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Presence in the West

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New Immigrant Congregations and Transnational Networks in North America and Europe

Edited By

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Chapter 8

AN EXPLORATION INTO THE RELIGIOUS LIFE OF ERITREAN IMMIGRANTS IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Tekle Woldemikael and Mesghina G. Medhin

Introduction

This essay deals with the religious life of Eritreans in the Unites States of America (USA). By religious life, we mean how the Eritrean communities practice religion in Diaspora. In their book, *Gathering in Diaspora* (1998), R. Stephen Warner and Judith G. Wittner state that there has insufficient focus on the social aspects of the religious life of immigrants and especially on "... what new ethnic and immigrant groups were *doing together religiously* in the United States, and what manner of religious institutions they were developing *of, by, and for themselves*" (Warner and Wittner 1998:8-9). Studies instead have centred their attention on the local, face-to-face religious assemblies, in other words, the congregations and not on the teachings, scriptures, buildings, and national umbrella organisations.

Similarly, Helen Rose Ebaugh and Janet Saltzman Chafetz who have studied immigrant congregations, used the term congregation to mean "very broadly, groupings of people who gather together for religious purposes and who create an ongoing structure in which to worship, share a religious tradition, interact as a group, and attempt to raise their children with specific religious beliefs, customs, rituals, and values" (2000:10). As a result, they too have lamented the absence of research on the social aspects of religious life of immigrants, and the lacuna of the religious life of Eritrean immigrants is not an exception.

This essay deals with the things that Christian Eritreans do *together, of, by, and for themselves*. It should be noted that within the Eritrean national identity there are nine ethnic and two religious groupings, Muslims and Christians. Out of the nine ethnic groups, the Tigrinya speaking Christian population constitutes at least 50% of the population and more than 90% of the Eritrean immigrants in the Unites States and Canada (Woldemikael 1998). Since the Tigrinya speaking Christians are dominant and involved in the various sectors of community-based, organisational activities of Eritreans in the US, this essay will deal with the social life of Tigrinya-speaking Christians. It describes how Eritrean immigrants, who were few in number and scattered across many parts of the US, with limited religious activities in the 1960s and 1970s, have become a much larger population, with many diverse religious institutions by and for themselves during the last thirty years. But first we will describe the methodology used in this essay.

Methodology

The methodology employed in this essay is participatory action research, which is defined as an approach to empower people through the process of constructing and using their own knowledge to increase the relevance of the research process (Whyte, Greenwood and Lazes 1991:20). Participatory action research includes involving the individuals under study directly in the research process, collaboration between community members and researchers and often aiming in engendering action towards solving communal concerns or issues.[1]

Eritreans as the New African Immigrants in the US

The presence of new African immigrants in the US has increased substantially in the last forty years, especially since the passage of the 1965 immigration act, which brought more ethnic and religious diversity to the racial and ethnic make up of the US. The total number of African-born immigrants in the US was more than 1, 000,000 in 2003 (Olupona 2007:28). Some of these new African immigrants are Eritreans. What most Eritreans share in common is the fact that they are from a nation that was carved out by the surgical interjection of a colonial power, the Italians, into the Horn of Africa, and created into a colony named Eritrea in 1890. The people, who lived in that former colony, identify themselves as Eritreans. The United Nations and the world community have accepted Eritrea as an independent nation after Eritreans conducted an internationally supervised referendum in which 99% of the population voted for the independence of Eritrea from Ethiopia.

Eritrea has a complicated recent history. The Italians ruled Eritrea from 1869-1941, when they were defeated by the British army. The British ruled Eritrea for ten years, from 1941-1952. During these ten years of British rule, the United Nations conducted a referendum among Eritreans and came up with a decision to federate Eritrea with Ethiopia. Ethiopia ruled Eritrea from 1951 to 1991, when a freedom organisation named the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front defeated the Ethiopian army in Eritrea. On May 24, 1993, Eritrea declared its official separation from Ethiopia and became the newest independent state in Africa. This event marked the end of the thirty-year Ethio-Eritrean War (1961-1991), the longest war in African history and one of the longest in recent world history (Woldemikael 1998).

