

# Causes of Religious Conflict in Ethiopia

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## Abstract

This study tried to see the causes of religious conflict in Ethiopia. Participants of the study were drawn from conflict-prone areas of the country, chiefly Muslim dominated areas. Christians of various denominations (mainly Protestants and Eastern-Oriental Orthodox or Coptic Church followers) and Muslims took part in the study. The results of the study showed that the desire to form an Islamic State, religious ethnocentrism, a new Islamic movement, the expansion of Christianity, reversing history and methods of preaching were found as major causes of the conflict. The conflicts are said to have brought destructions which caused the massacre of Christians by Islamic fundamentalists as a result of which, according to the study, forty five people were wounded, properties worth of more than five million dollars were destroyed, about five thousand people were forced to flee their homes, and a considerable number of Christians were forced to convert to Islam.

**KEY WORDS:** Ethiopia, conflict, religion, fundamentalist, ethnic, Islam

## Introduction

Christianity and Islam have peacefully co-existed in Ethiopia for centuries. According to tradition, a group of Arab followers of Islam in danger of persecution by local authorities in Arabia took refuge early in the seventh century in the Aksumite Kingdom of the Ethiopian Christian highlands.<sup>1</sup> These people were well-treated and permitted to practice their religion as they wished. Consequently, the prophet Muhammad concluded that Ethiopia should not be targeted for *jihad*.<sup>2</sup> Since ancient time, Christian-Islamic relations have remained generally cordial.

Notwithstanding such peaceful co-existence, there were some occasional clashes between Muslims and Christians; the invasion of ‘*Grag*’, the ‘*Khedive of Egypt*’ and the ‘*Mahdists*’ were just few examples. In the first half of the sixteenth century, Ethiopia suffered a devastating Muslim invasion led by Ahmad Ibn Ghazi who declared a *jihad* (holy war) against the Ethiopians. In this regard, Young noted that in 1527 *Ahmad* the *Grag* led a Moslem army from the southeast, and with the support of co-religionists in

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<sup>1</sup> Pankhurst Richard, 1974: “Education, Language and History: A Historical Background to Post-War Ethiopia,” *The Ethiopian Journal of Education*, 7(1): 75-79.

<sup>2</sup> Ephraim Isaac, 1971 “Social Structure of the Ethiopian Church,” *Ethiopian Observer*, 5(14), 240-287.

Arabia and Turkey, quickly spread north overcoming the more poorly armed soldiers of Abyssinia, destroying churches, and causing massive dislocation; but later Ahmad was eventually defeated with the timely assistance of the Portuguese in 1541.<sup>3</sup> In a similar manner, at the end of the nineteenth-century, the Mahdist movement arose against Ethiopia as a combination of religious revivalism and Sudanese nationalist opposition to Egyptian rule.<sup>4</sup> Mahdist forces occupied *Matamma* following the Egyptian evacuation, and initiated a period of border raids and another arena of Ethio-Mahdist confrontation was in the south, in the present-day *Wallaga* region.<sup>5</sup>

Apart from these main historical clashes, the two major religions have co-existed peacefully in Ethiopia. This being the case, some political movements have tried to manipulate religious differences as a source of conflict by encouraging the ‘alienated groups’ to raise religious demand. As the Italian invaders tried to favor the Muslim community to stand against their Christian brothers, the Oromo rebels also exploited Islam as a nationalist ideology for their nationalist projects. Despite the fact that the Oromo rebels attempted to use Islam as an instrument for their nationalist agenda, the Oromo nationalism in the mid-1960s was dominated by the Mecha Tulema, a self-help association with political and cultural attributes led by the dominant figure Tadesse Biru.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, the Eritrean Liberation Front leadership stressed pan-Arabism and Islam as a means to build ties with lowland sheikhs and ethnic leaders, an approach that led to accusations that it was sectarian and feudal.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the fact that such political groups tried to use religion differences for their political program by creating more sub-units that makes the case complex, the two religions in Ethiopians have lived peacefully for a long period of time, considering humanity, the long-held traditions, history and culture which have shaped the collective identities of Ethiopians.

