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14 Religion and the secular state order: the Ethiopian experience

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INTRODUCTION

In one or the other form, religion is as old as human history. It has played and is playing an important role in social life in governing people's relationships with one another. Historical facts ascertain that, religion was once the major source of legitimacy for controlling political power and administering worldly affairs. Most kings, including Ethiopian emperors,[2] claimed to derive their authority from the divine order. However, religion's vital role in state and political affairs started to decline following the Enlightenment in eighteenth-century Europe.[3] The public role of religion was negotiated again and again between the enlightened political elites and religious figures to limit its roles in private realms. This, in turn, led to the emergence of secularism, which intended to draw a line separating religion and state – at least in their functional spheres.

Secularism, as a principle that tries to limit the public role of religion, is not a "one-size-fits-all" magic formula applicable allover the world for all religions and states. It is rather a "contingent and contested social construction" that depends on the prevailing social, cultural and religious conditions of a given society and time variables.[4] Secularism, as a principle of functional separation between state and religion, was introduced to achieve the following major purposes: (1) protecting the state from excessive religious influence (freedom for the state); (2) protecting religion from the coercive powers of the state (freedom for religion), or (3) managing religious diversity. Secularism is not about eliminating religion from public spheres altogether, but rather to define its "proper place" by guaranteeing state neutrality in religious matters.[5] Secularism is also important to advance the equality of religions and freedom of believers. In spite of the many advantages that secularism can offer for multi-religious societies and states across the world, it is challenged by religious fundamentalists who claim to offer higher moral and ethical values to the public than the virtues of secularism.

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2 The Constitution of the Empire of Ethiopia, 1931, the 1955 Revised Constitution of The Empire of Ethiopia, the Civil Code of the Empire of Ethiopia Proclamation, No. 165 of 1960 and other laws of Imperial Ethiopia claim Emperor Haile Selassie I as "Elect of God" where his power was unlimited and unquestionable by the people.

3 Smith G. 2008. *A Short History of Secularism*. London: IB Tauris & Co Ltd.

4 Hurd ES. 2008. *The Politics of Secularism in International Relations*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 99.

5 Esposito LJ. 2010. *The Future of Islam*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

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The word fundamentalism has its origin in descriptions or American Protestant movements that oppose Darwinian evolution theory and advocate for the literal interpretation of the Bible.[6] At present, there is growing religious resurgence across the world.[7] Some of the revivalist groups are critical of the secular state, oppose traditional practices and preach for strict observance of the fundamentals of their religious core dogmas.[8] Nowadays, there is a tendency for political actors to label these revivalist groups as fundamentalist. However, all revivalists are not fundamentalists, though fundamentalists might benefit from the activities of the revivalists. Religious fundamentalism can be manifested either in political terms, such as ousting the existing regime by violence, or in non-political terms, such as purging one's religion from "un-religious practices" and "saving the community" from moral sloppiness.[9]

This research reported here focuses on and examines the political manifestation of religious fundamentalism and intolerance towards other religions from the Ethiopian context. Following the institutionalisation of religious freedom and separation of state and religion in post-1991 Ethiopia, a religious renaissance has arisen – though not necessarily connected with religious fundamentalism. While some groups[10] are trying to maintain the status quo of being a state religion, others advance for more parity and rights. In an atmosphere of fear of religious fundamentalism for disrupting the secular state order, it is quite timely to undertake research in this area to understand the underlying problems and provide possible policy recommendations. In doing so, this research poses the following major questions and examines the plausibility of government's fear on the basis of empirical evidences: (1) Is there religious fundamentalism in Ethiopia? If so, how it is manifested? (2) Where do the government's own religious policies and strategies fit into the process of religious fundamentalism?

The chapter comprises four major parts. The first part provides a brief historical account of state-religion relations in Ethiopia. The second part discusses the legal frameworks governing religious freedom and secularism in the post-1991 period. The third part analyses the conceptual discourses of religious fundamentalism and its potential threats for the peace and stability of the country. The fourth part touches upon some of the signs of religious fundamentalism and explores how government's own policies and strategies fit into religious radicalisation in the country.

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6 D'Souza D. 2008. *What's is So Great about Christianity?* Jaico Publishing House, Mumbai.

7 Smith, *A Short History of Secularism*.

8 Revivalist groups as used in this writing is denoted to mean those religious groups from all religions who work to strengthen the influence of religion in political, economic and social life of a society.

9 Anonymous. n.d. "The Question of Religion's Role in Politics and Society: Modernization, Secularization and Beyond?", n.p., 23.

10 See for example, the parliamentary speech of the late Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Meles Zenawi on 17 April 2012. He mentioned the Mahbere Kidusan (Association in the name of Saints), a reform movement within the Ethiopian Orthodox Church claiming for the restoration of the Church's privileged status of the imperial era, as one showcase.

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STATE-RELIGION RELATIONS IN ETHIOPIA: HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

During the imperial era (1930–1974), three combined homogenising elements (Amharic language, Orthodox Christianity and Semitic culture) were used as a litmus test to screen out the fit and unfit candidates for Ethiopian officialdom.[11] This policy of assimilation was practised for centuries, despite the diverse nature of Ethiopian society. Loyalties to one's religious and ethnic identities, other than the above specified core religious and ethnic identities, were regarded as the antithesis of the Ethiopian nation-state. Hence, homogenising the diverse society through an ethnic and religious "melting pot strategy" was the "only option" available, and the rulers engaged in it both openly and systematically. The 1955 Revised Constitution of the Empire of Ethiopia legally instituted Amharic and Orthodox Christianity as official language and state religion.[12] It required the Emperor to be a member of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC). The 1960 Civil Code recognised the legal personality of the EOC by law while other religious groupings were subject to registration and renewal of their license on the basis of the laws of association.[13]

Nonetheless, the efforts of the previous regimes to forge a single national identity through linguistic and religious uniformity proved to be a futile exercise.[14] It caused discontents and open protests from the oppressed religious and ethnic groups, the peasant masses, urban dwellers and the Ethiopian students in the 1960s and even earlier. Muslims and non-Orthodox Christians, in particular, opposed the privileged status of the EOC as a state religion and demanded religious parity.[15] The opposition finally culminated in the February 1974 Revolution which resulted in the ultimate demise of the imperial regime and its replacement with the military rule, popularly called Derg. The Derg regime (1974–1991) came up with the new Marxist-Leninist ideology, and in a breakthrough from the past legacies, it officially declared the equality of all religions that heralded the complete divorce between the EOC and the Ethiopian state. It boldly proclaimed that "state/government and religion are separate, while the legal personalities of all religious institutions are to be determined by law."[16] It also declared religion to be a private matter with no more roles in politics and state affairs.

