

REGNUM STUDIES IN GLOBAL CHRISTIANITY

ORTHODOX HANDBOOK ON ECUMENISM
Resources for Theological Education

“That they all may be one” (John 17:21)

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REGNUM BOOKS INTERNATIONAL, OXFORD
(in cooperation with WCC Publications),
Oxford, 2014

(92) ECUMENICAL DIALOGUE IN THE ERITREAN ORTHODOX TEWAHEDO CHURCH

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Introduction

The Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church is the youngest member of the Oriental Orthodox Church family, and it would not be an exaggeration to assert that it is also one of the least known Orthodox Churches worldwide. Although the Eritrean Orthodox Church was established only in the course of the last decade of the 20th century, it shares (together with the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church) a heritage of a centuries-old tradition which goes back to the times of Late Antiquity. This young and simultaneously ancient Church is just making its first steps within the institutionalized ecumenical movement, but the interaction with other Christian denominations has already played a constitutive role in its formation.

Modern Eritrea is located along the south-western coast of the Red Sea, an area which once used to be the site of the ancient Kingdom of Aksum extending across the Red Sea into the Arabian Peninsula and beyond to the Gulf of Aden. Being a major player in the trade between the Roman Empire and Ancient India, China and Persia, the kingdom flourished from the 1st to the 7th century and attracted merchants and settlers from throughout the ancient world. It is therefore natural that the cosmopolite Kingdom of Aksum from the earliest times also had a number of Christians, but they were first of all foreigners and lived predominantly in the port city of Adulis. During the reign of Ezana (ca. 325–365), whose religious policy can be seen as an *imitatio imperii Romani*, the conversion of the kingdom to Christianity took place and was inaugurated by the ordination of its first bishop – St. Frumentius, a Syrian from Tyre, who is revered in Eritrea and Ethiopia as the ‘Revealer of Light’. Thereby a long-standing ecclesiastic bond between the newly founded Church and the Holy See of St. Mark (the Coptic Orthodox Church) was established.

The Other as a Challenge: Early Contacts with the Western Christianity

“Encompassed on all sides by enemies of their religion, the Ethiopians slept for near a thousand years, forgetful of the world by whom they were forgotten.”¹ This famous passage of the British historian Edward Gibbon transmits an idea which still dominates in the contemporary historiography – the idea that, since the rise of Islam in the neighbouring regions, Ethiopia (including Eritrea) was totally isolated from the wider world and the rest of Christianity throughout the centuries.² But as the new findings indicate, the Christians in the Horn of Africa were engaged in a rather active interaction with the Christian *oikumene* long before the advent of the Jesuit mission in the 16th century.³ But in what follows we would like to focus on the interactions between the Orthodox Christians in Eritrea and the representatives of other Christian traditions in more recent times – close before and after the birth of the modern ecumenical movement.

¹ Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, (New York, 1910), 176.

² For a critique of the contemporary historiographical discourse on the interaction between Ethiopia and the Western world see: Andreu Martínez d’Alòs-Moner, “Europe and Ethiopia’s Isolation: the Ethio-Jesuit Paradigm Revised (17th cent.),” in Ludwig Gerhardt (Ed.), *Umbrüche in afrikanischen Gesellschaften und ihre Bewältigung*, (Berlin, 2006), 223–233.

³ For the sources and literature on this mission see: Leonardo Cohen Shabot – Andreu Martínez d’Alòs-Moner, “The Jesuit Mission to Ethiopia (16th–17th centuries). An Analytical Bibliography,” in *Aethiopica: International Journal of Ethiopian and Eritrean Studies* 9 (2006): 190–212. A historical overview of the Ethio-European contacts in the Middle Ages can be found in: Wilhelm Baum, *Äthiopien und der Westen im Mittelalter: die Selbstbehauptung der christlichen Kultur am oberen Nil zwischen dem islamischen Orient und dem europäischen Kolonialismus*, (Klagenfurt, 2001).