This happened because the relationship between Christians and Muslims seems to have been relatively cooperative for a longtime but nowadays this relationship appears to be competitive. In Muslim-dominated areas of Ethiopia, the interactions are more likely to be characterized by lack of cordiality, mutual suspicion and fear, following the conflict, particularly in areas where Christians are a minority, and/or, perhaps, vice versa. Among the various religious conflicts happening in Ethiopia, *Zelalem* tried to assess the religious clashes which happened only in the *Didessa* and *Gomma* districts of Western *Oromia*.<sup>8</sup> In a similar manner, Afe work focused on the religious tolerance in Addis Ababa.<sup>9</sup> Both studies did not address the causes of religious conflicts in a wider perspective and this study tries to fill in this research gap and it reviews causes of religious conflicts in the country. Taking the above points into account, the purpose of this study is to explore causes of religious clashes in Ethiopia.

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<sup>3</sup> John Young, *Peasant revolution in Ethiopia: The Tigray People's Liberation Front, 1975-1991* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 209.

<sup>4</sup> Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia: 1855-1991* (Addis Ababa University Press, 2002), p. 57.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* p. 57.

<sup>6</sup> Adejumobi, Saheed, *The history of Ethiopia* (London Greenwood Press, 2007), p. 112.

<sup>7</sup> Young, *Peasant Revolution in Ethiopia*, p. 129.

<sup>8</sup> Zelalem Temesgen, “The 2006 Religious Conflict in Didessa and Gomma Woradas of Western Oromia,” *Institute of Ethiopian Studies: M.A. Thesis*, Addis Ababa University, 2010.

<sup>9</sup> Afeework Hailu, “Religious Tolerance in Addis Ababa 1991-2008,” *Institute of Ethiopian Studies: M.A. Thesis*, Addis Ababa University, 2009.

### The Research Process

The primary purpose of this study is to identify the causes of religious conflict happening in Ethiopia in the past few years. The study was conducted in three Ethiopian localities, namely *Jimma*, *Kemmise* and *Bale-Robe* because of the many religious conflicts in these areas. Thus, the study tried to find out what reasons were perceived to potentially cause religious conflicts. Due to the sensitivity of the topic, qualitative research methods were employed. I have chosen a qualitative phenomenological research to study the lived experience of the participants. In explaining phenomenological research, Creswell noted that phenomenologists focus on describing what all participants have in common as they experience a common phenomenon.<sup>10</sup>

A well-designed qualitative study requires a relatively small number of respondents to yield rich data needed to understand subtle meanings in the phenomenon under study. Furthermore, Dornyei noted that in qualitative research, the main goal of sampling is to find individuals who can provide rich and varied insights into the phenomenon under investigation so as to maximize what we can learn and this goal is best achieved by means of purposive sampling.<sup>11</sup> Thus, in selecting samples for the focus group discussion (FGD) and the interview, purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used. I also tried my level best to get data from the local government officials but, presumably, due to lack of transparency and willingness on the part of the local government officials, I could not interview or make them participate in the focus group discussions. It has been very challenging to get data with regard to religious conflict in Ethiopia. It seems that the government might opt to handle disputes quietly and internally but it could not be so because interest-based and value-based conflicts tend to require a holistic and extensive dialogue and this should not be done without the involvement of the public. Thus, the acts of the government, hiding the case from media coverage, may not be justifiable. This showed that data about religious conflict in Ethiopia are less accessible, for people refrain from giving data about the conflict for fear of state reprisal. As a result of this, many people assume that it is illegal to offer information about the conflict. Thus, it is believed that giving information about the conflict is equated with breaking the law of the government.

The number of subjects taking part in the FGD and in the interview sessions was eighteen (having six members in each group) and fifteen respectively. The subjects were Muslims, Orthodox Christians and Protestants. An attempt was made to identify individuals who were in the churches while the conflicts happened. To gather meaningful information about the intimidations experienced through these conflicts, church leaders, pastors, priests, mosques imams and adherents of each religion took part in the study.

The instruments were refined through pilot testing. During the focus group discussions and interviews, I made a brief explanation about the objectives of the research. I was able to create a non-threatening environment by engaging in warm-hearted conversations with the subjects in order to extract the necessary information from the discussants. Before and during the discussion, discussants were reminded not to worry about the responses they gave. The qualitative data were transcribed and the verbatim accounts were thematically analyzed. In order to uncover the hidden deeper meaning of

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<sup>10</sup> Creswell John, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, (London, SAGE Publications, 2007), p. 58.

<sup>11</sup> Dornyei Zoltan, 2007 *Research Methods in Applied Linguistics: Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methodologies*, p. 113.

the data, a certain analytical process was employed; these were transcribing the data, coding, categorizing, producing tentative data and interpreting the data.