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11 Wudu TK. 2006. *The Ethiopian Orthodox Church, the Ethiopian State and the Alexandrian See: Indigenizing the Episcopacy and Forging National Identity, 1926–1991*, PhD Diss, University of Illinois, 241-242.

12 The 1955 Revised Constitution of the Empire of Ethiopia, arts 125 and 126, respectively.

13 Civil Code of the Empire of Ethiopia, Proclamation No. 165 of 1960, arts 398 and 407, respectively.

14 Wudu, *The Ethiopian Orthodox Church, the Ethiopian State and the Alexandrian See*.

15 Wudu, *The Ethiopian Orthodox Church, the Ethiopian State and the Alexandrian See*, 283.

16 1987 People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia Constitution, art 46.

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LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND SECULARISM: POST-1991 ETHIOPIA

The guarantee of freedom of religion is to be found in almost all "liberal democratic constitutions".[17] At the same time, almost all liberal constitutions maintain the principle of secularism. However, maintaining the delicate balance between the principles of secularism and religious freedom remains a daunting task for all governments across the globe. Secularism, as we discussed earlier, is about limiting the public role of religion in order to ensure the freedom of the state from undue influence of religion. In practice, religious groups may not content with their roles being limited to the private realm; hence, they are demanding more roles. The government also tries to defend its vital roles in public spheres free from religious influence. It forces religious groups and activists to retreat from such places, sometimes with the use of its coercive arms: secular laws, policies and actions. In this regard, the demands of religious groups for more visibility and roles in the public sphere, including politics, pose a serious threat for maintaining the principle of secularism. Undoubtedly, the restrictive policies and actions of governments over religious practices for the sake of maintaining the principle of secularism also limit the rights and freedoms of religious groups. Tensions and frictions between the two actors remain a persistent phenomenon that calls constant negotiation and renegotiation.

With its democratic deficits,[18] the debate on the constitution-making process during the transitional period of Ethiopia (1991–1994) reflects two extreme strands with regard to state-religion relations: one from the previously privileged religion and the other from the previously marginalised religions. The previously established official church, the EOC, has made claims not only for the restoration of its properties confiscated by the Derg regime but also its "stolen status quo" as a state religion.[19] There were some reflections from the members of the EOC that the national church status of the EOC, which was illegally taken, if not stolen, by Derg, should be reinstated under the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) regime. However, their claim did not receive a majority support in the debate. There were also demands from previously marginalised religious communities, particularly from Muslims, for the incorporation of *sharia* law in the Constitution – though their desire failed to come true. They openly expressed their feelings in the November 1994 demonstration held immediately before the ratification of the constitution.[20]

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17 In a research conducted by the Pew Forum for Religion and Public Life (2009:8) on 198 countries, "76% of countries and territories […] call for freedom of religion in their constitutions or basic laws and an additional 20% protect some religious practices".

18 For example, some strong political parties or liberation fronts, such as the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), were excluded from the process.

19 Woldeselassie W. 2012. *Adisu Tornet ena Haimanot: Keqezqazaw Ye-Alem Tornet Magist* [The New War and Religion: In the Aftermath of the Cold War]. Addis Ababa: Mega Private Ltd, 142.

20 Abbink J. 2011. "Religion in Public Spaces: Emerging Muslim-Christian Polemics in Ethiopia", *African Affairs* 110(39):253-274.

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Within the Constitution Commission, there were some members who proposed a more passive secularism,[21] in which the public role of religion has to be recognised in the constitution. They argue that, in a deeply religious society like Ethiopia, expelling religion from public affairs altogether could adversely affect the stability of the state and the normal functioning of the political system by forcing religion to comeback in a backdoor.[22] Andreas Eshete, a professor of philosophy, who was one of the members that proposed passive secularism, argued in favour of adopting a more pragmatic and inclusionary institutional arrangement that embraced religious roles in the public sphere on the basis of positive and negative implications. On a positive note, Andreas argues that, religions usually secure grassroot support from the community that could be exploited by the government, making them partners for its national development and democratisation endeavours. Curtailing religion at home or at the private level or totally expelling religion from the public sphere, he argues, is not only undesirable and impractical, but also tantamount to loosing the benefits that it could offer to the society and the country at large. He provides that, an organised religion with "limited and proper place" in the public sphere could be helpful in different spheres of the state's activities. It could be an input in the legislative forum, on moral and welfare issues and a partner for the state in the provision of public services, such as education, healthcare, and other social services. On a negative note, Andreas provides that, excluding religion from the public spheres could instigate conflict and is tantamount to allowing politics to be played under religious cover. This is reflected in the government's allegation of some religious groups and opposition political parties playing politics with religious cards.

