

# ***Tähadiso* Movement a Myth or Reality?**

## **Inter-Ethiopian Orthodox *Tewahdo***

### **Church Rivalries**

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#### **Abstract**

Religious reformist movements are often described to have lasting socio-economic and political outcomes in a given setting. This paper aims to understand the development of the *Tähadiso* movement within the Ethiopian Orthodox *Tewahdo* Church and the complexity of rivalries emerging. The paper will further try to show the populist representation of reformist concepts of the *Tähadiso* movement within and outside the church by drawing on discourses regarding the contentions, the struggles, and the controversies surrounding the *Tähadiso* reformist groups as raised by different actors. The central questions to be dealt with in this paper include: what is *Tähadiso*? How does the movement evolve through time? How can *Tähadiso* movement be best understood, as an established reformist movement, a sect within the Ethiopian Orthodox *Tewahdo* Church (EOTC), or a myth? Who has an active agency in the reformist movement? What effects and implications do such movements have on the church? By expounding on these questions, this paper will sketch out the understanding of the embryonic idea of *Tähadiso* and its place within the contemporary Ethiopian Orthodox *Tewahdo* Church.

KEY WORDS: *Tähadiso*, Ethiopian Orthodox *Tewahdo*, Religious Reform

#### **Brief Overview of Reformist Movements within the EOTC**

For long, Ethiopia has been considered as “an island of Christianity”, the Ethiopian Orthodox *Tewahdo* Church (EOTC) being the mainstream religion of the society and the official national religion whereby other religious groups were often considered as ‘new’ with an ‘outsider’ status (Robinson 1976). Long established and rooted in ancient traditions, the Ethiopian Orthodox *Tewahdo* Church dominated the social, economic and political life of citizens’ at large (Tadesse 1974).

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A number of movements, however, have arisen in the church's history with the aim to re-examine the doctrinal position and to "purify" the church. This paper argues that a full understanding of the contemporary reformist movement within the EOTC needs a diachronic approach to the subject matter, as the "new" developments in and around the church relates at large to the history of several generations of reformist endeavours and thoughts influenced by both internal and external factors. Some accounts on the reformist movements within the EOTC dates back to the medieval period. The reformist teachings by Dekika Estifanos (decedents of Estifanos) (1406-1478 EC) in Northern Ethiopia targeted the main teachings of EOTC including saint intercession, mystery of the Trinity and adoration of religious images (Hable Selassie 1997; Maimire 2010). This movement from within the Ethiopian Orthodox Church was considered as heretic and faced fierce resistance from King Zara Yacob (Maimire 2010; Tadesse 1972). Furthermore, the controversy between two religious groups, followers of father Tekle Haimanot (the head of Debre Libanos monastery and founder of several monasteries in southern Ethiopia) and father Ewostatewos (founder of several monasteries in today's Eritrea and Armenia) on the celebration of the Sabbath was another development in the medieval period that led to sectarian movements within the church. The former was in favour of minting the old EOTC and Alexandrian position of celebrating the Sabbath on a Sunday while Ewostatewos called for the celebration on Saturday as stipulated in the Old Testament. Another "face of Ethiopian Christianity", as Fargher (1996) puts it, came into being with the missionary-evangelists. One of such reformist movement in the EOTC is often referred back to the Portuguese missionaries of the 17<sup>th</sup> century who brought spiritual instability and doctrinal controversies within the EOTC. The Jesuit missionary teaching, expelled in 1632, and the controversy that followed ended dividing the church over the nature of Christ. The controversies surrounding the nature of Christ led to sectarian reformist ideas and the emergence of three doctrinal schools of thought on the nature of Christ. The first of the three the Tewahdo doctrine is the official teaching of the Church of Ethiopia which confesses the unity of two natures of Christ, divine and human whereby the term Tewahdo ("unity") signifies this central teaching. The second group was called Qebat, "unction", and this doctrine stresses the anointing of Christ and not upon the incarnation of the Son. The third group was Tsegga Lej (Son of Grace) which on the other hand supported the teaching of the "Three Births": eternal birth of the Son from the Father, genetic birth of the Son from the Virgin Mary and birth from the Holy Ghost after the incarnation of Jesus. The orthodoxy of the church was put into question with a call for reconstruction of belief within the church. This was laid to rest in 1855 when the *Tewahdo* doctrine was renounced by Emperor Tewodros (c. 1818 – April 13, 1868) as the only accepted and established doctrine in the country (Sergew 1972). Any doctrinal stance opposed to this was hence regarded as a heretical teaching and thus condemned.

