

# **A Philosophy Essay Competition at AAU**

*(In memory of the late MS. Zemeta Gorfu)*

**Note:** *In memory of the late W/t Zemeta Gorfu, sister of poet and philosopher G. E. Gorfu, a Campus wide philosophy essay competition was held by The Philosophy Department of Addis Ababa University on July 21, 2005. The three winners of the essay competition were:*

*1<sup>st</sup>. Prize: Abel Chernet,*

*2<sup>nd</sup>. Prize: Tasew Asfaw*

*3<sup>rd</sup>. Prize: Chemed Bokora*

*Some graduation magazines of the department were also handed out to attendees of the essay competition. The Philosophy Dept. is graduating students in philosophy this year after a pause of 15 years, probably due to the change of the educational system from the Communist philosophy left behind by the former government to Liberal philosophy. The three essays were read: the first one in full and the later two in summaries. The dept. and the faculty have made every effort to organize the essay competition amid the hectic graduation time of the University. Dr. Bekele Gutema, Dean of the social studies Faculty led the ceremony. Dr. Bekele remembered Zemeta to have been his teacher of Geography when he was 7th Grader in Ambo around 1962/63 Ethiopian Calendar. Monetary awards of \$3,000 Birr, \$2,000 Birr, and \$1,000 Birr were given to the winners. The winning essay, as can be expected, was on the Ethiopian national philosopher, Zara Yacob. The winning essay is given below:*

## **“ZARA YACOB’S THEORY OF TRUTH”**

**BY**

**Abel Cherinet (SSR/1576/93)**

### **1. Introduction**

This is an expository paper on Ethiopian philosophy in general focusing on Zara Yacob’s philosophy in particular. Expository-because, based on the understanding that philosophy is a systematically constructed structure of thought, an edifice, and in the absence of much expository works on Ethiopian philosopher(s), it may serve as a reflection in subsequent thoughts that will contribute to the continuation and construction of Ethiopian philosophy. To this end, I have chosen Zara Yacob and a topic that defines his philosophy, i.e. his theory of truth as in the *Hatata*. A critical appraisal of Zara Yacob’s

theory of truth is not under purview of this paper. Thus, this paper contains Zara Yacob's theory of truth and is composed of five subtopics. In the first, the fact which inspired Zara Yacob's philosophy is given. The nature and criterion of truth is analyzed in the second. In the third subtopic, the relation between truth and falsity is assessed. The mode of awareness of truth and the reasons why people adhere to falsity more than they do to truth are explained in the fourth and fifth subtopics respectively. Finally, a summary of Zara Yacob's theory of truth with some remarks on his philosophy is provided in the conclusion section.

## **2. Theory of Truth**

### **2.1. The Genesis of Inspiration**

Zara Yacob's philosophy is initiated generally by his experience of the world around him and essentially by the experience of religious differences among believers and their respective claims thereof. To this end, Zara Yacob explains:

*Once I asked a 'Frang' (or foreigner) scholar many things concerning our faith: he interpreted them all according to his own faith. Afterwards I asked a well-known Ethiopian scholar and he also interpreted all things according to his own faith. If I had asked the Mohammedans and the Jews, they also would have interpreted according to their own faith; then, where could I obtain a judge that tells the truth? As my faith appears to be true to me, so does another one find his own faith true; but **truth is one.**<sup>1</sup>[emphasis added]*

Diligent interpretation of the above passage reveals that Zara Yacob is impressed, nay perplexed, with the tension between believers' judgment of their own faith (and also with his conception of the truth). The tension arises as all believers claim that their faith stands in contradictory position with others that only their must be true and others' necessarily false. They all aggressively affirm truth to themselves. That is, believers either individually or collectively claim exclusive domain over true faith. When a believer

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<sup>1</sup> Claude Summer, "The Treatise of Zara Yacob," in Ethiopian Philosophy, Vol.2 (Addis Ababa: Commercial printing press, 1985),p.234

individually asserts true faith to herself/himself, s/he makes truth subjective. Moreover, when believers collectively assert true faith to their religion, they make truth relative. This inevitably brought about disagreement among them. However, Zara Yacob considered their claim to be contrary such that it's possible for all claims to be false. Indeed, it's rightly so for he asserts that 'truth is one'. Thus, the existence of disagreement among believers regarding true faith inspired him to articulate his own theory of truth.