Scholars in qualitative research have used the voices of the participants in their studies. In doing so, Creswell stated that short eye-catching quotations are easy to read, take up little space and stand out from the narrator's text and are indented to signify different perspective.<sup>12</sup> Influenced by Creswell's argument, I used short eye-catching quotations throughout the analysis. The number of quotations in the forthcoming six sections varies from two to five which shows the relative degree of importance given to the points discussed. Regarding ethical issues, both the interviewees and the discussants were informed about the anonymity of the participants. I told them that I would not expose their names in both the analysis and the data; I informed them that I would rather use pseudo names.

## Results and Discussion

For the present study, the participants from *Jimma*, *Bale* and *Kemmise* stated a number of multi-layered motives and the chief reasons have been classified into various sections. The perceived causes for the existing religious conflict in Ethiopia are the formation of Islamic State (IS), religious ethnocentrism, the new Islamic movement, reversing history, the expansion of Christianity, and ways of preaching.

### *Formation of Islamic State*

Participants in the study listed causes of the conflict. In this connection, Mr. Kebede (Coptic Orthodox Christian) stated:

‘Attackers, who got support from the Arab world, were in Somalia and in the Arab world and they brought youngsters under their control. Their objective is to eradicate Christianity from the region.’

Similarly, Mr. Tesfa (Protestant) added:

They [the fundamentalists] just want to form Islamic State; these fundamentalists have been supported by the Arab States. They recorded all the incidents on video, the act of burning the Christian church, and sent it to the Muslim nations. For the sects, they would get support from the Arab nations.

Mr. Jemal (Muslim) noted:

‘They [the fundamentalists] need to make the whole region Muslim-dominated. They claimed that the region is a Muslim area; that is why they forced Christians to convert to Islam.’

Mr. Molla (Muslim), on his part, contributed:

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<sup>12</sup> Creswell, 2007: *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design*, p. 182.

‘In the religion of Islam, there is a doctrine which forces all people to convert to Islam; such form of religious theology could also be a cause of the conflict. Fundamentalists insist that Islam is the unique and final option for human beings because it is a “peaceful” religion.’

Mr. Adissu (Coptic Orthodox Christian) listed the following:

‘Fundamentalists brought destructions which caused the massacre of Christians by Islamic fundamentalists as a result of which, forty five people were wounded, properties worth of more than five million dollars were destroyed, about five thousand people were forced to flee their homes, and a considerable number of Christians were forced to convert to Islam.’

As Lemma’s response indicated, the local people wanted to keep the area as ‘Muslim dominated’; they just wanted to establish Islamic State. This finding was corroborated by Zelalem’s result. Zelalem reported that the new Muslim sect demanded that the totally Islamic state led by ‘*Sharia Law*’/Islamic law be established.<sup>13</sup> In a similar manner, Zeidan stated that fundamentalists aim at completely Islamizing the social and political systems of their societies and establishing a worldwide Islamic state based on Islamic law.<sup>14</sup> Tibi also stated that all Muslim fundamentalists set the implementation of the Shari’a/Islamic law as the primary condition for the realization of an Islamic system of government.<sup>15</sup> In its regular meeting in Abuja, Nigeria, in 1989, the ‘Islam in Africa Organization’ announced that every country in Africa has to implement Islamic Law; to this end, every support has been rendered.<sup>16</sup> Fundamentalists want nothing less than to control the world and submit it to Islam; that is, the primary aim of fundamentalists is the formation of an Islamic state with a new political order. As these data show, fundamentalists aim to convert all people to Islam but converting all Christians into Islam is against the dynamics of modern religiously pluralist states. This situation turned the case into interest-based and identity-based conflicts which did not have a great potential for compromise.

According to the words of *Kebede* and *Tesfa*, the Arab world supported the fundamentalists in the act of Islamizing the population. Consistent with this, Braswell stated that Saudi Arabia funds the building of mosques and the establishment of Islamic organizations across the world.<sup>17</sup> The Saudis have a desire to form Islamic States across the world; to this end, this country exerts much effort towards the Islamization of citizens all over the world, and Muslim fundamentalists are said to have been financed by the Islamic Relief Aid. Supporting this finding, Afe work’s respondents also stated that there are ‘NGOs’ and ‘foreign agents’ that work legally in Addis Ababa.<sup>18</sup> As a matter of fact, the actions of these institutions would bring religious instability, according to the aforementioned respondents. Since long time ago, the Arab World has never felt comfortable with Ethiopia. For this, *Mesfin* mentioned a range of historical reasons of which the following are most important.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Zelalem, 2006: *The 2006 Religious Conflict in Didessa and Gomma Woradas of Western Oromia*, p. 91.

