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SACRALISING CYBERSPACE: ONLINE RELIGIOUS ACTIVISM IN ETHIOPIA[1]

Meron Eresso

Abstract: In the modern technological era, social media has become one of the imperative ways to exchange ideas, converse, disseminate information and advocate for diverse socio-political causes. Accordingly, social media serves as a platform for expressing religious views, practicing religion in a virtual space with a cyber-community of believers, communicating religious differences, advocating for a religious cause, and as a forum of religious learning and teaching. The ubiquitous nature and growing use of social media pose a challenge to the geographic appeal of religion. Growing cyber spirituality is becoming visible in the global south where the technological advancement is in its formative stage. Paradoxically, despite the very poor profile of cyber technology, coupled with repressive political regimes, there is a growing religious cyber activism in contemporary Africa. There is a discernible gap of empirical studies on the appropriation of social media for religious purpose, their use by religious clerics, lay believers and religious activists. By exclusively focusing on the case of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church, one of the oldest oriental orthodox churches, this paper sheds some light on how the modern social media is serving as an alternative platform for religious communities including the old conservative religious establishments.

Keywords: *Ethiopia, Social Media, Orthodox Tewahido Christians, Online Protest, Religious Activism*

1 This paper is part of an on-going postdoctoral research project of the author, who is a postdoctoral fellow and recipient of the Volkswagen Foundation "Knowledge for Tomorrow" Postdoctoral Fellowships in the Humanities in Sub-Saharan Africa and North Africa and an adjunct assistant professor of anthropology at Addis Ababa University, the Centre for Human Rights.

Introduction

The merits and downsides of Internet-based social networks is a debatable matter, triggering discussion among scholars across a wide range of disciplines. Some scholars emphasise how social media assists in the exchange of ideas, providing individuals and groups with interactive platforms to share and discuss various themes (Piskorski 2014). Arguing along the same line, Rainie and Welmann (2012) present the positive influences of social media and other Internet-based social networks. Part of the multiple values pointed out by scholars include the significance of social media to document memories, to inform, advertise and enhance friendship and knowledge, offer a private space, and help individuals and groups in building talents. Social media is able to positively impact social standing and the process of political mobilisation. The value of social media technologies in sparking massive social change has gained more popularity in the aftermath of the Arab spring revolutions (Alexander 2010). Social media technologies like Facebook, twitter and YouTube are considered to have significantly contributed to the revolutions across the globe. In fact, the 2009 Moldova revolution was referred to as the "Twitter Revolution" (Papic and Noonan 2011). Similar arguments were made for the Gezi Protests that took place in Turkey, in the late spring of 2013 (Gulizar and Weiyu 2015).

Others contend that the contribution that social media has/had on the rise and success of revolutions is exaggerated, rather describing the contribution of social media as being insignificant (Malcolm 2010). For those arguing along this line, even though social media offers a ground for activists to express themselves, they do not in any way guarantee the end. Furthermore they argue that the social ties to be formed on social media are built on weak stalemates. Turke (2011) argues that social media usage affects individual communication skills. The addiction to social media and the resulting psychological ailment is described as being one major downside. Others raise their concerns in relation to the effect of social media on dwarfing journalism.

In autocratic political systems, social media is said to offer new sources of information and alternative platforms for discussing diverse socio-political agendas (Kalliopi 2011) Moreover, online social networks are described to enhance public awareness about political fraud in

non-democratic environments (Ora and David 2015). On the one hand, studies contend that the diffusion of digital media does not always have democratic consequences. Numerous studies conducted in different parts of the globe, on the other, allude to governments often dissuading Internet users from political activism and tend to use social media as political instruments of control (Kathy and Sarah 2012).

The academic discourses on religion and social media evolved from an era of emphasising the effect of social media in threatening the authority of clerics, accenting the link between social media and growing radicalisation, to the latest discourse of stressing the harmony between social media and religion. Cheong (2012) discussed how earlier studies of religion and the Internet emphasised the effect of digital media in disrupting religious authority and being a threat to the power of traditional institutions claiming a charismatic authority to teach and interpret religious books. According to this earliest line of thought, the introduction of the Internet to religious realms undermines the authority of traditional religious figures by creating a fertile ground for emerging new popular clerics, who are conversant with the new technology (Cheong 2012). As Abrams, Baker, and Brown (2011) highlighted, the uses of social media are negotiated by religious figures that try to maintain their power. The other dominant discourse in earlier studies on religion and social media focused on discussing the positive correlation between growing cyber activism and growing religious radicalisation (Barnet and Reynolds 2009).

Today, a number of studies focus on addressing elements of complementarity between religion and ICT by analysing how digital media positively impacts religion. Accordingly, there are studies investigating the synergetic relationships between online and offline faith and looking into how religious leaders shape, sustain and are being sustained by digital and social media practices (Cheong 2014). Some of the scholarly works on religion and social media tend to show how social media practices and religious change are mutually constitutive (Gillespie, David and Greenhill 2012**)**. The agency of the religious clerics in appropriating different social media is a theme addressed by scholars, wgo describe the phenomenon as "strategic arbitration" (Cheong, Huang and Poon 2011).[2]

2 Strategic arbitration is a phenomenon whereby the clergy are insinuated to adjust their social identity to become guides and mediators of knowledge and can be

The significant use of social media by religious communities and religious figures led leaders of mega churches to gain wider publicity, making them "religious celebrities" (Cooke 2008) and "holy mavericks" (Lee and Sinitiere 2009). It is further argued that such trends enhance the growth of a class of "pastor-preneurs" (Twitchell 2007), who build their power by capitalising on such technologies. Cyber activism is transforming the old debates on religious knowledge and authority, and on the formation of religious groups and communities and their networks. Cyber space is offering platforms to present and represent different thoughts and missions, providing believers with a forum to ask questions and find immediate answers to problems concerning their own religious beliefs.

