

# Missionary Dilemmas in Times of Persecution: Case Ethiopia

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In 1981, during the communist regime, I worked as visiting professor at the Mekane Yesus Theological Seminary (MYTS) in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.<sup>2</sup> At the same time I served as liaison between The Norwegian Missionary Society (NMS) and The Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY). On the basis of my office I was asked, via Rev. Tasgara Hirpo, by the EECMY president, Emmanuel Abraham, if I was willing to collect information on the harsh experiences of the EECMY at the time and forward it to The Lutheran World Federation (LWF).<sup>3</sup> It was clear that the president himself was not in a position to speak openly.

The president had been a minister in Haile Selassie I's government. Only by forceful intervention by LWF, documenting his faithful service for the Ethiopian people, did he avoid execution at the hands of the revolutionary government in 1974.<sup>4</sup> Later on, working as president of the EECMY, his position was vulnerable. In the political climate of the time, with a Marxist-Leninist inspired dictatorship in power, the question of information was most sensitive. The request was therefore of great consequence and a risk to my wellbeing and the work of my mission.

At the time the General secretary of the EECMY, Gudina

Tumsa had been abducted. His whereabouts were unknown.<sup>5</sup> The freedom of faith, conscience and assembly was at stake. Preaching was restricted, church buildings were being closed in the hundreds, colleagues were imprisoned, and congregation members were indoctrinated for hours in Marxist-Leninist philosophy. A severe crisis in the relationship between church and state was developing.

My contract with the mission stated explicitly that I abstain from any kind of political activity while serving as a guest in a church and a country. The first question then was whether the government's harassment of the church was of a political kind? And would not information be seen as an unfriendly act? The request presented a huge dilemma. This paper is an exposition of how it was solved. At the same time it sheds light on dilemmas of missions and churches, locally and internationally, during times of persecution.

### **Two Brands of Dictatorship**

I was sent to Ethiopia during Haile Selassie's regime. Neither was I nor my mission aware that the sheer permission to work in Ethiopia was part and parcel of the Emperor's political ambition to modernize the Empire.<sup>6</sup> *The Imperial Decree on Mission*, from 1944, had come about after a prolonged struggle between the Patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC) and the Emperor. The Patriarch maintained that it was a grave political mistake to split the ideological base of Ethiopia in the form of two kinds of churches. In Ethiopia ecclesiology thus has a political dimension.<sup>7</sup>

The Emperor's feudal regime was autocratic with a poor record on human rights. In fact it was the last country in the world to abolish slavery (1933).<sup>8</sup> When my mission responded to a call from the EECMY, a debate rose in Norway whether it was politically neutral to work in Ethiopia. The mission responded with a statement that it was our main task to save souls.<sup>9</sup> The political constellation in any given time could not be of consequence. Here the mission retorted to an age-old Lutheran pietistic tradition to keep the regiments apart.<sup>10</sup> This statement was soon put to the test.

In 1974 the Ethiopian revolution erupted. The state disinte-

grated into chaos and internal strife. In February 1977 Mengistu Haile Mariam orchestrated a coup d'état. One of his first moves was to confiscate Radio Voice of the Gospel 12 March 1977. In the aftermath of Mengistus takeover hundreds of youth were killed during the so-called red terror.<sup>11</sup> Because of the gross violations of human rights, USA withdrew its support. Mengistu therefore turned to the Soviet Union for assistance. The prize was a communist dictatorship, guerrilla warfare and a battleground of the Cold War.<sup>12</sup>

### *The withdrawal of the missionaries*

The question now was if the change in dictatorial framework had any consequence for the missionary enterprise? The rapid developments, the dramatic turn of events and the propaganda were a heavy strain on all the supporting missions.<sup>13</sup> The question of missionaries' security therefore became critical during the spring of 1977. The question whether or not they should withdraw caused deep conflicts of conscience for the missionaries. Gradually the missions brought the issue to their boards and decisions were made to withdraw personnel from the exposed areas.