<sup>14</sup> Zeidan, 2003: *Swords of Allah*, p. 11.

<sup>15</sup> Tibi, 1998: *The Challenges of Fundamentalism*, p. 142.

<sup>16</sup> Beyagebegnal, 2012: *Islamic Radicalism and the Process of Islamizing today’s Ethiopia*, p. 17.

<sup>17</sup> Braswell, 1996: *Islam: Its Prophet, People, Politics and Power*, p. 270.

<sup>18</sup> Afeework, 2009: *Religious Tolerance in Addis Ababa 1991-2008*, p. 85.

<sup>19</sup> Mesfin, 1971: *Ethiopia and the Indian Ocean*, p. 4.

The first reason is that, unlike the North African countries, the Ethiopian highland has remained immune to repeated attempts of the Arabs to convert it to Islam; this symbolizes the failure of the Arabs and of Islam in general. This factor must lie within the framework of historical clashes; for example, *Abmed Gragn's* invasion (1531-1543) and the movements of the *Mehadists* could be mentioned as instances of the attempt to convert the country into Islamic State. Second, Ethiopia breaks the solid continuity of Islam from the Mediterranean Sea to the Indian Ocean. Third, most people agree that Islam holds hidden hostility to all those they say are 'infidels', those who have not accepted Islam nor submitted to it. Due to this, the Arab world, having had an intense desire to make the country of Ethiopia an Islamic state, has been since long an enemy of Ethiopia. Just as an example, the separatist movement in Eritrea which was initially the Muslim-dominated Eritrea Liberation Front was supported by nations in the Arab world, such as Syria and Iraq which regarded Eritrea as an integral part of the Arab homeland.<sup>20</sup> Eritrean secessionism was born, nurtured and brought to full maturity in Egypt.<sup>21</sup> The material and moral support of the Arabs for the Eritrean Liberation Front could also be taken as a calculated long-range policy to weaken Ethiopia. This showed that Ethiopia is in danger from all sides except from Kenya in the south. Muslim [Arab] fundamentalists try their utmost therefore to subvert Christian Ethiopia and spend a large amount of the money that they remit Ethiopia for terrorist attacks. In view of the above, most people consider the actions of Muslim fundamentalists as being secretly aimed at realizing their ardent desire of the formation of Islamic State in Ethiopia.

With regard to *Molla's* response, Muslim fundamentalists insist that Islam is unique and final. I think, there is a need to see things through a different set of social lenses because a religious preference involves subjectivity. In drawing an analogy between a religion and a wife, Shenk clearly showed the level of subjectivity in comparing wives and religions.<sup>22</sup> When a husband says to his wife that she is the most beautiful woman and is the only one for him, this statement is true for him but it is not universally true. The wife of the husband might not be as pretty as other women but he perceives her as the most beautiful because of variation in perception and it is in human nature to be attracted to what is familiar to us. In the face of modern religious plurality and relativism, it seems irrational to absolutize a particular religious understanding. Religious plurality is part of our current social existence and is a global phenomenon that cannot be ignored at all.

### *Religious Ethnocentrism*

According to the data, the rising tide of religious conflict is fueled by ethnicity. Still, participants of the study have listed down this factor as a key cause.

Mr. Yilkaal (Protestant) said the following:

'Ethnic and religious conflict feed each other. In the Ethiopian context, the way ethnic conflict has been handled causes religious conflict; this is because, people become conscious about their identity.'

Mr. Molla (Muslim) on his part mentioned the following points with regard to this:

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid: p. 18.

<sup>21</sup> Mesfin, 1999: *The Horn of Africa: Conflict and Poverty*, p. 84.

<sup>22</sup> Shenk, 1997: *Who Do You Say that I am*, p. 39.

‘The political system paves a way for the formation of ethnocentric thought; and now villages become ethnocentric; this gives rise to the emergence of ethnocentric religion.’

Mr. Nurhussen (Muslim) in the interview session forwarded the following regarding the conflict happening in Bale-Robe,

‘The cause of the conflict was identity consciousness which is the result of ethnic-politics.’

Similarly, with regard to the conflict in Bale-Robe, Mr. Dawit, a protestant religious leader, during the interview, noted the following:

‘I think some hidden agendas were the reasons for the religious conflicts. In any case, the existing ethnic conflict heightens the salience religious identity and this leads to religious dispute.’

