

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	1
1. Introduction	2
2. Historical overview of the relationship between state and religion	4
2.1. <i>Christianity and the state: global overview.....</i>	<i>4</i>
2.2. <i>Islam and the state: global overview</i>	<i>7</i>
2.3. <i>Africa and the state-religion conundrum</i>	<i>9</i>
3. State-religion relationship in Eritrea: pre-independence era	9
3.1. <i>Christianity and the state in Eritrea</i>	<i>10</i>
3.2. <i>Islam and the state in Eritrea</i>	<i>14</i>
4. State-religion relationship in Eritrea: post-independence era	16
5. Excessive state interference as a major cause of religious persecution	19
5.1. <i>Jehovah’s Witnesses: the first victims of religious persecution.....</i>	<i>20</i>
5.2. <i>The persecution of Eritrean Muslims.....</i>	<i>21</i>
5.3. <i>The persecution of the Pentecostal movement.....</i>	<i>22</i>
5.4. <i>Intensity of violations</i>	<i>24</i>
6. Conclusion.....	25

The Troubled Relationship of State and Religion in Eritrea*

Daniel R. Mekonnen* & Selam Kidane**

Abstract

Eritrea is a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, and multi-religious country. The country does not have official state religion. However, since the country's independence in 1991, the relationship between state and religion has been troubled one. There are at least four religions, whose existence is officially recognised by the state and are widely known as: Islam, of the Sunni rite; the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahdo Church, part of the worldwide Coptic Orthodox Church of the eastern rite; the Eritrean Catholic Church, part of the worldwide Roman Catholic movement; and the Eritrean Evangelical Church, part of the Lutheran World Federation. On the other hand, there are a number of religious beliefs which are not formally recognised by the state. Members of these religious groups practice their belief clandestinely at the risk of insurmountable levels of persecution; if caught practicing their religion in whatever form, they are treated harshly. The persecution of these groups takes place mainly in the form of coerced repudiation of one's own religion. This is routinely accompanied by various forms of human rights violations such as prolonged arbitrary detention and solitary confinement, including torture. In some extreme cases, it also entails extrajudicial execution. In this context, freedom of religion is severely restricted in Eritrea due to excessive levels of state intervention in matters of personal belief or creed. As such, Eritrea has become a major spot of religious persecution in the world. This has prompted, among other things, the description of Eritrea by the American President in September 2012 as one of the worst abusers in the world, along with North Korea. The relationship between state and religion has been a troubled one, particularly since the Eritrean Government introduced a new policy in 2002 ordering the "closure" of all other religions except the four officially recognised beliefs. This paper critically analyses the troubled relationship of state and religion in Eritrea and in so doing it addresses the challenge from a human rights perspective.

* Paper presented at the "Conference on Law and Religion in Africa," University of Ghana, Faculty of Law, 14–15 January 2013. This is a mere draft document. Please do not cite without prior consultation. The opinion expressed in this paper is solely that of the authors. It should not be attributed to any other individual or organisation of whatsoever nature.

* Research Fellow: Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, and Felsberg Institute for Education & Academic Research (FIBW), Felsberg, Germany; email: daniel.mekonnen@fibw.eu or danielrezene@gmail.com.

** Policy Officer: Strategy, Systems and Performance, Schools and Children's Services (SCS), London Borough of Enfield; Selam Kidane is also a Founding Member and Director of Release Eritrea; email: Selam.Kidane@enfield.gov.uk or selamkidane@hotmail.com.

1. Introduction

This paper discusses the troubled relationship of state and religion in Eritrea. Having obtained *de facto* independence in 1991, after a thirty-year war of independence with Ethiopia, and *de jure* statehood in 1993, the country is the second youngest in Africa, the youngest being the newly born Republic of South Sudan. In this contribution, we aspire to discuss the sad state of affairs in Eritrea through the lens of a historical overview of the relationship of state and religion dating back to the ancient times up to the modern era.

But, what is the need of analysing the relationship of state and religion in Eritrea? We try to answer this question briefly based on the salient observation of Bereket H. Selassie, who asserts that religion is one of the three major forces that define modern politics, the other two forces being nationalism and the demands of constituent parts of a state in national politics.¹ As such, an understanding of the relationship between religion and state is a very important indicator in comprehending the state of human rights and political development, particularly in post-conflict tyrannical states, such as Eritrea. However, we note that Eritrea is a very difficult case study in terms of explaining its predicament using the characterisation of a *pre-*, *in-* and/or *post-*conflict state, as explained below.

