

Re-Envisioning Ecumenism and World Christianity in the Age of Reformation: The Theological Dialogue of *Abba Mika'el* and Martin Luther

By Stanislau Paulau

The sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation not only dramatically impacted the fate of Western Christendom but also profoundly reshaped the trajectory of Christianity as a worldwide religious system. The ways in which the Reformation legacy has taken root and been expressed contextually around the world – particularly in Africa, Asia, and Latin America – invite attention and constitute one of the most vibrant research fields within the academic discipline of World Christianity.¹ Yet, the relations between the Reformation and the wider world can also be conceptualized in a radically different way. Instead of looking at the Reformation as an initially European phenomenon that became global as a result of worldwide transmission and cross-cultural diffusion of its impulses (predominantly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries), one can invert this perspective and ask whether the Reformation itself can be seen as a product of the increasing global interconnectedness of the early modern Christian world. In the following, I will argue that non-European actors have a considerable share in what became known as the Protestant Reformation and that the religious knowledge produced by and about them was a substantial influence in the development of early Protestant identities. In order to substantiate this claim, I will focus upon African, and more specifically Ethiopian, agency.

By the turn of the sixteenth century, the Christian world was of course comprised not only of Roman Catholicism – at that time still predominantly constituted in Europe – but also of various branches of Eastern Christianity, which extended geographically from Eastern Europe, through the Eastern Mediterranean (including Northeastern Africa), to South and East Asia. The fact that these Eastern churches did not recognize the primacy of the pope became an im-

portant argument in the early anti-Roman polemics of the Reformers. Thus, already at the Leipzig Debate in the summer of 1519 (but also in his later writings), Martin Luther expressed the opinion that the Eastern churches were neither heretical nor schismatic, even though they did not recognize the primacy of the pope as divine right.²

Reformation historians have typically argued that Luther himself had no personal contact whatsoever with Eastern Christians; the commencement of Orthodox-Protestant interactions is usually associated either with the activities of Philipp Melancthon in the 1540s³ or, more frequently, with the correspondence between the Tübingen theologians and Patriarch Jeremiah II of Constantinople on the Augsburg Confession in the 1570s.⁴ And yet, as I have demonstrated in a recently published book,⁵ this established narrative has to be reconsidered in the light of the new evidence showing that the first documented encounter of the Reformers

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with Eastern Christianity can be traced to the time of Luther. Remarkably, this encounter took place due not to European but to Orthodox initiative. In 1534, an Ethiopian Orthodox monk and deacon *Abba*⁶ Mika'el (ሚካኤል) traveled to Wittenberg in order to meet the Reformer Martin Luther. This meeting, which largely remains ignored to this day,⁷ should be regarded and studied closely as the very first Protestant-Orthodox encounter. At the same time, the history of Ethiopian-European relations has to be revised – since, conventionally, scholars of Ethiopian studies suggest that the first encounter between Protestantism and Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity occurred in 1636, when Peter Heyling, a Lutheran from Lübeck, reached Ethiopia.⁸

It was on May 31st, 1534, that an Ethiopian monk appeared in Wittenberg and, having approached Luther, initiated a theological discussion with him. The details of this unusual occurrence appear in a letter written by Melanchthon on the very same day to the Wittenberg lawyer Benedict Pauli.⁹ According to this letter, despite initial communication difficulties – Melanchthon had to invite one of the fellow scholars as an interpreter – *Abba* Mika'el and Luther were able to speak about the doctrine of the Trinity. The African guest proved himself to be *homo ingeniosus*.¹⁰ *Abba* Mika'el stayed in Wittenberg until July 4th, 1534. The two reformers were on site during almost the entire stay of *Abba* Mika'el and met repeatedly with him for theological discussions.¹¹

