7 SOCIAL MEDIA AS AN ALTERNATIVE SPACE FOR FAITH: INTER- AND INTRA-RELIGIOUS POLEMICS AMONGST THE ETHIOPIAN DIASPORA

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INTRODUCTION

In the twenty-first century, the internet has influenced and transformed large parts of our society, as well as individual lives.² Social media also has flourished in the age of the internet,³ and it has become the most powerful tool of communication in emerging world.⁴ In the last couple of years, people have become dependent on social media and websites such as WhatsApp, imo, Twitter, Facebook and YouTube to distribute verbal and audiovisual messages. In the past few years, social media websites have become global, giving young people, in particular, a new way to interact with each other and communicate with the world.⁵ The coming of the social networking era has brought forth infinite access to free speech in our social environment. The social media environment, including blogging websites and apps such as Twitter, MySpace and Facebook has facilitated this atmosphere of free conversation.⁶

Information Communication Technology (ICT) is defined by Manuel Castells⁷ as “the converging set of technologies in microelectronics, computing (machines and software), telecommunications/broadcasting, and optoelectronics”.⁸ For the

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 - 2 Gelfgren S. 2016. “If you need a virtual community, something is wrong with your congregation: Institutionalized Laestadianism and the use of digital media”, *Journal of Religion, Media and Digital Culture* 5(2):279-295.
 - 3 Ef Rajeev MM and Jobilal. 2015. “Effects of Social Media on Social Relationships: A Descriptive Study on the Impact of Mobile Phones among Youth Population”, *International Research Journal of Social Sciences* 4(2):11-16.
 - 4 Dwiwedi PK and Pandey I. 2013. “Role of Media in Social Awareness”, *Humanities & Social Sciences Reviews* 1(1):67-70.
 - 5 See the essays in *Student Journal for Media and Literacy Education (SJMLE)*. Vol. 3. Fall 2011. Online at: <http://understandmedia.com/pdf/SJMLE-Vol.-3.pdf>
 - 6 Kathleen C and Anuhea R. 2010. “Free Speech: Benefit or Liability”, *Student Journal of Media Literacy Education* 1(1):5.
 - 7 Manuel Castells is a leading scholar of Communication and Social Sciences at the University of Southern California.
 - 8 Castells M. 1996. *The Rise of the Network Society*. Second Edition. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 500 (cited in Storck M. 2011. *The Role of Social Media in Political Mobilization*:

purpose of the present study, social media networks (SMNs), a subset of ICTs, will be defined as “online tools and utilities that allow communication of information online and participation and collaboration”.⁹ Additionally, social media tools are websites that “interact with the users, while giving them information”.¹⁰ Widely and effectively used social media include WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and blogging.¹¹

Facebook was launched in 2004 as a social networking website exclusively for Harvard students. Now it has about two billion active users, as of September 2017.¹² Facebook users interact with other users or “Facebook friends” by posting on their own pages, by sharing and commenting on others posts and writing on other members’ “walls” or sending direct personal messages. Users are able to create and join interest groups, “like” pages, import and search for contacts, and upload photos and videos.¹³ YouTube was the first website dedicated solely to uploading and sharing personal video. Billions of videos are viewed each day on YouTube. As well as uploading and viewing media, users can also leave comments on videos. YouTube is the most frequented website online.¹⁴

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF INTER- AND INTRA-RELIGIOUS POLEMICS IN ETHIOPIA

For centuries, Ethiopians were known for tolerance and interreligious coexistence. However, this does not mean that there were no religious polemics or sporadic confrontations. There were occasionally seen in the elites.¹⁵ In recent years, these polemics have been rapidly mounting, since the coming power of the current Ethiopian government under the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). Following the change of government and the adoption of secular system, which granted equal right for all religions, there emerged polemical books of Orthodox Christianity directed against both Protestant Christian Ethiopians and Muslims.¹⁶ Interreligious competition also increased. Polemical videos between

A Case Study of the January 2011 Egyptian Uprising. MA Thesis, University of St. Andrews, Scotland.

9 Storck, *The Role of Social Media in Political Mobilization*.

10 Storck, *The Role of Social Media in Political Mobilization*.

11 Storck, *The Role of Social Media in Political Mobilization*.

12 “Facebook Statistics”, Facebook. Online at: <http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics> [Accessed 23 October 2017].

13 Storck, *The Role of Social Media in Political Mobilization*.

14 33 “Top Sites”. Online at: <http://www.alexa.com/topsites> [Accessed 10 November 2011].

15 Hussein A. 2006. “The Dynamism of Religious Conversion in the History of Ethiopia: Some Reflections”, *International Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 2(1/2):195-205; Hussein A. 2006. “Coexistence and/or Confrontation?: Towards a Reappraisal of Christian-Muslim Encounter in Contemporary Ethiopia”, *Journal of Religion in Africa* 36(1):4-22.

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

believers were filmed and publicised.¹⁷ Gradually, the religious polemics on social media changed their tone to a more violent and offensive approach.

