Islam and Christianity in the Horn of Africa: Somalia, Ethiopia, Sudan

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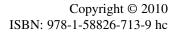LYNNE RIENNER PUBLISHERS

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Muslims and Christians in the Horn of Africa: Interactions Across the Centuries

IN JUNE 2006, a radical, Taliban-like Islamic government connected to Al-Qaida emerged in Somalia. In December, it was toppled by an Ethiopian invasion, followed by two years of Ethiopian occupation. This drama, which underlines the global importance of religious relations in the Horn of Africa, was still unfolding after the Ethiopian evacuation of January 2009 and can be regarded as one of the focal points of today's Islamic-Christian interaction. The local and historical backgrounds of this interaction are of universal significance, for it was in this corner of the world, in the Horn of Africa, that Islam and Christianity first met, and the legacies of that initial meeting continue to affect their relations even today. The dialectics between the mutual historical concepts and images of local Christians and Muslims and the relevance of these to the modern history of relations between Somalis, Ethiopians, and Sudanese are the subject of this book.

Sudan and Somalia are Ethiopia's immediate neighbors. Their histories have been inseparably connected to the history of both the Ethiopian Christian state and Ethiopia's Muslims. And in both Sudan and Somalia today, radical Islam is strong enough to cause implications for Ethiopia, and indeed for global security.

Muslims and Christians first met and talked in Ethiopia. The Prophet's earliest followers, the *sahaba*, who were persecuted in Mecca by the local Arab pagans, were instructed by Muhammad in 615–616 to seek asylum with the Christian king, Najashi Ashama of *al-Habasha* (Ethiopia). Thus, the first *hegira* was to Christian Ethiopia, and Najashi Ashama, recognizing the refugees as believers in one God, gave them shelter and enabled them to prosper in his country. This episode, a detailed story of early Islam's survival, redemption, and success, is in it-

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self outside the scope of this book (though I will refer to it throughout). What is of importance here is that it left a double message for Muslims.

The Ethiopian Christian *najashi*'s generosity, his refusal to betray the first small community of Muslims to their Meccan persecutors, his befriending of and corresponding with the Prophet, and his contribution in other ways to Muhammad's victory have continued to resonate among Muslims across the centuries. The Prophet was said to have dictated that his followers should "leave the Ethiopians alone as long as they leave you alone," which for many ever since has been a message of flexibility and tolerance. For moderates, the Ethiopian benevolence and the Prophet's attitude and teachings meant that Islam accepts non-Muslims and particularly Ethiopians as legitimate neighbors, provided they do not attack Islam or mistreat Muslims. This implies that living under a non-Islamic, yet righteous, government is legal, for the Prophet himself told the early Muslims to find shelter under the Christian *najashi,* whom he described as a just king "who oppresses no one." Indeed Ethiopia's saving of the *sahaba* not only gave the country a special place in Islam, but has also served as a message of universal significance, one often still applicable to other cases of Islamic-Christian dialogue.

However, later in the story, according to Islamic sources, in the year 628, after Muhammad emerged victorious, the *najashi* answered the Prophet's call and himself adopted Islam. But he was soon betrayed by his Christian subjects and died an isolated Muslim. This second part of the episode left a different, contradictory message that has been recycled ever since by less tolerant Muslims, namely, that once the Ethiopian king accepted the Prophet's mission, Ethiopia became a part of the land of Islam. According to this interpretation, the *najashi*'s demise was the first defeat and humiliation of Islam, and Ethiopia's betrayal was the ultimate sin of *irtad*, that is, of being a Muslim and returning to heresy. Ethiopia, it followed, must be redeemed under a Muslim king. Thus "*Islam al-najashi*" was, and still is, the goal and the slogan of the radical wing of Islam, ever in dispute with those preaching tolerance and acceptance.

