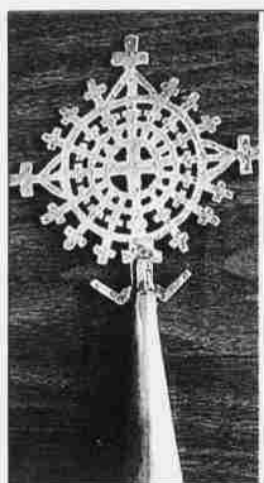


# RELIGION & SPIRITUALITY

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Missionary Elma Patzwald gives collection to the U of C

## Artifacts reveal depths of faith in Ethiopia

GORDON LEGGE  
CALGARY HERALD

When Lutheran missionary Elma Patzwald lived in Ethiopia in the early 1970s, she scoured local markets searching for Christian artifacts.

Little did she know that her personal passion for one of the world's oldest nations, its people and their faith, would lead to the accumulation of an academic treasure trove.

Last summer, shortly before she died of pancreatic cancer, Patzwald, 72, bequeathed her collection, small library and photographic slides of the rock churches of Lalibala to the University of Calgary's religious studies department.

"Elma's legacy ... is more than a gracious gift," religious studies instructor Anne Moore recently told a special service of recognition and commemoration at the university.

"It is hopefully a stimulus for the future exploration into the history of Ethiopian Christianity, the role of Ethiopia for the development of Judaism, Islam and Rastafarianism, the connection between belief and art and, hopefully, it will also serve as an inspiration for the role of women within research and the developing conversation between faith communities and the academic community of the University of Calgary."

Patzwald's donation includes a hand cymbal, an incense censor, several hand or priests' crosses, several pectoral (neck) crosses, a bronze and a wooden processional cross, a story panel about the Queen of Sheba, and a blue slate panel depicting several icons.

There are also hand-copied icons of King David and St. George, together with a pencil drawing of an Ethiopian priest, and textiles with panels displaying Ethiopian crosses and the Lion of Judah.

"Fifty years from now, these might be very important," Moore said during an interview, noting that given the country's instability, such expressions of art may vanish over time.

For the most part, scholars have concentrated on texts related to the history and theology of Christianity, she says. Now they are discovering that art and archaeology render important material about a religion and its followers.

"We have tons of information about Augustine," says Moore. "We have very little understanding of Augustine's congregation."

Already, it's stimulated many questions that could become areas of research about the Ethiopian Orthodox Church which practised in isolation until relatively recently.

For instance, Moore is intrigued by the absence of the Christ figure from the Ethiopian crosses. "Does this absence reflect particular theological views of Christ?"

At this point, there is no value on the collection nor do scholars know the age of most of the pieces. Some are obviously contemporary. Some date back to the Italian occupation before the Second World War. Some appear older.

"It's not of any lesser importance," says Rabbi Eliezer Segal, head of the religious studies department. "It's tangible. That's what is important. These are items that played a very tangible role in the life of the community.



Anne Moore (above) is researching the collection, which includes a brass pastoral cross (right) and a cross which is worn around the neck (inset).

It's not something we have to read about in a book."

Patzwald, a Saskatchewan native, was working for the Lutheran church in the United States when she visited a friend in Ethiopia in 1970, says her sister, Norma McNair.

"While there, she really took a great affection for the Ethiopian people and Africa," says McNair.

Even though she had been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, Patzwald, a small, wiry woman with a keen intellect who was full of life, decided at the age of 45 to move to Africa.

There she became director of personnel for the Radio Voice of the Gospel in the capital Addis Ababa in 1971.

The station provided an additional source of news throughout Africa that was neither controlled nor manipulated by various political factions.

After Emperor Haile Selassie's overthrow in 1976, she returned to Canada and worked for the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Canada, first in Regina and then later in Winnipeg, until her retirement in 1987, when she moved to Calgary where her sister lived.

In the mid-1990s, Patzwald took some continuing education courses about early Christianity from Moore and told her about her collection.

"She valued them as visual representations of the piety of the Ethiopian people," says Moore. Out of their friendship came the bequeathment.

Currently, the collection is wrapped in tissue paper, stored in cardboard boxes and locked in filing cabinets in Moore's office while the department decides what to do with them.

Calgary scholars are waiting for the new occupant of the university's Chair of Christian Thought, who arrives in August, before deciding about the collection's future. Moore hopes it can be displayed in portable showcases so that the artifacts can be viewed by the broader community. "Elma Patzwald had a respect and reverence for the religious expression of the Ethiopians," says Moore.



Shannon Oatway,  
Calgary Herald



Photo courtesy Norma McNair family  
Elma Patzwald donated her collection.

"Her collection was gathered neither out of a tourist-type of interest nor an interest in design. Rather it was a collection driven by respect and empathy.

"She gave Religious Studies her collection because she saw the department as a place where the religiosity of the artifacts would be treasured, researched, discussed and respected."

## Storied land at crossroad of belief

GORDON LEGGE  
CALGARY HERALD

Popular history has made much of the supposition that the lost Ark of the Covenant may be hidden away somewhere in Ethiopia.

That's nonsense, says Anne Moore, an instructor in early Christian history at the University of Calgary.

