

# RELIGION IN CONTEMPORARY ETHIOPIA

HISTORY, POLITICS AND INTER-RELIGIOUS RELATIONS

Jörg Haustein, Abduletif Kedir Idris and Diego Maria Malara



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## THE ETHIOPIA PEACE RESEARCH FACILITY

This literature review was written for the Ethiopia Peace Research Facility (PRF). The PRF is an independent facility combining timely analysis on peace and conflict from Ethiopian experts with support for conflict sensitive programming in the country. It is managed by the Rift Valley Institute and funded by the UK government.

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## THE RIFT VALLEY INSTITUTE

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# ACRONYMS AND INITIALISMS

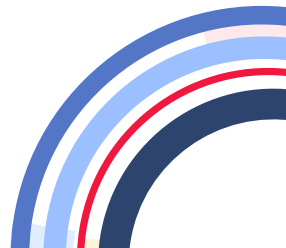
<b>CSO</b>	civil society organization
<b>DHS</b>	Demographic and Health Survey
<b>ECFE</b>	Evangelical Churches' Fellowship of Ethiopia
<b>ECGBC</b>	Ethiopian Council of Gospel Believers' Churches
<b>EECMY</b>	Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus
<b>EIASC</b>	Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council
<b>EOTC</b>	Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church
<b>EPRDF</b>	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front
<b>IAP</b>	Islam in Africa Project
<b>IPI</b>	Interfaith Peace-Building Initiative
<b>IRCE</b>	Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia
<b>ISIS</b>	Islamic State
<b>KHC</b>	Kale Heywet Church
<b>LPI</b>	Life and Peace Institute
<b>NCA</b>	Norwegian Church Aid
<b>PM</b>	Prime minister
<b>TPLF</b>	Tigrayan People's Liberation Front

# INTRODUCTION

Religious affiliation is almost universal in Ethiopia, which means that religions amass significant political capital but may also act as potential catalysts for conflict. After five decades of ostensibly secular politics—first under a socialist dictatorship and then driven by the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF)’s strict insistence that religion and state be separated—religion has made a political comeback under Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. Religion is once again part of political discourse, whether it be in defining political constituencies, demarcating differences, or articulating visions of Ethiopian unity.

This, however, increases political complexity, as religious affiliation in Ethiopia is part of a multi-layered nexus incorporating ethnicity and other, secondary, social characteristics, such as occupation or class. This often makes religious politics difficult to decipher, especially when it comes to anticipating, preventing and resolving conflict. For a long time, an increasingly contested narrative of peaceful coexistence has obscured simmering tensions. When these flare up, typically in localized clashes, they quickly assume national importance, for example in generating new dialogue initiatives or anticipating conflict in other locations.

This review offers a comprehensive introduction to this landscape, drawing on the most relevant academic publications on religion in Ethiopia. Section 1 provides an overview of the politics of religion since the making of the modern Ethiopian nation state in the nineteenth century. Section 2 then surveys the four most important faith groups in contemporary Ethiopia (Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Protestantism/Pentecostalism, and so-called ‘traditional religions’), with a particular focus on how current political debates have led to tensions and divergences within these groups. Section 3 explores inter-religious relations, before the review closes with some suggested avenues for future research.



# RELIGION AND STATE IN ETHIOPIA: HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Modern Ethiopia is no stranger to religious plurality and its political consequences—in fact, many contemporary issues can be traced back for centuries. Tensions between the Orthodox Christian emperors and neighbouring Muslim states came to a head in the Abyssinian–Adal War of 1529–1543. Christian Ethiopia was saved from collapse by Portuguese intervention, and this conflict would come to define the country’s Christian-Muslim relations for centuries to come. The continued Portuguese presence led to Susenyos’s (r. 1606–1632) conversion to Catholicism, only for this alliance with Western Christendom to end in disaster when Jesuit priests attempted to impose European rites.<sup>1</sup> During the subsequent restoration of the Orthodox state in the Gondar era (1632–1706), Catholics were reconverted or expelled, while the country’s emperors moved to end Christological conflict within the Ethiopian church.<sup>2</sup> Muslims and Jews were segregated from Christians,<sup>3</sup> while substantial efforts were made to integrate incurrent Oromo groups, who had migrated into central Ethiopia, through a mix of assimilation and conversion. Protestant missions commenced toward the end of the subsequent ‘era of the princes’ (1755–1855), which was marked by a collapse of central authority, but the missionaries immediately ran into political difficulties when Emperor Tewodros II (r. 1855–1868) sought to harness their technological abilities for military purposes in restoring the empire. When Tewodros finally held them hostage to press for military support from the UK, he was met with a British military expedition that ended his life.<sup>4</sup>

Various historiographical narratives have arisen from this history that continue to define inter-religious relations in modern Ethiopia. Orthodox Christianity has the oldest presence in the region, extending back to the conversion of Ethiopian kings in the fourth century and the subsequent consolidation of Christian monasticism and theology in the late fifth century.<sup>5</sup> Ethiopian Orthodox mythology, however, claims an even more ancient history. According to the thirteenth-century myth of the *Kəbrä Nəgäśt*, the Ethiopian emperors are descendants of Solomon, with the Ark of the Covenant located in Axum.<sup>6</sup> Muslims, in turn, tell their own

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1 Harold G. Marcus, *A History of Ethiopia*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994, 39–40.

2 Paul Henze, *Layers of Time: A History of Ethiopia*, London: Hurst and Co., 2001, 100–107; Marcus, *A History*, 43–44.

3 Abdussamad H. Ahmad, ‘Muslims of Gondar 1864–1941’, *Annales d’Éthiopie* 16 (2000).

4 Gustav Arén, *Evangelical Pioneers in Ethiopia: Origins of the Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus*, Stockholm: EFS Förlaget, 1978, 45–104.

5 Henze, *Layers of Time*, 38.

6 Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia: 1270–1527*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972, 249–50.

narrative of ancient origin, with Ethiopia proclaimed the country of the first *hijra*. This relates how, prior to the Prophet's exodus to Medina, Mohammed's companions found refuge under an Ethiopian king who had converted to Islam.<sup>7</sup> Protestants, despite being relative newcomers, have also produced their own narratives of indigeneity, from Krapf's mid-nineteenth century ethno-nationalist musings on the Oromo as the 'Germans of Africa' to more recent Pentecostal histories of longstanding missionary independence.<sup>8</sup>

These historical and historiographical claims have shaped religion in contemporary Ethiopia, forcing successive regimes to grapple with the country's religious plurality and the modernizing demand for a secular—or at least religiously neutral—state.

## MODERN NATION-BUILDING AND RELIGIOUS PLURALITY: THE IMPERIAL RECORD

Ethiopian historiography has largely subscribed to the notion that modernizing forces in Ethiopia had a secularizing impact. Such sentiments are reflected in the words, 'Religion is private, the country is collective' (*haymanot yägäll näw, agär yägara näw*), an oft-used phrase variously attributed to either Menelik II (r. 1889–1913) or Haile Selassie I (r. 1930–1974)—the two emperors most often commemorated as founders of the modern Ethiopian nation state.<sup>9</sup> While these sentiments may well have been held by the era's intellectual reformers,<sup>10</sup> they should not be mistaken for actual state policy.<sup>11</sup> What emerged instead was a politicization of religion in order to secure imperial power.

Yohannes IV's (r. 1871–1889) project of imperial restoration after Tewodros' demise was

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- 7 Dereje Feyissa, 'Muslims Renegotiating Marginality in Contemporary Ethiopia', *The Muslim World* 104 (2014): 298–300.
  - 8 Johann Ludwig Krapf, *Travels, Researches, and Missionary Labours in Eastern Africa*, London: Trübner and Co., 1860, 122; Jörg Hausteine, *Writing Religious History: The Historiography of Ethiopian Pentecostalism*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2011, 37–89; Jörg Hausteine, 'Historical Epistemology and Pentecostal Origins: History and Historiography in Ethiopian Pentecostalism', *Pneuma* 35 (2013).
  - 9 Archbishop Yesehaq, *The Ethiopian Tewahedo Church: An Integrally African Church*, Nashville: Winston-Derek Publishers, 2005, 81; Fouad Makki, 'Empire and Modernity: Dynastic Centralization and Official Nationalism in Late Imperial Ethiopia', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 24 (2011): 278; Jon Abbink, 'Religion in public spaces: emerging Muslim-Christian polemics in Ethiopia', *African Affairs* 110 (2011): 259. The earliest written source of this statement quoted in academic research is a 1965 booklet by the Ministry of Information attributing the saying to a 1945 speech by Haile Selassie (Ministry of Information, *Religious Freedom in Ethiopia*, Addis Ababa, 1965, 16; see Jürgen Klein, *Christlich-Muslimische Beziehungen in Äthiopien: Interreligiöse Situation – Konfliktträume – Verstehenszugänge*, Münster: Lit, 2021, 81).
  - 10 Bahru Zewde, *Pioneers of Change in Ethiopia: The Reformist Intellectuals of the Early Twentieth Century*, Oxford: James Currey, 2002, 136f.
  - 11 Tibebe Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia: Resistance and Resilience*, Waco: Baylor University Press, 2009, 410n40.



premised on enforcing Christian uniformity. Re-emerging Christological conflicts in the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) were settled through political pressure and violence, with Christianity imposed as the universal religion for all citizens. Aside from Yohannes's own piety, two political reasons underlay this. Firstly, Yohannes' reign was marked by conflict with his Muslim neighbours, from the encroachment of Egypt in the 1870s to his battles with the Mahdists in the 1880s, which would cost him his life. The claim that he was defending the Christian faith helped rally large armies.<sup>12</sup> Muslims, meanwhile, were forced to convert.<sup>13</sup> Secondly, the enforcement of Christian Orthodoxy strengthened Yohannes' political base, which lay in the Orthodox highlands of Tigray, Gondar and Gojjam, while weakening his foremost rival and ultimate successor, Menelik II (r. 1889–1913), who drew his strength from expanding into the Muslim and 'pagan' areas of the east and south.<sup>14</sup>

Following Yohannes' death, Menelik inherited the empire and continued Ethiopia's expansion into the south, east and west. At the same time, the former core areas of the north were weakened by warfare, disease and famine. This shift in the country's geographic orientation necessitated the integration of religious diversity,<sup>15</sup> even as the subsequent installation of settler-landlords reinforced notions of Amhara-Orthodox dominance, the effects of which persist to this day in the south's political economy.<sup>16</sup> Hence, Menelik enabled a certain level of religious autonomy, for example in the Muslim-ruled 'province' of Jimma. Foreign policy also pointed to the integration of Islam, with Menelik's main enemies no longer Egypt or Sudan, but encroaching European colonialism, in particular Italy's fraudulent claim to an Ethiopian protectorate. It was now the Christian nation of Italy that, in Menelik's words, sought to 'ruin the country and to change our religion',<sup>17</sup> until it was repulsed for a generation in the 1896 battle of Adwa. Seeking to balance out French and British interests in the Sudan, Menelik even established cordial relations with the Mahdist caliphate.<sup>18</sup>

12 Harold G. Marcus, *The Life and Times of Menelik II: Ethiopia 1844–1913*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975, 40.

13 Marcus, *The Life and Times*, 58.

14 Marcus, *The Life and Times*, 27, 28.

15 See also Hussein Ahmed, *Islam in Nineteenth-Century Wallo*, Ethiopia: Revival, Reform, and Reaction, Leiden: Brill, 2001, 185.

16 Marcus, *The Life and Times*, 193f; Haggai Erlich, 'Ethiopia and the Middle East: Rethinking History', in *New Trends in Ethiopian Studies. Papers of the 12th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*. Michigan State University 5–10 September 1994. Volume I: Humanities and Human Resources, eds. Grover Hudson and Harold G. Marcus, Lawrenceville: Red Sea Press, 1994. 74–82; Terje Østebø et al., 'Religion, Ethnicity, and Charges of Extremism: The Dynamics of Inter-Communal Violence in Ethiopia', *European Institute of Peace*, 2021, 29–31, [www.eip.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Ostebo-et-al-2021-Religion-ethnicity-and-charges-of-Extremism-in-Ethiopia-final.pdf](http://www.eip.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Ostebo-et-al-2021-Religion-ethnicity-and-charges-of-Extremism-in-Ethiopia-final.pdf).

17 Marcus, *The Life and Times*, 160.

18 Marcus, *The Life and Times*, 175.

This tactical embrace of Islam had its limits, however, as Menelik's never-crowned heir—his grandson Lij Iyasu—was to discover. Iyasu's father, originally a Muslim leader and close ally of Menelik in Wollo, had demonstrated how religion was interwoven with political power in Imperial Ethiopia when he converted to Christianity under Yohannes' edict of religious uniformity. Iyasu was only 13 years old when he was named heir to the throne and, in trying to emerge from his appointed regents' shadow during Menelik's dying years, made numerous enemies thanks to his inexperience and impulsiveness. Iyasu sought to counterbalance these failings by building up his popular appeal among a variety of constituents, which included propagating a vision of religious and ethnic equality.<sup>19</sup> Driven by a mixture of domestic and foreign political calculations, Iyasu began integrating Muslim politicians into Ethiopian rule. His most prominent regal rival was Tafari Makonnen, who would go on to become Emperor Haile Selassie I but was then governor of Harar. Iyasu's embrace of Islam thus ensured the Orthodox Tafari could not build a power base in the east. Internationally, Iyasu's approach to Islam aligned Ethiopia with Germany and the Ottoman Empire in the First World War, in the hope that the ambitions of France and England in the Horn of Africa could be contained.<sup>20</sup> Though it remains disputed whether Iyasu actually converted to Islam,<sup>21</sup> the mere accusation that he had done so ultimately led to his downfall, with the Orthodox patriarch releasing Ethiopian rulers from their vows to the emperor. Menelik's daughter Zewditu (r. 1916–1930) was installed as empress, and Tafari appointed her regent and heir apparent.

During his early regency, Tafari was seen as 'the natural ally of the progressives' because he struggled against the conservative establishment and their figurehead, the devout and traditionally minded Zewditu.<sup>22</sup> Following his ascent to the throne in 1930, however, it became clear that the primary drive behind Haile Selassie's modernist reforms in education, administration and the military was imperial absolutism. One of Haile Selassie's first acts as emperor was to task the reformist intellectual Tekle-Hawariat Tekle-Mariyam with drafting an Ethiopian constitution. This constitution, promulgated in 1931, was modelled on the Japanese Meiji-era constitution, which in turn was based on the Prussian model of imperial monarchy.<sup>23</sup> The Ethiopian constitution even exceeded the absolutist tendencies of its templates, foregoing an independent parliament and eliding civil rights, including freedom of religion. The Ethiopian state rested solely on the 'imperial dignity' of Haile Selassie (Arts. 3, 5), who sovereignly 'instituted' legislative chambers (Art. 7) and 'recognized' a very basic set of individual rights and duties (Arts. 18–27).

19 Marcus, *The Life and Times*, 252, 258.

20 Marcus, *The Life and Times*, 166–68.

21 Marcus, *The Life and Times*, 267–76; Erlich, 'Ethiopia and the Middle East', 84–90; Zewde, *A History*, 124–28.

22 Zewde, *A History*, 110.

23 Zewde, *A History*, 62; Calvitt J. Clarke, 'Seeking a Model for Modernization: Ethiopia's Japanizers', *Selected Annual Proceedings of the Florida Conference of Historians* 11 (2004).

Remarkably, the 1931 constitution made no reference to the EOTC, which had crowned and legitimated Ethiopian monarchs for centuries. The national myth of the thirteenth-century *Kəbrä Nəgāst* was instead condensed into the constitutional persona of the emperor, ‘whose line descends without interruption to ... King Solomon of Jerusalem and ... the Queen of Sheba’ (Art. 3). From this constitutional position, Haile Selassie asserted governing power over the EOTC, beginning with a series of laws on the church’s land ownership and finances instituted before the Italian invasion of 1936.<sup>24</sup> Following the invasion, Haile Selassie was driven into exile, with Fascist Italy employing a divide-and-rule strategy that sought to dilute Ethiopian resistance by securing the loyalty of Muslims. The occupiers recognized Islamic courts, supported Muslim education, subsidized the *hajj* pilgrimage, and funded the construction of over 50 mosques, including the al-Anwar Mosque in Addis Ababa.<sup>25</sup>

With Italy ousted and Haile Selassie returning from exile in 1941, the Orthodox Church once again assumed its place at the centre of Ethiopian politics. Muslims, meanwhile, were accused of having collaborated with Ethiopia’s enemy and faced harsh measures. The emperor continued his programme of aligning Ethiopian Orthodoxy with the state via the extensive ‘Regulations for the Administration of the Church’ of 1942,<sup>26</sup> which subjected ecclesial rights, institutions and finances to state supervision.<sup>27</sup> Through constant interference, Haile Selassie prevented the patriarchate from becoming an independent authority,<sup>28</sup> further reinforcing the Orthodox Church’s subservience to his throne by securing its autocephaly from the Coptic Church in 1959. In cementing his post-war Western alliances, the emperor also worked towards better integration of foreign missions in the ‘Regulations Governing the Activities of Missions’ of 1944.<sup>29</sup> The regulations set up the state as arbiter of religious plurality, with areas of the country open or closed to missionary proselytization based on whether the EOTC had a strong historical presence and hence would be resistant to Protestant competition. (In closed areas, missionaries were still welcome to work in aid and development.) While this gave missions a legal footing beyond imperial toleration, in practice the decree granted the Orthodox opposition a powerful lever against foreign missions in cases where they could be construed as having violated the

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24 See Calvin E. Shenk, ‘The Development of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and Its Relationship with the Ethiopian Government from 1930 to 1970’, PhD dissertation, New York University, New York, 1972, 71–79.

25 Hussein Ahmed, ‘Coexistence and/or Confrontation? Towards a Reappraisal of Christian-Muslim Encounter in Contemporary Ethiopia’, *Journal of Religion in Africa* 36/1 (2006): 8f; Terje Østebø, *Localising Salafism: Religious Change Among Oromo Muslims in Bale, Ethiopia*, Leiden: Brill, 2012, 125–31.

