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**ARTICLE**

**Missionary education: An engine for modernization or a vehicle towards conversion?**

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Fantahun Ayele

*Full Length Research Paper*

## **Missionary education: An engine for modernization or a vehicle towards conversion?**

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It is now 460 years since the arrival of the first Jesuits who came to implant Catholicism in Ethiopia. In order to promote their evangelical activities, these Catholic missionaries managed to open the first mission schools in the country. The Jesuits are, therefore, regarded as pioneers of missionary education in Ethiopia. Their missionary work was not, however, successful for the introduction of Catholicism resulted in much bloodshed. King Fasiledes (1632-1667) who viewed Catholicism as a threat to the country's unity expelled the Jesuits and cut off Ethiopia's relations with Europe. European missionary societies had to wait for more than a century and a half before opening mission stations in Ethiopia. In the first half of the nineteenth century, Protestant and Catholic missionaries began flocking to Ethiopia. As a means of winning converts, they opened mission schools at various sites. Since missionary education was geared towards religious success, it was accompanied by the publication and distribution of Scriptures. This gave rise to the development of vernacular literature. The study employs a qualitative study based on primary and secondary sources. This study thus, critically examines available literature and tries to reinterpret existing evidence to investigate the nature of missionary education in Ethiopia. The findings show that missionaries played a great role in expanding modern education in both rural and urban areas. However, missionary education was used as a means to win converts and subsequently increase the number of adherents. In most cases, a considerable number of students who attended their education at mission schools eventually became followers of Protestantism or Catholicism, and some even managed to be evangelists.

**Key words:** Missionaries, education, Jesuits, Protestants, Ethiopia, converts.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the sixteenth century, Christianity underwent tremendous changes. The Catholic church came under increasing pressure to undertake meaningful reforms and to distance itself from worldly wealth and corruption. The 95 theses formulated by Martin Luther eventually led to the birth of Protestantism. In an attempt to introduce reforms and stop the expansion of Protestantism, the Catholic church launched what was known as Counter-Reformation or Catholic Reformation. In the meantime, missionary societies came into existence. One of the most influential religious groups was the Society of Jesus founded by Ignatius Loyola in 1534. The Jesuits then embarked on a determined missionary work in different parts of the world (Hitchcock, 2012).

In Ethiopia, the Jesuits had an opportune moment to begin missionary work. The Christian king, Libne Dingil (1508-1540) had requested military assistance from Portugal against a Muslim conqueror named Imam Ahmed Ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi. In response to that request, the Portuguese government sent 400 soldiers under the command of Christopher da Gama. Sixteen years after the arrival of those Portuguese soldiers, the first Jesuits set foot on Ethiopia (Ullendorff, 1960; Marcus, 1994).

## METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative study based on a careful examination of both primary and secondary sources. Pertinent published and unpublished works have been consulted, cross-checked and reinterpreted. In addition, several informants who attended missionary education have been interviewed and the oral information they provided has been critically examined. Finally, since the author himself is a product of missionary education, he has used his own experience and observation to analyse and uncover the underlying issues in missionary education.

## THE ORIGINS OF MISSIONARY EDUCATION

Missionary education in Ethiopia can be traced back to

the advent of the Jesuits in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The Portuguese military intervention in the sixteenth century against the onslaught of Ahmed Ibn Ibrahim (commonly known as Gagn – the left-handed) presented the Jesuits with a golden opportunity to begin missionary work in Ethiopia. The first Jesuits, therefore, arrived in Ethiopia in 1557 and were later reinforced by additional missionaries in 1603 (Bahru, 1991; Gebreal, 1976; Hess, 1970; Ullendorff, 1960).

Until the rise of Susenyos (1607-32), however, the Jesuits' effort in winning adherents met with no marked success. In a desperate attempt to strengthen the monarchy and subdue the nobility as well as the clergy, Susenyos entertained the hope of getting foreign military assistance. The Jesuits quickly exploited Susenyos' sympathy to the best advantage (Bahru, 1991; Gebreal, 1976). Pedro Paez, who was determined "to bring the Ethiopian sheep in to the Roman flock," (Marcus, 1994) succeeded in converting the king into Catholicism around 1612.