While polemics between believers have existed in Ethiopia for some time, a new, violent and potentially problematic genre of polemics emerged after the boom of online social media, which in turn challenged believers' inter- and intra-group social relations, as well as Ethiopian state policy.¹⁸ After the 1990s, the nature of religious polemics changed due to two primary factors: (1) the declaration of religious freedom for all faiths with the new secular system and (2) the emergence of social media. With some exceptions, pre-1974 era was quiet for the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC), and there were no strong rivalries or polemicists who challenged it. Hence, for the EOC, the post-1974 missionary polemical moment was a relatively new thing, as historically they were not geared to active conversion or revivalist efforts. The pre-1974 method of EOC polemics was mostly detrimental to the development of other religions, but after 1974, in general, and the 1990s, in particular, the polemics become both defensive and offensive in kind. Religious polemics in Ethiopia have been interwoven with politics in service of hegemonic strategies and claims to power.¹⁹ Despite the current secular system, it is impossible to say that Ethiopian politics has been free from the influence of religion. Ethiopia officially divorced its state from religion only after 1974, and it became secular state in the 1990s, with constitutionally enshrined freedom of worship; however, religion is still present in the public sphere and influences community life. According to 2007 census,²⁰ about 96% of Ethiopian people are religious believers; therefore, it is inevitable that there is a religious agenda behind political parties and entities in Ethiopia. The characteristics of most political parties in Ethiopia reflect this fact.

Generally, in terms of themes, means and types of polemics, the confrontation has been between Ethiopian Muslims and Christians. These polemics can be categorised into three phases. The first phase is the pre-1990 period. During this period, polemics were conducted rarely. In rural areas, polemics were held in a face-to-face manner amongst religious leaders, mainly regarding religious doctrines and dogmas. The polemics were more poetic and indirect. Moreover, during this period the polemics were mainly nonviolent and had less impact on the social relations of the believers.

The second phase lasted from 1991 to 2010. During this period, the theme, space and means of polemics changed. In this phase, there were visible religious antagonisms within and between various faiths, mainly through printing media and audiovisual messages. For instance, a religious-revivalist trend was visible

17 In this study, the term "polemics" refers to the practice of engaging in controversial debate, strong verbal or written attack against individuals, groups of individuals, organisations or other things.

18 Abbink, "Religion in Public Spaces".

19 Abbink, "Religion in Public Spaces"; Hussein, "Coexistence and/or Confrontation".

20 2007 National Population and Housing census of Ethiopia. Central Statistical Agency, Ministry of Finance and Economic Development, Government of Ethiopia, 2007. Online at: <http://catalog.ihsn.org/index.php/catalog/3583>

amongst and within the Christians and Muslims. Most of these polemics in the second phase were manifested through publications. Both Christian and Muslim elites initiated religious books, magazines, newspapers and other publications for larger audiences, and in these there are clear polemics and provocations. For instance, five polemical magazines were published by the EOC: *Mälläkät*, *Astireyo*, *Simi'a Tidiq*, *Hämmär* and *Akotate*. And five polemical magazines were produced by Muslims such as *Hikma*, *Al-Hijab*, *Hijra*, *YeMuslimoch Guday* and *Al-Islam*. There were also newspapers produced by Muslims, such as *Salafia*, *Qudus*, *Bilal and Jumaa*. Protestant-Evangelical groups have also produced several magazines and newspapers. Both Christians and Muslims started to produce more DVDs, VCDs and MP3 files to promote religious doctrine, liturgy, religious songs, *Menzuma*, *Neshida*²¹ and other consciousness-raising material.²²

Polemicists were typically young and mostly from the educated class and urban dwellers. Urban centres, mainly Addis Ababa, were the epicentre of the polemics. More and more aggressive and polemical books eventually came to be produced from all religious groups. For instance, an important polemicist and defender of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity, Kidanä-Mariyam Getahun, published at least three books on the subject between 1991 and 1995. His last work was entitled “የእስላምና የክርስቲያኑ ውይይት” (Yä-Muslimu inna yä-Kristiyanu Wiyiyit or “Muslim-Christian Dialogue”). Kidanä-Mariyam later also wrote against the Pentecostal Protestant faith.²³ In 1998, an Evangelical Christian, Mäsmärä Solomon, published “ይድረስ ለሙስሊም ወገኖቼ” (Yidräs lä Muslim Wägänoch, an English translation of which is “May It Reach to My Muslim Compatriots”), which was critical of Islam. That book, in turn, prompted a polemical response from Muslims. In the same year, the retired university lecturer Alämayyāhu Mogäs published a book entitled “ለምን አልሰለምኩም?” (Lämən Alsällämkum?, or “Why did not I become a Muslim?”), which was his quite provocative and forcefully worded reply to, amongst others things, the translated booklet “Is Jesus God?” by Ahmed Deedat, the *da’wa* activist whose impact was growing in Ethiopia in the early 1990s. The Muslim response to Alämayyāhu’s publication was one of indignation. Moreover, Orthodox writer Efrem published a book entitled አከራሪ እስልምና በኢትዮጵያ (Fanatic Islamism in Ethiopia), and others have continued the trend of expressing fear of growing Muslim influence.²⁴

Muslims have also written books defending their religion. Ahmedin Jebel has published books entitled የሴቶች መብት በእስላም (The right of women in Islam) and ኢትዮጵያውያን መስሊሞች ከ615-1700: የጭቆና ትግልና የትግል ታሪክ (Ethiopian Muslims 615-1700: The History of Repression and Resistance). Renowned Muslim scholar and translator

21 *Menzuma* and *Neshida* are Islamic songs practised by elders and youths, respectively.

22 Abbink, “Religion in Public Spaces”.

23 Abbink, “Religion in Public Spaces”.

24 Samuel A. 2007. *Do We Have Religious Tolerance in Ethiopia?* Addis Ababa: Mega Printing (in Amharic) and Eshäte E. 2008. *Fanatic Islamism in Ethiopia*. Addis Ababa: Ethio-Tiqur Abay Printing (in Amharic) (cited in Abbink, “Religion in Public Spaces”).