26 Shenk, ‘The Development of the Ethiopian’, 221–27.

27 Christopher Clapham, *Haile-Selassie’s Government*. London: Longmans, 1969, 82.

28 Haile Mariam Larebo, ‘The Ethiopian Orthodox Church and Politics in the Twentieth Century: Part II’, *Northeast African Studies* 10 (1988): 10.

29 For a copy of the decree, see Aymro Wondmagegnehu and Joachim Motovu, *The Ethiopian Orthodox Church*, Addis Ababa: Ethiopian Orthodox Mission, 1970, 170–74.

decree's religious or linguistic stipulations.<sup>30</sup>

The relationship between nation and faith was further recalibrated in the 1955 revision of the constitution promulgated at Haile Selassie's silver jubilee, with the Orthodox Church now legally enshrined as the Ethiopian Empire's established faith (Arts. 10, 16, 20, 21 and 126). The constitution also, however, contained acknowledgement of the country's religious plurality, guaranteeing non-interference in the exercise of 'any religion or creed', albeit governed by broadly defined political constraints.<sup>31</sup> This was in part due to the fact that the 1955 constitution sought to integrate the 1952 federation with Eritrea, where these basic rights were already guaranteed. In addition, the new constitution was strongly influenced by Haile Selassie's American adviser John Spencer, who drafted the original English text on the basis of the US Constitution.<sup>32</sup> Yet, as subsequent developments show, religious liberty remained a right in theory alone, as neither the political system nor the courts upheld it in practice.

The civil code of 1960 likewise ruled out discrimination on the basis of religion, while at the same time recognizing the EOTC as the only religious institution formally established by law. Under regulations published in 1966, other religious groups could apply to register as associations with the Ministry of the Interior.<sup>33</sup> For Ethiopian Muslims, consistently treated by Haile Selassie in the mode of a 'patronizing Christian king',<sup>34</sup> the civil code and registration procedure were a retrograde step. Despite having been enshrined into law during the Italian occupation,<sup>35</sup> Islamic jurisdiction and institutions were excluded from the emperor's modernizing legal framework. A draft chapter of the civil code making special provisions for Muslims was omitted from the final version, and *qāḍī* courts were not even mentioned in Ethiopian procedural law.<sup>36</sup> Thus, while Muslim courts and some Islamic institutions, such as schools, continued to be recognized in practice, they were offered no legal footing other than those pertaining to the registration of associations.

30 Nathan B. Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers: Anabaptist Church Growth in Ethiopia, 1948–1998*, Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1998, 128–31; Etana Habte Dinka, 'Resistance and Integration in the Ethiopian Empire: The Case of the Macca Oromo of Qellem (1880s–1974)', PhD dissertation, SOAS, London, 2018, 29f.

31 Haustein, *Writing Religious History*, 5.

32 John H. Spencer, *Ethiopia at Bay: A Personal Account of the Haile Sellassie Years*, Algonac: Reference Publications, 1984, 258.

33 Tsahafe Tazaz Akilu Habte Wold, 'Legal Notice No: 321 of 1966. Regulations Issued Pursuant to the Control of Associations Provision of the Civil Code of 1960', *Negarit Gazeta* 26 (1966).

34 Erlich, 'Ethiopia and the Middle East', 55.

35 Terje Østebø, 'Christian–Muslim Relations in Ethiopia', in *Striving in Faith: Christians and Muslims in Africa*, eds. Anne N. Kubai and Tarakegn Adebo, Uppsala: Life & Peace Institute, 2008, 77; Østebø, *Localising Salafism*, 125–29.

36 Hussein Ahmed, 'Coexistence and/or Confrontation', 9–10.

Protestant mission churches continued to operate under the 1944 missions' decree, with national churches not formed until the end of the Haile Selassie era. This meant the first test of the registration provisions would fall to a small but ambitious religious fringe: Ethiopian Pentecostals. Foreign Pentecostal missions had come to Ethiopia in the late 1950s, following which an independent group—consisting mostly of university students—broke away and formed the first national Pentecostal assembly: the Ethiopian Full Gospel Believers' Church.<sup>37</sup> Their attempt to register this new organization betrayed the students' modernizing aspirations and elite mobility, prompting the authorities to decline their application and setting the young Pentecostals on a path to conflict with the state.<sup>38</sup> Having failed to secure their ambitions through political negotiation, the courts or international support, they regrouped underground, laying the foundations for a narrative of religious persecution and a spiritual defiance of political power.

### **'THE REVOLUTION ABOVE ALL!': RELIGION AND THE DERG**

The Ethiopian Revolution was the culmination of several popular demands, one of which was equal rights for all religions. Widescale protests and strikes erupted from February 1974, beginning with taxi drivers, students and teachers, as well as mutiny within the army.<sup>39</sup> In April 1974, Muslims held a large demonstration in Addis Ababa, with about 100,000 participants forwarding 13 demands, including the separation of religion from politics, as well as the right to form a national organization of Ethiopian Muslims.<sup>40</sup> This led to counter-protests by the Orthodox establishment,<sup>41</sup> though the Muslim demonstration received some Christians support as well.

A new constitution was drafted to accommodate the various grievances and relieve political tensions.<sup>42</sup> Regarding matters of faith, the draft now contained a constitutional right to form religious associations for the propagation of any faith, as long as it was 'not used for political purposes or its presence prejudicial to public order or morality' (Art. 24). The wide remit of this safeguarding clause meant little would have changed in practice, as it gave the state almost boundless power to intervene and regulate. On the whole, the constitution fell far short of separating church and state, mandating that the emperor belong to 'the Monophysite Ethiopian Orthodox Church' and that prayers for him were offered in all religious services (Art. 9). Even so, Patriarch Theophilos condemned the constitution for failing to define a special legal persona

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37 Haustein, *Writing Religious History*, 37–136.

38 Haustein, *Writing Religious History*, 137–87.

39 Heinrich Scholler and Paul Brietzke, *Ethiopia: Revolution, Law and Politics*, München: Weltforum Verlag, 1976, 4f.

40 Hussein Ahmed, 'Coexistence and/or Confrontation', 10; Østebø, *Localising Salafism*, 198.

41 Hussein Ahmed, 'Coexistence and/or Confrontation', 11.

42 Scholler and Brietzke, *Ethiopia: Revolution*, 154–83.

for the EOTC, which he (rightly) feared was a first step towards disestablishment of church and state.<sup>43</sup>

Such discussions were rendered moot, however, when the ‘coordinating committee’ (Derg) of the armed forces established its hold on the revolution. As the Derg stepped up attacks on the emperor, even the patriarch fell into line. In his traditional broadcast on Ethiopian New Year (11 September 1974), Patriarch Theophilos omitted the constitutionally demanded prayer for the emperor and his family, blessing the revolutionaries instead and casting their cause as a ‘holy movement’.<sup>44</sup> Haile Selassie was deposed and arrested by the Derg the very next day, never to be seen in public again.<sup>45</sup>

The revolution soon took a violent turn, with a deadly shoot-out between different factions of the Derg and the murder of political prisoners. As Mengistu Hailemariam began his rise to the top, the Derg declared socialism as its governing philosophy. This was presented as a special Ethiopian variant of communalism arising from the country’s cultural and religious traditions:

The political philosophy which *emanates from our great religions* which teach the equality of man, and from our tradition of living and sharing together, as well as from our history so replete with national sacrifice is *Hibretsebsawinet* (Ethiopian Socialism).<sup>46</sup>

At the same time, Ethiopia’s unity and egalitarian values were presented as ‘the sacred faith of all our people’.<sup>47</sup> This double identification of socialism with religion initially found support among various faith constituencies. Some Orthodox clergy pointed to the similarity between Jesus’ teachings and the ideals of socialism,<sup>48</sup> while Muslims for the first time enjoyed national recognition of three Islamic holidays.<sup>49</sup> Among Protestants, the general secretary of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY), Gudina Tumsa, issued a pastoral letter in support of socialism, promising to hand over the church’s charitable institutions to the state now that

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43 Calvin E. Shenk, ‘Church and State in Ethiopia: From Monarchy to Marxism’, *Mission Studies* 11 (1994): 208.

44 Haile Larebo, ‘The Orthodox Church and the State in the Ethiopian Revolution, 1974–84’, *Religion in Communist Lands* 14 (1986): 150.

45 He was kept under house arrest and murdered by the Derg in August 1975 (Haggai Erlich, *Haile Selassie: His Rise, His Fall*, London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2019, 182–85).

46 Provisional Military Government of Ethiopia, ‘Declaration of the Provisional Military Government of Ethiopia’, Addis Ababa, 20 December 1974

47 Provisional Military Government of Ethiopia, ‘Declaration’, 7.

48 Teferra Haile-Selassie, *The Ethiopian Revolution 1974–1991: From a Monarchical Autocracy to a Military Oligarchy*, London: Kegan Paul International, 1997, 154.

49 Hussein Ahmed, ‘Coexistence and/or Confrontation’, 11.

the government had committed to taking care of the people's needs.<sup>50</sup> Likewise, members of the Derg and official newspapers emphasized the common ground between religions and Ethiopian socialism.<sup>51</sup>

It is important to note this alignment, as subsequent repressive measures against various religions have led opponents and supporters of the revolution alike to contend that the regime pursued plans for the destruction of Ethiopian religions from the start.<sup>52</sup> Such a simple juxtaposition of socialism and religion obfuscates the more complicated relationship between religion and politics under the Derg. The revolutionary regime had inherited from Haile Selassie a highly centralist state ruling over an ethnically and religiously fractured country. As such, the government continued to consolidate power through integrating and subjugating religions even as it abolished Orthodox privileges. As with Haile Selassie, this entailed a mix of co-optation, regulation and repression.

The EOTC was the first to become aligned, with the land reform of 1975 depriving the church of its economic foundation in land revenues and rendering it dependent on state subsidies.<sup>53</sup> Further restructuring efforts were supported by some within the church but strongly opposed by Patriarch Abunä Theophilos—now a fervent critic of the Derg—and his allies, leading to his deposition in 1976.<sup>54</sup> He was imprisoned for three years and murdered in 1979. Under the eyes of the Derg, the church elected a replacement in the apolitical monk Abunä Takla Haymanot, who would not contest the authority of the state. When he died in 1988, the synod elected an

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50 Jörg Haustein, 'Navigating Political Revolutions: Ethiopia's Churches During and After the Mengistu Regime', in *Falling Walls: The Year 1989/90 as a Turning Point in the History of World Christianity = Einstürzende Mauern. Das Jahr 1989/90 Als Epochenjahr in Der Geschichte Des Weltchristentums*, ed. Klaus Koschorke, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2009, 126.

51 Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement*, 2012f.

52 Haile-Selassie, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, 154; Peter Schwab, *Ethiopia: Politics, Economics and Society*, London: Frances Pinter, 1985, 92f; Giulia Bonacci, 'Ethiopia 1974–1991: Religious Policy of the State and Its Consequences on the Orthodox Church', in *Ethiopian Studies at the End of the Second Millenium: Proceedings of the XIVth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies November 6–11, 2000, Addis Ababa*, eds. Baye Yimam, Richard Pankhurst, David Chapple, Yonas Admassu, Alula Pankhurst and Teferra Birhanu, Addis Ababa: Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University, 2000, 593–605. In particular, in 1981 an alleged secret Derg memorandum was published in various outlets appearing to show a detailed plan for eradicating religion in Ethiopia. Its authenticity was denied by the government and later scholarship has concluded that the document was likely forged (Larebo, 'The Orthodox Church', 156; Øyvind M. Eide, *Revolution and Religion in Ethiopia: Growth and Persecution of the Mekane Yesus Church, 1974–85*, Oxford: James Currey, 2000, 163; Wudu Tafete Kassu, 'The Ethiopian Orthodox Church, the Ethiopian State, and the Alexandrian See: Indigenizing the Episcopacy and Forging National Identity, 1926–1991', PhD dissertation, University of Illinois, Urbana, 2006, 351–52).

53 Haustein, 'Navigating Political Revolutions', 152.

54 Kassu, 'The Ethiopian Orthodox Church', 310–23.

acclaimed ‘man of the revolution’ in Patriarch Merkorios.<sup>55</sup> Both patriarchs regularly appeared with Mengistu Hailemariam at public functions, and both were members of the national parliament during the Derg’s rule. While this political alignment did not mean Orthodox practice was entirely free from socialist attacks and repression, the Church nevertheless continued to operate, retained its social prestige, and managed to grow significantly.<sup>56</sup> Donham, for instance, suggests that the instalment of an acquiescent patriarch meant the EOTC ‘had become virtually an arm of the revolutionary state’.<sup>57</sup> Repression of religious institutions thus went hand in hand with co-optation, with the Derg successfully using the EOTC’s ramified network to ‘spread its ideology and control over rural localities’,<sup>58</sup> in part through the new patriarch promoting seminars on the compatibility of socialism with Orthodoxy.

Islam was also co-opted by the state, serving as a counterweight to the continuation of Orthodox privileges, with Muslim clergy appearing alongside the Orthodox patriarch at state occasions.<sup>59</sup> In 1976, the Derg agreed to the formation of the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (EIASC). While this appeared to fulfil a longstanding Muslim demand, it also gave the government a central handle by which to co-opt Islam. Moreover, Muslims continued to face adverse conditions. The EIASC was never granted full legal recognition and the family of its first chairman suffered a brutal government attack in 1977, with one of his sons arrested, tortured, and murdered, and another son imprisoned.<sup>60</sup> The *hajj* and the importation of religious literature remained restricted, as were Sufi practices and prayers in official settings. A marked increase in government schools also led the state to attempt to replace traditional Islamic institutions of learning, inadvertently fuelling Islamic reform movements through the promotion of educational modernism.<sup>61</sup>

On the Protestant side, the Derg’s record was incongruent.<sup>62</sup> Larger churches were forcibly aligned, beginning in 1979 with the arrest and clandestine murder of Gudina Tumsa. His sustained attempts to engage constructively with socialism while shoring up the churches against revolutionary excesses were seen as a political threat. Moreover, Gudina’s brother, Baro Tumsa, had become a leading Oromo nationalist and guerrilla fighter against the Derg. With

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55 Kassu, ‘The Ethiopian Orthodox Church’, 360.

56 Kassu, ‘The Ethiopian Orthodox Church’, 296–305.

57 Donald L. Donham, *Marxist Modern: An Ethnographic History of the Ethiopian Revolution*, Berkely: University of California Press, 1999, 142.

58 Donham, *Marxist Modern*, 142.

59 Jon Abbink, ‘An historical-anthropological approach to Islam in Ethiopia: issues of Identity and politics’, *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 11 (1998): 117.

60 Østebø, *Localising Salafism*, 199–200.

61 Østebø, *Localising Salafism*, 226–35.

62 See Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement*, 209–72.



the abduction of Gudina, the government began confiscating assets and closing scores of local parishes in various mainline denominations. Despite these oppressive measures, most mainline denominations had managed to attain official recognition by the mid-1980s. Alongside the EOTC and the EIASC, Protestants were consulted in the drafting of the 1984 constitution, and they subsequently secured the reopening of some churches, and obtained a seat in parliament.<sup>63</sup>

Marginal churches, like Mennonites and Pentecostals, on the other hand, were not enticing targets for co-optation and from 1978 onwards suffered near universal closures. Pentecostals in particular were regarded as a disruptive presence<sup>64</sup>—while not politically oriented, their prioritization of faith over the requirements of the state meant they clashed with authorities. Abstention from alcohol, effervescent religious practices and a proselytizing zeal also exposed them in local communities. In order to avoid closures themselves, mainline Protestant pastors sometimes even collaborated with the Derg to oust Charismatic groups.<sup>65</sup> Pentecostals and Charismatics quickly re-established resilient underground networks, further setting them up as the epitome of ‘illegal’ religion and arguably increasing their attractiveness to ordinary Ethiopians as the Derg’s failures and brutality mounted. In its campaigns against these groups, the Derg vernacularized the derogatory epithet ‘Pente’, which came to be applied to mainline Protestants as well, some of whom had never even heard of the term or Pentecostalism (Donham 1999, 144–45).

The Derg’s co-optative management of the major Ethiopian religions led to the country’s first inter-religious forum, which was convened in 1978 during the Ogaden War as a means of shoring up popular support and ascertaining the loyalty of Muslim elites. The forum’s motto was ‘religion shall not divide us’, with religious authorities warning against disturbing national unity through politicizing faith.<sup>66</sup> Nevertheless, representatives of the EOTC and the EIASC used the opportunity to draft a non-public, joint letter to the Derg complaining of restrictions in the exercise of religious freedom.<sup>67</sup>

Socialist Ethiopia was, therefore, no simple ideological onslaught against religion. Rather, it represented a radical continuation of Haile Selassie’s nation-building project where a centralist state co-opted religious majorities. Though undoubtedly there were Marxist ideologues who

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63 Eide, *Revolution and Religion*; Johannes Launhardt, *Evangelicals in Addis Ababa (1919–1991): With Special Reference to the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus and the Addis Ababa Synod*, Münster: Lit, 2004; Hausteim, ‘Navigating Political Revolutions’, 124–30.

64 See Hausteim, *Writing Religious History*, 188–247.

65 Hausteim, *Writing Religious History*, 239–47. The term Charismatic is typically used for people within mainline denominations who adopt Pentecostal beliefs and practices.

