

Speech at the Vigil for Ethiopian Victims – Dr. Getachew Haile

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(Prepared in English, but summarized in Amharic)

<http://www.satenaw.com/prof-getachew-haile-speeches-at-vigil-for-ethiopian-victims-in-new-york/>

Martyrdom is not new for Ethiopian Christians. We have endured the lion's share of suffering throughout history. But what happened in Libya this month is even more painful because we did not read it as an event of a distant past. It is so painful because it happened in the twenty-first century, today, when we thought the age of enlightenment had tamed the beast in us. Human beasts are still among us, enjoying their sports of beheading innocent people. Their trophies are heads of Christians. They show their trophies with pride to the mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, friends, and fellow citizens of their victims. If what these terrorists did is in the name of God, as they claim, then the Devil has beguiled them in Allah's clothing. God wants us to die for his children, as his Son did, not to kill them.

The great civilization of Aksum was destroyed by a natural disaster as well as by human crimes. But that was in the sixth century when the revolt of non-Christians destroyed the cultural heritage of the nation. The church of Aksum, which the first Muslim refugees described with glowing words, was wiped out.

The damage that the sixteenth-century religious conflict and power struggle inflicted on people and the Christian heritage is known to be detailed here but not too well to be ignored all together. Both Christian and Muslim writers have chronicled most of the events. Since these were internal conflicts among brothers of different faiths, we want to learn that part of history only not to repeat it and to move forward together toward a peaceful life of complete freedom.

Unfortunately, unbearable crimes, such as the one committed this month in Libya on innocent Ethiopians, constantly remind us that we are still in the dark ages. Though it is true that this did not occur in Ethiopia, I hope that what did happen in Libya by itself is not indicative that something similar will happen in Ethiopia as well. Of course, we are gathered here this evening to mourn the murdered, but at the same time, we are not sure that such incidents will not happen in Ethiopia. Just think of what happened to the monks and students of Debre Asebo Monastery in Tcherfcher a few years ago. The poor monks and students were beheaded in exactly the same manner the Ethiopian martyrs of Libya just suffered.

The only difference between the Libyan and Tcherfcher crimes is that a video recording of when the monks and students of the latter were slaughtered like a festival lamb was not widely circulated. They were slaughtered by Ethiopian Muslims incited, as the criminals themselves told us, by the TPLF, just as the inhumane killing of our brothers in South Africa was incited by the Zulu King. Let us remember the Debre Asebo martyrs today with the martyrs in Libya and South Africa. Let us condemn the criminals and their inciters.

It is good to know that the good South Africans and the South African authorities have condemned the crime committed on those guests in their country. But as head of the state, the president should go beyond condemning the crime and take full responsibility for what happened, and bring the criminals, including the Zulu King, to the country's criminal court. Only then we will believe that the concern of the authorities is real—not merely a lip service for public consumption and for appeasing the conscious of the international community.

In the Christian tradition, a martyr is one who witnesses, *sim'* or *sema't*, that Jesus Christ is the Lord. Our countrymen preferred death to renouncing their faith. They also witnessed how Christianity survived in Ethiopia despite all odds when it did not in North Africa and the Sudan. It is with such great sacrifice and resiliency that there is an ancient Christian Church today in Ethiopia. When we read history, we learn that the road from Ethiopia to the Holy Land is littered with remains of Ethiopian pilgrims, envoys who went to Alexandria to bring metropolitans, and young men and boys to seek consecration at the Alexandrian patriarchate when there is no metropolitan in their country. The number of martyrs, even in times of peace, could be incredibly high if counted. The clergy were attacked more often than not while serving in church. Let us take two cases, just as an example: the hymn composed to commemorate Martyre Ze-Iyyesus of Debre

Libanos, commemorated on 25 Hamle:

Greeting (*selam*) to Ze-Iyyesus, whose wont was to fight against concupiscence,
Who never tasted at mealtime anything but the Eucharist,
When the Aremawiyān cut his throat with the sword,
He was found bending at the gate of the altar in a worshipping state,
Embracing the threshold of the door with his hands.

And the case of the monks of Debre Damo and their abbot Isayiyyas, commemorated on 14 Sene:

Greeting (*selam*) to the shedding of your blood on this day,
By the hand of the Hanafi Muslims, who were dead from the life of Christ.
O followers of Abune Aregawi, the ninety-nine martyrs,
With Abbot Isayiyyas, I long for your help.
Be with me and lodge with me, forever and ever.

This martyrdom is not related to the sixteenth-century Islamic revolt because its army did not come to Debre Damo.