If an active interaction of Christians in Eritrea with the Catholic Church was established already in the Middle Ages, the first encounter with Protestantism happened first in the 19th century.⁴ And this encounter was rather the result of a misfortune of Swedish Lutheran missionaries who came into the Eritrean city of Massawa in 1866 looking for a way to reach the land of the Oromo people, who were believed still to be “pagans”.⁵ But as they were successful neither in this undertaking, nor in the attempt to start a mission among Kunama and Barya in the north-west Ethiopia, they found no better idea than to propagate Lutheranism in Orthodox areas of Eritrea.⁶ This inevitably led not just to an encounter, but to a certain clash between both traditions. Protestant proselytism among its members prompted the Orthodox Church to initiate a discussion with the missionaries and to give a theological response to this challenge.

Luckily enough, some Eritrean manuscripts have preserved echoes of these theological debates, whereby we have at our disposal not only a missionary perspective on the situation documented in their reports and diaries, but also – what is extremely rare – an indigenous African view on a Western mission. These manuscripts were composed by the monks of the Debre Bizen monastery, one of the main spiritual and educational centers of the Orthodox Church in Eritrea, in the beginning of the 20th century. The most important work is entitled *The Book of Wisdom* and is composed in the form of a dialogue between an Orthodox and a Protestant, discussing variety of theological issues, both theoretical and practical (here the question concerning fasting played an important role).⁷ Nevertheless, this manuscript presenting an outstanding example of the Orthodox apologetic literature and an important document of the early Orthodox-Protestant dialogue is still awaiting its publication and a detailed analysis.

However important the dialogue with the Protestants might have been, the interaction with the Catholic Church received much more attention from the side of the Orthodox Eritreans, because from a certain point it exceeded a mere theological framework and became an issue of survival. It had to do with the political transformation of the region. Since the end of the 19th century, Eritrea started taking its modern shape in particularly through a series of small scale expansionist activities of Italy. As the culmination of this process the Italians declared the occupied territory to be its new colony, which they called with the word derived from the Latin name of the Red Sea – *Mare Eritreum* – ‘Eritrea’.⁸ The time of the Italian occupation (1890–1941) had not only a tremendous impact on all spheres of life, but played also a major role in the process of the Eritrean

⁴For general information on the political background to the missionary initiatives and their consequences in the 19th century see: Donald Crummey, *Priests and Politicians: Protestant and Catholic Missions in Orthodox Ethiopia (1830–1868)*, (Oxford, 1972). For the perspective of the first Protestant missionaries on the Ethiopian Church tradition see: Stanislau Paulau, “Encountering the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in the Pre-ecumenical Age: First Protestant Missionaries in Ethiopia (1829–1843),” in E. Ficquet and A. Hassen (eds.), *Movements in Ethiopia, Ethiopia in Movement. Proceedings of the 18th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, (Addis Ababa: CFEE – IES, 2014). *Forthcoming*.

⁵For an overview of the history of the Evangelical Church in Eritrea see: Karl Johan Lundström – Ezra Gebremedhin, *Kenisha: The Roots and Development of the Evangelical Church of Eritrea 1866–1935*, (Trenton: The Red Sea Press, 2011). For the history of the educational work of the Swedish mission in Eritrea see: Jonas Iwarsson – Alberto Tron, *Notizie storiche e varie sulla missione evangelica svedese dell’Eritrea, 1866–1916*, (Asmara, 1918).

⁶Sven Rubenson, *The Survival of Ethiopian Independence*, (London, 1976), 288–289; Gustav Arén, *Evangelical Pioneers in Ethiopia*, (Stockholm, 1978), 127–148.

⁷EMML [Ethiopian Manuscript Microfilm Library] 1233, Ff. 5a–24b and ff. 29a–89b. The book was composed in 1905 E.C. (= 1912–1913 A.D.). The same manuscript contains also a report of a dialogue that took place on Maggäbit 18, 1902 E.C. (= March 27, 1910 A.D.) between an Orthodox called Tasfä Šelläsē and the Protestant Abbā Māso, see: EMML 1233, Ff. 89b–96b. For the description of the manuscript see: Getatchew Haile (ed.), *A Catalogue of Ethiopian Manuscripts Microfilmed for the Ethiopian Manuscript Microfilm Library, Addis Ababa and for the Hill Monastic Manuscript Library, Collegeville. Vol. 4: Project numbers 1101–1500*, (Collegeville: Hill Monastic Ms. Libr., St. John’s Abbey and Univ., 1979), 217.