66 Eide, *Revolution and Religion*, 164–66; Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement*, 213–14.

67 Klein, *Christlich-Muslimische Beziehungen*, 209–10.

advanced ‘scientific socialism’ in opposition to religion,<sup>68</sup> the Derg’s political energy was primarily directed at making religions subservient to the state. This was done by aligning hierarchies, suppressing ‘insurgent’ religions, and disturbing religious practice where it clashed with collective requirements or emerged as a political force powerful enough to unite different regions, ethnicities or other segments of society. Constitutionally secular and ideologically atheist, the socialist state thus maintained—perhaps even increased—the political significance of religions through the centralizing controls imposed. Aligned religious leaders lent the state political legitimacy, while alienated religious groups formed alternative political communities, be it through Pentecostal underground churches, Protestant missionary support for Oromo liberation movements,<sup>69</sup> or the rise of Islamic reformism as a response to the co-optation of ‘*ulamā*.’<sup>70</sup>

## **LIBERATION AND CONTROL: RELIGION AND ETHNIC FEDERALISM**

In 1991, the Derg was ousted by a coalition of rebel armies, led by the Tigrayan People’s Liberation Front (TPLF). The TPLF came from a similar ideological background as the regime it fought, with its leader, Meles Zenawi, only renouncing Marxism-Leninism in 1990, at about the same time as Mengistu Hailemariam.<sup>71</sup> Like the Derg, the TPLF’s former ideological leanings had not prevented it from co-opting religion during the insurgency. The TPLF leadership refrained from attacking monastic and ecclesial privileges, and Orthodox priests were recruited as combatants or for practical support, while Muslim support for the TPLF rose as the Derg failed to deliver on religious equality.<sup>72</sup> At the same time, the TPLF stepped into the established political role of regulating the church, organizing church conferences that, for example, pushed for a separate church secretariat in ‘liberated territories’ or sought structural reforms.

Having ousted Mengistu, the TPLF established a new governing formula in the form of ethnic or ‘multi-national’ federalism. The Ethiopian state now no longer rested on the integrity of the centre, but rather on a constitutional contract between the ‘nations, nationalities and peoples of Ethiopia’.<sup>73</sup> Politically, this entailed forming a governing coalition made up of ethnic parties: the EPRDF. Administration of the country was organized into ethnically defined states or regions, which were allowed to adopt their own languages and scripts, and even given the right to secede. Earlier notions of Abyssinian cultural supremacy were replaced by the official

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68 Østebø, *Localising Salafism*, 199.

69 Haustein, ‘Navigating Political Revolutions’, 128f.

70 Østebø, *Localising Salafism*, 220–35.

71 Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution 1974–1987: A Transformation From an Aristocratic to a Totalitarian Autocracy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, 362.

72 John Young, *Peasant Revolution in Ethiopia: The Tigray People’s Liberation Front, 1975–1991*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, 174–78.

73 ‘The Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia’, *Federal Negarit* 1 (1995): preamble.

valorization of cultural and ethnic diversity, visualized in seemingly ubiquitous depictions of ‘cultural’ dances on state television.

Despite being a radical and promising attempt at solving the age-old friction between Ethiopia’s fragmentary and centrist tendencies, the project was fraught with tensions. The main ethnic groups recognized were very different in terms of their geographic distributions, cultural configurations and internal plurality.<sup>74</sup> In addition, the dynamic of centralization continued unabated, with the TPLF establishing undisputed hegemony over the army, the political process and economic assets.<sup>75</sup>

The EPRDF’s stance regarding religions was also characterized by ambivalence. Officially, Ethiopia was a strictly secular state. For the first time, the Ethiopian constitution provided a robust formula for freedom of religion and the non-discrimination of religious minorities. In accordance with the 1966 regulations, all religious groups could attain legal status through registering as a non-governmental association. The EOTC, however, retained its privileged legal position as the only *religious* body directly established in Ethiopian law and thus was not subject to the registration requirement and the state oversight this afforded.

Moreover, as soon as political considerations got in the way, the government’s promise of state neutrality was cast aside.<sup>76</sup> Shortly after the TPLF took over Addis Ababa, Patriarch Abunä Merkorios was forced to abdicate and managed to escape from Ethiopia. Surrounded by a tightly knit entourage that regarded him as the legitimate patriarch, he established what became known as the ‘Legal Synod in Exile’ in the USA.<sup>77</sup> In 1992, the Ethiopian Holy Synod elected a Tigrayan monk, Abuna Paulos, as the new patriarch. Despite the EPRDF wishing to emphasize its discontinuity from the Derg, the election was seen as a continuation of the long-standing pattern of governmental interference in Orthodox institutional processes. Meanwhile, other Orthodox believers considered the election of Paulos—a protege of Abuna Theophilos and a former political prisoner of the Derg—as the ‘the reinstatement of the righteous succession to

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74 Merera Gudina, ‘Contradictory Interpretations of Ethiopian History: The Need for a New Consensus’, in *Ethnic Federalism: The Ethiopian Experience in Comparative Perspective*, ed. David Turton, Oxford: James Currey, 2006; Fisseha Assefa, ‘Theory versus practice in the implementation of Ethiopia’s ethnic federalism’, in *Ethnic Federalism: The Ethiopian Experience in Comparative Perspective*, eds. David Turton, Oxford: James Currey, 2006.

75 Sarah Vaughan, ‘Federalism, Revolutionary Democracy and the Developmental State, 1991–2012’, in *Understanding Contemporary Ethiopia: Monarchy, Revolution and the Legacy of Meles Zenawi*, eds. Gérard Prunier and Éloi Ficquet, London: Hurst & Co., 2015.

76 Jörg Haustein and Terje Østebø, ‘EPRDF’s Revolutionary Democracy and Religious Plurality: Islam and Christianity in Post-Derg Ethiopia’, in *Reconfiguring Ethiopia: The Politics of Authoritarian Reforms*, eds. Jon Abbink and Tobias Hagmann, Abingdon: Routledge, 2013.

77 See Walle Engedayehu, ‘The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church in the Diaspora: Expansion in the Midst of Division’, *African Social Science Review* 6 (2014).

Abuna Theophilos, who had been uncanonically eliminated and replaced'.<sup>78</sup> Throughout Paulos' patriarchate, there were widespread concerns that he was a fervent supporter of the EPRDF, sharing its modernistic approach to development. In 1997, Bahatawi Fekade Selassie, a hermit who had been a vocal critic of Abuna Paulos, was shot dead in the church of Istifanos in Addis Ababa, allegedly by a bodyguard attempting to defend Paulos from the hermit's aggression.<sup>79</sup> This excessive use of force to repress dissent shocked the Orthodox community, indicating as it did an affinity between state brutality and a violent church authoritarianism embodied by the patriarch.

In 2012, Abuna Paulos and Meles Zenawi died unexpectedly within a week of each other, fuelling fevered speculation and creating a disorienting power void.<sup>80</sup> Following the nomination of an interim patriarch, the government made a failed attempt to reconcile the Ethiopian synod with the exiled one. In 2013, the election of a new Tigrayan patriarch, Abuna Mathias, frustrated Orthodox believers' expectations for change, confirming in their eyes that the government intended to continue meddling in religious affairs. The absence of any high-profile contenders in the election only served to confirm suspicions about governmental involvement.<sup>81</sup> Abuna Mathias was seen as less politically involved than his predecessor, and widely considered a skilful diplomat having himself tried to reconcile the two synods while Archbishop of North America. Yet, his closeness to Paulos and ethnic identity provoked ongoing anxiety.

Muslims, meanwhile, suffered 'enduring constraints'<sup>82</sup> in the securitization of Islam and the co-optation of the EIASC, with mosques remaining a contested presence in the public sphere.<sup>83</sup> Much of this was framed as protecting Ethiopia from 'religious extremism', typically in connection with events that fuelled concerns about Islamic terrorism in the country: a violent clash in the al-Anwar mosque in Addis Ababa in 1995; the assassination attempt on Mubarak the same year; 9/11 and the subsequent 'war on terror'; and Ethiopia's invasion of Somalia

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78 Stéphane Ancel and Eloi Ficquet, 'The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) and the Challenges of Modernity', in *Understanding Contemporary Ethiopia: Monarchy, Revolution, and the Legacy of Meles Zenawi*, eds. Gerard Prunier and Eloi Ficquet, London: Hurst & Co., 2015, 80.

79 Ancel and Ficquet, 'The Ethiopian Orthodox', 80.

80 Éloi Ficquet, 'La Mort du Premier Ministre Éthiopien Meles Zenawi (Aout 2012): Dissimulation, Assomption et Sanctification', *Politique Africaine* 142 (2016).

81 See Ancel and Ficquet, 'The Ethiopian Orthodox', 88.

82 Feyissa, 'Muslims Renegotiating', 289.

83 Hussein Ahmed, 'Coexistence and/or Confrontation', 12–14.



in 2006.<sup>84</sup> As with the Derg, state interventions tended to produce the opposite of what was intended, with the government's sponsorship of a particular Sufi movement (al-Ahbash) an especially instructive example of how EPRDF interference eroded the EIASC's legitimacy and therefore the very 'Ethiopian Islam' it sought to promote through this conduit.<sup>85</sup> Al-Ahbash was cast by the EPRDF as non-violent and contextually adapted Islam, and in political terms was perceived as easier to control given its less robust ties with international Muslim communities and institutions. This transparent move on the part of the government prompted resistance, however, strengthening the reformist factions within Islam the state had sought to contain.

Protestants benefitted most from the EPRDF regime. For the first time, they could freely register churches and gain regular access to land for church buildings and burial grounds. Having already grown substantially during the era of operating underground, Protestant numbers soared, their population share increasing from just over 5 per cent in the mid-1980s to well over 25 per cent in recent statistics. This Protestant proliferation was fuelled to a large degree by Pentecostal expressions and inaugurated an entrepreneurial fragmentation of the church landscape. As Pentecostal beliefs and practices became embedded in mainline Protestant denominations, the (originally derogatory) epithet 'Pente' became a widely accepted self-designation for all evangelicals.<sup>86</sup>

Pentecostals largely understood their success as the 'fruit' of the persecution they had endured and a vindication of their political strategy—liberty and growth had not come through 'worldly' politics, but rather through spiritual resilience and defying government oppression. For much of the EPRDF era, this led to widespread disengagement from formal politics in favour of 'healing the country' through personal conversions and realizing developmental aspirations.<sup>87</sup> Accordingly, converted ex-politicians such as Tramrat Layne, former prime minister (PM) of the transitional government, were held in higher regard than Pentecostal politicians who had risen through the party ranks. Even Meles's successor, Pentecostal PM Hailemariam Desalegn,

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84 Abbink, 'An historical-anthropological approach', 118; Hussein Ahmed, 'Coexistence and/or Confrontation'; Jörg Haustein and Terje Østebø, 'EPRDF's Revolutionary Democracy and Religious Plurality: Islam and Christianity in Post-Derg Ethiopia', in *Reconfiguring Ethiopia: The Politics of Authoritarian Reforms*, eds. Jon Abbink and Tobias Hagmann, Abingdon: Routledge, 2013, 166f; Mohammed Dejen Assen, 'Contested Secularism in Ethiopia: The Contention Between Muslims and the Government', PhD dissertation, Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa, 2016.

85 Terje Østebø, 'Islam and State Relations in Ethiopia: From Containment to the Production of a "Governmental Islam"', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 81 (2013); Feyissa, 'Muslims Renegotiating', 289.

86 Jörg Haustein and Emanuele Fantini, 'Introduction: The Ethiopian Pentecostal Movement – History, Identity and Current Socio-Political Dynamics', *PentecoStudies* 12 (2013).

87 Dena Freeman, 'Pentecostalism in a Rural Context: Dynamics of Religion and Development in Southwest Ethiopia', *PentecoStudies* 12 (2013); Emanuele Fantini, 'Go Pente! The Charismatic Renewal of the Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia', in *Understanding Contemporary Ethiopia: Monarchy, Revolution and the Legacy of Meles Zenawi*, eds. Gérard Prunier and Éloi Ficquet, London: Hurst & Co., 2015.

failed to earn a wholehearted Protestant embrace. While this was arguably in part due to his membership in the widely ostracized anti-trinitarian sect of Oneness Pentecostalism,<sup>88</sup> as a man of the party he lacked—despite his religious confessions—the transformational aura of a born-again politician.

Two EPRDF policies influenced all religions alike. Firstly, in seeking to cut off outside political influence, the government enforced a strict separation between advocacy organizations and development work in its 2009 charity proclamation. In practice, this meant charitable work by a religious organization had to be split off into a separate entity, with detrimental effects for development areas that were of religious concern, such as efforts to curb female genital mutilation/cutting.<sup>89</sup> Secondly, in 2010, the government pushed for the establishment of inter-religious councils at a national and local level. While this fitted with the EPRDF's political aesthetics, it made religious leaders vulnerable to political surveillance and co-optation.

On the whole, the official secularism and pluralizing logic of the EPRDF regime came with a certain systematic affinity for Protestantism, thus promoting its growth. The fragmented and mostly Pentecostalized proliferation of Protestant churches matched the state's divide-and-rule strategy, while the movement's internal differences and largely apolitical vision of spiritual transformation presented no direct challenge to those in power. Nevertheless, the substantial growth of Protestantism prepared the ground for the re-emergence of religious narratives at the heart of Ethiopian nationhood.

## EMPIRE RESURGENT? ABIY AHMED'S GOD TALK AND ETHIOPIAN NATIONALISM

In February 2018, following three years of unrest, Hailemariam Desalegn announced his resignation as PM and chairman of the EPRDF. The protests were led by Ethiopia's largest ethnic group, the Oromo, who had long been subject to political marginalization. Hailemariam's resignation sparked a political crisis, with the various ethnic parties within the EPRDF vying for power. In the end, Abiy Ahmed from the Oromo Democratic Party managed to gain the crucial support of the Amhara National Democratic Movement, as well as a sizeable bloc of the Southern Ethiopian People's Front, and was elected chairman of the EPRDF and sworn in as PM. It soon became apparent that this was more than a swing of political power toward the Oromo within the ruling governing coalition. Abiy moved to abolish the EPRDF's ethnic rendering of politics altogether, reverting instead to a one-nation ideal of Ethiopia, albeit articulated as multi-ethnic collaboration within his governing philosophy of *'mädämär'* (synergy).<sup>90</sup>

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88 Jörg Hausteijn, 'The New Prime Minister's Faith: A Look at Oneness Pentecostalism in Ethiopia', *PentecoStudies* 12 (2013).

89 Jörg Hausteijn, and Emma Tomalin, 'Keeping Faith in 2030: Religions and the Sustainable Development Goals: Findings and Recommendations', Arts & Humanities Research Council, 2019, 12, <https://religions-and-development.leeds.ac.uk/research-network>.

90 Abiy Ahmed Ali, መደመር [Synergy], Addis Ababa, 2019.

Politically, this made sense. The system of ethno-regional federalism was controversial, in particular among urban elites and sections of the formerly predominant Ethiopian highlands, who felt disowned by the TPLF's erasure of the old imperial symbols of nationhood and its redrawing of borders and administrative units around ethnicity. Aligning with these forces represented the most straightforward way for Abiy to broaden his Oromo power base into a national coalition capable of displacing the TPLF hegemony and circumventing ethnic coalitions, with their long history of tactical manoeuvring. Abiy quickly built a broad popular platform through a series of liberating reforms, and weakened the TPLF by making peace with former arch-enemy Eritrea. He then set about transforming the EPRDF from an ethnic coalition into a programmatic party: the Prosperity Party.

The audaciousness and pace of these reforms can only fully be understood if one takes into account religion, which, in a sharp departure from previous leaders, is at the forefront of Abiy's political rhetoric.<sup>91</sup> There are a number of reasons for this, the most obvious being Abiy's personal faith as a Pentecostal Christian. Among Pentecostals, stories abound of his reign having been prophesized—a notion Abiy had nurtured for years.<sup>92</sup> In his acceptance speech upon being elected to office, Abiy recounted how as a boy his mother had whispered into his ear that he would one day serve his nation from the palace. On multiple occasions since, he has reiterated the notion that his rule was ordained and is upheld by God.<sup>93</sup>

It is important not to reduce Abiy's invocation of faith to religious psychology, however, as two important political factors underlie the prominent role played by religion in his governing platform. Firstly, Abiy's background and political career impressed on him the political potency of religious identities in Ethiopia. Hailing from a Muslim father and Orthodox mother, Abiy converted to Pentecostalism during his youth.<sup>94</sup> This personal acquaintance with all three faiths soon became an important political resource as Abiy transitioned from a military to political career. Posted by the military to his home town of Beshesha in the Jima zone, he was engaged in Christian-Muslim peacebuilding and conflict resolution initiatives following violent inter-religious clashes in 2006. Subsequently, as parliamentarian and deputy president of Oromia

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91 Jörg Haustein and Dereje Feyissa, 'The Strains of "Pente" Politics: Evangelicals and the Post-Orthodox State in Ethiopia', in *Routledge Handbook on the Horn of Africa*, ed. Jean-Nicolas Bach, London: Routledge, 2022, 486f.

92 Bekele Woldekidan, a well-established pastor and historian of Abiy's denomination, the Full Gospel Believers' Church, recounted how Abiy himself claimed over twenty years ago that he would one day be PM (Etalem Mesgana, 'Amazing Miracle in Ethiopia Interview with Pastor Bekele Woldekidan Part II', YouTube, 9 April 2020. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=ywTGT08vEE4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ywTGT08vEE4)).

93 Feyissa and Jörg Haustein, 'The Strains', 486.

94 According to the above-mentioned story, he would have been a Pentecostal already in the autumn of 2000.

Region, he intensified these efforts in his support for the Religious Forum for Peace.<sup>95</sup> This led to his PhD thesis on ‘Social Capital and its Role in Traditional Conflict Resolution in Ethiopia: The Case of Inter-Religious Conflict in Jimma Zone State’, which he defended at Addis Ababa University in 2017.<sup>96</sup> Brokering inter-religious peace and emphasizing Ethiopia’s multi-religious character thus became a key element of Abiy’s political capital as he ascended to power.