Before 1991, Eritrea was a battlefield for continuous hostilities that date back at least to the Italian colonial era at which time the country was created as a modern polity. From 1991 to 1998 it saw a relatively peaceful transition to a much anticipated democratic order which never materialised until this moment. From 1998 to 2000 it fought a devastating border conflict with Ethiopia. In the words of Greg Cameron: “From the ashes of this calamitous reversion to war, there arose a *dirigiste* state.”² The nation has already become “a battalion state.”³ Given its unimpeded high-speed course towards a “militaristic garrison state,”⁴ the

¹ Bereket H. Selassie, *Wounded Nation: How a Once Promising Eritrea was Betrayed and its Future Compromised*, Trenton, NJ: Red Sea Press Inc., 2011, p. 237.

² Greg Cameron, “The Eritrean State in Comparative Perspective,” in David O’Kane & Tricia Redeker Hepner (eds), *Biopolitics, Militarism and Development: Eritrea in the Twenty-First Century*, Berghan Books: Oxford & New York, 2009, p. 143.

³ Christian Bundegaard “The Battalion State: Securitisation and Nation-Building in Eritrea,” PSIS Occasional Paper # 2, 2004, available at http://mercury.ethz.ch/serviceengine/Files/ISN/20600/ipublicationdocument_singledocument/3cb39359-b77b-4042-a6c6-f99d9e897f83/en/PSIS-OccPap-2_2004-Bundegaard.pdf.

⁴ Tricia Redeker Hepner & David O’Kane, “Conclusion: Biopolitics and Dilemmas of Development in Eritrea and Elsewhere,” in David O’Kane & Tricia Redeker Hepner (eds), *Biopolitics, Militarism and Development: Eritrea in the Twenty-First Century*, Berghan Books: Oxford & New York, 2009, p. 168.

nation is just an inch away from becoming another failed state in the Horn of Africa. In a region which has already produced such a failed state in the last two decades, the likelihood of Eritrea becoming another failed state is not improbable.⁵

Whilst a number of factors have contributed to the sad state of affairs in Eritrea, the repressive political culture of the ruling and sole political party, the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), is the main problem. As noted by David Bozzini, the state in Eritrea is imagined by the society as authoritarian, unaccountable, volatile and violent; and the political leadership is an all-powerful and capricious, ready to do whatever it can, at the cost of individual basic freedom (including matters of intrinsically personal nature, such as religious creed), in order to hold state power intact and uncompromisingly. The political leadership continues in power despite its large delegitimation and widespread popular disapproval of its policies.⁶ This provides the broader context within which we try to analyse the troubled relationship of state and religion in Eritrea, which has now become a major cause for unprecedented levels of religious persecution and other forms of human rights violations in the country.

Our paper is organised as follows. The current section is the introductory part. In the next section, we will provide a brief historical overview of the relationship between state and religion, starting from ancient history to medieval times and the modern era. This provides a broader overview that fits the purpose of our research, particularly in the context of the two most dominant religions in Eritrea: Christianity and Islam. In the third part, we will discuss the troubled relationship between state and religion in Eritrea with emphasis on the post-independence era. However, in order to have a very picture, we will briefly touch on the pre-independence history of state-religion relationship in the country. The fourth part will link the debate with the prevailing excessive state interference in religion, a practice which has become as a major cause of unprecedented levels of religious persecution in the country. In elaborating the challenge, we will discuss some representative case studies of religious

⁵ Daniel Mekonnen, "Drivers of Fragility and the Perils of State Failure in Eritrea," a paper presented at the International Conference on "Human Security: Threats, Risks, Crisis," 18–19 October 2012, Kadir Has University, Istanbul, Turkey.

⁶ David Bozzini, "Low-Tech Surveillance and the Despotism State in Eritrea," *Surveillance & Society* 9(1/2) (2011), pp. 104, 110. Bozzini discusses the political crisis in Eritrea in the context of one of the most controversial government policies, which is mandatory and indefinite military conscription of all virtually every adult member of the society. For further on this, see Weldehaimanot, op cit; Kibreab, op cit; Hirt, op cit.

persecution that took are currently taking place in Eritrea. Finally, we will conclude our paper by summarising the main findings of our research.