Ustaz Hassen Tajū has also published lots of polemical books. His book entitled የሐመረ ተዋሕዶን ቅጥረት በእስልምና እውነት (The Mistakes of Tewahdo [Orthodox] in the verity of Islam) was very polemical and controversial at the time of publication and since. Other Muslim polemical publications are works that were translated into Amharic from Arabic, along with the work of *da'wa* activists, such as the influential South African Muslim preacher Ahmed Deedat (1918–2005) and the Indian Muslim writer-preacher Zakir Naik.²⁵ In some parts of the country, such as Addis Ababa, Harar, Kemise, Gondar, Jimma and Begi, the polemics turned into actual confrontation and blood-shed, as conflicts were incited by the polemical publications. People began practise their religion more and more in the form of competition, and intra-religious polemics also began to emerge. A number of mosques and churches were built, and there were serious polemics about their construction.

The third phase of the polemics lasted from 2010 to date. In this phase, social media became the battlefield of faith-based polemics and verbal warfare. During this period, social media became sophisticated and served as the main means for religious propagation and debate. Youth have been the main social media polemicists. Particularly since the beginning of Ethiopian Muslims' Movement in 2011, social media has become a key space for inter-and intra-religious polemics. There were also two further developments during this period: (1) the government began deeply intervened in religious affairs and (2) Ethiopian diaspora communities from the United States of America, Europe and the Middle East took control of the agenda of religious polemics on social media. This chapter focuses on this last polemical phase.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM AND RESEARCH METHOD

For centuries, religious tolerance was the natural culture of Ethiopia. Historically, Ethiopian societies were known for diversity and interreligious coexistence and were exemplary in terms of interreligious tolerance.²⁶ The saying "religion is private whereas Ethiopia is our common" (ሐገር የጋራ ነው ሐይማኖት የግል) has been the guiding principle for the people of Ethiopia.²⁷ However, this important heritage of inter- and intra-religious tolerance and fraternity have gradually deteriorated. The Ethiopian diaspora and the advancement of social media in quantity and quality have played a vital role in the deterioration of religious tolerance in Ethiopia. Though sporadic polemics between believers have a long history in Ethiopia,²⁸ a new and potentially problematic dynamic of polemics has come about with the emergence of online social media.²⁹ Historically, the Ethiopian diaspora has played their own role in

25 Abbink, "Religion in Public Spaces".

26 Abbink, "Religion in Public Spaces".

27 Abbink, "Religion in Public Spaces".

28 Abbink, "Religion in Public Spaces".

29 Abbink, "Religion in Public Spaces".

shaping Ethiopian politics. They have had invisible hands in the political situation of the state from the distance. Currently, the diaspora communities have started actively engaging in religious affairs, but too often in biased and provocative ways. By using social media such as Facebook, WhatsApp and YouTube as their main tools, the Ethiopian diaspora from United States, Europe and Middle East have been engaging in religious polemics. Internet debates, in turn, come to serve as input for both printed and broadcast local media in Ethiopia and public discourse.³⁰

The civil disobedience of Arab world – particularly Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria and Yemen – was also provoked and exacerbated by social media. Likewise, religious tolerance has rapidly declined in Ethiopia. There have also been religiously based conflicts in Ethiopia within and between Muslims and Christians because of the religious polemics conducted amongst diaspora Ethiopians on social media. Elites and youth are in the forefront in provoking such conflicts. However, there are very limited academic studies in the area. The main objective of this chapter is, therefore, to appraise the impacts of inter- and intra-religious polemics of Ethiopian diaspora in the country's religious tolerance and coexistence and to suggest some possible solutions to overcome these challenges.

For this chapter, a qualitative descriptive research method was employed. The data were gathered through internet, online live discussion, peer discussion and the researcher's direct observations and active involvement. Closed chat rooms and WhatsApp groups have been accessed by using the snowball sampling technique. Snowball sampling is used where potential participants are hard to find. It is a sampling technique in which research participants recruit other participants for a test or study.³¹ Internet-derived data allow researchers to access something much closer to the experience of everyday life than we ever encounter in interview settings.³²

Data have also been accessed through internet mainly Facebook and YouTube, including discussions in which the researcher was a participant as well as an observer and through informal discussion about online religious polemics with the researcher's Muslim and non-Muslim friends. The data have been collected, analysed and interpreted using qualitative method and academic and grey literature.³³ The internet offers rich data for almost any social researcher, particularly those working in sensitive areas. Qualitative methods using internet-derived data have become one of the emerging fields in social science studies. In addition, the internet can make previously temporary and hard to record aspects of daily life into researchable phenomena.

30 Abbink, "Religion in Public Spaces".

31 Gilbert N. 2001. *Social Research Update*. Guildford: Department of Sociology, University of Surrey.

32 Hine C. 2001. "Internet Research and Unobtrusive Methods", *Social Research Update* 61. Online at: <http://sru.soc.surrey.ac.uk/SRU61.pdf>

33 Grey literature here refers to any unpublished documents, such as annual reports.

INTER- AND INTRA-RELIGIOUS POLEMICS, SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE ETHIOPIAN DIASPORA

Hatred, discrimination, and violence in the name of religion are certainly not new phenomena, but rather date back through the historical record.³⁴ However, the level of interreligious hatred has been increasing exponentially since the 9/11 attacks, in which Islam was portrayed as a source of terrorism. Since then, numerous religious polemics have been uploaded to YouTube, and many individuals have been actively engaged in polemical activities on Facebook mainly through likes, comments and sharing of posts. These polemics have been conducted within and between Christians and Muslims. On a strictly theological basis, it is sometimes difficult to define what would be considered inter- or intra-religious distinctions. Within religions, there are denominations and factions who may or may not view themselves as part of a broader one. However, for the purposes of the current analysis, Christianity and Islam are treated as key and distinctive religions in Ethiopia, such that conflict between these sects would be represented as an instance of interreligious violence. The polemicists who are subjects of this chapter are based in Europe, United States and Middle East-based Ethiopian diaspora communities. There are a number of violent online debates and discourses between Muslim and Orthodox Christians, between Muslims and Protestant Christians and between Orthodox Christians and Protestants. However, Muslims versus Orthodox Christians and Orthodox Christians versus Protestants polemics are the more pronounced and common polemics amongst the Ethiopian diaspora communities.

