

Review

## Religion and social cohesion in Ethiopia

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**Ethiopia is one of the fastest growing economies in Africa. It is also a home to multitude of ethnicities, religions and cultures. The country has been experimented with several political formations with mixed results. The recent transformation into a federal state has put religion, ethnicities and the nature of the federal state into direct confrontation with each other. Like many developing countries, Ethiopia faces the major challenges in managing diversity of religion and ethnicity. Recent events (in the past fifteen months) indicate a rising tension between the state and Islam on the one hand and Islam and Christianity on the other. This paper explores the role of religion in social cohesion in Ethiopia and social cohesion as a prerequisite to development in Ethiopia. The article argues that social cohesion can only be enhanced and deeply promoted through collaborative efforts of all religions and through engagement with federal and state authorities.**

**Key words:** Development, ethnicity, politics, peace building, religion, social inclusion, social exclusion.

### INTRODUCTION

Ethiopia is an ancient country with complex historical fissures along religious lines. With a population of approximately 73.9 million (Summary and Statistical Report of the 2007 Population and Housing Census Results, Draft Report, December, 2008). Ethiopia is the third most populous country in Africa after Nigeria and Egypt. Other census estimates put Ethiopia's population at 84.73 million (2011) (The World Bank: <http://data.worldbank.org/country/ethiopia>) surpassing Egypt (82.5 million, 2011) (The World Bank: <http://data.worldbank.org/country/egypt>) and making it Africa's second most populous country after Nigeria.

Ethiopia's rich cultural heritage includes both tangible and non tangible assets such as the ancient handcraft production, various ceremonies and festivals as well as eight cultural heritage sites registered by UNESCO. The country's cultural heritage and diversity is enhanced by a representation of many religions including Christianity, Islam and Traditional African Religions (The Central Intelligence Agency - CIA, The World Factbook on

Ethiopia, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/et.html>, (accessed 31 August 2012). Due to the varied geographical formations of Ethiopia, it has been quite difficult to determine the distinctive number of ethnicities, cultures, traditions and languages. The main languages of Ethiopia include Amharic, the 'working language' (people of Amhara origin comprise 29% of the population), Oromo (people of Oromo descent comprise 33% of the population). Other very important languages include Tigrinya, Somali and Afar among others (Angelica, 2012). For several centuries, Ethiopia was equated to the ancient Abyssinia cultures of Amhara and Tigray in government and foreign circles. There is a renewed interest in understanding Ethiopia; which, can be explained in part by its diversities (language, ethnicities, religion, etc.) and by its complicated and turbulent political history.

The Ethiopian state has undergone complex transitions including a socialist revolution that toppled the Monarchy and Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974, a protracted civil

war that led to the overthrow of strongman and Socialist dictator Mengistu Haile Mariam in 1991, the cessation of Eritrea as part of the Ethiopian state in 1992. These events have helped shape the internal relations amongst various ethnic and religious groupings in the country. To understand the role of the church in social cohesion in Ethiopia one needs to appreciate these complexities and transformations that occurred in the country. The methodology used in developing this article is a review of the literature on religion and social cohesion in Ethiopia and a limited number of structured interviews with a few scholars on diversity management in Ethiopia.

## RELIGION IN THE CONTEXT OF ETHIOPIAN HISTORY

Writers on Ethiopian history have often laid much emphasis on its Christian heritage. This is generally because Ethiopia has been a history of its kings. According to legend, the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon are ancestors of a line of monarchs that continued, with two brief interruptions, until modern times. Their son, Menelik, was declared king by his father, and those claiming to be his descendants continued the dynasty until it was overthrown in 1974.

In the first century C.E., the ancient city of Axum became a political, economic, and cultural center in the region. The spread of Islam brought about the demise of the Axumite empire leading to the loss of control over the Red Sea. The political center shifted southward to the mountains of Lasta (now Lalibela).

It was in the early fourth century C.E. that a Syro-Greek castaway, Frumentius, was taken to the court and eventually converted King Ezana to Christianity, thereby making it the official religion. As Islam made its appearance on the coast, Christians retreated into the highlands and consolidated their authority there, establishing Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity as the state religion (<http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Ethiopia#Pre-history>; accessed February 26, 2013).

From this epic, a national identity emerged as God's new chosen people, heir to the Jews. The Solomonic emperors are descended from Solomon, and the Ethiopian people are the descendants of the sons of the Israeli nobles. The descent from Solomon was so essential to the nationalistic tradition and monarchical domination that Haile Selassie incorporated it into the country's first constitution in 1931, exempting the emperor from state law by virtue of his "divine" genealogy. Both the Orthodox Church and the monarchy fostered nationalism. The Solomonic monarchy had a variable degree of political control over Ethiopia from the time of Yekunno Amlak in 1270 until Haile Selassie's dethroning in 1974.

Other than contacts with Portugal that enabled Ethiopia to turn back Muslim invaders in 1572, few Europeans arrived in Ethiopia until the nineteenth century. All this contributed to Ethiopia's isolation from

1755 to 1855, called the "Age of Princes." The emperors became figureheads controlled by regional warlords. Ethiopian isolationism ended following a British mission that concluded an alliance between the two nations; however, it was not until the reign of Emperor Tewodros II, who began modernizing Ethiopia and recentralizing power in the emperor that Ethiopia began to take part in world affairs again.