2. Historical overview of the relationship between state and religion

In much of our contemporary world, the concept of separation of religion and state has been adopted widely and many more aspire to it in principle. Even where states have adopted a state religion, the status is often only limited to some form of formal recognition, with much of the social role of religion or religious institutions having been taken over by the state.⁷ This is the result of a gradual but not always amicable separation from a world that was riddled with enmeshment of religion and state, going right back to the ancient history of state and religion. At the same time, it is important to understand that while separation of religion and state has never been practiced in the world in its strictest sense, some studies on this area indicate that the principle receives greater recognition in democratic societies than in repressive ones.⁸ With objective of providing a broader overview that fits the purpose of our research, in the following paragraphs we briefly discuss the global history of state-religion relationship in the context of the two most dominant religions in Eritrea: Christianity and Islam.

2.1. Christianity and the state: global overview

As far as the global history of church-state relationship is concerned, the most important departures points is the era of the Greek and Roman Empires, when Christianity was assigned the status of state church of the Roman Empire, following a period of intense persecution.⁹ Whilst this status enabled the church to gain certain privileges, it also led to the loss of the church's autonomy, as Constantine and his successors sought to impose their views on the church with increasing prominence of the Emperor in the life of the church. This was particularly the case in the eastern parts of the Roman Empire, where the emperor tended to

⁷ See, generally, Metin Cosgel and Thomas J. Miceli, "State and Religion," *Journal of Comparative Economics* 37 (2009), pp. 402–416; Philip Hamburger, *Separation of Church and State*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004, pp. 287–334, 342.

⁸ Jonathan Fox, "World Separation of Religion and State into the 21st Century," *Comparative Political Studies* 39(5) (2006), p. 537.

⁹ Wolfgang Huber, "Church and State: Theological Aspects," in *The Encyclopaedia of Christianity*, vol. 1, Grand Rapids and Leiden: Eerdmans and Brill, 1999, pp. 502–508.

rule over both church and state, heading church councils and deciding on theological controversies. On the other hand, in the western side, where the Empire was declining and gradually falling, the Bishop of Rome was the single strongest figure having usurped many prerogatives ascribed to both the church and the state.¹⁰ The confusion continued in different formats well into the medieval period, where both collusions and confrontations were prevalent, most notably the Crusades and the Investiture Controversies, respectively.¹¹

With the Protestant reformation, the question of the distinctness of the church and state, and the relative authority of each with respect to the other was raised.¹² However, the period is also a period of great political tensions between the emerging states and different versions of Christianity were aligning with the different territorial powers. For example, the Lutherans and Calvinists aligned themselves with local and national political authorities in northern Europe, thus encouraging the emergence of modern national communities. As such, the church-state issue was not resolved; rather it was transformed from a tension between the pope and the emperor to a tension between nations. This has led to religious wars with horrendous consequences right across Europe, to an extent of influencing the cultural context of the United States as populations begun to emigrate to that part of the world.¹³

The establishments that were the features of the period remained intact, well into the 18th century, when the French Revolution disrupted some of them.¹⁴ However, some, like the Church of England, remain intact to date, although various principles that took root subsequently (for example, religious tolerance), have put a check on the exclusivity of the establishment.¹⁵ Even in the new nation – the United States, respective colonists brought with

¹⁰ Alan D. Strange, “Church and State in Historical Perspective,” available at http://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=43 (accessed 8 January 2013). See also, generally, Harold J. Berman, *Law and Revolution: The Formation of the Western Legal Tradition*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983.

¹¹ Michael Hughes, *Early Modern Germany: 1477–1806*, Philadelphia: MacMillan Press and University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992, p. 5; John M. Riddle, *A History of the Middle Ages: 300–1500*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008, P. 315.

¹² Edit Simon, *Great Ages of Man: The Reformation: A History of the World's Cultures*, Pueblo, CO: Time-Life Books, 1966, pp. 120–121.

¹³ “History of Europe: Demographics,” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, available at <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/195896/history-of-Europe/58335/Demographics#ref=ref310375> (accessed 4 January 2013).

¹⁴ See, generally, Frank Tallett, *Religion, Society and Politics in France Since 1789*, London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2003.

