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Review of Parfitt, T. and Trevisan Semi, E. (eds), 'The Beta Israel in Ethiopia and Israel: Studies on the Ethiopian Jews'

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cultures, he/she certainly did not function automatically as the Christian God of Providence. 'Missionary ethnology' has confused the true picture.

Traditional African religion focuses completely on improving terrestrial life. Prayers are pragmatic—they try to seek favours, and rarely contain worship, thanksgiving or the expectation of future reward. The ultimate fulfilment of human life lies within earthly life itself, so that even the cult of ancestors revolves around eliminating obnoxious interference from the deceased in one's own situation. The rites of initiation and membership of secret societies effect mainly social and economic integration in tribal power structures. According to the author, the core of traditional religion in Africa consists of magic and witchcraft, not in salvation, not in a relationship with a transcendent God or securing a happy afterlife. The question can, therefore, be raised whether the anthropocentric religions of Africa do not, in their final analysis, lead to atheism.

The author maintains that the conversion of Africans to Christianity was, at least partly, due to the pagan logic of self interest. Knowing the Christian God was perceived to be more powerful than traditional magic and to provide access to the wealth and technological superiority of the Whites. This hidden motivation shows up in a pseudo-magical approach of many Christians to personalities and practices: to God, Jesus, Mary, the priest, the Eucharist, medals, and so on. These are interpreted in terms of traditional sorcery. The cities of Africa are invaded by a multiplicity of secret societies and churches which celebrate the human search for wellbeing, a new mixture of idols.

Basing himself on research done in a number of African countries among ordinary Christians, the author shows not only a high degree of confusion about orthodox Christian beliefs and morals but also a pronounced religious indifference amongst a proportion of believers. 'Such religious indifference exists in black Africa just like anywhere else', he asserts. 'One meets a lot not only amongst high school and college students, but also amongst professionals, academics and business executives'. They consider religion a private affair. They resent authoritarian intervention in their own moral decisions. Some prefer a responsible humanism to religion.

The author devotes another part of his book to an analysis of recent African literature. Here, too, a new phenomenon is observed. A number of African novelists de-mystify traditional African magic by questioning religion as such, replacing it with respect for the scientific method. Others turn directly on Christianity, accusing Christian missionaries of having prepared the way for the colonisers. Christian faith

is presented as a fraud, a colossal mystification of the world of the Whites, which succeeded in putting the Whites on a higher level and in creating God in the image of the Whites. Some leading African authors, such as the Cameroonian Mongo Beti and the Kenyan Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o present themselves as agnostics.

At the time of writing, Metogo further outlines the influence of Marxist thought on Africa. Africa's fifty-plus countries had twenty-two communist parties. Five countries were ruled by Marxists, namely Angola, Benin, Congo, Mozambique and Ethiopia. Many prominent African intellectuals are Marxists who actively promote atheism, such as Sékou Traoré, Marcién Towa and Paulin Hountondji. The influence of communist thought through government imposition, either through openly challenging Christian values or in more subtle forms, is indisputable in many African societies.

Metogo thus comes to the conclusion that religious indifference, and even agnosticism and atheism, are realities in Africa. He pleads for the Church in Africa to take stock of the true situation, for theologians to ask new questions. What is true African culture?—Do we not easily fall into the trap of a naive 'inculturation'? How can African Christians themselves be mobilised to deepen their faith, with full awareness of today's world? What pastoral support can the Church offer to people in this process?

Years ago, when taking part in religious sociological research in Hyderabad, India, I learnt a valuable lesson from a Muslim friend, a professor at Osmania University. 'A discordant voice reveals more about the true situation than a hundred who express the majority view', he told me. Metogo is such a discordant voice, and I hope that many will take note of what he has to say.

JOHN WIJNGAARDS

PARFITT, TUDOR & TREVISAN SEMI, Emanuela (eds.), *The Beta Israel in Ethiopia and Israel: Studies on the Ethiopian Jews*, Richmond, Curzon, 1999, xiii, 304 pp., £40, 0 7007 1092 2.

The book is an interesting collection of essays on an ever-fascinating subject, and is the result of the second conference of the SOSTEJE (Society for the Study of Ethiopian Jewry), held in Jerusalem and Beer Sheva in May 1995. The collection forms part of the ongoing process of intense scholarly commentary on the evolving community of Ethiopian

Jews in Israel. The book is very readable and contains new and sometimes revealing information on the Ethiopian Jews, but also some strange and qualitatively weak papers, which might have been better rewritten, expanded or left out.

The twenty-five (mostly rather brief) chapters are from various disciplines, and provide an overview of the historical and socio-cultural process of the transformation of Beta Israel (in Ethiopia) into Ethiopian Jews (in Israel), both from the perspective of the Ethiopian Jews involved and from that of the 'receiving side': the world Jewish community and later the State of Israel. In this book, any preoccupation with 'proving' the Jewish credentials of the Beta Israel is (fortunately) completely lacking. Instead, engaging and informative chapters on processes of social change, identity formation and popular culture are presented. There are also some interesting contributions on historical matters, e.g. R. Pankhurst's chapter on dynastic linkages between Beta Israel and the medieval Christian monarchs. His material seems to suggest that oppositions between the two communities in that period were more of a political than of a religious nature.