Soon after claiming its independence, the new Eritrean regime surprisingly began to repress religious groups it believed posed a challenge to its authority. Its first victims of persecution were the Jehovah Witnesses, who were singled out because they refused to participate in the government-sponsored popular referendum of 1993. The persecution of others religious groups, including various Christian denominations and Muslims of various persuasions, followed suit. At the same time, the new Eritrean regime increased the militarisation of society through enforcing national service among the youth. While national service began as a two-year requirement in 1994, it has subsequently turned into an unending service that has been going on for more than a decade. There are young men and women who began their national service some thirteen years ago with a promise to be released after two years who are still serving today without respite. While the youth are trained as soldiers to defend the highly contested borderlands between Ethiopia and Eritrea, they are also treated as forced labourers, constructing roads, bridges, buildings, and dams. The religious repression and unending national service has led young Eritrean men and women to leave home and migrate to various parts of the world in search of refuge and asylum. As a result, most of the Eritreans who came to the US were refugees and asylum seekers from domestic repression before and after independence.

Migration Patterns and Religious Life

Immigrants often bring their religious faith with them and try to recreate their faith in their new home. According to Warner, what is so distinct about the immigrants who have come in the last forty years is the expansion of the boundaries of American religious pluralism (Warner and Wittner 1998) beyond European and early African communities. The Eritrean case fits this pattern. By coming to the US, Christian Eritreans have brought religious and ethnic diversity to the religious pluralism of American society as well as ethnic diversity within the black population of the US. What is often overlooked is that even though they are all Christian Eritreans who speak the same language, they bring multiple and intersecting religious identities to American society, while their internal diversity links them to other religious groups in Africa and the US (Hepner 2003). Our description of the transformation and growth of religious activities and institutionalisation among Eritreans in the US during the past thirty years can therefore best be understood by classifying the immigration patterns into the following three periods of history.

The First Period (1960s to the late 1970s)

The first wave of Eritrean immigrants which came into the US during this period included two groups. Those who came in the 1960s were few, numbering not more than a couple of hundred. They came mostly as students and with a few professionals. Most lived in metropolitan Los Angeles and Washington D.C. These included a diverse group of Christians including Orthodox, Protestants and Roman Catholics, although the majority was Orthodox. During this period, the significance of religion in their lives was limited and their social life rotated around finishing their education and professional work experience and returning to their homeland. A few in their free time after school or work actively followed the politics of the independence of Eritrea from Ethiopia.

Those who came in 1960s and 1970s were mostly students of Orthodox Christian origin, and the rest were Protestant and Roman Catholic. They were a generation that came of age in the 1960s and 1970s rejecting their parents' Orthodox faith. They saw the Orthodox Church as backwards, ignorant, conservative, oppressive, and unquestioning supporters of the oppressive regime of Emperor Haile Selassie I (1892-1975), who ruled Ethiopia for over fifty years until he was overthrown in 1974. They were a part of the generation that embraced communist and socialist worldviews and distanced themselves from their parents' perceived conservative religious outlook and lifestyle. Instead, they aimed at reconstituting their society into a new modern nation.

Some of the students who came to the US during this period were born from Protestant or Evangelical families in Eritrea. Some had converted from their parent's Orthodox faith to Evangelical Protestantism while still in Eritrea. When they came to the US, they expected that their American Evangelical Christians counterparts would welcome them, inviting them to preach in their churches. Unfortunately, they did not receive the warm hospitality they expected from the churches. These former Eritrean Evangelical Christians saw such reception as racism. Many therefore shifted their attention from religion to the politics of their homeland, focusing on the political crisis and the revolution then raging in their home of origin, while they found companionship and friendships from their other Eritrean student activists resident in the US.