## **2.2. The Nature and Criterion of Truth**

For Zara Yacob the nature of truth, to reiterate, hinges on his assertion that 'truth is one', meaning truth is *objective*. By objectivity, rightly construed, Zara Yacob understands personal assent to (or judgment of) certain attributes of a thing rather than a transcendental or *a priori* principle. Because he inquired and criticized individuals' and groups' claims towards their own faith or religion respectively, so as to establish what is lacking; viz., agreement.

Truth, being an assent of certain attributes of a thing, has got three possible competing subjects; either an individual, groups of individuals or all individuals. If the subject of truth is an individual (as in the Ethiopian scholar and the 'Frang'), truth will be subjective. If groups of individuals (as in the Mohammedans and the Jews) were given as subjects of truth, that will make truth relative.

For Zara Yacob, however, making truth subjective to the individual or relative to the groups is inevitably contradictory no less than it is inconsistent. So, by the principle of elimination, Zara Yacob dispelled the possibility of an individual or groups of individuals to be the proper subjects of truth, thereby rejecting the subjectivity and relativity of truth. In effect, he affirmed all individuals taken together as the legitimate subject of truth, thus established objectivity as the genuine nature of truth.

As to the criterion of identifying truth, Zara Yacob argues, "when all people agree on one

thing, that thing appears to be true; but it is not possible that all men agree on falsehood...”<sup>2</sup> Here, he robustly endorsed universal agreement as the ultimate criterion of truth in response to the pervasive lack of agreement among believers. Accordingly, for Zara Yacob, “truth compels singular agreement, whereas falsity or false faith does not.”<sup>3</sup> That is, ‘*x*’ *is true* means it is possible to win everybody’s agreement on it. Truth is incommensurable with disagreement. Thus, universal agreement provides both sufficient and necessary conditions as the criterion of truth. Therefore, Zara Yacob’s theory of truth stipulated the nature of truth as an objective attribute of things, which compel universal human agreement as its criterion. At this juncture, it is natural to ask what the ‘thing’ is to which truth and falsity are objective attributes of.

### **2.3. The Relation between Truth and Faith**

When it comes to the ‘thing’ of truth, Zara Yacob proposes faith as the object of truth and falsity. Since Zara Yacob’s philosophy is primarily initiated by the existing division among believers and he inquired into it so as to establish, albeit restore, agreement, the very thing upon which believers lack unanimity and need to scrap their partiality is identical with the ‘thing’ to which truth and falsity are attributed. And it is evident from his previous explanation that the thing upon which believers are divided and lacked unanimity is regarding their faith. So, the ‘thing’ to which truth and falsity are attributed is faith.

Consequently, Zara Yacob is similar to Bertrand Russell for whom “... [Faith] is that thing which bears truth.”<sup>4</sup> That is, truth and falsity can be predicated of faith. As a result, a given faith is either true or false depending on its compliance with universal human agreement. If a faith succeeded to comply with universal agreement, it is a true faith; and if it failed to do so, it is a false faith. Thus, Zara Yacob distinguishes two forms of faith: true faith and false faith.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., P.239

<sup>3</sup> Teodros Kiros, “Zara yacob: A Seventeenth century Ethiopian founder of Modernity in Africa,” in Explorations in African Political Thought: Identity, Community, Ethics, ed. Teodros Kiros (London: Routledge, 2001), P.73.

<sup>4</sup> Richard L. Kirkham, Theories of Truth: A critical introduction (Cambridge: MIT press, 1995), p.58

At first sight, it appears contradictory to see Zara Yacob the rationalist entertaining the notion of faith. This happens because faith is usually taken as a non-rational assent to some theological principles. However, this is not the case for Zara Yacob. For him, according to Claude Sumner, faith is a rational assent given to an assertion (1978:205). Moreover, it is not necessary for the assertion to be theological. The assertion could take either theological or non-theological form, either religious or secular. Hence, for Zara Yacob faith and rationality do not stand asunder, let alone contradict each other. Instead, there is a strong intimacy between them. Faith and reason are commensurable. Faith could and should be rational when it withstands the critical scrutiny of reason.

Notwithstanding the explanations he offered on how we can distinguish between true faith and false faith (i.e. the universal agreement requirement), it's not yet clear how we can be aware of them?

