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Social Functions of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahdo Church

Abstract

The article discusses social functions of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahdo Church, emphasizing those that are institutionalized under the Development and Inter Church Aid Commission. They have been strengthened after 1994 and mainly concern the economic development of the country. Group 1 includes church projects on the social and economic development of parishes, as well as projects activating women and the clergy in local development. An economically and environmentally important project of afforestation, as well as a medical service programme targeting mainly HIV/AIDS victims are also among the subjects of this article.

The article presents social functions of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahdo Church (EOTC) at the turn of the 20th century. The analysis was carried out mainly on the basis of my two field researches conducted in Ethiopia in June and November 2008. The data comes from Addis Ababa, the central part of Ethiopia, and Mekelle, Tigray province in the north of the country. As a theoretical background, I have adopted the functionalist approach and defined church as an institution performing a variety of functions with the main objective to satisfy the essential social needs, i.e. education, safety, food, shelter, integration and expression¹. In the article, I will briefly present EOTC's integrating and educational functions, emphasizing the enrichment of the church's social functions undertaken after 1994 with an element of promoting the country's economic development.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahdo Church has about 40 million believers, accounting for about 50 per cent of the Ethiopian population, 400,000 clergy and 35,000 churches across Ethiopia. As an organization, EOTC was long related, both formally and in spiritual

¹ B. Szacka, *Wprowadzenie do socjologii*, Oficyna Naukowa, Warszawa, 2003, pp. 132–133.

terms, to the Ethiopian state. This relationship was underlined by a provision in the Ethiopian Constitution of the Imperial times, which defined EOTC as the “Established Church of the Empire and [...], as such, supported by the State”.² For centuries, EOTC fulfilled a prominent socio-political function of integration, introducing and upholding the sacred element in the life of the state, which helped keep the multinational country in unity. The outside and surface manifestation of this function were state emblems and state colours – green, yellow and red – placed on churches and church institutions, as well as on EOTC announcements and posters.



Photo 1. Gate of Saint Mary's Church, Addis Ababa. To the right, the announcement that a pilgrimage to Axum is to be undertaken during Saint Mary of Tsiyon Feast, November 21, 2008. Photo by an author

In addition, a religious function of integration emphasises the communal aspect of the church and focuses on organizing the religious and community life of the believers. The examples include not only the celebration of Holy Mass, but also pilgrimages to sites of Christian worship scattered across the country, organized by churches during specific religious festivities.

² A. Wondmagegnehu, J. Motovu, *The Ethiopian Orthodox Church*, Addis Ababa, 1970, pp. 14–15.

Along with the function of integration, the church has traditionally been involved in educational activities. At the time of the Empire, church and state education were formally separated: “schools are separated from the Church. The Church is free to establish special religious schools (elementary, high and secondary schools and Colleges) for the training of priests and is free to manage them”.³ Nevertheless, in many parts of the country church schools were the only place children could learn to read and write, the only institutions, in fact, to provide elementary education. At present, the educational function of the church has been expanded into secular education, with church education continuing. At the same time, the church covers Sunday Schools, kindergarten and day care levels with its development programmes.

For centuries, the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahdo Church has been engaged in social services in an effort to improve the living standards of the Ethiopian population. In view of the region’s frequent and devastating droughts, its activities have been directed towards reducing the impact of natural disasters by providing food, clothing and medical care, as well as by delivering spiritual support. The formal separation between the church and the state proclaimed in Art. 11 of the Ethiopian Constitution of 1994 changed the *status quo* of the Ethiopian state, which became secular. EOTC, deprived of much of financial support from the state it had enjoyed earlier, began searching for new methods to raise money for its social activities. I would like to indicate two of such methods: an increasing institutionalization of social aid which took the shape of social programmes often donated by other charity organizations or conducted together with them, as well as shifting the weight of social service from aid to development activities, or at least combining the two kinds of work.

The institutionalized aid of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church was initiated in 1972, when, by the decision of the Holy Synod, a Development and Inter Church Aid Commission (DICAC) was established. Beginning from the 1980s, DICAC started the implementation of rehabilitation programmes in addition to previous EOTC-run relief programmes. After some years of activity, DICAC was included into the EOTC structure as a department, changing its name to a Development and Inter Church Aid Department, DICAD. In that period, the organization supported not only natural disaster victims, but was also directed toward the civil war victims, integrating families separated by war and providing aid to refugees. It did not intensively participate in development activities, concentrating on relief efforts. In 1993, the Holy Synod decided to merge three of its aid departments, DICAD, the Refugee Counselling Services (RCS) and the Council for Child Care (CCC), under a new DICAC with a list of precisely determined tasks and objectives. Among them, the most innovatory focus has been on the economic, social and cultural development of society, on encouraging the clergy to participate in development activities of local parish communities as well as on making parish churches economically self-reliant.⁴ At

³ Ibid. p. 16.