But who was this Ethiopian monk and how did he come to Wittenberg? Since, according to Melanchthon, *Abba* Mika'el was able to communicate in broken Italian (although he did not speak either Greek or Latin),¹² it can be assumed that he spent a long time in an Italian-speaking environment. Most likely he belonged to the Ethiopian monastic community in Rome. The church of *Santo Stefano dei Mori* (or *Santo Stefano degli Abissini*), adjacent to St. Peter's, had served as the main meeting place and guest house for Ethiopian pilgrims from the 1480s onwards; it developed into an important center of Ethiopian Orthodox intellectual life and also received the formal status of an Ethiopian Orthodox monastic community in 1515.¹³ A further indication of this hypothesis is provided by the manuscript "Vat. et. 47" of the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, which formerly belonged to the Ethiopian Orthodox monastery in Rome.¹⁴ On fol. 215^r, at the very end of this fifteenth-century manuscript, there is an addendum of a later date that identifies a certain Mika'el from the Ethiopian Orthodox monastery in Rome as the owner of this manuscript. In view of the fact that the entire monastic community was small even during its heyday between the 1520s and 1550s and consisted of around five to forty monks (this number varied), it is quite conceivable that this Mika'el is identical with the Ethiopian deacon who visited Wittenberg.

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The travel of an Ethiopian monk to the cradle of the Reformation clearly challenges the perception of early modernity as a period in the history of Christianity in which processes of globalization were driven exclusively by Europeans discovering the wider world and expanding their missionary network. It is not only the mere fact of the existence of such an early encounter between an Ethiopian Orthodox monk and the German reformer that is significant, however, but also and especially that encounter's prevailing theological dimension. This meeting was the venue for a remarkable theological dialogue about the core issues of Christian doctrine, resulting in a mutually shared conviction that Ethiopian Orthodox Christians and proponents of the Wittenberg Reformation belonged to the very same Church of Christ.


This fundamental conviction is reflected in the formal letter of recommendation that the Wittenberg reformers issued to the Ethiopian monk before his departure from Wittenberg (the letter was drafted by Melanchthon and signed by Luther).¹⁵ Interestingly enough, the preserved formula that expresses this ecumenical attitude is that of *Abba* Mika'el: "Even though the Eastern Church observes some divergent ceremonies, he [= *Abba* Mika'el] also judges that this difference does not abolish the unity of the Church nor conflict with faith."¹⁶ The Wittenberg Reformers expressed their explicit support for this ecumenically oriented ecclesiology.¹⁷ The basis for this conviction was agreement on such central issues of the Christian teaching as the doctrine of the Trinity and the understanding of the Lord's Supper. The existing differences in some ceremonies were not regarded as essential and, consequently, were seen as *adiaphora*. The assertion that the fathers of the Reformation and Ethiopian Orthodox Christians confess essentially the same faith was quite extraordinary in the context of the advancing polarization and enduring theological polemics within Latin Christianity in the sixteenth century. Even though the short-

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age of accurate knowledge about each other's theological positions and the possible misinterpretations caused by the difficulties of communication may have contributed to this Orthodox-Protestant ecumenical understanding, this does not undermine the fact that both parties seem to have been genuinely convinced of their accord.

The conviction that Ethiopian Orthodox Christians and European Protestants shared in the same faith and belonged to the very same *one* Church of Jesus Christ demonstrably formed a significant point of reference in the theological thought of the Wittenberg Reformers. For instance, three years after the meeting with *Abba* Mika'el, on November 17th, 1537,¹⁸ Luther mentioned: "Three years ago, there was an Ethiopian monk with us, with whom we had a discussion through an interpreter. He summed up all our articles [of faith] by saying, 'This is a good *credo* (that is faith).'"¹⁹ This statement demonstrates a striking parallelism with a passage from Luther's Wittenberg sermon dating from the same year, in which he spoke of the unity of the true church of Christ, referring to a certain Ethiopian as his example of a fellow believer.²⁰ The fact that Luther had repeatedly, and in various contexts, expressed the conviction that he professed the same faith with the Orthodox Ethiopians and belonged together with them to the one true Church of Christ, demonstrates the importance of this idea for his ongoing theological reflection. As long as Protestants found themselves at a formative stage, the reference point of the Ethiopian other played a stabilizing role. In the context of theological polarization within Roman Christianity, the idea of common belonging to the very same church as Orthodox Christians in distant parts of the world gave credibility to the article of the creed regarding the unity and universality of the church. For Luther, ecumenical agreement with *Abba* Mika'el became not least a means of inscribing the Reformation into the global Christian context.