Orthodox Christian versus Muslim polemics

Muslim versus Orthodox Christians polemics are the most dominant and violent online religious debates. As discussed above, Ethiopian Muslims and Orthodox Christians have competed one another nonviolently, but sometimes violently, for long time. Hence, the polemics between the Orthodox and Muslims are deeply rooted and more common. The current social media polemics have been conducted mainly through Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. The polemical statements have been made both in closed groups and in open social media. Polemics have initiated mainly following events actions closed taken by the government or by other believers that have been perceived to be advantageous to one or another religious group.

Preaching against Islam or Christianity is another important source of polemics. For instance, an anti-Muslim diatribe exceeding one hour in length and entitled “Fanatic Islam a threat for Ethiopian Orthodox Church” (አክራሪ እስልምና የኢትዮጵያ ቤ/ክ አስቸጋሪው ፈተና) was uploaded to YouTube.³⁵ The video was released by members of Ethiopian

34 Woolf LM and Hulsizer MR. 2003. “Intra- and Inter-Religious Hate and Violence: A Psychosocial Model”, *Journal of Hate Studies* 2:5-26.

35 “Ethiopian Orthodox Church vs Islam Jihadists – አክራሪ እስልምና የኢትዮጵያ ቤ/ክ አስቸጋሪው ፈተና”, *YouTube*, 27 October 2015 [Accessed 10 February 2019].

diaspora community in the United States. It is more political than theological in content. In this video, the preacher denies the conversion of Negus Nejash, also known by the name Najashi in Ethiopian history.³⁶ Ethiopian Muslims argue that Najashi not only sheltered the *sahabas*, but also ultimately embraced Islam. Najashi's benevolence is said to have been reciprocated by the Prophet, not only in the form of the declaration – *utruku al-habasha ma tarakukum* ("leave the Ethiopians alone as long as they leave you alone"), but also the Prophet's in absentia performance of a special Islamic funeral prayer (*salat al-ghaib*) to King Najashi upon his death. The latter indicates his conversion to Islam.

As historian, Hussein Ahmed³⁷ has noted, "Ethiopian Muslim tradition has canonized the Aksumite king as a Muslim saint under the honourific name, Ahmad al-Najashi, Ahmad being the name believed to have given to him by the prophet."³⁸ For Muslim polemicists, the Najashi narrative helps to reposition the Ethiopian Muslims' national identity.³⁹ In these polemics, the preacher considers Ahmed Ibn Ibrahim (Gragh Ahmed) as enemy and invader of Christian Ethiopia. However, Muslim polemicists have argued that, for Ethiopian Muslims, Ahmed is not only Ethiopian, but also a national hero. In fact, the cases of these two kings, Negash and Ahmed ibn Ibrahim, remain the main agenda social media polemicists. The video provokes hostility amongst Ethiopian Muslims and Christians by depicting the Christians as victims of the Islamic movement. The preacher of this polemic has also tried to create division amongst Muslims by provoking one mainly Sufi sect against other sects. At the end of the video, the preacher also criticises the current patriarch of Ethiopia and the Tehadiso Orthodox Church.⁴⁰ These kinds of heated, offensive and provocative videos from both Christian and Muslim polemicists have been uploaded to YouTube mainly from United States Ethiopian diaspora community.

36 Nejash was the king of Ethiopia who warmly welcomed the companions of Prophet Mohammed in 615. According to Arab historians and Muslim scholars, he is said to have embraced Islam.

37 Professor Hussein Ahmed was a scholar at Addis Ababa University. He published more than 35 articles in reputable academic journals about Ethiopian Muslims. He passed away in 2009.

38 Feyissa D and Lawrence B. 2014. "Muslims Renegotiating Marginality in Contemporary Ethiopia", *The Muslim World* 104(3):281-305; Ahmed H. 1996. "Current Trends in Islamic Literature in Ethiopia (1995-96)". Paper presented at the Fourth International Conference on the History of Ethiopian Art, Trieste, Italy, 24-27 September.

39 Feyissa and Lawrence, "Muslims Renegotiating Marginality in Contemporary Ethiopia", 282; Erlich H. 1994. *Ethiopia and the Middle East*. Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers; Erlich H. 2007. *Saudi Arabia and Ethiopia: Islam, Christianity and Politics Entwined*. Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publisher; Hussein A. 2001. *Islam in Nineteenth Century Wollo, Ethiopia: Revival, Reform and Reaction*. Leiden: Brill.

40 Tehadiso is a new sect of Orthodox Christianity that recently separated from Ethiopian Tewahdo Orthodox Christianity.

Muslim-Orthodox case studies

The following practical case studies are important examples of Orthodox Christian-Muslim polemics in social media discourses in the years 2017 and 2018, which I actively engaged for the purpose of this study. During those years, Muslims and Christians have issued heated polemics on dozens of issues, but I raise only a few.