⁸See: Haggai Erlich, “Pre-Colonial Eritrea”, in Siegbert Uhlig (ed.), *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, Volume 2, D–Ha, (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2005), 358–359.

nation-building.⁹ Obviously, the ecclesiastic landscape of the country under the new ruler could not remain the same – the Catholic missions in the region gained the momentum.¹⁰ The colonial powers tried to use the Catholic mission as one of the tools in their propaganda of the new policy, connected with Italian national ideology.¹¹ Therefore the French Lazarists who were active in Eritrea prior to Italian colonization were suspected of disloyalty to the colonial state on the grounds of their nationality and replaced by the Italian Capuchins in 1894.¹² In order to strengthen the Catholic Church a new structure, the Apostolic Prefecture of Eritrea, was established.

At the same time, the Orthodox Church in Eritrea, being a diocese of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, was the main bearer of the national identity and culture and was therefore seen by the Italians as a great threat. Owing to the proximity of the co-religionist Ethiopian Empire, where the Orthodox Church was still a pillar of the State, the danger of a potential resistance movement coming out of the Church and acting with Ethiopian help was very probable. Hence the colonial powers started to use various strategies to weaken the influence of Orthodoxy in Eritrea. First of all, the Italians undermined the economical power of the Orthodox Church and confiscated its lands. Second, they tried to challenge its religious authority through the educational policy – all the education was delegated to the missionaries, who became responsible not only for colonial teaching and the propagation of Italian culture, but also for lessons on religion.¹³ In 1929, to counteract the potentially dangerous influence of the Church, the colonial government even abolished the Ethiopian ecclesiastic authority over Eritrea. However, both the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church and the Coptic Orthodox Church, to whose jurisdiction the Ethiopian Church still belonged at that time, proclaimed this step uncanonical and correspondingly invalid. Another important element of the colonial religious policy was the support of Islam. As Federica Guazzini remarks, “the Italians actively encouraged the spread of Islam in Eritrea in order to achieve the support of their Muslim subjects and to set them against the Orthodox.”¹⁴

All the attempts of the Italian government to weaken the Orthodox Church led neither to the extermination of its underground links with the Ethiopian empire, nor to a desirable number of Eritrean Orthodox conversions to Catholicism. And since the interaction between both Churches was very much instrumentalized for political aims and happened in a strictly power-related context, no significant attempt towards a real dialogue was made from either side. And if the encounter with Protestantism was a relatively new challenge for the Orthodox Church which demanded a theological response, the Catholic Church was already quite well known – Orthodox polemical literature against Catholicism had flourished already in the 16th and 17th centuries and could be further used for the apologetical purposes.¹⁵

⁹ Cf.: Redie Bereketeab, *Eritrea: The making of a Nation, 1890–1991*, (Trenton, 2007); Bairu Tafla, “Independence through Independence: the Challenges of Eritrean Historiography,” in Harold Golden Marcus (ed.), *New Trends in Ethiopian Studies. Papers of the 12th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, Michigan State University, 5–10 September 1994*, (Lawrenceville, 1994), 497–514.

¹⁰ The 19th century Catholic mission in Eritrea started with Father Giuseppe Sapeto who came in the late 1830s and was soon joined by Justin de Jacobis, appointed to be Perfect Apostolic of Ethiopia and neighboring regions. Donald Crummey, *Priests and Politicians: Protestant and Catholic Missions in Orthodox Ethiopia (1830–1868)*, (Oxford, 1972), 60; Kefelew Zelleke – Friedrich Heyer, *Das orthodoxe Äthiopien und Eritrea in jüngster Geschichte*, (Aachen, 2001), 156.

¹¹ Dirar, U. “Church-state Relations in Colonial Eritrea: Missionaries and the Development of Colonial Strategies (1869–1911),” in *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 8.3 (2003): 391–410.

¹² See: Metodio da Nembro, *La missione dei Minori Cappuccini in Eritrea 1894–1952*, (Roma, 1953).

¹³ For an analysis of the colonial textbooks (also regarding religion) in Eritrea see: Tekeste Negash, *Italian Colonialism in Eritrea, 1882–1941. Policies, Praxis and Impact*, (Uppsala, 1987), 72–79.