¹⁵ See, generally, Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 2nd ed., New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004.

them some of their religious establishments and many were retained well into the 19th century, when the Bill of Rights limited the blurring but not quiet creating a “wall of separation” between church and state. However, Jonathan Fox notes that from 152 countries surveyed in his research, the United States is the only country in the world which has full separation of religion and state in the strictest sense of the term.¹⁶ Speaking about state-religion relationship in the US context, one notes that the above cited famous phrase, “wall of separation,” is widely attributed to Thomas Jefferson, the third president of the United State. Believed to be part of a letter¹⁷ Jefferson sent to the Danbury Baptists Association, the phrase is very much associated with the religion clause of the American Constitution, which, in its First Amendment, provides as follows:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.¹⁸

Yet, it is only by the middle of the 20th century that the religious clauses of the US Constitution were extensively interpreted by the US Supreme Court as the basis for a religiously pluralistic society and even then the disentanglement was not straight forward due to controversies such as religious observance in public schools and issues of influence of religious groups on public policies.¹⁹ Nations such as India and Japan often emphasize separation of religion and politics even while religious leaders and groups play an active role in politics.²⁰

From the above it can be safely concluded that although our era of “secularism” has not attained full separation of the two institutions, the limited separation have resulted in religious bodies loosing much of their power to assert exclusivity as governments increase

¹⁶ Fox, note ** above, p. 537.

¹⁷ James Hutson, “‘A Wall of Separation’: FBI Helps Restore Jefferson’s Obliterated Draft,” *Library of Congress Information Bulletin*, 57(6) (1998), available at <http://www.loc.gov/loc/lcib/9806/danbury.html> (accessed on 4 January 2013).

¹⁸ First Amendment (Amendment I) to the United States Constitution of 1791.

¹⁹ Some of the most important American cases on the relationship between state and religion are *Reynolds v. United States*, 98 U.S. (8 Otto.) 145 (1878), and *McCullum v. Board of Education*, 333 U.S. 203 (1948), as cited by Huston, note ** above.

²⁰ Edwin O. Reischauer and Marius B. Jansen, *The Japanese Today: Change and Continuity*, 2nd ed., Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988, p. 215; Praveen Swami, “Protecting Secularism and Federal Fair Play,” *Frontline* 14 (22), 1 November 1997, available at <http://www.frontlineonnet.com/fl1422/14220170.htm> (accessed 4 January 2013); *S. R. Bommai vs. Union of India* ([1994] 2 SCR 644: AIR 1994 SC 1918: (1994)3 SCC1).

their focus on aspects of life traditionally considered within the domains of religion. Whilst the above description can serve as a useful framework for observing the relationship between church and the state, the following sub-sections will look at regional differences and the differences across religions in order to ensure a more comprehensive overview.

2.2. Islam and the state: global overview

As the central religious text of Islam, the Quran is the main source of understanding of the relationship between the state and Islam. In addition to the Quran, the Hadith (the jurisprudence emanating from the teachings of Prophet Muhammad) is also regarded as a source on several issues of government and state in Islamic societies. However, issues of governance are also resolved by making reference to the formations of *ummah* (community).²¹ Lapidus asserts that in the classical Islamic society there was no distinction between the religious and political aspects of communal life, because:

The Caliphate was both the religious and the political leadership of the community of Muslims, whose individual believers and subjects belonged to a polity defined by a religious allegiance ... This view of the seamless web of Islamic political and religious institutions has its basis in the experience of the Muslim community of Medina under Muhammad's leadership. Since Muhammad was the Prophet who revealed God's will in all of life's concerns, belief in Islam entailed both loyalty to a chief whose authority derived from his religious position, and membership in *ummah* – the community that led. In this case, religious and political values and religious and political offices were inseparable.²²

The al-sahifah al-Medina (the constitution of Medina) speaks of all of the significant tribes and families of Medina as forming one *ummah* (community) in order to act collectively in enforcing social order and security and defending against enemies.²³ However, after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, in 632 C.E., the first challenge faced by the *umma* was in fact the problem of government and specifically how to select a successor to the Prophet. The first

²¹ UK Centre for Legal Education, "Sources of Islamic Law," available at www.ukcle.ac.uk/files/.../797.6c9011e8.SourcesofIslamicLaw.pdf (accessed 4 January 2013).

²² Ira M. Lapidus, "The Separation of State and Religion in the Development of Early Islamic Society," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 6 (1975), p.363. See also generally, Ira M. Lapidus, "State and Religion in Islamic Societies," *Past and Present* 151 (1996), pp.3–27.

