



What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?

Over the past few weeks I have been lightly disturbed by what I have continued to learn and to understand what the Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity seem to be maintaining and teaching. This was not the first time. It started with an avid interest almost twenty years ago which led to my first book ታቦት ከቤተ መቅደስ ወደ ቤተ ክርስቲያን. As I continued to enquire, to investigate and to learn, my interest turned into an alarmed state and again led to the publication of my second book - የተሻለ እውነት በደብዳቤ. As I further continued to research more and learn more, it has now become disturbing if not frustrating.

Some of the things I am learning are not out there openly as official position of the Church but I read them inconspicuously in books or articles online and learn from on social media from staunch followers and advocates of the Church. A few weeks ago, I had started organizing short teaching materials and

posting them on my page but had to disturb the flow when I was attracted to a recent posting.

The posting was an invitation to attend an online course on Orthodox mystical teaching and practice and Orthodox philosophy. It promises “What you'll get from it is strong, clear and practical knowledge about the original and timeless Orthodox Christian belief and teaching, and deep understanding about how to practice it.” The introduction itself declares that the original and timeless Orthodox Christian belief and teaching is based on mysticism and philosophy. Now mysticism is not peculiar to the Christian faith. We have Jewish mysticism (kabbalah) and mysticism in Islam (Sufism). I would not dare to posit that the relative mysticism in Christianity is Orthodox Christianity; however, my recent readings of different materials seem to strongly suggest so. I would have had a completely indifferent view if these notices had nothing to do with or were not related to the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC). Again, even if not an official statement, this is coming from a follower of the EOTC, an avid adherent and practitioner of the Church and to some extent a passionate defender of the doctrine. If this is not in any way shape or form connected to the official dogma, doctrine and position of the Church, then the EOTC should reprove and correct such position. However, I do not believe that this would be the case given that, through the extensive investigation, research and reading I have done on the EOTC, it upholds and teaches such position. And hence, why I am putting out this posting.

Now, what do we mean by mysticism or mystic belief and practice? The word mysticism is derived from the Greek word that is defined as secret, hidden or concealed. Merriam Webster defines it as “The experience of mystical union or direct communion with ultimate reality reported by mystics or the belief that direct knowledge of God, spiritual truth, or ultimate reality can be attained through subjective experience (such as intuition or insight). Without delving into a long explanations and discussions due to space constraint – the teaching on orthodox mysticism that was being offered, I suppose, is to teach how one finds union/communion with God by following certain mystical (concealed, secret) practices or practices that cannot be

understood by laymen or cannot be objectively explained. Now there is nothing unchristian about having communion with Yahweh or having direct knowledge and experience of Him. Examples can be provided from biblical contexts. The challenge that this position presents is the mystic nature that is required to achieve this union or communion without which no relationship with God can take place. Namely, that there is secret and/or hidden knowledge, practice or observance required. Mystic Christian proponents including Early Church Fathers from the second century onwards have been preaching/teaching this position. But we do not find any such teachings or practices in the Scriptures (irrespective of which canon we accept). Communion with God is through Jesus Christ our Saviour. Period. The Gospel of John, written at a time when Gnostic and pagan philosophical teachings were being introduced in the church in disguise, made sure to rebut such a notion in the 18th verse of the first chapter – “No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him.” (NASB translation). If we need to know God, if we need to have fellowship, union, communion with God our go to person is Jesus Christ our Saviour. Not a bishop, an Early Church Father, a ritual or an experience.

As I was contemplating for the past few weeks since reading the advertisement for the online course, I got to read a lot – church history, early church fathers, the word of God (the Bible) – to gain a better understanding of the historical and theological contexts. I am now more than convinced – after alluding to this fact in my first book and writing a little more in detail about it in my second book – that element of Gnostic teachings, pagan practices and tenets of Greek philosophy have all found their way and have established themselves firmly in Orthodox teachings and doctrine and more specifically in our case within the EOTC.

Emphasis on ascetic practices, the honoring of monastic lifestyle and practices, the exclusion of a few who have received or are able to receive theistic knowledge and experience are a few examples that can be cited. Theosis, apparently a fundamental teaching and doctrine held by Orthodox Churches including the EOTC, maintains that mankind can become god or divine. I wonder what the answer would be if I (or even you) were to ask an Ethiopian (in general) or an EOTC follower (in particular) if she/he had the potential of becoming god or divine (መለኮት). I mean if that is not outright heresy I don't know what is! The reason why we (mankind) were chased out of our glorious status and abode (Garden of Eden) in the first place was because mankind – instigated by the enemy, Satan – wanted to become god. Now the same story has come back disguised with exceptionally fancy theological and philosophical words and terminologies!! Get behind me Satan!!!

It is not as if our Lord Jesus Christ never warned us of ravening wolves in sheep clothing (Matthew 7:15) or the Apostle Paul of empty deception, philosophy and traditions of men (Col 2:8). We have been warned. I am just reminding you.

Blessings