Case 1: The question of Axum mosques

The most heated discourse between Ethiopian Orthodox Christian and Ethiopian Muslims has been over the issue of mosque building in the city of Axum in northern Ethiopia. In Axum, Muslims are not allowed to build mosques. Orthodox Christians believe that Axum is the holy city of Orthodox where the original “Ark of the Covenant” (*Tabot*) was preserved in Church of Our Lady Mary of Zion, such that Muslims and Protestants are not allowed to build any religious institutions in Axum and its environs. This prohibition of mosque building in Axum prompted Muslim bloggers and activists to call for the building of mosques in Axum in posts on their Facebook pages. This resulted in debate in Ethiopian diaspora communities.

The debates and polemics have taken place in comment sections after some text has been posted about the issue. For example, an article of mine about Axum mosque building, posted on my Facebook wall, was shared by 600 polemicists and generated lots of comments in response, both of appreciation and opprobrium. The comments were posted mainly by activists from Ethiopian diaspora in Turkey, Middle East, United States and Europe. These polemics have had actual impacts on the interreligious relation of the local people. There were practical clashes between Muslims and Christians. For instance, churches have been burnt in Muslim-dominant areas such as Jigjiga, and mosques have been burnt in Christian-dominant areas such as Gondar.

Case 2: The demolition of Saint Yohannes Orthodox Church in Lagetafo, Oromia

The destruction by the Muslim mayor, Chaltu Sani, of Saint Yohannes Orthodox Church, which had been constructed without the knowledge and permission of the municipality of the city in Lagetafo in Oromia region, caused a serious rift between Muslim and Orthodox Christians on social media, mainly on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. The Ethiopian diaspora from United States and Europe polemicised, mainly against Mayor Chaltu, as being against Orthodox Christians. Muslim polemicists, mainly from Ethiopian Muslim diaspora communities, residing in the Middle East and elsewhere defended her in an open counter-attack against the Christian polemicists. This caused conflict and debate amongst Muslims and Christians in Ethiopia. Finally, most probably because of the impact of this social media campaign, the government allotted the Saint Yohannes community another plot of land in compensation for the demolished church.

Case 3: The book of Abduljelil Ali Kassa

At the beginning of 2018, Abduljelil Ali Kassa, a Muslim Ethiopian student in Italy, published a polemical book about Emperor Tewodros entitled “ኪነት ያገኘው አጼ” (approximate English translation: “Tewodros: An Emperor venerated with arts”). The publication of this book was a vital episode for Ethiopian Christians on social media. Christians consider Tewodros to be the initiator of modern Ethiopia, and they have a great respect for him. However, Muslims have an historical grievance against him for having committed massacre on Muslims to create a Christian Ethiopia. In touching upon this hitherto untouched issue of Ethiopian historiography, the author disclosed a history of Emperor Tewodros that had long been buried. According to Abduljelil, the emperor became famous by artists eulogising and praising him in the ways that he never deserved. As to Abduljelil, these tales and music made Tewodros out to be great man, when in reality he was a murderer.

This book was a focus of social media argument for months, and the argument does not seem yet to be terminated. Ethiopian Christian diaspora polemicists mainly from United States and Europe, seriously criticised the book and intimidated the author with threats of death. A video was released that incited Orthodox Tewahdo Christians to kill the author whenever and wherever they found him.⁴¹ This in turn provoked Muslim activists and polemicists to post more and more polemical issues on Facebook. Ethiopian diaspora Muslims from Middle East also released videos to intimidate any Christians who would try to attack the author by any means. The book was highly promoted by Muslim diaspora groups, mainly based in the Middle East. Following the social media polemics, discussions have taken place about the book and its author on private television channels in Addis Ababa, such as Ethiopia News Network (ENN).⁴²

Case 4: The official visit of former Prime Minister Hailemariam to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States

The former prime minister, Hailemariam Desalegn, made an official visit to Saudi Arabia. Following this visit, Ethiopian Muslim diaspora social media activists from Turkey expressed their positive feelings and appreciations on their Facebook walls. Ethiopian Christian diaspora groups from the United States and Europe, however, raised concern about the relationship of Ethiopia what they called its “historic enemy”, Islamic countries. This issue caused violent arguments amongst Muslim and Christians diaspora, which were later extended to the homeland. This in turn created mistrust and suspicion between Ethiopian Muslims and Christians in Ethiopia.

Case 5: Jawar Mohammed speech of “Mecha”

Jawar Mohammed, executive director and founder of United States-based private television Oromia Media Network (OMN), has emerged as one of the most influential

41 The online polemic was held in 2018. The present researcher watched it live online.

42 ENN is a private television station transmitted from Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

Ethiopian Muslim diaspora activists and political analysts. As of January 2019, he had 1,555,231 followers on Facebook. Jawar is said to be an engineer of the current Ethiopian political syndrome, including a public mob and boycott which have been experienced in Ethiopia for the last five or more years. The Ethiopian state sponsored television (EBC/ETV) made a documentary film to defame and label Jawar as terrorist. While he was making speech for Muslim audience, Jawar used the term “*mecha*” to explain the culture of the local people. A *mecha* is actually a traditional knife of the Oromo people that is used for harvesting their farms. It also serves to defend and attack enemies. However, it seemed that Christian polemicists intentionally twisted his speech out of context, making it look as if Jawar promoted Muslims to attack Christians by using the term *mecha*.