Accordingly, Abiy quickly involved himself in religious policy upon becoming PM, inserting himself into the already advanced negotiations aimed at resolving the schism between the EOTC and the exile synod. To much acclaim, he steered the talks to a successful end. Abiy also helped mend a rift among Muslims that had arisen between some of the Muslim protest leaders and the EIASC, whose leadership had been installed by the previous government. Alongside these reconciliation efforts, Abiy carefully avoided the usual evangelical exclusivism and embraced all religions, paying tribute to the Orthodox Church’s role in Ethiopian history, becoming the first PM to attend *iftār* celebrations in Ramadan 2019, and signalling his support for the celebration of Oromo traditional religion.<sup>97</sup> More fundamentally, he established Islam and Protestantism as fully institutionalized religions in Ethiopian law, giving them the same status as the EOTC. On the Muslim side this involved granting legal personality to the EIASC through a parliamentary act, while on the Protestant side a new entity was created in the form of the Evangelical Council, which unites (almost) all major Protestant denominations in Ethiopia and gives them legal status as religious bodies.<sup>98</sup>

A second political reason underlying Abiy’s foregrounding of religion is the link between Ethiopian national identity and religious exceptionalism. As noted above, all the major religions in Ethiopia attribute a special status to the country in their historical narratives, embracing the notion that its people are especially blessed by God. It is little wonder, then, that Abiy’s emphasis on Ethiopian unity over ethnic diversity regularly entails invoking God’s favour, whether this be in spiritualized interpretations of political events or the newly minted tradition of ending speeches with the phrase ‘May God bless Ethiopian and all its peoples’.<sup>99</sup> Even in his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, Abiy argued that Ethiopia’s ‘thousands of

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95 Abiy Ahmed Ali, ‘Countering Violent Extremism Through Social Capital: Anecdote from Jimma, Ethiopia’, *Horn of Africa Bulletin* 29 (2017).

96 Abiy Ahmed Ali, ‘Social Capital and Its Role in Traditional Conflict Resolution: The Case of Inter-religious Conflict in Jimma Zone of the Oromia Regional State in Ethiopia’, PhD dissertation, Addis Ababa University, 2016.

97 Hausteina and Dereje Feyissa, ‘The Strains of “Pente” Politics’, 489.

98 The Evangelical Council gave itself a basic trinitarian formula, which by default excludes Oneness Pentecostals, a large group in Ethiopia (see Hausteina, ‘The New Prime Minister’s’).

99 In many instances, Abiy uses the Amharic word ‘*fāṭari*’ for God, which means creator. Other words for God have specific Christian connotations and would undermine the appeal of Abiy’s multi-religious offering among Muslims.



years' of independence were linked to peaceful coexistence between Islam and Christianity.<sup>100</sup> Abiy's religious governing platform therefore presents much more than the narrow evangelical politics often diagnosed in the foreign press.<sup>101</sup> In essence, it revives the old imperial/Orthodox vision of 'one Ethiopia under God', now broadened into a multi-religious proposal delivered in Pentecostal style.

Even so, the limits of Abiy's governing pitch emerged early in his reign. From September 2018 onwards, the country has been afflicted by violent inter-ethnic and inter-religious clashes that have left hundreds dead and millions internally displaced.<sup>102</sup> Amid a context of simmering, decades-long grievances, Abiy's lofty rhetoric of synergy and Ethiopian unity has proven largely vacuous. Instead, people have increasingly resorted to the safety of ethnically or religiously defined kinship communities, with each clash deepening antagonisms and sowing expectations of further conflict.<sup>103</sup>

This failure of governance has left Abiy vulnerable to criticisms that he is driven by religious zeal rather than political reason. Most prominent among his critics have been leading members of the TPLF, who as early as August 2019 contrasted their secular 'realism' with Abiy's 'Great Ethiopia mantra' of a country prospering as it stretched its hands to God.<sup>104</sup> This dissonance only increased as Abiy failed to secure the support of the TPLF for his reform agenda, ultimately resulting in the Tigray War.

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100 Abiy Ahmed Ali, 'Lecture, Nobel Peace Prize', Nobel Prize, YouTube, 10 December 2019, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=jESA8MLAuCw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jESA8MLAuCw).

101 Andrew DeCort, 'Christian Nationalism is Tearing Ethiopia Apart', *Foreign Policy*, 18 June 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/06/18/ethiopia-pentecostal-evangelical-abiy-ahmed-christian-nationalism/>; 'God Will Make You Prosper: Charismatic Christianity Is Transforming Ethiopia', *The Economist*, 24 November 2018; 'Make Me a City: Power and Planning in Ethiopia', *The Economist*, 18 June 2022; Jean-Philippe Rémy, 'Abiy Ahmed, chef de guerre avec un prix Nobel de la paix', *Le Monde*, 4 February 2021, [www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2021/02/04/abiy-ahmed-premier-ministre-d-une-ethiopie-entre-guerre-et-paix\\_6068696\\_3212.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2021/02/04/abiy-ahmed-premier-ministre-d-une-ethiopie-entre-guerre-et-paix_6068696_3212.html); Fritz Schaap, 'Ethiopia's Chosen One: A Brutal War Waged By a Nobel Peace Prize Laureate', *Spiegel International*, 28 October 2021, [www.spiegel.de/international/world/ethiopia-s-chosen-one-a-brutal-war-waged-by-a-nobel-peace-prize-laureate-a-d2f4d03e-90e4-49a4-918b-96d4543f722b](https://www.spiegel.de/international/world/ethiopia-s-chosen-one-a-brutal-war-waged-by-a-nobel-peace-prize-laureate-a-d2f4d03e-90e4-49a4-918b-96d4543f722b).

102 For an overview and detailed analysis, see Østebø et al., 'Religion, Ethnicity'.

103 Østebø et al., 'Religion, Ethnicity'. 31.

104 Hausteina and Dereje Feyissa, 'The Strains of "Pente" Politics', 49of.

# CONTEMPORARY SITUATION

As religion has returned to the forefront of Ethiopian politics, significant tensions exist within all three main religious blocs: Orthodoxy, Islam and Protestantism. These are important to understand in order to appreciate the complexities of inter-religious relations in the country. Traditional religions form a fourth religious bloc that will be discussed in this section, which however, overlaps with the three other religions in many respects rather than forming a primary affiliation for many Ethiopians. The Catholic Church, despite retaining an official presence in Ethiopia, has a statistically insignificant reach of less than one per cent of the country's population overall.<sup>105</sup> Smaller churches and religious groups, such as Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses, also exist, but have not left a noticeable imprint on Ethiopia's religious fabric. A final group worth mentioning are Ethiopian Jews or Beta Israel, which following their large-scale immigration to Israel between 1977 and 1991 no longer have a numerically significant presence in Ethiopia.<sup>106</sup>

## ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY

Since the end of the Derg regime, the EOTC has experienced a period marked by the 'progressive erosion of Orthodox privilege and Church influence in matters of state'.<sup>107</sup> This loss of hegemony is exemplified by the steep decrease in the number of Orthodox Christians, many of whom have converted to competing Christian denominations.<sup>108</sup> According to the census, the population share claimed by Ethiopian Orthodoxy declined from 54 per cent to 43.5 per cent between 1984 and 2007. At the same time, however, the post-socialist era saw a period of intense innovation in which the church experienced something of a revival.<sup>109</sup> After years of social control and repression—in religion as in other spheres of life—the Orthodox Church witnessed a significant uptick in attendance as people sought refuge from the uncertainties of the socio-economic

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105 According to the 2007 census, the church only exceeds the 1 per cent threshold in Gambella (3.4 per cent) and the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Region (2.4 per cent).

106 Steven Kaplan, 'Art. Betä ʾĪsra'el', in *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica: Vol. 1*, ed. Siegbert Uhlig, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2003. In contemporary scholarship, the Beta Israel's claim to Jewish heritage is largely understood as mythological (Kaplan 2003), akin to that of the Judaizing influences in Ethiopian Orthodoxy (Afework Hailu 2020).

107 Tom Boylston, 'Orthodox Modern', Focus On The Horn, 2 July 2012, <https://focusonthehorn.wordpress.com/2012/07/20/orthodox-modern-religion-politics-in-todays-ethiopia-part-1/>.

108 Haustein and Terje Østebø, 'EPRDF's Revolutionary Democracy'.

109 Tom Boylston, *The Stranger at the Feast: Prohibition and Mediation in an Ethiopian Orthodox Christian Community*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2018.

transformations sweeping the country.<sup>110</sup> Confronted with a new religious market characterized by intense inter-religious competition, the EOTC emphasized its role as the ‘pillar of Ethiopian history’<sup>111</sup>—that is, an institution capable of providing continuity between the ancient Ethiopian state and its recent revolutionary incarnations.<sup>112</sup>

This historiographical repositioning of the EOTC was, in part, facilitated by the EPRDF’s folkloric re-stylization of religious identities in the public square and media—through selected Orthodox festivals and symbolism—which reinforced the pluralistic image of the country the government wished to perpetrate. Despite initial concerns regarding the over-regulation of religious expression in public and the ‘domestication of religion as culture’,<sup>113</sup> the EOTC soon realized the potential of occupying the public sphere with its sounds, symbols and rituals. Religious festivals became a means of invoking the historical imagination of Orthodoxy as the pillar of Ethiopian history through ‘highly recognizable indicators of civilization’: historical buildings, a literary tradition and national origin myths.<sup>114</sup> This engagement with history, however, remained vulnerable to being co-opted by the state in the service of wider national self-representation projects. With Orthodox believers seeking to consolidate and expand their presence in public spaces, these spaces became catalysts for inter-religious confrontations and violence across the country.<sup>115</sup> Recent years have seen a surge in polemics between the Orthodox Church and other religious groups—often intersecting with ethnic grievances—regarding ownership of specific sites in Ethiopian cities, or even concerning the fact that particular names bear religious connotations (for example, Meskel Square, or the Square of the Cross, in Addis Ababa and other towns).

While Abiy Ahmed’s ascension to power brought about an initial loosening of control over public expressions of religious belonging, it also engendered increasingly embattled forms of religious communication. During recent Orthodox festivals, for instance, believers have been

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110 Diego Maria Malara and Bethlehem Hailu, ‘Possessed by the Post-Socialist Zeitgeist: History, Spirits and the Problem of Generational (Dis)continuity in an Ethiopian Orthodox Exorcism’, in *Charismatic Healers in Contemporary Africa: Deliverance in Muslim and Christian Worlds*, eds. Sandra Fancello and Alessandro Gusman, London: Bloomsbury, 2022.

111 Ancel and Ficquet, ‘The Ethiopian Orthodox’, 63.

112 Diego Maria Malara, ‘Exorcizing the Spirit of Protestantism: Ambiguity and Spirit Possession in an Ethiopian Orthodox Ritual’, *Ethnos* 87 (2022).

113 Tom Boylston, ‘What kind of territory? On public religion and space in Ethiopia’, *The Immanent Frame: Secularism, Religion, and the Public Sphere*, 6 August 2014, <https://tif.ssrc.org/2014/08/26/what-kind-of-territory-on-public-religion-and-space-in-ethiopia/>.

114 Boylston, ‘What kind of territory?’.

115 Abbink, ‘Religion in public spaces’; Boylston, ‘Orthodox Modern’; Boylston, ‘What kind of territory?’; Boylston, *The Stranger*; John Dulin, ‘Intelligible Tolerance, Ambiguous Tensions, Antagonistic Revelations: Patterns of Muslim-Christian Coexistence in Orthodox Christian Majority Ethiopia’, PhD dissertation, University of California, San Diego, 2016.

spotted wearing t-shirts bearing slogans that depict Ethiopia as a Christian island in a Muslim sea. For many observers, this represents an exceptionalist and exclusionary message that seeks to re-centre Orthodoxy as the real driver of Ethiopian history—a vision at odds with the secular policies of recent decades. Despite early enthusiasm surrounding Abiy Ahmed's attempts to place God at the heart of Ethiopian politics, there is growing discontent in Orthodox quarters about the PM's scrutiny of religious groups, as well as his inaction in protecting Orthodox Christians of Amhara background, who have been victims of recurrent ethnic and religious violence.

Politically, the post-EPRDF years have been difficult for the EOTC. Abiy Ahmed's facilitation of Merkorios' return to Ethiopia involved an unprecedented arrangement whereby two patriarchs would share power. While it is difficult to infer any direct political consequences arising from Merkorios' return, one possible impact is a limiting of Abuna Mathias' political influence, thereby breaking the government–patriarch axis. Merkorios' media and public event appearances were very limited in the months preceding his death in March 2022, leading to speculation that he had previously suffered a stroke and that the real decisional power during this time rested with his embattled entourage (which is notorious for its opposition to the EPRDF). Some commentators claim that after Abuna Mathias openly used the term genocide to denounce mass violence against Tigrayans, members of Merkorios' entourage went to the government palace to protest about his behaviour. It is also rumoured that high-ranking clerical figures close to Merkorios were the real architects of the press silence imposed on Abuna Mathias. Hard as it is to validate such rumours, they should be recognized as having agency in their own right in terms of shaping politico-religious discourse in the country. Some members of the synod have publicly distanced themselves from Abuna Mathias's comments, making it clear they do not represent the synod's official view.

Abuna Mathias has also come under attack from prominent Mahibere Kidusan members, who, under Abiy Ahmed, have gained access to important government positions. Mahibere Kidusan, initially set up in 1991 as a student-led movement active in higher education and subsequently brought under the Sunday School Department of the Church, soon expanded its communication activities to encompass religious pamphlets, newspapers, and programmes aired on the radio, television and, later, the internet,<sup>116</sup> with the aim of democratizing access to religious knowledge.<sup>117</sup> The movement's 'discourse is aimed at restoring the original identity and values of Christian Orthodox Ethiopians by extending to the laity practices that used to govern only priests, such as strict observance of fasting, sexual abstinence, and celebrating marriage by taking communion'.<sup>118</sup> As the movement's conservative message gained popularity among

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116 Ralph Lee, "Modernism" and the Ethiopian Orthodox Sunday School Movement: Indigenous Movements and Their International Connections', *Journal of Ecclesial History* 73 (2022); Ancel and Ficquet, 'The Ethiopian Orthodox'.

117 Boylston, 'What kind of territory?'.

118 Ancel and Ficquet, 'The Ethiopian Orthodox', 84.

middle-class, educated elites with access to a robust socio-political capital, Mahibere Kidusan grew in strength within the Orthodox panorama, and ultimately ‘felt strong enough to criticize patriarch Abuna Paulos, whom they considered to be too careless about the deterioration of the Church and too subservient to the government’.<sup>119</sup> This critique engendered divisions within the synod, leading to the movement’s members being threatened with excommunication.<sup>120</sup>

Tigrayan Orthodox Christians are acutely concerned about the appointment of Daniel Kibret—a renowned Mahibere Kidusan preacher—as advisor to the PM, fearing the movement will feel further legitimated in extending its influence over the synod. This would be in line with Mahibere Kidusan’s ambition to set the Orthodox agenda and the movement’s tendency to consider itself the true custodian of the Orthodox tradition. Daniel Kibret, along with other famous preachers, have not only accused Abuna Mathias of partisanship in the conflict, but have been criticized for deploying dehumanizing metaphors in their portrayal of Tigrayan people. For some Tigrayan commentators, Mahibere Kidusan has always been characterized by reactionary nostalgia for an idealized imperial past in which the Orthodox Church occupied a prominent role in politics. In recent years, however, the fear is that this vision has morphed into open support for Amhara nationalist claims and their version of history. Meanwhile, in some Amhara nationalist circles, Daniel Kibret is accused of no longer speaking in defence of Amhara’s interests because he is seen as co-opted by the government in his position of social affairs advisor. While Mahibere Kidusan may be less homogenous in terms of its members’ opinions—including about the war—than is commonly assumed, internal dissent is often condemned to public invisibility due to fears of repercussions, with elements of the movement’s leadership now having direct access to political power. There are, however, indications of divisions along ethnic lines, and influential Tigrayan Mahibere Kidusan members have abandoned the movement following the onset of the civil conflict.

Mahibere Kidusan’s support for the war has been highly visible, with preachers criticized for inflammatory rhetoric, which thanks to digital media has had immediate, countrywide impacts. Moreover, Mahibere Kidusan, as well as other Orthodox organizations, have come under scrutiny for their alleged fundraising capacities in relation not only to the government’s war effort, but, according to Tigrayan activists, armed nationalist groups such as Fano. It is worth noting that despite international attention being focused on Mahibere Kidusan, there are a number of other *mahābāroč* (associations) that, since the end of the Derg, have extended their operations well beyond their original purpose of commemorating saints days.<sup>121</sup> Indeed, these associations have developed dense national and transnational networks capable of mobilizing

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119 Ancel and Ficquet, ‘The Ethiopian Orthodox’, 84.

120 Ancel and Ficquet, ‘The Ethiopian Orthodox’, 84.

121 Stéphane Ancel, ‘Mahbär et Sänbäte: Associations Religieuses en Éthiopie’, *Aethiopica: International Journal for Ethiopian and Eritrean Studies* 8 (2005); Anne Britt Flemmen and Mulumebet Senese, ‘Religious Mahbär in Ethiopia: Ritual Elements, Dynamics, and Challenges’, *Journal of Religion in Africa* 46 (2016).

significant amounts of capital for pious purposes, such as restoring rural monasteries or countering the expansion of other faiths in rural areas through church-planting.<sup>122</sup> The extent of these associations' involvement in fundraising for the army and/or ethnic militias is, however, hard to determine.

The outbreak of the Tigray War in November 2020 put the Tigrayan Orthodox clergy in a difficult position. Their hopes of receiving support from non-Tigrayan Orthodox Christians in other regions were soon thwarted as it became apparent that many supported the Ethiopian National Defense Force. In November 2020, the International Orthodox Tewahido Association of Tigrayan Clergy was established, lamenting the absence of an unambiguous condemnation of war atrocities from the Holy Synod. In February 2021, the Tigrayan clergy refused to meet with a group of elders from Addis Ababa that included an EOTC delegation. The Dioceses of Mekelle issued a statement of protest denouncing the indiscriminate violence that had taken place during the conflict, as well as the looting of religious artefacts. In March 2021, the Tigrayan clergy issued a statement announcing the foundation of the International Orthodox Tewahedo Association of Tigrayan clergy, an unaffiliated political organization bringing together clergy from across Tigray and the Tigrayan diaspora with the aim of establishing a separate church. Further statements in May detailed the killing of over 300 religious figures and the destruction of several Tigrayan churches.

