

BOOK REVIEWS

Donald L. Donham

***Marxist Modern: An Ethnographic
History of the Ethiopian Revolution***

Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999
Oxford: James Currey, 1999. 236 pp, pb, \$19.95

Donham, Professor of Anthropology at Emory University, here attempts to analyze the effects of the Marxist revolution and the impact of modernity upon a small people group in southwestern Ethiopia, the Maale, between 1974 and 1991. This carefully researched and well-documented ethnographic study comprises seven chapters and applies theories and insights from the dialectic of modernist Marxism, local Maale traditional culture, and what the author terms 'anti-modernist evangelical Christianity'—namely that of SIM missionaries. The book enables all those involved in the missiological enterprise to better understand the growing literature produced by secular scholars about modernity impacting non-western church culture.

A recent example of this genre of writing is that of two distinguished secular ethnologists, John and Jean Comaroff, who attempt to read old missionary documents in new ways. Their two-volume *Of Revelation and Revolution* is a study of the evangelizing efforts of two 19th century British non-conformist missions to the Tswana of southern Africa. This scholarly work, published by University of Chicago Press in 1991 and 1997, attempts to interpret the motives of the Tswana who forsook their traditional religious practices for Christianity. The Comaroffs conclude that the Tswana changed their belief system merely for practical benefit; therefore their faith commitment was merely a humanist faith. From detailed archival research the Comaroffs also deduced that the 19th century members of the London Missionary Society and the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society were the initial agents of colonialism among the Tswana.

Let me comment in particular on two chapters from *Marxist Modern* because of their missiological significance for AJET readers. It is evident that Donham spent considerable time researching within the SIM Charlotte archives. In his introductory 'Acknowledgments' he kindly pays tribute to SIM Archive staff, Gary Corwin, Jo-Ann Brant and Sarah Ely who "provided me with indispensable help" (p. xxv). Chapter 4, "The Dialectic of Modernity in a North American Christian Mission" describes the founding of the Sudan Interior Mission (SIM) in Canada by Rowland Bingham, whom Donham describes as an "entrepreneur for Christ" (p.85). Donham quotes letters by SIM Ethiopia missionaries to justify his contention that "medical technology became almost a modernist fetish in the hands of anti-modernist missionaries" (p.89). In the conclusion of this chapter, Donham affirms the significant expansive growth and the positive self-identity of the Wolaitta evangelical church in southern Ethiopia from 1938 to 1944. He acknowledges that it was committed evangelists from Wolaitta who established the majority of churches in southern Ethiopia from 1938 to the present. Donham is to be commended for his scholarly ability in handling a myriad of historical data from the SIM archives.

Chapter 5, "The Cultural Construction of Conversion in Maale" focuses on the SIM missionary activity deployed from the Bako SIM station to nearby Maaleland. Donham, a close observer of the small but growing Maale congregations, relates the dynamic relationship that SIM missionary Alex Fellows, based in Bako, developed with the evangelists sent from Wolaitta to the Maale. Fellows is described as "encouraging and linking up groups, creating modern organizations with representative practices, monthly meetings, and bureaucratic procedures" (p. 109). The section on 'An indigenous theory of conversion' highlights Donham's understanding of Maale cosmology. From personal narratives that were collected from many Maale Christians, Donham could conclude that the impetus for conversion was promise of health and wealth. But further research from the Maale past indicated that when unusual calamity struck an individual or a family, the teachings of indigenous prophets were to be heeded and a new belief system was to be accepted. This new belief system for the Maale, who were suffering from drought, was evangelical Christianity, which initiated modernity in Maaleland around 1960. Donham concludes this chapter with what he describes as ironic. "Rowland Bingham: that dour Canadian believer in angels and demons, lakes of fire that burned forever, and a Jesus Christ who would be returning any day now – to rule the world" (p. 121) was the architect who produced such unusual results for modernity within much of southern Ethiopia.