Beginning with the formative decades of modern Ethiopia, Sudan, and Somalia, this book examines their concrete relations and their mutual Islamic and Christian conceptualizations. The Ethiopian dimension of these relations was also nuanced and varied. The Ethiopian Christians' conceptualization of Islam and of Muslims was similarly dichotomous, somewhat parallel to and dialectically interconnected with Islamic concepts of Ethiopia's Christians. On the one hand, there was the ancient notion that the country's politics and culture were anchored

in the Middle East: in Egypt, but also in Jerusalem and in eastern Christianity. This basic connection was perhaps best manifested in the tradition of Ethiopia's head of the church, the *abuna*, being an Egyptian monk (from the fourth century until 1950) and a bishop of the Egyptian Coptic Church. It was further cemented by the medieval ethos that Ethiopia's emperors were descendants of King Solomon of Jerusalem. This essential linkage to the east, going to the very identity of and legitimizing the political order of Ethiopia, implied cultivating workable relations with Islamic rulers in the area. In previous studies, I dubbed this concept of vital proximity to Islamic countries the "Egyptian *abuna*." On the other hand there was its polar opposite, a persistent legacy of suspicion, fear, and even demonization of Islam, the "Ahmad Gragn syndrome," namely, the vivid, ever-recycled memory of the sixteenth-century destruction of the Christian kingdom (1529–1543) by an Islamic holy warrior, Ahmad Gragn, from the town of Harar, who united many of the Muslims of the Horn of Africa, and was inspired and helped by Arab scholars and Ottoman commanders in Arabia. Throughout Ethiopian history, Christian-Islamic dialogues or confrontations always developed against the background of interplay between these dichotomous concepts: that of leaving Ethiopians alone opposed to *Islam al-najashi* on the Islamic side, and that of the Egyptian *abuna* as opposed to the Ahmad Gragn syndrome on the Christian one. Naturally, an emphasis on the negative by one side would dialectically encourage the militancy of the other, and vice versa.[1]

In Chapter 2, I discuss relations between Ethiopia and Sudan between 1884 and 1898. In this period, the Sudanese were reborn as a modern community through the Mahdiyya, one of the more effective movements for Islamic political revival. The movement, led by Muhammad Ahmad, the messianic, self-proclaimed Mahdi (literally, "guided [by God]"), and by his successor Khalifa (Caliph) 'Abdallah al-Ta'aishi, managed to overcome local tribalism, free the land of Egyptian occupation, and build an independent, militant Islamic state. It thus not only managed to herald Sudanese modern awareness, but also strove to correct, purify, and lead the entire Muslim world. It was committed to jihad against the Westernizing of Muslim countries, primarily Egypt, and was finally destroyed by the British occupiers of the land of the Nile. As a local movement with universal aspirations, the Mahdiyya was also concerned with neighboring Ethiopia. In the period of the European imperialist "scramble for Africa," the Mahdiyya had dilemmas about this Christian state. The Mahdists' concrete policies, ever inspired by interpretations of the Prophet's history, were directly influenced by the initial

Islamic dichotomy regarding Ethiopia. During the period discussed, they experienced all the conceptual and practical options and came full circle, from leaving the Ethiopians alone as legitimate neighbors to insisting on *Islam al-najashi*, to finally seeking an alliance with and even salvation from the Christian king of Ethiopia.

Chapter 3 examines Ethio-Somali relations during the first two decades of the twentieth century. It begins in 1899, when the Islamic-Christian political dynamic shifted from the Sudanese Mahdist to the Ethio-Somali theater. By that time, the Somali-speakers had been occupied and divided by European powers and by Ethiopia. Sayyid Muhammad 'Abdallah Hasan, nicknamed by the British the "Mad Mullah," worked to unite Somalis under his banner of militant Islam, a somewhat similar story to that which had unfolded in Sudan. His success, however, was less than that of the Sudanese Mahdiyya. Foreign occupation and weak social cohesion among Somalis were among the reasons for his failure. However, the *sayyid*'s twenty-year struggle proved to be the formative period of Somali self-awareness and modern nationalism. In studying the Ethiopian dimension of the *sayyid*'s story, I follow his concepts of the Christian neighbor and occupier. Initially connected to the more radical wing of universal Islamic ideas, the *sayyid* began his mission conceiving of Christian Ethiopians as his ultimate enemies. However, facing reality, he began to pursue other options and, like the Mahdists in their time, he also came round the full conceptual circle. Indeed, this Somali holy warrior finally ended as a refugee, seeking asylum in Christian Ethiopia, claiming that he himself was an Ethiopian Muslim.