In December 2021, the International Orthodox Association of Tigray Clergy stated its support for a schism, bemoaning Abuna Mathias's mistreatment at the hands of other members of the Holy Synod, who had criticized his stance on the war. Meanwhile, many in Ethiopian Orthodox circles dismissed such statements as the work of the diasporic community and, as such, unrepresentative of the will of the Tigrayan people. This dismissal echoed widespread accusations that the Tigrayan diasporic community—often termed 'digital Weyane'—were not only detached from the concerns of Tigray's residents, but supported a 'terrorist group' (the TPLF) more interested in retaining political power than in the wellbeing of Tigrayans. Finally, on 10 February 2022, under 'Tigray Orthodox Tewahido Church' letterhead, a statement appeared announcing a local patriarchate had been established. Abuna Merha Kristos, interim chair of the independent Tigrayan Orthodox Church, stated in an interview that ties to the central synod were irrevocably broken and that 'We can't live with those who massacre us'.<sup>123</sup> Importantly, independent Tigrayan Orthodox congregations had already formed in the diaspora by that time, with sizeable communities in Philadelphia, Chicago, Baltimore, Toronto, Adelaide and Leeds. Despite this, many Ethiopian Orthodox Christians remain critical of the schism's legitimacy, or are doubtful as to whether a schism had taken place at all. While the lack of notable statements in the meantime has left the issue unresolved, for many Tigrayans residing abroad—who are playing an increasingly central role in framing discussions about the conflict—returning to the

122 Boylston, 'What kind of territory?'; see Boylston, *The Stranger*.

123 Dimtsi Weyane Television, 'የት/ጠ/ቤት መመስረት የትግራይ ህዝብ ታሪክ እና ቅርስ ለመጠበቅ ይረዳል - ብጹአ አቡነ መርሃ ክርስቶስ' [The establishment of a Tigrayan church office will help to keep the history and heritage of the Tigrayan people], YouTube, 13 Feb 2022, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_VBTHd6qybW](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_VBTHd6qybW).

EOTC is not a viable option.

Tigrayans are not the only ethnic group to air major grievances against the EOTC leadership. On 22 January 2023, three Orthodox Archbishops led by Abuna Sawiros announced the constitution of a new Orthodox Synod in Oromia, and the ordination of 26 new Bishops without the consent of the Holy Synod of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church. The schismatics were excommunicated on January 26 and accused of illegal ordination.<sup>124</sup> Following this strong reaction, the Holy Synod called on Orthodox believers throughout the country to publicly demonstrate their support for a united church. Abuna Sawiros maintained that the split was a consequence of the fact that Oromo were under-represented in positions of power within the EOTC and that the church did support the use of Oromo language in praying, preaching and religious teaching. These conditions, he lamented, led many Oromo Orthodox Christians to convert to other faiths. On 4 February 2023, when a Bishop appointed by the schismatics was expected to enter the church of St. Michael in Shashamane, large crowds of Orthodox Christians loyal to the official Synod gathered in the area attempting to occupy the church. Ethiopian security forces killed at least eight people in their attempt to disperse the crowd.<sup>125</sup> There were multiple reports of violence towards Ethiopian Orthodox clergy and believers in different areas of the country, which led to increasing concerns about Abiy Ahmed's inaction in protecting citizens as well as accusations that he actively supported the schism.

An agreement to resolve the crisis was reached on 15 February 2023, resulting in the reunification of the two Synods.<sup>126</sup> Speculation remains as to whether the rapprochement was a consequence of church diplomacy or of a direct involvement of Abiy Ahmed in response to Orthodox mass-mobilization. As the schismatics sought forgiveness, the Holy Synod made significant concessions, committing, for instance, to promoting the use of Oromo language in church services and activities in Oromia, allocating more economic resources to those churches, and opening more theological colleges and training centres in which local clergy can be taught in the Oromo language. The schismatic Archbishops will be allowed to return to their original dioceses retaining their old title, while the bishops they ordained will return to their former rank, but the Holy Synod will consider confirming their promotion whenever possible.

124 EOTC TV, 'በወቅታዊ ጉዳይ ዙሪያ ከቅዱስ ሲኖዶስ የተሰጠ መግለጫ' [A Statement from the Synod on the Current Issue], YouTube, 29 January 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K4yJ4NjCWgE>.

125 Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, 'ጥበብአዊ መጠቀሚያ ጥበቃ ላይ የሚገኝ መፍትሔ የማፈላለጥ ሥራ ሲጠናከር ይገባል' [Work to Find a Solution Must be Strengthened to Avoid Worsening of Human Rights Violations], Press Release 10 February 2023, (<https://ehrc.org/%E1%8B%A8%E1%88%Bo%E1%89%A5%E1%8A%Ao%E1%8B%8A-%E1%88%98%E1%89%A5%E1%89%B6%E1%89%BD-%E1%8C%A5%E1%88%Bo%E1%89%B6%E1%89%BD-%E1%88%B3%E1%8B%AD%E1%89%A3%E1%89%A3%E1%88%B1-%E1%8A%Ao%E1%8D%8B%E1%8C%A3/>)

126 EOTC Broadcasting Service Agency, 'ቅዱስ ሲኖዶስ እና በሕገ ወጥ መልኩ ሣመቱ በፈጸሙት አባቶች መካከል የተደረሰው ስምምነት' [Agreement Reached Between the Holy Synod and the Factional Fathers Reached], Facebook Post, 15 February 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/eotctvchannel/posts/pfbidozGTc8DAhFhexgDFYfxHMe7Y2CURPjahWwXkv9i8YAFBZUUe9rrpeFEY8AETnv33tI>.

## Islam

The 2007 national census puts the proportion of Ethiopians who are Muslim at 33.9 per cent. This figure has, however, been roundly rejected by Muslim critics. Mainly citing estimates by US Department of State publications and the CIA World Factbook, which in the preceding years estimated the figure as being 45–50 per cent, most in the Muslim community assert they constitute at least half the national population. In light of the overwhelming lack of trust in Ethiopia's public institutions—including the national population and housing census commission—elites from almost every ethnic and religious segment claim much higher figures than shown in official statistics. The census figures remain, however, the most geographically detailed numbers there are, and any plausible refutation of them should deconstruct them at the local level.

Abiy's swift enactment of the EPRDF Executive Committee's decisions to release political prisoners, including numerous Muslim protest movement leaders, won him considerable support. He invited the protest movement's main figures to his office and took some of them on his various trips around the country and to his meeting with the Badr Association in the US, a significant diaspora organization supporting Ethiopian Muslims. Despite this, the reform of the EIASC soon proved to be a lingering point of tension between the incumbents—widely understood as having been installed by the EPRDF government—and a broad coalition of outside groups pushing for reform, at the forefront of which was the Ethiopian Muslims' Solution Finding Committee. Initiatives involving prominent personalities, including business people, senior civil servants and former diplomats, achieved little. With a sense of stalemate creeping in, Abiy created a committee tasked with putting forward solutions. This was composed of three members of the EIASC, three representatives of the Ethiopian Muslims' Solution Finding Committee, and three 'neutral' actors—comprising two academics from Addis Ababa University and Mohammed Jemal Agonafer, an influential religious personality—intended to serve as a balance between the two groups. Mufti Haji Umer Idris, one of the three EIASC representatives, had been less than enthusiastic about the EPRDF regime's promotion of the 'al-Ahbash' brand of Sufism, which triggered the 2012 protests, and even took part in events organized by the protest movement as a show of unity between 'Sufi' and 'Salafi' groups.<sup>127</sup> For this reason, his appointment as chair of the select committee was widely popular.

This 'Committee of the Nine'—as it became known in order to distinguish it from the so-called 'Awolia Committee'—identified three main tasks for itself, which were to culminate in the production of three documents. The first task was to prepare a legislative draft that would provide sturdier legal ground for the EIASC—a longstanding demand of Muslims in Ethiopia given its importance for attaining formal legal equality with the EOTC. The second task was to produce a range of proposals for the organizational restructuring and reform of the EIASC,

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<sup>127</sup> Juxtaposing 'Sufi' and 'Salafi' is unhelpful in its generality, as it elides the wide spectrum of difference within each group and sets up a clichéd antagonism that has afflicted understanding of Muslim reform movements in many countries. Given these labels have now become self-identifications within the Ethiopian Muslim political discourse, however, they are adopted here within quote marks.



encompassing—among other issues—representation, election and internal administrative structures, and defining the role of the *ulema* and lay management personnel. The third task was to produce a theological document—dubbed the ‘ulema document’ but formally named ‘yā-ulāma andənāt sänād’, meaning ‘religious scholars unity document’—setting out the basic theological positions underpinning the unity of Ethiopian Muslims. As such, it was perceived as an attempt at managing the points of difference between the ‘Salafi’ and ‘Sufi’, with the aim of organizing under an umbrella national organization.

While work on producing the legislative draft went smoothly, the latter two tasks proved controversial. The main sticking point on the restructuring agenda was the role of the *ulema* in the EIASC’s day-to-day administration, as well as the need for and mode of accountability regarding the laymen’s executive board. The initial proposal was to delineate the functioning of the EIASC into two areas—religious and administrative—with power over these functions assigned to, respectively, the council of *ulema* and the executive board. Some groups broadly identifying with the ‘Sufis’—both from within and external to the EIASC—argued that the *ulema* should take a more direct role in the EIASC’s everyday management, and that the executive board should be directly accountable to the council of *ulema* rather than being a parallel body. There was also pushback—again mostly from the ‘Sufi’ network—against elections as a representation mechanism, and the suitability of emulating the federal structure in the EIASC. Further controversy dogged efforts to draft the unity document. A faction of ‘Sufi’ groups insisted that a narrower definition of mainstream Sunni Islam articles of faith should be used for the purposes of EIASC membership, claiming the existence of an ‘Ethiopian Islam’ characterized by unique religious traditions. This includes the notion that the EIASC was established on the basis of the ‘Al-Ashari’ and ‘Maturidi’ theological schools, thereby precluding the schools that ‘Salafi’ Muslims generally rely on regarding matters of divinity. As such, the ‘Sufi’ group insisted that the broader expression ‘*Ahl As-Sunna wal-Jama’a*’ (Adherents to the Sunna and the [Muslim] Community) was insufficient and that the ‘Al-Ashari’ and ‘Maturidi’ schools should be explicitly referenced in this foundational document. In response, the ‘Salafi’ groups insisted that religious figures such as ‘Ibn Taymiyah, Ibn Al-Qayyim, and Muhammed Ibn Abd al-Wahab’ should be included in the document as well. In light of such divisions, some key figures in the ‘Sufi’ camp went as far as arguing that the EIASC should be reserved for them, and that the ‘Salafis’ should establish ‘their own Mejlis’ or council. The vast majority of the gathered scholars from all ‘sects’ were, however, willing to compromise in order not to let this historic opportunity slip through their fingers.

With frustrations at the lack of progress mounting, a coalition of the ‘Salafis’, together with a faction of the ‘Sufis’ around Mufti Haji Umar and outside activists, organized—with government assistance—a ‘national conference’ at the Sheraton Hotel in Addis Ababa on 1 May 2019, which was also attended by the PM and the then minister of peace Muferihat Kamil. Here, a change of leadership was made, with the transitional leadership body now composed of two main structures. The first was a council of *ulema* composed of an equal number of ‘Sufi’ and ‘Salafi’ scholars, with Mufti Haji Umer appointed president, and Dr Jeilan Khedir, a prominent figure among the ‘Salafis’, vice president. The second was an executive board of laymen consisting

of academics and organizational management professionals. The radical dissenters form the ‘Sufi’ camp staged a walk-out and protest at the event, even heckling Abiy on his arrival. Despite this, many from their ranks—including Hassan Taju, now ambassador to Kuwait—seemed to endorse the process at the time. A major concession to reassure ‘Sufis’ was the appointment of firebrand lawyer and religious scholar Shiekh Kassim Tajudin as the council of *ulema*’s general secretary.

The transitional leadership’s expressed objective was to finalize the pending reform documents and facilitate elections within a year. Not long after its formation, however, some within the transitional body—together with their affiliates—actively sought to undermine the arrangement, claiming the Sheraton consensus, including its decisions and planned arrangements, had been imposed upon them. Various mediation efforts from within the community, as well as by the United Arab Emirates government, failed, while some members convinced Mufti Haji Umer to take a more sectarian and hardline position. Attempts by PM Abiy to intervene were unsuccessful, with Haji Umer claiming he regretted the integration of the ‘Salafis’ into the EIASC and would do everything he could to reverse it.

When members of the laymen’s executive board were suspended by the council of *ulema*’s general secretary and Mufti Haji Umer, they refuted the suspension’s validity in light of their direct mandate from the Sheraton conference and the internal rules adopted since. Members of the council of *ulema*—enough to command a majority—held meetings that were not attended by the president or general secretary, and passed major decisions aimed at breaking the paralysis. These, however, were not enforced, resulting in a long period of stalemate. Both factions — the executive board and the majority of *ulema* in the council on one side, and the president, secretary general and their allies on the other — sought the intervention of the Ministry of Peace and other authorities, but, citing the Tigray War and other ‘more pressing matters’, the government failed to act in any decisive manner until July 2022, when the approaching Eid al-Adha holiday risked open violence. Calling a meeting of figures from both sides, which was later televised, PM Abiy proposed reconvening the Sheraton conference and gave detailed instructions on who was to attend. Mufti Haji Umer and his followers, however, refused to participate. Thus, of the 300 attendees who elected the transitional EIASC leadership at the original Sheraton conference, 261 were involved in the reconvened conference on 18 July 2022. However, prominent ‘Sufis’ notably the Imam of the Grand Anwar Mosque, Sheikh Taha Harun, took part. Sheikh Hajj Ibrahim Tuffa, was elected president of the council of *ulema*, with both the former president and vice president removed from office.

Earlier, in April 2022, following the Tigray Orthodox Church leaders’ declaration of separation from the EOTC with the intension of establishing their own synod, the Tigray Regional Islamic Affairs Council had declared something to the same effect.<sup>128</sup> The July 2022 elections, however,

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128 BBC News, ‘የትግራይ ስልጣን አመራሮች ከኢትዮጵያ ስልጣን ጠቅላይ ምክር ቤት ጋር ያለቸውን ግንኙነት ማቋረጣቸውን አስታወቁ’ [Tigray’s Muslim Leaders Announce their Decision to Break Relations with the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council], BBC News, 15 April 2022, [www.bbc.com/amharic/news-60385016](http://www.bbc.com/amharic/news-60385016).

included a round of votes by regional delegates in which attempts were made to ensure Tigrayan Muslims were represented. Thus, the status of Tigrayan Muslims remains unresolved at present.

## PROTESTANTISM

The rise of Protestantism is the biggest demographic shift Ethiopia has seen in the past 30 years. Protestants accounted for little more than 5 per cent of the country's total population in the 1984 census—this more than tripled to 18.6 per cent in the most recent 2007 census, and has grown further since.<sup>129</sup> The latest full Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) of 2016 estimated Protestants at constituting just under 23 per cent of 15–49 year olds, while the most recent mini-DHS estimated Protestants as accounting for 27.4 per cent of Ethiopia's 15–49 year-old women.<sup>130</sup>

As is the case for all the major religions in Ethiopia, the regional distribution of Protestants is uneven. In the Orthodox heartlands of Tigray and Amhara, Protestants remained a marginal minority of less than 1 per cent in the 2007 census, despite a significant urban presence.<sup>131</sup> According to the same census, over 97 per cent of Protestants live in the south and west of the country, with the largest populations shares in the Gambella (70.1 per cent), the (former) Southern Nations', Nationalities and Peoples' Region (55.5 per cent), and the West Wellega Zone (59.5 per cent) and Guji Zone (56.1 per cent) in the Oromiya Region. These areas have also seen higher than average population growth, which—aside from conversions—explains some of the national Protestant increase. Protestantism has a significant rural presence in areas where it is strong, making it more of a rural than an urban phenomenon overall.<sup>132</sup> In Addis Ababa, Protestants were recorded as constituting just under 8 per cent of the city's population in the 2007 census, though this is likely to have increased significantly since then. The gender distribution in Ethiopian Protestantism largely follows the country's, while its age distribution is skewed towards youth and young adults.

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- 129 Transitional Government of Ethiopia, Office of the Population and Housing Census Commission, *The 1984 Population and Housing Census of Ethiopia: Analytical Report at National Level*, Addis Ababa: Central Statistical Authority, 1991, 60; Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Population Census Commission, *Summary and Statistical Report of the 2007 Population and Housing Census: Population Size by Sex and Age*, Addis Ababa, 2008, 17, [www.csa.gov.et/pdf/Cen2007\\_preliminera.pdf](http://www.csa.gov.et/pdf/Cen2007_preliminera.pdf).
- 130 Central Statistical Agency, Demographic and Health Survey 2016. Addis Ababa: Central Statistical Agency, 2017, 42; Ethiopian Public Health Institute and ICF, *Mini Demographic and Health Survey 2019: Key Indicators*, Rockville: EPHI and ICF, 2019, 8.
- 131 Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Population Census Commission, *Summary and Statistical Report*, 17; Jörg Haustein, 'Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity in Ethiopia: A Historical Introduction to a Largely Unexplored Movement', in *Multidisciplinary Views on the Horn of Africa*, eds. Hatem Eliese, Köln: Rüdiger Köppe Verlag, 2014.
- 132 Only 11.6 per cent of Protestants live in cities or towns, compared to 16.1 per cent of the overall population (Haustein, 'Pentecostal and Charismatic', 14).

