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## Islam and Christianity: Can They Co-Exist? *The Answer Lies in the Horn of Africa*

*What plays out in the Horn of Africa can provide some fascinating, often surprising insights into the future of Islam and Christianity in that region, and beyond. Will they move towards a head to head confrontation? Or, can they live in peace? Professor Haggai Erlich of the Open University answers these and many more questions.*

Prof. Haggai Erlich has been immersed in the study of the African continent for forty years, almost a lifetime. Head of Middle Eastern Studies in the Open University's Department of History, Philosophy and Judaic Studies, and author of 13 Open University textbooks, Prof. Erlich analyzes some of the most important issues that are playing out on the international stage and addresses the most pertinent question: *Can Christianity and Islam co-exist?* in his newest book, **Islam and Christianity in the Horn of Africa – Somalia, Ethiopia, Sudan.**

### Ethiopia: The Key

According to Prof. Erlich, a pioneer in the study of Ethiopia's Semitic-Oriental background, part of the answer lies with Ethiopia.

"What makes Ethiopia a model from which we can learn," Prof. Erlich

explains "is that the country has always been an intersection of various cultures: African on the one hand, Semitic and Oriental on the other."

"Yes, Ethiopia is located on the African continent, but it also feels itself part of the Middle East."

Ethiopia epitomizes African pride; having successfully fended off foreign aggression and imperialism – from Islamic invaders in the 16th century to the European imperialists of modern times.

Its history can be traced back two millennia. The nation embodies a unique spirit and fierce determination to hold onto its roots.

### Early Christianity

Ethiopia was the third country in the world, (in 333 AD) to adopt Christianity, following Eastern Rome and Armenia. The head of the Ethiopian Church was an Egyptian monk, trained and appointed by the Copts; political hegemony was legitimized by the Church.

Islam also existed in Ethiopia from the early years. In fact, it was a Christian Ethiopian king who provided asylum and protection to the persecuted Moslems, enabling them to settle and prosper in Ethiopia.

The evolution of the Christian-Islam relationship in Ethiopia is really quite interesting. While they did learn to live amicably, there was no doubt that political power remained in the hands of the Christian Church and any challenges to their supremacy were roundly suppressed. Yet, the history of how a Christian king stood up for the first fleeing Moslems against the Arab pagans of Mecca, remains part of the traditional Moslem back story helping to shape their attitudes towards Ethiopia.

"The uniqueness of Ethiopia," Prof. Erlich elaborates "is that it comprises a culture which built up a political system, a state and even an empire that lasted some two millennia. It managed to withstand the strongest forces in history: Islamic empire and European imperialism and still retain its sovereignty."



*Ancient texts, Lalibela, Ethiopia.*

## A Multi-Cultural Society

Ethiopia was a culture that managed to bring together various ethnic groups. "It was always helped by the fact that it is a natural citadel, a mountainous country. But, the real secret was a political system, legitimized and inspired by a national Christianity, which managed to organize, recruit and when needed, muster substantial forces," Prof. Erlich explains.

"And this held true until Haile Selassie was deposed as the last Christian king and was replaced by a Soviet-oriented dictator. Then in 1991 a new regime came into power which embraced the country's diversity and reopened it to the world. Ethiopian Christianity now flexibly reconnects with its historical roots, re-energizes itself and re-asserts itself within a diverse Ethiopian society while rebuilding renewed relations with Islam and Muslims."

This new multi-cultural diversity is now being felt by the neighboring countries in the Horn of Africa.

## Moderate Islam

Bringing into play his unique perspective of the Oriental-Semitic otherness of Ethiopia combined with its African-ness, Prof. Erlich believes that Ethiopia's legacies of tolerance and understanding will enable "the country to come to terms with moderate Islam."

His unusual and penetrating analysis of the recent war between Ethiopia and Somalia, whereby he not only reconstructed the strategic drama, but also closely followed the internal discussions among the various groups, offers an exquisite example of why this can come to fruition.

When in December 2006, a Taliban-like government was in place in Somalia, threatening Jihad against Ethiopia, the Ethiopian army invaded the country and remained there for the next two years. This action brought to a head the confrontation between Islam and Christianity in the Horn of Africa, revealing, once again, the perspectives of Moslems vis à vis Christians.

"While on the Islamic side, it exposed the ultimate demonization of others, it also enabled a moderate Islamic camp to regroup and express its praise of Ethiopia, because historically it was tolerant and saved the early supporters of the prophet," Prof. Erlich explains.

This exposition was mirrored on the Christian side, "where one camp demonized Islam, while another camp called upon historically neighborly relations, and the country's close identification with the Middle East."

By following the discussions on both sides, and illuminating them against a historical background of religious perceptions and political, military and diplomatic developments in the Horn of Africa since the late 19th century, Prof. Erlich is convinced that "we can choose to be inspired by messages of understanding or messages of militancy." The moderates are choosing the former.

Historically speaking, there is hope that this will and can continue.