As the data above show, the religious conflict got an ethnic basis and ethnic federalism provides fertile ground for ethnic and religious fundamentalists to flourish. Since EPRDF (‘Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Democratic Front’) came to power in 1991, religious and ethnic conflicts have been endemic and the numbers of such conflicts have been increasing. It was noted that ethnic federalism will inevitably reinforce rather than minimize conflict between groups.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, the International Crisis Group underlined that there is a growing discontent with EPRDF’s ethnically defined state and with its rigid grip on power stirring fears of continued interethnic conflict.<sup>24</sup> Asnake, on his part, noted that inter-ethnic tensions and conflicts have accompanied the federalization process in Ethiopia; and mismanagement of ethno-linguistic diversities in the country has been one of the perennial causes of conflicts in the country.<sup>25</sup> Considering ethnocentrism as an arrogant philosophy of narrow-minded African dictators, and fully accepting federalism as a basis for political power and shared governance, *Alemayehu* demonstrated that the current political elites of the Ethiopian government have been hanging us separately one by one on the hooks of ‘ethnic federalism’.<sup>26</sup> Bahru, on his part, noted that ethnic federalism has saddled us [Ethiopia] with a host of problems and he further commented that the federal arrangement needs to reflect historical reality, conform to economic rationality and facilitate an efficient administration.<sup>27</sup> To achieve these goals, the American-style territorial federation is to be preferred.

Although a number of comments were forwarded about the effects of ethnic federalism, the government has never wanted to take any of them seriously. In this regard, the International Crisis Group stated that the regime is unwilling to share power or to accept criticism as normal.<sup>28</sup> This is because ethnic federalism has been designed intentionally to divide the society. Many authors describe ethnic federalism as a malicious tactic of TPLF (Tigray People's Liberation Front) to plant divisions among ethnic groups so as to create

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<sup>23</sup> Bekalu, 2017: ‘Ethnic Federalism and Conflict in Ethiopia,’ p. 43.

<sup>24</sup> International Crisis Group, 2009: Ethiopia: Ethnic Federalism and Its Discontents, p.153.

<sup>25</sup> Asnake, 2002, Federalism, Some Trends of Ethnic Conflicts and their Management in Ethiopia, p. 17.

<sup>26</sup> Alemayehu, 2013: Ethiopia: Liberating a "Prison Nation, p. 2.

<sup>27</sup> Bahru, 2008: *Society, State and History: Selected Essays*, p. 54.

<sup>28</sup> International Crisis Group, 2009: Ethiopia: Ethnic Federalism and Its Discontents, p. 154.

legitimacy for its minority rule over the other ethnic majorities. Most supporters of the opposition allege that the TPLF clearly manipulates ethnic identities and conflicts in order to stay in power.<sup>29</sup> For the current government, ethnic federalism has served as a political strategy to divide the society into compartmentalized classifications because a divided society does not rally to the common goal of challenging the government. Rather, in the Ethiopian case, the people have been under a climate of fear and suspicion of each other.

Some scholars seemed to rise against ethnic federalism by arguing that it undermines the integrity and the unity of the Ethiopian population by magnifying the ethnic differences and that it thereby negatively affects the solidarity of the people. Ethnic federalism never clips the strings of separateness but rather feeds division and remains a powerful force in dismantling social unity and national identity. That is, a shared identity and a sense of community have lessened significantly since 1991 because of ethnic federalism. Ethnic federalism has exacerbated differences among groups, promoted ethnic self-awareness and tensions among all groups.

Thus, the Ethiopian ethnic federalism appears to be one of the main causes of intensified religious conflict. In this connection, *Zelalem* noted that the enormous value given to local ethno-linguistic identity today has tempted political parties to tie ‘their own’ peoples distinctiveness not only strictly to cultural terms but also to religious orientations.<sup>30</sup> The emergence of ethnic politics in Ethiopia has divided the various ethnic groups and promoted religious intolerance with devastating consequences.

### *The Coming of the New Islamic Movement*

Islam has a number of sects; one of which is *Wahhabis /Khawerji* Movement. In connection to this, Mr. Mulatu (Muslim) stated the following:

‘There were divisions among Muslims. Older Muslims are criticized by the youth since their way of life was similar to Christians’ life.’

Mr. Yilkal (protestant) addressed the points below:

‘The Wahhabis’ movement aiming to purify Islam from the tradition has been a cause for the rise of fundamentalists.’

