Secularization in the Global South: The Case of Ethiopia

Wilson N. Brissett

While the academic debate over the validity of the theory of secularization continues in American and British universities, it must be remembered that secularization theory also exerts a very practical influence in places quite distant from the sacred halls of the Ivy League and Oxbridge. In colonial and postcolonial contexts, its influence has rarely been other than pernicious. The marriage of secularization and modernization theories in the social sciences produced a great deal of useful, if still controversial, analysis of modernity in Western societies. In the global South, however, the union served, more often than not, to legitimate authoritarian ideologies of progress that, through the militant socialism of the 1960s and 1970s, extended the destructive logic of cultural paternalism beyond the fall of the colonial regimes and into the era of de-colonization. And while socialist states in Africa and Latin America fell like dominoes through the 1990s, the toxic cultural impact of the militant socialist appropriation of secularization theory remains thick in the atmosphere. If European and North American audiences have become thoroughly aware of our complicity in the resource problems that plague the global South, we have yet to consider fully the enduring, corrosive influence of the political uses of our social science theories.

The experience of Ethiopia across the twentieth century crystallizes with terrible clarity the ravages of secularization theory in the global South. Here we see how the classic theory's guiding assumption—that the process of modernization requires a dismissal of any traditional religious commitments that do not comport with a scientific, naturalistic, enlightened worldview—opened the door to the tragic cycle of violence that dominated twentieth-century Ethiopia and shows few signs at present of receding into a more just social and political equilibrium.

Wilson N. Brissett is a doctoral candidate in the Department of English at the University of Virginia and a dissertation fellow at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture. His dissertation is entitled *Beauty among the Puritans: The Cultural Aesthetic of Early New England.* He conducted research in Ethiopia in the summer of 2005.

© Kate Hundley, 2005

Ethiopia, dominated in the first half of the twentieth century by the personage of Emperor Haile Selassie, entered the League of Nations, and acquired the status of African golden child among the Western powers after Selassie famously abolished slavery in the 1920s. Despite advances in modern infrastructure and Western education, however, Ethiopian intellectuals became impatient with the slow pace of reform, and the Emperor's regime was overthrown in 1974 by a self-identified Marxist-Leninist military junta, later known as the Derg. The Derg ruled the country with an iron fist and an indifference to the sanctity of life. Lamin Sanneh has shown that, in this authoritarian environment, resistance was not cheap for those who managed to maintain it:

> The story of what happened in Ethiopia may stand as an object lesson for all concerned. Shortly after he came to power in 1974, Mengistu Haile Mariam, styling himself after Lenin, unleashed what has come to be called the reign of Red Terror that engulfed the monarchy and the church. In 1977 and 1978 alone, the regime killed half a million people, according to reports by Amnesty International.[1]

The Derg was displaced in its turn in 1991 through the military collaboration of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) and the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). EPRDF became the ruling party, known as Ehadig, under

---

[1] Lamin Sanneh, "Conclusion: The Current Transformation of Christianity," *The Changing Face of Christianity: Africa, the West, and the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) 216.

the new constitution and immediately announced a doctrine of democracy and liberalization. Despite these stated ideals, and despite once again paving Ethiopia's way into favor with the West, Ehadig has retained its control of political power since 1991 by manipulating elections. Most recently, in June 2005, Prime Minister Meles Zenawi preserved his place at the head of state by crushing opposition protests to the tune of nearly seventy dead and hundreds imprisoned.

The dominant interpretation of what went wrong in Ethiopia often focuses narrowly on problems of material circumstances—economic inequality, the seeming intractability of the configuration of global power, the need for land policy reform—to the neglect of equally significant cultural factors that address the less visible realm of moral order.

The materialist account of the political tragedy of modern Ethiopia is finally as insufficient in explanatory power for the past as it is impotent to heal the deep cultural fissures…

This pattern holds true even within the more personal register of Nega Mezlekia's English-language memoir, *Notes from the Hyena's Belly*, which recounts his experiences in Ethiopia during the revolutionary era.[2] Mezlekia's book is an artful narrative that weaves together traditional wisdom, Orthodox ritual, and reports of historical brutality—all delivered with a terrible irony that seeks desperately to claim some minute comic distance from realities that otherwise threaten to swallow the speaker in silence altogether.

