

“Neutral” Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Churches (EOTCs) in the Diaspora: Is it not High Time to Take a Principled Stand?

by
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Introduction

In this brief commentary, the writer attempts to show the extent to which the recently-concluded peace and unity mediation of bringing the two EOTC Holy Synods into one was doomed from the start, and why it miserably failed despite the gallant effort of the mediators. Furthermore, the author posits that the time is now ripe for the “neutral” EOTCs to join their sister churches of the Holy Synod in exile in light of the failure of the peace mission. Using the facts that came to light during the course of the mediation, the writer makes an objective assessment of the issues affecting the status of unity within the EOTC, both in the Diaspora and in Ethiopia. Critical for this analysis are recent reports that have characterized both the haste with which the Home Synod is preparing to install a new Patriarch in Ethiopia, and the Ethiopian government’s continued policy of meddling in the affairs of the Church. This turn of event has come despite the seemingly promising pronouncement made by the representatives of the two squabbling Holy Synods in the aftermath of their peace and unity confab in Dallas, Texas.

The Context and Failure of the Mediation Mission

During the last three years, peace and unity mediators, consisting of concerned EOTC clergymen assisted by a few members of the laity, have made a genuine effort to bring the division between the two Holy Synods to a close, while aiming to restore the sanctity of the Church that has been severely damaged by the division. However, the three rounds of talks that took place in the U.S. did not substantively alter the status of the schism within the Church, which has profoundly bedeviled it for more than two decades. The major cause of the division, of course, was the Ethiopian regime’s installment of the late Abune Paulos in 1991 as the Patriarch of the EOTC illegally and in contravention of the Orthodox canon law. This was done by replacing Archbishop Abune Merkorios, the reigning Head of the Church at the time. The government’s action led subsequently to the establishment, in North America, of a Synod in exile led by the dethroned Patriarch, with a group of Archbishops and other clergymen supporting his cause. Since then, the Church has been in a state of paralysis, as EOTCs throughout the Diaspora became highly consumed with the crisis, and, in many cases, even embroiled with further division of their own, as they became either the supporters of the Synod in exile or of the Synod at home. Some among these churches also took a neutral stand, which has no canonical basis in Oriental Orthodoxy, to which all EOTCs are supposed to prescribe in theory as well as in practice.

The breakthrough that was expected of the meeting between the teams of the representatives of the two Holy Synods in Dallas in the first week of December 2012 never materialized.

Nonetheless, the members of the ***Council of Peace and Unity of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church*** should still be applauded for their effort. In retrospect, however, their mission was simply based on what may be termed as “wishful thinking,” which in essence was an exaggerated sense of faith and trust in the role that mediation has played historically to resolve disputes in Ethiopia. At the same time, the mediators seemed to have failed in recognizing this fact: the prevalence in Ethiopia today, and for the most part during the last 21 years, of a regime that gives not even an inch of compromise on anything that has the potential of changing the status quo, which, in effect, means maintaining the supremacy of its minority rule over all other Ethiopian ethnic groups without any limit to its domination. In other words, the mediators were under the false illusion that the members of the Holy Synod in Ethiopia were free to determine the fate of the return of the exiled Patriarch without realizing that the regime has been the driving force, all along, in determining whether Patriarch Abune Merkorios was to be reinstated to his former position or not. It has become clearer to all keen observers now that the regime has its own Patriarch in mind. The fact that the Tigrean People Liberation Front (TPLF)-dominated government in Addis Ababa had made the decision to install a Patriarch of its choice, replacing the deceased Abune Paulos, a Tigrean, with another of the same ethnicity, was in itself the cause d’être for the failure of the peace and unity mediation.