²³ Robert B. Serjeant, "Sunnah Jami'ah, Pacts with the Yathrib Jews, and the Tahrim of Yathrib: Analysis and Translation of the Documents Comprised in the So-Called 'Constitution of Medina,'" *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 41 (1978), pp. 1–42. See also, generally, Qamaruddin Khan, *Political Concepts in the Quran*, Lahore: Islamic Book Foundation, 1982.

disagreements that emerged within the Muslim community, which led to the eventual division of Islam, can thus be traced to this challenge.²⁴

Given the limited nature of political guidance in the Quran, Muslims had to innovate and to improvise with regard to the form and nature of government. They drew on Quranic principles such as Shariah and the heritage of the regions that they conquered. However, Islamic political theory took shape much later, subsequent to the historical development that it addressed, and indeed most major political concepts did not develop except during periods when the political institutions about which they were theorising were in decline.²⁵ Up to the beginning of the nineteenth century, Muslims thought of politics in terms of the *ummah*, and of a caliphate or a sultanate. The term *dawlah* was indeed used by medieval Muslim authors and generally meant “to turn, rotate, or alternate” but gradually the word came to mean “dynasty,” and then, very recently, state. The concept of Islamic state emerged as a reaction and response to the demise of the last caliphate in Turkey in 1924.²⁶

Contemporary states that call themselves Islamic states are very different from each other and particularly so in their political forms and constitutional arrangements. Saudi Arabia, the earliest contemporary Islamic state, is a monarchy. Iran, by contrast, is a republic with a constitution, a president, systems and institutions that are not particularly Islamic. In Sudan the establishment of an Islamic state was through a “socialist” military regime and in Pakistan the establishment also came via a military coup. Whilst this makes a definition of an Islamic State difficult, the failure of secular systems in many secular states in Muslim majority states always makes the idea of an Islamic State an alternative that many continue to contemplate.²⁷

²⁴ Reuven Firestone, *Jihad: The Origin of Holy War in Islam*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 118; Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Medina*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956, pp. 227–228.

²⁵ *Ibid*; see also generally, Bernard Lewis, *From Babel to Dragomans: Interpreting the Middle East*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

²⁶ Mahmoud Haddad, “Arab Religious Nationalism in the Colonial Era: Rereading Rashid Rida’s Ideas on the Caliphate,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 117(2) (1997), p. 253. On the concept of *dawlah*, see Franz Rosenthal, “Dawla” in Bernard Lewis, Charles Pellat and Joseph Schacht (eds.) *Encyclopedia of Islam*, Leiden: Brill, 1965.

²⁷ See, generally, Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na’aim, *Islam and the Secular State: Negotiating the Future of Sharia*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008.

2.3. Africa and the state-religion conundrum

The modern African state has followed similar patterns to the above in its relationship with religion (both Islam and Christianity), where states alternate between appeasements and confrontations, in an attempt to answer the issue of: who shall rule, and how shall the state be governed? The religious leaders of Africa have a lot of influence over the state through their connections across society and also due to the fact that religion is more rooted in the society than state institutions that are relatively new (and aliens). There are many examples of positive changes that came out of this dynamics: challenges to dictatorships, injustice and corruption. However, religion has also played key roles in a number of occurrences that are causes for concern including: the participation of some Roman Catholic priests in the Rwandan genocide, the vast network of organisations and individuals who are associated with al-Qaida that led to the bombings in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam.²⁸

3. State-religion relationship in Eritrea: pre-independence era

A discourse on the relationship between the state and religion in Eritrea is best understood in the context of religious composition of the Eritrean society, which is a typical example of religious pluralism. Eritrea's religious pluralism is attributed to at least two major factors: a) the pluralistic nature of the Eritrean society, which constitutes at least nine officially recognised ethnic groups,²⁹ and (b) the long and successive history of colonialism and trans-continental migration which dates back to the early history of the two most prominent religions in the region: Christianity and Islam. But Eritrea is not a land of only Christians and Muslims. Often forgotten from mainstream discourses are adherents of indigenous belief systems, which include the veneration of ancestral saints and other supernatural forces or agencies.

²⁸ Austin M. Ahanotu (ed.), *Religion, State and Society in Contemporary Africa: Nigeria, Sudan, South Africa, Zaire and Mozambique*, Bern: Peter Lang, 1992.