¹⁴ Federica Guazzini, “Colonial history of Eritrea,” in Siegbert Uhlig (ed.), *Encyclopaedia Aethiopia*, Volume 2, D–Ha, (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2005), 361.

¹⁵ See Enrico Cerulli, *Scritti teologici etiopici dei secoli XVI–XVII. II: La storia dei quattro Concili ed puscoli monofisiti*, (Città del Vaticano, 1960). For a more recent Orthodox reaction on the Catholic mission see: Stéphane Ancel, “Discourse Against Catholic Doctrine in Təgray (Ethiopia): A Nineteenth Century Text,” in *Aethiopia, International Journal for Ethiopian and Eritrean Studies* 15 (2012): 92–104.

From the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in Eritrea to the Eritrean Orthodox Church: Inter-Orthodox Relations

In the course of the 20th century, the Eritrean political situation had been changing dramatically. After the defeat of the Italians, Eritrea was governed by the British (1941–1952), and subsequently federated with the Ethiopian Empire, only to be annexed in 1961. This led to the formation of an independence movement, which erupted into a 30-year war against successive Ethiopian governments that ended in 1991. Following a UN-supervised referendum in Eritrea in which the people overwhelmingly voted for separation from Ethiopia, Eritrea declared its independence and gained international recognition in 1993.

The Eritrean independence from Ethiopia became a huge challenge for the Orthodox Church which was still the Ethiopian Church. As it is often the case in the history, the Church decided to adjust to the utterly new political reality: “In view of the way the Orthodox Church in Eritrea had been co-opted by the imperial regime, it is understandable that the Eritrean Church felt obliged to dissociate itself from Ethiopia and become a patriotic national church.”¹⁶ But taking into consideration the canonical status of the Orthodox Church in Eritrea, this was not an easy undertaking. Here, several facts from the inter-Orthodox relations have to be recalled. Since the 4th century when St. Frumentius was ordained in Alexandria to be the first bishop of Aksum, all the Patriarchs of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (including Eritrea) were sent from the Coptic Church. The situation changed only in the middle of the 20th century when the number of Ethiopian bishops was steadily increased until an independent Holy Synod could be formed. The culmination of the process took place in 1959 when the Coptic Patriarch granted Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church autocephaly and consecrated Abune Basilios as the first Patriarch of the Ethiopian Church.

So being just a diocese of the Ethiopian Church, the Eritrean Orthodox community could not expect that the Ethiopian Church would give it autocephaly after the separation of Eritrea. So in order to obtain autocephaly, the Eritrean Orthodox hierarchs decided to make a detour and to appeal for an intervention of the Coptic Church. The Holy Synod of the Coptic Orthodox Church responded favourably to this request and authorized the training of as many as ten future bishops for the Eritrean Church in Coptic monasteries. And in 1994, five new Orthodox bishops for Eritrea were ordained in Cairo.¹⁷ The clash with the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church – which saw the actions of the Coptic Church as a violation of its canonical jurisdiction over Eritrea – was inescapable. Although the official documentation implies that there is a smooth transition to ecclesiastical independence, in reality things looked rather different. Initial reactions in Ethiopia upon hearing of the Coptic intervention were extremely negative and caused a rupture in Ethiopian-Coptic relations. Even though thereafter an agreement was signed in Addis Abeba that reaffirmed the autocephalous status of both the Ethiopian and the Eritrean Churches and recognized a primacy of honour of the Coptic Church among the Oriental Orthodox churches in Africa, the situation remained tense. And here the ecumenical movement became instrumental for the normalisation of the relationships between both Churches. As the Coptic journal *Glastonbury Bulletin* informed, “Relations between the Coptic and Ethiopian Churches have been strained since 1994... During the recent General assembly of the World Council of Churches in Harare, meetings between the two churches delegations produced hopeful signs that the problems between the two churches soon might be healed.”¹⁸ But these hopes were not to become

¹⁶ Joachim G. Persoon, “The spiritual Legacy of the Ethio-Eritrean Conflict,” in *Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* 57 (2005): 298.

