

The Meditations of Zara Yaquob ⁽¹⁾

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ABSTRACT: Claude Sumner was the first English-speaking scholar to introduce the thoughts of Zara Yaquob to the philosophical world. Sumner undertook the arduous task of comparing Zara Yaquob with Descartes on methods of thinking. For Sumner, modern philosophy began in Ethiopia with Zara Yaquob at the same time as in England and France. In what follows, I will compare Descartes and Yaquob as well.

Introduction

I would like Zara Yacob to introduce himself in his own words:

I was born in the land of the priests of Aksum. But I am the son of a poor farmer in the district of Aksum; the day of my birth is 25th of Nahase 1592 A. D., the third year of the year of [King] Yaquob. By Christian baptism I was named Zara Yacob, but people called me Warqye. When I grew up, my father sent me to school in view of my instruction. And after I had read the psalms of David my teacher said to my father: "This young son of yours is clever and has the patience to learn; if you send him to a [higher] school, he will be a master and a doctor." After hearing this, my father sent me to study zema. But my voice was coarse and my throat was grating; so my schoolmaster used to laugh at me and to tease me. I stayed there for three months, until I overcame my sadness and went to another master who taught qane and sawsaw. God gave me the talent to learn faster than my companions and thus compensated me for my previous disappointment; I stayed there 4 years. During those days, God as it were snatched me from the claws of death, for as I was playing with my friends I fell into a ravine, and I do not know how I was saved except by a miracle from God. After I was saved I measured the depth of the ravine with a long rope and found it to be twenty-five fathoms and one palm [deep]. Thanking God for saving me, I went to the house of my master. After this I left for another school to study the interpretation of the Holy Scriptures. I remained ten years in this type of study; I learned the interpretations of the *Frang* and of our own scholars. Oftentimes their interpretation did not agree with my reason; but I withheld my opinion and hid in my heart all the thoughts of my mind. Having returned to my native Aksum, I taught for four years. But this period was not peaceful: for in the XIX of king *Susanyos*, while *afons*, a *Frang*, was *Abuna*, two years [after his arrival] a great persecution spread over all Ethiopia. The king accepted the faith of the *Frang*, and from that time on persecuted all those who did not accept it.

The long paragraph above is a succinct and moving portrait of the Ethiopian philosopher's turbulent life. One immediately senses the presence of an independent, wise and even shrewd mind. Beyond the self-portrait, there are a few remarks about Zara Yacob by C. Sumner,⁽²⁾ who is the first English speaking scholar who introduced the thoughts of the philosopher to the philosophical world. The long debate over the authenticity of the authorship of the treatises of Zara Yacob has now been skillfully put to rest, and it is no longer doubted that Zara Yacob, and not Padre Urbino as Conti Rossini claimed, who created the literary figure of Zara Yacob.⁽³⁾ It is Sumner who undertook an arduous task of comparing Zara Yacob and Descartes on methods of thinking for example, and has

established a solid place for Zara Yacob. Indeed for Claude Sumner, "Modern Philosophy, in the sense of a personal rationalistic critical investigation, began in Ethiopia with Zara Yacob at the same time as in England and in France."⁽⁴⁾

I, too, will briefly compare the two thinkers below. Most recently, the philologist, Mudimbe, has also noted that Zara Yacob occupies a major place in the development of African philosophy.⁽⁵⁾

Descartes and Zara Yacob

To begin with, at the outset, nothing could be as stark as the differences between the material lives of these two persons. Descartes, a privileged European, a revered son of the Sorbonne, loftily gazed at the world, from a fire place, where he wondered and doubted his own existence. After a trying mental anguish, he finally arrived at the conclusion that he actually existed distinctly and clearly. *Meditations on First philosophy* is a report on Descartes' long journey toward the belief in the existence of God. It is God, Descartes discovered during his agonizing meditations, who revealed to him the comforting and convincing proofs of his existence. More like the Greek philosophers, and unlike Descartes the modernist, Zara Yacob did not doubt his existence. He believed that he was created by God for a purpose. Zara Yacob, lived in the tall and deep mountains of Ethiopia like a hunted deer, running for his life, successfully escaped the persecution of his countrymen, and finally settled to the solitary life of the mind. Like Machiavelli before him, he avoided the company of bad men, and chose to treat himself to daily conversations with God, out of which came his very brief but deep essay on the nature of knowledge, and human nature itself.

