

Law, Religion and Reconciliation in Africa



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15 RELIGION IN ETHIOPIA: ITS ROLE IN CONFLICT AND PEACE

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INTRODUCTION

The triviality of religion in politics and social relations in the age of modernisation and secularisation posited by secularists and sociologists was always unrealistic.² The resurgence of religion in domestic and foreign relations and in governing the behavior of individuals and groups made the matter real. Contrary to the assumption of many secularists, the role of religion in the life of both individuals and groups has increased over time. Religion remains a private matter of individuals no more, but rather affects state matters in ways that necessitate understanding of its roles in communal relations as well as relations with the state. With the increasing role of religion in peoples' lives comes the interest to study about the role of religions in conflict and peace.

Research on the role of religion as alternately a source of conflict and a source of peace and harmony has grown, though not necessarily in diametrically opposite directions. On the one hand, religion has frequently come to be labeled as the cause of conflict.³ It is regarded by many as a cause of division and discord among human beings that exacerbates conflict. When religion is combined with other intervening factors such as ethnicity, culture and socio-political contexts and manipulated by

1 Assistant Professor of Federalism and Governance Studies, College of Law and Governance Studies, Addis Ababa University.

2 See, e.g., Cox H. 1966. *The Secular City*. New York: The MacMillan Company (cited in Hashemi N. 2010. "The multiple histories of secularism: Muslim societies in comparison", *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 36(3-4):327). Cox describes secularism as "the liberation of man from religious and metaphysical tutelage, the turning of his attention away from other worlds and toward this one" Hashemi, himself, argues that, "sociologically, secularism correlates with modernization in terms of a gradual process that leads to the declining influence of religion in social institutions, communal life, and human relationships".

See also Inglehart R. 1997. *Modernization and Postmodernization: Cultural, Economic, and Political Change in 43 Countries*. Princeton: Princeton University Press (cited in Kuru A. 2007. "Passive and Assertive Secularism: Historical Conditions, Ideological Struggles, and State Policies toward Religion", *World Politics* 59(4):568-594. Inglehart advances a "modernization or secularization theory" and argues that "the importance of religion diminishes and ultimately disappears as the world people scores progress and development in technology and economy".

3 See, e.g., Huntington SP. 1993. "The Clash of Civilizations?", *Foreign Affairs* 72(3):22-49; Huntington SP. 1997. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. London: Simon and Schuster; Lewis B. 1990. "The Roots of Muslim Rage", *The Atlantic*, September (all cited in Silvestri S and Mayal J. 2015. *The Role of Religion in Conflict and Peace-building*. London: The British Academy, 15).

different actors of conflict, it has the potential to aggravate conflicts. On the other hand, some consider religion to be a means of unity and harmony because of its moral and spiritual values.⁴ For them, the ethical guidance and values of religions respecting human dignity, social justice and equality enhance the potential role of religion for peace and harmony among different communities in the world. There are different studies that assert religion is not the cause of conflict, but that other contextual factors are important in determining the exacerbating roles of religion in conflict.⁵

Ethiopia is not an exception. Religion is an important identity marker in Ethiopian society. As per the 2007 population census of the country, more than 97 per cent of the people are followers of either Christianity or Islam. In Ethiopian history, religion has been both a dividing and uniting force in the community, exacerbating different types of conflicts but also serving as a source of peace through its work in promoting mediation, reconciliation and forgiveness among conflicting parties. Nonetheless, due to intervening factors, such as politicisation of ethnic identity in the contemporary ethnic-based federal system of Ethiopia and its manipulation by political and religious authorities for political ends, religion is increasingly becoming a source of discord and disharmony. This is not the whole story, however. Using the authoritative role of religious leaders on their community and the religious doctrines, religion is also serving as a uniting factor and conflict resolution institution.

This chapter examines the role of religion together with other factors, such as the intervening factors of the government and the Ethiopian political structure that operates along ethnic identity lines, that have repercussions on the potential roles of religion in peace and conflict. Although religion can be defined in different ways and the fluid nature of the concept encompasses several issues, the focus in this paper is only on the role of Christianity and Islam in Ethiopia. The research

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- 4 See, e.g., Johnston D and Sampson C. 1994. *Religion, the Missing Dimension of State-Craft*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Johnston D (ed). 2003. *Faith-Based Diplomacy Trumping Realpolitik*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Appleby RS. 2001. "Religion as an Agent of Conflict Transformation and Peacebuilding", in Crocker CA et al (eds). *Turbulent Peace: The Challenges of Managing International Conflict*. Second Edition. Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 821-840; Gopin M. 2000. *Between Eden and Armageddon: The Future of World Religions, Violence and Peacemaking*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Smock DR. (ed). 2002. *Interfaith Dialogue and Peace Building*. Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press; Shah T, Stepan A and Toft M (eds). 2012. *Rethinking Religion and World Affairs*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Coward H and Smith GS. 2004. *Religion and Peacebuilding*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press; Little D (ed). 2007. *Peacemakers in Action: Profiles of Religion in Conflict Resolution*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (all cited in Silvestri and Mayal, *The Role of Religion in Conflict and Peace-building*, 28).
 - 5 Stewart F (ed). 2008. *Horizontal Inequalities and Conflict: Understanding Group Violence in Multi-Ethnic Societies*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. Stewart concludes that conflicts in multicultural societies occur because of cultural inequalities coincided with economic and political differences. Religion, as any other factor, appears as a source of the problem but cannot alone constitute as the cause of conflict. While the causes of conflicts may be something else, religious factors can influence the dynamics and intensity of the conflict.

employed a qualitative research design, involving both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were collected in Addis Ababa, through interviews with religious leaders, government representatives, academicians, experts and ordinary citizens, as well as through direct observation. Structurally, the paper is organised as follows: The second part following this introduction examines conceptual and theoretical discussions of the role of religion as a driver of conflict and a source of peace. This dual approach is necessary, because focusing on religion alone leads to either overemphasizing the role of religion in conflict and peace or overlooking the importance of other factors. The third part examines the Ethiopian situation, discussing, contrasted with the governments' approach of repression, co-optation or befriending of religious leaders and institutions and their impact on peacemaking. Finally, conclusions will be drawn with possible recommendations for promoting the role of religion as a source of peacemaking.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RELIGION, CONFLICT AND PEACE

As highlighted above, religion's role is usually viewed in binary terms: as a driver of conflict and source of peace. It is an oversimplification to designate religion's role in conflict and peace in an "either-or" dichotomy, as it may be both at the same time. There are also other contextual, historical and socio-political factors that intervene in its role. If we try to understand religion in this rigid categorisation, it may lead us to the labeling of religion as bad (violent) and good (peaceful). This in turn leads us to an incorrect perception of religion as the cause of all conflicts or the sole solution for all human ills that obscures the real problems. Understanding the context in which religion operates and interacts with other aspects of human experience at a global, national, institutional, group or individual levels helps us to develop a more nuanced understanding of its roles in peace and conflict. In the Ethiopian context, where this study mainly focuses, for example, one cannot understand the role of religion in peace and conflict in isolation from the intervening factors such as the role of the state, societal make-up and the political structure where it operates.

