

An interview with the Ethiopian Patriarch, Abune Matthias



Patriarch Abune Matthias in the chapel of the Ecumenical Centre, Geneva, February 2017. © Peter Williams/WCC

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The visit 9-10 February 2017 to the World Council of Churches (WCC) by the Patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, H.H. Abune Matthias, occasioned reflection on the distinctive history and traditions of that ancient church, as well as its role in Ethiopian society and in the larger ecumenical landscape. Coming to his work from a lifetime of service in the church and its monasteries and schools during an especially turbulent time, Abune Matthias was elected in 2013. The church numbers about 50 million members, including several million outside Ethiopia itself, where it accounts for about half the population. What follows is a brief interview with the Patriarch.

Your Holiness, why are you visiting the World Council of Churches, and why is it important to do so?

Visiting the WCC is important because the World Council of Churches is very important for our church, our unity, our journey together. Our church was a founding member of the WCC, and that is why after four years of my patriarchate I decided to visit here to convey my support of ecumenism.

You have spent much of your life in monasteries, from your youth, and monasteries remain 1500 strong in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. What is the importance of monastic life today—when life seems so busy, chaotic, and secularized? What is its value today?

Monastic life remains vital to the life of the Ethiopian church. For one thing, it is a voluntary commitment, and there is no influence from outside. One has to decide if one wants to be a monk and to live that life, if one wants to live apart from the rest of the world. It is important for the whole church that there are people who want to pray for those outside the monastic life. The monastic life is really arranged for total focus on God, so there is nothing else to think about. It is a life for the life of the church and a world of service, because of the link to the church at large, so monasticism is a place where one is getting in connection with God for the sake of humanity.

It is also a source of education for those in the surrounding areas, both in the monastery and our monastery schools. The value of the monastic life today, in this secularized society, is, through formation and education, to protect people from going into a different life, a less grounded life, which is important in terms of their own personal life and the lives of students there. So, being in the monastery, they can teach students a different life, maybe saving them from many other things which are not good for human well-being. The monasteries are the ones in connection with spiritual life, so by teaching and instructing monks and students they bring people back to real life, so that people can live with God, rather than leaving God, being just secular and abandoning religion. The monks bring them back because they are always with God.

So it's like a school for Christian life...

Yes. For example, in my own life, I lived in a monastic setting all my life, and today that spiritual life gives me strength to do my own special work. The spiritual life also supports a healthy physical life. So now I am always fully focused on and committed to the work I do in service to the church. Nothing else can come into my mind, because I don't have any reference point or higher value outside the church.

Another topic: the Bible. The Bible has figured so hugely in the life of the Ethiopian church and its people, with its long history of translations and commentaries—and Ethiopia is even mentioned in the Bible itself. You yourself are a scholar of the Bible. In the present context, what is its importance? Is it still a pillar for the Ethiopian Church?

The Bible, though ancient, is extremely important in the life of the Church, even today. The ancient Ethiopian language—Ge'ez—was the language used in the first Bible translations and is still the liturgical language of the church, though the Bible is also available in Amharic, which is the official language of modern Ethiopia. The Bible has not only been translated from the ancient languages to the modern one, it is now even in many of our regional languages. Because the Bible offers a deeper analysis of our being and our spiritual life, all our teaching is really based on the biblical verses and values. In our schools and educational institutions, our religious and ethical teaching, as well as in the church itself, the Bible remains really important in our church life.

Something which is different, in terms of the use of the Bible in our church: as in other Oriental Orthodox churches, we accept 81 books in the Bible, rather than 66, as many Protestant churches do, or 73, as the Catholics do. The Ethiopians venerated the Old Testament even before the birth of Christ, so the teachings of the Old Testament are still very important in the Ethiopian church, in our personal lives, for example.

You have been involved in religion and politics for many decades and even went into exile at one point for criticizing the then-communist government. What is the proper role for the church in such situations: are you a broker, an arbitrator, or a convener of the conflicting parties? Do you take a prophetic stand or a mediating one? What's the role of the church amid all the present social and political turmoil in the country?

Sometimes government has tried to control religious life. For example, in the past, during the communist regime, the government issued a proclamation to burn all the religious books in the country. So we sent some of the books outside the country, so that others could use them. This period was for us a big challenge, because of which many people also lost their lives, including clergy.

People died, others were imprisoned. Still, with all that, they were unable to succeed in destroying religious life. Similarly, if you take the case of the Soviet Union, even after 70 years, people still came back to the church. Likewise, after a directive that all books then at press be burned, we told people, if you want the books that are going to be burned, come and collect them. So I and others had the opportunity to go there and collect them and hide them in our houses.

Now the situation has changed with the current government. Politics and the church are different entities in the country. They are legally separate. The politicians do their own work, and they don't have to come to the church. And we in the church are separate, doing our own work: we teach our people, worship with them, and counsel them because that is our mandate, our responsibility. So we have no problem carrying out our duties.

Of course, we are part of the larger society, part of the people. So whenever there are challenges, our responsibility is to advise people. And when there is violence, we bring them together to address the problem. So that is why the church makes room for everyone. The responsibility of the church is not taking this side or that side but, as much as possible, encouraging, counseling, asking everyone to come in and sit down together and solve their problems through dialogue and discussion. That is our responsibility as church leaders.

Since your election in 2013, you have been to Cairo, Kerala, Rome, and now Geneva. What is your vision or goal for the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in relation to the whole *oikoumene* and for the future?

My first priority has been to visit our sister churches—the Coptic Orthodox Church, the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church in India, and the Armenian Apostolic Church in Cilicia—since we are in full communion with these Oriental Orthodox churches. I was also planning to go to Armenia proper, to the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin. Everything was ready, and I was ready to fly when we heard the terrible news of the killing of the Ethiopian Christians in Libya. When that news of the martyrs came, I gave up those plans. The main reason for my visits to these churches is that we are one church, in communion, together. We want to strengthen our relationships, our unity, and our working together.

I also visited the Vatican and His Holiness Pope Francis. It is an international church, and many church leaders visit him, so I also paid my respects there. All these visits are to stress unity and our being together as Christians.

[Patriarch Matthias: “Peace is the message of every day”](#) (WCC press release of 10 February 2017)

[Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church](#)

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