

Why silence from religious leaders? Reflection on the indifference of religious organizations in the current Ethiopian crises and tragedy

“It’s not unpatriotic to denounce an injustice committed on our behalf, perhaps it’s the most patriotic thing we can do.”

— **E.A. Bucchianeri, Brushstrokes of a Gadfly**

“All too often, when we see injustices, both great and small, we think, That's terrible, but we do nothing. We say nothing. We let other people fight their own battles. We remain silent because silence is easier. Qui tacet consentire videtur is Latin for 'Silence gives consent.' When we say nothing, when we do nothing, we are consenting to these trespasses against us.”

— **Roxane Gay, Bad Feminist**

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(1) Point of departure

Ethiopians are currently affected by untold misery and agonizing but muffled national sorrow. The country's fate is in the hands of arrogant and murderous groups of people under TPLF¹ leadership. Mass arrest, murder, slaughter, and inhumane treatment of *zealous Ethiopians* are a common scene. At the time of writing this paper, the killings go on in particular in the Amhara and Oromo regions. But where is the anguished outcry of our spiritual and religious leaders? Where are their voices? Why don't we hear them condemning the murder of young Ethiopians? One expects the leaders of Ethiopian churches and mosques – all the centers of holy worship where the most fundamental laws of humanity are preached: that murder is wrong, that causing the suffering of others is the deepest profanity against God.

As we all know there is no “military” solution to the current murder business in our country. Ethiopian religious and spiritual leaders both at home and in diaspora need to come out, loud and clear – and repeatedly so – that we are all – every single one of us – children of God and that to murder is to profane the very God they claim to glorify. It's hard to miss the news today. In Woldia last month, more than 20 unarmed young people died in broad daylight for expressing dissent; hundreds languish in prisons. There are rumors that the prisoners are being exploited as “slave labors”. It is sad that Ethiopian religious leaders and establishments make no effort to make this particular slaughter of innocents a priority. Continued overwhelming silence on the part of our religious leaders is always wrong and will be a catastrophe in the struggle to defend the unity of Ethiopia and sanctity of the lives of young Ethiopians².

¹ TPLF is the main and most powerful party within the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), the so called ruling political coalition which consists of four political parties. The TPLF-backed Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front took power after the collapse of the Derg in 1991.

² A deputy bishop for a diocese in Northern Ethiopia is an exception to this. He is a brave man who condemned the killings in Woldia. The deputy bishop, Abun Ermias believes that the Epiphany day killings in Woldia town a few weeks ago were premeditated. “Father Ermias said the church does not believe the youth did anything wrong on that fateful day. “The youth were just angry at the sight of the security forces on their religious day. They might have hurled insults at the soldiers or some might have thrown stones. But the response from the soldiers was fire,” he told Hara Tewahido. “It looks like they just came to shoot at people.” “So many were killed and injured. We still don't know how many,” Father Ermias said. Even priests carrying the replica of the Arc of the Covenant in the religious procession were attacked with gas canisters and were able to complete the procession with the help of other priests, according to father Ermias. “We don't know why they (the soldiers) came to a religious ceremony. And it looks like they came to kill.” <https://ethsat.com/2018/01/ethiopia-bishop-thinks-woldia-killings-premeditated/>

In a disaster or national tragedy, religious leaders are frontline, trusted caregivers to whom people look for assistance and support for healing. They are also expected to be the voice of the voiceless. Although the primary function of religious leaders is the care of the soul, which involves showing compassion and empathy for people in times of crisis by offering comfort, support, clarity, direction, and spiritual resources, they are also expected to condemn killings and inhumane treatment and to admonish political leaders for these actions. The current situation in Ethiopia now requires their leadership and guidance primarily to stop the madness orchestrated by the ruling elites' intent on destroying Ethiopia and creating civil war; secondly they can help create a forum for national reconciliation, stability and sustainable peace. As known, religious and community leaders have the unique position of being able to respond to people who are impacted by injustices and man-made national disasters because they are already in an established role, have a core of relationships, and bring a faith-based perspective that speaks to the need for *meaning* that is both so pervasive in the human experience of suffering and common for many Ethiopians.