Religion as a driver of conflict

There are some scholars who argue that religion is the major cause of conflict both at individual and societal level. In their view, religious differences by themselves cause conflicts to occur at various levels of human interaction. They argue that religion can be a cause of structural violence, as it encourages discrimination and exclusion because of its advocacy of possessing absolute truths. In this context, religious identities erect strong walls and provoke confrontation between those who belong to a certain religion and its truth claims against those who do not. In this sense, due to its inherent dichotomisation of in-group and out-group, religion leads to structural violence within a society. Johan Galtung, a sociologist known as the founder of peace and conflict studies, has maintained that religion could be a cause of cultural violence, noting "how different factors such as religion, ideology,

language and ethnicity become intertwined to shape ways of thinking and behaviors that can lead to situations of exclusion, discrimination and eventually also physical violence".⁶ Looking this in another way, if religion is interwoven with ideology, culture, language and ethnicity, it can cause exclusion, discrimination and, ultimately, physical violence. This explains the ongoing conflicts in Ethiopia, where religion-related conflicts are intertwined with ethnicity and language to discriminate and attack the "out-groups".

Some scholars also argue that religion can be an indirect cause of violence through their inaction. While religions are expected to use their potential for peacebuilding, they may support states when they are at war through silence. In this case, although religion by itself is not the driver of the conflict, it becomes an obstacle to peace.⁷ Some other scholars also argue that religion by itself cannot be a cause but only part of the exacerbation of conflict. For example, as Jonathan Fox, a professor of religion and politics, argues, self-determination questions and nationalism are the primary causes of ethnic conflict. However, religious factors change the dynamics and intensity of the conflict, with religion becoming a driver of the conflict when it combines with other factors. Indeed, Fox argues that religious conflicts are more contagious than other forms of conflicts.⁸

Others also argue that conflicts, by their nature, are multi-causal and multi-dimensional that cannot be reduced to one singular cause. Galtung argues that to understand the potential roles of religion for conflict or peace, it is important to look at the extent to which religions promote or reject direct and structural violence. As he asserts, "the idea of being a 'Chosen People' and the value of 'aggressive missionarism' built into the core belief system of a religion can lead to direct violence perpetrated by its followers."⁹ For him, terms such as "Holy War" and "Just War" are used to justify direct violence against other people.¹⁰ Galtung added that some religions also promote forms of structural violence, such as economic exploitation and political repression.¹¹ He further argues that the promotion or rejection of direct violence and structural violence depends on the nature of different religions.

6 Stewart, *Horizontal Inequalities and Conflict*.

7 Boulding E. 1986. "Two Cultures of Religion as Obstacles to Peace", *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 21(4):501-518 (cited in Silvestri and Mayal, *The Role of Religion in Conflict and Peace-building*, 16).

8 Fox J. 2003. "Counting the Causes and Dynamics of Ethnoreligious Violence", *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 4(3):199-144 (cited in Silvestri and Mayal, *The Role of Religion in Conflict and Peace-building*, 18).

9 Galtung J. 2014. "Peace, Conflict and Violence", in Hintjens H and Zarkov D (eds). *Conflict, Peace, Security and Development: Theories and Methodologies*. London: Routledge, (cited in Silvestri and Mayal, *The Role of Religion in Conflict and Peace-building*, 19).

10 Galtung, "Peace, Conflict and Violence" (cited in Silvestri and Mayal, *The Role of Religion in Conflict and Peace-building*, 19).

11 Galtung, "Peace, Conflict and Violence" (cited in Silvestri and Mayal, *The Role of Religion in Conflict and Peace-building*, 19).

However, he stresses that his theory is used only to show the need for dialogue both in intra- and interreligious relations to promote the peace potentials of religions.¹²

There are still others who argue that it is not religious values or beliefs that lead to violence but the manipulation of religion by power-thirsty individuals, whether religious or political. Although the ultimate goals of such individuals are power and control, they provide religious justifications for their struggle in order to get support from the religious community. Religious groups or religious leaders who are in competition with others create alliances with political elites to become triggers of intra-religious and intra-state conflicts. They mobilise their followers for material or dogmatic supremacy, but religion is not the prime source of conflict.¹³ Others also argue that the religious texts provide justification either for violence or peace but the manipulation of such texts by reckless political and religious elites for their lust to power exacerbates conflict. Religion and peacebuilding scholar Scott Appleby argues that “religious illiteracy” of the ordinary masses allows for manipulation of religious texts by self-centred political and religious leaders to fulfill their political ends.¹⁴

On the contrary, there are scholars who argue that religious texts and beliefs themselves provide justifications for war and violence. According to some, just war theory can serve as a Christian justification for war.¹⁵ Under just war theory, war is justified against aggressors, but the ultimate objective is to end the war or conflict and so that peace prevails. Islam has also developed the idea of just war in the form of self-defence with limited circumstances, the ultimate goal being to restore peace and freedom of worship of Allah.¹⁶

Religion as a source of peace

Sara Silvestri and James Mayal, scholars of international politics and international relations, respectively, assert that the role of religion in enhancing peace and the interest of nations in using religion for promoting peace are now increased more than ever. They stress: “Academic and policy-oriented literature on religion and international affairs is rich in publications arguing that religion is a useful – if not necessary – instrument for achieving peace. More specifically, religious beliefs/values, religious leaders and faith-based organisations are thought to have huge potential in promoting peace in any society and/or in the international arena.”¹⁷

12 Galtung “Peace, Conflict and Violence” (cited in Silvestri and Mayal, *The Role of Religion in Conflict and Peace-building*, 20).

13 Silvestri and Mayal, *The Role of Religion in Conflict and Peace-building*, 24.

14 Appleby RS. 2000. *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence and Reconciliation*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield (cited in Silvestri and Mayal, *The Role of Religion in Conflict and Peace-building*, 24).

15 Biggar N. 2013. *In Defence of War*. Oxford: Oxford University Press (cited in Silvestri & Mayal, *The Role of Religion in Conflict and Peace-building*, 30).