The encounter of *Abba* Mika'el with Martin Luther challenges the eurocentric narratives still dominating the

historiography of early modern Christianity and exemplifies how global epistemic entanglements shaped the early formation of Protestantism. By doing so, it enables us to revise radically not only the picture of African-European interactions in the sixteenth century, but also that of proto-ecumenical relations in the age of the Reformation. 

Notes:

1. See, for instance, Frieder Ludwig et al. (eds), *Reformation in the Context of World Christianity: Theological, Political and Social Interactions between Africa, Asia, the Americas and Europe* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2019); Dale T. Irvin, *The Protestant Reformation and World Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017).

2. At its most elaborated, this argument is expressed in Luther's work *Von dem Papstthum zu Rom gegen den hochberühmten Romanisten zu Leipzig* [On the Papacy in Rome: An Answer to the Celebrated Romanist at Leipzig], published in 1520. Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 6, Schriften 1519/20 (einschließlich Predigten, Disputationen) (Weimar: Hermann Böhlau, 1888), 285–324. Regarding the position of the Orthodox churches in Luther's ecclesiology see: Fairy von Lilienfeld, "Zum Wesen der Kirche. Einheit, Kontinuität und Universalität der heiligen katholischen und apostolischen Kirche in der Theologie Martin Luthers und in der 'eucharistischen Ekklesiologie' des 20. Jahrhunderts," in *Sophia – Die Weisheit Gottes. Gesammelte Aufsätze 1983–1995*, ed. Karl Christian Felmy, Heinz Ohme and Karin Wildt (Erlangen: Lehrstuhl für Geschichte und Theologie des christlichen Ostens, 1997), 3–12. See also George Pósfay, "'The Whole Christian Church on Earth' – Luther's Conception of the Universality of the Church," *Lutheran Theological Seminary (Gettysburg) Bulletin* 72 (1992).

3. Thus, for example, Daniel Benga suggests locating the first personal meeting between a Reformer and an Orthodox Christian in Melanchthon's meeting with the Greek Franciscus Magera at the Regensburg Reichstag in 1541. Benga, *David Chytraeus (1530–1600) als Erforscher und Wiederentdecker der Ostkirchen. Seine Beziehungen zu orthodoxen Theologen, seine Erforschungen der Ostkirchen und seine ostkirchlichen Kenntnisse* (Giessen: VVB Lauferweiler Verlag, 2012), 54. See also Daniel Benga, "Philipp Melanchthon und der christliche Osten. Bis heute unbekannt Begegnungen Melanchthons aus den Jahren 1541 und 1556 mit orthodoxen Christen," *Orthodoxes Forum* 16 (2002).

4. Dorothea Wendebourg, *Reformation und Orthodoxie. Der ökumenische Briefwechsel zwischen der Leitung der Württembergischen Kirche und Patriarch Jeremias II. von Konstantinopel in den Jahren 1573–1581* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986), 18–24; Daniel Benga, *David Chytraeus*, 45–50; Johannes Karmiris, "Luther und Melanchthon über die Orthodoxe Kirche (I)," *Kyrios* 6.2 (1966); Johannes Karmiris, "Luther und Melanchthon über die Orthodoxe Kirche (II)," *Kyrios* 6.3 (1966); Oskar Wagner, "Luther – Osteuropa und die griechisch-orthodoxe Kirche," *Kyrios* 4 (1964); Viorel Mehedintu, "Martin Luther und die Ostkirche," *Ökumenische Rundschau* 32 (1983); Ernst Benz, "Die östliche Orthodoxie und das kirchliche Selbstbewusstsein der Reformation," in *Evangelisches und orthodoxes Christentum in Begegnung und Auseinandersetzung*, ed. Ernst Benz and Lev Zander (Hamburg: Agentur des Rauhen Hauses, 1952);