(2) Religious beliefs in Ethiopia: tensions, conflicts and government subversion/control

I have some theories on this issue, and I expect the reader to contribute to the discussion. I have yet to corroborate my assumptions with a corpus of data, but the most important concept here in this article concerns how we should mobilize religious leaders and organizations to attend to the needs of their followers. Ethiopians need guidance from respected community leaders more than ever before. I do not intend to blame any groups of leaders or religious organizations. I simply want to stress the importance of their *presence* in this critical period of Ethiopian history. I have little doubt that the overwhelming majority of the Muslims and Christians in Ethiopia are against the regime and its divide-and-rule strategy. I want to believe that the majority of Catholics, Orthodox Christians, Muslims, and Ethiopian Protestant Churches (including Pentecostals both as organizations and individual Christians) have fought and are still fighting for justice, truth, and the rule of law in Ethiopia. However, the manifestation of the resistance and protest varies. Compared to the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church, which is one of the oldest churches in the world, the Protestant sects – the Evangelical Churches, the Pentecostal Churches, the Methodist Churches, the Lutheran Churches, the Baptist Churches, the Episcopalian Churches, the Mennonite Churches, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, the Seventh Day Adventist Churches, and many other fragmented Protestant Churches – have set foot in Ethiopia only recently. Therefore, their roles in the politics of Ethiopia differ accordingly. According to Haustein (2014), there is a new religious factor in Ethiopia that attracts considerable public attention, invites dispute, influences social behavior, and has produced new Amharic phrases. It is visible in the multitude of church signs in any town or even small villages, displaying names like “Full Gospel Believers Church” (ሙሉ፡ወንጌል፡አማኞች፡ ቤተ፡ክርስቲያን, *Mulu Wängel Amañočč Betä-Krəstiyan*), “Paradise Church” (ገነት፡ቤተ፡ ክርስቲያን, *Gännät Betä-Krəstiyan*), “Light of Life Church” (አይወት፡ብርሃን፡ቤተ፡ ክርስቲያን, *Həywät Bərhan Betä-Krəstiyan*), “Deliverance Church” (አርነት፡ቤተ፡ ክርስቲያን, *Arənnät Betä-Krəstiyan*), and many more.³ (There are even some unsubstantiated but widely held assumptions or claims that these protestant sects *passively collaborate* with the regime because the regime offered them a larger space — both physical space and greater authoritative latitude — to practice their religion). Another equally

³Jörg Haustein (2014) Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity in Ethiopia: A Historical Introduction to a Largely Unexplored Movement. Hatem Elliesie (ed.): *Multidisciplinary Views on the Horn of Africa*. Studien zum Horn von Afrika, 1, Köln 2014, pp. 109–127.

unsubstantiated claim is that *because the regime is actively anti-orthodox establishment, these religious groups are elated as their rival establishment is being weakened*. Article 27 warrants freedom of religion, belief, and opinion, which includes the right of believers to “establish institutions of religious education and administration in order to propagate and organize their religion.” Based on these constitutional provisions, the legal framework for the registration of associations, already set up by the 1960 Civil Code and the “Legal Notice No. 321” of 1966, was now put into practice, allowing and mandating the official registration of all religious bodies.

The expansion of *protestant sects* is visible. However, their relationships with other well-established religious organizations such as the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the Muslim community is not unproblematic. It is high time that these groups of churches – the Muslim organizations, the Orthodox Church etc. – take concerted initiatives to condemn the atrocities in Ethiopia and frame a peaceful transition. Internal strife and dispute on trivial differences in doctrines are only prolonging the regime’s hold on power and thereby the sufferings of the faithful. Although religious organizations are to be independent of political control in a healthy, just, and inclusive society, the situation in Ethiopia is different. The Ethiopian orthodox church is fully controlled by the TPLF or in other words by Tigreans. A closer observation of the power structure at the Ethiopian Orthodox Patriarch Office shows that 90 % of Department heads are TPLF members or members of Tigrean ethnic group. This connection is why the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church is in trouble both financially and freedom-wise. According to a number of observers and documented literature, the regime violates religious freedom or intervenes, in particular, in orthodox religion affairs.

The sad thing is these churches (Lalibela, Axum Zion etc.) generate a huge amount of income through tourism, but they have not benefitted from this revenue. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church has borne the brunt of this biased treatment since the TPLF came into power. The most common explanation for the government’s attack on the Orthodox religious foundation has to do with the deep *Orthodox tradition* of upholding Ethiopianism. The church is still famously known to raise the flag, the banner of Ethiopia proudly⁴. (By the way, I have never seen the flag being waved in festivities or services or ceremonies of other religious foundations in Ethiopia. I am ready to be corrected). In particular, the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church maintained, affirmed and defended against any encroachment on the just liberties of