⁴ Centre for Human Environment, *Comprehensive Development of the Commission’s Human Resource Development and Utilisation Potential, Relief, Rehabilitation and Development Programmes, Programme Review and Proposal of Actionable Qualitative Change*, Addis Abeba 1996, pp. 2–3.

the same time, several specific aid and development projects were proposed by EOTC, and coordinated and managed by regional DICAC coordinators. Those perceived by the Ethiopian people and international evaluators as the most required and efficient are: the Inner Church Programme, Parish Community Development Programme, Food-for-Work Programme, Women in Development Programme, Health Programme and the Afforestation Programme (Farm Forestry).

The Inner Church Programme has three sub-programmes and is essential for parish communities across the country. The Parish Council Organization sub-programme increases laity participation in church life. The programme organizes new parish councils and strengthens the existing ones. In 1995/6 it focused on 450 parishes. The Clergy Training sub-programme aims at mobilizing the clergy to act as motivators of development. The Sunday Schools sub-programme organizes and develops Sunday Schools across the country. The Parish Community Development Programme corresponds to the Inner Church Programme, focusing on local activities like cottage industries (weaving, knitting, grinding mills), small-scale agriculture projects and afforestation. In 1994, “[t]he income from these programmes has increased the revenue of many parishes”.⁵

The Food for Work programme, co-financed with USAID (United States Agency for International Development), started in 1971. Oriented towards sustaining the good condition of Ethiopia’s natural environment and increasing the level of agricultural activities, the programme involves construction of terraces to conserve soil and water, production of seedlings, wildlife conservation as well as construction of water ponds and spring development. It targets the poorest parts of Ethiopia, such as the Keffa and Illubabor districts. The Food for Work programme is closely related to the Afforestation Programme (Farm Forestry), which informs people about benefits coming from forests and teaches them how to plant and protect forests. At present, churches in Ethiopia are among those rare places that, after a long period of forest degradation caused by inefficient husbandry, have remained surrounded by forests – only because of the sacred status they enjoy among the local population.

Therefore, charging DICAC with running the afforestation programme is well justified. The programme started in 1986, and has since led to the establishment of many nurseries and to planting millions of trees across the country. Nurseries selling tree seedlings have become a source of income for farmers and parishes, as well as monasteries. Some church projects initiated under this programme were taken over by local communities after they had terminated.

⁵ Ibid. p. 8.



Photo 2. Church of Saint George, Mekelle, Tigray. Photo by an author

The very important church programme Women in Development “creates awareness on equality of women”⁶ and encourages women to participate in development activities, as well as to benefit from development. Under this programme, church staff establishes kindergartens, childcare centres, flour mills or local drinking water supplies to reduce the women’s workload. Nuns are also among the target groups intended to benefit from the programme’s objectives and activities.

Among the many relief and rehabilitation programmes, the Health Programme is the priority for a country plagued by mass HIV/AIDS morbidity. Until now, two hundred Hope Centres have been established across Ethiopia, delivering medical service and palliative care as well as providing information on HIV/AIDS to the people. This EOTC programme is conducted in cooperation and with financial support of the International Orthodox Christian Charities.

⁶ Ibid. p. 20.



Photo 3. Department of HIV/AIDS Prevention in Addis Ababa. Photo by an author

At the moment, DICAC is attempting to decentralize its activities and develop a network of local centres. Such centres have already been established in three dioceses: Northern Gonder, Northern Wello and Tigray. Problems with decentralization result directly from the shortage of educated staff, as only 22 from among 615 DICAC workers hold at least a BA degree, and merely three of them work in the regions.⁷ The Human Resources Development programme, which aims to upgrade the technical capacity of the DICAC personnel, is supposed to change this situation.

For centuries, the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahdo Church has fulfilled social functions in order to raise both the spiritual level and the living standards of Ethiopian society, as well as to uphold social balance within the country. However, under a new legislation introduced by the 1994 Ethiopian Constitution, ETOC's social functions have been channelled into some very specific programmes which are aid oriented and, additionally but very substantially, foster the country's economic development.

⁷ Ibid. p. 26.