Some studies conducted in different sub-Saharan African countries have extensively presented the use of social media in religious missions (Dorothea E. Schulz 2011; Brian 2014). Innocent (2012) discusses how social media is affecting community and social interaction in digital religious discourse in a Western African context, drawing on experiences form Nigeria, Ghana and Cameroon. Rosalind and Benjamin, in their edition *New Media and Religious Transformations in Africa* (2015) present different case materials on Africa's rapidly evolving religious media scene. In a nutshell, the interrelationship between media and religion is a theme that attracted less attention of scholars across various disciplines around the globe in general and in sub-Saharan African countries in particular. Accordingly, there is no single academic writing in Ethiopia addressing the religious media scene.

A recent study by Dereje (2015) has accented how social media is serving as an alternative political platform in Ethiopia. He argues that in contexts where there is an authoritarian state and an adversarial and polarised press, the social media become alternative and safer ways of communicating ideas. Social media as Dereje puts it has "revolutionized Ethiopia" (Dereje 2015: 12).

By drawing on the existing gap of research on religion and social Internet networks in Ethiopia, this paper examines how different Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido (here after, EOT) Christian individuals and groups use social media. This article is part of the author's

encountered both online and offline.

ongoing postdoctoral project that deals with the overarching theme of growing religious-based conflicts in contemporary Ethiopia. Part of the problem addressed by the project is hence, to understand the signification of social media in contemporary religious politics. With this objective of understanding the signification of the social media, the author has conducted fieldwork. One of the data collection tools used is the analysis of the contents of messages posted on Internet social networks, specifically Facebook pages and YouTube posts of EOT religious activists. Furthermore, the empirical base of this paper partly draws on accounts from the key informants interviewed. These key informants come from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, whereby membership to the EOT church is their single common denominator. Hence, this paper gives an insight into the diverse purposes for which social media is being used by religious communities ranging from its utilisation for staging polemics, serving as a platform for religious protest, for proselytisation, and for mobilisation of the community of believers for diverse purposes. It tries to understand how religious discourse is developed and dispersed through social media.

These online movements' best show how the social media is helping the process of objectification of the EOT church's new discourse of victimhood, i.e., the shift from being dominant (an established Church in pre 1974 period) to the dominated, with a new sense of vulnerability. Furthermore, this is becoming a rhetorical strategy for religious mobilisation by means of defining inter-faith relations as "existential" and securitisingIslam in Ethiopia. The paper presents how the online debates surrounding religious discourses are highly informed by the offline political developments. The phrase "sacralising cyber space" refers in this paper to the signification of social media by different EOT individuals and groups as to be substantiated in the subsequent sections of the paper.

The paper is structured into four sections. The first section presents a brief background history on the development of ICT and social media in Ethiopia. The second section gives readers a brief overview of the EOT church and contemporary developments in the use of social media among the orthodox Christians. The third section presents and analyses the signification of social media by different EOT groups and individuals and the different purposes they serve. The final section presents a concluding remark.

Brief Overview: ICT and Social Mediascape in Ethiopia

The use of the Internet in Ethiopia began in 1993 when the UN Economic Commission for Africa established a store-and-forward e- mail service called PADISNet (Pan African Documentation and Information Service Network), which connected daily via direct dial calls to GreenNet's Internet gateway in London.[3] This was followed by the initiative of the US-based NGO, HealthNet, and the establishment of a node at the Medical Faculty of the University of Addis Ababa, which provided e-mail access to medical researchers via the HealthSat/VITA Low Earth Orbit (LEO) satellite (ITU 2002). EthioNet was launched in January 1998. Ethiopia is one of the sub-Saharan African countries with the lowest Internet penetration rate (ITU 2013). According to the latest ratings of the International Technological University (ITU) in 2014, Ethiopia ranked 151st out of 157 countries in terms of ICT development. It is a country with the largest agrarian population, about 85% of the overall citizens residing in rural parts of the country. Of this overall number the largest majority of the country's Internet users are based in the capital city Addis Ababa (Dominique 2010). It is one of the sub-Saharan African countries where the national Ethio-telecom monopolises the telecommunication market, having a significant effect on the growth of ICT. Accordingly, National Ethio-telecom is the sole institution mandated to provide services of fixed and mobile phones, Internet and data communications, acting as the sole Internet Service Provider (ISP) (ITU 2002).

In recent years, the Ethiopian government has come up with ICT expansion projects like WoredaNET, SchoolNET and the ongoing mega project of the East African Submarine Cable System (EASS). These projects targeted connecting different institutions as schools, hospitals and government offices through broadband Internet by means of satellite or fibre-optic cable. WoredaNet provides e-mail, videoconferencing and voice-over-Internet Protocol (VoIP) services to directly connect the federal government with local governments, including peripheral areas thereby helping to digitalize state formation in the institutional sense of the term (Gebre and Melessse 2014). SchoolNET provides streaming audio and video through a

3 For the beginnings of the Internet in Ethiopia, see ICT Focus Magazine. Available online: http://www.ictfocus.info/resources/Beginning-ofInternet-inEthiopia.asp. Accessed on 3June 2015.

downlink-only VSAT (Very Small Aperture Terminal) satellite as part of the wider political project of an equitable service provision for all (Samuel 2007). Ethio Telecom, previously known as the Ethiopian Telecommunications Corporation (ETC) is running mega projects worth billions of dollars on the extension of the telecommunications system and expansion projects of mobile and Internet connectivity, projects which are run by Chinese and Indian companies.

The first participatory media came into existence in the early 1990s when an Ethiopian e-mail distribution network called EDDN was formed (Abiy 2011). With strong anti-government views, EDDN remained the only platform of e-participation up to the time when Kitaw Yayehirad, an Ethiopian IT specialist living in Geneva, started networking Ethiopians using his websites cyberethiopia.com and ethioline.com in 1997. These developments in the late 1990s and the early 2000s marked a significant shift from print to online media. The year 2000 marked this significant shift, when the popular magazine of *Ethiopian Review* discontinued the printed edition of the magazine and began to exclusively publish online: Ethiopian review, consisting of multidirectional platforms of public participation such as blogs and discussion forums. The following year marked the boom of popular websites such as Ethiomedia.com and Nazret.com.