More immigrants and asylum seekers came after the overthrow of the Emperor Haile Selassie's rule in 1974. Most were political exiles that opposed the new regime in Ethiopia and included army officers, middle-level bureaucrats, students, professionals, and skilled urban workers. As with the first group, they were focused on their educational and professional careers and some on the politics of their homeland (Ghebremedhin 1997:62). They were united in their political outlook towards the events in their home country, especially supporting one political organisation, the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF) that opposed and conducted armed uprisings against the Ethiopian rule in Eritrea. They saw themselves as sojourners, who were planning to return home and had no intention of staying in the US.

The Second Period (1980-1991)

In 1974, a revolutionary regime known as the Dergue (lit: 'Committee') overthrew Emperor Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia. Declaring itself as socialist in 1975, the Dergue took power into its own hands, unleashing a reign of terror for seventeen years until its formal demise in 1991. It established a one party state and strongly suppressed any political opposition to its rule. The second wave of immigrants came to the US due to the terror, violence, torture, and persecution they experienced or feared they might experience in their country under the Dergue.

This was also the period when independent, Charismatic, and particularly Pentecostal congregations began to grow in size and popularity in Ethiopia and Eritrea. One can make a correlation with the increased political repression and authoritarian rule in Ethiopia, and the Pentecostal movements thriving in Ethiopia and Eritrea. Their competition for followers among the youth brought them in direct conflict with the established Orthodox, Lutheran, and Roman Catholic churches in Ethiopia and Eritrea. These established churches and the socialist regime in Ethiopia began anti-Pentecostal and Charismatic campaigns. The persecuted members of the Pentecostals and other Charismatic churches thus sought refuge in the Sudan and Kenya, with others immigrating to the US as refugees.

With the passage of the Refugee Act of 1980, which allowed African immigrants to enter the US as legal refugees, thousands of Eritreans and Ethiopians resettled across the US. These mostly came through Sudan, although many were processed in Italy and Kenya. These groups brought more diversity within the immigrant population from Eritrea. Although they were mostly Christian and Tigrinya speakers, there were a significant number of Eritrean Muslims and/or Eritreans who spoke languages other than Tigrinya and belonged to other ethnic groups. Unlike the earliest immigrants, who were mostly young and

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middle aged urban and educated males, these Eritrean refugees consisted of diverse groups, women and men of varied ages and educational levels, from rural and urban backgrounds. They included singles, married couples, extended families, children without family support, and the elderly, of varied social class backgrounds. They also brought diversity of views on the politics of Eritrea, supporting different and opposing political movements. They especially supported the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), the other Eritrean political movements that opposed the Ethiopian rule in Eritrea while competing for control of the political space with the dominant EPLF, supported strongly by the first wave of immigrants. It is within this group that came some lay clergy and trained priests who were able to lead immigrant communities in religious worship. During the 1980s therefore, Eritreans began to focus more on their religious life. They were, however, few in number, scattered, and poorly organised.

While most of the Orthodox Eritreans invested their energies into political activism, Evangelical Eritrean Christians were more committed to their faith and reorganising their religious life within their new surroundings. The Besserat Evangelical Society (BES), founded in 1982 in Columbus, Ohio by an Eritrean Evangelist, Dr. Bahram Fessehazion is a good example of the organising abilities of Christian Evangelical Eritreans. Still based in Columbus, Ohio, it remains an on-going, non-denominational, and biblical outreach organisation. Having its first annual conference in 1983 with around fifty people in attendance, it has held annual conferences every year since. The BES has spread its influence among thousands of Eritrean immigrants in many parts of the US during the past twenty-five year period. It has pursued its organisational mission through printed materials, internet websites, audiovisual media, annual conferences, retreats, formal and informal visitations of members, and publishing its quarterly periodical Besserat.[2] The reach and influence of the BES in the US is reflected with the founding in 1984 of the Biserat Hibret Wengel (BHW). The BHW organises summer activities for both adults and youth and brings Eritreans together during holidays and Thanksgiving, inviting guest speakers to address issues relating to religious and family life.[3]

The Third Period (1992-2007)