The Jesuits who regarded education as the principal way of spreading Catholicism, opened the first mission schools in Ethiopia by the beginning of the seventeenth century. As early as 1617, they are reported to have opened schools and seminaries at Fremona (Tigray), Dembia (Gondar) and Qollella (Gojjam). At these schools, the Jesuits taught reading and writing in Amharic and Portuguese. These early educational activities had religious and political targets. It was the desire of the Portuguese to make Ethiopia a Catholic state and control the Red Sea region (Pankhurst, 1974; Merid and Rubenson, 1975; Trimmingham, 1976).

Never the less, the introduction of Catholicism into the country brought about a bloody civil war, which forced Susenyos to abdicate in favour of his son, Fasiledes (1632-1667). Following his rise to power, Fasiledes restored Orthodox Christianity and expelled the Jesuits. The expulsion of the Jesuits, which was attended by the closure of all schools and seminaries, marked the beginning of Ethiopia's isolation from Europe. The doors

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of Ethiopia remained closed for over 150 years (Gebreal, 1976; Pankhurst, 1974; Marcus, 1994). The schools they had established in different parts of northern and north-western Ethiopia were abandoned and deserted. There are still ruins of such buildings in Fremona, Dembia and Qollella.

About half a century after the expulsion of the Jesuits from Ethiopia, an attempt was made to revive Catholicism in Ethiopia. In 1698, Iyyasu the Great, the Ethiopian king at Gondar invited a French physician named Charles Jacques Poncet to cure him from his skin disease. However, the strong suspicion towards Europeans made it impossible for the French to use Poncet as an agent to preach Catholicism once again in Ethiopia (Natsoulas, 2003).

Although the Jesuit legacy had created a strong suspicion towards foreigners, various missionary societies began to flock to Ethiopia in the first half of the nineteenth century. During the *Zemene Mesafint*, missionaries were relatively free to preach their faith (Gebreal, 1979; Rubenson 1976). In an attempt to establish contacts and get firearms from Europe, some regional rulers like *Dejach* Wube Hayle Maryam, Nigussie Wolde Mikael both from Simen and King Sahile Sillase of Shewa favoured missionaries (Rubenson, 1976).

Modern missionary education revived with the arrival of two Protestants from the Church Missionary Society (CMS), Samuel Gobat and Christian Kugler in 1830 (Crummey, 1972; Rubenson, 1976). The other missionary Society, the British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS) based in London had already begun printing scriptures in Geez since 1810 to be distributed in Ethiopia. Subsequently, the BFBS published the first Geez Psalter in the same year to be followed by the Amharic version. In 1824, the society also produced the Geez-Amharic version of the Four Gospels and in the following year it published the first Amharic version of the New Testament (Pankhurst, 1974).

The development of religious literature in Ethiopia was accompanied by the opening of modern mission schools.

In the 1830s, for instance, two other Protestant missionaries, C.W. Isenberg and J.L. Krapf, taught 30 to 40 children at their school in Shewa. To make the missionary education more attractive, Isenberg published teaching materials in Amharic including “a spelling and

reading book and a geography, both in 1841 and a history of the world in the following year” (*Ibid.*).

The publication of textbooks in Amharic made the teaching-learning process highly attractive. The skills of reading and writing in turn encouraged students to read scriptures and religious tracts published in Amharic and freely distributed among the people. Missionary education thus promoted the expansion of Protestantism and Catholicism.

The nineteenth century also saw the revival of Catholic missionary work. Although the “Jesuit experiment” was a complete failure, Catholic missionary activities resurrected with the coming of Giuseppe Sapeto and Giustino De Jacobis to Ethiopia in the late 1830s. The latter was responsible for the foundation of the Lazarist mission in Northern Ethiopia. Similarly, Cardinal Massaja founded the Capuchin order in Ethiopia following his arrival in 1846 (Bahru, 1991).

In 1841, De Jacobis sent 41 Ethiopians to Europe (23 to Rome and 18 to Marseilles) for religious training. One of them was *Girazmach* Yosef Nigusse who later acted as an interpreter when the Wuchale Treaty was signed in 1889 between emperor Menilek II and the Italians. In 1847, the Lazarists opened their mission school in northern Ethiopia (Pankhurst, 1974).