¹⁷ For more details on the negotiations between the Eritrean and the Coptic Churches see: Friedrich Heyer, “Die Einwirkung des koptischen Patriarchats auf die Gründung des orthodoxen Patriarchats von Eritrea,” in Martin Tamcke (Ed.), *Daheim und in der Fremde. Beiträge zur jüngeren Geschichte und Gegenwartslage der orientalischen Christen*, (Hamburg: LIT, 2002), 252–259; Wolfram Reiss, “Vereinbarung zwischen der Koptisch-Orthodoxen und der Eritreisch-Orthodoxen Kirche,” in Martin Tamcke (Ed.), *Daheim und in der Fremde. Beiträge zur jüngeren Geschichte und Gegenwartslage der orientalischen Christen*, (Hamburg: LIT, 2002), 261–265.

¹⁸ “Hope For Improved Relations Between Coptic and Ethiopian Churches,” in *Glastonbury Bulletin* 100 (1999): 71–72.

reality: in the very same year 1998 – against the will of the Orthodox Ethiopians – the last step in the process of creation of the autocephalous Eritrean Orthodox Church was undertaken and on 8 May the Pope of the Coptic Orthodox Church enthroned the bishop of Asmara Abba Philipos as the first Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church. Wolfgang Hage rightly points out that the Eritrean Church presents a remarkable example of the fact that the state-oriented model of obtaining autocephaly (“an independent Church for an independent state”), as it is often the case in Eastern Orthodoxy, can function also among the Oriental Churches.¹⁹

Of great ecumenical significance was the protocol signed between the Coptic and the Eritrean Orthodox Churches on the occasion of the granting autocephaly. It represents a unique example of the recognition of mutual independence and, at the same time, a commitment to common actions in all spheres of the Church life.²⁰ Declaring that the two Churches belong to the See of St. Mark and confess one Orthodox doctrine (article 3), the protocol stresses a need for a special liturgical expression of their closeness to each other (article 4): “In order to manifest and affirm the spiritual relations between the two Churches, His Holiness the Pope of Alexandria and His Holiness the Patriarch of Eritrea should be mentioned in all the liturgical prayers – the name of the Alexandrian Pope to be mentioned first.”²¹ This is an unparalleled practice within the Orthodox tradition. The protocol also anticipates further steps: a common general Synod of both Churches is to be convened together every three years (article 6), a common delegation for ecumenical dialogues on matters of faith is to be formed (article 10) and a standing committee to promote cooperation in such areas as theological education, social services, pastoral care and development projects is to be established (article 12). However this autocephaly and the program of cooperation defined in the protocol had ambivalent consequences. On the one hand, it set the groundwork for an unprecedentedly in the Orthodox world partnership between two (the Eritrean and the Coptic) Churches. On the other hand, totally neglecting the just claims of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church for jurisdiction over Eritrea, it intensified already existing inter-Orthodox tensions.²² And political circumstances were not favorable for solving these tensions: in the beginning of May 1998 at the very same time as the Eritrean Orthodox Church celebrated the consecration of its first Patriarch, the Eritrean–Ethiopian War began.

Current State of the Eritrean Orthodox Church and its Engagement in the Ecumenical Movement

The war killed thousands of people, displaced hundreds of thousands and caused a serious humanitarian crisis. It was over only in June 2000, and the ecumenical movement played a key role in advocating for peace-making during the war and assisting in achieving reconciliation thereafter. Immediately after the outbreak of hostilities, the General Secretary of the World Council of Churches (WCC) wrote to the leaders of Ethiopia and Eritrea, imploring them to stop the fighting and to resolve the border issue, which was the immediate source of contention, by peaceful means. In 1999, an ecumenical delegation led by the WCC visited both countries to express the concerns of the Churches around the world and to offer its assistance.

¹⁹ Wolfgang Hage, *Das orientalische Christentum*, (Stuttgart, 2007), 226.

²⁰ “Protocol between the Coptic Orthodox Church (COC) and the Eritrean Orthodox Church (EOC),” in Martin Tamcke (Ed.), *Daheim und in der Fremde. Beiträge zur jüngeren Geschichte und Gegenwartslage der orientalischen Christen*, (Hamburg: LIT, 2002), 266–275. See in the footnotes also the comparison of the similar agreement which was signed in 1994 between the Coptic Orthodox Church and the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church. The text of this protocol can be found in: Klaus Schwarz (Ed.), *Überleben in Schwieriger Zeit. 4. Evangelisch/Orientalisch-Orthodoxe theologische Konsultationen*, (Hannover, 1995), 97–102.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 272.