What makes Donham's ethnographic study significant for missiologists within Africa is his use of personal narratives of ordinary Maale Ethiopians. Their stories, recorded at intervals from 1974 to 1996, are the "resulting sedimentation" that provided the scaffolding for *Marxist Modern*. A conundrum for Donham was to observe that what he termed, in the religious sense, "anti-modernist" SIM missionaries from Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States, who preached the gospel and inspired the formation of communities of Maale evangelicals, resulted in what in turn became "an intensely modernist group of converts" (p. 178), involved in the vanguard of education, modern health practices and constructive social interaction. It would appear that Donham's overarching categories of 'modernist' versus 'anti-modernist' break down when applied to SIM missionaries. Rather, they operated within an integrated model of preaching the gospel which liberated the spirit and made use of modern technology which enhanced the quality of daily living. In his "Afterword/Afterward" Donham acknowledges that by 1991 modernist Marxism within Greater Ethiopia had eventually ran its course, with no genuine followers remaining. But on the other hand, he observed this phenomenon among the Maale evangelicals during the heyday of the Ethiopian Revolution. "Strengthened by persecution, Kale Heywet Churches [in Maale] began to attract the young in increasing numbers ..." (p. 182). He concedes that the Maale evangelicals are the new modernists.

Donham is to be commended for his willingness to sympathetically explore a faith community in such depth by means of his particular social anthropological theory. His conclusion, however, suggests that his categories are insufficient to encompass all the dynamics of either church or mission.

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CONTRIBUTORS INVITED FOR *AJET*

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Scholarship: Articles should reflect serious scholarship based on library or field research. Bibliographic references should preferably be no less than ten. The English composition should be accurate and readable, without the need for extensive editing.

Format: Articles should be typewritten, double-spaced with bibliographic information of every book used at the end of the article. Footnotes or End Notes should be properly given, following guidelines of scholarly publications.

Biographic Information Requested: Authors should include a brief biographic sketch of their present vocational work, together with the last degree obtained and name of the institution from which the degree was obtained.

J Daniel Hays

***From Every People and Nation,
A Biblical Theology of Race***

Leicester: Apollos/Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003
240 pp, p/b, £12.99

According to Hays, the western world has tended to impose its own characteristics on its depiction of biblical characters, both in art down through the centuries and, more recently, in the cinema, overlooking or misinterpreting important biblical data in the process, to the detriment of a sound theology of race.

Hays examines pertinent biblical texts. For example, in the Genesis creation narrative, the racially generic Adam represents the whole of humankind who, irrespective of racial distinctions, share equally in the dignity of bearing the image of God.

The so-called 'curse of Ham' (Genesis 9) has often been used to sanction discriminatory views towards Black African races. Hays robustly rejects this misrepresentation of the text: the 'curse' is directed specifically against *Canaan*, and is rather to be interpreted in the light of the Israelites' eventual conquest of Canaan and its inhabitants.

The 'Table of Nations' in Genesis 10 provides theological grounding, Hays argues, for the common origin of all races; all fall equally under the judgment of God and, therefore, are equally eligible for the promise of divine blessing that is made to Abraham, and that informs many other texts in both the Old and New Testaments.

Even the chosen people of God were not ethnically 'pure'. The 'mixed crowd' (Exodus 12:38, NRSV) that shared in the Exodus event along with the 'sons of Israel' almost certainly included Cushites (Black Africans). If these accepted worship of Yahweh and were circumcised, they were eligible to share in the covenantal Passover meal. Significantly, in Hays' opinion, it is not God who criticises Moses' marriage to a Cushite (Numbers 12) but Aaron and Miriam. Indeed, in the dispute God stands with him against them. Hays concludes from this episode and from other evidence that racial intermarriage is sanctioned by Scripture *for believers*.

Hays then sets out his case that Black Africa played a large part in the biblical story, noting the 54 references to Cush/Cushites in the Hebrew OT. Phinehas the priest, and Ebed-melech who helped Jeremiah out of the slimy cistern, are other notable Black Africans in the biblical narrative. The point is pressed so vigorously that some readers could gain the impression of a certain excess and imbalance. Hays served in mission in Ethiopia (broadly associated with ancient Cush) over a number of years, so his emphases are perhaps understandable. But his interest in Black Africa is also due to his perception that some of the ugliest expressions of racism have been, and still are, directed towards Black African races.

