

# RELIGION, CONFLICT, AND SOCIAL COHESIVENESS: INSIGHTS FROM JIMMA

Girma Defere & Jörg Haustein



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### THE ETHIOPIA PEACE RESEARCH FACILITY

This report 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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**COVER DESIGN:** Designed by Maggie Dougherty.

# CONTENTS

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<b>Abbreviations</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Summary</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>History and demography</b>	<b>9</b>
Historical background	9
Current demography and socioeconomic profile	10
The clashes of 2006 and 2011	12
<b>Inter-religious relations</b>	<b>14</b>
General perceptions of inter-religious conflicts	14
Remembering past religious conflicts	17
Recent tensions and thwarted conflicts	20
<b>Intra-religious divergence and conflicts</b>	<b>23</b>
The politics of Muslim ‘fundamentalism’	23
Renewal and ethnic conflict in the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church	25
Protestant fragmentation	28
<b>Resources for conflict prevention and peace</b>	<b>31</b>
The Inter-Religious Council and other institutional initiatives	31
Personal relationships	34
<b>Conclusions</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>39</b>

# ABBREVIATIONS

<b>EECMY</b>	Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus
<b>EOTC</b>	Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church
<b>EPRDF</b>	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front
<b>IRC</b>	Inter-Religious Council

## SUMMARY

- Despite its predominantly Muslim surrounding area, Jimma is one of the most heterogeneous cities in Ethiopia's Oromia region. Unlike other Ethiopian cities and towns, Jimma has not seen any major inter-religious or -ethnic clashes since the fall of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front. Even so, serious clashes between Muslims and Christians—both Orthodox and Protestant—did erupt in surrounding Jimma zone in 2006 (Beshasha) and 2011 (Asendabo).
- Today, the Beshasha and Asendabo clashes are still regarded as having upset the long-established status quo of inter-religious conviviality. The various alleged causes—competition over land, conspiratorial movements, political interests and rising extremism—are not seen as solved, prompting contemporary tensions to be interpreted through similar lenses. Thus, while the city and wider region have not seen any major inter-religious clashes since 2011, locals remain fearful that conflict could re-emerge.
- While such wariness has arguably led to successful preventative measures in some cases, Jimma has for the most part failed to develop comprehensive dialogue and peacebuilding structures. Despite some religious leaders engaging in inter-personal and communal activities, their initiatives appear hampered by a lack of ongoing support. Jimma's Inter-Religious Council (IRC) largely seems to operate reactively, contributing to a perception that dialogue fulfils a primarily political function, leaving structural issues unaddressed.
- Nonetheless, a resilient ethos of inter-religious conviviality still appears to be present in inter-personal relationships. Some issues of trust and scepticism towards inter-religious marriages notwithstanding, Jimma does not seem a religiously segregated space. Whether in family relations, friendships or workplace settings, the study unearthed numerous examples of mutual respect across religious boundaries. In particular, neighbourhood associations have kept people engaged, even where inter-religious relationships are otherwise absent.
- The IRC should be strengthened and financially supported in order to widen its reach and enable further preventative measures. Alongside this, stronger regulations need to be established granting more equitable access to land and public space. More generally, local government authorities must strive to observe the constitutional provisions ensuring secularism, the rule of law and impartial public service delivery.

# INTRODUCTION

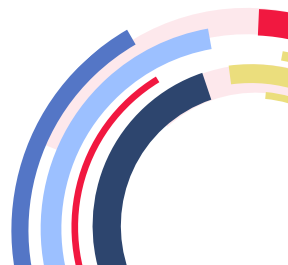
Despite its predominantly Muslim surrounding area, Jimma is one of the most heterogeneous cities in Ethiopia's Oromia region. Unlike other Ethiopian cities and towns, Jimma has not seen any major inter-religious or ethnic clashes since the fall of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) in 2018. In the time of the EPRDF, however, serious clashes between Muslims and Christians (both Orthodox and Protestant) had erupted in the surrounding Jimma zone in 2006 (Beshasha) and 2011 (Asendabo). At the time, the clashes garnered national attention, prompting various dialogue and peacebuilding initiatives. It was this history that led to Jimma's inclusion in our research project on religious polarization in Ethiopia. More specifically, the project sought to answer two main questions:

1. What is the current understanding of past religious conflict and to what extent does it continue to shape people's outlook on inter-communal relations?
2. What inter-religious peacebuilding initiatives have been developed in the aftermath of the conflict and to what extent have they been successful?

The study is based on interviews with 34 Jimma city residents, the capital of Jimma zone, conducted by four researchers between October and December 2022. One of the researchers—a resident of Jimma—subsequently contributed to the drafting of this report. Due to the precarious security situation in the wider Oromia region at the time of the study, we were unable to conduct research directly in Beshasha and Asendabo, the two places most directly associated with the inter-religious violence of 2006 and 2011. Nonetheless, our interlocutors in Jimma city were fully aware of the conflicts taking place across the zone and their wider impacts. Moreover, the focus on Jimma city, which is more vibrant and diverse than the surrounding countryside, allowed us to gain a better sense of current tensions and peacebuilding initiatives.

Having adopted a qualitative approach, we recruited a diverse group of interview partners. Respondents belonged to Islam (14), Orthodox Christianity (8) and Protestantism (12), and hailed from a variety of ethnic groups. Some interlocutors were religious leaders, serving their denominations in capacities ranging from leading local congregations to regional coordination. Many had also been engaged in inter-religious dialogue initiatives, including the Inter-Religious Council (IRC) of Jimma. Others were lay members from different professions, alongside several students and housewives. The age of respondents ranged from 20 to 78 years old, with males constituting the majority (27) of the study sample. While a small-scale study such as this cannot claim statistical representativeness, we have nevertheless striven to encompass diverse voices and opinions in both our research and analysis. As such, we believe the study gives a good account of current perceptions and debates in Jimma concerning inter-religious matters, even if its design does not enable us to quantify them or determine majority opinions.

Part 1 of the report presents a historical and socio-demographic overview of Jimma, before part 2 moves onto a discussion of past and contemporary inter-religious relations. Part 3 looks at intra-religious divergence, which for many interlocutors is a further source of debate and conflict, particularly regarding Islamic reform movements and ethnic divisions among Christians. Next, part 4 examines dialogue initiatives and personal relations as avenues for securing peace. The report concludes with a few summary observations.





# HISTORY AND DEMOGRAPHY

As per the country's 1995 constitution, the Ethiopian state has a federal structure, composed of regions largely defined according to ethnic group or nationality. Jimma city is located in Oromia—Ethiopia's largest and most populous regional state—and serves as the capital of Jimma zone. It is south-western Oromia's biggest city and its economic centre, with a long history as a political capital and trading hub.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Jimma emerged as an Oromo state in the nineteenth century, founded by Abba Jifar I (r. 1830–1855).<sup>1</sup> Historical records indicate that Jiren, now a suburb of Jimma, was an important trade centre in the Kingdom of Jimma.<sup>2</sup> Thousands of people flocked to this market hub in the early nineteenth century, including subjects of all five Gibe kingdoms, the Amhara people from Gojjam and Showa, and a variety of ethnic groups, such as the Kefa, Yem and Konta.<sup>3</sup> Christianity arrived alongside these migrations and cultural interactions.

Meanwhile, the Oromo in Gibe region were driven to embrace Islam in the mid-nineteenth century by a number of factors.<sup>4</sup> One was the decline of the Gadaa system and the failure of traditional cosmology in light of changing socio-political conditions. At the same time, long-distance trade and the availability of Muslim merchants and clerics to teach Islam created an environment conducive to the religion's expansion in the area. By contrast, Islam encountered considerable opposition in Kefa due to the strength of indigenous religion there, in turn stimulating the further expansion of Islam in Jimma. Unlike the Kefa, the Oromo welcomed Islam as a means of reorganizing the Gibe region's socio-political and spiritual life. Moreover, Islam emerged as an alternative to those opposed to the expansion of Orthodox Christianity.<sup>5</sup> By the end of the nineteenth century, there were about 60 Madrasas or Islamic schools in Jimma, mainly located in and around the Jiren area.<sup>6</sup> Large numbers of students came to Jimma from surrounding communities to attend Islamic schools, over time making the city

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- 1 Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia, 1855–1991*, 2nd ed., Oxford: James Currey, 18.
  - 2 Bahru, *A History*, 21–23.
  - 3 Donald N. Levine, *Greater Ethiopia: The Evolution of a Multiethnic Society*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1974.
  - 4 Guluma Gameda, 'The Islamization of the Gibe Region, Southwestern Ethiopia from c. 1830s to the Early Twentieth Century', *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 26/2 (1993).
  - 5 Abbas Haji Gnamo, 'Islam, the Orthodox Church and Oromo Nationalism (Ethiopia)', *Cahiers d'études africaines* 165 (2002).
  - 6 Mohammed Hassen, *The Oromo of Ethiopia: A History, 1570–1860*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, 158.

not only a political and economic centre, but a hub of Islamic learning and culture attractive to populations from across the country.

The Kingdom of Jimma was one of Gibe region's five Oromo monarchies to be subjected by Emperor Menelik II's army in the early 1880s.<sup>7</sup> Having chosen to submit peacefully, however, Abba Jifar II was able to negotiate autonomous status for his kingdom. This encompassed control over religious affairs, including the authority to grant permission (rarely given) for the construction of churches.<sup>8</sup> When Abba Jifar died in 1932, Emperor Haile Selassie decided to end Jimma's autonomy. As early as the mid-1920s, Haile Selassie had drawn up plans to connect the south-western region with Addis Ababa in order to control the former's coffee trade—already a major export crop. Thus, the Kingdom of Jimma was formally absorbed into Ethiopia, leading to the ensuing political centralization becoming intertwined with the region's changing political economy.