During the period discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, Ethiopia's Christian leaders and rulers, like their Islamic Sudanese and Somali counterparts, wavered between their options and concepts. Each had his own emphasis and during the period there were significant changes in the state's attitudes toward Islam and Islamic neighbors. Emperor Yohannes IV, 1872–1889, and Emperor Menelik II, 1889–1913, both worked to strengthen Christian dominance, but were also ready to switch from one concept to its opposite. Yohannes was more of a crusader in the spirit of the Ahmad Gragn syndrome, and Mahdist jihadism aroused in him a sense of siege and Christian militancy. Yet he was also ready, when circumstances dictated, to resort to moderate terms of mutual understanding with the Sudanese. Menelik was more of a self-assured conqueror, who occupied the Somali-inhabited Ogaden desert and vast areas inhabited by other local peoples. He developed into a more sophisticated diplomat, better able, paternalistically and benevolently, to open toward Islam—and in our case toward Somalis and Sudanese—within his

Christian empire and without. His successor on the throne of Ethiopia, his grandson Lij Iyasu, the son of a converted Muslim, himself returned to Islam and apparently aimed, together with the Somali *sayyid*, to achieve a total revolution in the Horn of Africa and in Ethiopia's identity and structure. He was consequently deposed in 1916, and replaced by a coalition headed by the future emperor Haile Selassie, who would restore Christian hegemony, revive the integration of the cross and the crown, and push Ethiopia's Muslims and his Somali subjects back to a deprived periphery.

These late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century episodes provide the essential background to today's developments, when religions are again being revived as political identities. Perhaps the more important lesson to be derived from the first part of this book is that religions carry all options. Muslims and Christians, even those remembered as uncompromising militants, could and did resort, as we shall see, to more than one concept of themselves and of others.

Our story of religions and politics in the Horn of Africa was interrupted more or less at the point at which we end Chapter 3. This was for two reasons. First, the Sudanese and the Somalis lost much of their independent political abilities. The Sudan was occupied by the British from 1898 to 1956 and the colonizers, conceiving of the Sudan as their safe base along the Nile, allowed the locals only a small measure of autonomy. The Somalis, after the end of the *sayyid*'s movement, showed little ability to overcome their sociopolitical fragmentation. They remained divided by the Italians and British until 1960, when the two colonies were declared independent and united to form present-day Somalia. The French Somali area became the separate state of Djibouti and remains outside our discussion. A good part of the Somali people remained under Ethiopian rule in the Ogaden desert, which, claimed by Somalia, would remain a bone of contention. Political relations among the Sudanese, Ethiopians, and Somalis, as a regional system of independent partners, were only resumed in the 1950s and early 1960s.

The second reason was that Islam, as a political identity, was marginalized during these periods and until the late 1980s. Most of the early modern movements for universal Islamic revival in the Horn and elsewhere became the spiritual backbone of different societies and states. In our context, the Mahdiyya contributed to the shaping of modern Sudan and the *sayyid*'s movement remained a formative event of Somali nationalism. Other similar cases illustrate how ideas of an all-Islamic, global nation were channeled through anticolonial and other dynamisms into spheres of particular separateness. Modern nationalisms in most Is-

lamic societies worked to redefine nearly everything, politics included. Islam, however, never bowed out. What was a most effective comprehensive identity since the seventh century has remained centrally relevant even when concepts, institutions, and energies of secular nationalism have seemed uppermost. In fact, the principal tension between those coexisting identities, their different values and legacies, can, to a large extent, explain the crisis in modern Islamic societies. The return of political Islam in our generation sharpens this inner tension and energizes arguments and conflicts throughout the Muslim world. In our story of the Sudanese and the Somalis, the forceful revival of political Islam can be dated to the 1980s. Prior to that and from the end of the Mahdiyya and of the *sayyid*'s movement, their inner dialogues, their anticolonial struggle, and their relations with Ethiopia were conducted mainly in the terminology of modern nationalism, itself varied. We shall follow some of this changing terminology in Chapters 4 and 6. However, since the final decade of the twentieth century, Islam has been back in full political momentum in the Horn of Africa, as discussed in Chapters 5 and 7.