This is not, however, to deny the fact that there are among the esteemed Fathers of the Holy Synod in Ethiopia who have a genuine interest in ending the divide within the EOTC, and their wish is naturally the return of the exiled Patriarch to his rightful place. But this group may either have been outnumbered by those following the regime’s directives or simply have now succumbed to the pressure placed upon them by the government to go along with the regime’s wishes. Whether this is the case or not, time only will tell. Yet there is concrete evidence pointing to the fact--- supported by the latest reports in Ethiopian websites quoting independent and reliable sources within the Synod in Ethiopia--- that the Holy Synod in Addis Ababa is indeed on the verge of choosing the 6th Patriarch of the EOTC. This, of course, would be contrary to the spirit and terms of the joint communiqué announced by the representatives of the two holy Synods after the meeting in Dallas. That communiqué noted that another round of mediation would take place in January in Los Angeles to continue the peace process. In light of the new developments in Addis Ababa, however, whether such a meeting will be held as scheduled remains to be seen.

As of late, it has been reported that a division has emerged within the Addis Ababa Synod itself between those wanting to withhold the election of a new Patriarch until the outcome of the fourth mediation meeting, and those who are advocates of the government’s wish and thus proceeding with the anointment of a successor to the late Abune Paulos. At the time of this writing, the latter group, which appears to be the majority within the Holy Synod, has reportedly the upper hand in the rivalry that seems to be unraveling. The regime’s mighty pressure on the Synod’s membership to follow the “official line” on the selection of the Patriarch may have played a major part in this instance.

The mediators ultimately found out, along with the overly anxious faithful of the Church, that the Holy Synod in Ethiopia has violated the terms of the agreement that the envoys from Addis

Ababa signed jointly with their counterparts from the Exiled Synod. One among the terms was the cessation of any provocative action by each Synod that will lead to the demise of the talks. After finding the sad news that the Synod in Addis Ababa was getting ready to conduct the election of the Patriarch, which they viewed as a clear violation of the terms of the agreement reached at the talks, the mediators issued a public statement on December 21, 2012 that criticized the move to do so. In the statement, they clearly lamented that the effort they had invested was in vain, adding that the promise to keep the talks going was hijacked by a group within the Addis Ababa Holy Synod that was determined to elect a new Patriarch contrary to the spirit and terms of the agreement made at the meeting in Dallas. However, the mediators avoided in their pronouncement the regime's "secretive hand" in the matter, knowing well that such a public communiqué blaming the regime for the standoff would be politically "suicidal."

What next for the "Neutral" EOTCs in the Diaspora?

The precarious position under which the neutral EOTCs in the Diaspora find themselves is hard to dissect thoroughly in an opinion as limited in scope as this one is. What is at stake, however, is that the time has become ripe for the so-called neutral EOTCs to take the righteous course of action and remain within the realm of legitimacy, as followers of Oriental Orthodoxy. In this regard, only two options are available to these churches: joining the Exiled Synod, or choosing the Home Synod by default. Neutrality should no longer be an option for these churches from hereon, and never should have been in the first place. Yet, in the view of this writer, the neutral churches would be better off seeking a formal affiliation with the Synod in Exile for several practical reasons, which will be made clear in the paragraphs below.

Indeed, recent events associated with the reconciliation effort for peace and unity within the Church have not only brought more clarity about the forced removal of the exiled Patriarch by the regime in power, but also debunked many of the falsehoods that were propagated against those Fathers who created the Exiled Synod in North America. The issues that were raised by opponents of the Exiled Synod, many of whom are among the leadership of the neutral churches in the Diaspora, have been fully addressed. Most if not all had justified their neutrality based on the erroneous assumption or using the pretext that the exiled Patriarch had vacated his seat on his own will due to illness, which was unmistakably a government-concocted public disclosure that has since been found to be baseless.

During the last two years, several pieces of evidence corroborating the real causes of the dethronement of Patriarch Abune Merkorios have been made public, thanks to several Ethiopian-based websites and other forms of media in the West. More troublesome is also the regime's covert intervention in the selection of yet another Patriarch of its own liking, an act which is increasingly becoming distressful to the faithful in the Diaspora as well in Ethiopia. Given these facts, any recognition of or association with a government-controlled Holy Synod in Addis Ababa would be tantamount to accepting the rule of dictatorship in Ethiopia. Above all, it would not be in the long-term interest of the unaffiliated churches to remain neutral, nor would it be a defensible choice for them to recognize the Addis Ababa Synod at this time.