During the Italian occupation of Ethiopia (1936–1941), Jimma was turned into a centre of Islamic learning in order to weaken the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.<sup>9</sup> The impact of this era is still visible in the city today. As part of their colonial project, the Italians also employed a divide-and-rule administrative structure based on ethnicity.<sup>10</sup> In 1942, the city became part of Kefa province, serving as its capital until 1991.<sup>11</sup> During this period, Jimma emerged as one of the biggest and most important towns in Ethiopia.<sup>12</sup>

## CURRENT DEMOGRAPHY AND SOCIOECONOMIC PROFILE

According to the 2007 Population and Housing Census of Ethiopia, Jimma zone had at the time a population of 2,486,155, consisting mainly of Oromo (87.6 per cent), with the remainder divided among various ethnic groups, including: Amhara (4.0 per cent), Yem (3.1 per cent), Dawuro (1.3 per cent), Kefficho (1.0 per cent) and Guragie (0.6 per cent).<sup>13</sup> The predominant

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7 Guluma Gemed, 'The Rise of Coffee and the Demise of Colonial Autonomy: The Oromo Kingdom of Jimma and Political Centralization in Ethiopia', *Northeast African Studies* 9/3 (2002).

8 Daniel Mains, *Hope is Cut: Youth, Unemployment, and the Future in Urban Ethiopia*, Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2012, 28.

9 J. Spencer Trimingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952, 204.

10 Mulatu Wubneh, 'Ethnic Identity Politics and the Restructuring of Administrative Units in Ethiopia', *International Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 11/1 & 2 (2017). See also how this ethnic politics and its religious significance is remembered in contemporary discourse: Daniel Mains, 'Drinking, Rumour, and Ethnicity in Jimma, Ethiopia', *Africa*. 74/3 (2004).

11 Herbert S. Lewis, *A Galla Monarchy: Jimma Abba Jifar, Ethiopia, 1830-1932*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1965, xvi.

12 Seifu Yonas and Jan Záhorkík, 'Jimma Town: Foundation and Early Growth from ca. 1830 to 1936', *Ethnologia Actualis* 17/2 (2017).

13 Central Statistical Agency, 'Population and Housing Census 2007: Oromia Statistics', 2007, 253–4. [www.statsethiopia.gov.et/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Population-and-Housing-Census-2007-Oromiya-Statistical.pdf](http://www.statsethiopia.gov.et/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Population-and-Housing-Census-2007-Oromiya-Statistical.pdf).

religion was Islam (85.6 per cent), followed by Orthodoxy (11.2 per cent) and Protestantism (3.0 per cent). Catholicism and people affiliating with traditional religion were marginal, each accounting for less than 0.1 per cent.<sup>14</sup>

The population of Jimma city (120,960 people), by contrast, was shown to be much more ethnically diverse. Although Oromo once again formed a majority, the percentage was much smaller (46.7 per cent), with larger proportions of Amhara (17.1 per cent), Dawuro (10.0 per cent), Guragie (6.4 per cent), Keficho (5.4 per cent) and Yem (5.1 per cent).<sup>15</sup> Even more significant was the contrast in religious composition, with Muslims forming the second largest group (39 per cent) after Orthodox Christians (46.8 per cent). Protestants remained a minority, but compared to the rest of the zone made up a considerably larger proportion of the city's inhabitants (13.1 per cent).<sup>16</sup> This religious and ethnic plurality is reflective of Jimma's long history as a trading town and regional hub, attracting migration from regions beyond Jimma zone, such as Shewa in the north or Kefa and Dawuro in the south.<sup>17</sup> The contrast between Jimma city and its surrounding area may, however, be responsible for increasing inter-religious tensions.

The disparity becomes starkly clear when comparing Jimma city to the surrounding *woredas* of Kersa, Dedo, Seka Chekorsa and Mana, where according to the 2007 census the proportion of Muslims ranged from 88.9 per cent (Kersa) to 93.0 per cent (Dedo).<sup>18</sup> By contrast, the Orthodox population ranged from 5.4 per cent (Dedo) to 10.9 per cent (Seka Chekorsa), with Protestants accounting for only 0.9 per cent (Kersa) to 2.3 per cent (Seka Chekorsa). These numbers reinforce the fact that although Muslims do not constitute a majority in Jimma city, Islam is overwhelmingly dominant in the immediately surrounding areas.

Current population projections from 2023 show that the population of Jimma city has more than doubled since the 2007 census, to an estimated 263,709.<sup>19</sup> This stands in contrast to Jimma zone and the *woredas* immediately surrounding Jimma city, which only grew by about 45 per cent over the same time period.<sup>20</sup> This ongoing urbanization comes with significant economic challenges. A 2020 report by the Federal Government of Ethiopia Central Statistical Agency revealed Jimma

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14 Central Statistical Agency, 'Population and Housing Census 2007', 340.

15 Central Statistical Agency, 'Population and Housing Census 2007', 277–8.

16 Central Statistical Agency, 'Population and Housing Census 2007', 364.

17 Mains, *Hope is Cut*, 25–42.

18 Central Statistical Agency, 'Population and Housing Census 2007', 340–1. On this contrast, see also Mains, *Hope is Cut*, 31–32.

19 Ethiopian Statistical Services, 'Population Size of Towns by Sex, Region, Zone and Weredas: July 2023', 2023, 28. [www.statsethiopia.gov.et/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Population-Size-of-Towns-by-Sex-as-of-July-2023.pdf](http://www.statsethiopia.gov.et/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Population-Size-of-Towns-by-Sex-as-of-July-2023.pdf).

20 Ethiopian Statistical Services, 'Population Size by Sex, Region, Zone and Wereda: July 2023', 2023, 12. [www.statsethiopia.gov.et/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Population-of-Zones-and-Weredas-Projected-as-of-July-2023.pdf](http://www.statsethiopia.gov.et/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Population-of-Zones-and-Weredas-Projected-as-of-July-2023.pdf).

city's overall unemployment rate to be 18.5 per cent—better than the unemployment rate for Oromia region overall (25.8 per cent).<sup>21</sup> That said, figures from a more detailed unemployment survey in 2012 suggest unemployment is much more prevalent among Jimma's youth, with figures for this group 10 per cent higher than the average.<sup>22</sup> Youth unemployment is a serious problem for Jimma—as it is for the country as a whole—given its tendency to fuel civil strife.

Although there are no current projections of ethnicity or religion, it seems safe to assume that Jimma's growth has not lessened its demographic plurality, implying increased inter-ethnic and inter-religious competition over land, economic opportunities and urban visibility. There are several mosques in different parts of the city, as well as Christian Orthodox, Protestant and Catholic churches. While Protestants are significantly smaller in number than Orthodox Christians and Muslims, their internal fragmentation has resulted in a proportionally higher number of churches, often with comparatively small congregations. Moreover, many Protestant churches offer religious services in rented houses or compounds, or rely on some form of mobile church due to lack of land ownership.

As far as settlement patterns are concerned, there are no specifically Muslim or Christian quarters. That said, the centre of the city is more mixed than some of its outskirts, which have predominantly Muslim populations. Land allocations for religious services are difficult to obtain, in particular for smaller and poorer congregations. Here, the use of the stadium for religious services has proved to be a point of contestation: while the Orthodox Church has been able to conduct larger gatherings at the venue, Protestants have found it difficult to obtain a permit for public services or evangelism there. This has eased somewhat in recent years, with Protestants allowed to use the stadium rent-free, although the charges for the requisite security services demanded by the administration remain considerable.

## THE CLASHES OF 2006 AND 2011

During the EPRDF era, Jimma zone faced multiple instances of inter-religious violence. The two most severe of these clashes were widely covered and had national repercussions. On 15 October 2006, several hundred Muslims attacked an Orthodox church in Beshasha (Agaro woreda) during a religious festivity.<sup>23</sup> The eruption of violence followed a previous altercation between Christians and Muslims in nearby Dembi over smoke from the large bonfire at the Orthodox *mäsqäl* holiday

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- 21 Central Statistical Agency, 'Key Findings on the 2020 Urban Employment Unemployment Survey (A Comparative Analysis with 2014-2016 and 2018 Survey Results)', 2020, 14. [www.statsethiopia.gov.et/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Key-Findings-on-The-2020-Urban-Employment-Unemployment-Survey-UEUS.pdf](http://www.statsethiopia.gov.et/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Key-Findings-on-The-2020-Urban-Employment-Unemployment-Survey-UEUS.pdf).
  - 22 Central Statistical Agency, 'Statistical Report On Urban Employment Unemployment Survey', 2012, 212, table 6.2. [www.statsethiopia.gov.et/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Urban-Employment-Unemployment-Survey-Statistical-Report-2012.pdf](http://www.statsethiopia.gov.et/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Urban-Employment-Unemployment-Survey-Statistical-Report-2012.pdf). Total unemployment in Jimma then was 16.5 per cent, but 26.3 per cent and 24.3 per cent among 15–19 year-olds and 20–24 year-olds, respectively.
  - 23 The village of Beshasha is near Agaro Town, the capital of Agaro *woreda*, which is why the attack is occasionally referred to under that name.

on 26 September, which claimed the lives of four Muslims. This provoked a week of violence in the region, during which four further individuals were killed, 1,500 people displaced, and many properties burnt and destroyed.<sup>24</sup> During the Beshasha attack, six Christians were killed and about 30 injured, while some were violently forced to convert to Islam. The church itself was torched and destroyed. A video showing brutal scenes from the attack circulated in Ethiopia afterwards. National leaders from all major religious denominations issued a joint statement condemning the violence. In February 2007, the national high court in Jimma sentenced six of the perpetrators to death and over 100 other participants to prison sentences.<sup>25</sup>

The second major clash occurred in March 2011 in the town of Asendabo and its surrounding region. Two Muslim contractors at the construction site for a Protestant church claimed to have discovered soiled Qur'an fragments in the church's latrine. An altercation ensued, which quickly spread to the surrounding towns and villages. Twenty-seven Protestant churches were burnt, as well as four Adventist churches and one Jehovah's Witnesses meeting place.<sup>26</sup> One person was killed, several injured, and—according to an Ethiopian Human Rights Council estimate—over 4,000 people were displaced.<sup>27</sup> In July, over 500 Muslims received prison sentences for participating in the violence.