In May 1977 the missionaries from The Sudan Interior Mission (SIM), working with the Kale Hiwot Church, were evacuated from their stations and the numbers reduced from 200 to 40 in Ethiopia.<sup>14</sup> By February 1978 The Norwegian Lutheran Mission (NLM) had reduced its staff in Ethiopia from 158 to 58.<sup>15</sup> The Norwegian embassy had advised the NLM four times to evacuate its missionaries. The mission had complied only partially with this advice, although by this time all the stations in the south-east had been evacuated. The Danish Lutheran Mission, working with the NLM in Bale, evacuated all their staff. The NMS, working in remote areas in Western Ethiopia, evacuated 16, all but one of their staff. They had been exposed to severe hardships and an attack by a guerrilla movement. The Norwegian Lutheran Free Church working in Ghion also evacuated their staff. The same did the Finnish Missionary Society. The Swedish Evangelical Mission and the German Hermannsburg Mission withdrew their staffs partly to Addis Ababa and partly back home.<sup>16</sup> Altogether 77 per cent of Lutheran missionary personnel were withdrawn from Ethiopia.<sup>17</sup>

A point of particular interest is the different strategies chosen by the Norwegian missions. In order to understand the decision of the NMS, one has to see it against the very painful experiences connected to the evacuation of China in 1949.<sup>18</sup> Part of the problem in China was disagreements among the missionaries on policy towards the Communist. In order not to risk a repetition of the China experience, the board of the NMS followed the advice of the Norwegian Embassy and made a formal decision to evacuate from Ethiopia.<sup>19</sup>

When security improved I was, together with a few colleagues, called back to service in 1980. The request from the EECMY president brought the issue of missions and politics to the test.

### **Political Dimensions of Human Rights**

Human rights may be organized in groups: I will comment on three of them in the following order: 1) *The right to life and survival*, 2) *Economic, social and cultural rights*, 3) *Individual human rights*.<sup>20</sup>

#### *The right to life and survival*

In my training as a theologian, human rights were not high on the agenda. The life and work of Jesus shaped the pattern of a missionary's work. The struggle for human dignity and against evil was thus given a Christological motivation. In traditional form I served as a preacher, leader of literacy schools, a clinic and an agricultural project. These activities were supportive of life and survival and seemed politically neutral.

Detailed studies of the people's motivations for changing affiliation to Evangelical Christianity reveal that the church's service within health and education was crucial. A people who only knew brutal exploitation, were surprised when experiencing love and kindness. Land-owner and slave were met and treated with the same respect. The missionaries thereby conveyed a new vision of man and a radical change of values. This body language thus represented a fundamental critique of the prevalent values and political structures of society.<sup>21</sup>

*Economic, social and cultural rights*

The Oromo, among whom I worked, had been subjugated to Imperial rule at the end of the nineteenth century. The Amhara, by virtue of their traditional position in society, their language and Orthodox Christianity defined Ethiopia to the detriment of other ethnic groups. Against this background the American anthropologist Donald Donham gives a powerful interpretation of the Evangelical movement: "It re-established the people's identity".<sup>22</sup> The African theologian Lamin Sanneh details this interpretation when he writes that the missions, in particular through Bible translations and efforts within education, gave the people "cultural self-understanding, pride of their own language, social awakening, religious renewal...".<sup>23</sup>

The first phase of the revolution brought some of this, in particular cultural rights, to the open in the so-called "First Charter" (20 December 1974). It envisioned Ethiopia as a country without "ethnic, religious, linguistic or cultural differences."<sup>24</sup> Without being aware the church's empowerment of oppressed groups turned out to have an ethnic dimension. This played directly into the ethno-political tensions of the state. When a liberation movement sprang up in the EECMY areas, partly led by former students of EECMY schools, the church was caught in the middle.

*Individual human rights*

As a missionary I only gradually became aware of how the Evangelical faith was reinterpreted in the minds of the listeners. The reception illustrates how a seemingly non-political message was translated into political reality. Gudina Tumsa gives a vivid example of what this means:

In Gemo Gofa we see for example a group of Christians bringing a landowner to court because he had confiscated their land. They fought their case up to the High Court of Ethiopia and won. For them justice was part of their understanding of salvation.<sup>25</sup>

This interpretation of salvation was a central issue in the famous EECMY letter to LWF in 1972. Here the young church

criticises the missions for not speaking up against colonial exploitation. The letter then points at structural aspects of injustice. By including the structures that hold humans in bondage and degradation, the Church expands its understanding of sin. The letter became a marker of EECMY theology which later on was characterized as *holistic*.<sup>26</sup>

The letter is in part a reflection of the ecumenical debate of the day, such as at the WCC in Uppsala 1968 and in particular the LWF General Assembly in Evian 1970, where human rights were on the agenda. These conferences made the EECMY turn towards issues of social justice and human rights. The issues were followed as a central concern of the WCC in Nairobi 1975 and the LWF assembly in Dar-es-Salam in 1977.

