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Religions and their publics:

What kind of territory? On public religion and space in Ethiopia

posted by Tom Boylston

Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi died shortly before the 2012 Meskel festival, the Finding of the True Cross—one of the major festivals of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Its public centerpiece is the burning of a great bonfire in Addis Ababa's Meskel Square, which takes its name from the occasion. State television broadcasts the ceremony every year, and the 2012 broadcast (2005 by the Ethiopian calendar) can be found on YouTube. The festival revolves around the bonfire, recalling the smoke that led Constantine's mother Saint Helena to the recovery of Christ's cross. On this occasion a kitsch re-enactment of the story precedes the lighting of the fire, as Helena and her entourage parade the cross, decked with fairy lights, on a carnival float [4:50-5:20]. Overlooking the whole event, and clearly visible as the fire burns, are several billboards depicting the recently deceased Prime Minister. One reads: "We will keep our word and fulfill your vision." The religious connotations of the Ge'ez word *ra'iy*, "vision," are presumably intentional.

The video tells us quite a lot about the tricky relationship between the state, ideas of nationhood, and public religion in Ethiopia. First of all is the very fact that this was televised and is now freely available on the internet for Ethiopians in the diaspora, as well as anthropologists, to think about. The camera also pays plenty of attention to the tourists at the event, in front row seats, and all with cameras of their own [3:05]. This is self-consciously a piece of display, to be recorded and circulated around the world. Some parts of the festival—the priests' chanting leading up to the burning of the bonfire—are recognizable from events performed in villages across the country, although here the priests' prayer staffs have conspicuous Ethiopian flags on them.

In some ways the event rehearses familiar tensions between God and government. The particular frisson on this occasion is because the Orthodox Christian claim to special association with the state and nation was officially dissolved forty years ago. Freedom of religion is constitutionally enshrined and the government has been fairly insistent in subordinating religious organizations to the state. The Meskel ceremony displays a project of a state trying to activate the tradition of Orthodox Christianity as an aspect of national heritage—religion domesticated as culture. The Orthodox tradition contains

highly recognizable indicators of civilization (fine buildings, a literary tradition) that can be mobilized for wider national projects. And the Orthodox Church still has much more official exposure than Muslim or Protestant groups who are increasingly seeking to establish their own presence in the public sphere.

The strange sense of being both dominant and ousted from dominance defines the current moment in Ethiopian Orthodoxy. In addition to losing its centrality in the state, the Church is losing members to Protestantism, and Orthodox Christians consistently describe secularism as an encroaching threat. Yet as a public presence and as an icon of national historicity, the Church remains extraordinarily potent.

While the video is available to a diverse international audience, it makes claims to precisely located spaces: Meskel Square, where the event takes place; the skyline of Addis Ababa; and the Ethiopian nation. The festival itself refers to a rather older transterritorial connection, the journey of Empress Helena from Constantinople to the Holy Land to find the cross on which Christ was crucified, as well as the subsequent conversion of Abyssinia to Christianity and the journey of one of the fragments of the cross, so it is said, to the church of Amba Gishen in northern Ethiopia. The story can be read as one about shifting territories, but also about the relationship between territorial sovereignty and God.

So if de-territorializing and re-territorializing processes are not new in Christianity, the density and intensity of juxtaposed sounds and images allow various interests to operate in the same spaces, sometimes forcing others out of public space, but just as often coexisting in uneasy, discordant accretions. The shift of religion into public space under secular government, now well described, involves a certain jostling for position: either among different religious groups, or between religions and state or corporate or political interests that seek to shape the public space for their own ends. One of the more noticeable aspects of life in Addis Ababa is the crowds of people clad in white cloaks moving to and from church; inhabitants comment that the niqab, too, has become a much more common sight. At the same time, both churches and mosques now make liberal ritual use of loudspeakers, creating a rather cacophonous soundscape, all while the dead Prime Minister looks out from billboards across the city. The state, religious groups, and other interests (corporate, NGO, very occasionally political opposition) establish a public presence through advertising—visual, audio, or televisual—but also through architecture, legal or ritual regulation, or by gathering people together in ceremonies, parades, or demonstrations.

Much of the world is seeing a boom in the construction of religious buildings, testament to the importance of the architectural component of religious publics, and there is likewise no shortage of examples of religious interests using public, highly visible gatherings in order to declare their presence in the national and (usually but not necessarily) urban context. Religions in Addis Ababa today build public presence through the occupation of space but also by competing for audio-visual territory with billboards, buildings, and loudspeakers, alongside the demonstrative potential of collectives of human bodies. These audio-visual methods of presence do much to shape the shared urban environment—the way that city dwellers feel one group or another to be ascendant in their lives, and experience themselves as part of either marginal or powerful collectives.

Two questions for students of public religion, then, are what sort of public are we talking about, and how do these publics relate to “sovereign,” “territorial” or “global” space? If media technologies do much to build the transterritorial connections that are so important in contemporary religions, they have just as much importance in establishing local territorial claims to public space: de-territorialized communications refer back to territorial locales.

Territory is not just about the occupation of land. It is just as much about soundscapes and sightlines, not to mention tastes and smells—which is why in Addis Ababa it is much more expensive to live on the high ground than in the valleys, where waste and pollution accumulate. And sights, sounds, and smells overlap, producing the distinctive experience of living in a city as a constant jostling for sensory presence. Though a church and a mosque cannot generally occupy the same ground, they may share one vista, and their sonic output can very frequently be heard in a single time and place. The sensory outputs of religious, political, and commercial organizations overlap and impinge on one another, with the constant potential for conflict.