There is something however that ties these two solitary thinkers, who contributed to the unfolding of the Enlightenment. Both were ardent believers in the power of Reason or intelligence as the final arbiter of human agonies. They were, each in his own way, staunch enemies of the dogmatics of the church. For both of them the light of Reason should illuminate the dark regions of human thought. Neither of the two recognized teachers, priests or experts to represent the will of others by claiming to be the representatives of the will of God on earth. Finally, for Zara Yacob, God is revealed through Natural Reason; and for Descartes it is disclosed to intelligence.

The comparison will be incomplete however, if one does not acknowledge the fact that, Zara Yacob and Descartes believed in the power of empirical / rational proof of the elements of nature which are good for the human body, and not what the Bible supposedly revealed to Moses, Christ or Mohammed. Given his inclination, Descartes became the founder of modern Philosophy of Science, and Zara Yacob in his own way, believed in common sense, a vehicle of Scientific thinking in his confrontations of the dogmas of the Bible, such as the practices of fasting, marriage and sexuality.

Finally, it is crucial that one notes the following—Descartes' rationalistic modern philosophy grew out of a both secular and religious European tradition of philosophy to which he responded with his method of Universal doubt. Zara Yacob on the other hand,

like a lonely star, did not have a constellation of a secular tradition, from which to draw. Surrounded by the powerful fortresses of religion, the philosopher had only his serene, and courageous mind, ready to inspect and examine everything that he thought could not withstand the analytic presences of his relentless Hatatas, which were not appreciated by a resistant and reluctant religious Ethiopian tradition, which exiled him to a cave.

I will present Zara Yacob's thoughts on three perennial topics of philosophy:

(1) Method of knowing God and the disclosure of truth

(2) Human Nature

(3) The obligations of humans.

I. Method of Knowing God

Zara Yacob's method could be roughly called a discursive subjection of faith, any faith, to a critical examination by intelligence or natural reason, which takes the form of honest searching or uncovering, called Hasasa or Hatata. Central to this project is the idea that reason itself is incomplete without God's guidance, yet reasonable human beings must subject their faith to critical self-examination before they believe. Faith in God must come after profound reasoning. All human perceptions, imaginations, judgments and apprehensions should be carefully subjected to his discursive method. Nothing should be accepted without getting tested by intelligence or natural reason. Unlike Kant, but like Descartes, faith is not superior to reason but can become superior to reason, if it is first examined and passes the test of natural reason. To put matters in perspective, consider first the way Descartes expresses what Zara Yacob is asserting, "And therefore it seems to me that I can already establish as a general principle that everything which we conceive very clearly and very distinctly is wholly true."⁽⁶⁾ For Descartes, distinctness and clarity are the ideals of successful communication.

Similarly for Zara Yacob, truth is clearly revealed to whoever seeks it "with the pure intelligence set by the creator in the heart of each man"⁽⁷⁾ Faith then is not an irrational form of giving oneself to an unknown external power called God. Not for Zara Yacob. Faith can become a rational and reasonable activity of the mind. It is an act of the intelligence that propels thoughtful and vigilant believers, like Descartes, to believe only after activating their intelligence to demonstratively provide the necessary and sufficient conditions for believing, in an overwhelming power, such as God. The proposition that "God exists" to Zara Yacob means "I have proven to myself beyond doubt that the power called God definitely exists and that I now believe, and further that from now onwards, I will not subject God to doubt, since God has now become to me a clear object of rational faith. I now totally believe.