When the revolution developed, the traditional response of the church could have been quiet withdrawal from the political arena. In stead we see a church that engages itself in the political debate of the day. The LWF was an active adviser in the process.<sup>27</sup> In a Pastoral letter from 1975 the church gives support to the revolution on the condition that the state would be based on law and human rights.<sup>28</sup>

As the revolution unfolded, *freedom of faith* turned out to be the critical element. In an attempt to stem the influence of atheist Marxism, Gudina Tumsa organized a Council for Cooperation of Churches in Ethiopia (CCCE). At this point Gudina Tumsa was invited to cooperate with the government. He declined because of the ongoing harassment of Evangelical Christians. As a result he was labelled an enemy of the state. The CCCE was seen as an attempt to organize an ideological opposition. Gudina Tumsa was eliminated and the state set out on a course to destroy the Evangelical churches.<sup>29</sup>

Without being aware, missionary and church activity interpreted from a perspective of human rights, had played straight into the socio-political, ethno-political, and the ideology-political realm.

### **To Speak Or Not To Speak**

The first to speak up was the Swedish Ecumenical Council in a letter to the Ethiopian government.<sup>30</sup> This was followed by a paper from a group under the British Council of Churches at

the beginning of 1979.<sup>31</sup> The Ethiopian government gave an indignant reply calling the accusations “calculated malicious lies”, adding: “If there are impossible things, tampering with religion in Ethiopia is one of those impossible things”. The government at all times denied any persecution of Evangelical Christians. This left the missions with a number of dilemmas. Let me indicate four of them:<sup>32</sup>

*Option 1: The traditional position*

The government’s reaction and the abduction of Gudina Tumsa a short time after left no one in doubt of the government’s will to silence any opposition. The prevailing attitude among the missionaries was to do what was possible and not provoke the government by revealing its violations of human rights. One should be grateful for the opportunities still available in a communist land and avoid provocation that would lead to expulsion and increased suffering for Ethiopian Christians. On the official level this was the position of NLM. The NLM worked in Southern Ethiopia where conditions were easier than in the west. They were very cautious about aggravating the government and putting the whole flourishing work in jeopardy. The general secretary of the NLM, Egil Grandhagen, in an editorial in their mission magazine, *Utsyn*, put heavy emphasis on the missionary task “to win souls”. “Therefore one has to draw a clear line between our call as Christian citizens and our call as a missionary organization”.<sup>33</sup> Against this policy it is quite remarkable that the NLM board permitted their representative in Ethiopia to join the information group.

*Option 2: Try to force the state*

The alternative option was to pressurize the government with a threat to withdraw all humanitarian support and with it much needed foreign currency. Both church and mission deemed it ethically impossible to use sick and hungry people’s right to life as a means in a power struggle with the government.

*Option 3: Shout it from the rooftops*

A third option was to deem the violations of human rights as so grave that one’s conscience forbade silence, whatever the

consequences. The Berliner Mission (BM) opted for this approach. BM publicly denounced the Ethiopian government, in particular for its oppression of the ethnic group Oromo.<sup>34</sup> Experiences from the Confessional Church's struggle during the Nazi regime had taught them that silence was a dangerous path. When the Hermannsburg Mission (HM) made a protest against BM for linking the violations of human rights to the Oromo's situation, the BM reiterated by accusing the HM "for once again keeping silent about concentration camps." EECMY protested against BM, maintaining that their action increased the pressure on the church. BM was not willing to yield. This forced the EECMY to break off relations with BM.<sup>35</sup>

*Option 4: Publicize undeniable facts*

This was the context of Emmanuel Abraham's request to me in 1981. Emmanuel Abraham gave one condition: In order to avoid any suspicion that information on the EECMY was linked to the Oromo ethnic cause, he demanded that only facts without interpretation be conveyed. Since the request came from the president of the church it was seen as urgent to me as well as my mission. How did I reply? I could not carry responsibility for such an undertaking alone. The first move was therefore to invite the representative of the Swedish Evangelical Mission (SEM), Rev. Ingvar Nilsson, the Hermannsburg Mission (HM), Rev. Willy Kalmbach and the Norwegian Lutheran Mission, Rev. Osvald Hindenes, for a meeting with the president's liaison. We decided that each of us pass the request on to our mission boards. All of them solved the dilemma by allowing us to convey information.