Along with the sight- and soundscapes built by institutional architecture and public festivals is the sensory environment that ordinary people produce or transmit. Amharic hymns, mostly new compositions, are major contributors, playing on CD or tape, in cafes and minibuses, and from hi-fi systems in shops and on street corners. It is not just the churches, but Christians themselves, who advance the Orthodox soundscape in public places, especially in the mornings. In an era when the requirements of making a living make it difficult to go to church, these hymns are becoming central to the religious lives of those Addis Abebans who can play the CDs in their workplaces. Waitresses, cleaners, and bus drivers are instrumental in producing the dominant Orthodox tone of city life.

Then there is visual presence: in addition to imposing churches and white cloaks, Orthodox stickers are ubiquitous. Sometimes these are mini-icons of Mary, Christ, or the saints; sometimes Bible quotations or statements of devotion to Mary (and hence of being Orthodox and not Protestant) in decorative text. Taxis and buses are usually plastered with these stickers, but those who have mobile phones or laptops, not to mention exercise books, invariably decorate them with a few icon stickers. It is significant that people place these badges on their transport and communication devices—the things that shape not just their living environment but also their ways of connecting with others. To describe the public nature of religion is to show how exactly people's modes of movement and communication are shaped into Christian (or Muslim, or other) styles. Religious decoration of cars and phones helps people not just to go to church and talk to the priest, but to travel and to talk religiously in a more general way. Media and movement are part of the territory.

For Muslims and Orthodox Christians alike, demonstrations of presence mean gatherings of people around sacred buildings. While Protestant churches are becoming more visible in Addis, I would suggest that the rise of Protestantism has been felt less in public gatherings than through statistics, especially the censuses that show consistent increases in the last 20 years. As Ethiopian Orthodox scholars like Getatchew Haile lament, religion has become a numbers game. Most probably this mode of operation was forced on Protestants, who under suspicion from all sides have often lacked the basis for public displays of presence, and have therefore maintained every indication of being apolitical successfully, indeed, that Ethiopia now has its first Protestant Prime Minister, with only the faintest outcry from Orthodox quarters. Somewhat consonant with anthropological arguments about Protestantism as a de-territorializing agent, the contrast between occupying space and claiming numbers of adherents is significant. Censuses and other surveys are gaining importance in Ethiopia, guiding aid and development policy as well as supporting claims to representation (recorded numbers of Muslims are contentious—2007 data suggests 43% Orthodox, 33% Muslim, 18% Protestant nationwide. The numbers game is a crucial counterpoint to the tangible ways of claiming presence I discuss here.

In many respects, Orthodox Christians and Muslims make claims to space (and hence legitimacy) in similar fashion. Firstly and most spectacularly, they do so by building churches or mosques. The

church-building frenzy has been going on for at least fifteen years, and the mosque-building has not lagged far behind. Half-built or brand new religious buildings abound in every city in Ethiopia. Christians speak of Muslim ambitions to build forty-four mosques to match the forty-four churches in Gondar, one of the symbolic centers of Orthodoxy. There is an ongoing dispute about whether a mosque can be built in Axum, reputed home of the Ark of the Covenant. Some of the new Mosques in the majority-Orthodox north are the results of new universities, as Muslim students begin to request their own places of worship. In Islam as in Orthodoxy, university campuses are focal points of religious activism, with the exchange of information between religious and educational spaces increasingly defining the ambitions of an emerging middle class for the promotion of religion.

This is not just an urban phenomenon, however. In my own doctoral field site, a market village an hour or so from the regional capital of Amhara, a new mosque was built two years ago for the town's Muslim minority—this in an area renowned for its monasteries. The minaret is now the tallest structure in the area by far, dominating the landscape and causing substantial discontent (although people by and large conform to established ethics of neighborliness rather than open confrontation).

The Orthodox response was to quickly raise money and build two new churches in the surrounding area, to add to the seven that were already there. Part of the purpose is to attract new student priests, and so contribute to Orthodoxy's future, but in the main it was to underline the point that this was a Christian area. Much of the money in church building projects like these comes from donations by individuals and para-church organizations in the cities. Organization members that I have interviewed describe an explicitly territorial project: their substantial fundraising helps to rehabilitate churches and so shore up the rural base of Orthodoxy, because they understand remote areas to be at special risk of being converted away by Islamic or Protestant rivals. The urban imagining of the rural religious world is fuelled by a substantial pilgrimage industry: trips to rural churches lead to major fundraising on their behalf, because they stake out Orthodox territory, both as an imagined terrain but also in terms of actual, tangible connections forged through pilgrimage and donations and staked out in concrete buildings.

This was all going on at about the time of the 2012 Meskel festival. People in the village watched the broadcast of that event, along with Meles Zenawi's state funeral, and so were well aware of the public happenings in Addis. Some shopkeepers put up small posters of Meles, though it was unclear whether this evinced genuine grief or a bit of political expediency. Indeed surely part of the point of such a public sanctification is to make the distinction irrelevant.

So the public presence of Christianity and the public face of the national leader both come out in connected ways in Addis and in the village seven hundred kilometers away. These forces work to bring the two into a single territory, not to de-territorialize them. The spatial or territorial aspects of publics and the communicative or mass-mediated networks of publicity are part of the same thing. Media help build the sensory territory of people's immediate lived environment, but also enable the connections that produce publics beyond the direct range of the senses. This is the complex space in which different interests compete, and sometimes coexist, in public.

Tags: church and state, Ethiopia, media, territory

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