Some poignant stories (like the one recounted by Trevisan Semi in Chapter 2 and S. Weil in Chapter 3) vividly present the dilemmas and problems of Beta Israel individuals. For example, in the 1920s J. Faitlovitch mounted a missionary effort to bring the Ethiopian Jews back into the fold of Talmudic Judaism. This experience reveals the appalling manipulation and indifference that some young 'Falasha' (as they were called at that time) were confronted with in Europe in that early period. The first Falasha brought out from Ethiopia by Joseph Halévy, a western Jewish emissary in the 1860s, was a boy named Dane'el, scion of a priestly Beta Israel family. He had died even before reaching Europe. Another contribution reveals the *amateurism and empty egocentrism* that characterised certain representatives of organised Jewry called upon to assist the Falasha but failing to do so (cf. Chapter 1 on Rabbi H. Nahoum by T. Parfitt, and note 77 on p. 39).

Very interesting is the brief contribution by D. Summerfield on the effect of the Italian Fascist occupation on the Beta Israel. Against the prevailing mythology that this impact was especially negative 'because the Beta Israel were Jews', Summerfield argues the opposite: they were not singled out for special persecution, but underwent the same fate as other Ethiopians according to their (political) attitude and activities vis-à-vis the occupation itself. Some gained benefits and improved themselves, others were victimised because of their opposition and participation in the Ethiopian Patriotic resistance.

Fascinating questions as to what 'conversion' means are evoked by D. Friedmann's chapter on the intriguing case of the *Falas Mura*, the ca 30,000 people of Beta Israel descent who some generations ago converted—for various reasons and in various degrees—to Christianity, or at least 'left' Beta Israel beliefs. Members of this ambivalent and 'liminal' group were finally accorded the right to immigrate in 1994 by the Israeli authorities, although on an individual basis. They are now in Israel, except for a few thousand still waiting in and around the compound of the Israeli embassy in Addis Ababa. Incidentally, in their case, it becomes evident how advantageous it can be *not* to have good written historical and family records to determine questions of identity.

New research is evident in the chapters by anthropologists J. Phillips Davids, on changing patterns of fertility among Ethiopian Jews in Israel, and D. Seeman, developing a new 'kinship' oriented approach to Beta Israel social organisation and identity. Davids's analysis reveals the rather predictable pattern of a slow decline of fertility among Beta Israel women in Israel, and she connects her argument in an interesting manner to the issues of the changing *meaning* of (having) children, and of sexual relations in Israel as compared to Ethiopia. Seeman's more methodological paper sensitively touches upon core issues in the study of the (continued) relevance of kinship ideas among the Beta Israel in Israel, such as the 'manipulation' of kinship links in contacts with the bureaucratic authorities. He explores the ambiguities of kinship talk in relation to state integration policies. This chapter, with some telling fieldwork examples, also has theoretical implications for the study of the Ethiopian Jewish community.

S. Kaplan's paper is a nice effort to use James Scott's concept of 'everyday resistance' in explaining the perceived 'problematic behaviour' of Ethiopians in Israel towards authorities and other Israelis. A question that remains after reading this chapter is whether there is a significant *generational difference* in the use of 'everyday resistance' strategies among the Ethiopian Jews: the younger generation cannot be expected to continue these strategies like the older generation (all born and bred in Ethiopia) does now. There are also some fascinating chapters presenting a new and original approach to the analysis of Beta Israel religious liturgy and music, as still partly performed by the Beta Israel priests in Israel. These chapters report on a wider research project, that it is hoped will yield many more interesting results. What seems to emerge from the various chapters is that the adaptation of the Ethiopian Jews in Israel is not one of wholesale 'assimilation': a distinct sub-culture is developing, with religious and cultural overtones. Perhaps the enduring

relevance of internalised cultural differences—even partly transmitted to the younger generation growing up in Israel—is becoming evident in this process. One may also predict that a cultural re-orientation towards Ethiopia, as the mother country, will increase in the years to come.

As this is a volume of conference proceedings, there are inevitably papers that have trouble fitting in. Benjamin Mekuria's chapter is a personal, but not particularly significant, reminiscence on the journey of some Beta Israel boys to the first Beta Israel school in Addis Ababa (1920s). The chapter by Anbessa Teferra on some Amharic dialectical differences, while interesting in some ways, has no relation at all to the theme of this book. There is a puzzling contribution by I. Grinfeld on the 'epistle of Elias'. Who Elias was and what the importance is of his epistle is not at all clear. S. Messing's chapter is an underdeveloped one and in presenting two 'documents' (a letter to him by Tadesse Yaqob—which is only a brief note—and one by J. Faitlovitch), he fails to comment further on what is really interesting in the content: especially, Faitlovitch's views on the origins, history and Jewish character of the 'Falashas'. The chapter on an Ethiopian Jewish musical band in Israel is very weak in analysis and too full of admiration, and the fieldnote sketch on an Ethiopian disco in Tel Aviv should perhaps not have been included here at all. Also problematic is the paper by K. Holert on Beta Israel women.

A few technical drawbacks of this work are that the references and the bibliographical format of the various chapters is not uniform, that it has no name and subject index, and that (except for the two editors) there is no information on the contributors. But, inevitably, there are major new data and insights to be found in this varied collection on the evolving sub-culture of Ethiopian Jewry in Israel, and as such it is a must for those interested in this remarkable community.

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