During this period, refugees and immigrants came to the US following Eritrea's Independence in 1991. Initially, many came through the US Government-sponsored lottery which granted them residency visas (Green Cards) through the United States Diversity Immigration Visa Lottery Programme which began in 1990.[4] Although some came to unite with their families in the US, the majority came as a result of the growing authoritarianism of the Government of Eritrean. This was especially true after 1998, when thousands fled either religious persecution by the government and/or to avoid the mandatory two-year national service required of all youth in Eritrea. As noted above, most were not allowed to leave after completing their national service and are still serving the regime some thirteen years later. Government-sponsored religious repression targeted religious groups that it perceived threatened its legitimacy and hold on power. Officially, the Eritrea Government recognises only four religions as being legitimate, namely Islam, Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Evangelical Christianity, the latter two having been introduced by Roman Catholic and Swedish Lutheran missionaries during the nineteenth century. The religious holidays of these four groups are celebrated nationally and their adherents are free to practice their respective religious obligations without hindrance. Instead, the Eritrea Government has restricted the religious freedom and the freedom of movement of religious groups perceived to be critical of it. The State has thus arrested without trial, members of the Jehovah's Witness community and some Muslim leaders, banned other religious organisations, closed health clinics run by foreign religious organisations, and refused visas to foreign churches and mission workers. In 2002, the State closed twelve Pentecostal and Charismatic churches and arrested men, women and children who practiced what the government labelled 'new religions.' In 2003, hundreds of members of new Protestant churches including the Full Gospel Church (Mulu Wengel), Kale Hiwot, and Rhema churches were arrested and placed in prison indefinitely without trial.

The Eritrean Government does not allow missionary activities through radio, newspaper, or the internet, neither does it allow religious schools for either Christians or Muslims. In recent years, it has even begun persecuting Orthodox Christians whom it perceives challenge Government-appointed religious leaders and Government-approved practices. The Christians who left Eritrea consisted of various faith groups, including Jehovah Witnesses, Pentecostals, and followers of various Evangelical churches.

Since the 1990s there has thus been a proliferation of Eritrean churches in many parts of the US, with major cities hosting several Eritrean Orthodox, Protestant, Pentecostal and Roman Catholic congregations. While a comprehensive description of the various religious gatherings of Eritreans in the US from 1991 to the present is beyond the scope of this essay, we will here restrict our narrative using observational and ethnographic materials, to the experience and practices of Orthodox Christian groups in Los Angeles, California.

The Religious Gatherings of Orthodox Christians in Los Angeles

Studies conducted by Warner (1998:20-23) and Ebaugh and Saltzman Chafetz (2000:135) have pointed out that immigrant religious institutions take many aspects of the congregational structures and community centre characteristics of American congregations not found in their home countries in order to adapt to their new home. It is really difficult to clearly delineate American congregational structures and community centre models from those of the countries of origin. The congregations that immigrants have built are often a hybrid, consisting of many influences, including US, other foreign places, and the nations through which they have passed on their way from their home of origin to resettlement in the US.

The independence of Eritrea from Ethiopia began a new chapter in the organisation of the religious life of Orthodox *(tewahdo)* Christians. Until the independence of Eritrea in 1991, there was hardly any independently organised religious life of Orthodox (*tewahdo*) Eritreans in Los Angeles. Most were attending Ethiopian churches. This included Virgin Mary's Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church,[5] located at 4544 Compton Avenue in South-Central Los Angeles, California (Nida 2007:209). Others attended Egyptian and Greek Orthodox churches.