Both these incidents prompted intensified inter-religious engagement, as well as maladjusted federal government efforts to combat Muslim extremism through anti-radicalism training and promotion of the al-Ahbash movement.<sup>28</sup> Inter-religious peace-building efforts were also central to Abiy Ahmed's PhD thesis on inter-religious conflict in Jimma zone, which he used to build his political profile through engagement in inter-religious peacebuilding.<sup>29</sup>

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- 24 Vicki Huddleston, 'Ethiopia: Recent Religious Violence in Oromiya Likely Has Many Root Causes', Confidential cable (US Embassy), 1 November 2006. [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06ADDISABABA2911\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06ADDISABABA2911_a.html).
- 25 US Department of State, 'Ethiopia: International Religious Freedom Report 2007', 14 September 2007. <https://2001-2009.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2007/90097.htm>.
- 26 Ethiopian Human Rights Council, '117<sup>th</sup> Special Report: Religious Conflict in Jimma Zone, Oromia Regional State Requires a Permanent Government Sponsored Solution'. [www.ehrco.org/images/117englishversion.pdf](http://www.ehrco.org/images/117englishversion.pdf) (accessed via Internet Archive). News reports claimed 69 churches had been destroyed, but this number was not confirmed by the Ethiopian Human Rights Council. Numbers released by the Protestant churches tally 65 burnt churches; see Gemedata Akuma Kubura and Fekede Silashi Fufa, 'The Emerging Dynamics of Socio-Religious Controversies and Conflicts in South Western Ethiopia', *American Research Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 7/1 (2021): 9.
- 27 Ethiopian Human Rights Council, '117<sup>th</sup> Special Report'.
- 28 On al-Ahbash and the EPRDF policy toward Islam, see Jörg Hausteijn, Abduletif Deidir Idris and Diego Maria Malara, 'Religion in Contemporary Ethiopia: History, Politics and Inter-Religious Relations', Rift Valley Institute, 2023, 20–22. <https://riftvalley.net/publication/religion-contemporary-ethiopia-history-politics-and-inter-religious-relations>.
- 29 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 thesis, Addis Ababa University, 2016.

# INTER-RELIGIOUS RELATIONS

It was Jimma zone's national profile an area of religious conflict and peacebuilding that led to its selection as a study site. While the security situation in 2022 and 2023 precluded data collection in Beshasha and Asendabo directly, the interviews conducted in Jimma city provided insights into how people perceived the past conflicts and the success of subsequent peacebuilding measures.

## GENERAL PERCEPTIONS OF INTER-RELIGIOUS CONFLICTS

Each interview began with the participant being asked about how they perceived religion's role in Jimma's inter-communal conflicts and peacebuilding. Many asserted that religion stood for peace, with other factors to blame for the conflicts that had arisen purportedly in the name of religion. This argument is exemplified by the following excerpts from a lengthy response given by an imam:

I believe that religion plays an important role in building peace and keeping people united. As a religious leader, I always teach people to live in love and unity. ... As you know, Islam itself means peace. And Islam means to keep the peace. Islam commands us to live in peace with people of other religions. We teach our followers this principle. Conflicts can arise because some people use religion as a cover for personal gain. Religion is an easy way to mobilize people. ... There are accusations against Muslims as if they were killers. These accusations do not take into consideration the fundamental principles of the Islamic faith. When I say that, I do not mean that there are no Muslims who can do anything wrong. But they cannot represent their religion. Such people try to use concepts related to religion, but interpret them out of context. In this case, they can violate human rights.<sup>30</sup>

Likewise, an Orthodox study participant argued that religion 'by itself is by no means the cause of conflict', but rather 'there are individuals who make use of the weakness of believers to incite conflict'.<sup>31</sup> A Protestant interlocutor expressed similar sentiments:

Religion alone cannot be considered a source of conflict. Conflict is a matter of personal attitude. It's about achieving personal interest. Religion is a sensitive issue. They [people looking to incite conflict] can use it for personal purposes. They do things that make people turn their friends against them in order to pursue personal gain.<sup>32</sup>

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30 Interview with imam of a local mosque, Muslim, male, age unstated.

31 Interview with person of unstated profession, Orthodox, male, age 55.

32 Interview with Evangelical Council member, Protestant, male, age 33.

Such sentiments clearly aim to detach religion—whether one’s own faith or religion in general—from any blame concerning the conflicts afflicting Jimma region. This relies on a clear-cut demarcation between the essence of religion, identified as involving peace, harmony and development, and its abuse by external, manipulative ‘personal’ or ‘political’ interests. While such a view enables the proponent to uphold religion as an essential resource for peace, it provides little more than vague allusions when it comes to analysing inter-religious conflict.

Other participants acknowledged that religion could be both a cause of conflict and a resource for peace. As such, they offered more detailed insights into how religious identities and sentiments can factor into inter-communal strife. Some observed that religious difference causes communal separation, whether in the form of arguments over prayer times and practices in rental compounds, or different dietary rules causing restaurants to be classified as either Christian or Muslim establishments.<sup>33</sup> Others pointed to rising ‘fundamentalism’ or ‘radicalism’, coupled with decreasing religious tolerance, as a key avenue by which religion contributes to conflict.<sup>34</sup> The catalytic role of religion in escalating conflict was also raised, as exemplified by the following quote:

Personal problems between two individuals can become the country’s problem when they take a religious dimension. This can create a fire that can burn the whole country. There are individuals who intentionally try to initiate such problems.<sup>35</sup>

Allegations that religious conflict was incited for ‘political purposes’ or ‘religious institutions have become a tool for politicians to manipulate them for their political purposes’ were often rather vague and not linked to particular examples.<sup>36</sup> In general, such views related to four main lines of argument, the first of which being that politicians use religious differences to pursue a ‘divide-and-rule’ strategy, with these differences especially easy to exploit due to their sensitivity.<sup>37</sup> Another line of argument pointed to political incompetence:

Political interference, politicizing religion without having a good knowledge of the religion has made religion a source of conflict. After conflict, religious institutions are then the ones invited to calm the crisis.<sup>38</sup>

A third line of argument blamed foreign influences for the influx of radical ideas, in particular Saudi Arabian influences on Ethiopian Islam. Finally, some Protestants highlighted their

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33 Interviews with housewife, Protestant, female, age 30; teacher, Protestant, male, age 33.

34 Interviews with church leader, Protestant, male age 32; regional church coordinator, Protestant, male, age 58; pastor, Protestant, male 45; Orthodox clergy member, male 38.

35 Interview with teacher, Protestant, male, age 33.

36 Interview with pastor, Protestant, male, age 50.

37 Interviews with, for example, church leader, Protestant, male, age 32; imam, Muslim, male, age unstated.

38 Interview with active mosque member, Muslim, male, age 55.

perception that politics is used as a means to protect the economic and social interests of the city's Muslim and Orthodox majorities.<sup>39</sup>

In practical terms, political tensions between the religions appeared to be linked mainly to competition over land and public space. As one participant put it:

The religious rivalry in Jimma is manifested through [discussions about] where to build mosques, churches, or chapels as well as public celebrations in the stadium; and religious “noise” production by means of big loudspeakers.<sup>40</sup>

Protestants in particular complained about unequal access to land for churches and burial grounds, with some claiming the city administration actively sided with Muslims over land allocations. They also noted they were not granted the same access to public spaces for religious activities as other religions. One incident reported in multiple interviews concerned a Protestant outreach attempt via street preaching that was seen as an attempt to ‘take over’ an area. According to one interlocutor, officials went as far as chasing the preachers off the street and labelling them ‘terrorists’.<sup>41</sup> The same informant contrasted this with a Muslim public prayer meeting closing down roads during Easter 2022, which he interpreted as demonstrating ‘this was a Muslim-dominated area’.

A further political factor worthy of consideration is ethnicity. In this respect, however, there was no clear pattern indicating whether people in Jimma identified more with religion or ethnicity. When asked whether religion, ethnicity or other social factors mattered more in Jimma, a significant number of informants insisted religion came first. For them, ethnicity was either a secondary identifier or a new threat to intra-religious unity resulting from ethno-nationalist politics (as in the case of the Oromo split in the Orthodox Church discussed below). Others, however, insisted that ethnicity mattered more than religion, while still others held that it depended on the individual. Some informants asserted that the question of primary identity was a shifting one, as demonstrated by the following statement from a Protestant interlocutor:

In my experience, ethnicity was the identifying factor a few years ago. Now, religion is the one that matters a lot, even though you are born here [i.e. in a Protestant minority context]. This means that the identifying factors in Jimma are: number one, religion—Islam, then Oromo, then the other defining element is locality. Ethiopian identity has no place.<sup>42</sup>

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39 Interviews with regional church co-ordinator, Protestant, male, age 58; teacher, Protestant, male, age 33.

40 Interview with advisor to Jimma zone council, Muslim, male, age 66.

41 Interview with church leader, Protestant, male, age not stated.

42 Interview with Protestant pastor, male, age 50.



Others, though, noted a recent swing towards ethnicity as the primary way of determining communal identities and boundaries. Such perceived volatility arguably reflects the contemporary situation in Ethiopia, with recent clashes seen either as primarily religious or primarily ethnic, leaving people unsure which community fault-lines are predominant when it comes to setting out kinship and anticipating conflict. On top of this, high unemployment levels may further stoke resentment, which can then be directed towards various political projects. One Muslim informant also expressed concern over the interaction between religious sentiment and the decadence of youth morals, which made it easier to mobilize youth for violent ends.<sup>43</sup>

## REMEMBERING PAST RELIGIOUS CONFLICTS

As detailed above, the area around Jimma has been associated with inter-religious clashes and peacebuilding efforts since 2006. Accordingly, many interlocutors insisted the rise of religious conflict was a new development for Jimma, standing in contrast to a longer history of conviviality. An Orthodox priest from the IRC summarized the area's history as follows:

During King Abba Jifar II, all the king's servants were Orthodox believers and ethnically they belonged to different ethnic backgrounds (Ahmara, Oromo, Kafficho, Dorze etc). King Abba Jifar did all these things intentionally to promote the peaceful coexistence of varied ethno-linguistic and religious groups or to avoid ethno-religious tensions in Jimma areas. ... St. Medhanealem church was constructed by the support of the king after receiving a letter of request from Emperor Menelik II. Many Muslims participated in the church's construction. This was more or less the scenario from then until 2006 when religious rivalry ended in violence, claiming the lives of some of our believers, including physical and verbal attacks on the church. That means up to this tragic event there was no contradiction between Muslims and Christians faiths.<sup>44</sup>

A Muslim participant offered a similar narrative of decline, qualifying his initial assessment of relative tranquillity and pointing also to ethnic and clan divisions:

In my view, inter-religion relationship is quite good. Of course, I cannot compare it with the previous time where religious differences did not matter for friendship, inter-marriages or other social gatherings. In the present time, different associations are established along ethnicity, religion and locality.<sup>45</sup>

Several interlocutors mentioned the Beshasha and Asendabo clashes when asked about recent inter-religious conflict. The former was mentioned less frequently and in more general terms than the latter, with Protestant respondents in particular bringing up the 2011 attacks on their churches in Asendabo and the surrounding region. Less mention was made by Orthodox

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43 Interview with Islamic teacher, male, age 40.