Chapters 4 and 5 analyze Sudanese-Ethiopian relations, together with the terminology and concepts underlying them, during three periods. Chapter 4 begins with the period of Haile Selassie from 1930 to 1974, during which, in 1956, Sudan gained independence. The major issues were the problems of Eritrea and of southern Sudan. In dealing with these, both sides faltered between new, shared concepts of modern African coexistence and the more antagonistic ones of revolutionary Arabism, on the one hand, and Ethiopian imperial domination, on the other. The second period, Mangistu's regime between 1974 and 1991, witnessed the deterioration of relations as well as a change in the conceptual language. The interaction was now inspired by communist and socialist terminology, but also by African concepts of affinity and cooperation. However, in spite of the secular language used during these two periods, occasional resorting to religious terminology suggests that these modern dichotomies derived also from the initial, basic Islamic-Christian ideas. The revival of political Islam in Sudan beginning in the mid-1980s and the resurfacing of religions in Ethiopia's political sphere with the fall of Mangistu ushered in today's return to the old mutual Islamic and Christian conceptualization.

Chapter 5 analyzes the renewed interpretations and reinterpretations of the formative Islamic-Christian legacies since 1991. It follows the internal discussions among Sudanese and among Ethiopians about their own identities, as they revolve around the story of the *najashi* and the

Prophet and around the legacy of Ahmad Gragn and similar formative memories. Here again, like in the days of the Mahdi, the *khalifa*, Yohannes, and Menelik, the picture reflected is multi-optional. The varied reservoirs of religious legacies continue to offer both neighborliness and enmity. Shaikh Hasan al-Turabi, for example, leader of Sudanese Islamic militancy and an associate of Osama bin Laden in the 1990s, has lately begun to preach intrareligious African neighborliness. As these lines are written, the forces on both sides that strive for Ethio-Sudanese stability and a return to the corresponding moderate historical messages seem, for now, to have the upper hand.

Chapters 6 and 7 return to the Ethiopian-Somali story and follow similar periodization, but offer less optimism. The issues dividing these countries are far more difficult to resolve than those between Ethiopia and Sudan. For the Somalis, Ethiopia is an occupier of the vast Somali-populated Ogaden, an integral part of their national identity. For many Ethiopians, the Somalis are the descendants of Ahmad Gragn, ever ready to destabilize southern Ethiopia. During the periods discussed in these chapters, 1943–1991 and 1991–2009, active hostilities erupted between the two sides. The conceptual sphere and its language, first more secular, then readdressing the old religious legacies, were harsher than in the Sudanese case. The evolution of the terminology and mutual images follows concrete developments and again, the picture is far from one-dimensional. As always, it is easier to observe the impact of Islamic-Christian legacies of suspicion and hostility. On the Ethiopian side, the Ahmad Gragn syndrome was to a great extent behind the decision to invade Mogadishu in December 2006. For the greater Islamic and the Somali side, the invasion inspired a momentous conceptual demonization of Ethiopia as the ultimate historical enemy of Islam. For the purpose of this demonization, the initial meeting point between Islam and Christianity was reconsidered and changed by the radicals from the elegant story of the Prophet and the *najashi* to a different episode. According to Islamic tradition, Abraha al-Ashram, an Ethiopian ruler of pre-Islamic Yemen, tried in A.D. 570 to demolish the Ka'ba shrine in Mecca and divert the local Arabs to a church he had built in San'a. The episode, alluded to in the Quran, was eternalized in the tradition that an Ethiopian would eventually destroy the Ka'ba, which, because of its extremely negative message, had hitherto rarely been mentioned. But today, for the radicals in the greater Islamic world and in Somalia, Ethiopia's leader, Meles Zenawi, is widely depicted as Abraha, the would-be Ethiopian destroyer of Islamic holiness.