If ironic distance provides one strategy for keeping existential annihilation at bay, the revelation of truth through sheer fact offers another. Mezlekia fights against the darkness by uncovering the wretched material situations that produced so much horror in revolutionary Ethiopia. Near the end of *Notes*, after Mezlekia has escaped to Canada, his reaction to the overthrow of the Derg indicates the helplessness Mezlekia feels in the face of history, even as he has offered compelling economic, agricultural, and political explanations of the path that led to Ethiopia's autocratic political fate:

> In 1991, the military junta that had ruled Ethiopia for over a decade was finally deposed by one of the guerrilla movements. I did not break open a bottle of champagne to celebrate the occasion, because by then I'd realized that what had happened in Ethiopia was not exceptional. To varying degrees, it had happened all over sunny Africa, and still does.[3]

Mezlekia demonstrates what he is not able to articulate: the materialist account of the political tragedy of modern Ethiopia is finally as insufficient in explanatory power for the past as it is impotent to heal the deep cultural fissures that shape the current social and political morass.

---

[2] Nega Mezlekia, *Notes from the Hyena's Belly* (New York: Picador USA, 2002).

[3] Mezlekia 351.

"Merkato"
Ethiopian Konjo Collection
© Marie Claire Andrea, 2005

While most commentators on this sordid history have, like Mezlekia, emphasized the material roots of Ethiopia's troubles, Ethiopian philosopher Messay Kebede has steadily offered an interpretation that focuses instead on the indoctrination of Ethiopia's intellectual elites in Western social theories that paired secularization with modernization and taught that the way of progress was to be achieved only at the cost of absolute retreat from backward native traditions. The door to the auto-genocidal Derg days was flung open, Kebede argues, during the time of the Emperor's love affair with Western education. Once reform proved powerless, the intelligentsia—those who had bitten hard at the notion that the prosperous future was a secular future liberated from the oppression of tradition—were ripe for the acceptance of the messianic political doctrine of Marxism-Leninism.

Claiming scientific authority that legitimated any means of revolutionary establishment, the Marxist Derg forced the transition to secular modernity that appeared stalled in the evolutionary process. Despite Ethiopia's grand history of repelling military invaders, a more sinister brand of colonial influence in the form of an indigenous, culture-slay-

© J. Jessup, 2005

ing secularization model produced a Westernized native regime as deadly, and perhaps more pernicious, to itself than any foreign occupier could have been.[4] The political-scientific doctrine of messianic Marxism-Leninism provided no deeper soil in which to sow a new Ethiopian political culture than a fanatical dedication to the revolution itself. Once nationalism was emptied of its traditionalist content, the best way to prove oneself a patriot was to display an enthusiasm for the revolution. In the context of this zealous one-upmanship, the wholesale murder of the Red Terror was countenanced by its perpetrators as the ultimate loyalty to the homeland.

In Ethiopia, those who were most able to resist the tide of the tyrannical socialist state, Kebede remembers, were those who clung to aspects of traditional Ethiopian life—in this case the ancient, nationalist Orthodox Church:

> People of my generation offered the greatest resistance to Marxism when they remained faithful to Orthodox Christianity. Let us admit it, the story of the spread of Marxist-Leninist views among the young of the 60s and 70s is the story of Westernized Ethiopians who, having walked away from the traditional beliefs of their people under the impact of Western ideas, were craving for a substitute.[5]

---

[4] Messay Kebede, "Marxism-Leninism and Ethnicity as the Two Stages of Ethiopian Elitism—Part I," *Addis Tribune* (19 October 2001) <www.addistribune.com/Archives/2001/10/19-10-01/Marxism.htm>. See also Kebede, "Guilt and Atonement: The Genesis of Revolutionary Spirit in Ethiopia," *Addis Tribune* (6 August 2004) <www.addistribune.com/Archives/2004/08/06-08-04/Guilt.htm>.

[5] Kebede, "Guilt and Atonement."

The experience of Ethiopia may be emblematic for the broader Marxist-impacted global South. If so, it seems secularization theory ended up, as often as not, serving as the handmaiden of ruthless politicians set adrift by the corrosive cultural influence of Western imperial powers. Those who found voices to oppose such rank abuses of authority often did so by drawing from the same traditional cultural resources the native usurpers sought to abolish. They often lost their lives in the struggle. In light of their courage, however, Kebede conceives of the possibility of a re-modernization of Ethiopia in which habits of mind and heart are shaped by a dynamic that preserves traditional Ethiopian culture as it seeks to come to grips with the realities of a modern economic and political world.[6] As Kebede's work suggests a new path for Ethiopian cultural analysis and development, though, it also offers unspoken reflections on European and American approaches to Africa: the constituent nations of the West have worked out modern cultural systems within the (now distant but yet discernable) frameworks of their own native traditional beliefs; perhaps Africa should be granted the elbow room to do the same in developing societies that respond to postmodernity on different, and quite possibly better, terms than those that have guided the West.

---

[6] His most elaborate formulation of this vision is laid out in *Survival and Modernization, Ethiopia's Enigmatic Present: A Philosophical Discourse* (Lawrence: Red Sea, 1999), where he also indicates the significant place of traditional Islam in shaping a new Ethiopian modernity.