Yet, the questions and the call for reformation raised by the different reformist zeal of the Portuguese missionaries were not evaded. The council of Boru Meda (1878) was held in Wollo to put an end to such controversies, to weed out Nestorians (heretics), and unite the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Nonetheless, the reformist movement within the EOTC continued, though in different forms and stages, up to the present time as will be presented in the following section of the paper.

In "recent" times, a new reformist movement has arisen within the EOTC named as *Täbadiso*, which calls out for a reform from within the church. *Täbadiso*, is a noun with the literal meaning reform which in the context of the reformist movement within the EOTC stands for the renewal of the old EOTC and some of its religious traditions. This

reformist movement questions the “syncretistic” practices within the Orthodox Church and the ‘impurity’ ingrained within it. According to sympathisers of the movement, these ‘impure’ traditions have for long been syncretised and legitimised into the churches official belief and practices. Thus, there is a dire need to cleanse it. And thus, the movement claims to be an old advocate for the return to “*pure tradition*” of the church rather than an inception of a different religion separate from the EOTC. The aim is thus, not to establish a new church, as claimed by the counter movement, but bring a reform from within. The leader of a German evangelical mission in Ethiopia, Gustaf Oren, explained the *Täbadiso* movement being not to establish a different church, rather to revitalise the spiritual life within the EOTC<sup>2</sup>.

As to the argument of Sergew Habte Selassie (1969), in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, reform of the church was not possible through a foreign institution with no understanding of the national life and problems. Hence, the missionary, “intentionally by-passed the Orthodox model and made a fresh start”; and this gained them relatively better acceptance. From 1950 to the 1990s, the missionary was able to look into the problems of the church and made use of this to condemn it as wrongful. From 1990 onwards, however, the *Täbadiso* accepted the church as the right one but made a distinction between the old EOTC and the new EOTC, the new being in the wrong direction and in need of reformation. They attempted to show the reform is all about taking out foreign elements integrated into the church through time. The objective is often described as not setting up a new church as such but introducing reforms within the church. This objective of reforming the church from within is clearly discussed in a magazine named *Finota Berhan* published in 2010 by Yemiserach Agelgelot, a protestant publishing house. The movement was not fully welcomed by the church and later went underground for their teaching surfaced in public as protestant and individuals were condemned out of the church.

Learning from the mistakes of the Jesuits, the *Täbadiso* movement was legitimised in being Ethiopian and ‘indigenous’. This, for those arguing against the movement, is an indigenisation of the global protestant movement framing it as an Ethiopian Orthodox reformist move. The movement is not solely limited to Ethiopia but also extends to other oriental and eastern orthodox churches. The “Living church” movement in Russia, the Martoma in India and the *Täbadiso* in Eritrea are all described to have the objective of westernising the Orthodox Church and expanding the occidental protestant into the east. The formation of the Indian sectarian church named the oriental protestant, the Martoma, is described to be one of the successful reformist movements targeting the orthodox churches. *Täbadiso* is hence seen as an evangelical missionary movement aimed at taking over the church from within.