²² The conflict between the Coptic Orthodox and the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Churches was overcome only in July 2007 through the assistance of His Holiness Aram I, Armenian Catholicos of Cilicia.

With the help of Norwegian Church Aid (NCA) and other ecumenical partners, interfaith committees from Orthodox, Protestant, Roman Catholic and Muslim leaders had been formed in Eritrea and Ethiopia.²³ Particularly significant were six peace meetings of religious leaders held in Europe, the United States and Kenya, as there were no other contacts between Eritrea and Ethiopia. The culmination of the reconciliation process were visits of the Ethiopian religious leaders to Eritrea and of the Eritrean religious leaders to Ethiopia in 2002, described by Abune Paulos, the Patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, as “a healing of wounds.”²⁴ Apparently, this successful experience of a productive interfaith work encouraged the Eritrean Orthodox Church to extend its ecumenical involvement. Apart from the participation in the official theological dialogues within the Oriental Church family,²⁵ it obtained membership in the World Council of Churches and in the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC).

However the Eritrean authoritarian regime did not excuse religious leaders from the criticism of the disastrous war – and consequently of its policy – and clearly considered it as threat for its authority. Also the participation of the Eritrean Orthodox Church in this ecumenical initiative was not passed over unnoticed by the Eritrean government. This resulted in a severe repression of civil society and in restrictions in the freedom of religious groups felt to undermine national integrity. In the course of this new religious policy, Eritrea became one of the world’s worst persecutors of Christians. Since 2002, the Eritrean government acknowledges a right to exist for only four “recognized” religious groups, the Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholicism, the Lutheran Church, and the Sunni Islam. Members of all other religious groups are badly persecuted – arrested, held in oppressive conditions, and sometimes even tortured to compel them to recant their faith.

Even though the Eritrean Orthodox Church enjoys the status of an officially recognized religious group, it faces a great deal of restrictions. In May 2002, the desire of the Eritrean government to control the oldest and the most influential institution in the country brought the installation of a political appointee as the General Administrator of the Church. This position, similar to that of the Ober-Prokurator of the Russian Orthodox Holy Synod in Tsarist times, has full control over the decisions of the Synod. Besides this, in order to weaken the position of the Church and to reduce its role to a mere arm of the Department of the Religious Affairs, the government either arrested or unfrocked a great number of the leading clergy who could oppose the new course of the government. Yet this was not all: the finances of the Church fell under the control of the government,²⁶ the most precious artifacts and manuscripts were declared to be “the property of the Eritrean people” and confiscated.²⁷ But what makes the religious policy of the government even more dangerous for the future of the Eritrean Orthodox Church is that presently all deacons and priests below the age of fifty are obliged to undergo an indefinite military service. During the last several years, more than 1,500 Orthodox priests were forced to join the army and as a result of the shortage of clergy, Orthodox churches – and first of all in rural areas – are being shut down at an alarming rate in Eritrea.²⁸

²³ *Minute on Peace and Reconciliation between Ethiopia and Eritrea*, adopted by the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches, Geneva, 26 August–3 September 1999. http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-commissions/international-affairs/regional-concerns/africa/minute-on-peace-and-reconciliation-between-ethiopia-and-eritrea?set_language=en

²⁴ Cf. Joachim G. Persoon, “The spiritual Legacy of the Ethio-Eritrean Conflict,” in *Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* 57 (2005): 300.

²⁵ Nareg Alemezian, “The Oriental Orthodox Family of Churches in Ecumenical Dialogue,” in *The Ecumenical Review* 61.3 (2009): 315–327.