Axum (the historic city where the 'Ark of the Covenant' is said to be kept) is known as a place where Muslims were said to be given refuge as they fled persecution as followers of Prophet Mohammed. Some of Prophet Mohammed's earliest followers, the *Sahaba*, sought asylum in Ethiopia following instructions from prophet Mohammed in 615-616. The Muslims were well received by the Christian King Najashi Ashama of al Habasha (Ethiopia). King Najashi Ashama recognizing the Muslim refugees as believers in one God, gave them shelter and provided them with opportunities to thrive and prosper in Habasha land. This marked the beginning of early arrival, settlement and survival of Muslims in Ethiopia (Erlich, 2010: 1).

Modern Ethiopian conceptualization of its formation is sometimes linked with its ancient history and culture which was anchored in the Middle East and in Jerusalem. Linking Ethiopia with Egypt and Jerusalem served two purposes. First, the links with Egypt is linked to the tradition of the Ethiopia's head of the Orthodox Church, the *Abuna*, an Egyptian (from the fourth century up until 1950). The *Abuna* was also the Bishop of the Egyptian Coptic Church.

Secondly, the link with Jerusalem is anchored on the medieval ethos that Ethiopia's emperors were descendants of King Solomon of Jerusalem. This essential linkage to the east according to Erlich (2010: 3) goes to the very identity of and legitimizing the political order of Ethiopia. As a result the political order of the Ethiopian state was compelled to cultivate workable relationships with Islamic countries in the region. Equally important in understanding this complexity in Ethiopia's religions is the "persistent legacy of 'suspicion, fear, and even demonization of Islam, the Ahmed Gragn syndrome' namely, the vivid, ever recycled memory of the sixteenth century destruction of the Christian Kingdom (1529 to 1543) by an Islamic holy warrior, Ahmed Gragn, from the town of Harar, who united many of the Muslims of the HoA" (Erlich, 2010: 3). The relationship (harmonious or confrontational) between Muslims and Christians throughout history has been informed by these dichotomous realities.

Different leaders had different ways of approaching their relationships with Muslims in Ethiopia and elsewhere in the region. The state's attitude towards Islam for example under Emperor Yohannes IV (1872 to 1889) and Emperor Menelik II (1889 to 1913) were toward the consolidation of Christian dominance although they were rather willing and ready to switch when

circumstances dictated to do so. Ethiopian expansionism under Menelik occupied the Somali Ogaden and other vast areas and developed a sophisticated diplomatic system that allowed for him to open up toward non-Christians. The occupation of the Ogaden marked the beginning of the Somali sociopolitical fragmentation. Haggai Erlich asserts that the “the Somalis after the end of the *sayyid’s* movement, showed very little ability to overcome their sociopolitical fragmentation” (Erlich, 2010: 5).

Despite the fact that the Derg regime (a socialist regime that took power through a violent coup that led to the overthrow of Emperor Haile Sellassie in 1974) dissociated the state from the church. The Orthodox Church is still considered in many quarters and by many Orthodox Christian Ethiopians as the state religion because of the belief that the nation is one of a covenant, the Ethiopian Orthodox church is the largest Christian church in the nation.

Politically, the Orthodox Church did not play a significant role in the affairs of the state until about the 14th century after the return of Queen of Sheba from a visit to King Solomon in Israel. As stated earlier, it is believed that Queen of Sheba had an affair with King Solomon and had a child called Menelik. As a result, Menelik is linked to the Jews through King Solomon and is therefore Solomonic descendant, making him a chosen one. Hence, Ethiopia is to be ruled only by male descendants of Menelik, who were later identified with the dynasty established by Yekunno, the nobles were to give their complete loyalty to the king depending upon the priests to rebuke him and God to punish him (Loukeris, 1995: 14).

In the ideological field, there was a concentration on the divine personality of the leader, the idea of “chosenness” the official nationalism practically meant domination of power, resources, politics and economics by the Amhara. The Amhara and the Tigre are the two dominant Christian groups, as well as the groups that have controlled the political and social space the longest.

In fact Ethiopia has been ruled throughout its history by these groups; the exception being the new Prime Minister Desalegn Hailemariam (from the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Regional State (SNNPRS) – who came to power after the recent death in August 2012 of Meles Zenawi. Historically, the Amhara and Tigray groups have dominated the politics of Ethiopia, while the rest and mainly Muslim people of the empire (who constitute the majority) (Loukeris, 1995: 14) have had to stay on the margins of political life in the country. Given that the Amhara and Tigray are mostly Orthodox Christians, some have argued that they (Amhara and Tigray) have had undue influence in the politics and economics of the state through the church. Therefore, Ethiopian Orthodox Church has played an important role in providing the establishment with the necessary ideological instrument that legitimized its domination (Loukeris, 1995: 14, 16).

Orthodox Christianity and Islam have coexisted since the times of Prophet Mohammed. The first Islamic believers in Ethiopia were converted when Prophet Mohammed was still alive and the first mosque (Al-Nejashi mosque) was built in the 8th century near Axum. It should be noted that the Orthodox Church has dominated the political, social and cultural life in the highlands because it has been the official religion of the imperial court and until Emperor Haile Selassie was deposed in 1974.

