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The Significance of Zera Yacob's Philosophy

Claude Sumner, *Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia*

1. INTRODUCTION

Since Zera Yacob may not be well known to all the readers of this journal, I would like to preface my article with a general introduction so that all would be in a position to understand Zera Yacob's contribution to Ethiopian philosophy and to the history of human thought.

I shall therefore begin by delineating the characteristics of 'Ethiopian Traditional Wisdom' (Section 2) so that we may better value Zera Yacob's work in relation to the 'philosophical' endeavours that preceded him.

Then I shall give the highlights of his autobiography up to his time of solitude in a cave in the Takkaze Valley (Section 3). Following the plan of his *Treatise*, I shall here expound the philosophy he elaborated in this solitude, making a parallel with his contemporary René Descartes, not only because so many scholars have done so, but also, and above all, because Descartes is well known by all (Section 4). Then, still following the plan of his *Treatise*, I shall summarize some salient features of his life history, but now as enlightened and guided by the principles he developed in the Takkaze Valley cave. His disciple, Walda Heywat, wrote an epilogue to this autobiography – this is how we know the year of Zera Yacob's death – and then added his own *Treatise* to that of his master in a manner that I would like to characterize (Section 5).

What is the spirit of this philosophy? Nearly all scholars have answered: rationalism. But what type of rationalism has seventeenth century Ethiopia developed in the person of one of its greatest representatives? This, too, I would like to discuss (Section 6).

Finally, I shall delineate some of the items that would be considered most significant to scholars concerned with 'Ultimate Reality and Meaning'. I have outlined a number of such items in the following areas: literary form – individuality of Zera Yacob's philosophy – theodicy – principles of ethics – individual and social ethics – the human person (Section 7).

2. ETHIOPIAN TRADITIONAL WISDOM

Philosophy may be taken in a broad sense and in a narrow and more precise way. Phi-

losophy in the strict sense has received different historical definitions throughout the ages. But whatever the specific acceptation one adopts, it always refers methodologically to a reflective, systematic, deep, and thorough way of thinking, and, historically, to a vast and rich display of subjects which have engaged the attention of different thinkers at various times and in distinct cultures: knowledge itself, its language, its method, being and non-being, good and evil, unity and multiplicity, motion, the world, living and inanimate beings, the human person and infinite being. Philosophy attempts to grasp the entire universe in a small number of principles (Sumner 1976, p. 100).

But philosophy may also be taken in a wider sense as a 'wisdom'. Wisdom is not synonymous with knowledge. It does involve several things: an end or purpose to be attained; an appreciative notion of this purpose; an ability, an inclination, and a steadfast effort to achieve the known purpose in the best possible manner. Such is wisdom considered subjectively, in the person who possesses it. Taking the term 'wisdom' in an objective sense and regarding it in a most general way, wisdom is the sum-total of things worth knowing and working for.

2.1 *Oral Wisdom*

Now Ethiopia possesses both types of 'philosophy', and as to wisdom in particular, it is expressed in both the oral and the written form.

Oral wisdom in Ethiopia, as in the rest of Africa – in particular Bantu Africa – is drawn from proverbs, songs, folktales, legends, and myths. It is a popular wisdom, the result, not of the speculation of an individual who constructs a whole system, but of the experience of an entire people. This experience is transmitted from father to son, from one generation to another, from one century to another. It is a stream that moves in the same general direction – the living stream of tradition. Its general characteristics are: orality, anonymity, traditionality, collectivity and, to a great extent, a lack of critical sense.

2.2 *Written Wisdom*

But for centuries Ethiopia has also been in possession of a written philosophy in the broad sense of the word. It is a literature of translation and adaptation. When we pass from oral to written wisdom, we move from mythical time to historical time. The names of the authors of these basic texts are known, as well as the country in which they lived, and the period of literary activity to which they belong. When a translation is made from Greek via Arabic, we know not only the name of the translator, but also the name of the author of the Arabic and Greek texts; we can make comparisons between texts, and distinguish the sources from the originality of the adaptation. The most famous 'Collection of Sayings' from the high plateaus of Ethiopia goes back to the first quarter of the sixteenth century CE, when Abba Mikael orally rendered into a current language Geez, an already existing Arabic text of the same type, and an Ethiopian scribe wrote it in Geez on parchment. The name of the Collection is *The Book of the Philosophers*.

The words *fālasfa*, 'philosopher', and *fālsāfāna*, 'philosophy', appear hundreds of times; they even appear in the title of *The Book*. Greek influence is everywhere evident: Pre-Socratic, Socratic, Aristotelian, but especially Platonic and Neo-Platonic. By far the greater number of 'philosophers' have Greek names. In their English form they are:

Alexander, Aristotle, Democritus, Diogenes, Galen, Heraclitus, Hermes, Hippocrates, 'One of the Ionian Greeks', Plato, Porphyry, Pythagoras, Sextus, Simonides, Socrates, Themistius, Fathers of the Church like Basil and Gregory. In the Ethiopian text, even if certain sections have been attributed to authors different from the original ones, the Greek origin of the great majority of names still remains.