²⁶ See: “The Sufferings of the Eritrean Orthodox Church,” in *Glastonbury Bulletin* 115 (2007). <http://britishorthodox.org/glastonbury-review-archive/glastonbury-review-archive-issue-115/6/>

²⁷ “The Detained Patriarch, Persecuted Christians and a Dying Church” (18 January 2012). <http://theorthodoxchurch.info/blog/news/2012/01/the-detained-patriarch-persecuted-christians-and-a-dying-church/>

²⁸ “Eritrean Orthodox Churches Closing Their Doors at an Alarming Rate” (13 October 2011), in *In Chains for Christ (ICFC). Voice of the Persecuted Church in Eritrea*. http://www.inchainsforchrist.org/index.php?view=article&id=70%3Aeritrean-orthodox-churches-closing-their-doors-at-an-alarming-rate&option=com_content&Itemid=54

However the head of the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church, Patriarch Antonios, took an uncompromising stand against all encroachments by the government in the affairs of the Church and demanded the release of the imprisoned Christians. The reaction followed quite soon, and Patriarch Antonios was removed from his office by the Holy Synod which sided with the government. He was soon arrested and became one of around 2,000 Christians detained without trial or charge by the Eritrean government.²⁹ Since then, he has neither been seen nor heard from. In order to justify this uncanonical action, representatives of the Synod even sought the support of the Coptic Pope Shenouda III to excommunicate Abune Antonios, but the Pope refrained from this and expressed his support for the persecuted Patriarch.

The religious policy of the Eritrean regime found its anticipated turn on 27 May 2007 when a pro-government bishop Dioscoros of Mendefera was installed as a new Patriarch. Although all other Oriental Orthodox Churches still continue to recognize Abune Antonios as the genuine and canonical patriarch of Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church,³⁰ the Eritrean Orthodox Community in Diaspora is divided into two groups: one (more numerous) supporting Abune Antonios and the other, Abune Dioscoros.

The severe restriction of religious freedom in Eritrea gained attention all around the world and this situation became a major concern not only for various NGO's, but also for Churches and ecumenical bodies worldwide. As the matter of fact, General Secretary of the WCC Konrad Raiser accompanied by an ecumenical team visited Eritrea in July 2002 and met there with Church leaders as well as government officials in order to advocate for the believers, whose fundamental human rights of freedom of religion, conscience, worship and organization had been violated.³¹ Intensive work in this direction is being done also by the Eritrean Orthodox Church in Diaspora. Its recent appeal from May 2013 to the Secretary-General of the United Nations Ban Ki-moon could serve as an example of its activity.³² In this letter the Archdioceses of the Eritrean Orthodox Church in North America, Europe and Middle East once again called upon the world community to help to release His Holiness Patriarch Antonios and all those who are in prison because of their faith.

As concerns the participation of the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church in the ecumenical movement, the situation is rather ambivalent. Although the official representatives of the Eritrean Orthodox Church participate in some ecumenical gatherings, their freedom of action is very much limited. Moreover after the forcible dismissal of Patriarch Antonios and the appointment of Abune Dioscoros, the canonical status of the Church in Eritrea is often questioned by other Churches. At the same time the Eritrean Orthodox Church consists not only of its members in Eritrea. It has already become an international body as the large number of refugees left Eritrea during the last decades established strong Orthodox parishes all around the world. These Eritrean Christians actively contribute to the ecumenical work at various levels, sharing both their ancient Christian tradition dating back to the first centuries and the experience of a dramatic history of the recent past.

²⁹ For more details see "Eritrean Patriarch Uncanonicaly Deposed," in *Glastonbury Bulletin* 113 (2006): 213–220. For the letter of the Abune Antonios to the Holy Synod after his removal from the position of the Patriarch see *ibid.*, 216–218. For the current information about Patriarch Antonios and activities see: <http://www.abuneantonios.com>

³⁰ "The Eritrean Church," in *Standing Conference of Oriental Orthodox Churches in America*. <http://www.scooch.org/member-churches/the-eritrean-church/>

³¹ Cf. *Letter of the Director of Commission of the Churches on International Affairs of the WCC to Mr Ali Ali Abdu, Minister of Information and Culture of Eritrea from 23 June, 2003*. <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-commissions/international-affairs/regional-concerns/africa/religious-freedom-and-liberty-in-eritre>

³² "Letter to the Secretary-General of the United Nations Ban Ki-moon" (18 May 2013), in *Eritrean Orthodox Diocese of North America*. http://tewahdo.org/Pdf/Letter_051813-English.pdf

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