Informants mention the existence of different denominations of the *Täbadiso* which were said to be prominent at different times. The “Church Missionary Society”, led by Alfred Bakston, is one among many, which came to Ethiopia in 1934 with such ideology. Associations were formed such as *Mahibere Bekur*, which was established in 1983 EC. The association had a regular magazine *Chora* targeted at criticising different literature produced by the mainline church<sup>3</sup>. The other denomination of the *Täbadiso* worth mentioning is the *Finote Hiwot Mahibere Medhanealem* which was vibrant in the eastern part of Ethiopia mainly in Dire Dawa and Adama towns. Unlike the *Mahibere Bekur* this mainly targeted *mahiberats* (associations). *Haimanota Abaew* is another movement from the

<sup>2</sup> <http://youtubegogogo.com/video/n-PdykMta3s/-2-6>

<sup>3</sup> A *mahiber* is an informal association usually made up of laypeople who meet on specific days of the month dedicated to a saint.

1960's which originally was established with the objective of teaching young Ethiopian Orthodox Christians as a way of protecting them from protestant teaching. This movement had originally the name Ethiopian Students Association and was established in 1959. For the first four years the association was vibrant in and around universities. Upon joining the World Christian Student's Federation, the association has adopted the main motto of the federation, unity within diversity, which calls for a universal manifestation of christen faith by passing religious groups. In the long term, *Haimanot Abaew* has officially called for reformist moves such as using modern musical instruments for spiritual songs which is to be discussed under section 2 of the paper as one of the main controversial issues. The association has managed in converting hundreds in Dire Dawa, Haraar, and Adama towns. It was also effective in Selassie cathedral, Lideta Mariam and Debre Berhan Kidus Goyorigis churches in Addis Ababa. The association was officially banned by the EOTC pope Abune Tekelehaiminaot on February 18, 1988. These are some more associations under the *Täbadiso* denominations raised by key informants as a way of demystifying the reformist movements within the EOTC and giving exemplary cases including *Kidist Ledeta Mabiber* which was active in Addis Ababa.

There is a change of strategy adopted over time to reform the EOTC. Regardless, as to the countermovement, the main nature of the *Täbadiso* movement can be seen within the framework of contextual evangelisation which calls for change from within using the language of the church. Accordingly, a leaked video released on YouTube shows how members of the *Täbadiso* movement confessing to these allegations and intruding the church<sup>4</sup>. Such intrusions as shown in this video relates to the underground missions whereby the reformists use converted EOTC church clergy to reach out to the mass. Furthermore, according to key informant interviews and the wide public opinions expressed in different social media accent the reformists have intruded the EOTC through renowned church singers and preachers who have dual loyalty. Some of the preachers and singers have been banned from attending any religious congregations of the EOTC based on allegations that they have been working with the *Täbadiso* movement for a long time. This indicates the reformation movements, which can be traced back to the fifteenth century and further, have continued to exist within the EOTC in different forms and with varied intentions. A number of studies, though not many, have been conducted on contemporary religious movements in Ethiopia (Abbink 2009; Dereje 2014; Fargher 1996; Haustein 2011; Meron, 2015, 2016; Ostebo 2007, 2009; Tibebe 2009). Most of the few existing literature, however, focuses on inter-religious movements and interactions. This paper adds to the existing literature by examining intra-religious movements within the Ethiopian Orthodox *Tewahdo* Church by drawing on the case of the *Täbadiso* reformist zeal.

### **The *Täbadiso* Movement: Elements of Contestation and Discourses of Authenticity**

As briefly discussed above, the *Täbadiso* movement unlike the prior reformist movements within the EOTC abundantly calls for transforming the church and its practices from within. This section of the paper presents the central tenets of the reformist movement and its major contestations and lines of differentiation from the mainline EOTC as presented by members of the reformist movement and some informants from the

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<sup>4</sup> For further details see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I3javBPBkgI>

EOTC.

Embedded within the “one religion, one baptism” ideology of the church, the *Täbadiso* and its counter movement contested over the ‘rightful’ Orthodox Church. Within this lies discourses of authenticity and legitimacy among different agencies, including the government and the church as an institution. These discourses were the centre of discussion over different social media platforms, where we, as researchers, came to know of *Täbadiso* and the counter movement.

One of the key elements which adherents of the movement object is the use of Geez language in the church. Geez has for long been the official language of the EOTC and the language of worship which is described as a language apt for preservation of unity of believers in a highly diversified socio-cultural setting of Ethiopia. *Täbadiso* calls for the use of Amharic and other languages as a way of enhancing the participation of members of the mystical body in the public worship of the church.