²⁹ The nine officially recognised ethnic groups, proportional to size, are: Tigrinya (ትግርኛ), Tigre (ትግረ), Afar (ኅፋር), Saho (ሳዎ), Hidarib (ሐዳርብ), Bilen (ብሉን), Nara (ናራ), Kunama (ኩናማ), and Rashaida (ራሻይዳ). However, there are at least two small communities which request official recognition as distinct ethnic groups and whose claim has never been officially addressed by the government. These are the two Muslim communities of Jeberti (ጃበርቲ) and Tekurir (ተኩሪር). The Jeberti speak Tigrinya and the government considers them as part of the Tigrinya ethnic group. The Tekurir, who are believed to be recently-settled descendants of the Hausa tribe in Nigeria, speak Arabic with an accent. On the question of Jeberti and Tekurir, see generally, Simon M. Weldehaimanot, "Eritrea: Constitutional, legislative and administrative provisions concerning indigenous peoples," in International Labour Organization and African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights *The Constitutional and Legislative Protection of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples: Country Reports*, (Pretoria, 2009): 3-4.

Within the broader category of Christianity, there are many sub-classifications which include Orthodox Christianity, Catholicism, the Jehovah's Witnesses, Evangelical, Protestant and Pentecostal denominations. Under the category of Islam, the most dominant segment is Islam of the Sunni rite. Wahhabism, which is regarded as a conservative branch of Sunni Islam, is also practiced in Eritrea. Another religion practiced in Eritrea, which does not belong to none of the two most dominant religions (Christianity and Islam), is the Bahá'í Faith. Some reports indicate that Judaism is also practiced in Eritrea, albeit in a very small or insignificant proportion compared to other religions.

There has been a varying degree of relationship between the state and religion throughout in the politico-legal history of Eritrea. Due to the size and long history of the two most dominant religions in the country, Christianity and Islam, we believe they can be used as the two most important reference points from which angle the relationship of the state and religion and can be assessed.

3.1. Christianity and the state in Eritrea

Christianity is regarded as the third oldest religion in Eritrea, next to ancient Mosaic belief and indigenous belief systems of the country. The latter, indigenous belief system is plausibly the oldest and the most persistent religion in Eritrea practiced up to the present time, albeit in a very insignificant proportion. Some segments of the Kunama ethnic group are the most known adherents of indigenous belief system in Eritrea.³⁰

The Eritrean Orthodox Church is the oldest embodiment of Christianity in Eritrea. This version of Christianity is part of what Jon Abbink describes (in an Ethiopian context) as an "indigenous form"³¹ of Christianity, although the validity of Abbink's terminology remains somehow questionable. Antiquity is a distinctive feature of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, which has a very strong influence from the other oldest African Orthodox Church, which is the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Citing other sources, Uoldelul Chelati Dirar traces the introduction of Orthodox Christianity into Eritrea to AD 320, a time which is characterised as

³⁰ The late Eritrean scholar, Alexander Naty (himself from the Kunamaland), writes that "the Kunama adhere to Christianity and to the traditional belief system but also include some Moslems." Alexander Nati, "Environment, Society and the State in Western Eritrea," *Africa* 72 (2002), p. 573.

³¹ Job Abbink, "An Historical-Anthropological Approach to Islam in Ethiopia: Issues of Identity and Politics," *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 11(2) (1998), p. 110.

the early apostolic era. Dirar adds, “The local Christian tradition attributes this to the missionary efforts of a group of nine monks who came from different areas of the Oriental Christian world at the end of the fifth century.”³² From that time, throughout the medial and post-medial period up to the mid-eighteenth century, Orthodox Christianity not only enjoyed “a long season of fervid proselytism” but also “provided spiritual guidance” and “a framework for the maintenance and reproduction of the existing social order.”³³

Throughout history, Orthodox Christianity was predominantly practiced in the highlands of Eritrea, which, for all intents and purposes, part and parcel of the ancient of the ancient civilisation of the Aksum and later Abyssinia. As a result, the Orthodox Church always maintained a very close relationship with the ruling class, particularly with the kings and emperors of Abyssinia. This long history of a strong relationship between the Orthodox Church and state (state in its ancient sense) was further strengthened in the mid-1800s as can be gleaned from the following observation of Tricia Redeker Hepner:

In the mid-1800s, the Orthodox Church formally aligned with the imperial [Abyssinian] monarchy under Yohannes IV and began “divinely ordaining” Emperors as well as exacting taxes on their behalf. The collusion of Church and State entrenched the cultural, political, and religious dominance of highland peoples, surrounded by a vast and feared Muslim periphery. The regional, economic, and religious division of the empire into sedentary, highland Orthodox Christians and pastoralist, lowland Muslims (and animists) characterized both Ethiopia and its northern province of Eritrea.³⁴