For Zara Yacob, a style of existence, such as marriage is a legitimate practice whereas monastic life is not. Marriage springs from the "law of the creator",⁽⁸⁾ monastic life does not. Put differently, by Zara Yacob's metaphysical yardstick, a practice such as marriage

discloses a clear and distinct idea that originates in God's intention. When monastic life is measured against that yardstick, it proves to be inferior to married life. It does not pass the litmus test of reason. These claims could of course be unsettling to a non-believer. Even a believer may not be completely satisfied in that, one could be a devoted lover of God, and still fail to accept marriage as the only way of life. Indeed, one need not agree with Moses to disapprove of marriage. But, it is my belief that, the argument in defense of marriage was not aimed at non believers as much as members of the same religious convictions, most particularly at those ardent believers who consider marriage as the defilement of the body. He is challenging those " dogmatists" with the counter argument that the body was bestowed to humans not for repression or denial but for a moderate joy. The believers need not be deprived of joy. The body was given to us for a purpose, and that purpose is embodied in the constancy of marriage. That is the first implicit argument, which I just fleshed out. There is a second argument.

The second argument was rather a common place in the seventeenth century. It is an argument that Aristotle among others initiated. That is, it takes at least two to produce an offspring, and through it populate the world. Without this act of propagation, strictly speaking, there will not be a world. Of course, Aristotle was not foolish to think that everyone will have to marry in order to have a world. In his metaphysical/biological system, some would have to produce children, and others could be celibate. Unlike Aristotle, the pagan, Zara Yacob the religious thinker, would not conceive of accepting children born outside the institution of marriage. To do so, would be to put God on the defensive, in that in order for the children to be blessed, marriage, "the law of the creator, is a necessary and sufficient condition. Without that message' sufficient condition, marriage would have become an incoherent and indistinct norm.

Zara Yacob also has the following things to say about Mohammed, " similarly, Mohammed said, ' the orders I pass to you are given to me by God;" and there was no lack of writers to record miracles proving Mohammed's mission, and (people) believed in him. But we know that the teachings of Mohammed could not have come from God; those who will be born both male and female are equal in number; if we count men and women living in an area, we find as many women as men; we do not find eight or ten women for every man; for the law of creation orders one man to marry one woman. If one man marries ten women, then nine men will be without wives."⁽⁹⁾

According to Zara Yacob, God does not order absurdities such as "Eat this, do not eat this; today eat, tomorrow do not eat, do not eat meat today, eat it tomorrow... neither did God say to the Muslims: 'eat during the night, but do not eat during the day.'"⁽¹⁰⁾ For Zara Yacob, these are unreasonable laws by human beings. God could not possibly stand behind them. These absurdities could not have emanated from human intelligence. God does not subject the human body to such traumatic deprivations. God loves his children too much to create cruel laws that disfigure the body not to say the soul. God knows the power of necessity, and the difference between necessity and luxury. As Zara Yacob put the matter, " For God created man with the same necessity for food on each day and during each month. The Jews, the Christians and the Muslims did not understand the work of God when they instituted the law of fasting; they lie when they say that God imposed fasting upon us and

forbade us to eat; for our creator gave us food that we supply ourselves by it, not that we abstain from it".⁽¹¹⁾ These absurd practices are guided not by truth revealed to human intelligence but by false faith, and false faith can be recognized, if one works at it, and strives to know the truth. Zara Yacob introduces a method of recognizing false faith through the following procedure.

To begin with, Zara Yacob instructs, humans are all equal in the eyes of God. This equality is expressed by the fact that God created all humans with intelligence. And because humans are fated to die, they are equal. Death does not discriminate. It is the ultimate equalizer. The human body is not entitled to immortality. Also, all persons, given their intelligences, can understand God's doctrines, through revelation. These revelations constituted the moments of truth. False faith, is manifestly non-truth, and cannot be revealed to persons, who are fated to experience truth. Truth occurs only when all persons agree on a given matter or value; whereas it is possible for all to agree on truth; it is not possible for all to agree on falsity. Truth compels singular agreement, whereas falsity or false faith does not. For example, the fact of the existence of created things leads one to agree on a true proposition such as " Humans are created beings with a body and soul " The believer experiences the proposition as a true object of faith, whereas its opposite, " created things are because they created themselves" would not be true. More to the point, Zara Yacob argues that the love of others is a singularly true and compelling value, that all humans can agree on, whereas hate, any form of hate, cannot be elevated to a value without serious resistance coming from human reason. The second is effectively an example of a false faith, that cannot pass the test of reason guided by God's doctrine. The second will be a failure of human intelligence, an abortion of reason, which is caused not by God's refusal to reveal a majestic truth that commands love, but rather humans' notorious weakness which prevents from loving deeply and unconditionally. Zara Yacob put it thus. "...the Christian faith as it was founded in the days of the Gospel was not evil, since it invites all men to love one another and to practice mercy toward all," but today my countrymen have set aside the love recommended by the Gospel [and turned away towards] hatred, violence, the poison of snakes; they teach things that are vain; they do things that are evil, so the are falsely called Christians".⁽¹²⁾ In an attempt to address the question why do humans believe in falsities, of which false faith is a particular example, he develops the proposition, God has given reason to everyone, hoping that it will be used for the search of truth, and the avoidance of falsehood. But human nature is too sluggish and weak to withstand the challenge, and this leads me to a discussion of Zara Yacob's views of human nature.