I am happy that Ethiopian Muslims are at the forefront of condemning these evil deeds committed on our people in Libya. Let us admit what it is: the criminals this time are Libyans, not

Ethiopians. Nevertheless, I feel obliged to remind our Muslim compatriots to remain vigilant that none of them fall victim to provocative incidents and to conducive conditions that would attract people to disrupt our harmonious life. I am worried because I see Ethiopians brandishing their blood-thirsty swords.

I also warn Christians not to think that all Muslims are potentially a threat to Christians and their institutions. Let us strive hard together to install a government that will treat us all equally and that cares for the people it governs. Ethiopia is mother to all of its children, with plenty of room for all.

We are entitled to be outraged, as we indeed are, at what happened to our brothers in Libya, as well as the victims in Iraq, Syria, and Egypt, and to mourn them. All these come from ancient Christian communities, some still speaking Aramaic, the Language of Jesus Christ. They have been there worshipping one God, discovered by our common spiritual father, Abraham, before the Islamic Prophet called the Arab tribes to worship one God.

We, Ethiopians, should be proud that this type of inhumanity is not in our history. What happened during the Derg era and now under the TPLF dictatorship—the strong destroying the weak—is an aberration in the history of our country. We come from a tradition of high morality and respect for human life. Our ancestors received guests; their role model is Abraham who reportedly did not take his meal but with visitors. Our mothers washed the feet of their guests. Guest are never asked to leave or even asked when they plan to leave. To the contrary, they are invited to stay longer when they prepare to leave.

We are poor of material wealth, but need has never affected the high morality we inherited from our ancestors. Captain Guta Dinka, the Ethiopian guard of Mr. Nelson Mandela, was a poor soldier, but he was not tempted for even a moment by the huge sum of money the warrior's enemies offered him if he betrayed. Judging us by their own low level of morality, they were sure he would jump on it.

You should also be proud that you had God-fearing kings. They ruled by the law. There were always lawyers at the palace to interpret the law for the judges and the king. Court sessions started with divine words read by the court priest to the judges to remind them that there will come a judgement day when their judgements will be reviewed before them and the Righteous Judge. Many of our kings were righteous; some even lived out their days as monks.

In the sixth century, King Kaleb was in Najran, a city in today's Yemen, to save a community persecuted because of its faith. He took the monastic garb after his successful military expedition. It is ironic that Ethiopians' blood is shed today in vain at the same place where their ancestors shed theirs to liberate others.

One of the successors of Kaleb gave safe haven to the persecuted followers of the Islamic Prophet. Their persecutors were after them in Aksum with a huge sum of bribe money. But the guests were well protected by the order of the righteous king who learned about the Islamic faith from the refugees and admired it so much that they thought he was at one with them in the faith.

It is no secret or surprise that the Ethiopian kingdom was headed by a Christian king, a complaint we often hear from our Muslim countrymen. But the kingdom was Christian ever since the conversion of the palace to the faith in the fourth century. The tradition of the king being a Christian and the observance of Christian holy days on a national level were set long before Islam took firm root in Ethiopia. Therefore, history did not help the nation until our time to

separate church and state. But consider two facts: in Ethiopia, neither the government nor the public ever interfered in the lives of the Muslims. They worshipped God freely according to their books, they built mosques, and they held their own courts where they practiced their Sharia law. Of course, that was not enough, and that is why many Christians died for an inclusive government. Also, compare the effort in our history to accommodate the need of Muslims with that of the Christians in some Islamic countries.

In the Middle Ages, when Christians were oppressed in many Islamic countries, Ethiopian Muslim communities were ruled by their own imams. As Emperor Zer'a Ya'iqob (1434-1468) once wrote to the Egyptian head of State, they were not demanded to pay jizya, taxes, for living in a Christian state as Christians were in Islamic Egypt.

Despite the wickedness of what happened to our countrymen in Libya and South Africa, Ethiopian Christians should be careful not to tarnish the high standard of morality they inherited in their reactions. The victims were countrymen of the Christian Ethiopians as well as Muslim Ethiopians.

We are comforted that Muslims and Christians alike are condemning this evil act all over the world. But one point in Islam should be denounced openly and unequivocally and discarded from Islamic religious literature by the Grand Mufti: He should issue a fatwa revising the definition of Islam. As it now stands, "Islam is religion and state—deen wa-dawla." He should denounce this definition in no uncertain terms, and declare that "Islam is religion only." As long as this old definition remains in effect, the group we call radicals are orthodox. Their books call them to form Islamic State wherever there are Muslim communities. The rest who do not honor this dangerous definition, Muslim or not, are heretics and kuffar.

May the Lord Jesus Christ give rest to the souls of all who were murdered because they carried his name in their hearts, and his cross on their necks.

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Thank you for listening.
Getatchew Haile