In the 1850's and 1860s, conditions favoured the Protestant missionaries more than the Catholics. Tewodros II (1855-1868) who was obsessed with the introduction of European technology in to the country had friendly relations with Protestant missionaries. His intimacy with John Bell and Walter Plowden seemed to have influenced Tewodros's relationship with Protestant missionaries (Bahru, 1991; Curmmeey 1972,).

More specifically, the missionaries from St. Chrischona institute at Basle, Switzerland known as the Chrischona Brethren are reported to have possessed some technical skills (Crummey 1972, 121). Such skills “made them more attractive to an emperor (Tewodros) bent on introducing European artisanship” (Bahru, 1991). The Chrischona Brethren were instrumental in the establishment of Tewodros's cannon foundry at Gafat and the subsequent manufacture of mortars (Rubenson, 1979).

The success of the missionaries in realizing Tewodros's



dreams of producing arms locally made the latter more sympathetic and friendly to the former. The missionaries were rewarded and called by Tewodros “my children” (Dufton, 1867; Crummey, 1972,). Tewodros’s amicable relationship with the Protestant missionaries “attained such degrees of intimacy as partaking together of Holy Communion” (Bahru, 1991). They were given “full permission from his majesty to preach and teach to the natives” (Dufton, 1867).

With the help of the missionaries, Tewodros erected a modern school at Gafat for literacy and technical training. The school was attended by young Ethiopians selected for technical training as well as freed slaves and orphans who lost their parents in war. Tewodros is reported to have been paying salary to his European teachers (*Ibid*; Crummey 1972, 128). With regard to the Catholics, Tewodros was not at all tolerant. Unlike the Protestants, their presence was viewed by Tewodros as a threat rather than as an opportunity. One of them De Jacobis, for instance, was actively backing Tewodros’s adversaries in Northern Ethiopia, first *Dejach* Wube Hayle Maryam and later his nephew Nigusse W. Mikael. De Jacobis had the aim of creating a Catholic state in Northern Ethiopia under French protection (Rubenson, 1979).

The diplomatic crisis between Britain and Ethiopia ended Tewodros’s friendly relations with the Protestant missionaries who finally became hostages in the hands of the Emperor. The British military intervention that followed precipitated the downfall of Emperor Tewodros (Marcus, 1994; Rubenson, 1979). Even before the death of Tewodros, another Protestant missionary society, the Swedish Evangelical Mission (SEM) had already set up a mission school in Northern Ethiopia in 1866 (Pankhurst, 1974; Gebreal, 1976).

In the 1870s and 1880s, missionary education did not make much headway. In the post-Adwa period, however, missionaries were again involved in expanding modern education benefiting a lot from Ethiopia’s intensive contact with Europe (Bahru, 1991).

## THE EXPANSION OF MISSIONARY EDUCATION IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

The first three decades of the twentieth century can be

taken as a landmark for the rapid expansion of missionary education. In the earlier centuries, following the expulsion of the Jesuits, missionaries were viewed with extreme suspicion and were treated as such. The most conducive moment for missionaries came with the rise of *Ras* Teferi in 1916 as heir and regent. To all intents and purposes, *Ras* Teferi supported the educational and medical activities of missionaries (Gebreal, 1976; Truneh, 2005). He had good reasons for giving moral and materials support to missionaries. To begin with, he himself was educated by a French Catholic priest, Father Andre Jarosseau who had been residing in Harar (Bahru, 1991). As a result, he seemed to have felt the benefits of missionary education. Secondly, his official visit to Europe in 1924, might have influenced him in seeking the expansion of modern education by missionaries and the introduction of European type of modern administration (Gebreal, 1976).

*Ras* Teferi’s official patronage of missionaries is evident from his speech (quoted in Tekeste, 1990: 13) made in November 1923 at a dinner banquet prepared in honour of American and Swedish missionaries in the palace:

... I, therefore, thank you on behalf of Ethiopia for having the desire to spread knowledge here. ... You honourable educators, who give instruction and direct the minds of the young people ... are accomplishing this noble work. You are not teaching them solely how to read and write, how to calculate but are also instructing them to be good servants of their country...

Here, *Ras* Teferi’s motive is explicitly indicated. He seems to be much concerned with the production of skilled personnel badly needed for the expanding bureaucracy. *Ras* Teferi’s open support gave rise to the development and expansion of missionary education in the years before 1935. “The education they provided” Pankhurst remarked, “became increasingly more widely diffused than government education ...” (89).