Hays is also seeking to redress the widespread opinion in Africa that the biblical world only impinged upon Africa with the relatively recent arrival of Western missionaries, and that Christianity is to be dismissed as a 'White man's religion'. Hays notes the frequent scholarly portrayal of Cushites in the Bible as belonging to the menial, slave classes and rejects it as a 'reading back' into Scripture of historical prejudices. In fact, Cushites often exercised important leadership roles in Egypt and elsewhere, and indeed Egypt was actually ruled by Cush in the 25th Dynasty (from 715BC to 663BC).

The prophets (especially Isaiah) and the prophetic voices in the Psalms present an eschatological vision of Yahweh bringing all peoples together in worship in fulfilment of the promise to Abraham. It is a vision whose fulfilment in Christ is emphasised by such New Testament authors as Luke and Paul. And the book of Revelation looks forward to the eschatological realisation of the people of God as multi-ethnic and multi-cultural, drawn from every nation upon earth, united in their worship of God and of the Lamb.

Hays writes in a clear and accessible style, with frequent summary sections. A bibliography of some 450 entries indicates the degree of his interaction with scholarly debate. There is an index of authors, and another of Scripture references. A map of the Ancient Near East and of north-eastern Africa would have been helpful. If some of his arguments are speculative, they are nevertheless based on careful scholarship. Finally, despite the academic rigour, pastoral and contemporary concerns of the author are not far beneath the surface. His theology is one of engagement; he argues passionately not for the obliteration of ethnic differences, but for their theological and spiritual irrelevance within the transforming unity of the family of God in Christ.

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Helen Miller

*The Hardest Place:
The Biography of Warren and Dorothy
Modricker*

Bellville, Ontario: Guardian Books, 2006. ISBN: 1-55306-994-3
[order from: Guardian Books, Belleville, Ontario K8P 1S3, Canada. \$22]

This is the extraordinary life story of Warren and Dorothy Modricker, pioneer missionaries to the Somali people. The author of this missionary biography, Helen Miller, is uniquely qualified for the task. She, like the Modrickers, was an SIM missionary to the Somali people. Helen went to Somalia in 1962, where she met her future husband, John Miller. Warren Modricker united John and Helen in marriage, and together they served with the Modrickers until 1972. Thus, she has written of this intrepid couple with the advantage of having personally known them.

Warren Modricker was born in 1907, and grew to young adulthood near Boston, USA. Like many other SIM missionaries of his generation, he grew up poor and during hard times. At age 15, before graduating from secondary school, Warren quit school at his family's urging in order to earn money and help with family expenses. Warren found work as a door-to-door salesman selling Christmas cards. He also renewed his interest in church and became active in the youth group. Another very active member of that youth group was a certain Dorothy Dixon, just three years younger than him.

Warren was invited by an older gentleman to accompany him to a service at a rescue mission in central Boston. Warren said later, "I will never forget that night, seeing many drunkards and others in bad shape." He was troubled by the message he heard, unlike anything that was preached or taught at his church, and announced "I'm never going back to that place." However, God was moving within his heart and he decided to revisit the rescue mission. That night he accepted Christ as his personal Lord and Savior. As president of his church's youth group, he shared his salvation experience with the others and invited them to accompany him to the Rescue Mission in Boston. Dorothy Dixon was among those who went, and that night she also accepted Christ.

Warren and Dorothy became good friends. They quit their jobs and enrolled as students at the Boston Bible Training Institute. As they grew in the things of

the Lord, Dorothy felt that God was calling her to Somalia. Warren thought that the Horn of Africa had been in contact with civilization for centuries, and wanted to go to a harder place, in fact, *the* hardest place. Little did he realize at the time that of hard places, Somalia would be among the very hardest (hence the title of the book). Dorothy eventually transferred to Wheaton College in Illinois, while Warren completed his studies at the C&MA's Missionary Training Institute in Nyack, New York.