16 Silvestri and Mayal, *The Role of Religion in Conflict and Peace-building*, 30.

17 Silvestri and Mayal, *The Role of Religion in Conflict and Peace-building*, 28.

There are scholars, such as Scott Appleby, who argue that the role of religion in conflict resolution and reconciliation is vital.¹⁸ Among other roles, religious beliefs and values, along with their leaders and organisations, play an important role in conflict resolution and peacebuilding in any community. For Appleby, ethics and ethical values enshrined in the belief system of religions are important components for promoting peace. In Appleby's analysis, the ethical values of religion are powerful elements for uniting divided societies in different aspects of social life such as culture, language, ethnicity, race and other divisions. For other scholars, too, religious values have a special role in creating dialogue for shaping good relations among societies.¹⁹ Indeed, much scholarly research has confirmed that religious leaders and faith-based organisations play a vital role in resolving conflicts through mediation and maintaining peace in society.²⁰

Compared to political actors, religious leaders have a comparative advantage in the promotion of peace and resolving conflict using their capital of religiosity or spiritual thinking. They are better trusted in resolving prolonged and intractable conflicts. Their closeness to the people is an asset in approaching conflicting parties and mediating between them toward amicable and peaceful solutions. Some argue that "the legitimacy and leverage of religious actors can be powerful factors in promoting successful mediation processes".²¹ Although there is no precise measurement about the peace potential of religions, many are in favour that religions have an inherent potential for peace and conflict de-escalation. What is a real advantage for religious leaders and institutions vis-à-vis governmental or non-religious institutions in resolving conflicts is their "well established and pervasive influence in the community and typically (though not always) a reputation as an apolitical force for change based on a respected set of values".²²

To sum up, despite the fact that religion in its own matters both in peace and conflict, other factors and their interplay must be taken into account in examining the potential of religion for peace and conflict. Contextual variables such as historical, socio-economic, cultural and political factors need to be considered in assessing the role of religion in promoting peace or exacerbating conflict in a given society.

18 Appleby RS. 2000. *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence and Reconciliation*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield (cited in Silvestri and Mayal, *The Role of Religion in Conflict and Peace-building*, 24).

19 See, e.g., Johnston and Sampson, *Religion, the Missing Dimension of State-Craft*; Johnston *Faith-Based Diplomacy Trumping Realpolitik*; Appleby, "Religion as an Agent of Conflict Transformation and Peacebuilding" (all cited in Silvestri & Mayal, *The Role of Religion in Conflict and Peace-building*, 28).

20 See, e.g., Gopin, *Between Eden and Armageddon*; Interfaith Dialogue and Peace Building Shah et al, *Rethinking Religion and World Affairs*, Little, *Peacemakers in Action* (all cited in Silvestri & Mayal, *The Role of Religion in Conflict and Peace-building*, 28)

21 Silvestri and Mayal, *The Role of Religion in Conflict and Peace-building*, 35.

22 Silvestri and Mayal, *The Role of Religion in Conflict and Peace-building*, 43.

THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN CONFLICT AND PEACE IN ETHIOPIA

Many of the conflicts in Ethiopia, both in historical and contemporary contexts, have been based on identity lines, the major fault lines being religion, ethnicity or both. Historically, the political power contenders defined their organisations or causes of conflicts in identity terms. There have ethnically and religiously organised conflicts in the country during the imperial (1930-1974), Derg (1974-1991), Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) (1991-2018) and the incumbent Prosperity Party (PP) (2018 to date) regimes.

In contemporary Ethiopia, ethnic identity is one of the most salient identities, and the post-1991 ethnic-based federal state arrangement reinforced its importance. Due to the overemphasis on ethnic identity, communities who profess the same religion are divided along ethnic lines and split from their religious community in support of the conflicting parties that belong to their ethnic identity. In this case, the major fault-line of conflict in Ethiopia is ethnicity, not religion. This is what peace researchers Kristian Harpviken and Hanne Roislien argue that "when religiously defined boundaries of inclusion and exclusion coincide with other identity markers, the dividing line between *Us* and *Them* becomes most clear-cut".²³

Historical overview

If one carefully examines Ethiopian political history, it is not difficult to understand how religion played a vital role in the Ethiopian body politic as a driving and unifying force for societal mobilisation both for and against governments. Rulers who deserted religious institutions and the faithful paid dearly, in many cases losing their power and even their lives. For Ethiopian rulers, therefore, the need to control and regulate religion and religious activities has been a priority agenda for centuries. The controlling and surveillance mechanisms employed by the EPRDF regime on Islamic institutions and the EOTC were more systematic and sophisticated, in that the regime used the co-opted EOTC Patriarchate and the Mejlis leadership to control any religious activities in the country.²⁴

The incumbent Prosperity Party (PP) regime, under Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali, came to power in 2018 from within the EPRDF party following three consecutive years of public protest in the country. The EPRDF and PP used the same constitution, the 1995 Constitution of Ethiopia, to govern state-religion relations with more or less similar policy orientations, and their policies towards religion exhibit similarities. Both of them have used religion for political ends and instrumentalised religion for controlling political power. Nonetheless, there are some differences in their approaches. While the EPRDF followed a policy of enclavement and containment

23 Harpviken KB and Roislien HE. 2008. "Faithful Brokers? Potentials and Pitfalls of Religion in Peacemaking", *Conflict Resolution Quarterly* 25(3):358.

24 Assen MD. 2016. "Contested Secularism in Ethiopia: The Contestation between Muslims and the Government". PhD Diss, Addis Ababa University. The name Mejlis is from the Arabic term *majlis*, meaning "council", and it refers to the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council, which is usually referenced as Mejlis.

towards Islam and EOTC, respectively, along with repression for long periods, the PP has been more friendly toward Protestantism and, to some extent, toward other religious groups.²⁵ Repression, enclavement, befriending and upgrading are also used simultaneously or separately depending on the contexts for its political ends. The instrumentalisation of religion for political ends is not without consequence. As we will discuss below, it has negatively affected the respectability of religious institutions and leaders in the eyes of believers and opposing parties in the country, who no longer regard them as impartial or apolitical arbiters in times of conflict.

RELIGION AND CONFLICT: INTERVENING FACTORS

Government repression, co-optation and befriending of religions

Co-optation and repression are the most commonly used approaches of Ethiopian governments to control religious institutions and their leaders. The incumbent Prosperity Party is well aware of the importance of controlling religious institutions and their leaders for maintaining its grip on power. It uses repression and co-optation as approaches inherited from the previous regimes. However, when the PP came to power in 2018, the government, particularly PM Abiy Ahmed was busy in discrediting the previous regimes' policy of repression of political dissent and religious organisations. In this regard, he was well aware of the grievances of the Ethiopian people. As a result, he released large numbers of political prisoners and promised democratic political reforms for the "benefit" of the population.²⁶ To mitigate religious grievances both in the Muslim and Christian community, he released the Muslim representatives who were imprisoned for alleged "crimes of terrorism and establishing an Islamic government" in Ethiopia in violation of the separation of state and religion.²⁷ Abiy Ahmed not only released these Muslim representatives but also arranged a discussion forum for creating unity between them and the co-opted Mejlis leadership.²⁸ This was relatively successful, and a transitional administration of the Mejlis was formed under the leadership of Hajji Umer Idris by drawing members from both sides. This has brought huge support and acclamation for the PM from the Muslim community and other sectors of the society. However, as informants of the present research believe, this proved to be "tactical" for the PM to get support from Muslims and to discredit the previous

25 Institute of Security Studies. 2022. "Empowering Religion in Post-2018 Ethiopia? Patterns & Implications". Unpublished Material.