Prior to the outbreak of the Italo- Ethiopian war, the Lazarists had a total of 4 schools for boys and girls at Alitena, Gula and in Addis Ababa. The Capuchins, on their part had 24 elementary and 7 secondary schools in addition to the 14 orphanages (*Ibid.*). During the same

period the following protestant missionaries were operating in Ethiopia (Table 1).

Although most missionaries gave more emphasis to the reading and understanding of the Bible, they had “a complete elementary school programme.” Since the curriculum was brought from their home countries, there was lack of uniformity in missionary education before 1935 (Gebreal 1976.).

Following the outbreak of the Italo-Ethiopian war in 1935, missionary education came to a standstill. Some of the Protestant missionaries like the Seventh Day Adventists were arrested and deported by the Italians. Some mission stations were also plundered. Even non-Italian Catholic missionaries were not spared (Lass-Westphal, 1972).

Soon after the liberation of Ethiopia from Italian occupation in 1941, many missionaries returned to Ethiopia to resume missionary work. Like the pre-war times, the government continued to encourage missionary education by granting land to missionary societies and guaranteeing security (Gebreal 1976.).

In addition to expanding their schools with renewed vigour, missionaries also helped the government in reopening some of its schools. The Teferi Mekonnen School, which had been established in 1925, was reopened with the help of an American missionary after liberation. Later on, some Canadian Jesuits were put in charge of the School. Likewise, Menilek School, the first government school to be opened in Addis Ababa in 1908, was supervised by a Swedish missionary (Perham, 1969).

In addition to the long-established ones, new missionary societies began to arrive in Ethiopia. In the years before 1974, the number of missionary societies finally reached 52 of whom 21 were Catholic and 31 Protestant (Gebreal, 1976).

Similarly, the number of mission schools showed rapid growth in the 1950s and 1960s. In 1959, for example, there were 271 mission schools dotted though unevenly throughout the country. That number rose to 385 just in a matter of five years. Likewise, enrollment grew from 46,562 in 1956 to 70,746 in 1963 (CSO, 1975: 209). Compared to government schools, female enrollment was relatively better in mission schools. According to the

1962 school census, females accounted 28.2 per cent of the student population in government schools. In contrast, they comprised 32.8 per cent in mission schools (*Ibid.*, 214).

In the post-liberation period missionary societies also began running secondary schools and even junior colleges. Between 1963 and 1965, there were about 4,683 high school students in mission schools (*Ibid.*, 210). In addition to the primary and secondary schools, the Lutherans had set up a junior college near Addis Ababa. The Seventh Day Adventists, too opened a junior college at Kuyera near Shashemene (Gebreal, 1976).

Before 1935, missionaries had complete freedom to use their own curriculum. The curriculum showed a clear bias toward religion for one of its objective was to produce evangelists (Daniel, 1984). In the Post-liberation period, however, they were obliged to come in line with the curriculum developed by the Ministry of Education. The newly established Department for Mission and Private Schools within the Ministry of Education was entrusted with the supervision of non-government education. Mission school students were thus required to sit for national examinations (Gebreal, 1976).

But the intriguing question arises as to what motivated missionary societies to expand modern education in Ethiopia. Was missionary education an end by itself or a means to an end? Basically, the principal goal of most missionaries was the expansion of their denominations. Accordingly, education was used as a means to that end (Crummey 1972.). As Aren (1978) sums up “...literary classes proved to be effective means of attracting adherents.” As indicated earlier, such religious objectives were interwoven with political and other motives.

The Bible formed a single main subject in missionary education. It was often offered in the first period to all classes. In this regard no specialization was needed. Every teacher had to teach the Bible. Classes usually began with a prayer. At the end of each academic year, the most outstanding students were awarded the Holy Bible. In Bible classes, students were encouraged to recite as many verses as possible both from the Old and the New Testaments. During the weekends, it was not uncommon to see students engaged in evangelical activities. Students and their teachers alike were

**Table 1.** Protestant missionaries operating in Ethiopia.

<b>Society</b>	<b>Year of entry</b>	<b>No. of personnel</b>	<b>No. of stations</b>	<b>Schools</b>
Swedish Evangelical Mission	1866	24	12	12
Seventh Day Adventist Mission	1906	22	9	6
Bible Friends' Mission	1911	10	3	4
United Presbyterian Mission	1919	22	3	3
Church Mission to Jews	1923	7	1	1
British and Foreign Bible Society	1926	2	1	-
Sudan Interior Mission.	1927	75	15	15
German Evangelische Mission	1927	10	3	2
Society for the Propagation of the Gospel	1928	1	1	-
Bible Churchmen's Missionary Society	1933	8	5	-

Source: (Lass-Westphal, 1972).

organized into volunteer missionary societies to carry out proselytization in neighbouring areas (Fantahun, 1986).