The Ark of the Covenant is an ornate, gold-plated, wooden chest that housed the two tablets of the Law given to Moses by God. It rested in the Holy of Holies inside the Tabernacle and was eventually placed in the Temple in Jerusalem by King Solomon.

Its final fate is unknown, producing much fodder for the imagination, such as the Hollywood movie, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.

Fanciful television documentaries have shown an ark being carried in procession around the famed rock churches of Lalibala, suggesting that it is the lost ark. But Moore says it's commonplace for Ethiopian Orthodox priests to carry a representation of the fabled ark in popular ceremonies throughout Ethiopia, such as during Timkat, the feast of the Epiphany.

"There are lots of arks of the covenant all over Ethiopia," she says.

That said, Ethiopia's religious history merits closer study. There are more than 60 references to Ethiopia, formerly known as Abyssinia, in the Christian Bible.

Legend has it that the Queen of Sheba lived there when she visited King Solomon, says a background paper prepared for the recent service recognizing Elma Patzwald's donation of her Ethiopian religious artifacts to the University of Calgary.

Subsequently, she bore him a son, Menelik I, who founded the Solomonic dynasty of rulers which occupied the Ethiopian throne almost without interruption until 1976, when Emperor Haile Selassie I was overthrown by a Marxist regime.

Ethiopia was one of the first countries in the world to adopt the Christian faith. Local tradition holds that conversion took place as early as the time of the Apostles during the first century.

Then, during the 4th century, Emperor Ezana, proclaimed Christianity as the national religion. Over the centuries, the Ethiopian church developed close ties to the Egyptian or Coptic Church. That lasted until the 1950s when the Ethiopians began to select their own Metropolitan from within the country.

Its close association with the Copts also resulted in the Ethiopian church being labeled heretical during the Monophysite controversy of 530 to 550 A.D.

At the time, it was thought that they viewed Christ as possessing only a divine nature. But it was an incorrect understanding. Like the Eastern Orthodox churches, they emphasized the oneness of Christ over his dual nature.

After being declared heretical, it was further isolated in the 7th Century when Islam surged through the region.

Other views also indicate a departure from historical Christianity. Ethiopian icons of the Virgin Mary and Christ child often depict Mary holding Christ's hand.

That represents the Ethiopian covenant of mercy wherein Mary has the ability to forgive sin. Other icons often depict St. George, the dragon slayer. But the reason is unclear.

With the Muslim incursion in the Middle Ages, all Christians were required to wear Ethiopian Orthodox crosses — which bear a remarkable resemblance to the Celtic cross — to identify themselves, a practice that persists to this day.

Ethiopia was also home to a distinct group of Jews, the Falshahs or Black Jews, who came to the world's attention when they were airlifted to Israel a few years ago.

While the Ethiopian Queen of Sheba is known to most readers of the Bible, few know that there is a vague reference in the Bible to Moses' Ethiopian wife. Jewish legend has it that after fleeing Egypt, Moses ended up in Ethiopia where he reigned as King for 40 years, says Rabbi Eliezer Segal, head of the university's religious studies department.

Ethiopia was also home to one of the earliest Muslim communities, when followers of the Prophet Muhammed fled opposition in Mecca and travelled to Abyssinia before the Prophet established his community in Medina.

More recently, Emperor Haile Selassie became the spiritual inspiration for the development of Rastafarianism, a new religion that emerged in Jamaica and became associated with reggae music and musician Bob Marley.

## Shell casing becomes hand cross

When is a cross more than a cross? When it's an Ethiopian Orthodox priest's hand cross.

That's evident after a close examination of a brass cross contained in the Elma Patzwald collection recently bequeathed to the University of Calgary's religious studies department.

The cross, worn smooth from use, reveals a dazzling array of symbolism embraced by Ethiopian Orthodox believers.

The hand cross, as it's called, is carried in the right hand, tucked away in the folds of a priest's robes, says religious studies student Karee Kamis, who visited frequently with Patzwald before her death last year in Calgary.

It is only brought out when requested by a believer, perhaps a sign of

the priest's role as a servant of the community, says Kamis. When he meets a church member and is asked for a blessing, he brings it out for them to kiss ritually.

This particular cross was crafted from an Italian artillery shell recovered after the Italian invasion of Ethiopia during the 1930s.

The base of the cross shows a circle, representing the beginning of creation.

Along the circle's circumference are three crosses, the Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Interwoven is a wreath-like design, showing the tree of paradise in the Garden of Eden, the same tree that supposedly was used for the cross of Jesus Christ.

At the base of the shaft is a small square, representing the Ark of the Covenant, which housed the two tablets with the Ten Commandments given to Moses by God. The cross's shaft symbolizes Adam, the first man.

Across the shaft are a series of serrations, meant to represent Jacob's ladder to heaven.

At the top of the cross are two points — Adam's arms raised upward in praise to God.

At the top is another circle, the table of the Last Supper with 12 crosses around the outside for the 12 Apostles. Inside both circles are doves, symbols of the Holy Spirit and wisdom.

Taken altogether, it represents the cross of Christ, Christian symbol of man's redemption.



Artisan retooled discarded shell into exquisite cross.