Mr. Kebede (Coptic Orthodox Christian) added the points below:

The traditional Muslim community in Ethiopia has been ‘Sunni’. The newly movement group named ‘Wahhabis’ was formed recently. This group is known for its fundamentalism. It is a group of educated religious youth. From this group, a very radical group was also formed and this is named as ‘Warj’. This group does not greet Christians; they stand against education except Quran; they are against government tax.

The dichotomy between progressive youth and traditionalist Muslims with respect to certain specific issues of Islam was one of the reasons of the conflict. As the statements

<sup>29</sup> Oakland Institute, 2014: Engineering Ethnic Conflict, p. 16.

<sup>30</sup> Zelalem, 2010: The 2006 Religious Conflict in Didessa and Gomma Woradas of Western Oromia, p. 106.



quoted show, the teaching of the fundamentalist group named ‘*Wary*’/’ *Khawerji*’ seriously instructs fellow Muslim not to greet Christians, not to pay tax to the government, not to drink milk, not to eat honey, and not to live peacefully and harmoniously with Christians. Regarding the origin of this sect and their further characteristics, *Zelalem* stated that *Khawerji* first entered *Harar* and then crossed into *Bale*, *Arsi* and lastly *Jimma*.<sup>31</sup> This sect brought new culture of dressing, wearing *hijab*, covering the full face of women Muslims and shortening the trousers of Muslim men along with leaving the beard and the moustache uncut.

*Zelalem* further stated that the young generation is controlled by the teaching of a new foreign extreme sect of Islam, ‘*Khawerji*’. Medhane, on his part, noted that lax religious policy and devolution of powers to the regions in Ethiopia after 1991 have created a fertile ground for the spread of the *Wahabbi* and other revivalist movements.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, the youth have started a campaign aiming to purify Islamic belief. When fundamentalists cause religious unrest; they need to produce various reasons and one of which is the production of spiritual renewal. Renewers of Islam such as the *Wahabbis* do not respect religious diversity and they become suspicious of any change when that change originates outside the Muslim community.

### ***Reversing History***

Furthermore, the participants of the study recorded that reversing history is also a cause for religious clash.

Mr. Yilkal (a protestant) said the following:

‘Ethiopia is said to have been a ‘Christian Island’ and this claim is not welcomed by the Muslim population. They thought that they were despised by the Christian rulers and they need to reverse this.’

Mr. Molla (Muslim) added the following points:

These fundamentalists stated that Emperor Yohannes IV forced Muslims [in 1878] to be converted to Christians since the numbers of Muslims in those days were few. Now, we have to reverse this history since our number is mounting from time to time.

As says *Yilkal*, the claim ‘Ethiopia is a Christian island’ was an appropriate way of describing Ethiopia as religiously homogeneous in those ancient days but not now. At present, Ethiopia is a divided nation in which a number of religions and ethnic groups try to co-exist together despite the challenges exerted by the ethnic federalism imposed some twenty-five years ago. In such a context, utterances or claims that ignore the heterogeneity of the country in terms of ethnic and religious groups might aggravate conflict. Afe work stated that some people think that Ethiopia is the ‘Island of Christianity’, but that claim is bluntly contradicted by the existing cultural heterogeneity of Ethiopia.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. p. 91.

<sup>32</sup> Medhane, 2004: *Turning Conflicts to Cooperation in the Horn of Africa*, p. 17.

<sup>33</sup> Afeework, 2009: *Religious Tolerance in Addis Ababa 1991-2008*, p. 84.

Despite the long co-existence between Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia, there were some occasional quarrels and hostilities between Christians and Muslims in which there were victims on both sides, as happened in many parts of the world. For example, the ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria also have some historical antecedents in many governmental actions during the colonial rule and after independence which encouraged, to a large extent, the sowing of the seeds of ethno-religious conflicts that are found to be rampant in the Nigerian nation today.<sup>34</sup> In the Ethiopian context, Afe work stated that some religious people have been unable to ‘forgive’ the past and they chose to dwell on past misdeeds.<sup>35</sup> If religious people hold antithetical position in all spheres of life, the ultimate effect of their move is sowing the seed of hostility, resentment and hatred in the generation to come. This is also against Islam, for the Quran suggests that it is better not to do revenge but people should rather act in a spirit of charity. Quran, Chapter 5: 45 states that: “We decreed for them therein that: the soul for the soul, the eye for the eye, the nose for the nose, the ear for the ear, the tooth for the tooth and an equivalent injury for any injury. However, anyone who pardons and forfeits as a charitable act will have his sins remitted.”<sup>36</sup> But fundamentalists who have been prone to conflict try to find a cause that triggers religious conflict.