However, the language and terms of compromise and mutual ac-

ceptance have also been there all along. Shaikh Ahmad Shaykh Sharif, who headed the Somali militant Islamic government of mid-2006, has meanwhile also come the full conceptual circle and, when elected president in January 2009, first went to Ethiopia to seek support against the Somali holy warriors. Like in the times of the *sayyid,* Menelik, and Lij Iyasu, so too among Ethiopians and Somalis of today, where voices of moderation are also clearly heard. Many of the moderates, in their struggle against enmity, continue to retrieve from the same reservoirs of Islamic and Christian concepts those that inspire good neighborliness. In trying to better understand and accept the "other," they are primarily working to define the Somali and the Ethiopian selves in more open terms.

Led now by the educated classes, all connected to Middle Eastern and global developments, Islam is again concretely behind much of the political story. Relating back to the formative years, and reconnecting with and reinterpreting the initial Islamic concepts of Ethiopia and Ethiopians, Islamic legacies are today even more dichotomous and polarized. Radicals among Sudanese or Somalis, more connected to Middle Eastern Islamic militancy, have deepened their demonization of Christian Ethiopians. In so doing, they revive and resort to demonizing traditions never referred to by the Mahdists or the Somali followers of the *sayyid*. Moderates, more in the spirit of local African Islamic traditions and of flexible orthodoxy, are more ready to accept others, to compromise with the region's diversity, and to legitimize constructive neighborliness with Christians.

Ethiopian Christianity, as a political identity, also experienced transformations throughout the twentieth century. Ethiopia emerged victorious from the dramas of the late nineteenth century. The stemming of European imperialism and Ethiopia's conquests and annexations of Islamic societies assured its survival as an independent Christian empire. With the exception of the 1936–1941 conquest by Mussolini, the country was spared the yoke of foreign domination. Though Muslims perhaps constituted half of Ethiopia's population, in the eyes of Christians, being Ethiopian and being Christian remained nearly synonymous and in practice were combined until the end of Haile Selassie's rule in 1974. Christianity and the church continued to be identified with imperial order and political hegemony. Ethiopia's leadership and upper classes continued to conceptualize themselves and understand others through this old Ethiopian Christian prism.

Victory of the traditional, however, also came with a price. Ethiopia did not benefit from what the anticolonial struggles contributed to other

societies in Africa and Asia, namely, modernization and social change. Rather, Ethiopia continued to recycle old values and structures; its combination of cross and crown helped little on the road to progress and development. The victory of the traditional proved even more costly with the 1974 revolution and the Mangistu regime (1974–1991). Borrowing from irrelevant materialistic, communist ideologies, the new leaders seemed to identify religiosity with backwardness. They discouraged Christianity and Islam on equal terms, but in practice, all Ethiopians, including the new leaders, were never really uprooted from the religious soul of their country. Christianity and Islam survived and regained momentum after the ousting of Mangistu and the establishment of a new regime, which has attempted to rebuild Ethiopia on the basis of its diversity. Today's Ethiopia is restructured along ethnic lines composed of ethnic states, and experiences active tensions between the main ethnic-linguistic groups. No less vivid, however, is the political revival of religiosity. Ethiopia's Muslims today are re-energized and successfully striving to fulfill their identity in Ethiopia as they rebuild their connections to the core countries of Islam. We shall address their dilemmas as well as the simultaneous revival of Christianity in Ethiopia, and the dialectical relations between them. Islamic-Christian relations, together with the ethnic question, are the main issues reshaping today's Ethiopia. They are integrally combined with the momentum of political Islam in Sudan and in Somalia. In both countries, the main internal political arguments revolve around the meaning of Islam, and Sudanese and Somalis participate in these with their concepts of Ethiopia often in mind.

Note

1. See Erlich, *Ethiopia and the Middle East*; *The Cross and the River*; and *Saudi Arabia and Ethiopia*; Kabha and Erlich, "Al-Ahbash and Wahhabiyya."