At the end of the day, the ideological conviction of the EPRDF, coupled with the diverse but competing interests of various religions, moved for the inclusion of an absolute separation clause of state and religion in the 1995 Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) Constitution. The Constitution unequivocally establishes the equality of all religions and the separation of state and religion (Article 11). It declares that; "state and religion are separate, there shall be no state religion, and the state shall not interfere in religious matters and religion shall not interfere in state affairs" (Article 11 (1-3). The Constitution contains various provisions which in one or another way refer to religion. Article 3(2) illustrates the emblem of the national flag, which reflects the hope of religious communities of Ethiopia to live together in equality and unity. Article 27(1) guarantees freedom of thought, conscience and religion for everyone, including the freedom to hold or adopt a religion of one's choice, either individually or in community with others,

21 As provided by Kuru AT. 2007. "Passive and Assertive Secularism: Historical Conditions, Ideological Struggles, and State Policies toward Religion", *World Politics* 59(4):568-594. There are generally two types of secularism; assertive and passive. Assertive secularism is a "comprehensive doctrine" that aims to eliminate religion from the public sphere, while passive secularism allows the public visibility of religious symbols and the government plays only "passive" roles in restricting freedom of religious expressions.

22 Interview with Dereje Feyissa by A Eshete, 13 May 2012, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

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and in public or private to manifest one's religion in worship, observance, practice and teaching. Believers are entitled to establish institutions of religious education and administration in order to propagate and organise their religion (Article 27(2)). It protects individuals from being coerced to adopt a certain religious thought, which would restrict or prevent their freedom to hold a belief of their choice (Article 27(3)). Unless there are compelling circumstances to do so, these freedoms could not be restricted. The external aspect of the freedom, that is, the manifestation of one's religious belief, may be subject to limitation only "to protect public safety, peace, health, education, public morality or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others, and to ensure the independence of the state from religion" (Article 27(5)). Despite the presence of legal provisions for the separation of state and religion, the government claims that, religious fundamentalists are now trying to stretch their rights and go beyond the constitutional limits for ousting the government to institute their religious dogmas by establishing a "theocratic state" in Ethiopia.[23]

RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM: CONCEPTUAL DISCOURSE

The term fundamentalism can be a controversial and politically-loaded term, especially where its original meaning is used, misused and abused by various actors to advance their own respective goals. The Oxford English Dictionary defines fundamentalism as "a form of Protestant Christianity which upholds belief in the strict and literal interpretation of the Bible [and/or] the strict maintenance of the ancient or fundamental doctrines of any religion or ideology."[24] In this context, an individual who strictly follows or upholds the fundamentals of the Bible or the Quran is regarded as fundamentalist. This does not, however, mean that the person who follows the fundamentals of his or her religious dogmas is necessarily against the secular order of a state. Notwithstanding the above statement, some scholars emphasise the political motivations behind fundamentalism rather than a pure act of literal interpretation and application of the texts of religious scriptures.[25] Further, some scholars argue that, apart from creating a closed community secluded from the evil effects of modernism,[26] fundamentalists work for "changing their environment to fit their ideology … by taking over or otherwise altering their state's regime through either peaceful political means or militant and violent strategies".[27]

23 For detailed information in this regard, see, for example, a documentary entitled *Jihadawi Harekat* [Holy War Movement]. 2013. Online at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g4SxGOS5y88; Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, Speech to the FDRE Parliament, 17 April 2012.

24 2008. *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*. Eleventh Edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

25 Thompson G. 2006. "Religious Fundamentalism, Territories and 'Globalization'", in *Centre for Research on Socio-Cultural Change (CRESC) Working Paper No. 14*. U.K.: Open University, 20.

26 Thompson, "Religious Fundamentalism, Territories and 'Globalization'". Thompson argues that it is in the interest of the fundamentalists to discourage believers from communicating with outsiders in order to create a closed community "to save theirs from evils."

27 Anonymous, "The Question of Religion's Role in Politics and Society", 23.

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From the above definitions, it is understandable that religious fundamentalism can be manifested either in political terms, in the form of overthrowing a political regime perceived as an obstacle for the dominance of religion over public spheres through violence (terrorist strategies), or through election or in non-political terms in the form of purging their religion from un-religious practices and moral lax. It also entails the feature of intolerance towards other religions and the co-religionists who are supposed not to be strictly observing their religious duties as prescribed in the religious scriptures.

In order to fulfil their objectives, fundamentalists usually recruit youths who are educated but unemployed, along with those aggrieved with the existing system and modernity. Disseminating propagandas through different communication technologies like the internet, mobile and other social media such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and other means available to the people are also at the disposal of these groups.[28] For this reason, it is worth analysing the Ethiopian context of religious fundamentalism, both in Islam and Christianity, using the scholarly discourse of fundamentalism manifested in political terms for ousting the sitting government in order to establish a theocratic state and propagate intolerance towards the followers of other religions.

RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM – A CHALLENGE TO THE SECULAR STATE: GOVERNMENT NARRATIVES

In spite of the legal frameworks and the practical measures that guarantee religious freedom and equality, the government claims that, there are fundamentalist religious groups from all religions who have the temptation to misuse, if not abuse, their constitutional rights and are propagating a "theocratic state" by ousting the secular government through unconstitutional means.[29] The threat of religious fundamentalism as an imminent threat for Ethiopia's secular political order and survival was reflected in the 2012 parliamentary discussion, where the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi responded to different questions raised by the Members of Parliament. On a point directly relevant for the research here, the Honorable Mohammed Abdosh asked, "While religious freedom and equality is anchored in the constitution and all religions are freely practising their religious rites (worship), why is religious fundamentalism and extremism observed in some parts of the country? What are the sources of these problems?",[30] without specifying what elements constitute "religious fundamentalism" and what kind of challenges religious fundamentalism poses to the secular state order. Abdosh further elaborated in the form of a leading question and warning. Specifically, he said, "Unless 'these signs of religious fundamentalism and extremism' are dealt with and avoided at their early stages, there is fear among the general public that