When Eritrea gained its Independence from Ethiopia in 1991, this led to the separation of the Eritrean Orthodox Church in Eritrea from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and to starting its own national Orthodox Church. This had an effect on Eritreans in Diaspora. In 1992, an Eritrean Bishop who was on a visit from Eritrea but had previously lived in the US, met with Eritreans in Los Angeles, California, and encouraged them to start an Eritrean Orthodox Church that used the Tigrinya language in their services for Orthodox Eritreans. The group subsequently asked an Eritrean Orthodox priest who was living in San Bernardino, a town near Los Angeles, to head the new Orthodox Church in Los Angeles. They asked another lay person who knew the Bible and who had experience in teaching and running religious organisations to help them. Those who formed this initial committee had little understanding of religious organisation or experience of running a church. Some were members of the student organisation that was supportive of the nationalist movement in Eritrea; others had participated in the armed nationalist movement in Eritrea and had later resettled as refugees in the Los Angeles area. The committee contacted an Egyptian Orthodox Church in Los Angeles to allow them to use their Church for their services. The Egyptian Church agreed and allowed them to conduct services after theirs had concluded on Sunday mornings. Opening circa 1992, they named the church the Medhane Alem Bete Kristian (lit: 'Church of Our Saviour') of Los Angeles.

Unfortunately, the Egyptian church burned down and Eritreans found themselves with no building in which to congregate. One of the members found a Presbyterian church in Englewood and again began services in 1998. With its congregation growing, the church asked members to pay a fee of between US$20 for each individual or US$40 per family for membership. From this, the church supported a priest, usually paying his rent and provided him with a meagre stipend. The members were diversified, some were doctors, nurses, ex-guerrilla fighters, others were deacons, trained religious teachers, and the poor on welfare. While they were capable individuals, most if not all, had little experience of running a church in Diaspora. Some had a limited religious background in Eritrea. The worship was conducted on Sunday mornings from 7:00 am to 10:00 am. They often served refreshments at the end of the service, usually tea and bread (*hambasha*). With time, other members of the clergy, elders, single, and married couples began to attend services in the Orthodox Church. Married couples brought their children to church with them, which was a new practice among Eritreans. Among Orthodox Christians in Eritrea, young people do not go to church with their parents. Thus, few young people knew or ever studied the Bible, or knew their religion well. While in Eritrea, religion was seen as part of the culture, and not ordinarily the means by which a person would conduct her/his life by following and knowing the teachings of the Bible.

During the mid-1990s, some of the members suggested the congregation start its own church. This was followed by fund raising events. Many individuals gave generously, most giving more than US$1,000 each and some even giving as high as US$5,000. There were some members who knew about real estate and how to get loans from banks. They helped the organisation to secure bank loan with which they bought a church building for US$390,000. By the end, the total cost of the church went up as high as US$810,000. This cost included the price of the land, church and rebuilding, repairing and furnishing of the church.

According to Wittner, religious assemblies make it possible for members to know one-another's unique qualities and special interests, to learn about their wants and needs. This knowledge results in producing solidarity among community of believers who then act and feel mutually responsible for one-another (1998:369) In the case of the Eritrean Orthodox church, there were many religion-oriented activities that brought the members together to create a sense of mutual responsibility and solidarity. A few such activities can be cited that brought members together. These include Holy Eucharist (*kidasse*), Confession, and Catechism each Sunday. When someone had an event in remembrance of a relative who had died or in remembrance of a favourite Saint, cooked food would be brought and served to everyone. Often, the church conducted baptisms, weddings, funerals, and memorial services. Following the traditional Geez Calendar and year, members also come together to celebrate the Orthodox New Year (*Hadis-Amet*), the Feast of the Holy Cross (*Baal Kudus Meskel*), Christmas (*Lidet*), Epiphany (*Timket*), Good Friday (*Arbi-Seklet*), and Easter Sunday (*Fasika*). During the Easter and Christmas holidays, members, their families and relatives celebrate a midnight service of Holy Eucharist. Afterwards, members would invite their relatives and friends to join them in their homes to eat together. In addition, the congregation annually celebrated a special patronage festival (*Negdet*), a continuation of the tradition of celebrating a church's patron saint with prayer, song, dance, food and drink. In Eritrea, people make a long distance pilgrimage to celebrate the patronal festival with their family members and relatives. Finally, Holy Eucharist was often conducted during special holiday and feast days in the presence of a bishop who would travel from Washington D.C or Eritrea for the event.