One may ask in this regard the following question: To what extent can a work translated from an Arabic text, which itself goes back to a Greek original, be labeled 'Ethiopian'? The answer is that in the past the Ethiopians never translated anything literally except for the Holy Scriptures: they adapted, modified, added, subtracted. A translation therefore bears a typically Ethiopian stamp. Although the core of what is translated is foreign to Ethiopia, the way it is assimilated and transformed into an indigenous reality is typically Ethiopian. This process is known as 'creative incorporation' (Sumner 1988, p. 170).

When compared with the type of wisdom described above, this one is written, not oral; its authors are well known; it is partially traditional (the Greek and the Arabic influences) and partially original (the Ethiopian adaptation). It is partially collective, and partially individual, and the lack of a critical sense is not as great as in the case of oral wisdom.

However great might be the richness and the depth of Ethiopian traditional wisdom, both oral and written, it still remains true that it does not possess the fully original and personal characteristics, the explicitly critical and methodological framework that marks off philosophy in the strict sense. If we look for the name of a great Ethiopian philosopher and free thinker, then we must turn to the seventeenth century.

3. A GREAT PHILOSOPHER OF SEVENTEENTH CENTURY ETHIOPIA, ZERA YACOB

3.1 *Biography up to his time of solitude in a cave in the Takkaze Valley*

In 1667, calculated according to the Gregorian calendar, an Ethiopian philosopher by the name of Zera Yacob (which means 'The Seed of Jacob') wrote a *Treatise* in which he recorded both his life and his thought. To a person acquainted with Ethiopian history, the name of Zera Yacob brings to mind the fifteenth century Emperor of that name who reigned from 1434 to 1468, who was the consolidator of the First Shoan Kingdom, a religious zealot, a literary figure of considerable repute, and an efficient administrator. Zera Yacob, the philosopher, lived about a century and a half later.

In terms of originality of thought, the philosopher was much more important than the king. He begins his *Treatise* with the story of his life. It is the only known autobiography in Ethiopian literature. He was born on August 28th, 1599, Gregorian calendar, near Aksum, from a family of poor farmers. Aksum was the capital of a kingdom and the cradle of a civilization which from the most ancient times up to the ninth century CE extended from the Red Sea coasts to the Nile plain and covered a great part of northern Ethiopia.

Zera Yacob attended the traditional schools of Ethiopia, studying in particular the Psalms of David, the *zema* (sacred music taught in church school), the *qene* ('poetry' or

'hymns') and the *sewasewa* ('vocabulary'; it designates the interpretation of the Holy Scriptures and is somewhat the equivalent of 'belles-lettres'). This is a point of special importance. The prose of Zera Yacob reflects the language that is taught in the *gene* school (Sumner 1976, pp. 93–8, 258). It is the jewel, the masterpiece of Ethiopian literature. Moreover his thought is imbued with the discussion and criticism which are encouraged in this school. The *gene*, or 'poems', were originally oral and use intricate, highly symbolic and even cryptic language. They were provided to me by Alemayyehu Moges, a scholar from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, and were published in my first volume on Zera Yacob. They show that there were issues at that time over the existence of God and the respect due to Him, ridicule at the wings and protection of angels, denial of the divine origin of the 'founders of religion', and scepticism about the sinfulness of homicide (Sumner 1976, pp. 99–108, 258).

In 1626, King Susenyos made his solemn profession of the Catholic faith. Shortly afterwards Zera Yacob was denounced before the king.

At that time, a certain enemy of mine, *Wäldä Yoḥannəs*, a priest from Aksum and a friend of the king, went [to bring a charge against me] since the love of kings could be won by a perfidious tongue. This betrayer went to the king and said this about me: 'Truly this man misleads the people and tells them we should rise for the sake of our faith, kill the king and expel the *Franḡ* [the foreigners, the Europeans, the Portuguese, the Catholics]'. He also said many other similar words against me (Sumner 1976, p. 5).

Zera Yacob was compelled to flee for his life, taking with him three measures of gold and the most precious of his possessions – the second great influence in his life together with *gene* language and culture: the Book of Psalms, the *Dawit* (Sumner 1976, pp. 89–93; 127–34; 255, 259–60; Sumner 1978, pp 181–95; 315–17). On his way to Shoa in the south he found a beautiful uninhabited place: a cave at the foot of a valley south of the Takkaze River, where he lived for two years. There in the peace and solitude of the cave, far from the conflicts among humans, he elaborated his philosophy (Salt 1814, p. 274; Sumner 1976, p. 5).

There is a parallel here with Zera Yacob's European contemporary, René Descartes. During the winter in Neubourg, Descartes was forced to stay in a locality where he found no society to interest him, and, undisturbed by any cause or passion, remained the whole day in seclusion in a room heated by a stove, and there occupied his attention with his own thoughts, thoughts that were embodied later on in his *Discourse on Method* (1637). Similarly Zera Yacob, in the quietness of a cave, where he meditated on the Psalms and reflected on the roots of antagonisms in the hearts of humans, developed a new approach to life and thought which, later on, would constitute his *Treatise* (Sumner 1981a, pp. 5–10).