The need to align the neutral churches with the Exiled Synod can be reasonably justified on both religious and political grounds. Since politics and religion are interwoven in the Ethiopian socio-political dynamics, as they are in all countries regardless of size and location, the justification to unite against regime injustice in society must supersede all aspects of group differences. Since the start of the split in the Holy Synod of the EOTC, the religious argument for neutrality used by the independent churches has stemmed from the belief that no two Holy Synods can legitimately exist at the same time. While recognizing the rightful place of Abune Merkorios as the reigning Patriarch of the EOTC, they were equally opposed to his flight from a possible persecution to which he could have been subjected under the regime that orchestrated his removal. They felt that the Patriarch should have remained at home and stood up to the government even by sacrificing his own life for the sake and honor of the Church.

Looking at it from a religious point of view, the argument that the Head of the EOTC should sacrifice his life **“to make a point”** is one that makes little sense. Given the potential that, if Abune Merkorios had remained inside Ethiopia, he would have been “eliminated” by the government to smooth the pathway for the regime’s handpicked Abune Paulos, one then wonders about the benefit that would have been gained by challenging the rulers at that time. As the “dagger or sword” of the regime was pointed at the Patriarch’s head, his handlers wisely took the safest and humanly possible course of action---escorting him to his temporary exile in Kenya. In essence, his flight into exile did deny the full legitimacy of Abune Paulos’s installment as the 5th Patriarch of the EOTC. Still, under no circumstances would there have been any religious justification for Abune Merkorios to remain in his native land under a threat of persecution or even outright elimination in ways that the 2nd Patriarch, Abune Tewofilos, met his fate at the hands of the Derg. No purpose would have been served for Abune Merkorios to possibly die in vain just to create a room for the ascension of Abune Paulos to the throne. Neither our Creator nor a true believer of Orthodox Christianity would condone the sacrifice of one’s life to make a “political statement,” which would have been the case in this instance.

With the recent death of Abune Paulos, many of the Ethiopian Orthodox faithful in the Diaspora were expressing hope that the unity of the Church under the remaining Patriarch would be restored and that the division among the EOTCs outside Ethiopia would also be an issue of the past. By and large, this would have fulfilled the desire of the entire Orthodox community, which has despondently agonized over the years with the highly unpopular split of the EOTC. However, it now appears that the unity demanded by the faithful has become once again more elusive, at least by the time of this writing. The main culprit for this is again the regime in Ethiopia, which has created the hurdle against reconciliation, peace and unity within the troubled Church. The long-awaited unity could surely have come about with the return of the exiled Patriarch, who has repeatedly expressed his wish to re-assume his former position and bring the schism within the Church to an end.

It is against this backdrop that the neutral churches must make the bona fide choice and become once again compliant with the principles and creed of the Orthodox faith, which could only be accomplished **by doing away with neutrality as they know it**. The neutral churches must be mindful of the government’s yearning to choose yet another Patriarch, as it did 21

years ago. As the regime's role in this matter becomes more evident in the weeks to come, the potentiality of being affiliated with the Addis Ababa Synod would be tenuous at best and objectionable at worst. This would be definitely an option for supporters of the regime, not for its opponents. It is an option that could also further beget turmoil within the Diaspora churches, since the legality of installing another Patriarch while the one dethroned is still alive would be an issue that would not go away easily. Thus, it would be advisable for the neutral churches to think this through and make the right call based of the circumstances that have emerged since the death of Abune Paulos. Again, the most practical alternative for them would be to make room for rapprochement with the distinguished Fathers of the Exiled Synod. It would be to everyone's interest to ensure that the unity of the Church in the Diaspora at least is maintained while looking to a future of unity of the Church under circumstances favorable to such an eventuality. In this writer's opinion, it would be unreasonable to think that the unity of the Church would ever come in the foreseeable future unless the grip of minority ethnic power is loosened and inclusiveness, as opposed to exclusiveness, becomes the guiding principle of rulership in Ethiopia once again.