This Protestant growth has been marked by an almost universal proliferation of Pentecostal liturgical forms, now accommodated theologically by all major Protestant denominations.<sup>133</sup> At the same time, this ‘Pente’ landscape is characterized by significant fragmentation, with the number of new churches and denominations increasing dramatically in recent years. Over the past 15 years, the Evangelical Churches’ Fellowship of Ethiopia (ECFE), traditionally the main umbrella organization for Protestants, has seen the number of churches in its membership increase from 22 to over 200.<sup>134</sup> Moreover, in recent years there has been a marked increase in churches and ministers propagating prosperity theology or claiming special prophetic/healing abilities.<sup>135</sup> The ECFE has a long tradition of rejecting such movements as ‘false teachings’, which has prompted the establishment of other umbrella organizations, such as the Pentecostal Churches’ Fellowship, Visionary Fellowship and the Gospel of Love Fellowship.

When in June 2019 Abiy Ahmed called Protestants to unity in a large meeting of over 400 leaders, promising official recognition as a religion in return, complicated negotiations ensued in order to bring all evangelicals together under a single umbrella. Given its longstanding role in representing all trinitarian Protestants, the ECFE resisted the formation of a new organization. This role had, however, been substantially eroded around 2012 when the two largest and most historic Protestant churches in Ethiopia, the EECMY and the Kale Heywet Church (KHC), left the ECFE over disagreements about political representation, voting proportions and attempts to centralize Protestant development efforts. In the end, Abiy’s call to unity prevailed—at least initially—and the Ethiopian Council of Gospel Believers’ Churches (ECGBC) was formed, consisting of the aforementioned Protestant fellowships, the EECMY and KHC, as well as numerous ministries and Protestant development organizations.

Proclamation No. 1208 of 2020 endowed the ECGBC with legal personality as representative of the Evangelical Christian community, granting Protestants the same legal status as the EOTC and EIASC.<sup>136</sup> The ECGBC’s member churches no longer have to renew their registration with the Ministry of Peace, with the Council expected to monitor the organizational and financial affairs of its over 1,000 members. Aside from a large land grant for erecting a head office and

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133 Jörg Haustein, ‘Charismatic Renewal, Denominational Tradition and the Transformation of Ethiopian Society’, in *Encounter Beyond Routine: Cultural Roots, Cultural Transition, Understanding of Faith and Cooperation in Development*. International Consultation, Academy of Mission, Hamburg, 17th–23rd January 2011, ed. Evangelisches Missionswerk Deutschland, Hamburg: EMW, 2011, [www.emw-d.de/fix/files/doku\\_5\\_encounter-beyond-routine2011.pdf](http://www.emw-d.de/fix/files/doku_5_encounter-beyond-routine2011.pdf).

134 It is symptomatic of Protestant fragmentation that the entrance requirement of a minimum 5,000 members per denomination was lowered to 1,500.

135 Emanuele Fantini, ‘Transgression and Acquiescence: The Moral Conflict of Pentecostals in Their Relationship with the Ethiopian State’, *PentecoStudies* 12 (2013); Fantini, ‘Go Pente!’, Emanuele Fantini, ‘Crafting Ethiopia’s Glorious Destiny: Pentecostalism and Economic Transformation Under a Developmental State’, *Archives Des Sciences Sociales Des Religions* 175 (2016).

136 ‘Proclamation No. 1208/2020: A Proclamation to Provide Legal Personality for Ethiopian Council of Gospel Believers’ Churches and Members’, *Federal Negarit Gazette*, 4 July 2020.

a house to rent in the interim, the ECGBC receives no support from the government. Even so, as Abiy's brain-child, it is viewed by many observers as a political forum, a perception that was reinforced by the fact that Professor Eyasu Elias, former president of the ECGBC and of the KHC, ran as a Prosperity Party candidate in the 2021 elections without resigning from either of his religious offices. Eyasu only stepped down after having secured his mandate, proceeding to enter government as state minister for agriculture. He was succeeded by Dr Tassew Gebre, a lifelong government employee who has served in various administrative capacities under the Derg and the EPRDF, and is a strong advocate of active Christian involvement in politics.

The unresolved tensions with the ECFE soon came to haunt the ECGBC in a dispute over voting arrangements. This led to the withdrawal of the ECFE from the voting assembly, followed by four of its largest and most historic member churches: the (Mennonite) Meserete Kristos Church, as well as the three first Pentecostal churches, including Abiy's own Full Gospel Believers' Church.<sup>137</sup> While all claim to retain their membership in the ECGBC and thereby their legal status, they refuse to recognize the ECGBC's current leadership. With no negotiations ongoing to resolve this conflict, it would appear that Abiy's attempt to unify Protestants has failed for now. In addition, the ECFE's president, pastor Tsadiku Abdo, has sought to establish a reputation as a politically independent voice, further increasing the risk that the ECGBC comes to be regarded as a politically willed compromise with 'false prophets', while the ECFE represents the 'untainted' venue for evangelicals.<sup>138</sup>

Political divisions now afflict all Protestant churches, whether it is in their stance towards the ECGBC, the Tigray War, or ethnic politics. Both the ECGBC and the ECFE issued strong calls for peace at the outset of the Tigray War, with the ECFE following up with further calls to prayer and fast when the TPLF broke the Ethiopian siege and advanced closer to Addis Ababa in 2021.<sup>139</sup> Despite this, individual Protestant preachers were vociferous in supporting the war, some invoking prophecies about a quick and victorious end. This effectively neutralized whatever political weight the official calls to peace may have had, while alienating Tigrayan Protestants in

137 See Hausteim, *Writing Religious History*.

138 Tsadiku Abdo, 'መንግሥታዊ ሀይማኖት የለም | እኛን ወደኋላ አልርሱ አስከሉኑ መውረዱ አያጥብም?' ['We do not have a governmental faith | You cannot dance alone by pushing us aside'], Yegna TV, YouTube, 2 April 2022, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=UwvvQ\\_4Xa7o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UwvvQ_4Xa7o).

139 Ethiopian Evangelical Council, 'ካወንሰሉ አስቸኳይ የጾምና ጸሎት አወጀ!!!' ['The Council Urgently Announces Prayer and Fasting'], Facebook post, 5 November 2020, [www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=pfbid0M9Z-v9KTnLymXb3EL8KFvipNTJJtaTaQUY14LsqCD2TcdJv6CavM2W4HtoWsqBd5bl&id=111866470446458](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbid0M9Z-v9KTnLymXb3EL8KFvipNTJJtaTaQUY14LsqCD2TcdJv6CavM2W4HtoWsqBd5bl&id=111866470446458). Evangelical Churches Fellowship of Ethiopia, 'አገራዊ የጸሎት ጥሪ' ['Countrywide Call to Prayer'], Facebook post, 5 November 2020, [www.facebook.com/ecfethiopia/posts/pfbidojrRK5yJL4qdcfBhuZMPqk6V5etC5jW2ctiqiY-J5SbG3j9BD9gUUJJVpkNh7oxS2YI](https://www.facebook.com/ecfethiopia/posts/pfbidojrRK5yJL4qdcfBhuZMPqk6V5etC5jW2ctiqiY-J5SbG3j9BD9gUUJJVpkNh7oxS2YI); Evangelical Churches Fellowship of Ethiopia, 'የአገዛዙበሔርን ፊት በጾምና በጸሎት መፈለግን ይመለከታል' ['Looking to Seek God's Face in Prayer and Fasting'], Facebook post, 6 September 2021, [www.facebook.com/ecfethiopia/posts/pfbidoq62Nid6tmraR56rMsCPSUvQerDaNTzrCmxjXwmZXSE3PB-Nj5LRZckHScNJ98T7TKDI](https://www.facebook.com/ecfethiopia/posts/pfbidoq62Nid6tmraR56rMsCPSUvQerDaNTzrCmxjXwmZXSE3PB-Nj5LRZckHScNJ98T7TKDI); Evangelical Churches Fellowship of Ethiopia, 'የጾምና የጸሎት ጥሪ' ['A Call to Prayer and Fasting'], Facebook post, 24 November 2021, [www.facebook.com/ecfethiopia/posts/pfbido37D5cpe-F63YEfmvsfYTKFheS6dSnN2qQaZtaP7BrySFamVU2BxyweucsfJQjVbNKBI](https://www.facebook.com/ecfethiopia/posts/pfbido37D5cpe-F63YEfmvsfYTKFheS6dSnN2qQaZtaP7BrySFamVU2BxyweucsfJQjVbNKBI).

Addis Ababa and the churches in Tigray. These prophecies have since been criticized by many, with church leaders in Addis Ababa maintaining they are still in contact with their Tigrayan branches even as official relations have been severed. Even so, one does not have to look far to find serious divisions about the war and Abiy's politics, or ethnic politics more widely.<sup>140</sup>

## TRADITIONAL RELIGIONS

The share of people adhering to 'traditional religions'<sup>141</sup> in Ethiopia seems to be in steady decline, down from nearly 6 per cent in the 1984 census to just under 1 per cent in the last full DHS of 2016.<sup>142</sup> This decline, much like that of the EOTC, seems to be explained by the rise of Protestantism over the same period of time. As anthropologists have shown in rural settings in the south of the country, there have been dramatic rates of conversion from traditional religions to Protestantism over the past two decades, often coinciding with noticeable changes in the local economy, value systems, traditional feasting and customary law.<sup>143</sup>

These statistics and the idea that traditional religions are being entirely supplanted by conversion to another faith are, however, somewhat misleading. In only allowing one choice, the demographic question merely reveals which religion respondents wish to be affiliated with in official statistics, obscuring how traditional practices, beliefs and values inform people's embrace of Christianity or Islam. Ethiopian Orthodoxy has a long tradition of incorporating local spirit beliefs and management. Accordingly, Harald Aspen, in his extensive study of

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140 See, for example, Naol Befkadu, 'Dear Abiy, please resign: a plea from a fellow Ethiopian evangelical', *Ethiopia Insight*, 4 October 2021, [www.ethiopia-insight.com/2021/10/04/dear-abiy-please-resign-a-plea-from-a-fellow-ethiopian-evangelical/](http://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2021/10/04/dear-abiy-please-resign-a-plea-from-a-fellow-ethiopian-evangelical/); Getachew Tamiru, 'Abiy Deserves Our Respect, Not Calls for Resignation', *Ethiopia Insight*, 28 October 2021, [www.ethiopia-insight.com/2021/10/28/abiy-deserves-our-respect-not-calls-for-resignation/](http://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2021/10/28/abiy-deserves-our-respect-not-calls-for-resignation/).

141 This term is rather problematic in a country like Ethiopia, where both Christianity and Islam have equally long and locally rooted traditions. It is used here nonetheless because 'African traditional religions' is still the established term for non-Christian/Muslim religions of African origin, and as such 'traditional religion' is also used as an identifier in the census.

142 Transitional Government of Ethiopia, Office of the Population and Housing Census Commission, *The 1984 Population*, 56; Central Statistical Agency, Demographic and Health.

143 Dena Freeman, 'Development and the Rural Entrepreneur: Pentecostals, NGOs and the Market in the Gama Highlands, Ethiopia', in *Pentecostalism and Development: Churches, NGOs and Social Change in Africa*, ed. Dena Freeman, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012; Freeman, 'Pentecostalism in a Rural Context'; Erik Egeland, *Christianity, Generation and Narrative: Religious Conversion and Change in Sidama, Ethiopia*, 1974–2012, Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 2016; Julian Sommerschuh, 'Whatever Happened to Respect? Values and Change in a Southwest Ethiopian (Aari) Community', PhD dissertation, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, 2019; Julian Sommerschuh, 'Legal Pluralism and Protestant Christianity: From Fine to Forgiveness in an Aari Community', in *Legal Pluralism in Ethiopia: Actors, Challenges and Solutions*, eds. Susanne Epple and Getachew Assefa, Bielefeld: Transcript, 2020; Julian Sommerschuh, 'From Feasting to Accumulation: Modes of Value Realisation and Radical Cultural Change in Southern Ethiopia', *Ethnos* 87 (2022).

Amhara spirit beliefs, concluded that Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity was the predominant ‘conceptual and religious framework for venerating spirited trees, praying for the soul of the a carnivorous beast, or conversations with personified, possessing spirits’.<sup>144</sup> While there may be efforts to control and correct such practices within the Orthodox Church,<sup>145</sup> these stand to bear little fruit given that esoteric practices within the church thrive on the ‘interplay of concealment and revelation’ emerging from the Orthodox tradition itself.<sup>146</sup>

On the Protestant side, a similar integration of traditional spirit beliefs can be seen in the practice of exorcism. Local beliefs are usually collapsed into the category of the Christian demon and exorcized with the proclamation ‘in Jesus’ name!’, together with a right-hand karate gesture directed at the spiritual entity. Even so, Pentecostal claims regarding the ultimate efficacy of their remediation—that exorcism will take care of malignant spirits once and for all—produces the paradoxical effect of amplifying spirit beliefs. The search for spirits to be exorcized, often accompanied by a ‘word of wisdom’ whereby the leader ‘sees’ and calls out to the spirits in an assembly until they manifest, has led to the ubiquitous presence of traditional spirits in Pentecostal healing meetings.<sup>147</sup> Moreover, given that some Ethiopian spirits are believed to afflict their host periodically, Pentecostals have battled with the issue of ‘re-possession’. While the majority of Pentecostals would frame such a case as spiritual relapse, the issue led to an early split in the movement, with one particular church proclaiming that upstanding, ‘born-again’ Christians may be afflicted by demons and therefore required ongoing diagnostic care and treatment.<sup>148</sup>

Beyond the question of spirit beliefs and management, some research has explored the extent to which traditional value systems have enabled the rise of evangelicalism. While Freeman suggests that in the Gamo highlands Pentecostals gained strength from their ability to channel a modernist disruption of the inherited economic and moral order,<sup>149</sup> Julian Sommerschuh makes the opposite observation, claiming it was the aspiration to more fully realize traditional values

144 Harald Aspen, *Amhara Traditions of Knowledge: Spirit Mediums and Their Clients*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2001, 235f.

145 Data Dea, ‘Christianity and Spirit Mediums: Experiencing Post-Socialist Religious Freedom in Southern Ethiopia’, Working Paper 75, Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, 2005.

146 Diego Maria Malara, ‘Sympathy for the Devil: Secrecy, Magic and Transgression Among Ethiopian Orthodox Debtera’, *Ethnos* 87 (2022): 458.

147 Jörg Haustein, ‘Embodying the Spirit(s): Pentecostal Demonology and Deliverance Discourse in Ethiopia’, *Ethnos* 76 (2011).

148 Haustein, ‘Embodying the Spirit(s)’.

149 Freeman, ‘Development and the Rural Entrepreneur’; Freeman, ‘Pentecostalism in a Rural Context’.

that attracted many within the Aari people of Dell to evangelicalism<sup>150</sup>—and that converts hence continue to challenge Pentecostal excesses regarding individualism and prosperity. Clearly, the engagement of evangelicals with traditional beliefs (and Ethiopia's new market economies) is complex and requires further research.

Ethnic nationalism is another context in which traditional religions continue to play a significant role. The Oromo religion is the most important in this regard, particularly its annual Irreecha festival. As Serawit Bekele's study shows, this festival has acquired a significant political dimension in the context of the Oromo protests and the state's brutal assault on the 2016 celebrations, which had turned into an anti-government demonstration.<sup>151</sup> The significance of Irreecha for Oromo nationality also means it overlaps with other religious identities, with the majority of spirit mediums identifying as Orthodox or Muslim.<sup>152</sup> Pentecostals, in turn, openly preached against Irreecha, though the more ethno-nationalist minded among them continued to attend despite the official proscription of their churches.<sup>153</sup> Between 2011 and 2013 a similar push against Irreecha took place within the Orthodox Church, largely following the Protestant logic characterizing the festival as built around demonic practices. Abiy Ahmed, however, has openly embraced the celebrations, despite the political cost among his own Pentecostal constituency, which considers them to be 'pagan'.<sup>154</sup> Similar 'traditional' religious revivals may be underway elsewhere, with the Sidama religion, for example, experiencing a recent rise despite the strong and generally prohibitive Protestant majority in the region.<sup>155</sup>

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150 Julian Sommerschuh, 'Questioning Growth: Christianity, Development, and the Perils of Wealth in Southern Ethiopia', *Journal of Religion in Africa* 50 (2020); Sommerschuh, 'From Feasting to Accumulation'.

151 Serawit Bekele Debele, *Locating Politics in Ethiopia's Irreecha Ritual*, Brill: Leiden, 2019.

152 Debele, *Locating Politics*, 33.

153 Debele, *Locating Politics*, 76, 155.

154 Haustein and Dereje Feyissa, 'The Strains of "Pente" Politics', 490.

155 Egeland, *Christianity, Generation and Narrative*, 200–206.



# INTER-RELIGIOUS RELATIONS

While inter-religious relations in Ethiopia were already fragile during the time of the EPRDF, instances of inter-communal violence with a religious component have increased markedly since Abiy came to power.<sup>156</sup> This is partially due to the local erosion of state power and government institutions capable of regulating inter-religious affairs, resulting in open conflict arising from deeply rooted grievances. As such, it is important to take a long view of Muslim–Orthodox, Protestant–Muslim and Orthodox–Protestant relations when exploring possible avenues for a peaceful coexistence.

## MUSLIM–ORTHODOX RELATIONS

Contemporary Muslim–Orthodox relations are governed by a myriad of constellations and narratives arising from Ethiopia’s long history of engagement between the two religions. Politically, Ethiopia’s Muslims were largely marginalized under the Christian empires, while the freedoms and equality gained in the decades since have often been limited by securitization, whether in the Ogaden War of the 1970s or in the more recent concerns about ‘extremism’ under the EPRDF regime. This has led to two mutually reinforcing narratives regarding Orthodox–Muslim relations in Ethiopia: on the one hand, the country is cast as a place of peaceful inter-religious relations, while on the other, instances of Christian–Muslim conflict are represented as recent erosions of this peaceful fabric, driven by extremist ideologies.