During the national election of 2005, there were dozens of political or quasi-political websites with multidirectional participatory platforms. This year also marked the significant growth in Ethiopian blogosphere, which the BBC described as "a small, but growing set of citizen journalists."[4] The major shift seen in due course, especially in the post 2005 period, was the birth of homeland bloggers like Urael, Ethio Zagol, Adebabay Ze'Ethiopia, Tsegasaurus unlike the pre 2005 scene dominated by the Diaspora. Developments post 2007 have seen an increase in journalists and politicians using individual and group Facebook accounts (Abiy 2011). Social media, specifically Facebook, became a forum that served beyond personal reconnection and became a new platform for staging protests against the state. Dereje (2015) has classified the "cyber protestors" into four general categories, i.e., the Ethiopian nationalists, the ethno-nationalists, the religious

4 A. Heavens, 20 December 2005. „African Bloggers Find their Voice," BBC: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/4512290.stm (accessed on January 23, 2015).

opposition and the liberal critics of Ethiopia's new political order, aka ethnic federalism and the developmental state.

The EOTC and Trends in the use of Social Media

The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church (EOTC) is one of the non-chalcedonian oriental orthodox Christian churches around the globe. As the oldest establishment it is also one of the founding members of the World Council of Churches.[5] According to the 2007 national census results, the EOTC has a total of 32,138,126 members, making up 43 % of the overall population of the country.

Orthodox Christianity became the official established church of the state during the reign of king Ezana in the 4th century and stayed the official religion of the state up to 1974. Alexandrian jurisdiction over the Ethiopian Church lasted for about sixteen hundred years, whereby the Ethiopian church was dependent on the Coptic Church as the bishop of Ethiopia had to be compulsorily selected among Egyptian monks and was consecrated only by the Egyptian patriarch. After lengthy negotiations, the autocephaly of the Ethiopian church was completed in 1951, when an Ethiopian-born Archbishop by the name of Abune Basilios was crowned as the first patriarch of Ethiopia in 1959.[6]

The EOT church had a favourable position in Ethiopian history due to its existence as the established church. Hence orthodox Christianity went beyond being purely religious and rather played an integral role in all aspects of national life; the Church had a significant place in the cultural, political and social life receiving significant support from the state. The fall of the imperial regime and the succession of the socialist regime in 1974 brought an end to the privileged status of the EOT church. In August 1974, the provisional government, by then under the control of the army, announced the separation of the Church and

5 The Oriental Orthodox churches include the Coptic Orthodox church of Alexandria, the Armenian Apostolic church, the Syria orthodox church, the Ethiopian orthodox Tewahido church, the Eritrean orthodox Tewahido church, and the Malankara orthodox church of India, which are all "Non-Chalcedonian," and are often referred to as monophsitie believing in one nature of Christ.

6 Archbishop Yesehaq. 1997. *The Ethiopian Tewahido Church: an Integrally African Church.* Winston-Derek Publishers. Turner, John W. „Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity: Faith and practices". A Country Study: Ethiopia (Thomas P. Ofcansky and LaVerle Berry, eds.)

the State. The promulgation of the secularity of the state in August 1974 put an end to the preponderance of the Ethiopian Church in the country. Furthermore, the agrarian reform announced on March 4, 1975 resulted in an unprecedented blow to the Church's revenues as most of the property of the church, specifically land, was confiscated.

In 1991 the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) ousted the military regime (Derg) and seized state power. The new Ethiopian government led by the EPRDF endorsed secularism with a strict separation of religion and politics. A part of Article 27 of the 1995 Constitution guaranteed everyone the right to hold or adopt a religion or belief of his choice and the freedom, either individually or in community with others, in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship. The regime change in 1991 brought a liberal turn in religious identification. The 1995 Constitution instituted religious freedom and equality through various provisions. One expects from such a liberal constitution a growing sense of empowered religious citizenship. On the contrary, the Ethiopian religious landscape is fraught with tension that occasionally erupts into religious violence. Historic religious minorities, Muslims and Protestants, took advantage of the new socio-political order and have shown a remarkable growth and visibility within the Ethiopian public space (Dereje 2011). Among the several changes that came to the EOTC was the significant decline in the number of EOT Christians. As Østebø and Haustein (2011) noted, the rise of Protestantism, from 5.5% of the overall population in 1984 to 18.5% in 2007 has come at the cost of the EOC, whose share declined from 54.0% in 1984 to 43.5% in 2007.

In the post 1991 period, religious-based strains and polemical exchanges became dominant. As Abbink (2011: 253) mentions in this period, "Religious identities are becoming more dominant as people's primary public identity, and more ideological." He further noted, "This development has ramifications for the public sphere', where identities of a religious nature are currently presented and contested in a self-consciously polemical fashion" (ibid). It is in this context of post 1991 Ethiopia and the aforementioned constitutional space that Ethiopia has witnessed a growing cyber spirituality.

Various forms of ICT have proliferated among the EOT Christians, ranging from websites, blogs, Facebook, twitter to podcasts serving

as alternative participatory platforms. Non-conventional media and social networks are becoming more popular among the EOT Christian youth as among all parts of the society. The profile of people using these networks ranges from young college students, Christian intellectuals and clerics to ordinary *mimanan* (community of believers).[7]

There is an internal debate on"how modern" the church can and should be. There are groups within the church, who oppose all types of modernity and those who are in favour of the selective appropriation of modern technology, especially in the context of the new competitive religious landscape whereby the Protestant churches are actively deploying new technologies. Part of the debate on the modernisation of the Church revolves around technology, music, administrative reform and proselytisation techniques. One of the debates relate to the ongoing movements in EOTC that call for a return to the classical adherence to the earlier Orthodox Church religious practices. One of these practices involves the strict abstinence from the use of modern musical instruments for church service and rather a call to use *Yaredawi Zema* (the hymn of Yared/Jared) and the use of traditional church musical instruments such as *Kebero* (drum), *Tsinasil* (sistra), *Inzira* (a large flute), *Masinquo* (a single-stringed violin), *Begena* (a great harp) and *Mequamiya* (the standing stick).[8] These movements are neo-traditional because they are part of attempts to restore things as they were (or at least as they are perceived to have been) during the period of the sacred history. The other element becoming equally controversial is the use of modern social media for proselytisation and related missions.