44 Interview with Orthodox priest, male, age 60.

45 Interview with active mosque member, male, age 55.

interlocutors of the Beshasha attacks on their community. Only two Muslim informants mentioned the incidents, one blaming it on politics and the other issuing a clear denunciation of the attacks:

As for conflicts, the conflicts in Beshasha and Asendabo were wrong. Both killed each other. We are all equal whether we are Muslim or Protestant. We religious elders do not accept that.<sup>46</sup>

In general, the interview findings were consonant with Gameda and Fekede's study of the Asendabo and Beshasha clashes, pointing to competition over physical space, mutual distrust, religious polarization and Muslim radicalization as the underlying drivers of the conflicts.<sup>47</sup>

Several Protestant interlocutors referred to the issue of competition over physical space, linking the attacks to their belief that Muslims had actively resisted church-building in the area. Given that the Asendabo conflict began at the construction site for a Protestant church, this is an unsurprising interpretation. Even those with little specific knowledge about the previous attacks used them as a reference point for contemporary difficulties in obtaining land for churches in Jimma city and the surrounding area:

I think before ten years, there was religious conflict in Beshasha and Asendabo. I do not know in detail about the issue. There was a problem of forbidding land for churches, and the churches were burnt during the conflict. Even nowadays, getting land for church construction is difficult. If they hear that a [Protestant] church is to be constructed, they perceive it as if something serious thing is to happen so that they have to prevent it.<sup>48</sup>

Assumptions regarding a planned agenda behind the conflicts surfaced in a considerable number of interviews—a clear reflection of the mutual distrust diagnosed by Gameda and Fekede. Many interlocutors regarded the clashes as well-prepared and orchestrated attacks, rather than the consequence of local disagreements. One particularly vivid example can be seen in the following retelling of the Asendabo attack:

Those who hated building churches in the area wanted to use a tacit strategy. They allegedly took advantage of Muslim workers to do what they believed could cause conflict. Afterwards, one of the Muslim daily labourers is said to have been instructed to tear out a page from the Holy Quran and throw it in the toilet. As soon as this was done, the same person started screaming and said he had seen pages of the Holy

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46 Interview with Muslim community leader, male, age 53.

47 Gameda and Fekede, 'Emerging Dynamics'.

48 Interview with teacher, Protestant, male, age 33. Another Protestant informant cited similar frustrations, claiming that the government sided with Muslims in land conflicts; interview with pastor and local church leader, male, age 45.

Quran being used as ‘toilet paper’ on the church premises. The other Muslim rushed into the churches’ compound and started violence.<sup>49</sup>

Two main arguments came to the fore among those reflecting on the underlying causes of the attacks. The first involved surmising who might benefit from sowing mutual mistrust, and why. Despite noting that he was too young to remember the conflicts in detail, a Protestant participant contended the main driver had been politics, which had aimed ‘to separate religion’ and ‘divide and control people’.<sup>50</sup> Similarly, an imam blamed ‘Woyane’ (Tigray People’s Liberation Front) politics, which ‘used division as a tool of rule’.<sup>51</sup> In his opinion, the ‘sensitive subject’ of religion was particularly vulnerable to such politics, and ‘of course’ the Asendabo rumours about the Qur’an being used as toilet paper was ‘a politically motivated act to divide our community’. A slightly different assessment was presented by an Orthodox Church leader, who claimed the conflict in Beshasha was ‘essentially related to the personal interests of a small number of individuals’ who ‘covertly worked to realize hidden political gains’ by infiltrating the local community.<sup>52</sup> This led him to conclude:

It’s not a religious conflict. Note that the first Orthodox church in Beshasha was built by a Muslim community. Orthodox did the same when the Muslims build new mosques.<sup>53</sup>

The second main argument laid the blame on external influence via ‘fundamentalist’ or ‘extremist’ teaching. An Orthodox interlocutor told us that while religion as such was not to blame for the conflict, new Muslim teachings ‘aimed at establishing true Islam’ had entered the region around this time.<sup>54</sup> According to him, these teachings were sponsored by outsiders and visible in people who ‘do not dress like other Muslims’ but ‘live like the Arabs’. A Protestant informant similarly contended that the ‘region wanted to live like Arabs’ due to their strong bond with Arabic countries through migration and financial flows.<sup>55</sup> Another Protestant interlocutor, who had personally witnessed the conflict in Beshasha, observed that:

Extremist Muslims came to this area and caused the problem. They are even against the previous Muslim teachings. They believe in jihad. They initiate members to kill others; they teach that at least believers have to have angry facial expression towards

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49 Interview with regional church coordinator, Protestant, male, age 40. A similar claim of the utilization of poor day labourers to cause conflict was made by another Protestant leader; interview with Jimma Bible Society member, male, age 57.

50 Interview with local church leader, Protestant, male, age 32.

51 Interview with imam, Muslim, male, age not stated.

52 Interview with regional church coordinator, Orthodox, male, age 57.

53 Interview with regional church coordinator, Orthodox, male, age 57.

54 Interview with person of unstated occupation, Orthodox, male, age 55.

55 Interview with church coordinator, Protestant, male, age 58.

us; consequently, their children are doing this. ... They are organized from the top [country] level to the bottom. They have financial support. They have strong financial support. Those who do this have great advantage. Even they themselves speak that huge budget is allocated for this purpose. One who does what is expected from him/her will be paid. Even there are training places that include religious places and private houses. And there is someone who organizes this; there is someone for whom a car is bought and given to. If he is exposed, he immediately gets passport and goes abroad.<sup>56</sup>

This movement, he contended, was so strong that it turned ‘previously peaceful’ Muslims into violent participants, who out of fear of social exclusion acquiesced to the new teachings. Peace was only restored through the ‘tow down’ intervention of religious leaders.

As these various statements demonstrate, the Beshasha and Asendabo clashes are remembered as atrocious attacks on religious minorities, with locals still fearful that conflict could re-emerge. In recounting these attacks, informants regarded them as having upset the long-established status quo of inter-religious conviviality. The various alleged causes—competition over land, conspiratorial movements, political interests and rising extremism—were not seen as solved, prompting contemporary tensions and incidents to be interpreted through similar lenses.<sup>57</sup>

## RECENT TENSIONS AND THWARTED CONFLICTS

While Jimma city and zone have been free of major inter-religious conflicts since 2011, several interviews provided indications of ongoing tensions and thwarted attacks. Some Orthodox and Muslim interlocutors mentioned an attempted arson attack on St. Mary’s church in Jimma about three years ago. Details of the incident were difficult to verify as the accounts were short on specifics and the attack was prevented, leaving no damage and prompting no further investigation. As one informant observed, ‘At the time, there was a high perception of violent conflict and there was big stress in the town but it did not happen’.<sup>58</sup> Nonetheless, some Orthodox interlocutors took the incident as confirmation that Muslim hostility towards Christians in Jimma was not a thing of the past and that attacks could occur at any time. One claimed that the more recent attack was ‘related to the Beshasha incident that happened 15 years ago’, while another asserted that the arson attempt showed Muslims ‘perceive this area as Muslim country’ and were therefore seeking to ‘eliminate’ Orthodox churches.<sup>59</sup> A Protestant participant instead linked the incident to a dispute over a plot of land, essentially claiming the thwarted

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56 Interview with Protestant pastor, male, age 56.

57 See also Mains, ‘Drinking, Rumour, and Ethnicity’, for similar observations two decades earlier. Mains concludes that the rumours about Protestant and Muslim behaviour he collected before the Beshasha and Asendabo conflicts had a particular political angle intended to express dissatisfaction with the EPRDF government.

58 Interview with Orthodox clergy member, male, age 38.

59 Interviews with religious teacher, Orthodox, male, 60 years old; Orthodox housewife, female, age 26.

attack had deeper roots in Christian–Muslim disagreements.<sup>60</sup> Two Muslim interlocutors also referred to the arson attempt. The first claimed that the ‘Wahhabi’ had ‘organized the youth’ to attack the church and went on to explain how detrimental the presence of these ‘fanatics’ was to the contemporary situation.<sup>61</sup> The other proffered a conspiracy theory in which ‘non-Muslims people wearing Muslim clothes’ attempted to burn the church, prompting the Muslim community to thwart the attack.<sup>62</sup>

The incident in question occurred during a period of rising inter-communal tensions in Ethiopia, as evidenced by the December 2019 attacks on mosques in Motta and the severe riots in multiple cities following the murder of popular Oromo singer Hachalu Hundessa in July 2020.<sup>63</sup> In fact, two informants conflated the St. Mary’s incident with attacks on Christian properties in Jimma in the wake of Hachalu Hundessa’s murder. Three participants in total, all Christians, mentioned these latter attacks, suggesting that only Christian houses were targeted by the violence. Given that Hachalu was an influential Oromo artist and voice of the Oromo protest movement, his murder and the violent responses provoked were typically understood in ethnic terms. Even so, the tendency to conflate Orthodoxy with an Amhara ‘settler’ identity meant it was possible to understand the violent Oromo responses to Hachalu’s murder as an attack on the Orthodox presence in the region, , despite the fact that Hachalu himself was Orthodox.<sup>64</sup>

Participants reported that a further spill-over incident from national events occurred in the wake of the April 2022 attacks on Muslims in Gondar.<sup>65</sup> Both Muslim and Christian informants agreed that a group of Muslim protesters enraged about the Gondar incident attempted to attack St. Michael’s Church in Jimma, but were immediately stopped by religious leaders. An Orthodox priest even described Muslim elders stepping in, who told the youth ‘kill us first!’ and reminded them that the church had been constructed in part with Muslim contributions.<sup>66</sup>

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60 The informant explained that the Orthodox Church had made available some land to the Red Cross during the hunger crisis of 1985. When the Red Cross left, Muslims tried to claim the land and build a mosque ‘in the evening time’ (i.e. under cover of darkness). Although this was prevented with help from the government, according to the informant it prompted the attack. Interview with Protestant pastor, male, age 50.