Claims to an Ethiopian tradition of peaceful religious coexistence often focus on Wollo province, a hub of Sufi Islam and Islamic learning, which due to its proximity to the old centres of the Ethiopian Christian empires has a long history of Christian–Muslim engagement. Hussein Ahmed has shown that contrary to such perceptions, the province was riven by the Christian expansionism under emperors Tewodoros II, Yohannes IV and Menelik II, often accompanied by enforced conversions or rebellions in the name of religion.<sup>157</sup> Similarly, Elois Ficquet reveals how the enforced ingestion of Christian meat was used as a means of conversion, though he also argues that under Menelik respect for dietary boundaries led to early forms of inter-religious coexistence, ultimately culminating in recent transgressions of these boundaries through joint feasting in the interests of a joint Oromo national project or the creation of public spaces of ‘relative secularism’.<sup>158</sup>

In contemporary Ethiopia, the Sufi spirituality of Wollo province does indeed seem to generate

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<sup>156</sup> Østebø et al., ‘Religion, Ethnicity’.

<sup>157</sup> Ahmed, *Islam in Nineteenth-Century*.

<sup>158</sup> Éloi Ficquet, ‘Flesh Soaked in Faith: Meat as a Marker of the Boundary Between Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia’, in *Muslim-Christian Encounters in Africa*, ed. Benjamin F. Soares, Leiden: Brill, 2006.

unique forms of Orthodox–Muslim co-existences, as Meron Zeleke Eresso demonstrates in relation to dispute settlement at the Sufi shrine of Teru Sina.<sup>159</sup> Meron studied the ‘category-crushing’ expressions of syncretic religious practice at the shrine, which combine Muslim, Orthodox and Oromo religious ideas and rituals, resulting in an indeterminate constellation of religious coexistence that aligned well with the EPRDF’s emphasis on ‘religious tolerance’ and provided conflict settlement mechanisms in lieu of functioning state structures. For Jon Abbink, Wollo is emblematic of socio-cultural hybridity, enabling unique but precarious modes of inter-religious coexistence.<sup>160</sup> Thus, the area became a key site for testing the advancement of reformist thought. As such, Abbink argues that the historical Wollo ‘model of Islam that was not antagonistic nor nationally divisive’ could act as a counterweight to the reformist Islam spreading in urban environments and among Ethiopian elites.<sup>161</sup>

Abbink’s other work on Christian–Muslim relations in Ethiopia is similarly concerned with rising exclusivism and intolerance. While in 1998 he argued that the ‘social and cultural conditions for the emergence of political Islam in a “fundamentalist” or, better, Islamist form are not good in Ethiopia’,<sup>162</sup> he offered a different assessment over a decade later, expressing concern regarding Ethiopia’s ability to maintain ‘secular order’ in the face of Islamic reformism.<sup>163</sup> This is symptomatic of a wider shift in perceptions of Christian–Muslim relations in Ethiopia during this time, driven in large part by the securitization of Islam (especially in the context of Ethiopia’s invasion of Somalia), a rise in Christian–Muslim conflict (involving both Orthodox and evangelical Christians), and studies about Islamic reform movements.<sup>164</sup> The 2006 clashes between Muslims and (predominantly Orthodox) Christians in Jima Zone attracted particular attention within the political system, as evidenced in the work of current PM Abiy Ahmed, who built his early political profile on reconciling and researching this conflict.<sup>165</sup> While Abiy’s conflict analysis pointed to Islamic reform movements as the main causative factor, research published just two years before the initial conflict highlighted the role of rumour and political

159 Meron Zeleke Eresso, *Faith at the Crossroads: Religious Syncretism and Dispute Settlement in Northern Ethiopia, A Study of Sufi Shrine in North Eastern Ethiopia*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2015.

160 Jon Abbink, ‘Transformations of Islam and Communal Relations in Wallo, Ethiopia’, in *Islam and Muslim Politics in Africa*, eds. Benjamin F. Soares and René Otayek, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

161 Abbink, ‘Transformations of Islam’, 73.

162 Abbink, ‘An historical-anthropological approach’, 123.

163 Abbink, ‘Religion in public spaces’; Jon Abbink, ‘Religious freedom and the political order: the Ethiopian “secular state” and the containment of Muslim identity politics’, *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 8 (2014).

164 Terje Østebø, ‘Growth and Fragmentation: The Salafi Movement in Bale, Ethiopia’, in *Global Salafism: Islam’s New Religious Movement*, ed. Roel Meijer, London: Hurst & Co., 2009; Terje Østebø, ‘Islamism in the Horn of Africa: Assessing Ideology, Actors, and Objectives’, Report 2, International Law and Policy Institute, 2010; Østebø, *Localising Salafism*.

165 Abiy Ahmed Ali, ‘Social Capital’, Social Capital, YouTube, 19 September 2015, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=SMD2pmsYZ2k](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SMD2pmsYZ2k); Ali, ‘Countering Violent Extremism’; Ali, ‘Social Capital and Its Role’.

leveraging in provoking inter-religious tensions.<sup>166</sup> These aspects were re-emphasized in a recent study of Orthodox attacks on Muslims in Mota in 2019.<sup>167</sup>

Two recent anthropological studies in Northern Ethiopia have helped move the analysis beyond a juxtaposition of ‘traditional’ peace and the threat of ‘extremism’. While Tom Boylston’s research on the Zege peninsula of Lake Tana is mainly concerned with the material, social and religious effects of ritual prohibition among Orthodox Christians, it also includes important insights about changing relations with the local Muslim minority.<sup>168</sup> Boylston notes how ritual boundaries, in particular around the consumption of meat and alcohol, have enabled inter-religious conviviality, aided by an avoidance of confrontational statements and the use of shared spaces, for example in the production and consumption of khat. In recent years, however, tensions have arisen. The upgrading of the local mosque from a mud house to a large concrete structure with a towering minaret prompted complaints, as well as the erection of competing Christian structures. This competition over public space is amplified by the now ubiquitous loudspeakers broadcasting religious ceremonies in the vicinity of mosques and churches. Social media has, according to Boylston, eroded the boundary between public and private, undercutting the politeness and conviviality that had characterized inter-religious spaces.<sup>169</sup> Moreover, Facebook and other social media have connected the local context to Christian–Muslim conflict elsewhere, for example in the circulation of shocking footage of the 2015 beheading of Orthodox Christians by the Islamic State (ISIS) in Libya and the multiple reactions this sparked.

John Dulin, in his study of Christians and Muslims in Gondar, attempts to map the instantiation and maintenance of Orthodox–Muslim boundaries, noting the considerable ‘cost’ of migrating between both communities, even as an outsider.<sup>170</sup> Dulin’s work offers an insightful analysis of day-to-day Christian–Muslim friendships and the management of latent antagonisms, combined with detailed analysis of the violent clashes that took place in 2009 during a *ṭimqet* procession in relation to a mosque construction. According to Dulin, an ‘ethics of concealment’ prevails under normal circumstances, preventing antagonisms from being articulated.<sup>171</sup> This precarious arrangement has come under pressure, however, not least from Pentecostals, whose mode of evangelism depends on bringing religious difference into the open. In addition, Dulin demonstrates how intra-religious diversity may lead to different interpretations of conflictual events, spotlighting the various ways in which ISIS’ murder of Ethiopians was perceived by the

166 Daniel Mains, ‘Drinking, Rumour, and Ethnicity in Jimma, Ethiopia’, *Africa* 74 (2004).

167 Østebø et al., ‘Religion, Ethnicity’, 15–23.

168 Boylston, *The Stranger*, 131–43.

169 Boylston, *The Stranger*, 137.

170 Dulin, ‘Intelligible Tolerance’.

171 John Dulin, “‘My Fast Is Better Than Your Fast’: Concealing Interreligious Evaluations and Discerning Respectful Others in Gondar, Ethiopia’, *Ethnos* 87 (2022).

local value regimes in Gondar.<sup>172</sup>

Boylston's and Dulin's work emphasizes the importance of local circumstances and discourses in understanding inter-religious relations and conflict. Broader analyses of Christian-Muslim dialogue and antagonism, such as Jürgen Klein's recent survey of Amharic apologetic writings,<sup>173</sup> retain importance for understanding the wider field, but like the general notion of 'traditional conviviality' versus 'extremism' provide no clear indicator of pending conflict. The long history of Orthodox-Muslim relations in Ethiopia has accumulated both conflictual relations and amicable social capital, so that local political dynamics must be studied in order to understand how inter-religious relations can fall out of balance and morph into open conflict.

## PROTESTANT-MUSLIM RELATIONS

Historically, Muslims have tended to focus their inter-religious attention on the EOTC, given its traditional predominance and the conflictual history of Islam and Orthodox Christianity in the country. Protestants, however, have preoccupied themselves with Muslims from their first missionary endeavours onward, aimed, in part, at preventing the further spread of Islam among the Oromo.<sup>174</sup> The works of John Spencer Trimingham, a former missionary of the Church Missionary Society in Sudan, Egypt and West Africa, provide a late instance of this attitude toward Islam. Trimingham's *Islam in Ethiopia* is a history of Christian-Muslim antagonism that casts Islam as an outsider religion.<sup>175</sup> As such, Trimingham, who two years prior had called for greater missionary efforts to contain Islam in Ethiopia,<sup>176</sup> was mainly interested in explaining how 'this Monophysite Christian fortress' was able to survive in the Ethiopian mountains and why it failed to propagate Christianity among the Muslim people of the lowlands.<sup>177</sup>

Trimingham's scholarship not only dominated the Western study of Islam in Ethiopia for decades to come, his missional approach was also archetypal for the Islam in Africa Project (IAP), which represented the first sustained Protestant effort to engage with Islam in the continent. The IAP was formed between 1957 and 1959 in order to help Christian churches conduct missions among Muslims while avoiding polemics and strengthening neighbourly relations in Christian-

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172 John Dulin, 'Transvaluing ISIS in Orthodox Christian-Majority Ethiopia: On the Inhibition of Group Violence', *Current Anthropology* 58 (2017).

173 Klein, *Christlich-Muslimische Beziehungen*, 219–376.

174 See Klein, *Christlich-Muslimische Beziehungen*, 116–18.

175 Spencer J. Trimingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952.

176 Spencer J. Trimingham, *The Christian Church and Missions in Ethiopia (Including Eritrea and the Somalilands)*, London: World Dominion Press, 1950.

177 See especially Trimingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*, 143–46

Muslim encounters.<sup>178</sup> Gradually, a more dialogical approach won the upper hand, signalled by the organization's 1987 change in name from the IAP to the Programme for Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa (PROCMURA).<sup>179</sup> IAP/PROCMURA entered Ethiopia in the late 1960s at the behest of the Mekane Yesus Church, in collaboration with Gunnar Hasselblatt, who had written his PhD dissertation on Islamic reformer Muḥammad 'Abduh.<sup>180</sup> Hasselblatt's IAP/PROCMURA tenure was marked by research on Ethiopian Islam and educating the church on his findings and possible missionary endeavours.<sup>181</sup> When Hasselblatt departed in 1975,<sup>182</sup> this missional approach was continued by his successors, with more dialogical and relational work mainly advocated by European PROCMURA advisers.<sup>183</sup>

The growth of Pentecostalism saw a rise in more confrontational Protestant approaches to Islam, occasionally prompting Muslim counter-reactions.<sup>184</sup> A much less covered missionary initiative spearheaded by Pentecostals and Charismatic Lutherans caused some controversy among Ethiopian Evangelicals, as it appeared to erode the strictly demarcated Christian-Muslim boundary. The so-called 'insider mission' approach is premised on the idea that someone can become a 'faithful follower of Jesus' while remaining within the mosque or 'Muslim culture'.<sup>185</sup> The intra-Protestant discussions around this controversial approach came to the boil around 2012 when well-established Bible translation institutes and publishers began producing so-

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178 Douglas Pratt, *Christian Engagement with Islam: Ecumenical Journeys Since 1910*, Leiden: Brill, 2017, 144.

179 Pratt, *Christian Engagement*, 151–53.

180 Gunnar Hasselblatt, 'Herkunft und Auswirkungen der Apologetic Muhammed 'Abduh's (1849–1905), untersucht an seiner Schrift: Islam und Christentum im Verhältnis zu Wissenschaft und Zivilisation', dissertation, Theologische Fakultät der Georg-August Universität, Göttingen, 1968.

181 Klein, *Christlich-Muslimische Beziehungen*, 125–26.

182 Hasselblatt would go on to produce Oromo-nationalist writings in the service of the Berlin Mission throughout much of the Derg era (see, for example, Gunnar Hasselblatt, *Leben und Sterben im Oromoland*, Stuttgart: Radius, 1984; Gunnar Hasselblatt, *Nächstes Jahr im Oromoland: Von der eklatanten Verletzung der Menschenrechte durch den abessinisch-amharischen Rassismus in Äthiopien. Ein Bericht*, Stuttgart: Radius, 1984; Gunnar Hasselblatt, ed. *Konflikt am Horn von Afrika: Oromoland und Abessinien in Äthiopien. Zeitzeugen in Zeitungsartikeln 1982–1986*, Berlin: Berliner Missionswerk, 1986).

183 See Peter F. Ford, 'Christian-Muslim Relations in Ethiopia: A Checkered Past, a Challenging Future', *Reformed Review* 61 (2008); Peter F. Ford, 'Christian-Muslim Relations in Ethiopia: Lessons from the Past, Opportunities for the Future', in *World Christianity in Muslim Encounter: Essays in Memory of David A. Kerr*, ed. Stephen R. Goodwin, London: Continuum, 2009; Klein, *Christlich-Muslimische Beziehungen*, 127–36.

184 Abbink, 'Religion in public spaces', 266.

185 The idea was spearheaded by American missionaries in Bangladesh and at Fuller Theological Seminary in California, and subsequently spread to various places in Asia and Africa. Though there is a flurry of primary material on this movement there is as of yet no completed academic study. A current PhD project at the University of Cambridge aims to close this gap (see Christian J. Anderson, 'World Christianity, "World Religions" and the Challenge of Insider Movements', *Studies in World Christianity* 26 (2020)).

called ‘Muslim-friendly’ Bible translations, some of which attempted to utilize different language around the divine sonship of Jesus. These efforts were subsequently condemned by the World Evangelical Alliance and led to widespread criticism of ‘insider movements’ as a syncretic form of ‘Chrislam’.<sup>186</sup>

In Ethiopia, one of the most prominent ‘insider mission’ advocates was Lutheran priest Belay Guta Olam, who had worked with missionaries in Bangladesh and wrote his PhD on ‘contextualizing Christianity’ among Oromo Muslims.<sup>187</sup> From 2005 to 2008, Belay also headed the PROCMURA office.<sup>188</sup> The ‘insider mission’ approach also found favour among other evangelical churches in Ethiopia, with the Gennet Church—one of the oldest Pentecostal churches in Ethiopia—operating a dedicated programme, mainly in the Rift Valley. Within the Full Gospel Believers’ Church and the KHC, similar missions were led by converts from Islam (Shiferaw Said and Anwar Mohammed), both of whom favoured a contextualized, insider approach and subsequently guided the ECFE’s efforts in this direction.<sup>189</sup> As in the international debate, it was the attempt to produce a ‘Muslim-friendly’ Bible translation in Amharic that brought discussions to a head in Ethiopia. This earned widespread condemnation of ‘syncretism’, leading the ECFE to distance itself from ‘insider’ approaches.<sup>190</sup> The intensity of the debate appears to have foreclosed any broader discussion of evangelical exclusivism in Ethiopia. Meanwhile, there has been no evidence of a Muslim reaction to these Protestant ‘insider’ mission efforts, possibly indicating that they have not been as successful or widespread as claimed by advocates.

## ORTHODOX-PROTESTANT RELATIONS

Though early Protestant missionaries regarded their work in evangelism, Bible distribution and theological dialogue as contributing to Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity, competing European and Ethiopian interests in the region meant any Protestant-Orthodox partnership would be

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186 The World Evangelical Alliance Global Review Panel, ‘Report to the World Evangelical Alliance for Conveyance to Wycliffe Global Alliance and SIL International’, 2013, [https://worlddea.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/2013\\_0429-Final-Report-of-the-WEA-Independent-Bible-Translation-Review-Panel.pdf](https://worlddea.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/2013_0429-Final-Report-of-the-WEA-Independent-Bible-Translation-Review-Panel.pdf).

187 Belay Guta Olam, ‘Contextualizing the Church Among the Muslim Oromo’, DMiss thesis, Fuller Theological Seminary, School of World Mission, Pasadena, 2003.

188 Klein, *Christlich-Muslimische Beziehungen*, 130.

189 Klein, *Christlich-Muslimische Beziehungen*, 137–41, 144–47; see also Gary Ray Munson, ‘A Critical Hermeneutic Examination of the Dynamic of Identity Change in Christian Conversion Among Muslims in Ethiopia’, PhD dissertation, University of South Africa, Pretoria, 2014.