⁴ A combination of factors made the relation between the TPLF and the church difficult. Firstly, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church had been at the center of the villages’ social life for centuries. Weddings and Christenings (baptisms, burial rites and meditation in conflicts between neighbors all took place via the church, and there were substantial numbers of priests in every parish who performed church services. Each household had a priest as its religious “father” who took care of the spiritual life of the family and was called for special life-cycle events to give his blessing. In every community the church was connected to each household in this way. Secondly, the church constituted a link between the people and the state. It had always stood on the side of the past Emperors, who furthered the existence, expansion and unity of the Ethiopian Church. It was organized hierarchically from the village to the national center and as an embodiment of spiritual and socio-cultural life. The institution of the church had always played a crucial role not only in community life, but also in mediation between rival forces and even between the state and rebels. The church taught its followers to respect their allegiance to the Ethiopian state and was, in effect, a school for national consciousness, using national symbols such as the flag in all religious and social events. No church ever conducted major ceremonies without hosting the Ethiopian flag – an act also regularly observed in the Ethiopian army. Thirdly, the church was the core legitimizing body for any emperor who ruled over Ethiopia. (Our longtime grievance against TPLF for hijacking the Orthodox Church was proven correct in Aregawi Berhe’s new book, “A Political History of TPLF” by Getachew Redda. <https://ethiopiansemay.blogspot.se/2009/07/our-longtime-grievance-against-tplf-for.html> (Access date 2018-02-08) .

the people and the nation's border. It also provided moral support or inspiration to Ethiopian patriots during the foreign invasions of Ethiopia.

The ruling party has since its inception organized and operated anti-Ethiopian Orthodox Church and anti-Muslim community activities in clandestine operation. The party infiltrated and 'contaminated' these important establishments that are the very fabric of Ethiopianism. The establishments are perceived as a threat to their ruling of the country that is centered on *unethiopianism*. The commitment and zealotry – to their religion and to the integrity of Ethiopia – of the Orthodox followers has been documented by international observers and researchers⁵. According to Jeff Diamant (2017), a senior writer/editor focusing on religion at Pew Research Center,⁶ Ethiopia has the largest Orthodox Christian population outside Europe, and, by many measures, Orthodox Ethiopians have much higher levels of religious commitment than do Orthodox Christians in the faith's heartland of Central and Eastern Europe. The country in the Horn of Africa has 36 million Orthodox Christians, the world's second-largest Orthodox population after Russia. Nearly all Orthodox Ethiopians (98%) say religion is very important to them, compared with a median of 34% of Orthodox saying this across 13 countries surveyed in Central and Eastern Europe. About three-quarters of Orthodox Ethiopians say they attend church every week (78%), compared with a median of 10% in Central and Eastern Europe and just 6% in Russia. Orthodox Christians do not make up a majority of Ethiopia's overall population: 43% of Ethiopians are Orthodox, while approximately 19% are Protestant and 35% are Muslim. Still, in 2010, the 36 million Orthodox Christians in Ethiopia made up about 14% of the world's total Orthodox population (compared with a 76% share in Central and Eastern Europe), up from about 3 million in 1910, when Orthodox Ethiopians made up 3% of the Orthodox total. This increase is owed mainly to natural growth in Ethiopia's population, which rose from 9 million to 83 million between 1910 and 2010. Ethiopian Orthodoxy is part of the Oriental branch of Orthodoxy, which accounts for approximately 20% of the global Orthodox population and is not in communion with Eastern Orthodoxy, the larger branch, largely due to theological and doctrinal differences.

For this reason, the TPLF considers the establishment as a threat for its divide-and-rule policies. It is rumored or believed 'that evangelical Protestantism (or Pentecostalism)⁷ is making aggressive attempts at converting members, and fundamentalist Islam is becoming more and more assertive in the country and the region'. I think we need to have substantial data and empirically-based studies before we definitively affirm this statement. I believe now is not the right time to discuss this thorny issue or create division in our society through different *schism* of the above nature. This only prolongs the regime's merciless attack on the youth of Ethio-

⁵ Orthodox Ethiopians are more likely than Orthodox Christians in Central and Eastern Europe to wear religious symbols (93% vs. median of 64%), to say they believe in God with absolute certainty (89% vs. 56%), to fast during holy times such as Lent (87% vs. 27%), and to tithe (57% vs. 14%). Indeed, these gaps between Orthodox Christians in Ethiopia and Europe mirror broader differences in religious commitment between people living in sub-Saharan Africa, where religious observance is relatively high among all major religious groups, and those in more secular societies in Central and Eastern Europe (see below for reference). Access date 2010-02-08.