### **THE UTILITY AND MEANING OF “SOCIAL COHESION” AS APPLIED IN THE CONTEXT OF ETHIOPIA**

According to Jensen (1998), social cohesion refers to a process “... of building shared values and communities of interpretation, reducing disparities, in wealth and income and generally enabling people to have a sense that they are engaged in a common enterprise facing shared challenges and that they are members of the same community”. Sartori (1997: 58-69) claims that human beings “endlessly seek identity in some kind of belonging”. In all societies, people live in social groups stratified by ethnicity, race, tribe, religion, caste, class or clan. In the past, men organized themselves in groups so as to assist each other through communal labor and so did the women.

Social cohesion is the connectedness among individuals of social groups that facilitates collaboration and equitable resource distribution at household, community and state level. It refers to those things which hold a society together. A society can cohere due to things like shared ethnicity, shared religion, for example. Religious traditions can also help to tie a society together by reinforcing a feeling of unity in its people. Social cohesion is vital for societal stability and facilitates the easing of material and psychological strain of poverty. It also affirms individual and group identities and includes rather than exclude less powerful groups (Deepa et al., 1999: 175). Social cohesion is an aspect of social wellbeing. It is determined by unity within a community, demonstrated by shared understanding, mutual support and reciprocity in relationships (Deepa et al., 2000: 151).

At a community level, social cohesion is an asset that provides security, regulates behavior and improves on people’s standards of living, while at state level, cohesive societies are likely to be efficient and capital rich therefore making them to be more productive than in fragmented societies. Putnam et al. (1993: 175) showed that a lack of “social capital is not merely a loss of community in some warm and cuddly sense”; rather social cohesion and civic engagements are “practical preconditions for better schools, security, faster economic growth more efficient government and improved standards of living”. With inadequate ‘supplies’ of social

capital, social institutions weaken and lose efficiency.

At a state level, cohesion plays a major role in determining the effectiveness of a particular state. In countries with high tensions or insecurity, for example, emphasis should be placed on measures that create bonds among disparate groups. This is especially important in countries where multiple identity groups are not concentrated in particular areas but are spread throughout the country, making it pointless to introduce federalism and other territorially based institutional arrangements. In such countries, programs should be adopted that create stronger social and cultural bonds across groups, that institutionalize cooperation, and that promote reconciliation where there has been a history of intergroup hostility ([www.fragilestates.org](http://www.fragilestates.org). <http://www.fragilestates.org/about/articles-and-publications/topics/social-cohesion>).

Social status in Ethiopia during the centuries of imperial rule depended on one's landholdings, which provided the basis for class formation and social stratification. The emperor, the nobility, and landlords occupied the social hierarchy's highest positions. Under them were smallholding farmers, followed by millions of landless peasants who cultivated rented land. In the twentieth century, most of the southern landlord class consisted of Christian settlers from the north (the 'highlanders'), whereas the tenants were mostly non-Christians and natives of the area ('lowlanders'). Thus, ethnic and cultural differences exacerbated class distinctions, which, in turn, adversely affected social relations (Isaac, 2011).

The traditional social system in the northern highlands was, in general, based on landownership and tenancy. After conquest, Menelik II (r. 1889-1913) imposed the north's imperial system on the conquered south. The government appointed many Amhara-speaking administrators, who distributed land among themselves and relegated the indigenous peasants to tenancy. The 1974 revolution swept away this structure of ethnic, class and religious dominance. The Provisional Military Administrative Council (PMAC, also known as the Derg) appointed representatives from within its ranks and the national system of peasant associations to implement land reform. Additionally, the government organized urban centers into a hierarchy of urban dwellers' associations (Kebeles). Despite these reforms, however, dissatisfaction and covert opposition to the regime continued in the civilian and military sectors. With the dissolution of the imperial system and the nationalization of urban and rural land in 1975, social stratification and community relations based on landholding largely disappeared.

#### **THE CONNECTIONS AMONG RELIGION, CONFLICT DYNAMICS, DEVELOPMENT OBJECTIVES, AND STATE POLICY**

The 1955 constitution stated that:

*"The Ethiopian Orthodox Church, founded in the fourth century on the doctrines of Saint Mark, is the established church of the Empire and is, as such, supported by the state (Markakis, 1974)"*

The church was the bulwark of the state and the monarchy and became an element in the ethnic identity of the dominant Amhara and Tigray. By contrast, Islam spread among ethnically diverse and geographically dispersed groups at different times and therefore failed to provide the same degree of political unity to its adherents. Traditional belief systems were strongest in the lowland regions, but elements of such systems characterized much of the popular religion of Christians and Muslims as well. Beliefs and rituals varied widely, but fear of the evil eye, for example, was widespread among followers of all religions (Markakis, 1974).

Officially, the imperial regime tolerated Muslims. For example, the government retained Muslim courts, which dealt with family and personal law according to Islamic law. However, the imperial authorities gradually took over Muslim schools and discouraged the teaching of Arabic. Ethiopian Muslims were also exempted from access to state power, and had great problems in maintaining their educational system (Markakis, 1974: 157; Loukeris, 1995: 16). Additionally, the behavior of Amhara-speaking administrators in local communities and the general pattern of Christian dominance tended to alienate Muslims (Loukeris, 1995: 16).