26 United States Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor. 2019. "2018 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, Ethiopia". Washington, DC: US Department of State.

27 Assen, "Contested Secularism in Ethiopia".

28 United States Department of State, Office of International Religious Freedom. 2020. "2019 Report on International Religious Freedom: Ethiopia". Washington, DC: US Department of State, 6.

regime as “oppressor of religions”.²⁹ The same PM who arranged reunification was later accused of creating discord and division between the Muslim religious leaders in which he again “tricked” the Muslim population by acting as a “neutral arbiter”.³⁰

A similar approach was followed for reconciling the differences within the EOTC. The first measure the PM took was to bring together the EOTC Synod led by the residing Patriarch Mathias and the exiled Synod led by Patriarch Merkorios. Immediately after his oath of loyalty to the country and the people, he went to the US and arranged a reconciliation forum between the two. He was successful in that aspect, too.³¹ The exiled Synod then came home and agreed with the seating Patriarch to work together as one. This also greatly helped the PM to get wide support from the Christian community. However, the same division happened later in the Orthodox Church and the government of Ethiopia (the PM, in particular) was implicated.³² This was also an indication that the PM was mostly busy getting support by mending broken relationships caused by the previous regimes instead of making it a “genuine work of the government” to create amicable relations among conflicting parties.³³

The PM also facilitated the coming together of different Pentecostal denominations and for the establishment of one umbrella organisation, the Ethiopian Evangelical Council (EEC).³⁴ The EEC organisation was recognised for the first time in Ethiopian history as a legal person through a proclamation.³⁵ In this regard, the PM took a policy of upgrading, if not befriending, the Evangelical Church in the country. However, although upgrading can be interpreted as empowering religion in a positive sense, the PP’s government is interested in empowering religion for its

29 Interview with a former member of Mejlis by MD Assen. Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 20 January 2023.

30 Interview with a former member of the Mejlis.

31 “Ethiopian Church officially declared re-unification in the presence of PM”, *borkena.com*, 26 July 2018.

32 Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church Synod. 2023. ወቅታዊ ጉዳይ ፤ የቅዱስ ሲኖዶስ አስቸኳይ መግለጫ [Current Affairs: Urgent declaration of the Holy Synod], MK TV/YouTube. Online at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ln_T11WTGnU [Accessed 5 March 2024]. In this declaration, the EOTC Synod expressed its concern of the undue intervention of government in religious affairs and supporting the splinter group from the Church.

33 Interview with former member of Mejlis.

34 See DeCort A. 2022. “Christian Nationalism Is Tearing Ethiopia Apart”, *Foreign Policy*, 18 June. Abiy Ahmed is aware of the importance of buying the loyalty of Evangelicals to strengthen his power grip. As a result, he established an umbrella organisation led by group of 15 Christian influencers. The founding document even dictates that its leaders are to be accountable to the PM.

35 As per Proc. No. 1208/2020, a proclamation to provide Legal personality to Ethiopian Council of Gospel Believers’ Churches and Members, “The Ethiopian Council of Gospel Believers’ Churches and members, religious institutions, organisations and societies established and to be established under it shall have legal personality without requirements of special registration”.

instrumental ends and political gains. Overall, the PM was quick enough to act as savior of religions by forging reunification between the two EOTC synods, uniting the divided Muslim leadership and facilitating the unity of the Evangelicals through one umbrella organisation. All these, however, were interpreted by our informants as “the PM’s desire to instrumentalise religion for achieving political goals”, though it ultimately undermined the respectability of religious leaders and institutions to act as neutral arbiters when conflicts occur.³⁶ It simply exposed them as surrogates of the regime.

THE IMPACT OF ETHNIC-BASED FEDERALISM ON RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS AND LEADERS

Following a regime change in 1991, the EPRDF government reconfigured the Ethiopian state along ethno-linguistic lines, which increased ethnic consciousness and amplified ethnic distinctiveness in the country.³⁷ The overemphasis on ethnic identity in the state structure, political party formation and the redistribution of the country’s resources encouraged, if not obliged, people to be more ethnic and compete in all aspects of life on the basis of their ethnic identity. Moreover, the relative liberalisation of religious freedom during the EPRDF regime encouraged people to be more religious and focus on their religious distinctiveness.

When the EPRDF took power in 1991, it allowed religious practices and granted freedom of religion for all. As part of its identity politics, all religious communities were allowed to act as they want.³⁸ It declared the principle of secularism and religious communities were allowed not only to believe and worship but also to manifest their belief in ways they deem appropriate. In this regard, although its ultimate objective was to elevate ethnic identity as a political element and criterion for state formation, it inadvertently encouraged religious communities to develop their organisations and identity boundaries in a way that subsequently caused religious and ethnic conflicts to occur and spread.

The competition for political power and resources between ethnically organised political parties created a rift among religious groups that polarised their relationship. As a result, ethnic conflicts are common throughout the country. Ethnic boundaries are now hardened more than ever before.³⁹ Political entrepreneurs manipulate ethnic differences and conflicts for their political ends. The influence of

36 Interviews with different informants from the Orthodox Christian, Muslim and Protestant religions by MD Assen. Addis Ababa, 20-25 January 2023.

37 Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE), 1995, art 46(2) (providing that “States shall be delimited on the basis of the settlement patterns, language, identity and consent of the people concerned”).

38 Abbink J. 2011. “Religion in Public Spaces: Emerging Muslim-Christian Polemics in Ethiopia”, *African Affairs* 110(439):253-274.

39 Assen MD. 2022. “Ethnic Federalism as a New State-building Approach in Post-1991 Ethiopia: Its Pitfalls and the Way Forward”, in Ibrahim A and Wolde K (eds). *Between Failure and Redemption: The Future of the Ethiopian Social Contract*. Evanston, IL:

ethnic federalism and its polarisation effects on ethnic relations is not limited only to the political elites and their relations. Religious institutions and religious leaders are divided along ethnic lines.⁴⁰ The politicised ethnic identity also negatively affected the impartiality and the apolitical nature of religious organisations and their leaders.