The general secretary of the NMS, Odd Bondevik, tried to establish criteria for relating to the Ethiopia situation. In the mission's magazine he wrote that "violations against basic human rights, whether they are against Christians or others, is our concern and we cannot pass by in silence." Bondevik defined the criteria by reference to the Norwegian Church's position during the Nazi regime. He quotes the Norwegian Church's stand in *Kirkens grunn*:

It is a sin against God if the state starts to tyrannize the souls

and claims the right to decide what a person shall believe, think and feel as his conscience ... Where the power of the state separates from justice, there the state is no longer a tool of God, but becomes a demonic power. Therefore there are limits to obedience against the state.<sup>36</sup>

All missions were thankful for the accurate information given by the group. By letting an international organization coordinate the information process, a uniform policy was possible and the missions and churches could speak with one voice. It was left to LWF to decide whether to publicise information or not.

#### *The confiscation of the EECMY Central Office*

The 10th of December 1981 the group got a tip, via a leak in the government, that it was decided to confiscate the EECMY Central Office as a first step to nationalize all church institutions. The decision only waited for Mengistu Haile Mariam's signature. When order was given to evacuate the Central Office two days later, information was sent to LWF. Through their contacts with the World Council of Churches all member churches were alarmed.<sup>37</sup> The result was a storm of protest from all over the world. No other institution of the EECMY was touched until on 25 January 1982 when the Mekane Yesus Theological Seminary was confiscated. The Seminary was, however, returned later the same day. The most plausible reason was that the decision to confiscate was made at department level. Mengistu could simply not risk a second international storm and so he ordered the return of the seminary.<sup>38</sup>

It is obvious that the government was furious about the bad press Ethiopia got in the West. Thinking the BM was behind the information the secret police sent two agents to East Berlin. There they were equipped with a bomb in order to blow up the BM headquarters and kill its mission secretary, Gunnar Hasselblatt. However, the bomb went off while they were arming it. One of the agents was killed and the other arrested by German police.

At this point the LWF saw the situation as so serious that Oberkirchenrat Christian Krause, on behalf of the LWF, esta-

blished contact with the Ethiopian Embassy in Bonn to inform them of the role of LWF. The ambassador rebuked him for intervening in Ethiopia's internal affairs. Krause reiterated with a reference to human rights declarations and told the ambassadors that the Christians in Ethiopia were our brothers and sisters.

### **Epilogue**

In January 1985 Emmanuel Abraham was replaced by Francis Stephanos as president of the EECMY. At the time more than 3000 churches (Kale Hiwot: 1700, EECMY: 1000, Pentecostal, Baptist and Mennonite: 300) were closed and church life was brought to a standstill. Francis Stephanos was then invited to participate in the drafting of a new state constitution. The Church Officers saw that the church's stand against the state had almost led it to destruction. They therefore stepped down and resolved that the president should accept the invitation. At the same time there was a shift in leadership of the LWF, with Gunnar Sålsett as the new general secretary. The LWF endorsed the EECMY decision according to the pattern of relationship to East European churches. The suffering of the Christians in Ethiopia was silenced! Two years later Francis Stephanos was elected as a member of the national congress. He took his seat together with leaders of the EOC and the Muslim community.<sup>39</sup>

The EECMY had come full circle, from Emmanuel Abraham participating in Haile Sellassie's autocratic government, via the EECMY letter of 1972 that criticized the missions for keeping silent on human rights abuses, via critical engagement during the revolution, to silent participation in a state with one of the worst records on human rights in recent history. The EECMY was domesticated and has never since dared speak up on human rights issues in Ethiopia.