During the border war with Ethiopia (1998-2000), the church actively participated by giving its blessing to the war and encouraging its members to contribute financially to the war effort. Indeed, some members of the Board of Directors of the Medhane Alem Orthodox Church were actively involved in fundraising and selling war bonds. Others, who were opposed to the Eritrean Government's war efforts were negatively sanctioned and discouraged from actively attending and participating in the activities of the church.

According to Ebaugh (2000) and Wittner (1998), community building is one of the central outcomes of religious gatherings. In the case of Eritreans, out of the religious gathering of the Medhane Alem Orthodox Church came the idea of organising a seminar and family retreat for families to talk and learn about family matters and problems. Although the seminar took place at the Medhane Alem Orthodox Church, many families travelled from as far afield as San Diego to attend the retreat. Ultimately, the family gathering became an independent organisation with a diverse membership, gaining participation from both Protestants and Roman Catholics. While it had its own membership and purpose, as with many other initiatives, it began well, but in time weakened. Hence, although it is still in existence, it is not strongly supported.

Internal Differentiation and Tensions within the Congregation

As has been pointed out by R. Stephen Warner, when a group organises itself for worship or for that matter any other purpose, it opens a space for the interplay of social dynamics (1998:23-24). Although church congregations provide physical and social spaces "in which those who share the same traditions, customs, and languages can reproduce many aspects of their native customs for themselves and attempt to pass them on to their children" (Ebaugh and Saltzman Chafetz 2000:80), they also rewrite a group's history. Church congregations construct themselves anew by refashioning some of their long-standing practices, as well as dealing with old and new internal divisions and contested politics within (Wittner 1998:367). In the case of Eritreans, these divisions and tensions revolve around the following four themes.

Competition between 'traditionalists' and 'modernists'

With the establishment and growing institutionalisation of the Eritrean Orthodox Church in Los Angeles, areas of internal competition and conflict were to emerge between the leading clergy of the church. Such tensions between what we might call 'traditionalists' and 'modernisers' arose because of the diversity of training, exposure and experience the clergy had had before they began working together under one congregation. The 'traditionalists,' had received less modern training as well as less exposure to American congregational style of religious organisation and service than the 'modernisers.' As a result, they wanted to conduct their services in the traditional Orthodox manner, serving the laity according to the more formal clergy-worshiper relationship model, conducting the long rituals with chants in Geez (the ancient language of the Orthodox Church), and finally, perform and control all rituals without the participation of the worshipers.

In contrast, the 'modernisers' consisted of more educated preachers with experience in evangelicalism, having skills and experience in speaking to the congregation in ways that addressed their spiritual and social problems.[6] They received encouragement from friends, family members, and many members of the congregation in their attempt to 'modernise' the religious services. They were far more accessible to the worshipers due to their openness to new and more evangelical styles of conducting worship, including allowing a choir in the church, preaching sermons on contemporary topics of interest, and giving more space for the participation of the congregation in the church services. In time, the 'modernisers' began to have greater influence among the worshipers. The 'traditionalists,' being jealous of this growing influence, accused the 'modernisers' of trying to turn the Orthodox Church into a Protestant church. The congregation, while they liked what the 'modernisers' were preaching, questioned their evangelical method of preaching, accusing them of trying to convert them into *kenisha* (Protestants) by using persuasive language, preaching on topical subjects and addressing their social problems, and encouraging them to study and openly discuss the Bible. While for many conservative Orthodox Christians the 'modernisers' style was persuasive, it was nevertheless new and non-traditional.[7] These accusations discouraged the 'modernisers' from actively participating in the religious services of the church and even resulted in some totally withdrawing from the congregation. Over time however, the 'traditionalists' began to regain an upper hand, succeeding in cutting off the 'modernisers' by winning the sympathy of older and more conservative women in the congregation, thereby labelling the reformers as 'modernisers' intent on converting the followers of the Orthodox Church to the Protestant religion.