An example of one of the polemics raised by Christians, in this vein, is the following:

A month before after I saw the Aljazeera program on which Jawar Mohammed declared his Oromo first credo, I raised a question in my article whether he is an Oromo first or a Muslim Oromo first. Today I get the answer not from anybody else but from his speech. He clearly injects his venomous propaganda at a Muslim gathering in the USA. He unequivocally stated that he is an Oromo first Muslim extremist who recommends the beheading of Christians with ‘Mecha’ – a sharp metallic farm tool. I have more questions for him. Since he stated that Ethiopia is imposed on him, why does he worry about Muslims in Gondar or in Tigray? Have he ever been in Gondar and saw how the Muslims and Christians live in harmony? I am sure he was never there. Have he ever know about the history of King Tsadique Yohannes of Gondar who gave green light to Muslims to preach their religion in his Christian empire in the seventeenth century? He never know about “Addis Alem” district which is at the heart of the present day Gondar city which is given by the king to Muslims to freely practice their religion? Till today the district is dominated by Muslims. Instead of fabricating his own rancor history in every platform, why not he tried to dig deep into real history? Of course he said his source of information about Muslims in Gondar is a single individual. Jawar’s explanation is full of animosity towards Christians. He is clearly preaching not equality, liberty and democracy instead establishing a Muslim republic under the supremacy of Oromo. Isn’t it worse than EPRDF? The people of Ethiopia is not looking for a racist religious extremist that may lead to bloodshed and chaos in the country but someone who believe in equality and freedom. Many Ethiopian Christians including me are condemning the intervention of the government on religious affairs of Muslims, but Jawar’s speech is more effective than “Jahadawi Harekat” in diverting the mentality of Christians against the felicitous questions of the Ethiopian Muslims. Isn’t Jawar’s speech legitimizing the claim of the Ethiopian government? I think ETV gets a video to show without any worry to prepare a documentary. Unless Ethiopian Muslims exclude such malicious ethnocentric religious extremist not to lead their religious quest, I can foresee their struggle derailing.⁴³

43 “Commentator on Facebook about Jawar Mohammed”, *Facebook*, 15 September 2017 [Accessed 15 March 2018].

These days, most Christians would be quick to label Jawar as a terrorist and anti-Christian. However, Muslims, mainly Oromo Muslim polemicists, argued in favour of Jawar. Indeed, in the Oromia region, he has strong acceptance by youth for he declaring himself to be “Oromo First” and creating strong Oromo nationalism in the name of *Qerro*.⁴⁴ For the last five years, boycotts in Oromia were ordered and controlled by Jawar Mohammed through social media, mainly Facebook and Twitter, and he remains one of the key polemicists of this period.

The themes of the polemics are theological, historical and political. For instance, Muslims have criticised Orthodox Christians for their concepts of the nature of the trinity, the *tabot*, the divinity of Christ, and their alcohol (ab)use. Christians have criticised Islamic practices of polygamy and women’s rights, as well as Islamic clothing, such as *niqab* (veil) and *jilbab*. Moreover, the Christians consider Muslims to be terrorists and aliens. There were such opinions amongst the members of Mahibere Kidusan even before the coming social media. However, social media has added fuel to an existing problem. The Muslims also used the derogatory term *kafir* against Christians. This, in turn, created suspicion and distrust amongst the common people at home in Ethiopia. From the Muslim side, the polemics have revolved around: Isa (Jesus) and the principle of trinity in Orthodox Christianity. Ethiopian history is also an important topic of discourse, particularly the historical dominance of Orthodox Christianity and the current Mahibere Kidusan movement. Muslim elites have posted on their Facebook pages historical writings that blamed Ethiopian monarchies, mainly those of Tewodros, Yohannes, Minilik and Haile Selassie I, as persecutors of Ethiopian Muslims, prompting debates marked by insults and rhetorical violence. As a participant and observer of debates, this researcher witnessed posts related to historical writings about Emperor Tewodros, as a persecutor of Ethiopian Muslims. In response to those posts, there are hundreds, if not thousands, of comments for and against from both Christians and Muslims in the Ethiopian diaspora. Muslims were for the post, and the Christians were against. Some of the Christian polemicists insulted Ethiopian Muslims, in general terms, as aliens and non-citizens. These and other issues raised by the polemicists have deteriorated the existing Muslim–Christian coexistence and tolerance. The comments have been forwarded from Ethiopians both home and abroad. Other polemicists have debated and competed over public space, often in the most literal sense over the question of when and where to build mosques, churches, or chapels; self-presentation in the media; public celebrations; and religious “noise” production by means of loudspeakers.⁴⁵ The polemics have been mainly initiated by Ethiopian diaspora residents in United States, Europe and the Middle East, but polemicists from Ethiopia have sometimes joined the debate in comments. Audiovisual messages have also been released, mainly from the United States, Europe and the Middle East.⁴⁶

44 “*Qerro*” is an Afan Oromo term to refer to youths.

45 See the cases of Legetafo Church and Axum Mosque discussed in this chapter.

46 Polemical agendas (texts) were posted by Muslim polemicists such as Abdurehim Ahmed, Abdujelil Ali Kassa and Mohammed Jemal.

