someone who has made stellar, scholarly contributions to Ethiopian languages, history and literary development. He is both admired and derided by many. He may be regarded by some as a model to be emulated, but others may see him as an embodiment of division, drawing criticisms mostly from his ardent critics. Yet this writer has been an admirer of this scholarly genius. However, his continued stand on neutrality on the Holy Synod has been rather dogmatic in the sense that he has not changed a bit over the years even with new developments that could possibly trigger a rethinking of his views, which happen to be contentious at times and may have broader implications for the unity and solidarity of Ethiopians in the Diaspora. A scholar of high stature, Dr. Getachew made a huge gaffe by sending mixed signals in his latest posting; he may have even made his readers more confused than they needed to be. At the time of this writing, he has already provoked two postings aimed at challenging his advocacy of neutrality, and a few others might follow.

The underlying premise in Dr. Getachew's latest writing is that the EOTC, as we know it, is not divided and that neutrality should be the preferred stance for churches in the Diaspora, so long as two rival religious entities (Holy Synods) claim to be a representative of the Church's highest ecclesiastical body. In a commentary written in Amharic and titled, "Our Mother Church is not Divided," the senior professor alludes to a reason that the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is not split because there are not known doctrinal issues that have created a division within the Church. The crux of his argument, therefore, is that the high-ranking clergymen that make up the Ethiopian Holy Synod are divided into two groups, forcing the faithful to either take sides or declare allegiance to their respective cause. Apparently, his prescription for the faithful is not only to ignore this non-doctrinal rift within the Church, but also to look beyond the artificial dividing line and worship in churches irrespective of their affiliation with one Synod or another.

Looking at critically his rational for neutrality in his article, I beg to question the state of mind in which the renowned professor was operating when he wrote it. This writer finds it absolutely ludicrous to read an assertion from him that the EOTC is not divided today. Contrary to his claim, the Church has been divided for more than two decades because of doctrinal issues: the forced dethronement of a living Patriarch and replacing him with another in violation of canonical law. There cannot be any denial of this fact in the case of Ethiopia. Secondly, the EOTC in the Diaspora is divided into three organized groups: churches that claim affiliation to the Exiled Synod; churches that maintain loyalty to the Home Synod; and churches that belong to neither group. This is also a fact that neither Dr. Getachew nor any other concerned Orthodox believer would dare refuting. Furthermore, the assertion that there are no practical reasons that preclude the faithful from attending any of the EOTC churches at any given time also begs further probing.

With all due respect to Dr. Getachew, the paramount question to be asked of him is, does he not really know that the division among Diaspora churches is not only real but also pervasive throughout the Diaspora churches? In fact, the divide is so widespread that it has split family members and friends in some cases, often based on which church one is a supporter of, or which Synod is a church affiliated with, or whether one is a member of a neutral church, and so forth. This divide has been going on for years unabated, and to deny otherwise would be disingenuous at best and outright dishonest at worst. To advance this argument, a case in point can be made. For instance, the city in which this writer lives is the site of four EOTCs, one of them a well established church with a large membership that is neutral; one smaller church affiliated with the Exiled Synod; and two smaller churches, one leaning to the Home Synod and the other a neutral church that split from it. It is a well established fact that the clergy of each of these churches are prohibited by their boards to celebrate each other's special church holydays because of the dividing line created by the crisis in the EOTC Holy Synod. This case alone proves the fallacy of Dr. Getahcew's argument that the Ethiopian Orthodox church is not in a crisis of division. If the illustrated case is not the side-effect of such a division, one must ask, what else could it be?

It is indeed ironic that Dr. Getachew wrote the article right after he had purportedly made peace with the high-ranking members of the Exiled Holy Synod, with whom he has had a strained relationship for several years due to his opposition to the Synod and its mission and goals. During his recent visit to Los Angeles to celebrate Timiket (Epiphany), Dr. Getachew reportedly reconciled his past estrangement with the General Secretary of the Synod, requesting for the latter's forgiveness, which was a gracious and novel thing to do on the part of the professor. However, his latest writing seemed to have put him at odds once again with the Synod's core mission of reaching out to individuals and churches that are embracing the neutral posture. His ideas, as denoted in his article, definitely run contrary to the goal of the reinvigorated Exiled Synod without any doubt. Again, Dr. Getachew has often been prone to controversy in good as well as bad times. I just wish he could see the larger picture this time and take a vanguard role in advancing the interest and unity of the Diaspora EOTCs. Which religious entity could have the potential of bringing such unity other than the Exiled Synod? It would be a remarkable and even a pragmatic undertaking for Dr. Getachew to reverse course and become the staunchest supporter of unity, validating the institutional appeal of the Holy Synod-in-Exile to bring together all Diaspora EOTCs under one and united body. After all, the good old professor was once the brain trust behind the

establishment of the same Synod that he so denounces despondently today. It is a well-known fact that at the time when the late Archbishop Abune Yisehaq was leading the charge during the early stages of the Synod's establishment, Dr. Getachew played a major role in it, advising His Eminence and others with enthusiasm and optimistic zeal.

Conclusion

In this brief critique, the author attempted to equate the neutrality posture pursued by several Ethiopian Orthodox churches in the Diaspora with the perpetuity of discord among the faithful. Using both Dr. Getachew's article on *Ethiomediamedia.com* as well as the statement of declaration issued recently by the Exiled Synod as a point of departure, a critical scrutiny of Diaspora EOTCs that claim neutrality was made, while providing the rationale for the possible fusion of such churches with the rest of the affiliated sister churches of the Exiled Synod. It was proven that the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in the Diaspora suffers terribly from a division, contrary to what Dr. Getachew would have us believe. Therefore, unity is surely and urgently needed in our community. Neutrality on faith begets crisis of despair more so than feelings of confidence, solidarity or even fellowship, which are undoubtedly the hallmarks of unity as well as an imperative for the collective security and wellbeing of a people. In the humble opinion of this writer, neutrality on faith is simply counterproductive to our sense of unity and solidarity, and it has neither canonical nor practical justifications for us to pursue it, as a community of Oriental Orthodox followers.

Given the backdrop above, the pragmatic and compelling action needed in the immediate future is for the neutral EOTCs and the Exiled Synod to call for a summit immediately first to clear up the misunderstanding that has caused the rift for several years and then map out a strategy that will not only foster unity among all the Diaspora EOTCs under the auspices of the latter, but also help expand the religious work needed to advance the expansion and services of our Church across the globe. With unity comes a collective strength that can be marshaled readily for the betterment of our people, wherever they may be.