28 Anonymous, "The Question of Religion's Role in Politics and Society".

29 Meles Zenawi, Speech to the FDRE Parliament.

30 Mohammed Abdosh. Speech to the FDRE Parliament, 17 April 2012.

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they could be transformed into terrorism with severe consequences. There are different 'internal and external anti-peace forces' who are taking shelter in religion [for achieving their political goals]."[31]

In his response, the late Prime Minister acknowledged the presence of threats of religious fundamentalism in the country. Islamic fundamentalists of the Salafi and Wahhabi schools and the Mahbere Kidusan (Association of Saints) were the major targets of his speech. He accused of the Mahbere Kidusan from Orthodox Christianity for harboring intentions to "restore the privileged status of the EOC" that it enjoyed during the imperial era. In particular, he elaborated:

> One of the slogans in the recent [2012] *Timket* [Epiphany] in Addis Ababa was unconstitutional – which avowed "one country, one religion". Those who carried this slogan were few. We don't have a constitution that says "one country, one religion". The constitution says; "one country, whatever number of religions". Although their number is few, this event showed us that there are individuals who want to erode the constitutional principle [of secularism] and establish a Christian state of Ethiopia.[32]

Based on his speech, there are fairly few individuals from the Orthodox Christian community who are misusing their constitutional rights to "restore the historically hegemonic Christian rule" by establishing a Christian government. However, as he stated, these groups of people are acting in this way for lack of awareness about their constitutional rights and duties – but not necessarily bad, intolerant or fundamentalist in their thinking. Hence, they can be straightened through education and awareness creation both by government organs and religious institutions.

There are Muslim counterparts, the Prime Minister said, "even bigger in number and more dangerous than those who carried the slogan of one country-one religion", who want to establish an Islamic state in Ethiopia. In his explanation, unlike the Christians, he categorised Islam and Muslims into "*nebar* (indigenous) and *metie* (exotic)". He stated:

> There is *nebar* (indigenous) Islam in Ethiopia which stayed for centuries. This is called Sufi Islam. In all Ethiopian regional states, hundred percent of the Muslims were Sufis. There is no Shi'a in Ethiopia. The so-called Salafi (Wahhabi) came to the country within the last 20 or 30 years. The rest is all Sufi. The Sufis coexisted peacefully with the Christians for thousands of years better than any other part of the world, notwithstanding the discriminatory policies of the previous regimes (against Muslims).[33]

In spite of these positive legacies, he emphasised that, the Muslim-Christian peaceful coexistence and the secular principle of the state, is now under challenge by the Salafi fundamentalist teachings.[34] It is obvious from his speech that, his government

31 Mohammed Abdosh, Speech to the FDRE Parliament.

32 Meles Zenawi, Speech to the FDRE Parliament.

33 Meles Zenawi, Speech to the FDRE Parliament.

34 Meles Zenawi, Speech to the FDRE Parliament.

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inclined towards endorsing Sufi Islam as "tolerant and acceptable" vis-à-vis the Salafis, whom he called as "intolerant and fundamentalist". Not only was their inherent intolerance towards other religions underlined in the discussion, but also their fundamentalist/violent inclinations and collaborations with international terrorist organisations such as Al-Qaeda. He stressed that,

> It is common knowledge that most of the members of Al Qaeda terrorist organization (at the global level) are Salafis. This does not, however, mean that "all Salafis are Al Qaeda". Saying this is not only wrong but also crime. But all Al Qaeda members are Salafis. For the first time in Ethiopia, an Al Qaeda cell has been discovered – mainly in Bale and Arsi (Oromia National Regional State). All the members of this cell were Salafis. This does not again mean that all Salafis in Ethiopia are al-Qaida; most of them are not. The Salafis claim that, "majority of Ethiopians are Muslims; the religious figure reported by Central Statistics Agency is false". Hence, they use it as a justification to their ultimate goal of "establishing an Islamic state of Ethiopia". Some Salafis even condemn the peaceful coexistence of Muslims and Christians in the country.[35]

In his speech, the Prime Minister emphasised that, "unless the government takes appropriate and timely measures, the threat is clear and imminent. We (the government) shouldn't go too far to see the risks. It is enough to see what the Salafis are doing in Yemen, Libya, Syria and Tunisia."[36] Some of these groups are creating trouble in such countries and "our Salafis are trying to bring the Arab Spring" home in collaboration with "our bankrupt politicians, who are unsuccessful in the political field".[37] The Prime Minister, representing the government, believed that the Salafis in Ethiopia were recruiting young innocent Muslims, who are unaware of its "extremist ideology and their rights and duties enshrined in the constitution". If the majority of Muslims, who joined this group unaware of their constitutional rights and duties or because of false promise, are properly informed, they will be on the right path. But, if the government fails to do this, the Prime Minister warned, the disaster to the country's peace and stability would be immense.

MANIFESTATIONS OF RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM IN ETHIOPIA

Many government sources reveal that, although ethnic conflicts arising out of the problems of boundary demarcation and competition for scarce resources and political power might contribute for instability, religious fundamentalism, by far, poses the greatest challenge and security threat for Ethiopia. Among others, an Amharic document entitled, *Yehaimanot Akrarinetin ena Yegosa Gichitochin Yeminfetabet Agerawi Eqid Meneshawechina Aqitachawech* (National Plan for Controlling Religious Extremism and Ethnic Conflicts: Background and Directions), prepared

35 Meles Zenawi, Speech to the FDRE Parliament.

36 Meles Zenawi, Speech to the FDRE Parliament.

37 Meles Zenawi, Speech to the FDRE Parliament.

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and disseminated for the public in 2011, gives an extensive coverage to threats of religious fundamentalism and the strategies to cope up the problems.