One of the widely used social media among the EOT Christians is Facebook. Individual and group Facebook accounts are becoming a means of everyday communication. It has become an everyday encounter to see thousands of EOT individual and group Facebook accounts displaying profile and/or background pictures of religious

7 There are no official census results on the percentage of the total Ethiopian religious communities using social media for religious discussion. This makes it difficult to provide the demographics of the group of believers using social media for variables such as age, education, and gender.

8 This hymn of Yared plays a very important role in all church religious services, some examples being the hymn on liturgy (Holy Mass), *Mahlet* (evening prayer), *Seatat* (the Horologium), *Fithat* (prayer for the dead) and, on spiritual weddings, in the Sunday Schools programs, and during holy days or feasts.

paintings of saints and/or verses from religious scriptures. Facebook is becoming one means through which the Ethiopian orthodox Christians are connected to the global orthodox Christians through such vibrant international Facebook groups as the International Orthodox Christian Network,[9] the International Orthodox Christian Charities and Ethiopian Orthodox and Proud – EOTC Laity. Some group Facebook accounts include the *Orthodox Mels Alat* ("orthodox has response").[10]

The other popular Facebook groups include the Facebook accounts of institutions like the *Mahəbara Qədusan*,[11] and the Ethiopian orthodox Tewahido church Sunday schools. The numerous Facebook groups of *Mahəbarats*[12] (associations) like the *Dekike Nabute* and *Dejocish Ayizagu* have thousands of members and followers around the world. *Dejocish Ayizagu* is an association established with the main aim of supporting rural churches. The etymology of the name of the association *Dejocish Ayizagu* is a combination of two Amharic words meaning "the gates should not be closed" (referring to the gates of churches). a metaphor referring to the purpose of the association, which is to support and rehabilitate old rural churches. As to be presented under section 3 below these *Mahəbarats* are engaged in various activities such as the renovation of old churches, support rural churches, engage in proselytisation and in different development projects. In addition to such group accounts a few renowned church clerics have thousands of followers around the globe. The two examples of such prominent figures are Deacon Daniel Kiberet and Deacon Henok Haile, known for their active blogs and tweets.

9 This Facebook page has over 3 million followers. The group brings together orthodox Christians around the globe; thousands of Ethiopians at home and in the diaspora are followers and members of this group. The official Facebook account is: https://www.facebook.com/MyOCN.

10 The Facebook page of Orthodox Mels Alat can be accessed at: https://www.facebook.com/pages/Orthodox-Mels-ALAT/981956948489884

11 *Mahəbara Qədusan* is an association established during the military regime by Addis Ababa university students, who were sent to Blaté military training college. The association focused on supporting the religious education offered at Churches, and advancing religious education for students studying at secular universities and higher academic institution.

12 The *Mahəbara* has a long tradition in EOTC. It is an informal association, usually made up of lay people meeting monthly on specific days of a month dedicated to a saint venerated in the EOT church.

The other social media widely used by orthodox Christians is YouTube. Numerous videos of religious preachings, polemical exchanges, news, healing testimonies have been uploaded to YouTube. These YouTube audio-visual materials are being posted on the various Facebook pages being viewed, linked and shared by thousands. Furthermore, there are numerous orthodox Christian Internet chat rooms like Ethiopian Orthodox *Tewahido Yeselamena Yefikir bet* (Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido peace and love chat room). These chat rooms are used for cyber social prayers and preaching.[13] The boom in uploads of free religiously themed applications used by the community of believers to spur their practices is another element that best shows the growing trend in the use of Internet media for religious missions.[14] Twitter has become another form of popular social media favoured as a concise medium of communication among the EOT youth and clerics. Twitter is offering the clerics a platform for real time information sharing and often-young clerics address their audiences with short written texts, whereby they provide links to graphics audio-visual materials.[15]

As to be presented in the following section, different social media is serving as a platform for protests, for proselytisation, for communication, for disseminating information and for staging polemical exchanges. As a way of substantiating the argument with empirical examples, the following section presents three of these multiple purposes the social media serves, namely: the use of the social media by EOT Christians as an alternative platform for protest, the use of social media as a platform for staging religious polemics, and its use in the mobilisation of a community of believers for diverse religious-political causes.

The Social Media as an Alternative Platform for Protests

One of the central arguments of this paper is that the online advocacy by the EOT religious columnists is highly informed by the offline political context. As Kalliope (2011) argues, in authoritarian and repressive

13 See http://www.paltalk.com/g2/group/905168365/DisplayGroupDetails.wmt

14 One of such free applications is the *wudase Mariam* prayer application prepared for different operating systems.

15 One of such columnists is Daniel Kiberet, a prominent Christian deacon with a global influence who is popular for his blog and tweets. The best known and widely followed twitter accounts include that of Deacon Henok Haile.

political environments social media serves as an alternative political platform to stage frustrations. In countries like Ethiopia, where the private and independent press and medias are facing different state regulatory challenges ranging from repressive censorship to bans, social media plays a significant role in informing the wider public about socio-political developments in and around the country.