4. ZERA YACOB'S PHILOSOPHY

4.1 *Parallel with Descartes' Discourse on Method*

The parallel with Descartes goes much deeper than the material circumstances leading

to the elaboration of their respective philosophies. Zera Yacob did not make use of anything similar to Descartes' universal methodic doubt. But there is a 'method' in Zera Yacob just as there is in Descartes. In both authors we find an occasion for a critical investigation, the need for such an inquiry, a criterion which leads to the establishment of a basic principle that is applied in both authors to theodicy, ethics, and psychology (and in Descartes to cosmology). Although the method of enquiring is revolutionary in both cases, its roots are deeply theological in both philosophers.

4.2 *Occasion for the two inquiries*

The occasion for Descartes' inquiry was the conflicts and disagreements among philosophers. There is not a single thing about which there is no discussion, nothing which is not open to doubt. The occasion for Zera Yacob's *Treatise* is the conflict among believers, mostly among Christians, but also among Moslems and Jews, and, on a broader level, among all human beings.

4.3 *Critical examination by the two philosophers*

Descartes, therefore, rejects all received opinions, all testimony of the senses, the information of our conscience, even the most obvious truths of a mathematical nature. He posits the critical problem in all its amplitude, but not for the sake of scepticism for its own sake. His intention is positive, namely to seek an indubitable foundation for sciences. Zera Yacob's criticism is not so thorough-going. He posits the need, even the necessity, of a *critical examination* in order to place to one side all the lies proffered in the name of divine revelation and to establish the truth, freed and purified from all human accretions.

4.4 *Methodology*

Descartes' *method* for attaining this rock of certitude that no doubt will erode was to base his system on his own thought. In being aware of thinking, he was aware of being. This principle is not a reasoning, but the immediate intuition of a fact. Likewise, Zera Yacob found in the light of reason, of a God-given reason, the method whose immediacy would enlighten his investigation.

4.5 *Criteria*

The clear idea will become for Descartes the supreme *criterion*, the centre not only of his method but also of his whole system. Likewise the light of reason is for Zera Yacob the discriminating criterion between what is of God and what is of human individuals, between the essential tenets of natural religion and the human additions to it which prove to be merely human inventions.

4.6 *The basic principle*

The clear idea, therefore, was for Descartes the basic principle which he applied to all the domains of the reality he was seeking to establish on firm ground: the nature of the human person, a thinking thing; the nature of God, whose real existence is included in the thought of Himself; the nature of the natural body, the clear idea of which yields only

extension, figure, and movement. Likewise, through the application of his method, Zera Yacob found a basic principle: THE GOODNESS OF CREATED NATURE. He often described it as 'The order of creation', or 'The laws of nature'. From this foundation he moved towards theodicy, ethics, and psychology, his theodicy being mostly a creational one, his ethics accepting only that which is based on the goodness of the created thing, like that of married life and of food, thus rejecting monastic life and fasting, and his psychology emphasizing human freedom and superiority over the rest of creation.

4.7 *Divergence between Descartes and Zera Yacob*

At this point in the parallel between the two authors, a significant *divergence* takes place. Descartes' method was linear. Being a mathematical genius, he hoped to discover the secrets of nature with a clearness and a precision equal to a geometrical theorem. Zera Yacob's philosophy did not present itself as a mathematical deduction, a straight-lined continuity from a first principle or a first idea, but rather as a fan-like unfolding similar to a great number of rays which meet at a common centre, thus safeguarding the complexity and richness of reality. In this sense Zera Yacob was not modern. His approach resembled more that of St. Augustine or St. Thomas Aquinas than that of Descartes or Leibniz. Or, if it is modern, then it shares more traits in common with Pascal and Locke than with Kant and Hegel.

4.8 *Mediaeval roots*

Now, if we analyze the philosophy of Descartes, we find that, in spite of its radical universal doubt which marks it off from all preceding philosophy, it has *deep roots in mediaeval thought*. Its notion of God, of substance, of the impossibility for matter to think, to take only a few instances, was taken from the great masters of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Descartes' method is radical, while his system is conservative. Such a dichotomy will also appear later on in Hegel.

Likewise, Zera Yacob's philosophy appears as a radical departure away from Ethiopian traditional thought, especially as concerns revelation, monastic life, and fasting. And yet his thought had deep roots in the traditional theology of Ethiopia, especially in the Psalms, and in the critical approach of the *gene* school. Although Zera Yacob's attitude was revolutionary, his system was, to a great extent, conservative, especially with regard to the existence of God, the natural law and the spiritual life. His basic archetypal images lay deeper than his conscious critical thought in a world of symbols that were common to Ethiopian Semitic thinkers (Sumner 1978, pp. 70–2, 309).

Perhaps the best judgement on the value of Zera Yacob's *Treatise* has been given by Enno Littmann: 'a real contribution to the history of human thought' (Littmann 1909, pp. 202; 219–20).