One of the major assets of religious institutions and their leaders has been their neutrality and impartiality in the eyes of the conflicting parties in a way that helped them to play a positive role in mediating and promoting peace. Markus Weingardt, for example, provides the unique role of religion-based actors and their potential for conflict resolution as compared to other non-religious mediators. He mentions three important characteristics of religion-based actors that suit them for resolving even prolonged, intractable and stalemated conflicts in any society. These qualities are related to their “professional expertise or conflict-specific knowledge, credibility, or perception of the actors as neutral and fair by the parties in conflict, and closeness to the conflict, namely emotional, personal, and/or human proximity of the actors to the conflicting parties and/or the conflict”.⁴¹ These important qualities of religion-based actors will obviously develop sense of confidence on the part of the conflicting parties to trust them as impartial mediators.

However, when the religious identity of the mediators is combined with other intervening factors, such as ethnic identity, it will reduce their credibility and neutrality. In Ethiopia, ethnic identity is highly mobilised and pronounced in all activities of life. States are organised along ethnic identity lines, political parties are formed on the basis of ethnic identity and mobilise ethnic groups for controlling political power and all other day-to-day activities of individuals including self-help associations and religious groupings are influenced by the ethnic identity of individuals. Government positions at different levels of state structures are being shared along ethnic proportionality. Many of the religious structures resemble the federal state structure. For example, *mejilis* is organised into federal and state *mejilises*. In this sense, the ethnic-based structure is reflected in the structure of *Mejilis*. The only hierarchical and centralised structures that refute the federal state structure are the EOTC and the Ethiopian Catholic Church (ECC). Even in this hierarchical and centralised church structure, the ethnic element is reflected in appointment and administering areas that are ethnically organised.

Northwestern Roberta Buffett Institute for Global Affairs and Northwestern University Libraries, Evanston, 233-266.

40 Yohannes H. 2023. “Ethnicity Tears the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahdo Church Apart”, *Public Orthodoxy*, 10 February.

41 Silvestri and Mayal, *The Role of Religion in Conflict and Peace-building*, 38 (citing Weingardt MA. 2007. *Religion macht Frieden. Das Friedenspotential von Religionen in politischen Gewaltkonflikten* [Religion makes peace. The peace potential of religions in violent political conflicts]. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer). Derg specifically targeted the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) “to revitalize its evangelizing mission in line with the aims of Ethiopian Socialism”.

In addition to apportioning the federal structure of the Church and Mejlis on the basis of ethnic identity, regional states' churches and *mejilises* are being administered mainly, if not exclusively, by religious leaders who belong to the ethnic group of that specific area. This means, for instance, that churches or *mejilis* in Tigray are to be administered by the Tigrayan ethnic group. The same is true for all other ethnic-based regional states in the country. This situation in the religious sphere, as in the political sphere, created ethnic division in religious institutions and among their leaders. Due to ethnic polarisation and political manipulation, religious institutions and their leaders are unable to transcend ethnic boundaries and act as neutral mediators and promoters of peace across communities. Instead, they themselves are trapped in ethnic conflict and became drivers of conflict. There are several empirical examples we can mention here but I will focus only on few that show how religion became part of the problem. The conflict in Tigray, the split of Oromia religious leaders from the EOTC and the conflicts within the Ethiopian Islamic Supreme Council are just some indicators.

THE CIVIL WAR IN TIGRAY AND THE ROLE OF CHURCHES AND MOSQUES

Since November 2020, civil war erupted between the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the dominant party in the former EPRDF coalition (1991-2018) and the newly established Prosperity Party regime (established by members from within the EPRDF in December 2019). Although the two contending forces provide different explanations for the causes of the war, it started due to a pre-emptive attack of the TPLF forces on the Ethiopian National Defense Force on 3 November 2020.⁴² This war is one of the most destructive wars in the history of Ethiopia, with more than a million deaths from both sides, huge property destruction and displacement of people. The conflict has ethnic flavours where the TPLF propagated the war as a "genocidal war" declared against the people of Tigray.⁴³

This war was the result of the propagation of the two sides for the last three previous years after the coming to power of PM Abiy Ahmed in April 2018. TPLF-dominated EPRDF was pushed out of power because of successive public protests throughout the country particularly from the two largest ethnic groups of Oromo and Amhara, who opposed the political and economic dominance of the minority Tigray. TPLF represents about 6.1% of the population of Ethiopia, while Oromo and Amhara represent about 34.5 and 26.9 per cent respectively. However, it was the TPLF who created EPRDF and organised political organisations for the Amhara and Oromo

42 EPRDF was a coalition of four ethnically organised parties formed in 1989 and ruled the country from 1991 to 2018; TPLF, Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM), Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO) and Southern Ethiopia People's Democratic Movement (SEPDm). Among these, TPLF was the architect and designer of EPRDF until it was replaced by the Prosperity Party (PP) in December 2019.

43 For more on this, see for example, Girmay M. 2022. "The record shows there is genocide in Tigray", *Ethiopia Insight*, 21 March.

ethnic groups to form the EPRDF coalition.⁴⁴ Put simply, although EPRDF was formally a coalition of four ethnically organised parties, organisations and fronts, TPLF was dominant and the others were largely surrogate parties.

The EPRDF ruled the country from 1991 to 2018 by “winning” five consecutive façade elections in the country.⁴⁵ It even won 100 per cent seats in the 2010 and 2015 elections. However, following the 2015 election, public protest erupted first in Oromia and then spread to Amhara and other regional states. The EPRDF regime tried to control it through suppression using the security forces until 2018, but it was unable to achieve control. The former PM of Ethiopia, Haile Mariam Desalegn, resigned in February 2018. A “reformist group” from within the EPRDF emerged and elected Abiy Ahmed Ali as chairman of the party. Subsequently, Abiy was declared to be the new PM of Ethiopia on the 2nd of April 2018. Immediately after holding office, Abiy restructured the party as a “national single party” by dismantling the coalition. This was strongly opposed by the TPLF. When the new Prosperity Party was formed in December 2019, the TPLF walked out and declared its official divorce.⁴⁶

In subsequent measures, the government of Ethiopia removed TPLF members from federal government offices. Many of the TPLF members, including the members of the House of People’s Representatives, fled to Tigray. The Ethiopian government started a propaganda agitation that “the TPLF was the sole perpetrator of the wrong doings during the last 27 years of EPRDF’s rule”.⁴⁷ The TPLF then started their counter-propaganda against the federal government that Abiy’s administration is working for “restoring the previous unitary and centralised governance by dismantling the ethnic-based federal system”.⁴⁸ For nearly two years, the two actors were exclusively involved in a war of propaganda against each other. To make things worse, Covid-19 pandemic emerged in December 2019 in the world and later in Ethiopia with its negative repercussions on the socio-political undertakings of the country that even aggravated the antagonistic relations between the two parties. Following the emergence of the virus in March 2020, the Ethiopian government

44 For the Amhara ethnic group, the Amhara National Democratic Organization (ANDM) and for the Oromo ethnic group, the Oromo People’s Democratic Organization (OPDO) were established in 1982 and 1990, respectively, taking the TPLF which was established in 1975, as a role model. The other coalition of the EPRDF, the Southern Ethiopia People’s Democratic Movement (SEPDM – representing at least 56 ethnic groups) was even established in 1992 after a year of controlling political power by the EPRDF.