Protestant Evangelical versus Muslim polemics

Even though not as frequent or rhetorically heated as the polemics between Orthodox Christians and Ethiopian Muslims, there are also polemics amongst Ethiopian Protestant Evangelicals and members of the Muslim Ethiopian diaspora on social media. The themes of the polemics between Protestant Evangelicals and Muslims are mainly theological. For instance, in January 2018, Uztaz Abu Hayder, a Muslim polemicist and Muslim preacher from United Arab Emirates, and Teklu Temesgen, Evangelical polemicist from Canada, conducted debate on Temesgen's official webpage.⁴⁷ The theme of the debate was "whether the Quran was derived from the Bible or not". Both polemicists invited their supporters, and the debate was completed peacefully that day, with only a few heated polemics in the comments. The next day, however, Temesgen released video about the debate against Abu Hayder. Abu Hayder soon responded, and the debate turned to polemics. Both polemicists released video through their Facebook pages. Gradually, the debate mounted and violent polemics were exchanged between Muslims and Protestants. Specifically, Ethiopian Muslim posters from Middle East engaged in the heated polemics in favour of Uztaz Abu Hayder. Even some Orthodox polemicists supported Uztaz Abu Hayder. From the other side, the same sort of rhetoric came from Protestant supporters of evangelist Temesgen. The polemics was a vicious circle from the grass roots that reached as far as Ethiopia.

Protestant Evangelicals versus Orthodox Christians

In addition to the interreligious polemics described above, there are also serious intra-religious polemics and debates that engage the Ethiopian diaspora community. These intra-religious polemics are mainly made in closed groups, so as to not to create further division. For the research on Muslim groups, I was able to access a number of closed chat rooms and closed WhatsApp groups for the purpose of accessing the data. As a Muslim, however I could not access the Christian closed groups and social media. However, I was able to watch and attend some online active social media polemics within Christian groups.

There are many anti-Protestant and anti-Orthodox Christian polemicists within Ethiopian Christian diaspora communities who upload videos through YouTube,⁴⁸ and numerous Facebook and WhatsApp groups have also been created for this purpose. The main areas of their polemics have been about the Virgin Mariam, religious songs, the monastery system and other theological issues. Moreover, the Orthodox Christians consider the Protestants to be newcomers and a by-product of Western influences.

47 "Religious dialogue between Teklu and Abu Hayder", *YouTube*, 15 January 2018 [Accessed 15 March 2018].

48 "The Amazing Debate Between E.O.T.C. and Ethiopian Protestant Part 3", *YouTube*, 26 August 2015.

Polemics amongst Orthodox Christians

Intra-religious polemics also exist within Orthodox Christianity. The polemics are conducted between the traditional Tewahdo Orthodox Christians and Tehadiso groups, between Orthodox Christianity and Mahibere Kidusan and between Mahibere Kidusan and Tehadiso groups.⁴⁹ Mahibere Kidusans are members of an association amongst the educated class who are distributed throughout government offices, including high-level political positions. Most of the Ethiopian Christian diaspora are in favour of this sect. The Mahibere Kidusans have tried to create relative harmony amongst different sects of Christianity. However, they blame the traditional Orthodox Christians for the gradual decline of the power of Orthodox Church in the country's affairs. The traditional Orthodox Christians have less support from diaspora communities, but they have had strong support from the Ethiopian government. They control the official power of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Tehadiso, new sect detached from Ethiopian Orthodox Church, has been criticised both by the traditional Orthodox Church and Mahibere Kidusan.

There are also heated debates amongst these sects of Christians, mainly on the theological issues. Until very recently, Ethiopia had two patriarchates, one at home and one in exile, which is prohibited under the rules of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The second patriarchate was formed after Abuna Merkorios, the fourth patriarch, was forced into exile when the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) took political power in the early 1990s. Although the ecclesiastical law of the church strictly forbids the appointment of a new patriarch until the death of the existing one, the government appointed Abune Paulos to replace Merkorios. That created divisions amongst church leaders and the laity and resulted in mutual excommunications between the two synods. The Ethiopian diaspora communities were in favour of the exiled patriarchate and serious social media polemics in this regard.

Polemics amongst Muslims

As a Muslim, I was able to access closed social media polemics through Messenger chat rooms, zooms and WhatsApp groups with different sects of Islam. Intra-Muslim polemics actually started in 1990s, before the coming of social media. The two Ethiopian Muslim diaspora religious figures from the city of Harar, Sheikh Abdallah ibn Muhammad al Harari, the leader of Sufist-al Ahabash oriented Islam and Sheikh Yusuf 'Abd al-Rahman, a Saudi-Arabia-trained Salafist-Wahhabist-leaning leader started polemics from their bases Lebanon and Saudi Arabia, respectively.⁵⁰ Most of the Muslim polemical contributions were initially directed to the Ethiopian Muslims themselves, not to Christians, exhorting readers to be better Muslims and cherish their own faith.⁵¹

49 "የጥራ ውሀ እንዴት ጣፈጠ – new Dr. Kesis Zebene Lemma sebket", *YouTube*, 20 July 2017 [Accessed 20 February 2019].

50 Abbink, "Religion in Public Spaces".

51 Abbink, "Religion in Public Spaces".

There are internal rivalries and fraction within Islam. For instance, there is growing rivalries between Sufiyya and Wuhabya/Salafiyya, the Wuhabya/Salafiyya and Ahbash, and Wuhabya/Salafiyya and Ihwan (Muslim brotherhood). Advocates for the Wuhabya and Ihwan sects posts against other sects on their Facebook pages and walls. Like that of Mahibere Kidusan for Christianity, the Ihwan (Muslim Brotherhood) supporters amongst Muslims are politically active and well educated. They want to create unity amongst all Muslims. But Wuhabya/Salafia sect has accused other sects for the violation *sunnah* – the way Prophet Mohammed practised Islam. They criticise religious performances of other sects, including traditional rituals, saint worship, pilgrimages towards spiritual sites and performance of religious songs or epics. On these points, there have been verbal battles, mainly between the Ihwan and Wuhabya/Salafiyya, through online social media, particularly closed social media and chat rooms. Sometimes, when consensus is not reached within closed debate, a group might post the issue on open social media and the polemics thus come out into open. For instance, well-known author and translator of Islamic books, Ustaz Hassen Taju and his supporters, are in favour of Sufi sects against Wuhabya/Salafiyya and Ihwan. They condemn the Ihwan-leaning arbitrary committee of Ethiopian Muslims for their “disrespect” of the Sufi *ulemas*. The members of the arbitrary ad hoc committee have not replied to polemics of Ustaz Hassen and other social media polemicists. However, the supporters of the committee, mainly from Turkey and the Gulf States, argue in the support the Committee against the groups of Ustaz Hassen.