The conviction that Ethiopian Orthodox Christians and European Protestants shared in the same faith and belonged to the very same one Church of Jesus Christ demonstrably formed a significant point of reference in the theological thought of the Wittenberg Reformers.

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Theodor Nikolaou, “Die orthodox-lutherischen Beziehungen im 16. Jahrhundert,” *Ökumenische Information* 14/15 (1980); Vasilică Mugurel Păvăluță, “Einige schriftliche Verweise Martin Luthers auf die Ostkirche,” *Review of Ecumenical Studies Sibiu* 9.3 (2017). For further genealogies of early relations between the Reformation and Orthodoxy, all of which proceed without Martin Luther, see for example: Ernst Benz, *Wittenberg und Byzanz. Zur Begegnung und Auseinandersetzung der Reformation und der östlich-orthodoxen Kirche* (München: Fink, 1971), 4–33; Paschalis Kitromilides, “Orthodoxy and the West: Reformation to Enlightenment,” in *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, vol. 5, *Eastern Christianity*, ed. Michael Angold (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Gisa Bauer, “Evangelisch-orthodoxe Religionsgespräche im 16. Jahrhundert,” in *Zwischen theologischem Dissens und politischer Duldung. Religionsgespräche der Frühen Neuzeit*, ed. Irene Dingel, Volker Leppin and Kathrin Paasch (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2018).

5. Stanislaw Paulau, *Das andere Christentum. Zur transkonfessionellen Verflechtungsgeschichte von äthiopischer Orthodoxie und europäischem Protestantismus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2021). An open access version is available at: <https://doi.org/10.13109/9783666336041>.

6. *Abba* (አባ, derived from *ab*, “father”) is an honorific title applied in Ethiopian Orthodox tradition to monks and clergy and is frequently used as a prefix to the name of a religious leader.

7. Among church historians, Martin Brecht and Tom G. A. Hardt are exceptions in this regard. However, they mention the meeting of Martin Luther and *Abba* Mika’el only briefly and do not go into detail about it. Cf. Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther*, vol. 3, *Die Erhaltung der Kirche: 1532–1546* (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1987), 67; Tom G. A. Hardt, “The Confessional Principle: Church Fellowship in the Ancient and in the Lutheran Church,” *Logia. A Journal of Lutheran Theology* 8.2 (1999), 27. Furthermore, recently David Daniels drew attention to this meeting and emphasized its extraordinary importance for church historical studies: “I believe the dialogue between Luther and Michael the Deacon is historically significant. For historical studies, it might be on par with the colloquy between Luther and Zwingli.” David Daniels, “Luther and Ethiopian Christianity,” in Ludwig et al. (eds), *Reformation in the Context of World Christianity*, 28.

8. Cf. Gustav Arén, *Evangelical Pioneers in Ethiopia: Origins of the Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus* (Stockholm: EFS Förlaget, 1978), 32; Ernst Hammerschmidt, “Die äthiopistischen Studien in Deutschland (von ihren Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart),” *Annales d’Éthiopie* 6.1 (1965), 255; Donald Crummey, *Priests and Politicians: Protestant and Catholic Missions in Orthodox Ethiopia, 1830–1868* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 10; David D. Grafton, *Piety, Politics, and Power: Lutherans Encountering Islam in the Middle East* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2009), 153.