45 Elections were conducted in 1995, 2000, 2005, 2010 and 2015. Except the relatively competitive election of 2005, which the EPRDF concede some seats to the oppositions, all others were nominal where the EPRDF won a landslide victory.

46 Pichon E. 2022. “Ethiopia: War in Tigray, Background and state of play”. European Parliament Briefing. Brussels: European Council, European Parliamentary Research Service.

47 See, for example, Evennett H. 2022. “Conflict in the Tigray region of Ethiopia”, UK Parliament, House of Lords Library, *In Focus*, 11 November.

48 Pichon, “Ethiopia: War in Tigray”.

declared a five-month state of emergency, including the postponement of the prescheduled election to be held in August 2020. The TPLF and the Tigray Regional State Administration strongly opposed the decision, as it was simply used as an excuse by the Ethiopian government to hold power illegally. Tigray insisted on conducting elections in defiance of the decision of the House of the Federation to postpone the nationwide election. It undertook its regional election in September 2020.⁴⁹ The House of Federation declared the election result as null and void, as it violates the 1995 constitution. Due to accumulated antagonistic relations between the two forces, civil war erupted in November 2020, just one month after the establishment of the new government in Tigray.

Before the start of the war, negotiation and mediation was attempted by different individuals and groups though with no avail to the efforts from both sides. Various community representatives, renowned Ethiopians, and religious leaders went to Tigray several times for peace negotiation. After the war began, however, the religious institutions and religious leaders of Tigray slowly isolated themselves. The Church of Tigray, for example, gradually separated itself from the EOTC, accusing it of supporting the war of the Ethiopian government against Tigray. It then declared the establishment of the Tigray Orthodox Tewahedo Church (TOTC) named as the See of Selama Kessate Beharan Archdiocese.⁵⁰ The conflict in the church appears to be more political in nature, and it mirrors the divisions between the Ethiopian government and Tigray. In a letter written to the EOTC, the Church of Tigray accused the Synod not only for their silence but for cooperating with the Ethiopian government in its “genocidal war against the people of Tigray”.⁵¹

The Tigray Islamic Affairs Supreme Council also accused of the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council for remaining silent on the war against Tigray and threatened to separate. It blamed some influential Islamic leaders for supporting PM Abiy Ahmed and his war against the people of Tigray.⁵² In this case, religious institutions and leaders became part of the problem instead of acting as promoters of peace and neutral arbiters between the conflicting parties. Divisions within religious institutions along ethnic lines were not limited to Tigray but reflected in other parts of the country. The Synod of Oromia and Ethiopian Nations and Nationalities declared its separation from the EOTC in January 2023, accusing the EOTC of not respecting the constitutional rights of the Oromo people to teach and preach in their mother tongue.

49 Pichon, “Ethiopia: War in Tigray”.

50 For more information on this issue, see Tesfaye MG. 2023. “Ethiopia’s religious institutions were a catalyst for the Tigray war”, *Ethiopia Insight*, 22 March.

51 Tesfaye, “Ethiopia’s religious institutions were a catalyst for the Tigray war”.

52 Tesfaye, “Ethiopia’s religious institutions were a catalyst for the Tigray war”.

THE SYNOD OF OROMIA AND ETHIOPIAN NATIONS AND NATIONALITIES – A SPLINTER GROUP FROM EOTC

Although Abiy Ahmed has tried to act as a uniting factor for divided religious groups in the country that are largely implicated with the previous EPRDF regime, many of the informants for this research believe that, it was not a genuine effort.⁵³ The division of religious institutions and their leaders reached to its peak in the country's history during the PP regime.⁵⁴ Instrumentalising religion for political ends is becoming clearer now than ever before.⁵⁵ The incumbent government, particularly Abiy Ahmed, is appearing to be savior of religions but actually not. Divisions within the EOTC, mainly along ethnic lines, are clearer now than ever before.⁵⁶ Religious leaders from the Tigray and Oromo ethnic groups in particular are pushing for separation, if not outright secession, from the EOTC often with the support of the federal and regional governments.⁵⁷ The Tigray National Regional State Orthodox Church leaders and leaders from the Islamic Affairs Supreme Council declared their official separation from the central EOTC Synod and Federal Islamic Affairs Supreme Council following the 2020 civil war in the country.

In a similar fashion, but even different from the Tigray counterpart, a new synod was established and declared by Oromo bishops as Synod of Oromia and Ethiopian Nations and Nationalities. The nomenclature itself is very odd and it is not clear whether the name "Oromia" is taken as Oromo ethnic group or a state. If it is taken as a state of Oromia, then it is at odds with the language of "nation" and "nationality", because it is supposed to represent other nations and nationalities in Ethiopia. The Oromo ethnic group bishops accused the church of denying the Oromo the right to learn and preach in their own Afaan Oromo language, but the church denies the accusation. In this regard, if the demand of Oromo bishops is to learn in their own language, it is obviously not their mandate to appoint bishops for other ethnic groups in the name of "nations" and "nationalities".

The split of the bishops who established the Synod of Oromia and Ethiopian Nations and Nationalities was implicated with the support of the federal government⁵⁸ and the government of Oromia National Regional State.⁵⁹ As it was common in

53 Interviews with different informants from the Orthodox Christian, Muslim and Protestant religions by Assen MD. Addis Ababa, 20-25 January 2023.

54 Interview with an Orthodox Christian religious leader by Assen MD. Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 25 January 2023.

55 Interview with an academician at Addis Ababa University by Assen MD. Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 21 January 2023.

56 Yohannes, "Ethnicity Tears the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahdo Church Apart".

57 Interview with a believer of Orthodox Christianity by Assen MD. Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 26 January 2023.

58 Etim A. 2023. "Ethiopia's ancient Orthodox Church accuses PM Ahmed of interference over rebel bishops", *Africa News Watch*, 3 February.