### *Expansion of Christianity*

Expansion of Christianity was mentioned as one of the factors that caused religious unrest. In this regard, Mr. Yilkal, a protestant religious teacher, noted the following during the interview session:

‘In most Muslim dominated areas, Protestants preach gospel widely and they convert Muslims into Christianity and this upsets the Muslim fundamentalists.’

Mr. Kedir (Muslim) stated the causes of the conflict as follows:

‘The expansion of Christianity in the region is one of the causes for the conflict. Particularly, the expansion of the Protestant church does not give comfort to the Muslim fundamentalists.’

Mr. Tesfa (protestant) added:

‘Now, the number of Christians is increasing and the local Muslim fundamentalists clearly state that Christians should leave the regions or they should be converted to Islam.’

Mr. Mulatu(Coptic Orthodox Christian) noted:

Since one Pastor has converted a number of Muslims to Christianity, he was forced to change his place because the surrounding Muslims strongly wanted to kill him.

Mr. Getachew, (Protestant) during the interview, had to say the following:

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<sup>34</sup> Salawu, 2010: “Ethno-Religious Conflicts in Nigeria,” p. 348.

<sup>35</sup> Afe work, 2009: *Religious Tolerance in Addis Ababa 1991-2008*, p. 96.

<sup>36</sup> Quran, Chapter 5: 45.

The expansion of Christians in the area did not relieve Muslim fundamentalists since they have had the desire to keep the area as Muslim dominated as before.

As these data show, the rise of Christianity in the regions has been viewed as a threat; extremists therefore opposed it. Basically, the *Orthodox Tewabido Church* is not much involved in raising the number of Christians as it rather focuses on maintaining the believers that already belong to this church. Contrary to this, the Protestant Church is a vibrant Christian church aiming to spread the gospel through eloquent preachers. But the efforts of the Protestant church to spread the gospel were unacceptable to Muslim fundamentalists. Islam in its advance has been successful in societies and among people in which there is freedom of religion and religious liberty but in many Muslim-dominated areas, Christianity faces prohibitions when it enters a region and/or faces restrictions of its activities.<sup>37</sup> This implied that Christian minority groups were denied effective religious practice. Christians were restricted from propagating their faith or seeking converts. This happened also because it should be remembered that Islamic law orders capital punishment for apostasy from Islam to other religions. This law posed therefore a great danger to Christians who share the gospel with Muslims.<sup>38</sup>

As human beings have inquisitive minds, they are able to investigate the world as it exists and choose what is relevant to him/her. Contrary to this, Islamic identity possesses a strong sense of self-sufficiency and is not readily open to finding or seeking the relevance of anything else apart from its own convictions.<sup>39</sup>

### *Ways of Preaching*

Participants of the study also mentioned ways of preaching as other potential causes of religious conflict. Mr. Dawit, a protestant religious leader, during the interview made the following points:

‘Muslims have disgraced the Christians’ faith by citing words from the Bible. To this end, they have been distributing cassette and CD of Dr. Zakir Naik, teasing the Christians’ faith.’

Mr. Ali (Muslim) added the following:

‘There were cassettes that aggravate the Muslim-Christian conflict.’

Mr. Hussien (a Muslim) on his part said:

‘Cassettes coming from outside Ethiopia have the potential to instigate religious conflict and supervisions should be made.’

As it can be seen from the excerpts above, there were some preachers who instigated conflict through their preaching. Afework also stated that some of the sub-groups in religious institutions as well as individual preachers, singers, publishers and writers acted irresponsibly towards glorifying their own line of faith at the expense of others.<sup>40</sup> For example, Dr. *Zakir’s* and his fellows’ inflammatory comments upon the Christian faith

<sup>37</sup> Braswell, 1996: *Islam: Its Prophet, People, Politics and Power*, p. 244.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, p. 244.

<sup>39</sup> Woodberry, 1989: *Muslims and Christians on the Emmaus Road*, p. 29.

<sup>40</sup> Afework, 2009: *Religious Tolerance in Addis Ababa 1991-2008*, p. 84.

have been a linchpin to the fundamentalist movement. Many innocent Muslims might take their words for granted and act violently and they have been involved in a radical violent campaign. As a result, their preaching agitates the Muslims to form militant Muslim groups. Provocative cassettes being played on public streets could be considered a form of aggravation. Even local stories and rumors, focusing on inter-religious implications, might trigger religious conflict, particularly when reported irresponsibly.