4.9 *Zera Yacob in his cave*

Let us therefore try to visualize 'Zera Yacob in his Cave', a scene that has been depicted in vivid colour by the Ethiopian artist Terrefe Debebe. It is about the year 1630; the cave opens on a large valley; in front of Zera Yacob, well protected in its leather case, lies the Book of Psalms, the *Dawit*; a ray of light penetrates into the dark

recess of the cave and illuminates the reflective features of the Ethiopian thinker. He has just been pursuing his 'Investigation of Faith and of Prayer' (Sumner 1976, p 7), and now he ponders:

I thought further and said: 'Why do men lie over problems of such importance, even to the point of destroying themselves?' and they deemed to do so because although they pretend to know all, they know nothing. Convinced they know all, they do not attempt to investigate the truth. As David said: 'Their hearts are curdled like milk'. Their heart is curdled because they assume what they have heard from their predecessors and they do not inquire whether it is true or false. But I said: 'O Lord! who strike me down with such torment, it is fitting that I know your judgement. You chastise me with truth and admonish me with mercy. But never let my head be anointed with the oil of sinners and of masters in lying: make me understand, for you created me with intelligence'. I asked myself: 'If I am intelligent, what is it I understand'? And I said: 'I understand there is a creator, greater than all creatures; since from his overabundant greatness, he created things that are so great. He is intelligent who understands all, and we ought to worship him, for he is the master of all things. If we pray to him, he will listen to us; for he is almighty'. I went on saying in my thought: 'God did not create me intelligent without a purpose, that is to look for him and to grasp him and his wisdom in the path he has opened for me and to worship him as long as I live'. And still thinking on the same subject, I said to myself: 'Why is it that all men do not adhere to truth, instead of [believing] falsehood'? [The cause] seemed to be the nature of man which is weak and sluggish. Man aspires to know truth and the hidden things of nature, but this endeavour is difficult and can only be attained with great labour and patience, as Solomon said: 'With the help of wisdom I have been at pains to study, all that is done under heaven; oh, what a weary task God has given mankind to labour at'! Hence people hastily accept what they have heard from their fathers and shy away from any [critical] examination. But God created man to be the master of his own actions, so that he will be what he wills to be, good or bad. If a man chooses to be wicked he can continue in this way until he receives the punishment he deserves for his wickedness. But being carnal, man likes what is of the flesh; whether they are good or bad, he finds ways and means through which he can satisfy his carnal desire. God did not create man to be evil, but to choose what he would like to be, so that he may receive his reward if he is good or his condemnation if he is bad. If a liar, who desires to achieve wealth or honours among men, needs to use foul means to obtain them, he will say he is convinced this falsehood was for him a just thing. To those people who do not want to search, this action seems to be true, and they believe in the liar's strong faith. I ask [you], in how many falsehoods do our people believe? They believe wholeheartedly in astrology and other calculations, in the mumbling of secret words, in omens, in the conjuration of devils, and in all kinds of magical art and in the utterances of soothsayers. They believe in all these because they did not investigate the truth but listened to their predecessors. Why did these predecessors lie unless it was for obtaining wealth and honours? Similarly those who wanted to rule the people said: 'We were sent by God to proclaim the truth to you'; and the people believed them. Those who came after them accepted their fathers' faith without question; rather, as a proof of their faith, they added

to it by including stories of signs and omens. Indeed they said: 'God did these things'; and so they made God a witness of falsehood and a party to liars (Sumner 1976, pp. 7-9).

5. RESUMPTION OF ZERA YACOB'S BIOGRAPHY

After the death of Susenyos, Zera Jacob left his cave to live again among people, and at last settled down in Enfraz with a certain rich merchant named Habtu, who became his patron. He wrote the Psalms for him in a beautiful hand which all admired, taught his sons, and married a maidservant of his family. It was at the request of one of Habtu's sons, Walda Heywat, that he wrote his famous *Treatise* which was completed in 1667 when the author was sixty-eight years old. He was to live in Enfraz for twenty-five more years. The brief account which he gives of his harmonious and happy family life, of his prosperity and the birth of his children and grandchildren is very striking in its patriarchal simplicity. He died in 1692 at the age of ninety-three.

He therefore stayed in Enfraz for sixty years. There he taught his philosophy, wrote his *Treatise*, married, established his family, died and was buried. The town of Enfraz is today very easy to reach since the highway between Gondar and Bahr Dar crosses it. Its milestone indicates that it is 590 kilometres from Asmara. It is situated at 60 kilometers south of Gondar, and 114 kilometres north of Bahr Dahr. Enfraz is really the city of Zera Jacob, not only because he remained in this town for nearly two thirds of his life, but also because this is the place where his philosophy, first elaborated in the solitude of the Takkaze Region, matured into full expression in his life, in his teaching and in his writings (Sumner 1981 b, pp. 10-1). This philosophy manifested his tolerant attitude towards life of his later years which he acquired in his birthplace of Aksum.