9. Letter of Philipp Melanchthon to Benedict Pauli, 31.05.1534. In Heinz Scheible, ed., *Melanchthons Briefwechsel. Kritische und kommentierte Gesamtausgabe*, vol. T6, *Texte 1395–1683 (1534–1535)* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 2005), 99–100. See also the recent introduction and translation by Timothy J. Wengert, “Melanchthon’s First Letter about an Ethiopian Visitor to Luther’s Wittenberg,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 35 (2021): 182–188. For the view arguing that Melanchthon possibly refers in this letter to a different visitor, see David Daniels III and

Lawrence Anglin, “Luther and the Ethiopian Deacon,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 32 (2018): 428–434.

10. Letter of Philipp Melanchthon to Benedict Pauli, 31.05.1534. Scheible, *Melanchthons Briefwechsel*, vol. T6, 100.

11. The only exception were the few days the Reformers spent in Dessau from 3 to 8 June 1534. Cf. Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 59, *Nachträge zu Band 1–57 und zu den Abteilungen “Deutsche Bibel” und “Tischreden”* (Weimar: Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1983), 351; and Heinz Scheible, ed., *Melanchthons Briefwechsel. Kritische und kommentierte Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 10, *Orte A–Z und Itinerar* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1998), 426–427.

12. *Ibid.*, 99–100.

13. Cf. Gianfranco Fiaccadori, “Santo Stefano dei Mori,” in *EAE* 4 (2010): 528–532; Sebastian Euringer, “San Stefano dei Mori (Vatikanstadt) in seiner Bedeutung für die abessinische Sprachwissenschaft und Missionsgeschichte,” *Oriens Christianus* 32.3 (1935); Mauro da Leonessa, *Santo Stefano Maggiore degli Abissini e le relazioni romano-etiopeiche* (Vatican: Tipografia Poliglota Vaticana, 1928); Marius Chaîne, “Un monastère éthiopien à Rome au XVe et XVIe siècle,” *Mélanges de la Faculté Orientale, Bayreuth* 5 (1911); Sylvain Grébaut, “Contribution à l’histoire du couvent éthiopien San-Stefano-dei-Mori,” *Revue de l’Orient chrétien* 26.3 (1927); Sylvain Grébaut, “La règle de Santo Stefano dei Mori,” *Revue de l’Orient chrétien* 27.3 (1929).

14. Cf. Sylvain Grébaut and Eugène Tisserant, *Bybliothecae apostolicae Vaticanae codices manu scripti recensiti iussu Pii XI Pontificis maximi* (Città del Vaticano: Biblioteca Vaticana, 1935), 199–201.

15. A critical edition of the letter of recommendation can be found in: Heinz Scheible, ed., *Melanchthons Briefwechsel. Kritische und kommentierte Gesamtausgabe*, vol. T6, *Texte 1395–1683 (1534–1535)* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 2005), 123–124. For an English translation, see David Daniels III and Lawrence Anglin, “Luther and the Ethiopian Deacon,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 32 (2018): 428–434.

16. “Nam etsi orientalis ecclesia habet aliquas dissimiles ceremonias, ipse quoque iudicat, quod dissimilitudo earum non tollat unitatem ecclesiae nec pugnet cum fide.” Scheible, *Melanchthons Briefwechsel*, vol. T6, 123–124. Author’s translation.

17. “Hanc sententiam et nos probamus.” *Ibid.*

18. In the edition of the speeches at table, “17 November 1538” is given as the date, but this may be an error. Insofar as Luther speaks of the monk visiting him *ante triennium* (“three years ago”), this statement would have to be from the year 1537.

19. “Ante triennium nobiscum hic erat monachus Aethiops, cum quo disputabamus per interpretem, et iste omnibus nostris articulis conclusus dicebat: Ista et bona creda, id est, fides.” Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe. Tischreden 1531–1546*, vol. 4, *1538–1540* (Weimar: Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1916), 152–153. See also Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe. Tischreden 1531–1546*, vol. 5, *1540–1544* (Weimar: Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1919), 450–451. Author’s translation.

20. Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 47, *Reihenpredigten aus den Jahren 1537 bis 1540* (Weimar: Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1912), 235–236.