#### **2.4. The Mode of Awareness of Truth**

As to how we come to know the truth, Zara Yacob has these two points to say:

- i. God has indeed given reason to all and everyone so that they may know truth and falsehood, the power to choose between the two, as they will.<sup>5</sup>*
- ii. ... to the person who seeks it, truth is revealed. Indeed he who investigates with the pure intelligence set by the creator in the heart of each man and scrutinizes the order and laws of creation, will discover the truth.<sup>6</sup>*

According to the first point, Zara Yacob is enunciating that God provided all people with the capacity of reasoning and the will power to choose truth or falsity. His conception of reason is instrumental in affecting the will power to exercise in such a way that we choose truth over falsity. That is, for Zara Yacob, unlike Plato, knowing the truth is not choosing it. Though human rationality can shed light on our choice making, our choice still remains as a separate endeavor.

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<sup>5</sup> Claude Sumner. Op. Cit, P. 240

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., P. 236

By the second point, Zara Yacob firmly establishes a relation between the capacity of reason and the power of choice making in order to elucidate how a certain mode of awareness of truth is possible. Any determined person can grasp the truth in the form of revelation (i.e. immediately) when s/he uses her/his capacity of reasoning to enlighten her/his choice of truth. Revelation, because God for Zara Yacob is after all the guarantor of reason. Sumner captured this point well when he assert, "... in the case of Zara Yacob, infallibility [which is the mark of truth] is guaranteed by God Himself..."<sup>7</sup> Therefore, according to Zara Yacob, the knowledge of truth is immediately accessible to a person so long as that person sought and attempted sincerely to discover it by employing his reason to choose truth from falsity.

### **2.5. Why People Adhere to Falsity?**

Despite his thoughtful analysis of the problem of truth claims regarding believers' faith and careful articulation of the his own notion of objective truth based on universal human agreement, Zara Yacob is still curious to identify why people are prone to falsity than to truth. For this purpose, he strives to explain the ultimate reason why:

*... I said to my self: 'why is 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 endeavor is difficult and can only be attained with great labour and patience... Hence people hastily accept what they have heard from their fathers and shy from any [critical] examination. But God created man to be master of his own actions, so that he will be what he wills to be...<sup>8</sup>*

Three points could be spelled out in order to capture Zara Yacob's arguments in the above passage. First and for most, he placed the ultimate reason why people resort to falsehood in human nature, in its 'weak and sluggish' nature. The very fact that people are endowed with the power of reasoning to discern between truth & falsity and the will

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<sup>7</sup> Claude Sumner, Ethiopian Philosophy: The Treatise of Zara Yacob & Walda Hiwot, An Analysis, Vol.3 (Addis Ababa: Commercial Printing press, 1978), P.94

<sup>8</sup> Claude Sumner. Vol. 2 Op. Cit., P.236

power to choose between the two does not guarantee that they will function in such a way that they apply their reasoning capacity to distinguish truth from falsity and their will power to choose the former from the latter. Because, to be possessed of a capacity of reasoning and to be able make proper use of it are two different things. After all, capacity *per se* doesn't tell between choices.

Although the application of reason can shed light on our choice, it is not the only thing that can affect our choice. Our choice is also strongly tempted by our inclination. A discrepancy arises out of the impossibility for our inclination to provide what the way of truth requires. While the way of truth is difficult, hence require lots of efforts and patience, our inclination usually preclude us from taking such a difficult way in favor of other easier way. Since it is impossible to reach a certain destination without taking the right track leading to it, our inclination cannot lead us to the truth. If so, the only other way towards which our inclination can lead us to is towards the relatively easier way of falsity. Besides, according to Zara Yacob, it is only the application of reason that can take us to and through the difficult way of truth.

Nevertheless, this inclination is so entrenched among the people that it is tantamount to what Zara Yacob called the 'weak and sluggish nature of man'. For Zara Yacob, therefore, as people usually make choices between truth and falsity based on their inclination rather than their reason, mostly their choices fail far short of being true; hence, they lie.

Secondly and consequent to the strong reliance of people on their inclination, Zara Yacob claims that people shy away from the difficult task of inquiring in favor of accepting what had been told. As a result, he alludes to people's tendency to relish the 'comfort' of adhering to tradition than embarking on rational inquiry to challenge the authority of tradition.

Thirdly, Zara Yacob subtly implied that the responsibility for the situation in which people turned out to be liars, which is really a human defect, is not attributable to God. As God is generous enough to create human beings intelligent with the will to determine

their own activities, people themselves are but responsible for the situations in which they live in. Human beings incur responsibility on to themselves as a result of possessing the capacity of reasoning and a will power. Responsibility follows capacity. Indeed this fact makes everyone not only capable of determining one's own deeds but also accountable for it. Consequently, he stressed the strong confidence and the kind of optimism he has on human capacity of achievement and changing situations.