5.1 *Zera Jacob's Disciple Walda Heywat and his Treatise*

Cervantes has placed by the side of Don Quixote, a country gentleman with an addled idealism, a peasant bent on earthly acquisitiveness by the name of Sancho Panza. And likewise it happened during the second half of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth that the great rationalist philosopher Zera Jacob had at his side a man who, although he did not share the originality of his master, turned out to be a magistral exponent of his thought. His name was Walda Heywat, 'The Son of Life'.

We may easily visualize a scene which must have often taken place in the house of the rich merchant in Enfraz. Two young men are seated at the feet of Zera Jacob, but the face of one of the two sons of Habtu is lit with a glow of understanding and admiration. Walda Heywat is aware that his master is not just one more teacher in Ethiopia, but a profound and original thinker. He will treasure the memory of Zera Jacob until his death. Not only will he encourage his master to write the story of his life and to expound his own thought, but after his master's death in 1692, Walda Heywat, although well advanced in age, writes a book on the things taught to him for fifty-nine years by Zera Jacob.

5.2 *A comparison between the two Treatises*

This second *Treatise*, however, is no mere repetition of the first. Although Walda Hey-

wat's ideas are basically those of his master, his presentation is quite different. Walda Heywat's style is remarkable for its pedagogical qualities. For instance Walda Heywat is a skillful storyteller. Each of his stories is an illustration in practical life of the principles he wishes to inculcate. Each of them also shows the deep influence of the folk literature of Ethiopia upon Walda Heywat, although these short stories are far more dramatic and picturesque in Walda Heywat than their original models in traditional wisdom literature.

But the pedagogical value of Walda Heywat's *Treatise* goes much beyond the literary qualities of its presentation. He seems to have selected amongst the ideas of his master those whose significance for human life is the greatest. These he expresses in a forceful way, often addressing himself directly to his readers as if they were his disciples. This is an essentially oral style – that of parents teaching their sons, of the sage talking to his pupils. Walda Heywat is first and foremost an educator, using pedagogical techniques: he is in constant communication with his 'students', asking questions, foreseeing objections, answering them, setting queries within his replies and keeping his audience in a living rapport through imperatives. The combination of practical significance and educational concern is such in Walda Heywat that present-day Ethiopia has set many aspects of his thought in the limelight. I shall mention some of these together with those of his master (Sumner 1981b, pp. 9–13) in the last section of this paper under the rubric of 'Ultimate Reality and Meaning' (Section 7).

To illustrate the contrasting approaches of master and disciple, we will study the field of social ethics. The family is the subject of a different approach as we proceed from Zera Yacob to Walda Heywat. In Zera Yacob we find no practical advice on the way to bring up children. As he focuses his beam of light upon the words of the Gospel which are at the source of monastic life: 'He who does not leave behind father, mother, wife, and children is not worthy of God', he finds that this runs counter to our God-given intelligence and is destructive of human nature itself. Conversely, the education of children, like the institution of the family itself, comes from the will of God and is in conformity with our reason: without it the very necessities of life cannot be fulfilled.

Walda Heywat's approach is much more practical than that of Zera Yacob. He gives a series of items of advice to parents towards their children. There is not a single mention of the light of reason, the will of the Creator, the order and law of nature – ideas that were dear to his master Zera Yacob. Everything is sapiential and parenetic (Sumner 1976, p. 273).

Zera Yacob

The Gospel also declares: 'He who does not leave behind father, mother, wife and children is not worthy of God'. This forsaking corrupts the nature of man. God does not accept that his creature destroy itself, and our intelligence tells us that abandoning our father and our mother helpless in their old age is a great sin; the Lord is not a God that loves malice; those who desert their children are worse than the wild animals, that never forsake their offspring (Sumner 1976, p 10).

Thank God for having given you children; be happy in them and love them as a part of your own selves; bring them up with great care and wisdom: see to it that you provide them with everything necessary for their life; guide them from childhood in the way in which God wants them to walk; teach them what they should know and do; do not give them bad example; let them not learn how to do evil by your example; give them an example of prudence and good conduct so that they may be prudent and behave well. As long as your children are young, let not their angry and enflamed character irritate you, because they cannot as yet distinguish the good from the bad. Be patient and strengthen your heart; you yourselves were brought up the same way, so you must educate your children with all patience without lassitude. Leave aside anger and throw out indignation, and do not be like those fools who get angry at their children and hit them each time they break a pot by accident or pour out a glassful of water without their fault, but keep silent if they act in an evil way. Bear with your children if by accident they damage unwittingly some of your belongings. But chastise them and beat them if you see in their hearts malice, pride, disobedience, anger, plunder and tear away the goods of others, or if they fornicate or do something similar, then chastise them, rebuke them, beat them in the right time, lest they become accustomed to do evil on account of your silence. Unless you punish them in their childhood, they grow up in their malice and once they reach adulthood, they will no longer listen to your warnings (Sumner 1976, pp. 52–3).