61 Interview with active mosque member, Muslim, male, age 55.

62 Interview with mosque committee member, Muslim, male, age 66.

63 For an analysis of both, see Terje Østebø et al., ‘Religion, Ethnicity, and Charges of Extremism: The Dynamics of Inter-Communal Violence in Ethiopia’, European Institute of Peace, 2021. [www.eip.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Ostebø-et-al-2021-Religion-ethnicity-and-charges-of-Extremism-in-Ethiopia-final.pdf](http://www.eip.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Ostebø-et-al-2021-Religion-ethnicity-and-charges-of-Extremism-in-Ethiopia-final.pdf).

64 See Østebø et al., ‘Religion, Ethnicity, and Charges of Extremism’, 25–31

65 See Yihenu Alemu Tesfaye and Fasika Gedif, ‘Religious Conflict in Gondar: Local Perspectives on Polarization and Peace-Building’, Rift Valley Institute, 2023. [https://riftvalley.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Religious-Conflict-in-Gondar\\_Final.pdf](https://riftvalley.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Religious-Conflict-in-Gondar_Final.pdf)

66 Interview with Orthodox priest, male, age 60.



The accounts given of this incident were scant on detail, however, with informants describing it as an expression of ‘disappointed youth’, a riotous event organized by ‘the fanatic group’, or a ‘politically orchestrated conflict’.<sup>67</sup> Nonetheless, the fact that the attack was thwarted by community leaders was celebrated by informants as demonstrating good inter-religious relations and vigilance. As a Protestant interlocutor observed:

The last time religious conflict erupted in Gondar, we knew Jimma would be the next target. We made it our mission to act quickly and to inform each religious community members to exercise extreme caution and avoid imminent danger.<sup>68</sup>

Similarly, a Muslim leader recounted:

Last time there was conflict in Gondar our young people were disappointed. And they got so emotional that they went so far as to attack Church Michael. We members of the multi-religions rushed to the church at once and I advised the young people not to do anything. Then they stopped and left.<sup>69</sup>

As these accounts show, the participants continue to regard Jimma as susceptible to religious conflict, despite no major clashes having occurred in the area since 2011. Christians in particular feel vulnerable: although they are not a minority in the city itself, this is certainly the case within a broader region commonly referred to as ‘Muslim country’. This not only pertains to Orthodox Christians but Protestants as well, despite the fact that only two isolated incidents of violence against the latter emerged during the interviews. One respondent mentioned an altercation in a suburb called Bacho Bore, when Muslims were building a mosque near a Protestant church.<sup>70</sup> Another recounted an attack on Protestant Christians shortly after a conference organized by a large Pentecostal church in Jimma.<sup>71</sup> The respective accounts lacked sufficient detail to enable thorough analysis or even a detailed narration of the incidents, but in both cases were cited as evidence of the continued minoritization of Protestants.

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67 Interviews with Muslim community leader, male, age 53; religious teacher, Orthodox, male, age 60; active mosque member, male, age 55.

68 Interview with Protestant church co-ordinator, male, age 40.

69 Interview with Muslim community leader, male, age 53.

70 Interview with pastor, Protestant, male, age 45.

71 Interview with evangelist, Protestant, male, age 38.

# INTRA-RELIGIOUS DIVERGENCE AND CONFLICTS

For many participants, perceptions of precarious Christian–Muslim relations in Jimma were accompanied by a sense of declining intra-religious cohesion. Both Christians and Muslims blamed the attacks on churches on Islamic reform movements, generally framed as new, disruptive, foreign-sponsored forces. On the Orthodox side, there were reports of internal tensions, with the secession of Oromo clergy—which took place during the fieldwork period—leaving its mark on Jimma. Protestants reported diversity but relatively little internal conflict, which is arguably reflective of their local status as a minority.

## THE POLITICS OF MUSLIM ‘FUNDAMENTALISM’

While Christian informants usually spoke of ‘fundamentalists’ or ‘radicals’ when describing the changes in Islam that had contributed to Christian–Muslim hostilities, many Muslim interlocutors offered a more differentiated analysis. The most frequent distinction made was between ‘Sufis’ and ‘Wahhabis’, with the latter described as either more ‘strict’ or less prone to ‘innovations’, depending on the participant’s point of view. A few added a third branch or group called ‘Khawārijis’, in apparent reference to the Kharijites, an early sect in Islam that sought to free the caliphate from genealogical descent and ethnicity. The term has some history in Jimma, having already been documented around the time of the Beshasha attacks.<sup>72</sup> Its use by participants appeared to represent a condemnation of those sectarian radicals seen as the most divisive, as the following response by a local imam demonstrates:

The third [group], the Khawarji, are generally called the rebellion, but can still be considered Muslims. They are best known for deviating from the ideal norms of behaviour. They wanted to have their own imam. They advocate against paying taxes and having an identification card. They wanted people to adhere to their concepts and regulations. But there are not as such successful.<sup>73</sup>

None of the study participants placed themselves in this category or defended such a perspective, adding to the impression that the term is in fact used by the government and the Muslim establishment to distance themselves from particular groups. On the other hand, certain people did align themselves—implicitly or explicitly—with either the ‘Sufi’ or ‘Wahhabi’ faction.

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72 See Terje Østebø, *Localising Salafism: Religious Change among Oromo Muslims in Bale, Ethiopia*, Leiden: Brill, 2012, 279.

73 Interview with imam, Muslim, male, age unstated.

The rhetoric directed between these two factions was quite divisive, despite a few informants claiming the differences between them were no longer as pronounced as they once were. One informant put forward a typical reformist set of arguments in defence of the ‘Wahhabi’ view. After briefly introducing the imams of the four main Sunni schools of legal interpretation (*madhāhib*), he continued:

These are the four Imamas in Islam. Each Imama has origin in the Qur’an but they differ in their teaching. Their books are sources for the current division. ... We Wahhabists are most known for our orthodox interpretation of Islam, its restoration in its original purity, or as it was and was practised during the life and times of the prophet and his immediate successors, the Caliphs. In contrast, Sufis act in ways not stated in the Shari’a or in the Qur’an and the Hadith.<sup>74</sup>

Another interlocutor likewise claimed that the main problem was that, ‘out of personal interest’ and for business purposes, some people preach behaviour absent from the Qur’an and ‘add new things to the Hadith that jeopardize the sayings and traditions of the Prophet Muhammed’.<sup>75</sup>

By contrast, those aligned with the ‘Sufi side’ or seeking to criticize a ‘Wahhabi’ perspective called the Wahhabists ‘revisionist’, ‘creators of violence in Islam’ or ‘fanatics’, accusing them of failing to promote ‘harmony or peaceful co-existences with other faiths’.<sup>76</sup> One ‘Sufi’-aligned participant noted alleged that the ‘Wahhabists’ were ‘supported by the Saudi government to dominate others’, and as a result now control most local mosques, adding, ‘whenever you see a big new mosque, it is constructed by the Wahhabists and funded by the Saudis’.<sup>77</sup>

The main point of contention between ‘Sufis’ and ‘Wahhabis’ that came up in interviews was the celebration of *mawlid*, including *īd milad al-nabī*, the commemoration of the Prophet’s birthday. This is important, as the EPRDF government’s promotion of the al-Ahbash movement exacerbated this conflict, arguably aiding—in contradiction of the policy’s stated aim—the spread of Islamic reform movements. Interestingly, similar language on this matter was employed by both sides. A participant critical of ‘Wahhabis’ stated that ‘the al-Ahbash doctrine forces us to celebrate the birthdate of the Prophet Muhammed that traditional Islam does not accept’.<sup>78</sup> Meanwhile, the previously quoted informant who laid out the case for ‘Wahhabi’ Islam also acknowledged that the al-Ahbash doctrine provoked divisions, in particular by focusing on

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74 Interview with religious teacher, Muslim, male, age 40.

75 Interview with imam, Muslim, male, age unstated.

76 Interviews with active mosque member, Muslim, male, age 55; sheikh and member of inter-faith dialogue forum, Muslim, age 78.

77 Interview with mosque committee member, Muslim, male, age 66.

78 Interview with sheikh and member of inter-faith dialogue forum, Muslim, age 78.



*mawlid*, a ‘point of departure in the Islamic religion’.<sup>79</sup> Both informants agreed it was pursuit of political interests by the EPRDF government that sowed the seeds of these divisions.

Under Abiy Ahmed, the policy of promoting al-Abhash was abandoned, leading to a rebalancing of the ‘Wahhabi’ and ‘Sufi’ groups in the federal-level Islamic Affairs Supreme Council.<sup>80</sup> One participant, in acknowledging this, claimed it was now the ‘*sunna*’ (i.e. non-Sufi side) that had the upper hand in the Oromia Islamic Affairs Supreme Council.<sup>81</sup> This rebalancing may also be the reason why others claimed the divisions between ‘Sufis’ and ‘Wahhabis’ are no longer as strong as in the past. Nonetheless, one Muslim community leader asserted he is regularly asked to intervene on issues concerning the celebration of *mawlid* and other doctrinal matters.<sup>82</sup>

## RENEWAL AND ETHNIC CONFLICT IN THE ETHIOPIAN ORTHODOX TEWAHEDO CHURCH

Several Orthodox informants pointed to divisions within the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) caused by so-called ‘renewal’ (*tehadiso*) movements. The term *tehadiso* originally referred to Charismatic movements within the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, but among interlocutors it seemed to represent a general rejection of modernizing, foreign influences perceived as contrary to the Orthodox Church’s character. Two informants contrasted *tehadiso* with ‘*tewahido*’—a term for unity or oneness, which forms part of the official name of the EOTC—effectively locating renewal movements outside acceptable Orthodoxy.<sup>83</sup> They claimed that *tehadiso* Christians reject baptism and fasting, and seek to replace old traditions and musical instruments. Moreover, they denied these movements were motivated by religious concerns, but rather self-interestedly pursued power and resources, fuelled by foreign funds. A similar perspective was provided by a third participant, who claimed that *tehadiso* groups received ‘support from abroad’ and are engaged in activities ‘for the sake of getting money’.<sup>84</sup> Such characterizations clearly sought to paint these groups as ‘revisionist’ and their illegitimate push toward modernization as detrimental to the EOTC. Underlying such sentiments, however, is a fear of Protestant or Pentecostal competition and influence, which these groups appear to channel. As one informant stated:

Previously, the religion of Pente [Protestantism] was rare but now they are expanding. There are things which are expected from someone following Orthodox religion. However, there are individuals who are not obeying the norms of this religion.