In due course Warren asked Dorothy to marry him and she consented. Without the aid of a mission board, the newly married couple trusted God to supply everything they would need to get to Somalia and to serve there. They went out as independent missionaries because, as they would later explain, no mission society was working in Somalia. Arriving off the coast of what was then British Somaliland in late 1933, the Modrickers were surprised and disappointed when the British administration denied them entrance, even though they had been issued a visa before leaving the United States. The British feared that allowing missionary work among the totally Muslim population would risk political unrest. The young couple had to be content with settling, temporarily at least, in the nearby British colony of Aden.

In Aden the Modrickers found a language helper and began to learn the language and make contacts in the Somali community. Although there was no mission board to hold them accountable, both were as diligent in studying and learning the language and in making friends and witnessing to Somali men and women, as though they had had to make out monthly written reports. When war erupted in Europe, because Aden was in the war zone Warren and Dorothy decided it was best to return to America, which they did in 1941. While back in the States Warren met Rowland Bingham, one of the founders of the Sudan Interior Mission (SIM), and learned that SIM was contemplating opening a field in Somalia. Warren was invited to join SIM and head up their Somalia work. So Warren and Dorothy joined SIM in 1943, and spent the rest of their lives associated with that mission.

In 1943 Warren was able to return to Aden, leaving Dorothy behind with the children in the States for the next two years. Eventually in 1945 Dorothy and two younger children were able to rejoin Warren in Aden. Three years later the mission asked Warren to try to get permission from the British administration to establish an SIM presence in Somalia itself. Warren made valuable contacts in Mogadishu, but no official permission was forthcoming at that time. Meanwhile Dorothy had sensed a calling from the Lord to undertake the translation of the

Bible into the Somali language, so during their next furlough Dorothy returned to Wheaton College to study Hebrew.

Finally in 1954, after twenty years of praying for and working with the Somali people outside of Somalia, Warren and Dorothy were able to move into Mogadishu, Somalia. They knew that this door of opportunity might not remain open indefinitely, since the country was largely Muslim and was moving towards self-rule. Warren was a man of vision and passion who thought expansively, prayed fervently, and worked tirelessly. He was a capable and no-nonsense administrator, able to negotiate effectively with government officials, and an effective fundraiser. He and Dorothy lived for the evangelization of the Somali people, and during their relatively short tenure at this time within Somalia itself they made extraordinary advances.

Despite Warren's several abilities, one that was not so in evidence was relating well to his younger co-workers who came to work in Somalia. The mark of a good biographer is to give as balanced a picture as possible and not to gloss over imperfections. Helen Miller is a good biographer. She writes that Warren, "being made of sterner stuff himself, was not too tolerant of what he felt might be lack of determination or courage when difficulties arose. What he didn't realize was that some of those early missionaries found him hard to work under, and several did not return after their first furlough."

In 1962 Warren turned his administrative duties over to someone else, which allowed him to devote more time to helping Dorothy with her translation work. From 1963 onward the work of missions in Somalia became more and more restricted by the newly independent Somali government, and in 1973 SIM was expelled. Warren and Dorothy continued working with Somali people and doing translation work in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and later in Nairobi, Kenya. Then in 1977 the translation of the entire Bible in the Somali language was completed and published. This alone was an accomplishment of monumental proportions. Also during their years in Ethiopia and Kenya the Modrickers helped pioneer a missionary radio ministry in the Somali language, and a Somali correspondence school outreach.

In 1983 the Modrickers moved to the SIM retirement center in Florida. When asked about their retirement plans, Warren and Dorothy would say, "We shall devote more time to reaching the Somalis in America, hold meetings as calls come in, and channel gifts to the field." This they did and more. In failing health, Dorothy entered into the presence of her Lord in 1995 at age 85. When a

daughter came to visit Warren in 1998, she found him at 91 still as energetic and optimistic as ever. And then one day during that visit she found him sitting where he had been having his morning devotions, resting peacefully with his open Bible, “quietly gone to heaven.”

During his retirement years Warren planned to write a book about their experiences as missionaries. He never did. He was busy, as always, seeking the salvation of the Somali people for whom he and Dorothy had devoted their lives.

Thankfully, Helen Miller has chronicled the lives of this remarkable couple, and has thus enriched the annals of missionary biography.

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