Dereje (2015) discussed how Ethiopian Muslims are using websites to stage their protest. In his discussions on online religious protests, Dereje built on the case of the Ethiopian Muslim protest that started in the summer of 2011 and presented how the activists used two strategies of an online and offline protest. In his account of the online protest, Dereje eloquently presented how iconic images of two forms of subtle resistance of the Muslim protest movement have been widely communicated through social media, i.e., the image of "the Sälät man" and the image of the "the prison wedding."[16] In a similar manner various orthodox Christians are appropriating social media as an alternative platform to communicate their anger, frustrations and objections against different actors including the government, business firms and other stakeholders, as to be illustrated with case examples.

One of the recent developments of the online protest against the government initiated by some EOT Christians relates to the protest against the accusation of *Mahəbara Qədusan*. *Mahəbara Qədusan* is an association within the EOT church that engages in multiple activities, including support for religious education offered at Churches and the offering of religious education for students studying at secular higher academic institutions. It is an active institution within the EOT church establishments that runs hundreds of projects costing millions of dollars. The association finances churches in remote/rural areas with the money it gets from the contributions of its members

16 The first is the case whereby on 8 August 2013 a young worshiper in Addis Ababa prayed the Eid Sälät encircled by an army of riot police, earning him the revered name of the "Sälät man" whose image has run on numerous Facebook individual and group pages as a profile and a background picture and catching the attention of international journalists. An equally intruding image popularised by the Muslim social media outlets is the prison wedding between two of the imprisoned protest leaders and their fiancée On 5 May 2013 two of the inmates detained at Qality Prison under terrorism charges, Khalid Ibrahim and Mubarak Adam, entered a marital union with Muna Sirāj and Halima Ahmed respectively.

and an income generated by various businesses it runs such as cafés, shops and its big publishing house.

This association has been accused by church officials of the Holy Synod of having ulterior political motives and in matters related to inciting religious based violence.[17] One of the grounds for labelling *Mahəbara Qədusan* a radical religious organisation partly relates to its labelling as a bastion of the *chauvinists* identified with centrist politics going against the ethno-federal political order of post 1991 Ethiopia. This development has called for a cyber-revolution whereby thousands of EOT Christians in Ethiopia and the diaspora used various social media platforms to show their sympathy and solidarity to the association, defining the allegations as a political measure. The main online protest emerged from the official webpage and Facebook account of *Mahəbara Qədusan*,defining the allegations as groundless. As a way of informing thousands of its members, *Mahəbara Qədusan* posted its official counter narrative to the allegations on its official Facebook page. A number of writings posted on this Facebook wall of the association discussed at length how the ongoing accusations are set ups by the government and its allies within the synod to control the vibrant institution. Numerous individuals and different groups have shared these articles and remarks posted on the Facebook page of the association. Furthermore, a large number of EOT Christian facebookers used the logo of the association as their profile and/or background pictures as a way of showing their sympathy for the association. One informant described this phenomenon as:

When one is confronted with such an outrageous situation whereby he/she cannot take his/her disappointment to the streets, the only option at hand is taking the protest to the web. I and other friends of mine used the logo of Mahəbara Qədusan as our profile picture for a period of two to four weeks in order to communicate the fact that we are against such groundless allegations and that we back the association that is falsely accused. Posting the logo speaks in volumes about the large support the association has among us the EOT youth. (Biniyam, 31, Addis Ababa. January 12, 2015)

17 To read more about the allegations, see http://www.dejeselam.org/2009/10/mahibere-kidusan-next-target.html

Some young orthodox informants feel that this is a balancing act intentionally done to make Muslims feel that they are not being singled out as radicals. As part of the ongoing online protest, several videos have been uploaded to YouTube and Wongeltube. One of these videos is a leaked video from a confidential and closed meeting of the EOT church synod whereby several church clergymen accused the association and made negative statements about the *Mahəbar*. This was recorded with hidden cameras and cell phones and was uploaded to YouTube.[18] These videos had several viewers and a closer reading of the numerous comments on the comment links shows the level of frustration and anger among the community of believers using social media. Others used their own personal blogs and twitter accounts to post statements objecting the accusations.[19] These YouTube videos and articles were posted and shared on several individual activists and groups Facebook pages, informing wider audiences both at home and in the diaspora.

The second example relating to such online protest as the case of the protest against the draft regulation that bans the displaying of religious symbols in public spaces, especially in secular institutions as schoolsThe main points of this draft legislation were brought to the public's attention during the summer of 2014 at a nationwide meeting held by the ministry of education with lecturers from state universities. On this occasion, different government officials heading the meetings talked about the draft manual for religious codes of conduct under preparation. One of the major issues discussed in the manual includes the ban on wearing religious symbols in secular public places.[20] This draft regulation has caused much anger and frustrations among orthodox Christians from different corners of the country and the diaspora. Accordingly, several protestors took their anger to cyberspace. Several pictures like the following were posted on different Facebook pages to communicate their reservations about the draft legislation.

18 One of the videos can be accessed at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KbbUXfbFsaU

19 One of such blogs is that of adebabay.com that can be accessed at: http://www.adebabay.com/2012/04/blog-post_20.html, see also the blog of Ahati Tewahido http://www.ahatitewahedo.com/2012/04/blog-post_19.html

20 At the Ethiopian Orthodox Church tradition *mahətab* or *kər* is a bundle of thread used as a cord of faith to symbolize baptism to the Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity.

In this context the picture of the *mahiteb* displayed on the background of this picture communicates a statement of resistance. The script in the picture reads "there is no joke with my mahətab and Saint Mary," accenting both the element of saint veneration, an important feature of the EOT church, and the central symbolic value of *mahətab*. Among Orthodox Christians, veneration of saints is a common religious practice. Saint veneration is in fact one of the major contentions between the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the various Protestant denominations (Tibebe Eshete 2009: 67). The strong tradition of venerating saints in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church goes to the extent of dedicating each day of the month to a different saint venerated by the Institution. Furthermore, there were ongoing discussions on Facebook and online pal talk rooms that allude to the situation if the law were passed; the resistance should go to the extent of having the religious symbols tattooed onto their body, an instance of embodying resistance or a kind of every-day form of resistance. The scripts of the pictures posted have strong political statements of resistance against this recent draft legislation that bans displaying religious symbols in a public space.