As we have seen earlier, the government believes that, contrary to the 1995 FDRE constitution, fundamentalists from both Christianity and Islam are trying to constitute a theocratic government in Ethiopia. Both groups are recruiting membership from their respective co-religionists for realising their goals using different methods, including arranging training opportunities domestically and abroad.[38] As government sources indicate, there are considerable numbers of believers from both sides joining these groups without having sufficient knowledge about the group's objectives. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the government to distinguish the fundamentalists from the "innocent masses" through public awareness campaigns.[39] In order to really understand religious fundamentalism in Ethiopia, it is equally important to know how the Ethiopian government understands religious fundamentalism, particularly the various forms of religious fundamentalism in Islam and Christianity, the country's two main religions of the country, analysed through the lenses of the conceptual discourses discussed above.

Islamic fundamentalism

According to government sources,[40] one of the ultimate goals of Islamic fundamentalists in Ethiopia is nothing but "establishing an Islamic government based on Sharia law". For the realisation of their grand mission, they devised both short and long-term plans. In the short term, they engage with the government in a way that looks like military combat. They mobilise the community under the pretext that, "Islam was/is dominated and marginalized in Ethiopia".[41] Islamic fundamentalists are depicting the previous regimes' policies of discrimination and marginalisation of Muslims in a more exaggerated manner and agitate the Muslim community that, "these policies and practices are still unaltered in the EPRDF regime."[42] They preach that the EPRDF government is in favour of Christianity to the exclusion of Islam and try to justify their actions for removing the system in any possible means available to them (including violence). Refuting this assertion, however, one interviewee for this research asserted that, "in fact, the memory of second-class citizenship and oppressed-mentality is still fresh in the minds of many Muslims, but no one blames the EPRDF for this, except requesting for properly rectifying the injustices committed in the past".[43]

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38 *Yehaimanot Akrarinetin ena Yegosa Gichitochin Yeminfetabet Agerawi Eqid Meneshawechina Aqitachawech* [A National Plan for Controlling Religious Extremism and Ethnic Conflicts: Background and Directions], 2011.

39 *Yehaimanot Akrarinetin.*

40 *Yehaimanot Akrarinetin*, 11.

41 Woldeselassie, *Adisu Tornet ena Haimanot*, 145.

42 Woldeselassie, *Adisu Tornet ena Haimanot*.

43 Interview with Mohammed Ali by the researcher, Addis Ababa, 25 November 2014.

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In a way that strengthens government claims, Woldeselassie Woldemichael, a former official in the Ethiopian national security service, argues that fundamentalist groups oppose the constitutional provision that declares the separation of state and religion as anti-Quran and against the principle of Islam.[44] The government document indicates that, contrary to the principle of freedom of education from the influence of religion enshrined in the Ethiopian Constitution under Article 90(2), the fundamentalists request educational administrations to grant worshiping places for congregational pray and allow "unacceptable Islamic dressings", such as *niqab*.[45] They also instigate believers to quarrel against other religious believers with false allegation that "the Holy Quran is torn apart or used as toilet paper by Christians; the Prophet Mohammed is insulted by Christians etc." without any tangible evidence to corroborate their allegation.[46] On top of that, Muslim fundamentalists are involving in "burning churches, killing Christians, agitating the people not to pay taxes to the [Christian] government, and not to take credit from government banks etc."[47]

In the long run, they plan to train their members in secondary and higher educational institutions in cooperation with foreign aid agencies and Islamic NGOs. They arrange foreign scholarships for their members in Sudan, Egypt and other Middle East countries.[48] The government believes that, some Islamic fundamentalists are focusing on the youth, occupying government bureaucracies and the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (hereafter, EIASC) leadership. They try to inculcate the idea of religious fundamentalism in the minds of students starting from the kindergarten all the way to universities. They encourage the construction of illegal mosques everywhere, even in places that are inconvenient for religious preaching using megaphones. They obtain land under the disguise of private endowment for dominating the public space to realise their ultimate objective of establishing an Islamic state. Some of them even get actively involved, in government bureaucracies, including the ruling party's political positions pretending to be supporters, for the sole purpose of controlling government institutions for their own fundamentalist goals.[49]

In addition to their intolerant behaviours towards followers of other religions and the secular state order, the "newcomers" called the Salafis are challenging the long-held practices of Sufi Muslims in the country. They actively oppose their co-religionists whom they believe are excessively lax in upholding their religious

44 Woldeselassie, *Adisu Tornet ena Haimanot*.

45 *Addis Raey Magazine* [New Vision Magazine], 2009. *Adis Raey Tir-Yekatit* [New Vision Magazine, January–February] 2(4):6. Note that *niqab* covers a Muslim woman's whole face with the exception of her eyes.

46 *Yehaimanot Akrarinetin*, 12.

47 *Yehaimanot Akrarinetin*, 12.

48 Woldeselassie, *Adisu Tornet ena Haimanot*, 145.

49 *Yehaimanot Akrarinetin*, 13.

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duties and are traditionalist or culture oriented in their practice.[50] The Salafis consider Sufi practices, such as religious rituals, celebration of *mewlid* (birthday of Prophet Mohammed), saint veneration, pilgrimage to tombs and others to be *shirk* (worshipping things other than Allah) and, thus, un-Islamic. The Salafis mainly depend on Islamic scriptures (Quran and *hadith*) as authentic sources of Islam and *sharia* law as the real source of justice and social equity.[51]

Despite these bold allegations, the government's perspective towards Muslims seems to have failed to differentiate Muslim activists and peaceful protesters who oppose what they consider "government interference in their religious affairs" from the fundamentalists who harbor political ambitions. The government's position appears to be influenced by the positions of Western governments towards Islam and Muslims after the 9/11 terrorist attack.[52] Some research works on Islam in Africa divide the Islamic scene in the continent into so-called African Islam and Reformist Islam, which by accident or otherwise, exactly coincides with the dichotomisation of Ethiopian Muslims by the government. The former, African Islam, is related to Sufi practice and interpreted as "tolerant, quiescent, and impotent in politics", whereas the latter, being influenced by the radical interpretation of Islam and radical Muslim scholars, is used interchangeably with Salafism, fundamentalism and hence political Islam.[53] Some sources, such as a 2003 Rand Corporation Report, have even suggested "encouraging the Sufis at the expense of *Salafis/Wahhabis*" to tackle the "perils of political Islam and global terrorism". It recommends establishing partnerships with Muslims who have a "democratic mindset" or who are "good Muslims (i.e. Sufis)" for the sake of undermining the activities of "radicals or bad Muslims (i.e. Salafis)".[54]

In the Ethiopian context, some scholars divide Islam into Ethiopian Islam and Middle Eastern Arab Islam or Fundamentalist Islam.[55] The former is characterised by its flexibility "with a popular set of beliefs, traditions and customs with the acceptance of Ethiopia and its legitimacy as a land led by Christian establishment".[56]

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50 *Yehaimanot Akrarinetin*, 13.