190 Mathetes, ‘Chrislam በኢትዮጵያ?’ [‘Chrislam in Ethiopia?’], 21 July 2012.

fraught with irreconcilable differences and political dangers.<sup>191</sup> Emperors therefore sought to divert Protestant efforts to non-Orthodox regions, first to the Beta Israel (Falasha) and later to the western and southern peripheries, which dovetailed with the nationalist interests of Swedish and German missionaries in the Oromo people.<sup>192</sup> Ethiopian Pentecostals would later follow a similar trajectory. Many of the early Pentecostals aimed to revive their churches of origin, whether Orthodox or mainstream Protestant, but the unfavourable response to their efforts prompted them to form a national association of their own. This decision was intensely debated, with some resisting the abandonment of the original revival mission.<sup>193</sup> Nonetheless, subsequent opposition endured by Pentecostals hardened denominational fronts and forged a sense of being persecuted for being the purest form of Christianity.<sup>194</sup> Therefore, even when the Orthodox Church also endured political pressure during the years of the Derg, an intra-Christian alliance never formed.<sup>195</sup>

As Charismatic forms became ubiquitous among Protestants in the EPRDF era,<sup>196</sup> the divide between Protestants and the EOTC deepened. This was not only fuelled by the significant growth of Protestantism at the expense of the Orthodox Church. Pentecostals in particular displayed a significant proselytizing impetus toward Orthodox Christians,<sup>197</sup> and their loud, intense services were harder to ignore in any given neighbourhood. Taking advantage of the EPRDF's relatively liberal policy on land grants for religious buildings and burial grounds, 'Pente' churches mushroomed in predominantly Orthodox areas, their buildings often competing visibly with Orthodox sanctuaries.<sup>198</sup>

Amid this environment of religious change, Orthodox Christians increasingly resorted to longstanding tropes of Protestants as 'foreign', 'heretics' and 'enemies of Mary', while

191 Arén, *Evangelical Pioneers*, 29–104; Daniel Seblewengel, *Perception and Identity: A Study of the Relationship Between the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and Evangelical Churches in Ethiopia*, Carlisle: Langham, 2019, 127–223.

192 Friedrich Flad, ed. *60 Jahre Mission unter den Falaschas in Abessinien: Selbstbiographie des Missionars Johann Martin Flad*, Gießen: Brunnen Verlag, 1922; Arén, *Evangelical Pioneers*.

193 Haustein, *Writing Religious History*, 128–29.

194 Haustein, *Writing Religious History*, 160–67, 226–47.

195 Afework Hailu Beyene, 'The Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the Charismatic/Pentecostals' Relationships in 1951–1991: A Charismatic/Pentecostal Perspective', MA thesis, Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, 2009. 49–55.

196 Haustein, 'Charismatic Renewal'.

197 Seblewengel, *Perception and Identity*, 123–24, 262–66.

198 Jörg Haustein, 'Pentecostalism in Ethiopia: A Unique Case in Africa', in *Global Renewal Christianity. Vol. 3: Africa*, eds. Vinson Synan, Amos Yong and Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, Lake Mary: Charisma House, 2016; for a rare counter-example of Orthodox growth in a Protestant areas, see Julian Sommerschuh, 'Respectable Conviviality: Orthodox Christianity as a Solution to Value Conflicts in Southern Ethiopia', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 27 (2021).

evangelicals tended to portray themselves as the ‘true believers’ and attacked the Orthodox Church as authoritarian and lacking true salvation.<sup>199</sup> Despite the EOTC’s founding membership of the World Council of Churches, there is no meaningful ecumenical forum in Ethiopia apart from the Bible Society, which has launched some high-level dialogue initiatives among trinitarian Christians.<sup>200</sup> As a result, the Protestant–Orthodox divide is often as sharply demarcated as the Muslim–Christian boundary, with considerable social costs when Orthodox Christians convert to Protestantism.

This antagonism has left Charismatic movements within the Orthodox Church in a precarious position. These movements are typically addressed using the Amharic word for renewal (*‘tehadiso’*), which in itself reveals a foundational split. For more traditionally minded Christians, renewal signals illicit innovations, whereas for *‘tehadiso’* groups it entails refreshing the church and its Orthodox profile, typically through engagement with some elements of Pentecostal spirituality or Protestant theology.<sup>201</sup> Despite their desire to remain within the Ethiopian Orthodox tradition and institutional framework, *‘tehadiso’* groups often run into trouble with clerical hierarchies, which may accelerate their transition into an independent Protestant church. A case in point is the Ammanuel United Church, which emerged from two Orthodox Charismatic youth groups that were exiled from their home congregations due to their exorcism practices, use of modern music and female leadership. The youths sought to establish themselves as an independent Orthodox Charismatic congregation distinct from Protestants in worship style and theology, which paradoxically increased its attractiveness to many Ethiopian Pentecostals seeking to reconcile their spirituality with the country’s cultural and religious heritage. Over time, this led to a ‘Protestantization’ of the fellowship, until it became a Pentecostal church like any other in liturgy and theology.<sup>202</sup> This case has intensified Orthodox scepticism against *‘tehadiso’* groups being a covert form of Protestant proselytization,<sup>203</sup> leading many Orthodox Charismatic fellowships to operate clandestinely. These groups often seek to ground their legitimacy in earlier Orthodox reform movements, particularly the Estifanosites of the fifteenth century.<sup>204</sup>

In recent years, movements within the EOTC have attempted to adapt to the challenge of Protestantism. Foremost among these movements is the previously mentioned Mahibere Kidusan, which has sought to defend the Orthodox Church as the only legitimate expression

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199 Seblewengel, *Perception and Identity*.

200 Seblewengel, *Perception and Identity*, 226–83.

201 Seblewengel, *Perception and Identity*, 346–49.

202 Data Dea, ‘Changing Youth Religiosity in Ethiopia: A Generational Perspective’, in *Generations in Africa: Connections and Conflicts*, eds. Erdmute Alber, Sjaak van der Geest and Susan R Whyte, Münster: Lit., 2008, 324; Hausteim, ‘Pentecostalism in Ethiopia’, 138–139; Seblewengel, *Perception and Identity*, 356–57.

203 Lee, ‘“Modernism” and the Ethiopian’, 109.

204 Seblewengel, *Perception and Identity*, 351–59.



of Christianity in Ethiopia, targeting Pentecostal doctrine as well as Orthodox Charismatics in its publications.<sup>205</sup> Moreover, Mahibere Kidusan has embraced an educational modernism that answers and to some extent mirrors the Pentecostal/Protestant challenge. The strength of Ethiopian Orthodoxy is no longer premised on the authority of tradition, monks or educated clerics, but on intellectual endeavour that explicitly grounds Orthodox theology in Biblical arguments, establishing its compatibility with modern life while shoring up the church through educating believers.

Another reaction within the Orthodox Church has been to spiritualize the Pentecostal challenge in the form of exorcism. The EOTC has a longstanding tradition of spirit management via priests or monks who act as healers by exorcizing ailments, including at holy water shrines where the role of the priest/monk is ancillary, if not secondary, to the power inherent in the location and holy water. Memher Girma, who was particularly popular in the early 2010s, has been one of the more prominent exorcists of recent years, regularly driving out the spirits of Pentecostalism.<sup>206</sup> The inquisitions of spirits preceding many of his exorcisms point to how the ‘Pente’ faith has been framed as a ‘lying spirit’ attempting to trick Orthodox Christians into betraying their faith through its music, glossolalia or prophecy. This Ethiopian Orthodox vision of spiritual warfare presents ‘an inversion of the geopolitical and historiographical imagination of African Pentecostalism’,<sup>207</sup> and seeks to shore up Orthodox believers against the modern dangers of foreign spiritual movements. Utilizing his status as social media sensation, Memher Girma managed to extend his reach far beyond his Addis Ababa constituency. Like Mahibere Kidusan’s intellectualist approach, the methods employed by Memhir Girma—who could be accused of acting like a ‘Pente’ pastor—illustrate how Ethiopian Pentecostals and Orthodox shape one another in a largely competitive and non-dialogical constellation.

## INTER-RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS AND INITIATIVES

The most prominent organization for managing inter-religious relations in Ethiopia is the Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia (IRCE), founded in 2010 by the Ethiopian government, spurred by a perception of increasing extremism and the political mobilization of religious constituencies the authorities wished to control. The IRCE is organized in parallel with government structures from the national level down to kebeles (sub-districts), and had as its founding members the

205 Mengistu Gobeze and Asamenu Kasa, *የቤተክርስቲያን ታሪክ: ቁጥር ፩* [Church History, vol. 2], Addis Ababa: Mehabir Qdusan, 2008; Seblewengel, *Perception and Identity*, 369–76; Lee, “Modernism” and the Ethiopian, 110–12. There are a number of similar publications from the Ethiopian diaspora (see, for example, Esubalew Belete, *የገሃነም ዴጃቮ: ፕሮቴስታንታዊ ደህድ በኢትዮጵያዊነት - ተዋሕዶነት - ሳይ ሲፈፈም* [Gates of Hell. When the Protestant Jihad against Ethiopianess or Oneness thrives], Alexandria, Virginia: Artistic Printers, 2004; Melaku Bawoke Terefe, *ሰውሩ አደጋ። አርቶዳክሳውያንን ስለ ፕሮቴስታንት አለም የተሳሳተ አቅጣጫ ለማሰጠን ቀቀ* [The Secret Grew. To warn the Orthodox about the Wrong Direction of the Protestant World], Los Angeles, 2005).

206 Malara, ‘Exorcizing the Spirit’.

207 Malara, ‘Exorcizing the Spirit’, 765.

EOTC, EIASC, ECFE, Ethiopian Catholic Church and the Seventh Day Adventist Church. Among Protestants, the IRCE deepened divisions about political representation, culminating in the previously mentioned exodus from the ECFE of the two largest churches (KHC and EECMY), which subsequently joined the IRCE. The IRCE seeks to facilitate national and local encounters between religious leaders and has produced an inter-religious training manual, which Klein sees as a milestone in the development of an Ethiopian inter-religious theology.<sup>208</sup> At the same time, the IRCE claims its main goal is to fight extremism, here defined as the denial of another religion's right to exist,<sup>209</sup> which may create the impression that its main aim is actually the securitization of religion. This, along with its official character, have limited the IRCE's popular appeal and effectiveness, a point yet to be fully examined in the few academic publications discussing the council and its genesis.<sup>210</sup>

Alongside and preceding the IRCE, there are a number of civil society organizations (CSOs) that engage in inter-religious activities,<sup>211</sup> the oldest of which is Norwegian Church Aid (NCA), which entered the country in 1974. During the Ethio–Eritrean War of 1998–2000, NCA facilitated dialogues between Christian and Muslim leaders from both countries.<sup>212</sup> This led to continued involvement in peacebuilding efforts, including in the aftermath of inter-religious conflicts in Ethiopia. With the restrictive CSO law of 2009, this advocacy work had to be discontinued and was not resumed when Abiy replaced the law in 2019. Inter-religious work continued in more traditional areas of development, however, such as work surrounding the HIV/AIDS epidemic or reducing gender-based violence.<sup>213</sup>

The Ethiopian Interfaith Forum for Development, Dialogue and Action took a similar approach of working via religious communities in the areas of HIV/AIDS, orphan care, peacebuilding and conflict transformation. It was founded as a branch of the World Faiths Development Dialogue at the Berkeley Centre for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs, and was registered in Ethiopia in 2002. The forum largely functions as an umbrella framework for religious development organizations, and in attaining resident status was able to circumvent the strict confines of the

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208 Klein, *Christlich-Muslimische Beziehungen*, 360–75.

209 Klein, *Christlich-Muslimische Beziehungen*, 213.

210 Tony Karbo, 'Religion and Social Cohesion in Ethiopia', *International Journal of Peace and Development Studies* 4 (2013); Getahun Kumie Antiegn, 'An Assessment of Religion, Peace and Conflict in the Post 1991 of Ethiopia', *Vestnik RUDN. International Relations* 19 (2019); Klein, *Christlich-Muslimische Beziehungen*, 207–15.

211 For a full list, see Klein, *Christlich-Muslimische Beziehungen*, 196–207.

212 Stein Villumstad, 'Inter-Faith Action in Times of Conflict', 2022, [www.academia.edu/794862/Inter\\_Faith\\_Action\\_in\\_Times\\_of\\_Conflict](http://www.academia.edu/794862/Inter_Faith_Action_in_Times_of_Conflict); for a critical appraisal of NCA, see Aud V. Tønnessen, 'Faith-Based NGOs in International Aid: Humanitarian Agents or Missionaries of Faith?' *Forum for Development Studies* 34 (2007).

213 Klein, *Christlich-Muslimische Beziehungen*, 198.

2009 CSO law.<sup>214</sup> Other organizations taking an inter-religious approach to development are Justice for All—Prison Fellowship of Ethiopia and Religions for Peace.<sup>215</sup>

The Life and Peace Institute (LPI) was founded in Uppsala in 1985, supported by Swedish churches, and came to Ethiopia at the end of the 1980s with the aim of using religious and traditional concepts to facilitate dialogue between the Derg and insurgent factions.<sup>216</sup> It is engaged in various inter-religious dialogue- and tolerance-building initiatives, many in collaboration with government universities. At the same time, the LPI has a wider Horn of Africa research project, which supports the African Union and other policy-makers on conflict issues, including inter-religious matters. It partners with the InterAfrica Group and the Peace and Development Centre, both of which are engaged in similar peacebuilding activities and research.

The Interfaith Peace-Building Initiative (IPI) has roots in a local branch of the United Religions Initiative and was officially registered in Ethiopia in 2003.<sup>217</sup> In the aftermath of the 2006 Jimma conflicts, IPI became co-ordinator of the National Interfaith Peace Council of Ethiopia, the forerunner of the IRCE. With the foundation of the IRCE, IPI was dissolved at the behest of the Ministry of Federal Affairs. Around 2010, PROCMURA strengthened its emphasis on inter-religious relations and set up interfaith committees, counterbalancing the conversion approach to Islam that had previously been predominant.<sup>218</sup> At the same time, the African Union established an Interfaith Dialogue Forum, which collaborates with the IRCE and since 2016 has been supported by the King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue.<sup>219</sup>

In addition to these CSOs, a number of universities engage in research and knowledge exchange on inter-religious affairs. While, like all state universities, Addis Ababa University has no official religious studies department, studies on religion and inter-religious relations have nevertheless been produced in various departments, as well as the Institute for Peace and Security Studies,

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214 'Who We Are', Ethiopian Interfaith Forum for Development Dialogue and Action, [www.acrl-rfp.org/networks-affiliates/east-africa/ethiopian-interfaith-forum-for-development-dialogue-and-action-eifdda/](http://www.acrl-rfp.org/networks-affiliates/east-africa/ethiopian-interfaith-forum-for-development-dialogue-and-action-eifdda/); on religion and development in Ethiopia, see also Emma Tomalin and Jörg Haustein, 'Keeping Faith in 2030: Religions and the Sustainable Development Goals. Workshop Report: Religions and Development in Ethiopia, Addis Ababa, September 20th–21st 2018', Arts & Humanities Research Council, 2018, <https://religions-and-development.leeds.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/10/2019/02/Workshop-Report-Ethiopia-Final-corri.pdf>.

215 Klein, *Christlich-Muslimische Beziehungen*, 203, 205.

216 Klein, *Christlich-Muslimische Beziehungen*, 201.

217 Klein, *Christlich-Muslimische Beziehungen*, 200.

218 Klein, *Christlich-Muslimische Beziehungen*, 133–134.

219 Klein, *Christlich-Muslimische Beziehungen*, 206.

which is part of the university.<sup>220</sup> Klein also notes that the MA programme at the Centre for African and Oriental Studies (College of Social Sciences) contains elements of religious studies,<sup>221</sup> though this is not well supported by the content descriptions on the webpages of the degree and the college. Religious colleges also offer inter-religious courses and support related research, but this is rooted in a confessional perspective, strengthening Klein's assertion that a 'neutral institution for (inter)-religious research, study, and education ... is desirable'.<sup>222</sup>



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220 Klein, *Christlich-Muslimische Beziehungen*, 204.

221 Klein, *Christlich-Muslimische Beziehungen*, 204.

222 Klein, *Christlich-Muslimische Beziehungen*, 205.

## CONCLUSION AND AVENUES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

As this survey has shown, religion is of considerable historical, social and political significance in Ethiopia. Rather than being a distinct social or even ‘private’ factor, religious identity is best understood as interwoven with historical narratives about Ethiopia, inherited political imbalances, claims to public space, ethnic identities, and articulated visions about the country’s future. As the historical overview shows, Ethiopia’s political management of religions has never been fully equal, even under robust legal frameworks separating church and state. Instead, the political system has laboured to mobilize and control the country’s religious plurality and particular faith constituencies. PM Abiy’s invocations of faith as he attempts to apply a post-ethnic formula to the Ethiopian nation state must therefore take account of this broader history. Further research is needed into how religion is employed in contemporary political rhetoric, as well as the ways in which religious constituents participate in and echo this rhetoric, acting as catalysts or conduits for social tensions.

Against this backdrop of historical processes and historiographical claims, there are local encounters between religions. These follow their own dynamics of boundary demarcation and mutual accommodation, concealment and revelation of difference, conflict and peace-making. Significant demographic shifts, as well as more liberal policy governing access to land for religious buildings and burial grounds, have exacerbated competition over public space, with previous claims to historical predominance sometimes challenged by these changes. Moreover, the major religions are far from homogenous entities, and as such are often engaged in internal discussions over how to align their politics and react to religious others. The standard narrative of ‘traditional’ peaceful coexistence being confronted by rising ‘extremism’ is not sufficient to unpack these various parameters, though the expectation and accusation of ‘extremism’ certainly plays a role in anticipating and generating conflict. This calls for more local research and comparative analysis aimed at mapping out the interplay of national and local politics with conflict drivers, and how this drives or helps reconcile religiously demarcated conflict.

Finally, existing avenues of inter-religious dialogue and peacebuilding may not be adequately adapted to local complexities and the changing religio-political environment. The IRCE is characterized by political capture and the securitization of religion, while the extent to which high-level efforts such as the inter-religious training manual for peace are reaching local actors is unclear. In other arenas of conflict, such as the Tigray War, calls for peace tend to ring hollow given that religious institutions themselves are riddled with political conflict. While there are a significant number of CSOs working in religious peacebuilding, it does not appear that their efforts are joined up particularly well. Where inter-religious conflict has emerged in recent years, it has generally been marked by failures on the part of state authorities and civil society actors to prevent outbreaks of violence or install avenues for post-conflict adjudication and

reconciliation. As anthropological writings in particular have shown, communities possess many cultural assets and traditions capable of preventing or alleviating conflict. Further research is necessary to identify these and elucidate a vernacular understanding of religious coexistence.



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