The other example of an online protest by EOT members was against a business firm called BGI Ethiopia.[21] BGI is the leading brewery in Ethiopia with the biggest share in the domestic beer market, which is known for its beer brand St George's. This beer has been on the market since 1922. The beer and the city's main football club called Saint George F.C. are named after one of the revered veteran saints of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, Saint Georg. Some EOT Christians are objecting to the fact that the saint's name is used as a trademark and branding an alcoholic drink. The logo of "ban St George" was used as a logo for this online protest and has been shared by several orthodox Christian face bookers. This is described by some informants as being "absurd" and against the basic teachings of the church that bans the consumption of alcohol:

> The main reason why I shared the logo of ban St George beer on my Facebook wall is to show my deep-seated reservation against the use of this holy name for branding an alcoholic drink. Whenever someone comes across the name St Georg displayed as a trademark on beer bottles, the person automatically relates the name of the beer to the saint, Saint George, venerated at our church. For an outsider this conveys the wrong message that consuming alcohol is tolerable at our church. As an orthodox Christian, such potential misinformation concerns me at the utmost. We were not around in the 1920's to object to its very usage as a trademark. Now that we are in a better situation to understand the potential damage such branding can do to the image of the church, we need to object to this offensive act. The Protestants can use this as one entry point to approach many fellow EOT Christians. We are not asking for the patent right or getting a share of the profit; all we are objecting to is that the company should avoid trademarks with such religious symbols. We are in a political environment where one cannot make such valuable critiques to the investor as such moves can easily be labeled as Elimatawi (anti developmentalist moves). That is why we have to appeal to the cyber community of believers through such online initiatives. (Yared Bira, 33, Addis Ababa, 13 May 2015)

21 This Facebook group has the slogan *Kidus Giyogisin silemediwew simun la msascahanat matakamun ikawamalahu*, i.e., I object to the use of the name of my patron saint for trademark. This group has a total of 6,045 members and can be accessed at www.causes.com/causes/564821-?fref=pb&hc_location=profile_browser.

Social Media as a Platform for Religious Polemics

Polemical exchanges between different religious groups are becoming one of the elements hinting at the growing religious-based tension in Ethiopia in recent years. Writing on the current religious polemics Jon Abbink (2011) noted that the potential effects of such polemical exchanges are leading to the redrawing of boundaries, the decline of dialogue and toleration, and deep rivalry, extending into the social and even demographic sphere.

A closer look at and analyses of the polemics in and around EOT Christians show that several orthodox Christians are engaged in intra- and inter-religious group polemical exchanges. The intra EOT polemical debates involve those exchanges between the mainline orthodox Christians and the different factions within the church, such as the *tahadəso* (reformist movement) and the recent millenarian movements of *Daqiqa Eləyasawəyan*, a splinter group interested in reforming the church and purifying it. The inter group polemical exchanges refer to the one between the EOT Christians and both Muslims and protestant groups.

In recent years, social media has become an alternative platform to stage such diverse polemical exchanges between contending groups. As this paper exclusively focuses on the developments around the EOT church and community of believers, it gives an example of how different EOT clerics involved in religious polemics target different contending religious groups and how the social media is serving as a platform to stage such discourses.

Numerous Ethiopian orthodox clerics and protestant pastors are engaged in religious debates of a polemical nature. One of such Ethiopian orthodox cleric known for his sentimental preachings and polemical exchanges is a young cleric named Miherete Ab Asefa. Miherete Ab's polemical preachings target Muslims, Protestants and the various reformist movements within the EOT church. A VCD entitled *protestanatwi jihad* ("jihad waged by the Protestants") based on the teachings of Miherete Ab became popular.[22] The polemics can be inferred from the provocative title of the VCD where the word *jihad*

22 A copy of this controversial video can be accessed at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y47C_SCkjIA Protestant Vs Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido ፕሮቴስታንታዊ ጀሃድ

is used as a metaphor to refer to the proselytisation missions of various Protestant denominations. As a way of speaking about the major theological differences between the Ethiopian orthodox Christians and Protestants, the preacher passes some statements, described by Protestants as being offensive. This video is uploaded to YouTube and it has several viewers a day. Such polemical exchanges are not limited to verbal attacks on theological differences. Scandalous news, the misinterpretation of religious figures, is also used in such polemical exchanges. The latest example comes from February 2015, whereby an Ethiopian Protestant pastor and singer is alleged to have sexually assaulted a married woman, news that was shared by several orthodox Christians in various Facebook video uploads.[23]

The Facebook group founded by the EOT Christian youth, which is renowned for its provocative polemics, is named *Orthodox Mels alalt* ("orthodox has a response"). As its very name implies that this group is actively engaging in direct polemical exchanges with the Protestants, the profile picture of this Facebook group is a cartoon of a Protestant pastor sexually assaulting a girl, who approached him for prayer.[24] The posts of this group address the Protestants as *Pente*, a derogatory term often used by orthodox Christians as a gloss to the various denominations of the Protestant Churches.

Numerous audio CDs, DVDs, VCDs and MP3 files with polemical speeches, sermons, religious songs and teachings are uploaded to various social media pages being shared and viewed by orthodox Christians in Ethiopia and the diaspora. One such inter-group polemical exchange is the heated theological debate between the EOT Christians and Muslims. One example is the four volume VCD by the aforementioned Ethiopian orthodox Tewahido clerk, Miherete Ab Asefa, entitled *Tallaq Fiticha* ("The Big Confrontation").[25] This VCD is a recording of sermons of MihereteAb Ab responding to the Indian-

23 For a relevant news item, see http://addisvideo.net/protestant-gospel-singer-and-pastor-tekeste-getnet-accused-for-sexually-assaulting-a-married-woman/

24 The official page of the Orthodox Mels Alat group is: https://www.facebook.com/pages/Orthodox-Mels-ALAT/981956948489884

25 This video can be accessed on YouTube at: http://www.ethiotube.net/video/12480/Islam-vs-Ethiopian-Orthodox-Tewahedo--ታላቁ-ፍጥጫ--Part-3-of-5. At the time this paper was written the video had 261,009 viewers.