The 1974 revolution brought a major change in the official status of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and other religions. In 1975 the Derg regime disestablished the church, which was a substantial landholder during the imperial era, and early the next year removed its patriarch. The ruling socialist party under Derg declared that all religions were equal, and a number of Muslim holy days became official holidays in addition to the Christian holidays already honored. During this regime, religion was considered irrelevant and ideological indoctrination which needs to be counteracted. Although the regime needed to separate itself from religious orientations and influence, in due course they were obliged to reckon with the various religious traditions in the country due in part to the recognition that at the heart of religion is the foundation of people's lives.

To the extent that no individual or group entertained any political aspirations, the regime did not go out of its way to obstruct or interfere with religious practices. This tolerance of religious differences, however, was not synonymous -on the ideological and rhetorical levels at least - with tolerance of religion per se. The new regime defined itself as 'Marxist' and, with this self-image, declared religion to be the 'opium of the people' (Summary and Statistical Report of the 2007 Population and Housing Census Results, Draft Report, Addis Ababa, December 2008). Because it labeled itself as Marxist, the regime was expected as it is for all Marxist/Socialist regimes to pursue repressive religious policies.

However, the regime was pretty pragmatic in its approach to religious groups and religion; in its rhetoric the Derg portrayed religion as an anti-national element, in practice it took no steps against individual-believers. This tolerance did not, however, characterize its policies towards religious institutions which, though generally not directly attacked, had their power indirectly undermined (Markakis, 1974). However, these policies were motivated mainly by the need to attain national unity. To achieve national unity, the Derg attempted to undermine all separatist - or potentially separatist - organisations. Since, in Ethiopia religious and ethnic affiliations often overlap, the Derg's measures against such organizations were seen as an expression of its anti-religious outlook (Markakis, 1974).

According to the 2007 census, Islam is the second-most widely practiced religion in Ethiopia after Christianity, with over 25 million (or 34%) of Ethiopians adhering to Islam (Loukeris, 1995: 16). The largest ethnic group associated with Islam is the Somali. Several other much smaller Islamic groups include the Afar, Argobba, Hareri, Saho, and Tigray speaking groups in the north. Oromo also constitute a large proportion of the total Muslim population. There are also Muslims in other important ethnic categories, for example, the Sidamo and the Gurage. In the far north - Afar, and the east, and to some extent in the south, Islamic peoples live side by side with Orthodox Christians.

The only people (variously estimated at 5 to 15% of the population) who have had little if any contact with Orthodox Christianity or Islam live in the far south and the west. Included among adherents of indigenous religions are most of those speaking Nilo-Saharan languages and many of those speaking Omotic and Cushitic languages, including sections of the Oromo, such as the pastoral Borana and the Guji. It is among these peoples that the few converts to missionary Christianity -- Protestant and Roman Catholic -- are to be found.

Markakis (1974) and Loukeris (1995: 16) remarked of Ethiopia that "the dominant element in this culture and its major distinguishing feature is the Christian religion." Yet almost all of the analysis of Orthodox Christianity as practiced by Ethiopians has focused on the Amhara and Tigray. The meaning of that religion for the Oromo and others is not clear. For some Oromo who achieved significant political power in Amhara kingdoms in the eighteenth century and after, adherence to Christianity seemed to be motivated by nothing more than expediency (Markakis, 1974: 157).

By the mid-twentieth century, some educated Amhara and Tigray had developed skepticism, not so much of doctrine -- although that also occurred -- as to the church's political and economic role. They had developed similar feelings toward the clergy, most of whom were poorly educated. Nevertheless, the effects of the church's disestablishment and of the continuing social upheaval and political repression after the overthrow of Emperor

Haile Selassie in 1974 impelled many Ethiopians to turn to religion for solace.

### **THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS, ACTORS AND MOVEMENTS IN REINFORCING OR MITIGATING SOCIAL DIVISIONS THAT DRIVE INSTABILITY**

Throughout history, religious leaders have had a significant role to play in the protracted nature of conflicts between Ethiopia's diverse identities. Emperor Haile Selassie was the first monarch to promote a more centralized ecclesiastical organization of the state. To begin with, he established the Ethiopian Orthodox Church as the centre of national resistance against Italian occupation. To counter Italian attempts to fraction the Church he abolished the Church courts, established the Central Church Treasury, defined church land and subjected it to taxation, and had all high ecclesiastical appointments made directly by him (Loukeris, 1995: 16). In spite of these moves from the monarchy, the clergy continued to enjoy its privileged positions in society. It continued to be the link through which unity and stability could be achieved without challenging the foundations of a feudalist imperial system which was bringing profit to the Church. "Being at the very heart of the 'divine order' that prescribed Ethiopia's future it (the Church) enjoyed high economic and social status" (Erlich, 2010).

Emperor Haile Selassie continued his attempts to assimilate people with no credentials of subordination (this includes all believers of the Islamic faith) to His Imperial Majesty, creating the necessary fertile ground for the opposition forces that took in many instances an ethnic and religious character.[very simplifying approach] Ethiopian Muslims, exempted from access to state power, had also great problems in maintaining their Islamic religious educational system (Erlich, 2010: 9).