59 Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church. 2023. ከኢትዮጵያ ኦርቶዶክስ ተዋሕዶ ቤተ ክርስቲያን መንበረ ፓትርያርክ የተላለፈ መልእክት [A message from the Patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox

Ethiopian history to appoint a new patriarch for the EOTC following regime change, Abiy's government was interested in doing the same.⁶⁰ However, an ethnic Tigran Patriarch, Abune Mathias, was in office who was appointed in 2013, following the death of an ethnic Tigran Abune Paulos in 2012.⁶¹

As we have discussed above, Ethiopian politics is shaped along ethnic lines, and religious institutions are also shaped along these lines. When the Tigran-led EPRDF regime was pushed out, an ethnic Oromo PM, Abiy Ahmed, came to power. The new government was interested to do the same.⁶² Patriarch Mathias was several times accused of supporting the TPLF-led war of 2020 and acting as a guardian of the previous regime.⁶³ The Patriarch himself once told foreign media outlets that "he was silenced and ignored by the government and state media". He has also accused the government of committing crimes against humanity and genocide over the people of Tigray.⁶⁴ When he went to the US for medical treatment at the end of 2022, he was a victim of a coordinated media campaign for stealing the church's property and heritage while he was going abroad. Many of our informants believe that "this baseless accusation was a deliberate campaign by supporters of the government and Oromo activists to pressure him not to return back to Ethiopia".⁶⁵ According to informants, "this was done for installing an Oromo patriarch in his place [who was] supposed to be a supporter of PM Abiy Ahmed & his government".⁶⁶ Unfortunately for them, the Patriarch returned after his treatment.⁶⁷

Later, in January 2023, a splinter group of the Oromo bishops declared the establishment of a new synod called the Synod of Oromia and Ethiopian Nations and Nationalities. The EOTC Synod immediately held an emergency meeting and

Tewahedo Church] (press release), EOITC TV/YouTube, 24 January. Online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=15Sxmbg0N9Y> [5 March 2024].

60 Interview with an historian at Addis Ababa University by Assen MD. Addis Ababa, 20 January 2023.

61 Interview with an historian at Addis Ababa University.

62 Interview with an historian at Addis Ababa University.

63 See United States Department of State, Office of International Religious Freedom. 2022. "2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: Ethiopia". Washington, DC: U.S. State Department, 5. There the report indicates that Patriarch Mathias accused the government of Ethiopia for genocidal war against the people of Tigray when he says: "I am not clear why they want to declare genocide on the people of Tigray? ... They want to destroy the people of Tigray".

64 The Patriarch said: "Many barbarisms have been conducted these days all over Ethiopia ... but what is happening in Tigray is of the highest brutality and cruelty". For more information on this issue, Tesfaye, "Ethiopia's religious institutions were a catalyst for the Tigray war".

65 Interview with different academicians at Addis Ababa University by Assen MD. Addis Ababa Ethiopia, 20-25 January 2023.

66 Interview with different academicians at Addis Ababa University.

67 Interview with different academicians at Addis Ababa University.

declared its illegality.⁶⁸ The EOTC Synod asked the government to enforce the law by protecting the Church's property from the illegal takeover by this group. The EOTC Synod in particular accused of the federal government, the Addis Ababa City Administration and Oromia national regional state government for supporting the illegal groups in facilitating its takeover of the Church's properties in Oromia and providing security protection for its members. In response to the Church's accusation, Abiy Ahmed summoned an urgent meeting of all the ministers and warned them not to intervene in the conflict.⁶⁹ The order seemed to favour the splinter group, as they were taking over the Orthodox churches in the Oromia region.⁷⁰ It was the responsibility of the government to prevent the EOTC from the illegal activities of the newly established Synod. However, the PM ordered his cabinet to refrain from any act.⁷¹ What seemed to be at odds with this order was that the Ministry of Peace, for example, was responsible for dealing with religious issues in registering or mediating religious conflicts or in other issues related to religion in the country.⁷² As a result of the government order, no one was even responsible to protect the property of the Church while they were occupied and controlled by the new Synod. In some instances, the security forces facilitate the capture of churches by the new Synod.

As a result of lack of government protection, the EOTC ordered its believers to protect their religious institutions. Due to confrontations between the government security forces and believers, scores of people were killed in many parts of Oromia.⁷³ After mandating its believers to wear black cloth for three consecutive days to express their grief, the Church wanted to call nation-wide protests in opposition against the government's compliance to the illegal activities. PM Abiy Ahmed who warned his cabinets to refrain from intervention was quick in calling church leaders

68 See ከኢትዮጵያ ኦርቶዶክስ ተዋሕዶ ቤተ ክርስቲያን መንበረ ፓትርያርክ የተላለፈ መልእክት። "A message from the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church Synod", EOTC TV/YouTube, 22 January 2023. Online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=15Sxmbg0N9Y> [Accessed 5 March 2024].

69 See ጠቅላይ ሚኒስትር ዐቢይ አሕመድ በሰላምና ሃይማኖታዊ ጉዳዮች ዙሪያ የሰጡት ማብራሪያ, "Explanations provided by PM Abiy Ahmed on Issues of Peace and Religion", Ethiopian News Agency/YouTube, 31 January 2023. Online at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IYSRc_feGyU [Accessed 5 March 2024].

70 Interview with an Orthodox Christian by Assen MD. Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 16 February 2023.

71 Interview with an Orthodox Christian.

72 As per Proclamation No. 1097/2018, Definition of Powers and Duties of the Executive Organs of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, the Ministry of Peace, among others, has the following responsibilities: work in cooperation with relevant government organs, cultural and religious organizations and other pertinent bodies to ensure peace and mutual respect among followers of different religions and beliefs, as well as nations, nationalities and peoples; identify factors serving as causes of conflicts among communities; register religious organizations and associations etc."

73 "Ethiopia church split resolved amid social media suspension", Associated Press, 16 February 2023.

to discuss on the issue. The Church forwarded some preconditions to be fulfilled and convened a conference with the PM. The PM finally agreed to bring the splinter group to the Church. Within a day, the PM brought them to the Church and asked apology for their misdeeds.⁷⁴

RELIGION AND PEACE IN ETHIOPIA

Ideally, for religions, all worldly matters are not the concern of human beings as it encourages, if not prescribes, to focus on good deeds to inherit the hereafter world. Land and geographic boundaries and ethnic identity differences are temporal, and religion guides people not to focus on such issues to be a source of conflict. The role of religion in promoting peace emanates from the religious texts, scriptures, doctrines and the moral authority of religious leaders. However, the use and misuse of such texts and the co-optation of the religious leaders by government actors spoiled religion's role in promoting peace and undermined the moral superiority of religious leaders. In this case, religious leaders and religious texts did not play their expected roles and reduced their contribution to maintaining peace.