6. SPIRIT OF HIS PHILOSOPHY: RATIONALISM

6.1 *Conflicting interpretations*

Many scholars have attempted to describe what may be defined as the 'spirit' of Zera Yacob's philosophy. 'Spirit' is here taken as meaning: 'an individual, a person, especially with reference to characteristics of mind or temper, as a bold spirit'. Since we are speaking of the individuality of Zera Yacob's philosophy, we may go beyond parallels with persons who are extrinsic to him, like Descartes, and try to characterize from the inside the main feature of his intellectual personality. Now we find that scholars vary to a great extent with regard to how we might describe his thought. In the thirty or so attempts that have been made, we find a certain pattern which, to use a modern political phrase, could be described as left-wing tendencies, a centre, and right-wing tendencies, the two opposed groupings being represented by various positions that pass from the moderate to the extreme. Such a pattern is, to a great extent, subjective and arbitrary; but it has the advantage of accounting for the very different and even sometimes conflicting interpretations that have been given to Zera Yacob's philosophy.

Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955) has also given rise to the most conflicting interpretations from the most enthusiastic admiration to the most heated disapproval. In the case of Teilhard, the diversity of criticism came from his attempt to unite what had been divided, to weld together in one great synthesis matter and spirit, faith and science. Not so in the case of Zera Yacob. But, like Descartes and Hegel, he unites a method that is revolutionary to a system that is, in the main, conservative. Hence those who have been

impressed by the method will mark it off as a scandal, a blasphemy, a heresy, an atheistic revolution. Those who share his conclusions will consider him as orthodox, a saint, even a mystic. Who is Zera Yacob? A rebel or a traditionalist? He is both, and hence he is attacked from all sides (Sumner 1978, pp. 73–4).

Amongst the various characterizations of the spirit of Zera Yacob's philosophy, the one that recurs most frequently is 'rationalism'. I have singled out fifteen scholars among the best known commentators on Zera Yacob who agree to describe him as a rationalist: Turayev, Nöldeke, Wey, Littmann, Kračkovskii, Harden, Guidi, Mittwoch, Ullendorff, Murad Kamel, Sylvia Pankhurst, Contri, Dr. Abba Ayelè Teklehaymanot, Marchiotto, Bahru Zewde (cf. Turayev 1903, pp. 445–6, 474–5; Nöldeke 1905, pp. 457, 459; Wey 1906, p. 361; Littmann 1909, pp. 202, 221; Kračkovskii 1924, pp. 195–6; Harden 1926, p. 99; Guidi 1926, p. 77; Mittwoch 1934, p. 1; Ullendorff 1945, pp. 61–2; Murad Kamel 1945, p. 3; Pankhurst 1955, p. 359; Conti Rossini 1957, 4: col 1818; Ullendorff 1960, p. 151; P. M. [Padri Mario da Abiy-Addi] 1964, p. 3; Marchiotto 1964–5, p. 224; Bahru Zewde 1968, p. 2). Now the term 'rationalism' has many correlated meanings, and it is important to find out in what sense exactly the term is to be applied to Zera Yacob.

6.2 Rationalism

Rationalism may be taken as a theory which holds that reason alone, unaided by experience, can arrive at basic truths regarding the world. Associated with it is the doctrine of inborn ideas and the method of logically deducing truths about the world from 'self-evident' premises. Rationalism is opposed to empiricism on the question of the source of knowledge and the techniques for verification of knowledge. Descartes, Leibniz and Spinoza represent the rationalist position; Locke, the empirical one. Zera Yacob shows no evidence of being a rationalist in this sense. More loosely, rationalism may signify confidence in the intelligible, orderly character of the world and in the mind's ability to discern such coherence. Irrational philosophies accordingly stress the will at the expense of reason, as exemplified in the voluntarism of Schopenhauer and the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre or Karl Jaspers. In this sense, Zera Yacob is a clear and resolute rationalist, although scholars are not referring to this particular signification when they say Zera Yacob is a rationalist.

The sense they are referring to is a religious one. In this case, rationalism is the view that recognizes as true only that content of faith which can be made to appeal to reason. In Europe the relationship of faith to reason was a fundamental datum of scholasticism. In Ethiopia, traditional 'philosophy' in its written form is intimately linked with Christianity in general and monasticism in particular (cf. Sumner, 1974, pp. 21–6). It is precisely in this sense of the absolute and exclusive sufficiency of human reason which denies all dogmatic assertion that reason would be unable to establish by its own means and to comprehend adequately that Zera Yacob is said to be a rationalist (cf. Jolivet 1951, p. 156). Turayev has underlined the historical circumstances that were favourable to the appearance of rationalism in Ethiopia in the seventeenth century.

We already know that heresies based on dogmatism and having a rationalist character were not unknown. For the case we are interested in, conditions were absolutely excep-

tional: the encounter with Christianity of Western culture and fierce religious disputes (Turayev 1903, p. 475).

Hence rationalism in Zera Yacob goes hand in hand with a deeply religious sense and even with piety towards an all-merciful and all-wise creator.

Through deep doubts, he [Zera Yacob] at last came back to a deep pious rationalistic belief in God as the all-merciful and all-wise creator (Baumstark 1911, p. 58; cf. Wey 1906, p. 195–361; Erdmann 1916, pp. vii ix, x, xi; Sumner 1978, pp. 74–5).