Did international pressure have any effect on the Ethiopian government's handling of the church? It seems that it merely aggravated the political authorities. The bomb in Berlin shows how far the government was willing to go in order to silence critics. However, in 1981 the proposed takeover of EECMY institutions never occurred and in 1982 the Mekane Yesus Theological Seminary was handed back. If this came as a result of the LWF channel, something substantial was achieved.

Let me finish with a reflection by Meseret Sebat Leab, a scholar of the EOC. At the time I did my research on the persecution of the EECMY, I asked how the church could cooperate with a government that had killed the Patriarch and appointed its own man against canonical law. He paused for a while before he answered: "Canonical law is one thing. Survival is another. What you are witnessing is a question of survival."

### **Abstract**

Under the Communist regime in Ethiopia 1974-1991, the Evangelical churches were subject to severe persecution, with more than 3000 church buildings closed and pastors imprisoned, tortured and killed. In this situation a group of missionaries was asked by the leadership of the Lutheran church to pass on information to the Lutheran World Federation. This was a politically charged request and therefore a risky undertaking. At the same time the harassment of the churches were serious breaches of human rights. The article explores the dilemmas of conscience of the missionaries and how the dilemmas were solved. At the same time the article sheds light on dilemmas of missions and churches, locally and internationally in relation to brutal dictatorships. It also shows how a church is forced from a position of critical engagement in society to submission and silence.

## Noter

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- <sup>2</sup> This article is a development of a lecture given at a conference in Sigtuna, Sweden, on the Nordic-Baltic churches and the cold war, 28.02.2012.
- <sup>3</sup> At the time Rev. Tasgara Hirpo was president of The Western Synod of the EECMY and at the same time my colleague at the MYTS.
- <sup>4</sup> In his autobiography: Emmanuel Abraham (1995) *Reminiscences of my Life*, Oslo, pp. 229-242, he gives a detailed account of his time in detention. On 23 November 1974 the acting prime minister and 59 member of Haile Sellassie I's government and other top officials were summarily executed, Eide, Ø.M. (2000) *Revolution and Religion in Ethiopia 1974-85*, Oxford, p.98.
- <sup>5</sup> Gudina Tumsa was abducted on 28 July 1979 and executed the same night. A detailed account of the imprisonment and abduction of Gudina Tumsa is found in Eide (2000), pp. 175-179.
- <sup>6</sup> The very title of the autobiography of Haile Selassie I, *My Life and Ethiopia's progress*, (1976) indicates the centrality of modernization by introducing into the country Western modes of education.
- <sup>7</sup> The political consideration that the religious unity was an important basis for national unity constitute the religio-political background for the opposition and persecution of Evangelical Christianity by local authorities prior to the revolution in 1974. Cfr. Eide (2000), pp. 25-39.
- <sup>8</sup> A detailed account of slavery in Ethiopia is found in Teshale Tibabu (1995), *The Making of Modern Ethiopia 1896-1974*, Lawrenceville NJ, pp53-70.
- <sup>9</sup> Gjeldsten, G. "Kritiske spørsmål", Norsk Misjonstidende nr 13, 1969.
- <sup>10</sup> The main points of the debate are referred in Eide, Ø.M. (2006) "Politikk, misjon og menneskerettigheter i Etiopia", in Thor Strandenæs (red.) *Misjon og kultur: Festskrift til Jan-Martin Berentsen*, Stavanger.
- <sup>11</sup> The terror and cruelty of the time are unparalleled in Ethiopian history. Estimates of the numbers killed vary. Andargachew Tiruneh (1993) *The Ethiopian Revolution 1974-1987: A Transformation from an Autocratic to a Totalitarian Autocracy*, Cambridge, p. 211, gives a careful number of 1500. Other sources give higher numbers.
- <sup>12</sup> For an overview of the larger political framework cfr. Latham, M.E. "The Cold War in The Third World 1963-1975", in Leffler, M.P. and O.A. Westad (2010), *The Cambridge History of The Cold war, Volume II, Crisis and Détante*, Cambridge, pp. 258-280. The shift of political alliances in Ethiopia during the Cold War is analysed in detail by Keller, E.J. (1991) *Revolutionary Ethiopia: From Empire to People's Republic*, Bloomington, IN, p. 191ff.
- <sup>13</sup> Vinskei: Situasjonen I Etiopia i dag, 6. desember 1976.