51 Østebø T. 2010. "Islamism in the Horn of Africa: Assessing Ideology, Actors, and Objectives". Report no. 2. Oslo: International Law and Policy Institute, 47.

52 For the obvious reason of the impact of globalisation, the Ethiopian case could not be seen separately from the global realities. The so-called war on terror has influenced and/or inspired the Ethiopian government to closely watch the activities of its Muslim communities. See, for example, some scholars such as Francois Craig, who argue that, the escalation of Islamophobic stands in the West after 9/11 directly influenced and shaped the "negative" attitudes of the Ethiopian government towards Muslims. See Craig F. 2013. "The rise of Islamophobia in Ethiopia", *OpenDemocracy.net*, 25 February.

53 Otayek R and Benjamin FS. 2007. "Introduction: Islam and Muslim Politics in Africa", in *Islam and Muslim Politics in Africa*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1-26.

54 Otayek and Benjamin, "Introduction: Islam and Muslim Politics in Africa".

55 Erlich H. 2010. *Islam and Christianity in the Horn of Africa: Somalia, Ethiopia, Sudan*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 128.

56 Erlich, *Islam and Christianity in the Horn of Africa*, 128.

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The latter "rejects Christian-led Ethiopia and works to win Ethiopia for Islam".[57] The Ethiopian government supported the efforts of EIASC leadership in bringing the so-called Sufi-oriented al-Ahbash Muslim scholars from Lebanon, probably as a way for countering the growing "challenges of reformist and/or radical Salafi Islam".[58] Dichotomising Islam into "moderate and radical" is also now widely diffused in the policy circles of the Ethiopian government. In one of the policy papers presented for public discussion, the government made its strategy crystal clear – namely, that "it will work in cooperation with Muslims of democratic-thinking in their worldly affairs and moderate in their religious views".[59] According to government document, most Salafis are "threats for the peaceful Muslim-Christian coexistence" in the country and are "threats of the FDRE Constitution" that celebrates the separation of state and religion (secularism). This act of the government absolutely fits into what a political scientist and anthropologist Mahmood Mamdani termed as "bad and good Muslims",[60] mainly used for establishing friendship with the former while "drawing a red-line" against the latter. The use of more noisy and unpleasant terms for Muslims, such as fundamentalist versus moderate, terrorist versus pacifist, good versus bad, peaceful versus violent, would certainly create divisions within the Muslim community itself and suspicion from the non-Muslims over the activities of Muslims, which in turn damages the peaceful coexistence of religious groups in the country. This categorisation, in some cases, pushes the so-called moderates to the hardliners' bloc. The effects of this policy – marginalisation and discrimination of part of the Muslim community – could aggravate problems of fundamentalism by further radicalising the so-called radicals. Moreover, the simplistic approach of dichotomising the Muslim community into contrasting camps by the government – either with us or with the fundamentalists – coupled with the "global war on terror", made some Ethiopian Muslims feel more alienated from the nation's body politic and may push them to resort to other available means, including violence.

Despite the assertion of some scholars about the presence of a growing threat of Islamic fundamentalism and the emergence of political Islam, working for "political victory for Islam",[61] others contend that fundamentalism in its political form is less powerful in Ethiopia.[62] According to religion scholar Terje Østebø, who extensively researched on contemporary Ethiopian Muslims, Ethiopian Islamist reform movement is more directed towards "purifying Islam and claiming for religious equality and

57 Erlich, *Islam and Christianity in the Horn of Africa*, 128.

58 Yuunus HM. 2013. "Ahbashism, Government and Ethiopian Muslim Protests", in *The Civil Rights Movement of Ethiopian Muslims: Context, Defining Features and Implications*. Brussels: Luqman Ethiopian-Belgian Muslims Association (LEBMA vzw), 35. Online at: http://luqmanethiopia.org

59 *Yehaimanot Akrarinetin*, 20.

60 Mamdani M. 2002. "Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: A Political Perspective on Culture and Terrorism", *American Anthropological Association* 104(3):766-775.

61 Erlich H. 2005. "Al-Qaeda's Threat to Ethiopia", *Terrorism Monitor* 3(3):176.

62 Østebø, "Islamism in the Horn of Africa".