Organisational Problems

There have been problems of accountability and democracy within the church hierarchy. The organisational hierarchy of the church includes the priest, a Board of Directors (*shimmagile)* and the congregation. The Board of Directors runs the affairs of the church without much say from the congregation. The priest works with the board and is paid a monthly stipend, but does not get involved in the financial day-to-day affairs of the church. The same board members have served for more than ten years and give a report of their activities usually once a year, which is far too little. On the other hand, participation in the elections of board members is not well-attended as many church members do not want to participate or give of their time in the committee work required.

Competition between Ethiopian and Eritrean Priests over Congregations

From the beginning, there has been tension between the priests of the Eritrean Orthodox Church and a Tigrinya-speaking Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Eritreans of the Orthodox faith have a history of attending both Eritrean and Ethiopian churches.[8] The Eritrean priest saw the Ethiopian priest as a direct competitor to his claims over Eritreans. There have been some humiliating incidents resulting from direct confrontation between these two leaders. The competition centred on traditional Eritrean women who found the Ethiopian priest more likeable and better able to connect with their concerns and needs. The Ethiopian priest was effective in addressing their spiritual needs, reminding them of their offerings, their favourite saints, and other related issues. He had an uncanny ability to remember personal events in the lives of members, including sickness, memorials, deaths, tragedies, and other personal concerns. He often willingly complied with their demands for special rituals to honour them, their families and relatives. Then, a border war flared up between Ethiopian and Eritrea in 1998 and lasted until 2000. This still simmering conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea continues along the border. This has given the Eritrean clergy an upper hand to win over adherents from the Ethiopian priest.

The Challenge of the Second Generation

This is the new generation who came to the US when they were still children, or were born in the US. The major long-term concern of Eritreans in the US has been how to continue their identity and traditional faith in their adopted home. They also aspire to pass their faith tradition to their children. In reality however, the parents had limited success in passing its sense of connection to its religion to their offspring. This failure has been a source of great anguish to them. Furthermore, Eritreans do not have language schools or skilled and experienced Tigrinya teachers to pass on their language. Added to this is the challenge that most church services are conducted either in Geez or Tigrinya, while most second generation Eritreans speak English. Indeed, there are hardly any services in English for young people. Even when Bible classes are conducted in English, the children do not understand the adults because they do not know how to speak to the children at their level. Their children are Americanised Eritreans who grow up exposed to American popular culture. Depending on their surroundings, they are also exposed to Caucasian, African-American, Hispanic and other cultures present in the US. Often, parents possess a negative outlook towards African-Americans, something which their children do not necessarily share. As a result of all these challenges, Eritrean Orthodox Christians have been unable to create suitable institutional mechanisms to incorporate second generation Eritreans into their churches.

Summary and Conclusion

During the past thirty-five years, there has been a substantial growth in the spiritual life of Eritreans in the US. Indeed, in the 1970s, it was unthinkable that most Eritreans would be associated with any form of organised religious life. Being few in number, they saw themselves as modern nationalists involved in the politics of their homeland. While their parents were traditional and religious, they embraced Marxism as their ideology and considered religion as part of the feudal structure that kept people 'backwards.' They blamed the Orthodox Church for collaborating with the ruling elites of Ethiopia—who themselves were predominantly Orthodox Christians—in advocating the unity of Eritrea with Ethiopia in the 1940s and 1950s. This ultimately led to the federation of Eritrea with Ethiopia for ten years, (1952-1962) and complete unity for a period of nearly thirty years (1962-1991).

With the arrival to the US of newer and varied immigrants in the 1980s came a diversity of views on religion. As with their earlier compatriots, these were also modernists who had broken away from their parents' erstwhile religious and cultural traditions. Many of this new generation had also embraced Evangelical Christianity which encouraged congregational participation and the intense study of the Bible. Modern Eritreans who had acquired their education at church mission schools, thus rejected the more traditionalist Orthodox Church in favour of those Christian denominations they perceived had embraced modernity such as Seventh-day Adventist, Lutheran, Evangelical, Roman Catholic, Jehovah Witness, and Pentecostal.