II. Human Nature

Human beings are exceptional beings in that—should they exercise their will power to its fullest capacity—they can decipher truth from falsehood and unfailingly choose truth over falsehood. However, the nature of humans, when they resort to themselves only, is not sufficiently adequate to be enabling. Under their own direction, they cannot know the difference between truth and falsehood. God's direction, in the secular form of the possession of intelligence, is that power which enables individuals to judge and choose correctly. Note that the stress is less on blind faith, and more on a faith that is guided by God's reason. Humans, when unaided by God's reason, are weak—so weak that they cannot

choose truth over falsehood. They get easily lured by the trappings of falsehood; wealth, status, power.

There are two kinds of laws, Zara Yacob contends, (1) The Law of God, and (2) The Law of humans. In order for humans to be self-governing in the realm of moral life, they must at all times, consult the Law of God. It is the Law of God which completes the incomplete and deficient Law of man. An exclusive use of (2) leads to falsehood; the use of the (1) by contrast enables humans—in a fashion that the (2) does not to recognize truth as truth, but truth as a semblance of falsity. It is only God who knows " the right way to act "⁽¹³⁾ and that when persons want to act rightly, they ought to consult the Law of God, which is in the heart of each person. It is crucial Zara Yacob adds, that one knows the humbling fact that everything that is of and by humans is of limited use and duration, whereas that which comes from the original source, God's doctrine as such, is illuminated by a total intelligence. Ultimately Truth cannot be reached by the affairs of humans only. Humans are liars, and that which comes from them is falsehood and false glory. True, the lies of humans does not affect the solid structure of the world in which they live. Lies, are effective only in the defilement of human character. Thus, when we lie, it is our souls that we destroy. The world, created by the original source, remains the same. Because, " the order of God is stronger than the order of men ".⁽¹⁴⁾

Humans are not merely liars. They are also are easy to tempt to errors and evil choices. It is God who sets up his children to the test of choosing evil over good. This test is God's way of separating the virtuous from, the non-virtuous. In a manner reminiscent of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, he argues that it is during the various agonizing moments of choice, that we reveal to the observing world who we are. Evil choices are made not because we don't know what the good is, but because we choose evil even when we know that we should not. Human nature is revealed precisely at the crucial moment of choosing. Zara Yacob is here on his own landing upon a similar insight as Aristotle's, although there is no direct evidence that he has studied Aristotle as systematically as the Bible.

In a spiritually comforting passage, he observes that when we feel unjustly treated by God, we should not be tempted to give up our faith in him. For God has his own mystical way of judging. What one considers just when measured by human Law, is unjust according to God's Law. We will be rewarded for it in the other life. We live in two worlds, the material one and the spiritual one; or as Kant would have it: the phenomenal and noumenal worlds. These two worlds are governed by two different laws, and that what is unjust in one is quite just in the other. As Zara Yacob put the matter "In this world complete justice is not achieved: wicked people are in possession of the goods of this world in a satisfying degree, the humble starve; some wicked men are happy, some good men are sad, some evil men exult with joy, some righteous men weep. Therefore, after our death there must needs be another life and another justice, a perfect one, in which retribution will be made to all according to their needs and those who have fulfilled the will of the creator through the light of reason and have observed the law of their nature will be rewarded."⁽¹⁵⁾