The political dimension of doing away with neutrality and joining the Exiled Synod-affiliated churches by the neutral churches could have a far important implication for the struggle against minority ethnic oligarchy in Ethiopia, as well. The faithful, whether their affiliation is with the Diaspora neutral churches or with those of the Exiled Synod-affiliated ones, as a whole are unhappy about governance in their country of birth. Many who are politically savvy and take a proactive stand on the pitfalls of ethnic-based federalism in Ethiopia know too well that to bring a lasting peace and a democratic rule in Ethiopia, the opposition must put pressure on the regime in power, so the ruling elites can be forced into negotiation to map out the future of the country and be made to opt for inclusiveness rather than for exclusiveness or monopoly of power. The regime's practices of governance have strikingly demonstrated control and dominance of all facets of the Ethiopian society during its more than two-decade of rule over the Horn of Africa country. This has come at the expense of disunity among the government's opposition, both at home and abroad. Unity throughout the Diaspora among opponents of the regime has been elusive so far, although as of late there are some positive indications that several organized groups are now coalescing around common national issues and developing gradually and solidly into a collective force to be reckoned with. As they become more aware that disunity within the Diaspora opposition has only helped the regime in Ethiopia to solidify its position of dominance while thwarting any possible pressure on it, they are now keen to come to together to collectively use all of the means at their disposal to push for the desirable regime change in Ethiopia.

In order to have the struggle for democracy and against ethnic minority rule bear fruit, the forces of opposition in the Diaspora must work in unison without the divisiveness that has beleaguered the Ethiopian Diaspora communities throughout the world for so long. Among the root causes of this disunity is the lack of harmony among the EOTCs across North America and elsewhere. If all the churches, especially those claiming to be neutral, were to come under the umbrella of the Holy Synod in exile, the potential benefit to the unity of the Diaspora opposition could be immeasurable. Mobilizing support and leveraging resources for a common

goal would be immensely enhanced, as would be diplomatic pressure on foreign governments supporting the regime at home. When this is matched with the interests of other non-Orthodox groups who share the political objectives of their brethren within the Orthodox community, the unity in diversity that could be marshaled against the regime would be insurmountable. The opposition can only be effective and have a meaningful force of power and influence, so long as such a unity is forged and put to effective use to bring about the needed change in Ethiopia.

It is no secret that the faithful within the many if not all neutral churches are avowed opponents of the ethnically-based political system that has been imposed on Ethiopians by the regime in power. They are equally saddened to find that the centuries-old Orthodox Church there has been under an enormous distress following the taking of power by the regime that uses ethnicity as the driving force of political decision-making, nation-building, and social re-engineering. The more the neutral churches see the government's domination of faith-groups in Ethiopia, the more likely their interest intersects not only with their brethren in the Orthodox faith, but also with those of other Christian denominations, as well with the followers of the Muslim faith. The unity within the Orthodox community in the Diaspora is therefore is one without which the struggle for democracy and rule of law can be waged in full force; and that unity could come about with the neutral churches abandoning the unorthodox practice of neutrality on faith, particularly in one that has never been the case in its storied existence since the 4th century A.D.

Conclusion

In this review, two interrelated points have been made with respect to the EOTC: explaining the futility of the mediation mission undertaken by a group of mediators, who made the noble endeavor to bring about reconciliation between the two rival EOTC Synods; and, more importantly, giving reasons for why the neutral EOTCs in the Diaspora should join the Holy Synod in exile should the regime in Ethiopia make good on getting a new Patriarch of its choosing elected, as expected. On the second point, in particular, the paper attempted to make a strong case for affiliation by neutral churches with the Synod in exile, arguing that the alternative would be neither religiously defensible nor politically palatable in light of minority-based authoritarian governance in Ethiopia. After all, the EOTC has seemingly become an appendage of the regime--- one that is overwhelmingly detested by the Diaspora Orthodox community, as well as by followers of other faiths. The writer persuasively advances the notion that the neutral churches should abandon their neutrality, both as a protest against installation of a new Patriarch while another is alive, and the government's continued intransigence against peaceful change in Ethiopia through negotiation and compromise. It has been further argued that unity among all the Diaspora EOTCs under the umbrella of the Synod in exile better serves both the political and religious objectives of the Orthodox Ethiopian Diaspora community, as we face a regime that continues to rule by force rather than through dialogue and political transparency.