The other line of contestation is the belief in saint intercession and their intermediary role. This according to some key informants and members of *Mahibere Kidusan*<sup>5</sup> links the *Täbadiso* to the Lutheran interpretation of faith that stresses the direct link between God rejecting the intermediaries such as the church, the clergy and saints. Likewise, the *Täbadiso* also accents on the responsibility of the individual to directly communicate with God. The other element of contestation relates to the use of musical instruments for spiritual church songs. The traditional church musical instruments used in EOTC include the *Tsenasil* (a type of sistrum), *begenä* (string instrument with ten strings), *kebero* (drum), and *masinqo* (a single-stringed bowed lute). As part of the reform, *Täbadiso* calls for use of modern instruments for church songs as a way of appealing to the youth and reforming the old traditions of the church.

The other element of contestation is on the nature of fasting at EOTC. According to the EOTC traditions, there are special days and occasions appointed for fasting. The fasting moments imply abstention from meat, fats and dairy products instead cereals and vegetables devoid of fats. Adherents of *Täbadiso* movement strongly condemn this act as an act seeking publicity for what is otherwise meant to be personal religious devotion. The *Täbadiso* movement further challenges the practice of removing shoes while entering the church. For the EOTC this is considered as an appropriate action as a way of showing deep reverence to the church since the liturgy is celebrated in a sacred place. Another element of contestation relates to the dressing code of the EOTC. While attending church services, EOT Christians usually wear *shamá*<sup>6</sup>. This is described by the *Täbadiso* as a norm that has no formal religious ground.

In addition to the call for reform on the tradition of the church mentioned above, the *Täbadiso* movement has what they call *Ye'emnet Meglecha*, where they are calling for a revision or reform of the church canon and dogma which they believe are against the bible. In fact, they argue that there is no need of a canon given that individual interpretation is allowed. According to the *Täbadiso*, every individual is or can become a

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<sup>5</sup> *Mahibere kidusan* was established during the military regime, when Addis Ababa university students were sent to Blaté military training college in the last years of the *Därg*. The association focused on supporting the religious education offered at churches, and advancing religious education for students studying at secular universities and other higher academic institutions

<sup>6</sup> *Shama* is often draped around the shoulders often drawn up over the chin and worn over the head exposing only the face.

priest for herself/himself. Last but not least, advocates of the *Täbadiso* movement mention that EOTC has gender disparity whereby women are often excluded from church positions including the priesthood.

In the debate of keeping tradition and bringing back the old church tradition, the words 'tradition' and 'time' has been put to question and debated among different actors, with different positions towards the movement. The concept of time differs to all actors involved and is the core of the *Täbadiso* movement. For the *Täbadiso*, time is accompanied with experiences which are not part of the church. They claim to be children of the forefathers, and thus as set by Luther, the way back to the original teaching of the apostles, ignored by the EOTC, should be established once again within the church through such movements. Meanwhile, for the church, it is an embrace for the long standing tradition, the holy tradition (*tenfit*), which the *Täbadiso* movement is against. It can thus be argued that the concept of time is seen as a discursive tradition defined by actors and agency.

Proponents of the *Täbadiso* argue that they are shunned out of the church by fundamentals not because of their standpoint, but rather due to the injustices going on around the church, which accounts for the reason they are trying to bring reform. For westerners, the church is considered to be the most authoritative and abusive institution which adds up to the notion of victimhood raised by this reformist group. Furthermore, adherents of the *Täbadiso* movement claim that complicated bureaucracy and corruption have led the church into an unstable structure. Ethnic conflicts and aspects of nepotism going in and around the church add up to the problems that EOTC is facing these days. These points are often raised by the *Täbadiso* proponents as a way of justifying the need for reform.