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79 Interview with religious teacher, Muslim, male, age 40.

80 See Haustein et al., ‘Religion in Contemporary Ethiopia’, 32–35.

81 Interview with religious teacher, Muslim, male, age 40.

82 Interview with Muslim community leader, male, age 53.

83 Interviews with Orthodox priest, male, age 60; Orthodox clergy member, male, age 38.

84 Interview with café worker, Orthodox, female, age 24.

Orthodox and Pente are different religions, but there are females who wear clothes like Pentes and this is creating complaining among believers.<sup>85</sup>

Given that none of the study participants were from these renewal groups, it was not possible to gain a counterbalance to this perspective. Nonetheless, it appears that the situation in Jimma mirrors the overall trajectory of the country, where *tehadiso* has been pushed to the fringes by another modernizing movement, the Mahibire Kidusan, which thrives on re-affirming Orthodoxy through such modern means as magazines and religious mass education.<sup>86</sup> This was also the perspective of one interlocutor, who when asked about the Mahibere Kidusan asserted that the movement was interested in modernizing the Orthodox Church while not compromising on doctrine.<sup>87</sup>

Another divisive issue that emerged concerning the Orthodox Church was ethnicity. The interviews in Jimma were conducted just weeks before the short-lived schism of three Oromo Orthodox Archbishops from the national EOTC in January 2023, with tensions over language and ethnicity apparent among those from both sides of the divide. One activist engaged in organizing Oromo clergy set out a lengthy list of grievances:<sup>88</sup> the church failed to promote cultural diversity ('In this church it was considered shameful to wear an Oromo dress'); its use of the Ethiopian flag colours in church compounds offended Oromo (some of whom associate the flag with the old empire that conquered their region); practitioners of Oromo Traditional Religion (*Waaqeffanna*) were refused burial grounds; the national church was governed by a national structure owned and run by Amhara and did not sufficiently integrate or represent Oromo clergy; revenues were not being shared adequately with Oromo churches; there was no theological college that offered Bible Studies in the Oromo language (Afaan Oromo), and insufficient clergy adequately trained in the language to provide pastoral services, such as confessionals. He ended with a call to disentangle the EOTC from the Ethiopian nation state project and revive its appeal by bringing it closer to the Oromo population:

Now we want to start a new synod that will allow us to teach theology and preach in Afaan Oromo. It also allows you to participate in management. You have to manage your resources. About 10 million people in Oromia left the Orthodox Church. This is because people did not understand the structure of the church, its inner workings [or mystery]. The Oromia clergy no longer want the Ethiopian Orthodox name. Orthodoxy is an international religion. Why should I use the prefix Ethiopia?<sup>89</sup>

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85 Interview with housewife, Orthodox, female, age 26.

86 Lee, Ralph, "Modernism" and the Ethiopian Orthodox Sunday School Movement: Indigenous Movements and their International Connections', *Journal of Ecclesial History* 73/1 (2022).

87 Interview with person of unstated profession, Orthodox, male, age 55.

88 Interview with advocator of Oromia clergy, Orthodox, male, age 38.

89 Interview with advocator of Oromia clergy, Orthodox, male, age 38.

Other informants of a similar persuasion focused on the issue of language and the associated obstructions put in place by the national church. It is important to note that such opinions were not limited to clergy, but appeared to hold wider appeal. One university lecturer gave the following account of the EOTC's internal conflict:

In my church, there are now two groups. The first is concerned with ensuring the right to conduct services in church in one's language [Afaan Oromo]; they want to teach, learn and worship in their own language without violating the norms of the Orthodox religion. But the other group is concerned with maintaining a doctrine of only one language: Amharic should continue to be the only language for conducting services in this religion, and this is raising disputes between the two groups. Those who are trying to bring change are working in the organized manner but they are not getting financial support from anywhere except from the believers.<sup>90</sup>

Similarly, a young waitress told us that the insistence on using Amharic in church services was discriminatory and symptomatic of longstanding exclusions. She therefore welcomed the debate that had arisen:

Previously, there was no open complaining about this issue. Whether you understood what they say [in their language] or not, you would attend church and return back home. But now people want to understand the Bible in their own language, and through struggle their need is being fulfilled to some extent.<sup>91</sup>

Those on the other side of the argument alleged that such demands were politically motivated. A clergyman working in an organizational capacity for the EOTC in Jimma zone told us that the dispute came down to nationalism and corruption in the area. While accusations that the Orthodox Church was a 'non-Oromo church' could be 'confusing at first', he asserted they were driven by a desire to gain leadership positions in the church.<sup>92</sup> Similarly, an older priest dismissed the various grievances raised by the other side: the EOTC already supported preaching in local languages, including Afaan Oromo, while certain elements of Oromo Traditional Religion—such as the annual 'thanksgiving ceremony' (*Irreecha*)—were accepted by the church as cultural traditions that believers were allowed to attend. Moreover, the move to establish a separate organization of Oromo clergy was not even supported by 'Oromo Christian leaders in the church', and hence had been abandoned by the leading priest behind the idea, who subsequently received a pardon and continued to serve the church. In short, the issue was a 'politically motivated act to weaken the church and damage her reputation', and had in fact already been resolved.<sup>93</sup>

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90 Interview with university lecturer, Orthodox, male, age 32.

91 Interview with café worker, Orthodox, female, age 24.

92 Interview with regional church coordinator, Orthodox, male, age 57.

93 Interview with Orthodox priest, male, age 60.



Contrary to this statement from December 2022, the conflict erupted onto the national stage with renewed vigour on 22 January 2023 under the leadership of Abuna Sawiros.<sup>94</sup> While the dispute was officially resolved a few weeks later on 15 February 2023, tensions ran high throughout Oromia region during this period, most visibly on 4 February 2023 when regional government security forces employed excessive force in the town of Shashemene. The forces killed eight people when dispersing a crowd that was attempting to prevent the take-over of a local church by the breakaway faction.<sup>95</sup> In Jimma city, tensions emerged when the local government arrested a bishop from the main EOTC synod who had arrived to consecrate a new church. By contrast, the regional government of Oromia expressed indirect support for a bishop from the defecting group by allowing him to travel from Addis to East Wollega while forbidding a bishop from the Ethiopian synod making the same trip.<sup>96</sup> Some suspected the regional government of pursuing its own political interests when dealing with the schism, even going as far as claiming it was openly hostile to Orthodoxy and deliberately kept quiet when Orthodox churches came under attack.<sup>97</sup> Others supported the breakaway synod, in particular Oromo nationalists who believed the EOTC had aided the ‘colonization’ of the Oromo people. Tensions around the breakaway synod meant public holiday celebrations during this period were subject to unusually tight security precautions. This may have helped prevent open conflict in light of the fact that Jimma’s ethnic and religious composition is just as diversified as Shashemene.

## PROTESTANT FRAGMENTATION

The study also found some internal divergence among Protestants, although not as pronounced as on the Orthodox or Muslim sides. Moreover, not everyone agreed there was even a problem. Thus, while one informant claimed that ‘in Protestantism there is unity in diversity’ and insisted overly deviant leaders are generally held to account by the Protestant community, another bemoaned that ‘now the existing condition is not only divergence, it is like being broken into pieces’.<sup>98</sup> In the latter’s view, there were too many people establishing breakaway churches for their own ‘financial benefit’, to gain support from abroad, out of disobedience to their previous church, or even with no clear purpose at all. Likewise, another participant said ‘coming out of the mother church and establishing new churches is becoming common nowadays’.<sup>99</sup> Although

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94 For a brief overview over the schism and its resolution, see Hausteijn et al., ‘Religion in Contemporary Ethiopia’, 31.

95 ‘Ethiopian rights commission says eight people killed in Shashemene, security forces applied “excessive use of force”’, *Addis Standard*, 11 February 2023. <https://addisstandard.com/news-ethiopian-rights-commission-says-eight-people-killed-in-shashemene-security-forces-applied-excessive-use-of-force/>.

96 ክርስቶፎሮስ ቲዩብ - Christophoros Tube, ‘ሰበር ዘ ብፁዕ አቡነ ኤርምያስ ዮብልጽግና መንግሥት ቤተክርስቲያንን በመዶሻ እያፈረሰት ነው አሉ’ (‘Breaking: The Blessed Abune Ermiyas Says the Prosperity Government is Demolishing the Church with a Hammer’), YouTube, 1 February 2023. Accessed 2 February 2023, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=B68KH0Ixe1w](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B68KH0Ixe1w).

97 ክርስቶፎሮስ ቲዩብ - Christophoros Tube, ‘Breaking: The Blessed Abune’.

98 Interviews with Jimma zone co-ordinator for a large Protestant church, male, age 40; pastor, Protestant, male, age 56.

99 Interview with teacher, Protestant, male, age 33.

some churches were, he felt, motivated by personal and financial gain, he recognized others as genuine, particularly in cases where people felt that ‘unnecessarily rigid’ church doctrines prevented them ‘teaching the Bible properly’. Thus, he opted for a simple tripartite typology when churches fragment: the remaining group, which ‘strictly follows the existing doctrine of their church’; a second group ‘concerned with teaching the Bible in detail, claiming that the former one is not doing it properly’; and a third group ‘which is concerned with doing business in the name of religion’. A further interlocutor saw the prevalence of ‘false prophets’ as a sign of the ‘end times’, accusing people of simply moving on to another church when challenged about their ethical behaviour.<sup>100</sup>

Aside from these general observations, two issues in particular came up as sources of division. The first was the national politics around Abiy Ahmed’s newly established Ethiopian Council of Gospel Believers’ Churches, which initially failed to integrate the much older Evangelical Churches’ Fellowship of Ethiopia.<sup>101</sup> A number of Protestant participants were well informed about this national conflict, but made clear that it had played out differently locally. For example, while Ethiopia’s second largest Protestant church—the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY)—is a member of the new Council at the national level, having left the Evangelical Churches’ Fellowship some time ago, it remains a member of the latter at the local level.<sup>102</sup> This is significant given the EECMY has a strong Oromo base, especially in Western Oromia, where Abiy began losing popular support early in his tenure. A number of EECMY clergy, therefore, view their church’s participation in the newly formed Council with suspicion, apparently insisting on local divergence from the church’s national politics. Accordingly, two informants claimed the local leaders seeking to establish the Council in the region were not well accepted, and were mainly seen as extracting money from the churches, while the older Fellowship was still seen as the main body of evangelical unity.<sup>103</sup>

The second big issue raised by Protestant interlocutors concerning divisions was ethnicity. Several regarded the ‘nationalism’ or ‘ethnic agenda’ now affecting their faith communities as a sign of religious decline. For example, one participant contended that the rise of ethnic politics showed that people had ‘left their religion’, with current wars and living crises the direct result of this lack of faith.<sup>104</sup> Another positioned ethnic politics as being part of a wider dynamic of fragmentation by interest groups:

In only one church, people will categorize themselves based on their ethnicity, locality, and even age. Even the younger ones are not accepting what the elders are

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100 Interview with housewife, Protestant, female, age 30.