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freedom, instead of establishing an Islamic state".[63] Moreover, the government's fear of Islamic fundamentalism and political Islam working for "establishing an Islamic state" is in sharp contrast with the narratives and deeds of Muslim activists. Many of them persistently channelled their grievances against government intervention in religious affairs through letters and peaceful protests while expressing their full support for the implementation of government policies of secularism.[64] None of them demanded an Islamic state or have showed any indication to that effect.[65] Some activists have publicly opposed any claim or demand for an Islamic state, not only for pragmatic reasons of the impracticability of this ideology in a multi-religious country like Ethiopia, but also as a matter of principle.[66]

Christian fundamentalism

Religious fundamentalism in Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity is represented through a religious association called Mahbere Kidusan, which advocates for the "restoration of the privileged status of the EOC as a national church".[67] As stated in the ruling party's document, although religious equality and freedom are guaranteed by the Constitution, some members of the EOC advocate for the establishment of a "Christian government or restoring the status quo of the EOC".[68] With its long tradition of dependence upon the state, it is quite natural and expected for the EOC to resist change in the direction of separation of state and religion. Some members of the Mahbere Kidusan claim that the religious freedom guaranteed in the FDRE Constitution and the subsequent opening of the country's door for Western liberal democracy and secularism is not welcomed by the church. It, as they believe, undermined the hegemonic power and control over its adherents.[69] They claim that; its "sheep (innocent followers) are now being stolen from its house (EOC) by the "aggressive and unethical Protestant evangelism".[70]

As we have discussed above, the late Prime Minister mentioned the Mahbere Kidusan as one branch of the Church "working for the restoration of 'one country, one religion policy' of the imperial regime".[71] As the government claims, this fundamentalist group "preaches racist politics in religious institutions; uses the financial resources

63 Østebø, "Islamism in the Horn of Africa".

64 Letters by the Muslims' Solution Finding Committee submitted to various government offices, including the Prime Minister's Office, 7 March 2012.

65 Interview with the leader of the Muslims' Solution Finding Committee member by the researcher, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 14 December 2016.

66 Interview with a Muslim activist Abubeker Adem by the researcher, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 25 November 2014.

67 Meles Zenawi, Speech to the FDRE Parliament.

68 *Addis Raey Magazine* [New Vision Magazine]. 2013. *Adis Raey Hamle-Nehasie* [New Vision Magazine July–August], 4(3):38.

69 Interview with Daniel Alemu by the researcher, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 26 November 2016.

70 Interview with Daniel Alemu.

71 Meles Zenawi, Speech to the FDRE Parliament.

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of religious institutions for supporting opposition parties, and collaborates with anti-government protests".[72] They disseminate hate speech in press and electronic media portraying the EPRDF-led government as the "foe of Orthodox Christianity".[73] Moreover, some of them accuse the government for apathy, while Christians were persecuted in different parts of the country by Muslim fundamentalists. The religious equality guaranteed and the inclusion of the state-religion separation clause in the 1995 Constitution is also misunderstood, as if it were included to undermine the Church by making it co-equals with other religions. To achieve their goals, members of this group mobilise the people in "religious institutions, different associations, primary and secondary schools, colleges and universities" to stand in opposition against the government.[74] In conformity with government allegations of members of Mahbere Kidusan, Woldeselassie Woldemichael also asserts that they are doing their level best to stir up antagonism between the people and the government, creating animosity among different religious followers through audio and video recordings.[75]

The population census result, which has been highly politicised throughout Ethiopian history, is also at the disposal of the fundamentalists manipulating it to their advantage. Some EOC members openly objected to the 2007 Population and Housing Census result, which, in their perspective, understated the Orthodox Christian population.[76] In their estimation, the Orthodox Christian believers constitute about 80% of the total population, and the 43.5% official report of the government is a "false fabrication" aimed at overstating the number of Muslims and Protestants in the country. In their view, the official numbers have weakened the Church's vital roles in social, economic and political spheres.[77] In terms of exponential growth, it is the Protestants who scored a remarkable achievement in the country's religious demographics with what was probably a national or world record for fastest religious growth, expanding from a margin of 10% in 1994 to 18.6% in 2007. The Muslims (33.9%) scored only a 1.1% incremental expansion from the 1994 census. Worth mentioning here is that, the 2007 census result has objected to by many ethnic and religious groups in the country. In the era of politicisation of identity in post-1991 Ethiopia, every ethnic and religious group in the country strives to getting its share of numbers increased, in some instances, with financial and power-sharing entitlements. Revealing and approving the 2007 census result by the FDRE Parliament was one of the most contentious issues. It was announced eight months later than planned because of opposition, particularly from the Amhara and Addis Ababa representatives and the Muslim and Orthodox Christian communities. The Orthodox Church and Muslims, particularly from the diaspora living in the U.S. and Europe, submitted their complaints to the Prime Minister's

72 *Yehaimanot Akrarinetin*, 13-14.

73 Woldeselassie, *Adisu Tornet ena Haimanot*, 142.

74 Woldeselassie, *Adisu Tornet ena Haimanot.*

75 Woldeselassie, *Adisu Tornet ena Haimanot.*

76 Abbink, "Religion in Public Spaces".

77 Woldeselassie, *Adisu Tornet ena Haimanot*, 142.

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office stating that, their respective numbers has been reduced unjustifiably. Badr International Ethiopian Muslims Federation,[78] for example, lodged a petition to the FDRE Parliament, the Prime Minister's Office, the Central Statistics Agency (CSA) and other government organs and the EIASC against the results of the 2007 population census. The government withheld the official announcement of the result for more than eight months, in part because of the complaints and calls for a recheck to rule out the possibility of error.

More than anything else, fundamentalists in the EOC oppose the state-religion separation clause in the Ethiopian Constitution complaining that, "this constitutional provision does not take into account of the historical contributions of the Church – more than any other religions – for the development and independence of Ethiopia".[79] The EOC always praises its "special contributions" to the country's educational system through developing its own alphabets, the Geez and Amharic scripts, – consonant with the Church's efforts to provide education for the Ethiopian people, while Muslims used to borrow Arabic scripts from Arabia.[80] It also claimed that the Church participated in defending the country's independence from colonialism, while the Muslims, Protestants and Catholics sought and obtained foreign support. The EOC, thus, regards itself as the only "true bastion of the national interest of Ethiopia".[81] Hence, it should not be treated in the same way as other religious groups or institutions.[82]

Contrary to government narrations and accusations against the association, the Mahbere Kidusan made its purposes and objectives crystal clear – namely, that "it is established with the full knowledge and endorsement of the EOC Synod to spread the teachings of the Church to the community and support the Church in its administrative endeavors".[83] The association was founded in 1989 by graduates from various universities of the country.[84] It was established with the purpose of promoting and protecting the faith and the mission of spreading the word of God through evangelism and proselytisation. The relationship between the Ethiopian government and the association was generally smooth up to 2005, but their relations started to deteriorate following the 2005 national election, when some of the association's members were accused of supporting opposition political parties and implicated with harboring religious fundamentalism. One of

78 Dereje F. 2011. "The Potential for and Signs of Religious Radicalization in Ethiopia". Research report submitted to DFID Ethiopia.