Former students of mission schools relate that since missionaries tried to inculcate strict Christian discipline, good virtue and decency in the minds of their students, even some non-Catholic and non-Protestant families preferred to send their children to those schools. Some of the missionaries were running boarding schools in some parts of Ethiopia. In those schools, church services were held on Friday evenings as well as Saturday in the case of Seventh-Day Adventist schools and on Sunday in other Protestant and Catholic schools. Attending church services was mandatory for all students regardless of their age, sex or religion (Informants: Wubetu Wagaw, Dessie Ayele, Asmare Asres and Waleign Mandefro).

Informants further underline that the missionary education they had attended during their formative years had contributed a lot to their current beliefs, practices and career. One of my informants, for instance, who was originally from an Orthodox Christian family concludes that the education he had attended and the songs he used to listen at the mission school eventually contributed immensely to his conversion to Protestantism (Informant: Walelegn Mandefro).

The proselytization effort of the missionaries was

further reinforced by the publication of the gospels in Amharic. That enabled the missionaries to reach out the people in rural areas. In contrast, the Ethiopian Orthodox church has been using Geez, an ancient language which is now restricted to the church. The liturgy services, the preaching and prayers in the Orthodox churches were performed in Geez. The Orthodox Christian followers, however, could hardly understand what has been preached (Truneh, 2005).

Being frightened by the use of missionary education for such purposes, the Ethiopian Orthodox church seemed to have insisted the government to take strong measures against missionaries. Consequently, a decree was issued in 1944 to restrict the work of missionaries. According to the decree, the country was divided into "open" and "closed" areas. Those regions predominantly inhabited by Orthodox Christians were termed "closed" and as the name indicates they were closed to missionary work. Regions with little or no Christian population were regarded as "open areas." Urban centers belonged to this category. Missionaries were free to operate in these open areas. As might be expected, the number of mission schools and student enrollment showed considerable growth in the "open" areas (Gebreal, 1976; Markakis, 1974).

Missionaries should, however, be complimented for the contribution they made in expanding modern education and creating educational elite. In addition to making modern education accessible to many poor Ethiopians, they played a considerable role in breeding “a new and more reform oriented – group” (Gebreal,1976). The earliest Ethiopian intellectuals like Professor Tamrat Amanuel, *Kentiba* Gebru Desta, Onesimus Nesib and *Aleqa* Tayye Wolde Maryam, to cite only a few, were sponsored and educated by missionaries (Bahru, 1991).

In conclusion, therefore, though missionary education was mainly used to increase the number of adherents, its contribution in the modernization of Ethiopia should not be undermined.

## Conclusion

Undoubtedly, both Catholic and Protestant missionaries have played a remarkable role in expanding modern education in many parts of Ethiopia.

In the absence of missionaries, the Ethiopian government would have found it very difficult to open schools in rural areas and expand modern education in all parts of the country. Thanks to missionaries, many children in rural Ethiopia have managed to go to school and improve their lives as well as that of their families. However, missionary education was used not as an end itself. It was rather largely employed as a means to an end, that is, to win converts and subsequently increase the number of adherents. In most cases, a considerable number of students who attended their education at mission schools ended up becoming evangelists themselves.

In many mission schools, the Bible was taught as one of the subjects given at the elementary and junior secondary levels. Students were encouraged to recite verses from the Bible. The Holy Bible was given as a reward for outstanding students at the end of each academic year. The missionary education in general and the Bible classes and songs in particular were so attractive to students. In addition, mission schools were known for inculcating strict discipline, and good virtues in the minds of children.

As a result, a good number of families preferred to

send their children to those schools. All these show to what extent missionary education was employed as a vehicle towards religious goals.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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