- <sup>14</sup> Peter Cotterell interview 3 May 1990, Kay Bascom interview 12 March 1995, cfr. Eide 2000:169.
- <sup>15</sup> Oswald Hindenes, 'Årsmelding fra Etiopia', *NLM Årbok* 1978:78.
- <sup>16</sup> The facts are compounded mainly from Report from a meeting between representatives of the EECMY and cooperating partners at Johannelund, Sweden, 25-26 August 1977. Cfr. Eide 2000:131.
- <sup>17</sup> The number of western missionaries working in the EECMY, was reduced from approx. 390 to 90.
- <sup>18</sup> As The Red Army advanced in China, most of the missionaries of the NMS were evacuated, but some remained. This created turmoil in the mission. Cfr. Eggen, E. "Kina" in Jørgensen, T. (red.) (1992) *I tro og tjeneste, Det Norske Misjonsselskap 1842-1992*, Stavanger.
- <sup>19</sup> Cf. Kjosavik, TD «Etiopia», in Jørgensen, T. (red.) (1992), *I tro og tjeneste: Det norske misjonsselskap 1842-1992*, p.140-146, Eide op. Cit.141.
- <sup>20</sup> Tergel, A. (1998) *Human Rights in Cultural and Religious Traditions*, Uppsala, gives a broad presentation of the churches' handling of issues related to human rights. In addition to the three groups mentioned here he also discusses ecological rights.
- <sup>21</sup> Cfr. Eide (2000) pp. 29, 63, 82.
- <sup>22</sup> Donham, D. & W. James (1986) *The Southern Marches of Imperial Ethiopia*, Cambridge, p. 45.
- <sup>23</sup> Sanneh, L. (1997) *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, New York, pp. 1-8.
- <sup>24</sup> Eide (2000) op.cit. 96.
- <sup>25</sup> Gudina Tumsa, (2003) *Witness and Discipleship: The Essential Writings of Gudina Tumsa*, Addis Ababa, p. 131.
- <sup>26</sup> The full text of the letter is published in Eide (2000) op.cit.263-268. For an analysis of the letter cfr. Eide (2000) pp. 68-70
- <sup>27</sup> Four seminars on Christianity and socialism were conducted at MYTS in 1975-6.
- <sup>28</sup> The full text of The Pastoral Letter is published in Eide (2000) pp. 269-70.
- <sup>29</sup> Patriarch Tewoflos had been arrested and was killed 27 July 1979, the night before Gudina Tumsa was killed. Hadji Mohammed Sani Habib, a leading Muslim, was forced into submission when the government killed his son and threatened to kill his second son. Cfr. Eide (2000) op.cit. pp. 113, 127-8, 164-5, 175-6.
- <sup>30</sup> Archbishop Sundby, Swedish Ecumenical Council to Ethiopian Government, Uppsala/Stockholm 18 January 1979.
- <sup>31</sup> Blair, M. "Christians in Ethiopia: A Background Paper on Recent Events", 19 February 1979, (Unpublished). Lutheran World Information 22 March 1979.
- <sup>32</sup> Getahun Ijigu, Ambassador Extraordinary to Archbishop Sundby, 24 January 1979.
- <sup>33</sup> Egil Grandhagen, 'Misjon og politikk' *Utsyn* 8 Februey 1981.
- <sup>34</sup> The mission secretary of the BM, Gunnar Hasselblatt, published a number of articles mainly in German newspapers 1982-6, cfr. Eide (2000) pp. 209-10.

- <sup>35</sup> The debate and the documents are presented in Eide (2000) pp. 211-12.
- <sup>36</sup> The public debate in Norway is presented in Eide (2000) pp. 213-4. Cfr. Austad (1977), Kirkens grunn: *Analyse av en kirkelig bekjennelse fra okkupasjonstiden 1940-45*, Oslo.
- <sup>37</sup> The gen.secr. of LWF, Carl H. Mau called upon all its member churches to “demonstrate solidarity with the Mekane Yesus Church in any way they deemed appropriate”, Eide (2000), p. 214.
- <sup>38</sup> Cf. Launhardt, J. (1982) *Uns erschrecken die Trommeln nicht mehr: Stadttrandgemeinde in Addis Abeba*, Erlangen, p212.
- <sup>39</sup> For this paragraph cfr. Eide (2000) pp. 235-48.

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