III. On Obligations

The fundamental obligation of humans is toward God. That is the first wisdom, the beginning of all knowledge. God created humans and endowed them with superior intelligence, with the hope that humans would use the endowment for the service of knowing God. As the philosopher put it, " God created us intelligent so that we may meditate on his greatness, praise him and pray to him in order to obtain the needs of our body and soul".⁽¹⁶⁾ It is after we imbibe God, the symbol of reason, that we put ourselves in the condition of his willingness to be obligated toward all "others." Thus, the first foundational obligation of human beings is to love others as you would yourself, and not to do to others what you would not do to yourself. It is reason, God's gift to us, which commands absolutely to love others as we love ourselves. Our obligations to ourselves are expressed in the secular form of meditations or the holy form of prayers.

Prayers are perhaps the deepest modalities of thinking (or if you like a fancier modernistic term) of Philosophizing. The Ethiopian Philosophers' prayers are deeply steeped in the mastery of David's psalms. It is via these intimate prayers that the relations among human beings are illuminated; it is out of these prayers that an original mode of African philosophy is born.

The persecuted philosopher was very worried about the presence of other jealous and often vicious local religious competitors . He was intensely sensitive to the watchful eyes of the Frang with whom he was at odds. While he was self-exiled in the cave, he tells us, "... I have learnt more while living alone in a cave than when I was living with scholars. What I wrote in this book is very little; but in my cave I have meditated on many other such things"⁽¹⁷⁾ Zara Yacob's breakthroughs in the world of philosophy are chiefly his few powerful pages, filled with the hermeneutic interrogation of the self via an entire surrendering to God or Reason if you prefer. His meditations or prayers originated in solitude, away from the influence of derivative books. His only reference is the Bible. He meditated in a way that cannot be captured by formal language. His thoughts seemed to have been enraptured by feelings which demand a great deal of respect and attention by a resistant and arrogant modern reader. His meditations, like Descartes, were courageously radical. He used his intelligence to delve into the complexities, ambiguities, and plenitude of the meanings of the psalms. When the psalms of David did not agree with him no fear of authority would detain his resolute mind from striking on its own. In this medieval philosopher, we sense the presence of a fiercely independent mind.

Consider for example some of his prayers:

Save me from the violence of men...

Do not withhold your kindness from me...

May your love and faithfulness constantly preserve me...

Do not let me be disgraced...

Turn to me and pity me...

Guide me and lead me...

Rescue me from my persecutors..

Let me hear your joy and exaltation...

Do not take away my hope...

Give me each day what I need to satisfy the necessities of life...

Save me from the hands and tongue of men, from bodily sickness and sorrow of the soul...

After his two years stay in the cave, he learned that the only everlasting value in the human world is the knowledge of God. Everything else is perishable, and that human things are essentially vain and contemptible, and inferior to the Reason that the creator gave us, so that we may know, (a) how and what to think (b) guide ourselves to the knowledge of human nature and finally we attain profound understanding of our obligations to ourselves and others.

His greatest prayer reads, "I am little and poor in your sight, O Lord, make me understand what I should know about you, that I may admire your greatness and praise you everyday with a new praise."⁽¹⁸⁾

Conclusion

Zara Yacob has not produced the type of secondary literature that his soul mate Descartes has. This is hardly surprising. In spite of the seminal contributions that his short essay makes to the field of religious thought in general, and moral philosophy in particular, I was disheartened to discover the non existence of major works on his meditations. Be that as it may, I now want to rethink his discussions of the nature of knowledge, human nature, and the moral obligations of human beings to one another.

What is truly outstanding about him is that contrary to the domestication of the rise of the Enlightenment solely to European cultural households and universities, here was a religious thinker, who managed to arrive at one central motto of the Enlightenment, as Kant put it, "Have faith in your own Reason." Zara Yacob discovered this motto of Reason's legislative power from the depth of his heart seasoned by a long and serious philosophic life in the imposing mountains of Ethiopia. He discovered the power of his mind to interrogate tradition, to critically examine the Gospels, to have faith only in God, whom he accepted as the symbol of Reason, and the creator of all human beings, when he dissociated himself from the influence of evil men, indifferent autocrats, and bad propagators of religious doctrines. He despised doctrines constructed by human beings. For him, the singularly effective doctrine is that of God: the most perfect, judicious, and wise observer of the

human drama.