101 See Hausteina et al., ‘Religion in Contemporary Ethiopia’, 36–37. This conflict has since been resolved.

102 Interview with leading member of the Jimma Evangelical Churches’ Fellowship of Ethiopia, Protestant, male, age 45.

103 Interviews with evangelist, Protestant, male, age 38; pastor, Protestant, male, age 50.

104 Interview with housewife, Protestant, female, age 30.

saying. Values are under threat; now persons are not obeying one another. Thus, it has become difficult even to teach the Bible freely because everyone interprets it in different ways as he or she wants.<sup>105</sup>

The same informant claimed the political allegiance of a given church was determined by an 'ethnic agenda', adding, 'Now everyone is searching for his or her own group'.

It is important to note, however, that this condemnation of ethnic politics was not universal. In fact, one participant presented the opposite view, celebrating rising ethnic expression even as he condemned Protestant fragmentation:

Today, worshipping God using our own culture, language and clothing style is becoming very common. Previously, it was considered a wrong practice. Nowadays, I attend church wearing my cultural clothes but previously this was impossible.<sup>106</sup>

When asked about future religious coexistence in Jimma, it became clear his hopes were bound up with integrating ethnic diversity and ethnic politics into religion, rather than using religion as a way to deny or flatten cultural particularities:

Often when we raise the religious agenda, there is also an ethnic issue. These two issues are much interconnected. It is often said that a religious man should not enter into political matters, and vice versa. However, the two issues are interconnected. When you adopt a religion, you cannot step out of your identity [ethnicity]. My religion could not remove my identity [ethnicity]. I respect both of them. But there are individuals who identify themselves more with their identity, and undermine their religion. It is better to avoid undermining each other, and to work toward respecting one another and living together in harmony.<sup>107</sup>

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105 Interview with pastor, Protestant, male, age 56.

106 Interview with teacher, Protestant, male, age 33.

107 Interview with teacher, Protestant, male, age 33.

# RESOURCES FOR CONFLICT PREVENTION AND PEACE

As noted above, most participants insisted that the religions present in Jimma were a resource for peace and promoted inter-communal respect and harmony. In terms of concrete expressions of inter-religious peace, interviewees mainly referred to the following two areas: 1) dialogue initiatives by church leaders and organizations, in particular the IRC; and 2) inter-personal friendships and relations.

## THE INTER-RELIGIOUS COUNCIL AND OTHER INSTITUTIONAL INITIATIVES

There is a history of inter-religious peacebuilding initiatives in the area around Jimma, which some interlocutors understood to be at the root of the local IRC. Following the 2006 attacks in Beshasha, a Muslim sheikh and an Orthodox priest from the nearby town of Agaro began publicly celebrating their friendship and set up inter-religious reconciliation activities and local dispute settlement mechanisms. This in turn led to the formation of the Religious Forum for Peace.<sup>108</sup> According to one informant, this template was applied in Jimma city on the initiative of Abadula Gemada, president of Oromia region between 2005 and 2010:

A forum was then established following the initiative of three Agaro town religious leaders (Orthodox, Protestant and Muslim). The forum has begun organizing community-level events and dialogues to defuse looming inter-faith tensions. They have managed to bring these tensions back to normal. The forum has become a model for the world. They formed the same forum, which includes seven denominations here in Jimma town. At least we agreed that this land belongs to all of us.<sup>109</sup>

Similarly, another interlocutor argued that the ‘the idea of inter-faith dialogue was started by Muslim and Christian friends in Agaro town’.<sup>110</sup> Given that the IRC of Ethiopia was formed in early 2010, however, it is quite possible the push for such initiatives was more national than conveyed by these informants. Nonetheless, it is important to recognize the role played by local conflict in the acceptance of these initiatives. In 2006 and 2011, the wider area around

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108 For the only published research into the Forum, see the rather vague remarks in Abiy Ahmed, ‘Countering Violent Extremism through Social Capital: Anecdote from Jimma, Ethiopia’, *Horn of Africa Bulletin* 29/4 (2017).

109 Interview with regional church coordinator, Orthodox, male, age 57. Abiy Ahmed (‘Countering Violent Extremism’) has claimed, without providing further detail, that the Religious Forum for Peace was established in 2011 without providing further detail. From this interview it seems that the initiative was already well-recognised and emulated elsewhere before 2010.

110 Interview with mosque committee member, Muslim, male, age 66.

Jimma was the subject of national concern about inter-religious conflict in Ethiopia, so it makes sense that participants would link the national push for IRCs with existing local peacebuilding initiatives.

Despite this local history, the study interviews revealed a rather ambivalent outlook on the IRC. Participants who were actively engaged in the IRC noted a range of achievements and challenges, including the IRC's preventative work around raising awareness of religious tolerance and working with the Jimma zone administration to prevent possible conflicts.<sup>111</sup> This sometimes entails making strategic use of the IRC's symbolic capital in order to demonstrate unity. Two informants, for example, stated the IRC had ensured that, during a recent visit by Abiy Ahmed, representatives from all seven of the IRC's religious groups greeted the delegation at the airport, thereby countering any attempt to 'create division' by excluding some and inviting others.<sup>112</sup> There also appears to be a special link between Jimma University and the IRC, enabling the latter to work with young people, who are typically seen as being at risk of engaging in inter-religious conflict.<sup>113</sup>

At the same time, those involved most closely with the IRC complained about the local government's lack of interest and support. One key issue raised was the absence of an office and meeting place for the IRC since the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission ceased paying the rent for the previous premises.<sup>114</sup> It was apparent that this had seriously weakened the IRC's operations in Jimma, stunting its development. As one informant observed:

I know the Council is like a growing baby ... in the process of learning. Let the Council take action. We need government support, such as providing offices.<sup>115</sup>

The weakness of the IRC was also apparent in responses from those not directly engaged with it. A significant number of participants claimed to know nothing of any inter-religious dialogue activities in Jimma, with some adding such activities would be very desirable for the city. Others noted that they had heard about dialogue initiatives, but added no specifics or even claimed the inter-religious forum or council was currently defunct or inactive. Moreover, in contrast to the narrative put forward by some that the IRC was rooted in a homegrown initiative, several informants regarded it as little more than a political tool brought in by the federal government.

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111 Interviews with Jimma zone church co-ordinator, Protestant, male, age 40; Jimma Bible Society member, Protestant, male, age 57.

112 Interviews with regional church coordinator, Orthodox, male, age 57; Evangelical Council member, Protestant, male, age 33.

113 Interviews with regional church coordinator, Orthodox, male, age 57; religious teacher and IRC member, Orthodox, male, age 60.

114 Interviews with Jimma zone church co-ordinator, Protestant, male, age 40; Jimma Bible Society member, Protestant, male, age 57; regional church coordinator, Orthodox, male, age 57; Evangelical Council member, Protestant, male, age 33.

115 Interview with Evangelical Council member, Protestant, male, age 33.



One noted that inter-religious dialogue only happens when religious leaders ‘are called by the political body to discuss conflicting issues both locally and nationally’.<sup>116</sup> Another saw inter-religious dialogue as only taking place following ‘initiation from the government’ and as being limited to the national level, adding that if religious leaders were to engage with one another ‘heartily’ it would be a ‘great thing for the country’.<sup>117</sup> A third participant said he did not think the IRC organized ‘inter-faith dialogue at the community, except when they show up at specific events as the government wants’.<sup>118</sup> Most damning, perhaps, was the verdict of a fourth interlocutor:

I have been invited several times to talk with people of different religions. I participated once and realized it was fake. Religious issues were not openly discussed. I felt like someone was sitting with me by force. If religious leaders really cooperate and engage with other religions, I think it will definitely have a positive impact.<sup>119</sup>

It is noteworthy that this sentiment of political capture was voiced exclusively by Protestant study participants. While this is not a representative sample, it may indicate that official dialogue initiatives lack effectiveness when it comes to Jimma’s Protestants due to their perceived minoritization and lack of political representation.

The study also found indications that inter-religious engagement in Jimma is not limited to officially organized, regular forums such as the IRC. Some religious leaders were keen to emphasize the symbolic importance of their personal inter-religious initiatives. A Muslim community leader suggested his involvement in the IRC was merely an extension of his earlier visits to St. Michael’s church at the bishop’s invitation during the height of inter-religious tensions, noting that ‘everyone was interested in my presence’.<sup>120</sup> Likewise, an Orthodox interlocutor, also engaged in the IRC, recounted how he attended the closing ceremony of a Pentecostal conference and as a result was suspended from his position in the EOTC, but managed to get reinstated through political intervention.<sup>121</sup> The previously quoted Protestant who argued the IRC dialogues were ‘fake’ cited as an example of better practice a seminar in Christian–Muslim relations at his church, to which members of the Muslim community were invited.<sup>122</sup>

Moreover, there appeared to be various other social initiatives spanning inter-religious boundaries. A Protestant pastor spoke of having coffee with leaders from other religious

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116 Interview with evangelist, Protestant, male, age 38.