### **Conclusion**

A range of issues were mentioned as causes for the eruption of violence among Muslims and Christians. Some of the causes mentioned by the informants of this study were the desire to establish an Islamic state; the influence of ethnic federalism on strained relationships between religious groups; the influence of the new Islamic movement on tensions already existing between Muslims and Christian; Christian missionary campaigns towards expanding their numbers in Muslim dominated areas; "reversing history" (by Muslims claiming that their increased numbers justify the reversion of their past minority position to that of the majority in a region), and inflammatory preaching by some Muslim leaders. Muslim fundamentalists want to see Islamic theocracy in the country and to that end they try to convert people to their religion by force.

It was noted that ethnic federalism has also aggravated differences among groups; it promoted ethnic self-awareness and created tensions and consequently conflicts among all groups. The data also clearly showed that the religious conflict observed in Ethiopia has been partly caused by the influence of the Arab world. It is a historical watershed that the Arab world has lit fire for the destruction of Ethiopia.

It was found out that some fundamentalists Muslims have tried to attack the Christian faith in cassettes and it is significant to note that at the height of religious troubles, it is such type of media provocation which exacerbates conflict. It was observed that denominationally-based publications and electronic media are less subject to monitoring by the government.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the results discussed herein in this study, the following recommendations are forwarded. The finding of the study showed that fundamentalists aim to form Islamic States through coercive measures such as by converting people involuntarily for fear they will be killed. Forcing people to renounce their religion is an unbalanced kind of thinking, for, no matter what type of religion people follow, we should not try to convert people by force. If fundamentalists use force for the expansion of their religion instead of convincing via peaceful discussion, 'Islam', which is used as a shelter by fundamentalists, may be labeled as a flag bearer of violence.

It was found out that ethnic federalism has been a cause of religious conflict. Federalism might be the order of the day but ethnic federalism should not be applicable to a country like Ethiopia where all ethnic groups have been dispersed sparsely throughout the country. The federal system of government on the basis of ethnicity could cause deep ethnic division and bring multiple problems and also generates a culture of mistrust that causes ethnic conflict.

It was noted that the coming of the new Islamic movement was one cause of the conflict. It should be clear from the outset that everything coming from outside, particularly, from the Arab world is cause for suspicion. Rather than being driven by new movements, the new generation of the Ethiopian youth needs to uphold the wisdom of their forefathers or ancestors and maintain tolerance in the face of ethnic and religious diversity. In this regard, Ephraim (1971:263) stated that a healthy society is not an extremist one; it is one that can combine the best of the past and the best of the present.<sup>41</sup>

The finding of the study further revealed that fundamentalists have the desire to reverse the previous history. Religious people need to forget the cumulative events of the past and the scares left by the previous regimes; they are supposed to learn forgiveness. From time immemorial, we have had an inheritance of unfair rivalry and we were fierce in the fights for power. There must be a shift away from the devastating struggle for power, for rivalry is not characteristic of a religion. Competitive identity, competitive religion, and ethnicity and culture should not be part of a pluralistic globalizing society. Particularly, competitive religion, a claim denoting that my religion is better than yours, is very much unwelcome. Instead, we have to accept and appreciate our differences.

The study revealed that expansion of Christianity in Muslim-dominated areas has been a cause of religious conflict. It is always proper to interrogate our own share in causing the conflicts and it is also better to meet people of other faiths and see their non-Islamic view point.

The study further found out that ways of preaching could cause religious unrest. The weighty knowledge of a spiritual leader could be tested against the behavior s/he shows and the utterances s/he makes. True preachers try to win human beings through love and humble treatment. They should not denounce the religious practices of other faiths. Religious leaders or preachers coming from Somalia, *Jijjiga* or from the Arab world should be seen in the light of their words and deeds. The mission of theology teachers should be limited to teaching and guiding the personal holy spiritual experience of the believers. To this end, they are supposed to preach love, respect, mercy, tolerance, kindness, spirituality dealing with holiness, absolute goodness, all of which is completely agreeable to our mind. Preachers need to plant a good faith in the hearts of the people. In doing so, they are to be more careful when they articulate any message. If they preach grievance, conflict and hatred, we expect Ethiopian Muslims to doubt the sincerity of their words. This is because, religious doctrines are not only principles; rather they are lives we have to actually live.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid, p. 84.

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