7. 'ULTIMATE REALITY AND MEANING' FOR ZERA YACOB

It is true that Zera Yacob and his disciple Walda Heywat who prolonged his master's thought in a second, more ethically-oriented and practical *Treatise* can only be understood within the geographical, historical, economical, political, social, and cultural framework of their time and place: the high plateaus and the valleys of seventeenth-century Ethiopia. But it is also true that a genius cannot be wholly explained by or reduced to deterministic factors. As Karl Marx so aptly observed, humans are not simply acted upon; they act; 'men change circumstances' (Marx 1995, p. 403; cf.: Sumner 1989, p. 70). It is the sign of the genius that he or she cannot be wholly explained by or reduced to deterministic factors. In the blending of environmental conditioning and human causality in which a personality expresses itself, the genius incarnates freedom of the spirit. Zera Yacob transcends the century which gave him life, language, education, solitude, and companionship. That is why his message is still significant for our times.

The aspects of his philosophy that are meaningful today depend, to a great extent, on one's thought, choice and even on one's most deeply seated emotions. One's judgement, at this level, is necessarily personal. In a schematic form, here are some of the aspects of Zera Yacob's thought that strike the present writer as significant for us today. Further research in the URAM of Zera Yacob might be able to make use of these notes as a basis for more reflection.

7.1 *Literary Form*

7.1.1 An autobiography

The autobiographical form is characterized by a constant alternation from the objective level of events to a subjective level of inquiry and meditation.

7.1.2 Ethiopian ABA' form

In Zera Yacob's writing we find the development to a high level of perfection of the Ethiopian Semitic quasi-dialectical pattern (ABA') of autobiography as well as a personal profile in the structure of the archetypal images he employed.

7.2 *Individuality of his philosophy*

7.2.1 A spirit of tolerance

7.2.2 Rationalism of a religious type

7.3 *Method in philosophy*

7.3.1 A critical approach to philosophy

7.3.2 A method in philosophy

7.3.3 Steps in this method: occasion – principle – criterion – light of reason – basis

7.3.4 A creational outlook

7.4 *Theodicy*

7.4.1 A philosophical approach to the problem of the existence and nature of God

7.5 *Principles of ethics*

7.5.1 A teleological dimension to principles of ethics

7.5.2 The introduction of the notion of the natural law

7.5.3 A complete set of sanctions

7.6 *Individual ethics*

7.6.1 The value of work

7.7 *Social ethics*

7.7.1 A social philosophy

Zera Jacob based his social philosophy on creationism with all its practical implications and applications.

7.7.2 Equality

The social ethics of Zera Jacob constitute a vigorous affirmation of the equality of man and woman, and of the equality of all humans irrespective of their different creeds.

7.7.3 Sexual ethics

Zera Jacob upholds and asserts the beauty of marriage and of the family. He also emphasizes love in interpersonal relations.

7.8 *The human person*

7.8.1 Freedom

There is in Zera Jacob's thought the recognition and strong affirmation of man/woman's freedom.

7.8.2 Concern with health and hygiene

7.9 *The Ultimate Reality and Meaning of Zera Jacob: The goodness of the created thing*

From all these aspects of Zera Jacob's philosophy pertaining to Ultimate Reality and Meaning, which item can be better sketched or expanded as an expression of ultimacy in Zera Jacob's thought? Indeed in his methodological approach what is the first object that is enlightened by the light of reason? What is the first result of the use of the inquiry as a criterion? The question is of capital importance since its answer will not

only be an immediate reply to a specific query, but will also reveal the basis upon which the whole structure of Zera Jacob's philosophy is built. This basis is the goodness of the created thing.

Why is it that Zera Jacob arrives at such a conclusion and what does he mean by it? He arrives at such a conclusion because, wishing to transcend the divisions that arise amongst humans and especially amongst Christians, he reaches a point of convergence for them all, a unanimous agreement sheltered from all further quarrels and disputes. Just as Descartes found in the clear idea a criterion which could not be eroded by any doubt since doubt only strengthened the certitude of thought itself, likewise Zera Jacob considers the existence of a Creator as a tenet which all the religions he knows – Christianity, Judaism and Islam – agree upon, and hence a tenet he may start from in order to build on solid ground.

How can we know which religious community, which sect really owns the truth, as all of them claim the possession of truth? Something of which all men have got one opinion is true; so it is with the existence of one God and Creator. But with religion and confession [*i.e.*, denominations], it is different (Wey 1906, p. 362).

Where all agree, there, reason tells me, stands truth (Marchiotti 1964–5, p. 225).

This agreement among all humans on the existence of a Creator was first postulated by Zera Jacob for the simple reason that there cannot be creatures without a Creator, while for Walda Heywat it was the basis of the faith, of all science and of all truth: all the teachers of humans and the books of the whole world agree on this point (Sumner 1978, p. 112).

I pray [you], let us think why all men agree that there is a God, creator of all things? Because reason in all men knows that all we see was created; that no creature can be found without a creator and that the existence of a creator is the pure faith (Sumner 1976, p. 12).

