

BOOK REVIEW

HAUSTEIN, Jörg, *Writing Religious History: The Historiography of Ethiopian Pentecostalism*. Studies in the History of Christianity in the Non-Western World, no. 17. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2011. 295pp. Pbk. ISBN: 9783447065283. €38.

Reviewed by: Jan-Åke Alvarsson, Uppsala University, Sweden. E-mail: jan-ake.alvarsson@antro.uu.se

According to the preface, Jörg Haustein set out to write the history of Ethiopian Pentecostalism. He ended up writing a historiography and reflecting on for example “the often irreconcilable difference between two accounts of the same event”. Instead of “the story of Ethiopian Pentecostalism”, we as readers are guided by the author through a number of different stories and accounts of the matter. It is a challenging and daring enterprise. A historian less talented than Haustein could have ended up with total chaos. Haustein does not. He provides us with fascinating reading, at times exciting as a thriller.

The book opens up with an historical background that frames the narratives of Pentecostalism in Ethiopia. In the text that follows, we can easily distinguish three points of foci: the relationship and tension between missionary initiatives and Ethiopian agency, and a related one, the issue of the “true origin” of Pentecostalism; the accounts of the persecution during the last years of Haile Selassie’s reign and during the dictatorship of Mengistu Haile Maram (referred to as the “Derg” in the book) and the potential relationship between persecution and the growth of Pentecostalism and Charismatic movements. The book closes with a theoretical reflection on the writing of religious history, discussing, for example, how point of departure and intention shape the narrative.

In Chapter 1 we learn about the evangelical backgrounds of the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements, and how German and Swedish Lutheran missions started in Ethiopia in the 1850s. The latter came to have an important influence among the Oromo people and in what is now Eritrea. The large Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus – strongly influenced by a Charismatic wave today – is a result of these early efforts. We also learn about the Sudan Interior Mission, another influential entity, which started its work in 1927, and the Mennonite mission, which initiated work in 1945.

In Chapter 2 we are provided with the history of the Finnish and the Swedish Pentecostal Missions that appeared in the 1950s. The Mattsson couple established work in the Addis Ababa area as from 1951. The Swedes came in waves, later the same decade. In 1960 they established their most important hub in Awassa in southern Ethiopia, halfway to the Kenyan border. There, as in their

other centres, social work was the official reason for being there. In Awassa they established a vocational school but on the side they also started church work. The summer conferences, initiated by Karl Ramstrand in Awassa, provided open doors for all kinds of denominations and came to be a breeding ground for the incipient Pentecostal and Charismatic movement.

In this description, Ramstrand stands out as different missionary as he obviously from the start encouraged the Ethiopians to start their own churches. Most other missionaries, however, seem to have favoured churches that could be led by their missionary organizations – something that caused repeated tension between Ramstrand and the rest of his compatriots. In this chapter we are also given a number of versions of “the first Pentecostal experience in Ethiopia” (p. 41). One of these versions is said to have taken place during the first summer conference in Awassa in 1962; the annual meeting “grew quickly and developed into a very successful yearly gathering” (p. 69).

It is in this context in Awassa that we first hear about Chacha Omahe, a Kenyan preacher that came to the conference for the first time in 1963, and then returned in 1964 and 1966. By many accounts he came to be a catalyst for the Pentecostal breakthrough. He had another style than the European missionaries and he conveyed a spirituality that was readily accepted by many of the participants. The importance of his visits is heavily debated but some claim that he “brought” Pentecostalism to Ethiopia. Haustein points to the fact that his African (i.e. non-European) background plays an important part in assigning him the role as the front figure of Pentecostalism in narratives that claim it to be an indigenous Ethiopian movement.

The whole of Chapter 3 is dedicated to this question of origins. Haustein presents us with different versions of the “real origin” (p. 90). At the same time he notes that “all of these histories tend to de-historicize the problem by adding an interpretative layer of origin and historical destination while not considering the context and identity politics of their sources” (p. 92). He then turns to contemporary sources, like letters and reports, to provide us with facts behind the narratives. Many of these origin narratives of course deal with the surge of the Full Gospel Believers Church (FBGC), today possibly the largest Pentecostal church in Ethiopia with more than half a million members. In many of the stories, the “Addis Ababa Student Movement” plays an important part. Here, Haustein provides us with a series of previously unpublished facts that help nuance the picture. In general, Haustein’s own position seems to be one of favouring the idea of a continuous process with many roots rather than the versions that claim a sudden outpouring of the Spirit as marking the beginning. In this chapter he traces the different roots and helps us see possible connections between mission initiatives, local and national ones and combinations thereof.