### **Multifaceted Counter Movements Targeting the *Täbadiso***

The resurgence of the *Täbadiso* reformist movement within the EOTC has raised fierce reaction from the mainstream EOTC believers. The emergence of *Täbadiso* has called for self-reflection within the church. Such counter movements to the *Täbadiso* to be presented in this section of the paper have adopted different strategies among which the use of social media is the major means to reach out to the community of believers at large.

Among the followers of the EOTC, there are different perceptions regarding the *Täbadiso* movement. There are some groups of informants who regard the problem to be the responsibility of the church not individual followers. Others support the movement for the church needs structural reform. Still some mention *Täbadiso* as a myth, far from reality. These different opinions have been reflected in social media and by key informants interviewed in the course of our research.

The major step in countering the movement dates back to the official denouncing of the *Täbadiso* by the synod which officially disclosed the existence of anti-EOTC and a reformist movement. Informant's emphasise the point that this has set the landmark in countering the movement and developing different strategies towards that end.

Since the *Täbadiso* movement focuses on individual followers, the counter movement has also been focusing on convincing individual followers of the EOTC and the lowest

structures of the church, that the *Täbadiso* movement is anti-EOTC and thus has to be eradicated from the church once and for all. One of the major measures being taken as a way of tackling the reformist movement is educating the mass and raising awareness of the community of believers about the very existence of *Täbadiso*. This according to key informants is a necessary step due to the fact that there are some members of the EOTC who question the very existence of the movement and who rather describe the discourses related to the movement to be a myth. The awareness raising campaigns hence targets EOTC members at different settings. As part of this awareness raising endeavour, different audio-visual materials are produced by associations and individual preachers which can be accessed for free<sup>7</sup>. There are numerous publications produced by Sunday schools and others accenting the very existence of the *Täbadiso* and the challenge the church is confronted with. One of such publication is the book entitled *Medlot Tsedq*,

.... the *Täbadiso* movement, has become a burning issue in the EOTC. It has touched almost all churches in both rural and urban areas. A number of writings are coming out by people inside the church. .... It has been more than 20 years since this movement has started. Though the Counter Reformation movement within the church has been an impediment, it has shown no indication of slowing down. There are more servants within the church who are being prepped for this. They are not yet revealed to the public. And their number is increasing through time. (Bekele Weldekidan in *Medlote Tsedq*, 2015)

The other strategy for sensitising the community of believers about the existence of *Täbadiso* was through publicly naming and shaming of associations and renowned individuals believed to have direct or an indirect link with the reformist group<sup>8</sup>. This includes providing a list of names of preachers, singers and renowned church officials believed to have links with the movement. The counter movement further lobbied to ban those suspected of having an ulterior motive of inscribing the *Täbadiso* teachings from attending any congregations held at EOTC and from attending any church services and demoting them from their official positions. This partly links to the aforementioned act of naming and shaming which is further pushed one step to delinking those suspects from having any affiliation with the church. This is described by informants as a quintessential act of protecting the potential damage to be caused.

The production of numerous audio-visual polemical teaching about the *Täbadiso* movements by renowned church clerics is another strategy used by the counter movement. The polemical teachings are recorded during religious congregations whereby the clerics target the central teachings of the reformist movement mentioned under section II above. As a way of informing the church community numerous parish churches have organised *gubae* (congregations) whereby they have invited clerics who are well known to the public and have a strong position against the *Täbadiso*. The preaching often accents the underlying similarity between the *Täbadiso* and the Protestants. The counter movement against *Täbadiso* assumes it to be an attempt to make the church protestant as stipulated in some of the changes the *Täbadiso* calls for. For example, those countering the *Täbadiso* movement mention that the call for the use of Amharic as an official church language is a phenomena that can be compared to Luther's dictum that, “the meaning of the bible has to be understood by everybody”.