### **3. Conclusion**

To sum up: Zara Yacob was militantly responsive to issues of practical import to his own time. His theory of truth is primarily inspired by the felt crisis and uneasiness of his time. "Religiosity, in its differing and thus bewildering claims, manifestations, and contradictory institutions, is the singular and defining concern of Zara Yacob's... thinking."<sup>9</sup> As a result, Zara Yacob delved into the nature of truth to finally identify it as an objective attribute of 'things'. Universal human agreement is taken as its criterion. In addition, the 'thing', which bears truth and falsity, is faith. Faith, as an assent to certain assertion and depending on its compliance with universal agreement, can be taken to be two in kind: true faith and false faith. People usually adhere to falsity or false faith, which failed to secure universal agreement, owing to their weak and sluggish nature. This in turn is explained by the strong fact that people mostly let their inclination, rather than

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<sup>9</sup>Tsenay Serequeberhan, "Philosophy and Post-colonial Africa," in African Philosophy: An Anthology, ed. Emmanuel C. Eze (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p 12

<sup>10</sup> W.H.D Rouse, trans, " The Republic," in Great Dialogues of Plato, eds. Eric H. Warmington & Philip G.Rouse (New York: Mentor Books, 1956), p.394



their reason, to determine their choices between truth and falsity. However, truth is immediately /directly accessible to whoever conducts a rational inquiry to figure it out.

Finally, here are some remarks on Zara Yacob's philosophy based on his theory of truth discussed thus far. The first thing that can be said of Zara Yacob is his rationality. For him, everything (including faith) should be subjected to rational scrutiny before it is accepted. Put it differently, we are justified, for example, in our faith if and only if our assent, which exists within our faith, is the result of rational scrutiny. This resolute rationality of Zara Yacob has the consequence of making him impartial and anti-traditional. His impartiality is exhibited in his rejection of all prejudices, be it religious or personal, be it indigenous or exotic, when it comes to his rational inquiry. It's thus the case for Zara Yacob that he deferred differences of the various contrary claims to truth and then embarked upon a rational investigation in search of it. In this sense, Zara Yacob is certainly in complete agreement with Socrates who believes that "a man is not to be revered more than the truth."<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, Zara Yacob came out to be anti-traditional as he was critical to the grand narratives of his time owing to his lofty rationalism and impartial convictions. Until one is loosed from the grip of prejudice, so it seems for Zara Yacob, one is devoid of the proper use of reason.

The second and last point is concerned with Zara Yacob's method of philosophizing, the *Hatata* (meaning inquiry). His philosophy started from the lived stringent conditions of his time and then engaged in an introspective reflection for solutions. However, this doesn't amount to saying that Zara Yacob essentially severed himself away from his society. Instead, the social milieu in which he lived sharply defined his philosophical investigation. Zara Yacob's retreat to the internal authority of the self by rejecting as illegitimate the external structure of authority, i.e. the church, represents his existentialism. This rigorous existentialist approach of Zara Yacob implied a radical understanding of the self as 'subject' and 'object' in relation to problems and their solutions. That is, for Zara Yacob, when people are in crisis, individuals are not only

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objects of the problems, but also subjects of solutions. Because, though a crisis creates a sense of trauma among the people, it also simultaneously creates an opportunity to perform. As such, he is an optimist about the individual's capacity as an agent to avert acute situations. That is why he calls for his fellow Ethiopians, like us, to further advance his philosophical reflections. Indeed, this shows the humanism of Zara Yacob. And it's an imperative impetus to our philosophical inquiry. Therefore, we ought to further develop Zara Yacob's enquiry in relation to the existing problems of our country, like underdevelopment. We must discharge the onus which lies with us to invest our philosophical enquiry on the perennial crisis (of our underdevelopment) such that we may offer a diagnosis of our time and a prescription for what ought to be done. Lately, I wind this paper up by quoting Zara Yacob's call to this end:

*I entreat any wise and inquisitive man who may come after I am dead to add his thought in mine. Behold, I have began an inquiry such as has not been attempted before. You can complete what I have begun so that the people of our country will become wise with the help of God and arrive at the science of truth...*<sup>11</sup>[emphasis added]

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<sup>11</sup> Claude Sumner. Vol. 2. Op. Cit., P.252

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