CONCLUSION

For the last couple of decades, Ethiopian diaspora have been playing visible and invisible roles in Ethiopian politics. These days, with help of modern technologies, the hands of Ethiopian diaspora have been extended into the country’s affairs in various ways. Very recently, these diaspora communities have been waging so-called religious “battles” through social media, mainly via Facebook and YouTube. They have been engaging in destruction of the strong bridges that have been built within and between Ethiopian Christians and Muslims for centuries. As social media increasingly becomes part of our daily lives, people have started to find new ways to interact with religion and religious communities; hence, web-based and mobile technologies have become the main tools to turn communication into interactive dialogue. Internet-based applications are recent phenomena, but they are booming as a means of dialogue amongst religious groups. Youth groups, in particular, are the main actors on these social media platforms.⁵²

From time to time, the amount of online social media has increased greatly, and the forms of internet usage have diversified seemingly without end. Social media such as Facebook, YouTube, Whatsapp, Twitter and blogs are often used as platforms for misinformation, stereotyping and even recruitment by violent extremists. Social media communities of Facebook pages, especially, have been serving as the main

52 The youth is familiar with technology and more active in social media.

channel of polemics within and amongst faiths. For a variety of reasons, social media has also become the preferred channel for Ethiopian religious polemics. First, social media is very fast and time saving. Information can reach any corner of the world within minutes, if not seconds. Second, there are no consolidated laws that bind social media. Third and last, people can partake in the polemics without revealing their identities, so they are not in a position to be asked about or accused for what they do on social media.

These social media polemics have become great challenges for coexistence and religious tolerance in Ethiopia. In particular, the diaspora communities of Ethiopia who reside in Europe, United States and Middle East have been eroding the existing religious tolerance and religious accommodation in Ethiopia. This assessment clearly reveals that religious polemics which have been conducted via social media are depleting inter- and intra-religious mutual toleration and cooperation. This generates political problems in Ethiopia, because polemics have a mass appeal due to intensive utilisation of new media technologies and funding from global partners and financiers. These effects gradually filter down from the urban areas, where most activists and propagandists operate, to the countryside, where people of different religious persuasion once got along, but now have to face the negative aspects of the polemics. The social media polemicists post horrible photos and videos to provoke believers. Images of ruins of burnt churches and mosques circulate through social media. The photos and videos may be real, photoshopped, fabricated or imported from other areas.

A major focus of the polemics is on the core theological differences: Jesus as God/Messiah or human being/prophet, the reality and meaning of the crucifixion, the compatibility between nature and unity of God/Allah and the idea of the Trinity, the status of Mohammed as the “last prophet”, polygamy and women’s rights in Islam, and so on. Here polemics challenge the content of religious doctrines, which are then argued about in a question–response procedure. Historical and political issues, such as the alleged conversion to Islam of Nigus Ella Ašama/Negash, the issue of Ahmed Ibn Ibrahim, the role Ethiopian emperors mainly Tewodros, Yohannes IV, Menilik II and Haile Selassie I, have also been major topics of religious polemics. However, the political motivation of these religious polemics, alongside the theological and historical debates, seems to be about gaining monopoly control over the country’s political arena. There is no doubt that it is not a “battle for souls”, but a battle for power – not doctrinal or historical battle, but a contemporary and political one. The Orthodox Christians are struggling to regain their former position as a state religion; whereas the Muslims seek to assure the sustainability of the current relative freedom.

Several recommendations follow from this analysis. First, there should be free, responsible and independent local media in Ethiopia. The absence of free media in Ethiopia creates a fertile ground for the consolidation of social media and polemics. Social media has become nearly the only source information in Ethiopia. Second, there should be open discussions amongst various religious groups to avoid unnecessary suspicions and distrust which have been created by social media.

The Ethiopian government has arranged such gatherings. Religious leaders who have religious knowledge and acceptance by the people should be participants. Third, leaders of all religious institutions should be elected by the consent of the people and without the intervention of the government. The government should not assign political cadres in the name of religion, as this has been created room and opportunities for polemics to emerge. Fourth, there should be binding rules against social media polemicists and bloggers who engage in creating social hostilities. For this, we can refer to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which foregrounds the protection of freedom of expression in Article 19. The ICCPR also recognises that certain exceptional speech falls outside of free expression. Therefore, Article 20 of the ICCPR calls for prohibitions on “propaganda for war”, and on “any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence”. Thus, under the ICCPR, certain expressions may be limited by law, if necessary, for the purpose of protecting personal reputation, national security, public order, public health or public morals. These provisions have a particular bearing on expression in relation to violent radicalisation and would be useful in the case of religious polemics on social media in Ethiopia.⁵³

53 United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). 2017. *Youth and Violent Extremism on Social Media: Mapping the Research*.