The basis of all faith, of all science and of all truth is to believe there is a God who created all, directs all, a perfect and infinite essence, that is and will be forever. All the teachers of men and the books of the whole world agree in this faith. We too should believe in it, and if we inquire about it, our reason teaches us it is true and cannot be false (Sumner 1976, p. 29).

The basis of the two *Treatises* is love for creation, which came out from the hands of God in all its beauty, and which the human creature at all cost must not destroy. The closer things are to their primitive state, the purer they are and the better is God served in them. The work of God is splendid as it is revealed in the mysteries of creation. God does not accept that his creature destroy itself by corrupting its own nature, says Zera Jacob. And Walda Heywat: the work of God is great in each creature; all His works are admirable and should be considered as so many gifts of the Creator; as human life ema-

nated in all its splendour from the lap of the Creator, so will it go back to Him; we should attempt to know and understand all the mysteries of this world and the beauty of the order of heaven and earth, and never should we break the proper equilibrium which marks the created universe (Sumner, 1978, pp. 113–4).

Our intelligence teaches us that all that the creator established is right (Sumner 1976, p. 10).

God does not change into impurity the order he imposed on all creatures with great wisdom, but man attempts to render it impure that he may glorify the voice of falsehood (Sumner 1976, p. 10).

All that God has created is very good in the way He created it; in each creature something useful is to be found which we must seek for our usefulness; he has put things clearly in front of the eyes of people in order that they seek and understand the wisdom with which they were created and find the utility which has been placed in them as the reason for their existence. How many things appeared as useless to our forefathers, which later on were found to be useful or how many things appear useless to us, whose usefulness will be found after us? In the same way, everything is created to be of use to man or for the adornment of the world, the dwelling of man who is superior to all other creations (Sumner 1976, pp. 29–30).

Creation in time is prolonged by ‘conservation’ so that the goodness of the creature keeps its constant significance and relevance as an ontological basis for Zera Yacob and Walda Heywat’s method (Sumner 1978, p. 115).

God sustains the world by his order which he himself has established and which man cannot destroy, because the order of God is stronger than the order of man (Sumner 1976, p. 13).

After he had created all, he does not forsake his creation, but he takes care of it and guards it according to the necessity of each creature, and leads all according to the way he created them; there is no error in him who created all with great wisdom and placed all things in their respective order as befits each singular creature and guarded them along the ways by which they are perfected each day of their existence, respecting the limit of their service determined by the law of their nature (Sumner 1976, p. 29).

From this point on, the *Treatise* in their logical development essentially appear as an application of the basic methodological approach to the interconnected realms of theodicy, ethics and psychology, Zera Yacob’s theodicy being mostly a creational one, his ethics accepting only that which is based on the goodness of the created thing, like that of married life and of food, thus rejecting the time-honoured monastic life and fasting of traditional Ethiopia, and his psychology emphasizing the human person’s freedom and superiority over the rest of creation. One does not move from one level to another in a

linear, vertical ascension as in Descartes, but rather, like the earth at dawn, the whole field of vision is invaded simultaneously at all points by the light which emanates from one single point, creationism, on the horizon of being (Sumner 1978, p. 116).

8. CONCLUSION

Our world in this last phase of the twentieth century is as divided as Zera Yacob's Ethiopia. The options are still the same, but they bear on more fundamental issues. Will humans break away from all roots or will they grow and deepen their existing roots? Is the rupture so piercing that nothing remains that is not torn asunder? Are the shocks of the future so compelling that one loses hold of one's own identity? Or does hope gleam somewhere, somehow, over and above the strife and stresses of the modern world, compared to which the divisions of the seventeenth century appear like toy battles for tin soldiers?

Zera Yacob's answer is one of lucid hope. He was not crushed by the events of his day, by its intolerance and narrow-mindedness. For his was the freedom of a critical mind. Only the one who accepts all indiscriminately ends up in an intolerable loss of all. Zera Yacob was saved from the absurd limitations of his time by his *hatata* ('inquiry'), by his power to investigate, to criticize, to discriminate and to evaluate. Just as today one is ready, in the freedom and light of one's reason, to seek for the clarification of issues and scrutiny of credentials.

Faced with mounting dissension, Zera Yacob sought, with serenity, a liberal mind and courage, for that which united all people beyond human divisions. It was the paradox of his life that his love which knew no boundary separated him from all in the isolation of his cave. But his cave may become for us the starting point to see and to accomplish the unity that the limits of his age had so narrowly constrained.

But, in the last analysis, it is probably by his confidence in the human person, in the power of his or her reason and the resourcefulness of nature that Zera Yacob is most relevant. In the present historical context of a world torn by ideological clashes and emptied by the rejection of so many values and of the meaningfulness of life, it is refreshing to hear a voice – a voice that was silenced for too long – that speaks in a simple, even naïve way the language of trust and hope and health. A crumbling world is crashing with a deafening noise. Would that tomorrow it listen to an uplifting voice that comes from Ethiopia! (cf. Sumner 1981 b, pp. 14–5; Sumner 1978, pp. 326–7).

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