Successive Ethiopian rulers repressed and co-opted religious institutions and leaders in a way that gravely twisted the role of religion in protecting peace in the community. The incumbent PP's government is even taking the issue to its extreme and abusing religious texts by using them out of context for political purposes that undermine believers' trust in religion. PM Abiy Ahmed in particular is (in)famous for using religious quotes in his public speeches, enhancing his legitimacy but using religion for political ends. A recent study by the Institute of Security Studies (ISS) in 2022, titled "Empowering Religion in Post-2018 Ethiopia? Patterns and Implications", maintains that:

The PP sustains the use-and-misuse of religion to advance political agendas. The PM and many other leaders of the PP co-opt religious holidays, ceremonies, and other events to get across politically charged messages and directions. [...] On the one hand, by co-opting religion, the ruling party tries to generate legitimacy for its causes and garner support for its actions and inactions. On the other hand, by exploiting religious leaders and religious texts to get across politically modified statements and messages, the ruling party and its leaders make religious teachings and leaders face grave consequences. [...] the PM and many other leaders of the PP simply-surgically remove religious ideas from religious texts and disseminate politically correct statements and this leads to the misinterpretation and misuse of religious texts, on the one hand, and the loss of credibility on the part of religious leaders, on the other.⁷⁵

Whatever positive intentions may be there on the government's side, people are sceptical considering it is abusing religious texts and messages for political

74 Sajid. 2023. "Oromia splinter Orthodox faction apologizes to Ethiopian Orthodox Church", YouTube, 15 February. Online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q7Psz6fLDf8>

75 Institute of Security Studies, "Empowering Religion in Post-2018 Ethiopia?", 21.

purposes. Many people worry about the PM's approach to religion. They see him as a religious preacher instead of a high-profile political figure administering the country with impartiality. In many of the public speeches or congratulating messages for religious festivities, the PM acts as if he is a follower of that particular religion. In the same study mentioned above, many people are sceptical of the PP's government for using religion for political goals, for the report's authors state that:

Skeptical of PP's administration and its "undue" engagement with Ethiopia's major religions, most of the interviewees expressed the imminent danger of losing moral leadership in Ethiopia. Religious teachings and leaders have always been critical agents of morality, ethics, and discipline. However, as the state indiscriminately exploits religious texts and turn religious leaders into another "state serving parasites", it will lead to socio-ethical and moral voids which cannot be filled otherwise. As one interviewee argued, through indiscriminately deploying religious texts and ideas to justify its causes, it renders religions meaningless and irrelevant [...].⁷⁶

PM Abiy Ahmed is omnipresent in almost all religious institutions and their activities, often assuming roles as a mediator, a guardian of religious institutions or invited guest in religious festivals. He aspires to control every aspect of life in a community in a fast moving authoritarianism with a flavour of populism that targets religious institutions and their leaders.

To indicate how the controlling mechanism and the appetites of governments for controlling religion increased over time and reached to its peak during the PP's regime, one informant, who is a historian at Addis Ababa University, gave the following account:

Controlling religion is common, if not a normal practice, by all Ethiopian governments. Emperor Haile Selassie I, for instance, controlled all religions particularly the EOTC. He had the prerogative power in the appointment of a patriarch through his role of final approval. Derg was even blatant in controlling religion, if not eliminating. It, for example, killed the patriarch of the EOTC in 1979 and replaced with another supposed to be a supporter of its ideology in clear violation of the rules of the Church. EPRDF was relatively more liberal in terms of religious freedom but was in absolute control of religious institutions and leaders either through repression or co-optation. It removed the patriarch of EOTC in 1992 and installed its own supporter as a new patriarch. The Prosperity Party follows more or less similar tactics of controlling religion. What makes the PP regime different from the previous regimes is a Big Man's control of religious institutions and their leaders. The Big Man is even (mis)using his personal religiosity to approach religious institutions, religious leaders and the Ethiopian people at large through religious appeal. The Big Man is acting as a guardian of all religions but actually damaging the reputation of all religions that ultimately undermined their roles of conflict resolution in the country.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Institute of Security Studies, "Empowering Religion in Post-2018 Ethiopia?", 21.

⁷⁷ Interview with an historian at Addis Ababa University by Assen MD. Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 25 January 2023.

In this regard, undue government intervention in religious affairs and government control and co-optation of religious leaders and institutions causes them to be viewed with suspicion among believers and conflicting parties when government tries to act as neutral mediators and peace promoters. The ethnic divisions that prevailed in the country after 1991 also created rift within religious leadership along ethnic lines that further undermined their potential roles for peace.

CONCLUSION

Religion is normally expected to be a source of peace, as the religious texts, ethical values and beliefs incorporated in the texts and the moral superiority of religious leaders support it. However, this is not always true. In some instances, religions themselves are becoming either the source of the problem or exacerbating conflicts in a society. In the Ethiopian case, religion has been taken hostage by former and contemporary governments of Ethiopia, who use religion for political ends. Religious values have also been overwhelmed by ethnic divisions and manipulations after the institutionalisation of ethnic-based federalism in the post-1991 period. In consequence, religions became either sources of conflict themselves or aggravated ethnic divisions and conflicts that were underway in the country.

Due to the work of the TPLF-led EPRDF regime's intervention in religious affairs, the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church and the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council were divided into two rival camps. The EOTC's division is as equal to how it was in the EPRDF era. The division started immediately after EPRDF's coming to power, and it was caused by the interest of the regime to remove the Patriarch of the EOTC in violation of the canonical rule of the Church. The regime accused of the patriarch for close ties with the previous military regime. Hence, Patriarch Merkorios was pushed out from the Church with active government involvement. With regard to the Muslims, the government relatively followed a liberal policy of religious freedom but strongly controlled the EIASC. This created discord and conflict within it that diminished its legitimacy in the eyes of the Muslim population.

The appointment of Patriarch Paulos under the support of government in 1992 and the tight control of EIASC leadership created deep anger and frustration among the Christian and Muslim population against the EPRDF government that contributed for its demise in 2018. PM Abiy Ahmed who came to power in April 2018 was well aware of the discontents of the people. In consequence, what he did was to arrange reconciliation forum among conflicting parties. Although he succeeded in reuniting the two synods of the EOTC and created unity between the two contending *mejilis* leadership actors, many of the believers viewed it with suspicion, as the government gradually used this leverage for its political purposes. In this regard, religious institutions and their leaders are co-opted and made mere subservient to the state instead of being independent and assertive to play their role of promoting peace and acting as neutral mediator in time of conflict.

The political factors of repression, co-optation and befriending of religion under PM Abiy Ahmed seriously crippled the potential role of religion for peace. Moreover, the ethnic elements of conflicts in the country further divided religious institutions and their leaders along ethnic lines that in turn exacerbated existing conflicts. In sum, while religious institutions and religious leaders were expected to act as impartial mediator to resolve conflicts, they added a fuel to existing fires.

Religion's potential role for peace is highly undermined by governments' excessive interest in controlling religious institutions and their leaders through repression, co-optation and befriending for political ends. For obtaining the maximum benefits of religion for peace in Ethiopia, therefore, "undue" government interference should be avoided or at least reduced. The state, the government and the community at large benefit more from independent and apolitical religious institutions and leaders than co-opted or controlled ones with minimal or no trust from the larger society.