In addition, although the Church was at the centre of Ethiopian domination it was not capable of adjusting to the changes taking place in contemporary world affairs after World War II. The Pan-African foreign policy orientation of the Imperial state was at cross-purposes with the long-standing problems with Islam. Ethiopia's neighbors, all with the exception of Kenya being Muslim posed new challenges to the imperial power. Whilst Ethiopia promoted a policy of Africa Liberation from the vestiges of colonialism, it had to contend with Sudan's (a Mahdiyya leaning state and an Ethiopian neighbor) independence in 1956 from British colonial rule. The major issues between Sudan and Ethiopia became South Sudan (for Sudan) and Eritrea (for Ethiopia). Both Sudan and Ethiopia faltered between new, shared concepts of modern African coexistence and the more antagonistic one of revolutionary Arabism, on the one hand, and Ethiopian imperial domination, on the other (Erlich, 2010: 9). In order to contain the aspirations of Somali separatists in the Ogaden region on the one hand, and contain Eritrea secessionists on the other, the Emperor was compelled

to make concessions to the Muslims; a situation that was not comfortable for the Orthodox Christians and the Church.

“Since the emergence of Islam in the 7th century A.D. in the Arab peninsula the history of the Horn of Africa took a new dimension. Despite the fact that the first contact of Abyssinia with Islam, through exiled Arabs who were followers of Muhammad, was peaceful, what came after is a continuous conflict. It would be an oversimplification to speak about Christianity versus Islam or vice versa. The geography of the region, the distinction between agriculturalists and pastoralists, as well as a history of migrations of new peoples who pushed the already existing ones are real causes, whereas religion is the picture the conflict takes in the ideological field” (Samatar, 1984).

The end of the Cold war marked the demise of many of authoritarian African states, Ethiopia included. The fall of the Marxist Leninist Derg regime in 1991 also marked the revival of religious activism in Ethiopia. Christianity for example received a new lease on life and was re-energized as an embodiment of the Ethiopia’s history and identity. Freed from communist anti-religious policy, traditional Ethiopian Christianity (Ethiopian Orthodoxy) now became enriched through challenging interactions with other emerging churches in Ethiopia and in Diasporas, and through new intensive connections with the wider Christian world (Erlich, 2010: 128).

Islam as a cultural and social identity also became an active and integral part of the Ethiopian fabric. Ethiopia’s redefinition as a federal state based on ethnic diversity contributed to the country’s openness toward Muslims and toward Islam. The Islamic momentum in today’s Ethiopia also has important political aspects that are very relevant to the country’s relations with its myriad Islamic neighbors including Djibouti, Eritrea, Sudan and Somalia.

Tracing the origins of rivalry and violent conflicts between Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia has to begin with Emperor Yohannes IV. It should be recalled that Yohannes IV did not tolerate Muslims and never gave them the opportunity to feel any sense of Ethiopian nationalism. Since the ousting of the Marxist Derg regime however, the country was rearranged as a decentralized system; although that rearrangement did not extend to the politico-religious aspects. Ethiopia and its neighbor Sudan both experienced the rise of religious militancy at the same time. With Eritrea’s independence ushered in a period where political religiosity and political Islam began to take root in Ethiopia. The ascendance of the EPRDF opened up cultural, economic and political spaces for a much broader participation by all citizens regardless of race, religion or ethnicity.

Both Islam and Christianity were exposed to new forms of religious influences from the Middle East (for Islam) and the west (for Christianity). “Inspired and aided by the various trends of global Islam, benefiting from the new open economy, gradually adopting Arabic, especially by the young generation, Ethiopia’s Muslims since the early

1990s have again been facing the Islamic dual conceptualization of their own country. In the spirit of Muhammad’s legitimization of the ‘land of righteousness’, they are now working to promote equality, tolerance, and to advance their new options in the redefined country (Erlich, 2010: 128). Some have however taken on the new and invigorated brand of political Islam, a brand which has boldly taken steps to confront the state. When EPRDF overthrew the Derg, a new political dispensation was ushered in. The new regime opened up culture and the economy and began to reconnect with the outside world. This brought in a new vitality to religiosity. Christianity was exposed to new influences particularly from the west. Islam on its part resumed its direct contacts with the Middle East. Inspired and aided by different brands of global Islam, benefitting from the new political and economic dispensation in Ethiopia, Muslims in Ethiopia gradually began to adopt Arabic. And, since early 2012, it is worth observing that quite a number of followers of Islam have begun to work toward the political victory of Islam.

Erlich (2010) describes two varieties of Islam prevalent in Ethiopia today. Ethiopian or African Islam, a flexible brand of Islam with a popular set of beliefs, traditions, and customs with the acceptance of Ethiopia and its legitimacy as a land led by a Christian establishment. The second brand of Islam is the fundamentalist and political militant brand which is inspired by and imported from the Middle East. This brand of Islam calls for a boycott of Christian-led Ethiopia and to win Ethiopia for Islam. It is this brand of Islam that was at the forefront in the recent confrontations (2012) between the state and followers of Islam (Erlich, 2010: 128). This phenomenon is what Samatar (1984) calls “the politicization of religion”<sup>1</sup>; where faith is transformed into political ideology that can mobilize constituencies.