Muslim *da'wa* preacher Dr Zakir Naik.[26] These videos are shared by numerous orthodox Facebookers and are posted on various websites.

The intra EOT polemics involve various fractions of the EOT Christians. The main targets of such online polemical attacks are the reformist movements within the Orthodox Church such as the *Tahadəso*. The *Tahadəso* are groups of orthodox Christians interested in reforming the church, as it features in the very name, *Tahadəso* (meaning reform). The 16 parts of video clips, entitled *Ethiopian orthodox Tewahido vs. Tahadəso*,with preachings about this splinter group within the EOT church were uploaded to YouTube.[27] These videos are shared on Facebook walls of several orthodox Christians. Some orthodox Christians have twitted about the controversy surrounding the *Tahadəso*.[28] The *Tahadəso* movement that is denounced by the Orthodox Church as a heretical group has become the target of online movements.

The other group that has faced equal resistance is the movement of *Daqiqa Eləyasawəyan*, followers of the prophet Elias. This is a splinter group preaching about the coming of the biblical prophet Elias in 2007. Prophet Elias's ministry during his second coming as explained by the *Daqiqa Eləyasawəyan* includes recolouring the Ethiopian orthodox Tewahido church.[29] The *Mahəbara Qədusan*, who has extensively published and made public denouncements of this sect, forwarded one of the major reactions to this group. These publications and the statements were shared by numerous Facebookers and hence had a wider web presence. Young EOT clerics and activists uploaded their preaching against this group on various social media pages.[30] The videos are shared by several Facebook groups and are uploaded on active blogs of religious activists.

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26 Some of the teachings of Zakir Naik and debates include his controversial preaching about the nature of Christ see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t5TBPBj4Z5k

27 New Ethiopian Orthodox Answer to Protestant and Tahadəso የተኩላው ለምድሲገፈፍ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H7FpYEI1a0c At the time this paper was written the video had 183,737 viewers. The other polemical video between the EOT and Tahadəso can be accessed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BntmKfpeYOM

28 See https://twitter.com/yonasseyoum2/status/524820313524019203

29 For more on the Daqiqa Elias movement, see Dereje Feyissa 2015

30 *Mels Le Eliasawiyan* is a response to the *Eliasawiyan* by Miherete Asefa - Ethiopian Orthodox Preaching: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CWh5FTgN4eE At the time this paper was written the video had 183,730.

As the cases of polemical exchanges with the Protestants, Muslims and reformist movements presented above illustrate, social media is becoming one of the alternative platforms for orthodox Christians to stage their difference. Moreover, social media is also serving as a platform to mediate the different factions of the church. The best example for such reconciliatory initiatives is the EOT blog of "Abba Selama," named after the first EOC pope, Abba Selama aka Kesate Berhan/Friminatos.[31]

Social Media as a Means of Mobilisation

Social media is being widely used for mobilising the community of believers in Ethiopia and beyond. The purposes of such mobilisations vary to a large extent as can be seen by the examples provided in this section.

In some cases, social media is being used as a way of informing the community of believers around the globe about the challenges orthodox Christians are facing in Ethiopia, as in the case of incidents of faith-based tensions and conflicts. The intention in passing on this information is to generate sympathy and to show solidarity to co-religionists affected in faith-based conflicts. One recent example is the petrifying pictures of dead bodies of Christians in Nigeria and Syria posted by the orthodox Christian network as a way of informing Christians about such religious-based conflicts happening in different parts of the globe.[32] Such graphic pictures and live videos of attacks on Christians posted on YouTube[33] and on the Facebook walls of several Ethiopian orthodox Christians around the world, is described by many as an act of informing one another about situations of fellow religionists and as an act of showing sympathy to the victims. This further demonstrates the growing pattern of inscribing global issues into Ethiopia's religious landscape.

In addition to sharing this global news, some Facebookers emphasise the victim's narratives in the context of the growing inter-faith conflict in post 2006 Ethiopia. Ethiopia in the post 2006 period has

31 The official page of the group can be accessed at: http://www.abaselama.org/

32 For more on this, see: https://www.facebook.com/MyOCN/posts/10153111956695330?pnref=story

33 The video can be accessed at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SwSYIHlQ5ZI

witnessed major religious conflicts, which defined the terms of the political debate. In the past decade various incidents were reported from clashes in different parts of the country, including those incidents of religious-based conflicts in Addis Ababa, Harar, Jimma, Gonder, Agarro, Alaba and Wolenkomi towns (Zelalem 2009). One of these incidents happened in Jimma town in western Ethiopia, whereby the gruesome depiction of religious violence was circulated nationwide and beyond by means of audio-visual materials. Several days of violence between Muslims and Christians swept through the area, ending with causalities and significant damage to property (Zelalem 2009). The repugnant aftermath of the massacre of worshipers in the church was captured with videotape and uploaded to YouTube. Soon bootlegged copies including an edited version superimposed with such phrases as "*Look at what they are doing to us*" began showing up across the country and being posted in various Ethiopian websites.[34] The graphic videos were uploaded to YouTube, having several viewers and being shared by thousands of Facebookers. This was used as a mobilisation strategy to draw sympathy with the victims and show the solidarity of orthodox and non-orthodox Christians both at home and in the diaspora. Many have posted these graphic pictures or at least communicated their sympathy by sharing the videos or pictures on their Facebook walls. One young Ethiopian orthodox Christian explained this phenomenon by saying:

> The graphic pictures are efficient in generating sympathy and drawing the attention of believers to the seriousness of the matter. Social media is offering us the platform to inform one another about such deadly attacks targeting thousands of fellow Christians both in Ethiopia and beyond. In situations where there are no free independent media outlets to discuss such issues, social media acts as an alternative to forums to communicate about such horrific incidents. By watching the video one can only admit the fact that as orthodox Christians we are confronted with a dreadful threat. (Nesanet Yamiru, 28, June 25, 2015, Addis Ababa)

A similar incident of the torching of and attack on an EOT church happenedin Silte Zone in SNNPR, in the neighbourhood of Qoto Baloso, in November 2011. A live picture of the incident, whereby a

34 For a copy of this video, see the following two links: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SwSYIHlQ5ZI and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QX9gILYFLkg

mob torched a church, was caught on video and uploaded to YouTube and Wongeltube. As in the case of the 2006 incident, this generated anger, frustration and discussions amongst orthodox Christians. As a result, a number of Christian networks around the globe posted on their respective websites the video clip showing live pictures of the churches being burnt down.[35] Renowned clerics took the theme as one of their main agendas of preaching. Very controversial songs by renowned orthodox Christian singers subtly addressed the topic, communicating the concerns about growing faith-based conflicts in the country. Videos of these preachings and songs were posted and shared by a number of Facebook groups. Similarly, several Ethiopian Muslims countered this by posting Christian violence against Muslims in Burma.Thus, by highlighting Christian violence in another part of the globe, Ethiopian Muslims seek to show that there is nothing inherently violent about Islam.

Furthermore, social media is being used for the purpose of mobilising the community of believers for different missions, i.e., supporting rural churches, engaging in the rehabilitation of churches and monasteries. Associations like *Mahəbara Qədusan. Dekike Nabute* and *Dejocish Ayizagu*, mentioned in section 2 above, capitalise on social media for mobilising the community to engage in such initiatives and volunteer for numerous projects. Such *Mahəbarats* as *Dejocish Ayizagu, Dekike Nabute* and *Mahəbara Qədusan* use their Facebook pages to reach out to the millions of orthodox Christians around the world.

An example of a giant project, advertised on social media, is the online fund-raising event held to raise funds for the construction of a Theology College in the Muslim-dominated and conflict-ridden part of the Jimma zone. This is a project run by the *Dekike Nabute* association. As Jimma is one of the epicentres of conflicts between orthodox Christians and Muslims (Zelalem 2009), and an area where several churches were attacked at different times, the construction of such a spiritual college in this very area was a project supported by millions of orthodox Christians. Both the advertisement of the fund raising and the inauguration of the college in December 2014 were posted on several websites, YouTube and official Facebook accounts of various EOT associations, individuals and groups. By posting pictures

35 See http://pamelageller.com/2011/03/ethiopia-muslims-burn-down-five-churches-while-screaming-their-war-cry-allah-akbar-falsely-accuse-ch.html/

of old ruined and impoverished churches on Facebook pages by these associations, the different groups mobilise the community of believers and donors to engage in the rehabilitation projects of rural churches and monasteries.[36]

The third example relates to the case of an online anti-homo movement.[37] Several EOT and non-EOT Christians opposing homosexuality and LGBT shared the call for an anti-gay demonstration planned in April 2014 on their Facebook walls, while others communicated their support by posting anti-gay symbols. There are several anti-LGBT Facebook accounts in Ethiopia such as *Ethiopia says NO to Homosexuality* and the Facebook account "Stop the LGBT! Movement."[38] This Facebook group critised President Obama's latest trip to Africa, how he abstained from making any remarks about gay rights, which he had made in Kenya, although he had clearly stated that he planned to do so right before he left for his trip to Africa.[39]

Conclusion

Based on an in-depth analysis of the case of orthodox Christians, this paper argues that, despite the poor proliferation of the Internet in the global south, there is a growing trend of appropriate Internet forms of communication media among the religious communities.

The signification of social media by different EOT actors shows a growing cyber spirituality in Ethiopia. The large-scale use of such alternative media has boosted the power of spiritual celebrities, who are renowned for their powerful preaching, polemical exchanges and critical take on the government and the Holy Synod. Social media is seen as offering alternative platforms for expressing opinions in a highly censored political environment. This element relates to Kalliope Kiriakopoulos' view. As has been elucidated with the cases of resistance against the legislation on religious codes of conduct in public spaces, social media is being used to stage protests. The solidarity with

36 One such posts can be accessed on: http://dekikenabute.blogspot.de/2013/01/blog-post_8936.html

37 For more on this, see: http://www.thereporterethiopia.com/index.php/news-headlines/item/1682-youth-forum-awaits-permission-to-hold-mass-demo-against-lgbt

38 See https://www.facebook.com/stop.LGBT.0?hc_location=ufi

39 See https://www.facebook.com/NOTOINETHIOPIA

Mahəbara Qədusan shows how this alternative media is used by the religious community to stage protests against various stakeholders.

In the context of growing inter-religious competition, and the felt need to reclaim the public space in the post 1991 political landscape of Ethiopia, social media is used to stage polemical exchanges, disseminatie information and generate sympathy from co-religionists. As the case material presented shows, the communication technologies are creating new transnational religious communities, which are mobilised for different causes. Social media is playing a quintessential role in the creation of such transnational religious communities (i.e., the community of orthodox Christians) regardless of differences, as is manifested in the case of the orthodox Christian network.

This paper argues that social media plays a quintessential role in enhancing local religious activism linked to transnational groups. By going beyond such generic arguments, linking the religious activism of youth to the effects of globalisation, the substantial issues often raised by these youth are often informed by domestic socio-political developments. By looking beyond this flow of ideas from the outside and by addressing the link between global and local religious activism it is equally important to see the agency of local religious actors in appropriating and making use of social media and other technologies, evident in their sense of mission to protect the interest of their religious community. Furthermore, as the experiences from Ethiopia discussed in this paper show, online discussions are extensions of the offsite everyday politics at home. Hence, as a way of understanding the debates on social media, one needs to contemplate relevant developments beyond cyberspace.

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