Until the end of the nationalist war in Eritrea in 1991, the spiritual life of Eritreans in the US was practiced in small pockets of Eritrean Diasporas scattered across the US. These groups were hidden from the gaze of the majority of Eritreans in Diaspora, their attention being primarily focused on supporting the nationalist cause emotionally, financially, and by mobilising supporters of the war. Even individuals with deep religious training and spiritual backgrounds were to become leaders in mobilising exiled Eritreans to rally behind the nationalist cause.

When the nationalist war came to an end in 1991, Eritreans in exile had to face the stark reality that either they had to fulfil their long-cherished dreams of returning to their homeland, or accept the fact that they were no longer in the US temporarily (Woldemikael 1998). While a few did return, the majority decided to remain and make the US their permanent home, at least until retirement. As a result, they began to look inside themselves and find meaning to their lives in the US. Many placed the welfare of their families and children as a priority. Social and spiritual life in the US thus became a major concern. Some used religion as a buffer against the intrusion of Eritrean national politics in their private lives (Hepner 2003). They thus began to attend to their spiritual lives without a sense of guilt and betrayal of those back in their homelands. Seeking to instil in their children the values and morals they believed in, they began flocking to various small Orthodox, Evangelical, Pentecostal, and other independent Protestant churches. As a result, there are at least one or two Eritrean Orthodox churches in every major city in the US, as well as a variety of thriving Roman Catholic, independent Protestant and Pentecostal churches in various parts of the US that serve Eritrean immigrant communities.

In the case of Eritreans living in the Los Angeles area, this present essay has sought to describe how the Eritrean Orthodox Church came into being, its activities, and its growth over time, as well as the internal relationships between members and their external relations with other immigrant churches in the greater Los Angeles area.

Notes

1. This essay represents a collaborative research between two Eritrean scholars with genuine concern about the religious and communal life of Eritrean immigrants in the US. The writers are immigrants to the US. Mesghina G. Medhin, arrived in the U.S. in 1982, and Tekle Woldemikael came in 1974. They have both been deeply concerned with the inability of Eritrean immigrants to create their own communities which effectively represent them to confront the challenges and constraints they face in their new place of residence. While Medhin has had a deeper involvement in the religious life of Eritreans in the US and Eritreans in Eritrea, Woldemikael is a sociologist who has had previous research experience of Eritreans and Ethiopians in the US.

2. The Besserat Evangelical Society (BES) <http://www.besserat.org/> [Accessed August 27, 2009].
3. Ibid.
4. Each year, the United States Diversity Immigration Visa Lottery Programme (Green Card) Lottery makes available 55,000 permanent residence visas through a computer-generated lottery. Such visas are only made available to applicants from what are termed 'low admission' countries and are distributed among six geographical world zones, namely Africa, Asia, Europe, South and Central America, Oceania and North America. For more details, see, <http://travel.state.gov/visa/immigrants/types/types_1322.html/> [Accessed August 27, 2009].
5. For more details, see their website <http://www.ethiovirginmary.org/index_a.htm/> [Accessed August 28, 2009].
6. Some key 'modernisers' were instrumental in establishing the Bisserat Hibret Wengel in La Mirada, Los Angeles County, California, an association affiliated with the Besserat Evangelical Society (BES) mentioned above.
7. Among Orthodox Christians there is no tradition of missionary work and the priests hardly understand the Bible which is often written in Geez, an ancient language of the Orthodox Church.
8. Although it is common for Eritreans to attend Ethiopian churches, it is rare to find Ethiopians attending Eritrean churches. Also, whether the Eritrean Orthodox Church would accept Ethiopian Orthodox believers is an open question. It should also be noted that Ethiopia is a culturally diverse society and Tigrinya speaking Ethiopians are historically related to the Tigrinya speaking Eritreans, who constitute the majority of the Eritreans in the US, and their home region is the closest Ethiopian territory to Eritrea.

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