The distinction between “African” and “Middle Eastern, Arab Islam” is an argument that has also been put forth by the US and other western nations in the fight against terrorism. “Middle Eastern Arab Islam” has come to be associated with fundamentalist, al Qaeda Islamist orientations. By the late 1990s after Osama bin Laden had been forced to move out of Sudan, Khartoum became the main source of external militant interference in Ethiopia. The teachings of the Wahhabiyas or the Middle Eastern Arab Islam are seen as uncompromising; whose only goal is Islamic victory in Ethiopia. These sources of tension between the various strands of Islam on the one hand, and between Islam and the state on the other, and between Islam and Christianity on yet another level continue to be a major source of instability in the country.

As stated elsewhere in this paper, proponents of African Islam in Ethiopia, though in the minority are increasingly becoming loud as their agenda continues to

<sup>1</sup> Habesha is how people of Ethiopian origin are referred to regardless of ethnic or religious identity.[?].

take centre stage in the political discourse. The main argument of African Muslims is that Arabs were and are “white imperialists” who invaded, dominated, and humiliated the native Africans. The Arabs they maintain were the first slavers, long before the Europeans. Though the Arab language was an important tool in spreading Islam, Africans should emancipate themselves from the Arabs, detach themselves from their kind of Islam, and revive their cultures and their languages as components of a better Islam (Erlich, 2010: 129, 135, 141). The goal, they contend, is to rebuild open societies that would better address local diversity and respect non-Muslims<sup>2</sup>. The main issue promoted here is to renew the call to rename “al Habesha” (Summary and Statistical Report of the 2007 Population and Housing Census Results, Draft Report, Addis Ababa, December 2008), a word that means a people of mixed origin (Arbulu, 2012). Whilst many in society accept this label as legitimate, Islamists calling for a total re-look into the origins of the word see it as an insult in Ethiopian nationalism.

The basic formative Islamic and Christian political legacies have continued to inspire the language of nationalist dilemmas and these have since the 1990s returned with a vengeance. The Ogaden region of Ethiopia, a region principally inhabited by Ethiopian Somalis who constitute the majority of Muslims in Ethiopia, is a painful wound in the identity of Somalis and Muslims in Ethiopia. Ethiopian Somalis still consider themselves as descendants of Ahmad Gragn (1529 - 1543), the medieval Islamic destroyer of Ethiopia. Both sides conceived their relations in existential terms, and they continue to do so today.

Proponents of the Middle Eastern Arab Islam call for the centralization and hegemony of values as initially modeled in Arabia. They basically see Ethiopia in its historical context; thus it is seen as a Christian state of oppression, heresy, and of the initial sin of dethroning the Muslim *najashi*, humiliating and defeating the only true religion. The entry of Ethiopia into Somalia and the defeat of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) in 2006 were seen by many fundamentalist Islamists as equal to medieval Ethiopia’s campaign to destroy the ‘Ka’ba’. Radical Islamists see the late Meles Zenawi as the successor of Abraha and other demonized infidels. A great deal of supporters in Somalia and elsewhere view the capture of Mogadishu in 2006 as the ultimate aggression on Islam by Christians from Ethiopia.

## **ROLE OF RELIGION IN ESTABLISHING SOCIAL COHESION IN ETHIOPIA**

Statistical data on religious affiliation are not entirely reliable, just like those of ethnic groups. Nonetheless, the

recent estimates from the 2007 Ethiopian census showed that the Christian Orthodox are 43.5% and mostly consist of the Amhara and Tigray ethnic groups, while the Somali, Afar, Argobba, Hareri, Saho, and most Oromo-speaking groups constitute the Muslim population, of 33.9%. In the recent decades, many Evangelical churches have been established in the country and are still growing. There are about 8.6% (Obtained from the Federal Republic of Ethiopia) of these, together with adherents to Pentecostalism. Those who profess traditional religious beliefs are 2.6%, and are found among groups like the Sidama, Gurage, Oromo of Arsi, Guji and and Borana, and the Nilotic groups along the Ethiopia-Sudan border. Catholics make up about 0.7% of the population<sup>3</sup>.

The history of cultural homogenization, together with a pressure for modernization, has undermined the value of cultural diversity. Cross-ethnic and religious dialogue has not been encouraged, further weakening the indigenous production systems<sup>4</sup>. Nonetheless, Ethiopian religious institutions have since the beginning of the federal constitution in 1995 (some Ethiopian academics (some Ethiopian academics that were spoken to argue this has been going on even during the reign of Emperor Haile Selassie) individually and collectively been involved in the promotion of social and spiritual integration of Ethiopian people and its myriad of diversities. The general goal of the religious institutions is to promote the values of Ethiopians in acceptance and respect of its diversities and living in harmony with these.

To promote these values, the Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia (IRCE) is the lead agency responsible for bringing together, in a collective manner, all faiths and religions to address issues of social exclusion and development in the country. Members of the IRCE include: the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, the Ethiopian Catholic Church, the Ethiopian Adventist Church, Evangelical Churches Fellowship of Ethiopia, The Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY) and the Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs in Ethiopia.

