



Open Letter to the Ethiopian Religious Community:

September 7, 2009

Prologue to my letter:

I warmly greet all of our esteemed members of the Ethiopian religious community. I am coming to you with a plea for your help. If I am wrong in certain areas in what I am about to say, I apologize to you in advance and welcome your correction. I hope I am wrong on many points and will be uplifted by your real life examples; however, I must raise my genuine concerns out of love and fear for the people of Ethiopia. This does not mean I am perfect, which I freely admit I am not; however, I must sound an alarm for Ethiopia. Our people need our religious leaders more than ever—for we are stumbling downward towards destruction.

Your brother,
Obang

Ethiopia: An Endangered People

Ethiopia is in great peril? Where are you? I cannot hear your voices speaking on behalf of the suffering people. I cannot hear your voices, warning those who are using their power, position or money to oppress the people, to repent of their ways. Where is your condemnation of violence, deceit, bribery, corruption, intimidation, exploitation, ethnic hatred, attitudes of ethnic superiority or cronyism? Who will tell us we must turn from our ways or we will reap the natural consequences of our own immoral choices which are already destroying Ethiopia. Ethiopians need the kind of help only God can give, but only if people turn back to Him. Some will listen, but who will tell them? We do not have time to wait! The looming signs of disaster are everywhere!

Are you seeing the hunger and hearing about projections that 2009 will be a repeat of 1984 when a million Ethiopians died of hunger? Already, 16 million Ethiopians are said to be in need of food aid—what will happen by the end of the year? Have you heard that the Meles regime is minimizing the need in fear of it becoming politically damaging?

Are you hearing about the new reports assessing the numbers of internally displaced Ethiopians to be in the hundreds of thousands? Many of these are people who were driven from their homes due to human rights abuses and the destruction of homes and property, committed by our own government?

Are you hearing about the poor who cannot find jobs, shelter or food so they end up homeless on the streets, begging or sometimes selling their bodies—just to survive? Among them are thousands of orphaned children who have no loving mother or father to hold them in their arms or sing to them as they cry from hunger. They have no one to protect them from those—sometimes from other countries—wanting to exploit them. Some of them are now sick, or have already died, from contaminated water as an already limited sanitation system can never meet the needs of all these homeless.

Are you hearing about the plights of those who have run from the country, looking for safety, jobs, education or opportunity? Many have encountered death on the sea. Some have been promised jobs in Arab countries; ending up as “slave laborers,” with no rights, but instead, being sexually exploited.

Are you aware that Western experts have called Ethiopia a “time bomb,” waiting to explode into violence and killing due to the ethnic hatred, anger towards a brutal and repressive government, economic desperation and the overall lack of hope. Are you worried that Ethiopia could be the next Rwanda as the destructive ethnically divisive policies of this regime implode?

Are you worried about what kind of alternative leadership we should have if this regime falls abruptly? Will it be any better? Are you worried about finding leaders who will put the interests of the people and the country ahead of ego, greed and self-interest?

Are you asking where the voices of reason, morality and reconciliation are that are needed to calm any chaos and help us find healing from the damage of the last years?

Are you concerned that our most fertile land is being sold or leased to foreign countries? Are you concerned that most of the farms that used to produce our food, are now growing flowers and non-food crops when Ethiopians are starving?

Are you aware of the pollution from of the lakes and rivers, like Lake Koka in Oromiya and the Awash River in the Afar region that are poisoning the people who are dependent on them for water?

Are you aware that in order to get into college, to get a job, to get a business, to get fertilizer, good seed, land or most anything that would better your life in Ethiopia, you have to be a member of the EPRDF?

Are you aware that the Meles regime gives guns and a free pass on accountability to government security forces who pose as others while attacking and killing?

Are you aware that others are then accused and held accountable, intensifying ethnic hostilities and sometimes justifying counter-insurgency attacks through these “false flag” operations?

Are you concerned about the increasing religious tension between the Christians and Muslims where such tensions never existed before the Meles regime?

Did you not know how we used to live in tolerance and respect for each other, unlike in other places in the world

Why are you not speaking up or teaching us to a better way? I am asking because I cannot hear the morally outraged voices of our religious leaders over what is happening? What would Jesus say? Who will speak for Jesus? If Mohammed was alive, what would he say? Who will speak for Mohammed? Where are the words of warning and the calls to repentance? Why is our religious community not warning us about eating from the poison apple of ethnic hate? Why is our religious community not calling us to care for the children, the vulnerable, the poor and the wayfarer? Why is our religious community not condemning injustice and human rights crimes? Why is the religious community not calling us to truth, honesty and integrity in all our dealings—even when no one is watching? Why is the religious community not warning those who are robbing and exploiting others?

Is it wrong when you gain wealth, power, position or “success” by cheating, bribing or destroying others through unethical deals, smear campaigns, selling out on others or simply because of your ethnicity, religion or “pro-government sympathies? Where are the religious leaders who should be telling us that life here on earth is short—that we will all ultimately face the judgment by our Creator God who sees all?

Please forgive me for speaking so strongly about this, for I know I have also failed at many points; however, I am in great fear that without exercise, the muscles of our faith, our conscience and our moral obedience to the universal natural laws of God, have gotten flabby with disuse—just when we need it the most!

I am fervently calling on our religious leaders to please be courageous, bold and outspoken in your faith by condemning the wrongs in our lives and in our society; calling to account not only our leaders, but each of us as individuals. What is hurting Ethiopia comes out of the darkness of our hearts before it ever reaches its victims. Those victims always include ourselves. We need to be warned and humbled like never before if we are going to avert this impending disaster!