<sup>7</sup> Some of this lectures available online are entitled: *ye tehadso mistr; Ethiopian Orthodox vs Tehadiso infidels No one deceive you; Tewabedo Vs Tebedeso - ተዋህዶ እና ተሐድሶ ፍጥጫ*

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.topix.com/forum/world/ethiopia/T6O91BG5VB91TLI0B>

Though the decreasing number of EOTC followers is not presently considered a concern, it has been taken as a matter of preserving national identity, history and heritage by the counter movement. This is framed in such a way that followers of EOTC have the responsibility to take care of the church and pass it down to the next generation in the same manner as they took over from their forefathers. With such claims, Sunday schools have taken up part of the counter movement both as a conglomeration of individual followers and as one organisational structure of the church. As Sunday schools have been the focus of the *Täbadiso* movement, with this the need to claim the responsibility for the counter movement has accordingly been taken up by them. With the far reaching network and ability of Sunday schools, the counter movement has taken a different path in different Sunday schools. In some, a separate committee has been set to tackle this problem alone. In the southern part of Addis, a new initiative has been taken up by Sunday schools. Programmes have been prepared to create awareness among the public on *Täbadiso* movement by five Sunday schools forming a coalition against the *Täbadiso*. In some churches, these programmes are held in collaboration with the *Sebeke Guba'e* while in others it is only the Sunday school that took the responsibility. For a while, at Saint Joseph church Sunday school such programmes were only for invited guests and Sunday school members, where it was prepared in a shroud of secrecy. These programmes prepared by the Sunday schools had the objective of teaching about the tradition and cannon of the church, since the *Täbadiso* movement is changing, and destroying the teaching of EOTC. Furthermore, the programmes were organised as a way of preserving the church tradition; showing that Sunday schools can do more than “celebrating epiphany together” thus broadening the spectrum of the counter movement to a larger audience and aim; keeping members of the school updated about the *Täbadiso* movement; showing what is expected of every member of the church as a way of inculcating the message that everyone has the responsibility to take up in the reformist group. With this, besides forming a well-organised structured network to deal with the *Täbadiso* movement, the programmes are focused on relegating the task of opposing *Täbadiso* to every individual rather than an organisational battle, such as between *Mahibere Kidusan* and the *Täbadiso* group. In such a way, taking responsibility is a matter of being a follower rather than being a part of the organisational structure of the church. Following the initiative taken by the Sunday schools, it is in fact a recent phenomenon where church administrators have become open about the existence of the movement. Immersed in the fear of being fired from their position or being relocated to remote areas, some church administrators have for long shied away from condemning the movement or publicly speaking about its very existence.

Despite such multifaceted countering attempts informants emphasised the point that the church has been unable to tackle the problem of the reformist movement for several reasons. First, there is no well-established structure for such counter movements and all the aforementioned attempts are described to be uncentralised. Some informants further raise the point that the *Täbadiso* movement has been seen as a shield to keep power within the church. Last but not least, there are some informants who mention that there is a weak flow of information between structures in the church about the *Täbadiso* movement and its counter movement. For the *Täbadiso*, the ultimate goal of the reform movement is a reconstruction and rebuilding of the church while for those countering the movement, such as the *Mahibere Kidusan*, the objective of the movement is to destroy the church and establish a new one as presented in this section.



## Conclusion

As it has been presented, the developments in and around the EOTC clearly shows the growing tension between the reformists and an aspiration to keep the old tradition of the church. The paper has further elucidated the point that any attempt to fully grasp contemporary reformist religious movements requires to be placed in the broader perspective as the EOTC has a long history of reformist movements or rather a number of waves of reform as presented briefly in this paper. The history of reformist zeal at the EOTC is thus complex and ambiguous. In this paper we argue that founding fathers of earlier reformist movements have influenced the more recent generations from where inspiration has been drawn.

The competing narratives between the reformist movement and those countering the reformist zeal are often framed in discourses of authenticity whereby time is described to be a legitimising variable of authenticity. The reformists argue in an anti-syncretic tone contesting what they call superstitious beliefs and acts injected into the old traditions of the church while the counter narrative to the reformist movement is an attempt to reform the 'old' and long standing traditions of the church.

Furthermore, as it has been discussed in this paper the local reformist movement within the EOTC is not at large framed within external poles of orientation but it is rather a movement that is formed by the local frame of conditions.

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