One of the most progressive approaches to social cohesion utilized by the IRCE was the establishment of the Inter-religious Dialogue- Ethiopia (IRD-E). The IRD-E was designed to develop interpersonal relationships among the various leaders of member faiths with the primary goal of learning about the cultural, ideological and religious views of each faith. Experiences in these dialogue sessions reveal that members of the various faiths have been able to enrich, deepen and broaden their own religious life through mutual understanding of one another’s convictions and witness. “It is the meeting

<sup>2</sup> The Ka’ba is a cubical structure located at the center of Masjid al-Haram in Mecca. The Baqara verse, revealed to the Prophet Muhammad, established the Ka’ba as the direction (qibla) towards which Muslims must address their five daily prayers, and as the destination of annual pilgrimage, or *hajj*, required once in the lifetime of every Muslim.

<sup>3</sup> Inter-religious Dialogue in Ethiopia, obtained from [www.novaPDF.com](http://www.novaPDF.com) on September 23, 2012. Cited from John Paul II, “Radio Message to the People of Asia.” Bulletin, 46 (1981), p. 14.

<sup>4</sup> Ethiopian Interfaith Forum for Development and Action Program Framework and Work Plan (2001), Addis Ababa.

of the hearts and minds of followers of various religions, a communication between believers at the religious level; a working together in projects of common concern.

The basis of the IRD-E is focused on three main aspects of religious convictions shared by all members of the group. These include:

- i) The unity of the human race;
- ii) The fact of religious pluralism; and,
- iii) The Ethiopian situation.

### THE UNITY OF THE HUMAN RACE

According to the IRD-E, theologically, the human family has only one origin - God. God is the God of all. Christians and followers of other religions therefore belong to the Kingdom of God already present in history. They share the responsibility of contributing to its growth and its final fulfillment in the end of time. They built this kingdom, whenever they promote the integral liberation of human persons, especially the poor and oppressed, when they stand up for human rights, whenever they foster spiritual and religious values. These make interreligious dialogue theologically necessary.

### THE FACT OF RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

Religious pluralism is a reality of Ethiopia (Orthodox Christians, Catholics, Muslims, Traditional religions etc.). This fact has taught generations to live, pray, work and die together.

### THE ETHIOPIAN SITUATION

Religious harmony is seen as a precondition for tackling the political, ethnic, social and economic problems Ethiopia faces in the twenty first century.

#### Forms of dialogue

The experience of the IRCE in dialogue has utilized four approaches to dialogue:

- i) Dialogue of life;
- ii) Dialogue of deed;
- iii) Dialogue of religious experience, and,
- iv) Dialogue of specialists.

The dialogue of life is premised on communication between and among believers with a goal to develop harmony and constructive sharing of experiences in their daily interactions. It is the simplest and most basic form of dialogue adopted by the IRCE.

The dialogue of deed is based on the common understanding that; *“All Christians must be committed to dialogue with the believers of all religions, so that mutual understanding and collaboration may grow, so that moral values may be strengthened so that God may be praised in all creation”*.

The dialogue of religious experience deals with aspects of faith and beliefs without compromising or reducing the essence of such beliefs. It takes the form of religious prayer, meditation, fasting, silence and other forms of exercises and allows participants to share beyond words.

The dialogue of specialists, finally, is a dialogue among religious experts who exchange information about their beliefs and practices with a view to deepen understanding as well as develop mutual understanding through discussions.

The complex nature of the Ethiopian situation has warranted these varied approaches to societal cohesion and inclusivity. At different levels, due to its unique context, the IRCE has undertaken dialogues at the inter-religious and intra-religious levels; meaning that the conflicts and misunderstanding between Christian faiths (Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the Ethiopian Catholic Church) on the one hand and between Christians and Muslims (Ethiopian Orthodox Church and Islam) on the other.

### DISCUSSION

It is generally agreed in academic circles and elsewhere that religion continues to be a strong ideological source for identity formations and values including those dealing with power, conflict, peace and development. In Ethiopia, religion has a new resonance in politics, economics and regional integration. Religious actors (including among others Muslims, Orthodox Christians, Pentecostal Christians and others) are playing critical roles in bridging the gap between the state's capacity to consolidate gains in its policy of Ethnic Federalism and social cohesion based on ethnic lines.

Religion's role in conflict management and social cohesion is a complex and controversial one. Religion can not only be part of the solution, it can potentially be part of the problem in social exclusion. Taking religious leaders and other religious actors to task in social cohesion is crucial in transforming previously divided societies. Religious entities and their leaders have resonance within communities (both at the federal and local levels) to provide a political and social voice for the voiceless and can become powerful symbols to militate against violent or divisive behavior, promote conflict management, develop a socially cohesive society and rebuild social relations through reconciliation. Muslim and Christian communities in Ethiopia need to continue to work earnestly and decide to what extent they can express themselves with a common purpose and avoid being manipulated by political forces. Building on their



common cause and purpose and spiritual connectedness and values must form the basis of collaboration and joint problem solving of societal problems. Building on the commonalities and living with the differences and expressing them in a non-violent way would help free religion from any misuse, and to present opportunities for religious people to march together as agents of healing and reconciliation.

Clearly, the approach taken by the consortium of religious organizations in Ethiopia utilizes a rights based approach to development and social cohesion. The conceptual and theoretical basis of the approach is Basic Human Needs (BHN). The BHN approach seeks to provide the holistic physical, mental and social development.

In Ethiopia today, increased mobility of goods, services and people, have created a situation where people of diverse religions live side-by-side. Christians do share apartments with Muslims. This is an opportunity that needs to be utilized. The rapid developmental approach of the Federal government has made this sort of arrangement possible. But this opportunity can also be a recipe for easy mobilization based on religious group affiliation and therefore can act as a recipe for violence.