When he criticized doctrines, he spared no one, neither the members of his own kind or the Frang. The African is often portrayed by the Western eyes as hopelessly irrational, impervious to logic and reason. The Ethiopian philosopher's rational meditations conclusively disprove that. Indeed, Zara Yacob's consistent reference to intelligence, that peculiar gift to humans, often goes much further than the Enlightenment philosopher's similar reliance on Reason as the ultimate arbitrator of humankind's infamous religious contestations. Even Kant, one of the greatest believers in Reason, dissociated Reason from faith, and made God not the symbol of Reason, but rather unknowable object of faith. For Kant, Reason and faith are separable. Not so for Zara Yacob. For the Ethiopian thinker, God is embodied in absolute reasonableness. It was not only Hegel, who corrected Kant, when Kant separated Reason and faith. For Zara Yacob challenged the local Ethiopian religious dogmatists as well as the European missionaries of his time with the argument that the Gospels are to be believed in because they are revealed by God. That is not enough. Not all the contents of the Testaments are believable. Some are less reasonable than others. Some merely reveal the incompetence and political agendas of the prophets, including Moses and Mohammed. As opposed to these methodological absurdities that either project foregone conclusions, or tightly close the doors of interpretation, he pushes the open argument that every intelligent human being has the inherent power with which to interpret the messages of the Bible, and that nothing is to be spared from critical interrogations by the mantle of Reason.

For him, the rationalist, everything is subject to scrutiny and severe test of Rationality. His reflections on human nature are equally original. He does not have much flattering things to say to us humans, himself included. He reminds us, rather pessimistically that, we are vain, indifferent, envious, and sometimes evil. As a corrective, contrary to the English rationalist, Thomas Hobbes, who argued that life is short, nasty and brutish, as are the human beings who live it, and that an absolute sovereign would have to be designated to silence men's insatiable passions for power, glory and status, Zara Yacob instructs that it is only deep prayers and meditations that may redeem humans from their bestiality. God does not directly speak to men when they err, he reflects; rather it is the erring humans who must constantly inform their actions by God's guidance, and that God would listen to human agonies if he is consulted. Political life then has much to gain from God, if it trains its citizens to habituate themselves to silent prayers in the form of meditations. In the course of time, and rather invisibly, men and women might be transformed by these meditations into morally conscious citizens. Citizens, who are morally/ rationally formed need not be silenced and intimidated by an authoritarian or manipulative sovereign; they can be appealed to as human beings perpetually aware of the possibility of erring, of the unwanted grounding of their actions on evil. Zara Yacob places the tragic course of racial and class wars, directly on the laps of human nature that is wrongly habituated to indifference, envy, vanity and self-absorbed glory.

Finally, the philosopher has quite a few challenges that he puts on human beings. The fundamental one is an absolute condemnation of ignorance as an excuse for not doing our duties. He holds men fully accountable for their actions. Similarly Zara Yacob chastises his

country men for imputing blames of deeds that they did not follow, wars that they could have avoided, greed and selfishness which motivated their actions, and the persecutions of all those whom they disgraced with their ways and doctrines.

For him, all these terrible actions are manifestly tragic exemplifications of the essence of a moral vision guided by the fear of God. Humans are simply fearful of what they should not fear, for example death; and fearless of precisely those dreadful predilections which lure individuals to do the socially disgraceful: Status, glory, fame and wealth.