79 Woldeselassie, *Adisu Tornet ena Haimanot*, 142.

80 It is true that Ethiopia is one of the few countries in Africa, which has developed its own letters owing mainly to the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahdo Church and its scholars.

81 Dereje F. 2011. "The Potential for and Signs of Religious Radicalization in Ethiopia". Research report submitted to DFID Ethiopia, 5.

82 Woldeselassie, *Adisu Tornet ena Haimanot*, 142.

83 Mahbere Kidusan 2008. "Brief Exhibition Guide for the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahdo Church: Past Present, Future". USA Center, July 30, 2008. Submitted by Mahbere Kidusan.

84 Mahbere Kidusan, "Brief Exhibition Guide for the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahdo Church".

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the documents released by the Ministry of Federal Affairs revealed that, "though the association's objectives are clear and legal, they are falling into [the] hands of some radicals and extremists who are trying to mix religion and politics for their own vested interests."[85] The 2012 parliamentary speech of the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi also reiterated this fact. Some of the association's members were labelled as "supporters of opposition political parties and propagators of religious fundamentalism in the country".[86]

However, many of its members and supporters do not agree with what the government accused the association with religious fundamentalism. They argue that, the association has no any record of fundamentalism and will never be part of it.[87] Ephrem Eshete, a member and scholar of Ethiopian Orthodox Church, for example, said, "I disagree with what the Prime Minister said about Mahbere Kidusan."[88] This is because, as he argued, "the T-shirt worn by some of the members in the Timket (Epiphany) celebration carrying a slogan "*andi haimanot* – one religion … but not one country" has religious roots, rather than reflecting fundamentalist tendencies intended to transmit intolerant messages towards other religious followers and the secular state order.[89] He said, it is an association established with the sole purpose of promoting Orthodox Christianity but with full respect for other religions in the country. Another writer, by the name of Girma Derib asserts, "Mahbere Kidusan has got 99 problems, but 'terrorism' [… isn't] one".[90] It never forced others to follow its way of teaching and disrespect the teachings of other faiths.

CONCLUSION

Although federal Ethiopia is a secular state with the constitutional principle of separation between state and religion and respect for freedom of religion,[91] religion appears to be present in all public spheres, sometimes claiming to play political roles. This is partly related to the opening up of public spaces for religious communities after the institutionalisation of democratic governance in the country in the post-1991 period and partly as a result of the global resurgence of religion. The long marginalised religious groups have now started to appear in public places

85 *Ethiopian Observer*. 2014. Unpublished material.

86 *Yehaimanot Akrarinetin,*

87 Ephrem E. 2008. *Akirari Islimina Be Ethiopia* [Islamic Fundamentalism in Ethiopia]. Maryland, Silver Spring.

88 Ephrem, *Akirari Islimina Be Ethiopia*, 1.

89 Ephrem, *Akirari Islimina Be Ethiopia*. He said that, as the Bible teaches us, it is a religious message of St. Paul under Chapter 4, No. 5, when he says, "One Lord, One Religion and One *Timket* (Baptism)". It is a biblical message and has nothing to do with intolerance or the establishment of a state ruled by one religious doctrine.

90 Girma D. 2014. "Mahbere Kidusan has got 99 problems, but 'terrorism' [… isn't] one". Unpublished material.

91 Constitution of Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Proclamation No. 1/1995, arts 11 and 27.

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with assertive roles in the country's social, economic and political life. In the last two or more decades, the public presence of Islam is more visible as is evident from the government bureaucracy (civil service), ministerial positions, construction of large numbers of mosques, strict religious observance (prayer, dressing codes etc.) and in the presence of Muslim outspoken activists. The rapid expansion of Protestantism is also evident, not only from exponential growth of adherents, but also with the active engagement of religious evangelism in all public places of the country. From a very marginalised and insignificant role at the beginning of the EPRDF's era, they reached to the level of "dominating the public space", which in some instances led to conflicts with the previously privileged religions.

In historic Ethiopia, where one religion was privileged in its social, economic and political status, the constitutional provision of "separation of state and religion" is a guarantee for those long-marginalised religions. Ethiopia is one of the countries in the world where ethnic and religious diversities are deep and wide in ways that require great care to maintain the delicate balance between religious freedom and secularism. For obvious reasons, mixing religion with politics creates social problems and conflicts, since it divides people along ardent lines often making negotiation for common terms difficult. To be fair enough, the only viable solution for multi-religious society to maintain solidarity and tolerance is secularism. In the struggle between a secular government and religious groups, the need for protecting spheres of influence from encroachment often creates tensions. Religious activists, though not for political reasons, try to enlarge their influence in public places in ways that inevitability attracts government attention and intervention. This in turn creates an opportunity for some fundamentalist groups to manipulate government's intervention to fulfil their own goals by sensationalising the issue and depicting the act as violation of the law. In this regard, the fear of the Ethiopian government for religious fundamentalism is not far-fetched. However, an exaggerated fear of religious fundamentalism to the extent of dichotomising believers into fundamentalist and moderate camps and dealing accordingly threatens the government's response to be transformed into a self-fulfilling prophecy. More importantly, the government's strategy of externalising all the problems as caused by the fundamentalists and the influence of "bankrupt politicians" will take nowhere in solving the real problems unless the government takes its own fair share.

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