Mechanisms for dialogue and encounter in existence must be used to foster greater knowledge and awareness among people of different religions. Unfortunately, increased relations between communities have sometimes been marred by tension and fear.

In the twenty-first century due to globalization and liberalization, religious organizations have taken on much broader development roles, including poverty alleviation and post conflict reconstruction.

There is also a wide consensus that there can be no valid model of human development which does not address spiritual values, independently of how, in a pluralistic environment, these special values are defined. At the United Nations World Summit for Social Development religious organizations committed themselves to "a political, economic, ethical and spiritual vision of social development" and noted that "social development is inseparable from the cultural, ecological, economic political and spiritual environment in which it takes place".

The lack of access to food, education, health, and the inability to enjoy fully one's own cultural heritage or to live in peace, free from domestic violence and protected from corruption, are not simply technical questions, but fundamentally affect the possibility of true self-realization, in line with human dignity, of millions of persons. The human family must find ways to respond urgently to the needs of every individual, especially the marginalized and those struck by natural and man-made disasters.

In Ethiopia, much progress has been witnessed in several areas to improve the material conditions of citizens. Much more needs to be done, however, to bridge the gap in inequalities. The "developmental state",

the slogan utilized extensively by Ethiopian leaders, is making profitable gains. These gains need, to be consolidated at the periphery of society so that a great many of the Ethiopian citizens experience the benefits of development efforts. Hunger, disease and poverty persist in the periphery. The lack of access to basic human needs continues to be problematic in many parts of the country, both in urban areas and in the countryside. The World Faiths for Dialogue and Development/Ethiopia (WFDD/E), established in 1999, has taken as a serious challenge the exclusion and lack of access of basic human needs of a large segment of Ethiopian society as a problem in need of a solution. Long-term human development involves enabling persons to realize their individual God-given capacities. It requires that fundamental human communities, at the local, regional and global level are respected and fostered. This incidentally is also the view of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) which since 1994 has developed a new development framework that places at the centre of development the human being – human communities as the pillar of all development programs.

The WFDD is thus a dialogue directed both at helping faith communities work more closely with each other to foster their shared vision of the dignity of the human person and thus to enhance a new understanding of development for all, especially the most marginalized.

The purpose of the Ethiopian Chapter of the World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD/Ethiopia) at its establishment was to coordinate the efforts of faith-based organizations in Ethiopia to fight poverty and to ensure food security.

## CONCLUSION

Since 1995, the new federalist constitution of Ethiopia has sought to distance the state from religion, making Ethiopia a secular state by law. This is a significant step in the modernization and developmental process of the country. The secularization of the state has however, produced a number of significant tensions between ardent believers in the Ethiopian state as a 'Covenant', and those adherents to the separation of church and state. These different worldviews have brought about new forms of state-societal relations. Although the influence of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC) has been greatly weakened, secularization and the spread of Pentecostalism have brought in a new and renewed vigor in the perceptions of people regarding the role of religion in the state. Secularization has not been able to entrench itself in society.

Ordinary people still believe that Ethiopia is a nation of 'Covenant', and as a result, they expect a dramatic divine blessing. Present economic and political challenges are viewed by believers as temporary calls for devotion and diligence in the Lord. Faith in Ethiopia's awakening will

bring abundant blessings to the land. As such, Ethiopia will wake up and 'stretch her hands unto God' (quite theological, however this is what theologians and indeed many believers in the Christian faith believe. It can be used as a sociological analysis, as it is based on perceptions of a great many believers).

Prophecies about Ethiopia's end-time blessing are rampant in religious traditions. Artists and other entertainment forays continue to provide hope through songs and lyrics about the divine destiny of Ethiopia. Across all religious divides, prayers about the realization of the covenant continue in earnest.

Ethiopian identity as illustrated by its relationship with religion has by its very nature been intensely conflictual. Coupled with governance challenges, the country continues to experience conflict between the major religions (Christianity and Islam) on the one hand and between religions and the state. Religion on the one hand plays a unifying role among the nation's ethnic communities; and on the other has been claimed to be responsible for inter-ethnic and inter-religious rivalries, contempt and mistrust.

In Ethiopian religious communities, this tension confirms the need to protect their individual identities and distinctiveness. Sometimes the difference between the legitimate search for identity and hostility towards neighbors of other religions is blurred. It is not uncommon to find a rise in influence of movements and leaders among the followers of major religious traditions who mobilize their believers in the name of preserving a perceived threat to their religion. What we are witnessing in Ethiopia today is an intensification of conflict among religions, between religions and the state and within religions.

It must be noted, however, that communal tensions spurred by religious plurality are often times a misuse of differences. Religion can evoke deep sensitivities and profound historical memories. Combined with political, tribal, regional identities, religious identities can evoke deep divisions, hatreds and enmities that are, in most cases, passed down through generations. Communities become even more polarized when people identify themselves exclusively by their religion; the relationships become explosive, with an ability to tear apart communities that have lived in peace for centuries. Preventing further polarization between religious communities on the one hand and between religious communities and the state on the other is crucial in maintaining stability in a developmental state. Through various media outlets and especially social media in today's world, conflicts among religious identities can spread quite easily.

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