Chapter 4 and 5 deal with the real persecution that Pentecostals suffered during the last years of the Ethiopian Empire and during the Derg, and the images and interpretations thereof. An early source of this torment was attributed to the Orthodox church, something that changed when this church also was subjected to persecution. In the end, many church leaders saw that persecution led to active Christians and many new converts and accepted it as something that God,

if not authorized, so at least allowed to happen. Persecution also forged different national and international agencies together, to act on behalf of the plagued brothers and sisters in Ethiopia.

In Chapter 6 the author reveals his thoughts on “Writing Religious History” and what it entails. He lays out four methodological propositions for how to make use of narratives, both realistic and well-founded stories, as well as fictional accounts, in the writing of history. This is of course not an easy task when the stories “often arrive at disparate representations of an event” (p. 256). One of Haustein’s major contributions with this book is to help us see through this maze of opinions and understand the driving forces behind the construction of history.

There is surprisingly little to say about the formalities of this book. Haustein is obviously a meticulous researcher and writer. There are extremely few typographical errors, and references, notes, bibliography and so on are all in order. Even the transcriptions from the six languages that the author has worked in (I can only assess five of them) are equally impressive.

The author has done fieldwork in Ethiopia, conducted a long series of interviews and collected material of historic interest. He has also visited countries with close ties, or that have been of special importance to the development of Pentecostalism in Ethiopia: Sweden, Finland and Switzerland (the WCC in Geneva). He has dug up unpublished material, gone through archives, and read letters and articles in the languages in question. The groundwork is simply exemplary.

Because of this thoroughness, the material is rich and varied for most of the periods studied. The author himself points to shallowness of the material on one of the periods, however: “The overview of Pentecostals during the Derg in this chapter has also demonstrated the effects of this scarcity of sources, in that only a fragmented account could be produced” (p. 211). Nevertheless, through a study of for example official and unofficial reports from this period he can show how information about the actual situation was consciously muted by many of the actors – resulting in an abstruse material, harder to define or explain than the rest.

Haustein’s method of writing up this interesting material is basically to place several texts alongside each other, let the reader confront the discrepancies, and then help her or him to understand how and why the text came to look like it does. He avoids cheap points where they easily could have been made. He is seldom ironic, even though much of the material lends itself to that. He is determined to be our impartial guide through these stories and finally provide us with the basic facts afterwards. This repetitive method could result in boring texts, but the author has a sense of timing and a feeling for the material that produces exciting reading.

In doing so, Haustein actually opens up for a reading that goes well beyond the interest in Ethiopian Pentecostalism in particular, or religious history in general. It addresses the important basic issues of how and why we write history. The author aptly shows in practice how intention and bias influence the end result. This method has a notable drawback, however. It alerts the reader also to question the author’s own intention and bias. Why should we as readers take his

version for granted? Maybe this is the most severe criticism that we can direct towards the book: We get to know very little about the author, why he has chosen Ethiopia, what his driving forces are, and how he legitimizes what he is doing. Apart from the skills he displays, there is little or nothing in the book to substantiate his implicit claims to be our authority on Ethiopian Pentecostalism.

Apart from the excellent crash course on Ethiopian history in the beginning, the rest of the book requires attentive reading. The many abbreviations used account for one reason. Nevertheless, there is also a slight tendency to overestimate the readers' background knowledge. I happen to belong to a category that has been to Ethiopia and who has written on Swedish Pentecostal mission to Ethiopia (one of the main protagonists of Hausteijn's account), and I have even met some of the people playing important parts – but still I have problems following the story at times. A simple map of Ethiopia and the places mentioned, for example, would have helped.

Having said this, I must say that I found the book to be exciting reading. It is a great contribution to the history of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity in Ethiopia, and it adds to our knowledge of the unusually complex missionary enterprises in this country. Most of all, though, it makes us reflect on how we produce and make use of history.