117 Interview with teacher, Protestant, male, age 33.

118 Interview with church leader, Protestant, male, age 32.

119 Interview with regional church coordinator, Protestant, male, age 58.

120 Interview with community leader, Muslim, male, age 53.

121 Interview with regional church coordinator, Orthodox, male, age 57.

122 Interview with regional church coordinator, Protestant, male, age 58.

communities, to the surprise of many, and hoped that such interactions would ‘cascade down to the followers’.<sup>123</sup> Members of two other Protestant churches mentioned their charitable initiatives in the community as a way of building links regardless of religious affiliation.<sup>124</sup> One of the accounts given involved the story of a local sheikh, who in his youth trained in woodworking at the church, went on to become a wealthy entrepreneur in Addis Ababa and 50 years later returned to the Protestant church to ‘testify about the importance of our church’.<sup>125</sup> There was also reportedly a support programme for school-age children run by a Protestant church in Jimma that allowed Orthodox and Muslim children to enrol as well.

## PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

As confirmed by many study participants, inter-religious friendships and relations are still very much the norm in Jimma city. Examples given included cordial workplace relations, strong neighbourly support, joint holiday celebrations, close friendships and unproblematic family relationships. As the following statement by a Protestant church leader indicates, such examples were often taken as demonstrating deeply engrained—and therefore not easily unsettled—norms:

Where there is tolerance there is no religious conflict. Let me give you our family as an example: my brother is a Muslim, my mother too, and my father is Orthodox, and I am Protestant. There is respect, love, happiness in our home. Difference in religion has never been a source of conflict for us.<sup>126</sup>

Typically, descriptions of personal inter-religious relations also emphasized mutual respect and accommodation. One Orthodox participant, for example, said he kept two prayer mats at home for when he entertains Muslim guests, avoids making noise when they pray, and never eats during their visits in Ramadan.<sup>127</sup> A Protestant interlocutor even claimed to regularly share the same meat with his Muslim friend during their mutual visits, despite the separation usually arising from the different slaughter requirements.<sup>128</sup>

Nonetheless, such depictions of a ubiquitous, unproblematic standard of personal inter-religious relations were not universal. Some, such as the Protestant pastor quoted below, diagnosed a notable decline:

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123 Interview with pastor, Protestant, male, age 45.

124 Interviews with Jimma Bible Society member, Protestant, male, age 57; church leader, Protestant, male, age unstated.

125 Interview with church leader, Protestant, male, age unstated.

126 Interview with church leader, Protestant, male, age unstated.

127 Interview with person of unstated occupation, Orthodox, male, age 55.

128 Interview with teacher, Protestant, male, age 33.



Up until some years ago, people used to live with one another peacefully, sharing their inner feelings with each other. People of different faiths freely lived together, shared religious festivals, communal feasts and sharing the same living spaces. Now, this has changed. Religious fanaticism is growing increasingly and this is affecting commonality.<sup>129</sup>

Several informants either suspected or stated as fact that people tended to hide their true feelings about other religions. In many cases, participants noted that while this may be driven by a desire to avoid religious antagonism or discrimination, it has come to fuel a culture of mistrust. As one interlocutor observed:

Concealing one's own feeling towards others and their religion, and pretending to respect them is a serious problem today. This characteristic is common among leaders of different religions; when they come together they act like as if they respect each other's religion, but when they are apart, they talk bad things against each other's religion.<sup>130</sup>

Inter-religious marriages, in particular, seem to have come under pressure. Some participants argued this was due to the decline of inter-religious friendships and a more general separation between religious groups. Others gave specific reasons as to why people should avoid inter-religious marriages. An Orthodox interlocutor noted that marriage outside one's religion can lead to exclusions and even impair one's health.<sup>131</sup> A Protestant informant, meanwhile, argued that a Protestant Christian cannot marry a non-Protestant because the Bible says a believer should have no alliance in marriage with a non-believer.<sup>132</sup> By contrast, most Muslim informants stated that that as long as the marriage is based on free will, a Muslim man can marry a Christian woman. Protestant informants, however, pointed out that this would usually entail the woman converting to Islam and so amounted to a 'proselytizing strategy', and that a Muslim woman marrying a Christian man would be 'unthinkable' to Muslims.<sup>133</sup> At least one informant noted that inter-religious conflict had begun to sow conflict in inter-religious marriages.<sup>134</sup>

Another important institution for inter-religious encounters at a personal level are cooperative associations. There are two particularly important such associations in Jimma: *edir* and *equb*. *Edir* (or *afooshaa* in Afan Oromo) is mainly a kind of savings or insurance institution for

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129 Interview with pastor, Protestant, male, age 50.

130 Interview with teacher, Protestant, male, age 33; similar sentiments were expressed in interviews with Protestant pastor, male, age 56; café worker, Orthodox, female, age 24.

131 Interview with teacher, Orthodox, male, age 32.

132 Interview with pastor and evangelical leader, Protestant, male, age 45.

133 Interviews with evangelist, Protestant, male, age 38; church leader, Protestant, male, age 58; pastor and evangelical leader, Protestant, male, age 45.

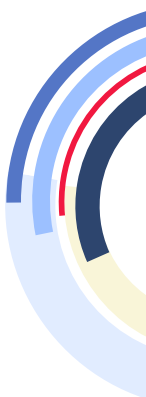
134 Interview with teacher, Protestant, male, age 33.

bereavement, with each member contributing and receiving funeral aid, emotional comfort or financial support upon the loss of a family member. *Equb*, meanwhile, is a traditional economic institution into which members pay dues and receive payouts through a lot system. *Edir* and *equb* are normally set up according to neighbourhoods and are therefore inter-religious in organization. Some participants whose friendships and relations were mainly limited to their own faith community noted these associations provided a rare space for encountering and collaborating with people from another religion. In many cases, this inter-religious set-up seemed still to be intact, with one participant going as far as saying the present situation was much better than the 1980s, when religious discrimination prevented Protestants from joining *edirs* and gaining access to the substantial bereavement support they provide.<sup>135</sup> Others, however, pointed to an erosion of the associations' inter-religious role. One Orthodox informant claimed that some people had begun establishing their 'own *edir* on the basis of their religion', while a Protestant interlocutor reported not feeling 'confident' in the association he had joined because his neighbourhood was '90 per cent Muslim' and he placed greater trust in his church providing for him should he face a time of need.<sup>136</sup> Overall, such sentiments indicate that the legal and financial fortification of these neighbourhood associations could offer a good low-level trust-building mechanism for inter-religious cooperation.

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135 Interview with evangelist, Protestant, male, age 38.

136 Interviews with clergy member, Orthodox, male, age 38; regional church coordinator, Protestant, male, age 40.



## CONCLUSIONS

Given the history of violent clashes in the wider Jimma area, our interviews in Jimma city provide important insights into the mid- to long-term prospects of inter-religious relations after conflict. It is clear that the violence of Beshasha and Asendabo continues to have a strong influence on how people regard Christian–Muslim relations in the region. Many informants were able to provide an account of the clashes despite almost none of them having witnessed the violence personally. Moreover, although there had been a judicial aftermath to the clashes, including sanctions as severe as the death penalty, it did not seem the incidents were viewed as resolved or that the community had settled on a particular narrative about them. Competing claims over the causes of the violence persisted and were easily linked to contemporary disputes or tensions. As such, the Beshasha and Asendabo conflicts form an enduring horizon of looming conflict, prompting a certain wariness among many study participants.

The period since the two major clashes has been characterized by intra-religious conflict and debates. Political attempts to promote the al-Ahbash movement have exacerbated debates between Sufi and reformist Islam, prompting rising caution among Muslims and Christians alike towards ‘Wahabbi’ influences. The Orthodox Church has had to wrestle with internal debates over ethnicity, including demands by Oromo clergy for better representation and cultural contextualization, culminating in the short-lived breakaway synod of early 2023. Protestants, meanwhile, are contending with internal fragmentation and competition, as well as the political fall-out over the newly formed Evangelical Council. The answer to our first study question, therefore, seems to be that religious conflict in Jimma is by no means a settled problem of the past. While the city and wider region have not seen any major inter-religious clashes since 2011, the threat of its re-emergence remains part of the present experience of many study participants.

The wariness prompted by this has arguably led to successful preventative measures, such as containing the threat of violence in the aftermath of the Gondar attacks on Muslims. At the same time, it is difficult to argue—in answer to our second study question—that Jimma has developed particularly successful dialogue and peacebuilding structures. While some religious leaders have shown substantial engagement in inter-personal and communal activities, their initiatives appear to have been hampered by a lack of ongoing support. Although an IRC exists and has local roots, it mostly seems to operate reactively, contributing to a perception that dialogue and joint calls for peace fulfil a primarily political function while leaving structural issues unaddressed. In this regard, the apparent lack of effective dispute settlement mechanisms for land allocation and equitable access to public space has led to considerable disquiet among Protestants. Furthermore, internal fragmentation within all three main religious communities indicates a weakening of the ability of inter-religious forums to settle communal grievances.

Nonetheless, a resilient ethos of inter-religious conviviality still appears to be present in inter-personal relationships. Some issues of trust and scepticism towards inter-religious marriages notwithstanding, Jimma does not seem to be a religiously segregated space. Whether in family relations, friendships or workplace settings, the study unearthed numerous examples of mutual respect and accommodation across religious boundaries, commensurate with the often-stated notion that ‘good’ religion enables peace. In particular, neighbourhood associations still seem to be keeping people engaged, even where inter-religious relationships are otherwise absent. Faith-based development charities and development initiatives also appear to have retained their reach. Despite the weakness of the organized inter-religious forum, therefore, it is apparently grassroots-level mutual engagement and initiatives that have helped sustain inter-religious peace in Jimma city.

Even so, it is important that the IRC is strengthened and financially supported in order to widen its reach and enable further preventative measures. Alongside this, stronger regulations and procedures need to be established granting more equitable access to land and public space. Local government authorities should strive to observe the constitutional provisions ensuring secularism, the rule of law and impartial public service delivery. Moreover, given the difficult political environment in Ethiopia at present—particularly around ethnicity, as well as the conflicts between Christians and Muslims in other parts of the country—it is important to remain vigilant, while simultaneously avoiding undue political interference in religious matters in the name of prevention. Inasmuch as people in Jimma identify strongly with their religions, religious communities act as conduits for societal tensions and conflicts. Yet, as the study has shown, individual religious leaders and personal relationships can form effective bridges between faiths. It is their work and mutual spaces of encounter that should be reinforced, rather than resorting to direct political intervention in religious matters.

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