Your role is not grounded in what people want to hear, but on what is true, what is right and what is honoring to God. We the people seek increased faith, hope and encouragement, but we also need reproof and correction. This is a time when God can empower religious leaders to awaken the conscience of a society, calling both leaders and people to prayer, repentance, action and transformation.

This is a time when religious leaders can impact a society which has forgotten about kindness and mercy, about truth and integrity, about forgiveness and asking for forgiveness, about saying the hard words of reality rather than the mushy words of flattery and false illusions. What is going on is wrong and we can never fix it by pretending it is not there! Our fear should not hold us back or it may be too late.

As the ethnic tensions are rising, I am not hearing or seeing religious leaders calling for reaching out to others; instead, our churches, mosques and synagogues too often become divided by ethnicity, politics, clan or village. Now, as I am writing this, I just read about one very positive example in Atlanta where divided people were able to come together for the first time in years to celebrate the opening of a newly built church. Here is an excerpt from the article:

*Leaders of various Ethiopian Orthodox churches in Atlanta but with opposing views on church matters brushed their differences aside for the day and celebrated the inaugural ceremony together in the name of peace and love. Abune Melke-Sadik of Oakland, in his teaching on Sunday said: "Jesus Christ was asked a question by his disciples... 'Where shall we find Thee?'" Jesus replied to all, "Wherever you converged in the name of love, I will be amongst yourself." So was the motto and the driving force that brought those church leaders whom had never seen each other for years, together at the compound of the new St. Mary Church in Atlanta. Priests from Eritrean and Tigrean churches were also present during the grand opening ceremony. Though not in its entirety, the gesture was viewed by many as exemplary and wished long lasting peace and reconciliation for the people. **Indeed, as one elder noted, the day was "a day of redemption" for many.***

I hope many other examples like these continue to surface for we Ethiopians need to learn to be loving towards one another, both inside and outside of our groups. To be human means to have a soul. Our spiritual leaders should be encouraging the care and healing of our souls, helping us to establish a vibrant relationship with God and with our fellow human beings.

If Jesus or Mohammed visited Ethiopia tomorrow and saw the dying in the streets and the lack of love, what would he say to religious leaders who said, "This is all about politics and I don't want to be involved?" What does it mean to truly be follower of Jesus, of Mohammed or Yahweh? Are our religious services, rituals, sacrifices, fasting and prayer enough or do we need to bear fruit?

What has happened that our religion is kept in the churches, the mosques or the synagogues? Why is it that our religious leaders are not talking to one another about finding moral solutions even if you hold different beliefs? People are suffering and looking up to their religious leaders for direction. They need to hear the truth, not only what the Meles regime wants them to hear? Who should be listened to—God or Meles? On that note, who will warn Meles and others around him to change their ways?

Have you heard that desperate Ethiopians are going to their churches, mosques and synagogues in huge and increasing numbers; praying to God as their only hope; not fully understanding that God can empower each of them to do extraordinary things, but not if they refuse to speak the truth, repent of their ways and to be individually transformed. Religious leaders can model the way, shepherding, inspiring and encouraging the people to act on their faith.

Throughout history, it has been leaders of moral strength and integrity who have warned people and nations, calling them back to fear God and to stop oppressing others. Look at some of the most famous modern day leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr, like Desmond Tutu, Mahatma Ghandi and the Dalai Lama who have called people to greater moral conviction.

Yet, it is not only about well known leaders, but it is sometimes a quiet, unknown, but strongly principled follower of the faith, whose actions will begin a river of blessing that will reach far beyond what they could have imagined. Ethiopia is thirsty for such leaders. Will you be one of them?

Do not go through the outer rituals of religious devotion, pretending that hunger, ethnic hatred, injustice and tyranny do not exist. Others depend on you for guidance, but if the “world” of Christian, Muslim or Jewish religious leaders refuses to confront evil and suffering, keeping on blinders to the real world, the people will find themselves facing the harsh realities of life alone. A healthy Ethiopia is not possible without a strong and vibrant religious leadership who put faith and duties to God above all else. Only then will we learn how to fear God and His universal moral law that calls us to love and protect one another in word and indeed.

The **Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia**, whose principles are “**humanity before ethnicity**” and “**no one is free until all are free,**” was formed to be the voice of the people and to bring greater solidarity among them.

One thing the Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia (SMNE) *to hold a National Reconciliation conference to work together towards creating a healthier*, more reconciled and more respectful society towards everyone, regardless of ethnicity, political view, language, color, gender, region or religion. This should be followed by *a conference for Ethiopian women and youth*.

Immediate Action Step: Next week, Ethiopians from all over will join with other justice-loving people for the March to Stop Genocide and Dictatorship in Ethiopia, the Horn of Africa and Africa. I am asking all religious leaders and followers who read this letter to encourage those in your religious communities to come. This march is about our survival. This march is about restoring God’s moral law that gives freedom, justice, equality and respect for human rights to all people. This march is about accepting one another and starting the process of reconciliation in a country where wounds, wrongs and grievances abound. We Ethiopians need strong moral leaders to speak up.

In closing, if you think I am wrong about some of this that applies to your own or others’ situations, please correct me. On the other hand, if I see horrific warning signs of a possible disaster in Ethiopia and I do nothing, I stand accountable before God and man. If our divisions, desperation, oppression and anger could set off a time bomb of destruction in Ethiopia; let us face it now. The Ethiopian people are expecting religious leaders to do something! No longer can any of us use the excuse that we did not know! Now, we all know!

May God change the course we are on and heal this country. May God free Ethiopians from the chains of fear, making them bold and courageous and strengthening their hands to do His good work! May He start a moral revolution in our hearts and minds, where we can converge in love in the name of brotherhood, sisterhood and humanity.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Obang Metho', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Obang Metho;
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