The philosopher preaches that moderation and self-control are the cardinal virtues that a medieval Ethiopia and through it, the selfish and cruel world desperately needs. And, from what we know about the way he lived, he himself was a model of a moral hero, an ethical man, born to an unethical milieu. Finally Zara Yacob makes great moral strides in the solution of a major problem in moral philosophy, namely when various individuals' images of God produce hostile doctrines which are eminently opposed to each other, what is to be done to avert cruel civil wars? His answers are challenging. First, for him, there is only one incontestable doctrine, as far as the believers are concerned. That he calls, God's doctrine, which he sharply distinguished from men's doctrine. God's doctrine is motivated by the search for truth, whereas human doctrine is tempted by falsehoods cloaked as truth. If one follows God's doctrine, one is invariably led to experience the disclosure of truth, through which, one can develop appropriate sense of duties, of obligations to oneself and all those others with whom we share the world.

Through numerous reflections on methods of knowing, on human nature, and finally on the scope of moral obligations, each of which are guided by comprehensive reason filled with moral sensibilities, this solitary Ethiopian thinker, who lived in a cave for two years, managed to contribute to the founding of what I wish to call African Enlightenment in the 17th century.

It is him who indigenized Reason, and simultaneously gave it a regional and international color, for which his modern readers ought to be enormously grateful. Zara Yacob's indiginization of philosophy as a religious thinker was not flawless however. Consistent with the dominant prejudices of the age, his views of non-Christians, particularly Jews and Muslims were not positive.⁽¹⁹⁾ Indeed, his strong belief in the power of Reason did not lead him to develop a politically fair principle of toleration. Similarly, his insistence like Aristotle before him, that marriage is part of the ontology of being would be shaken by tough challenges from feminists and postmodernists of the contemporary milieu. If we evaluate his program by the yardsticks of modernity, there is much in his vision of the good life that many persons would find quite oppressive and very intolerant.

But still, in contemporary hermeneutics of discussions of reading the Bible, there is no substitute to the type of confidence and independence of mind, needed for interpretation, which Zara Yacob's philosophy solidly established.

Notes

(1) I would like to thank Professors Glenn Tinder and Winston Langley of the University of Massachusetts for reading this paper and commenting on it. I would like to thank as well Professor Edouard Bustan for providing me with a forum at the African Studies Center of Boston University to discuss my paper. Finally, my greatest thanks to May Farhat of Harvard University for her invaluable comments.

(2) C. Sumner, "The Treatise of Zara Yaquob," in *Ethiopian Philosophy*, Vol II, (Addis Ababa: Commercial Printing press, 1976) p. 1.

(3) Ibid., ff. See as well the summary of the debate in Claude Sumner, *The Source of African Philosophy: the Ethiopian Philosophy of Man* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1986), pp. 41-42.

(4) Sumner, *The Source of African Philosophy: The Ethiopian Philosophy of Man* , p. 42.

(5) V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention Of Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

(6) Descartes, *Meditations* (New York; The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1960) p. 34.

(7) Zara Yaquob, p.9.

(8) Ibid., p. 9.

(9) Ibid., p. 10.

(10) Ibid., p. 11.

(11) Ibid., p.11. For a remarkably similar argument but without explicit religious bent, see Aristotle's *The Nicomachean Ethics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982.) See the discussions of Moral Evil in Book iii.

(12) Ibid., p.13.

(13) Ibid., p.13.

(14) Ibid., p. 13

(15) Ibid., p. 14.

(16) Ibid., p.16.

(17) Ibid., p. 17.

(18) Ibid., p. 19.

(19) Zara Yaquob does not directly mention Christ himself, but is severe in his criticisms of the European and Ethiopian Christians of his time, as is clearly stated in various passages such as the following, " the Frang tell us; ' God's doctrine is not with you , but with us (p,12) and " However, to say the truth, the Christian faith as was founded in the days of the Gospel was not evil, since it invites all men to love one another and to practice mercy towards all. But today my countrymen have set aside the love recommended by the Gospel (and turned away towards) hatred, violence...(PP, 12-13.) Zara Yaquob would very would have few disagreements with the interpretations of Christianity in the able hands of the distinguished political philosopher, Glenn Tinder. In his highly acclaimed book, *The political Meaning Of Christianity*, (Harper Collins Paperback Edition, 1991.) Professor Tinder has introduced the notion that Christianity is guided by the vision of the prophetic Stance, which is based " on two basic Christian tenets, the selfish nature of humans and the hope that is present in Christ. P, 13.