⁶ Ethiopia is an outlier in the Orthodox Christian world <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/11/28/ethiopia-is-an-outlier-in-the-orthodox-christian-world/>

⁷ Jörg Hausteiner (2014) argues that despite its fairly ubiquitous presence, there are hardly any academic publications about this new religious factor. The standard Amharic dictionaries do not yet include the term ቅንጥ (pānte) and its correct spelling is not solidified. Obviously, the word is derived from the Amharic term for Pentecost (ቅንጥቆጥ, pāntāqoste), or the English "Pentecostal," and as such it points to the Pentecostal movement. But how did Pentecostalism come to Ethiopia in the first place? Why has it become such a notable phenomenon only now, whereas in other African countries, such as neighboring Kenya, it has been around for much longer? Why are mainline Protestants, such as Lutherans and Baptists, labeled as pāntes as well? What is the significance of these developments for the religious landscape of Ethiopia as a whole? These are interesting questions that I would like to return to in a new article.

pia. It is high time that our young people stop being cannon fodder. It is high time that our religious establishments stop being simply passive attendees or catalysts of burial services for the murdered unarmed citizens. My colleague Steven Kaplan once said that the division among Ethiopian Orthodox Christians was caused by ethnic issues. He further explained that the schism caused churches in the diaspora to split, where some are in communion with the Synod in Ethiopia, some are loyal to the Synod in exile, and some churches are trying to remain neutral⁸. In February 2013, the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) Synod in Exile in North America issued a statement, published on *Ethiomedias*, regarding the divisions within the church, in which they state that those who stand for the peace and unity of our Church, including our religious fathers, the clergy, organized Orthodox groups, and the faithful at large in Ethiopia, are being subjected to threats, intimidation, and warnings often coming from government operatives that oppose the return of the legal Patriarch to Ethiopia. (EOTC Synod in Exile 23 Feb. 2013⁹).

(3) Summary and The Road Forward

What do we expect from our religious leaders and establishments irrespective of denomination, doctrine, sect or worldview (ideology) at this critical period in Ethiopian history?

- 1) We should be well aware that that the regime plays with fomenting conflicts and tensions among our religious and spiritual leaders as well as ethnic groups. These kinds of power games and domination should be admitted and openly discussed by the religious establishments, as these conflicts and simmering tensions might lead into ethnic-based violence and instability. The faithful demand honesty and integrity from their leaders
- 2) We need the voices of our religious leaders because they carry great power to galvanize our communities toward more effective and spiritually-grounded action for justice.
- 3) It is unacceptable that our leaders are silent in the face of unspeakable atrocities. They should make their voice heard in a peaceful manner and call for the political leaders to address the matter and encourage the regime to start a dialogue with opposition forces to resolve the stalemate. “Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.”¹⁰
- 4) I believe that there is a prominent role for religious authorities in present day Ethiopia NOT only for the purposes of edifying a community, but also calling out injustices, be they theological or civic.
- 5) Our major religious institutions and their leaders are controlled by the regime’s supporters and Ethnic Tigreans through a divide-and-rule policy that has resulted in the overwhelming majority of Ethiopians being marginalized. Correspondingly, both middle level religious leaders and grassroots active members must mobilize their followers to strive and fight for an inclusive and just society. Ethiopians are aware of

⁸ Ethiopia: Treatment of members of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) by authorities (2011 - July 2014). <http://www.refworld.org/docid/54c9f9584.html>

⁹ <http://www.refworld.org/docid/54c9f9584.html>

¹⁰ — **Robert F. Kennedy**

the regime's behavior and actions as malicious and contemptible, and therefore our religious leaders have a duty to teach the public to stand against this dangerous agenda! Signs of internal colonization have been observed. Internal colonization is a theory that seeks to explain how persistent and pervasive inequality and domination in all aspects of life are maintained in a society when there is not necessarily a foreign ruling power. In Ethiopian history, religious leaders have always fought gallantly against colonizers and intruders both foreign and homegrown.

- 6) Despite differences over specific theological or doctrine issues, religious leaders must find ways to build a movement that seeks justice for all Ethiopians. Surely it is time for the larger progressive religious movement to do just that.

- 7) If you, religious leaders, do not stand in uniform condemnation of this killing spree, then not only will you be judged by our people, not only will you be judged by history, you will be judged by God. There is no room in today's Ethiopia for different faiths, different sects, or different doctrines to battle among themselves for power, when the battle is rather between good and evil, death and life. It is a matter of priority!

“In keeping silent about evil, in burying it so deep within us that no sign of it appears on the surface, we are implanting it, and it will rise up a thousand fold in the future. When we neither punish nor reproach evildoers, we are not simply protecting their trivial old age, we are thereby ripping the foundations of justice from beneath new generations.”

— Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago 1918-1956*

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