What followed is an elevated rank and status of the Orthodox Church, compared to all other religions. During this time, the rank and status of the Orthodox Church was equivalent to or akin to a state religion, mainly in the highlands of Abyssinia (which also included parts of Eritrea), where this particular religion was practiced predominantly. In reference to the ancient Abyssinian state, which also includes parts of Eritrea, Abbink says that Christianity has never been officially prescribed as a state religion.³⁵ However, the relationship between the Orthodox Church and the ruling class (the monarchs) was so intact to claim that the relationship between the state and the Orthodox Church was a simplistic one. From Abbink’s

³² Uoldelul Chelati Dirar, “Church–State Relations in Colonial Eritrea: Missionaries and the Development of Colonial Strategies (1869–1911),” *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 8(3) (2003), p. 392.

³³ Dirar, note ** above, p. 392.

³⁴ Tricia Redeker Hepner, “Religion, Nationalism, and Transnational Civil Society in the Eritrean Diaspora,” *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 10(3) (2003), p. 271; see also Dirar, note **, p. 393.

³⁵ Abbink, note ** above, p. 115.

own observation, an emperor of the old Abyssinian state had to be always a Christian and he was regarded the “Protector” of the Church, while priests have officiated in the crowning ceremony of the emperors. In fact, since the period of the Aksumite Kingdom, the Abyssinian “state has been defined partly through its association with Christianity”³⁶ and the ideological framework of the state was framed according to the theological construction of the Orthodox Church. Such has been the practice until the downfall of the last Ethiopian Emperor, Haile Sellassie I, in 1974. Ever since the role and function of the Orthodox Church has dwindled considerably. But in both countries, in Eritrea and Ethiopia, the church still remains the biggest Christian denomination.

A very important aspect of Christianity in Eritrea is that of the history of Catholicism and Protestantism. While the history of the Catholic Church in the region is traced to the early 1500s, the church landed in Eritrea firmly only in 1837, a time which has marked the arrival of the Jesuit missionaries (who were later followed by Lazarists). Borrowing the expression of Hepner, the arrival of the Catholic Church in Eritrea can be described as an enabling step for Italian colonial rule.³⁷ Indeed, as the official religion of Italian colonizers, Catholicism was soon to assume a very instrumental role in solidifying Italian colonialism in Eritrea. In terms of timing, Eritrea was officially declared an Italian colony only in 1890, at least half a century after the arrival of Catholic missionaries. However, the arrival of the Catholic missionaries has played a crucial role in accomplishing a successful Italian settlement policy. This was evident, according to Dirar, from the level of understanding that was reached (like in any other missionary scenario) between the Italian state and the Catholic Church, via its Congregation of Propaganda Fide – the main missionary body of the church). This agreement is believed to have finally led to the substitution of the French Lazarist Fathers (the first Catholic missionaries in Eritrea sent by Vatican) by Italian Capuchins in 1894.³⁸ Citing Confessore, Dirar further expounds the scenario as follows:

It also led to the reorganization of the mission which, in keeping with colonial boundaries, was transformed into the Apostolic Prefecture of Eritrea and was thus separated from the previous Mission of Abyssinia. This process was finalized with the expulsion, in 1895, of all French

³⁶ Abbink, note ** above, p. 115.

³⁷ Citing Tom Killion (1998), Hepner writes that: “Catholic missionaries had been present in Ethiopia since the 1500s but attracted more resistance than converts. In 1632, they were expelled by Emperor Fasilidas for their role in civil strife between Catholic converts and local Orthodox adherents.” Hepner, note ** above, p. 271. See also Tom Killion, *Historical Dictionary of Eritrea*, New Hampshire: Scarecrow Publishing, 1998, p. 132.

³⁸ Dirar, note ** above, pp. 398–399.

Lazarist Fathers from the territory of the colony. After the Italianization of the mission, the *Associazione nazionale* played a crucial role in trying to make the settlement policy successful. It became directly involved in the selection of candidates from the Italian countryside and, in some cases, even covered part of their initial expenses.³⁹

Of course, in 1890, by declaring Eritrea “colonia,” Italy was trying to use Eritrea “as a gateway to penetrate into Abyssinia,”⁴⁰ a dream which never materialised due to the defeat of the Italians in the famous African resistance against European colonialism, the Battle of Adwa of 1896.⁴¹ However, Italian influence on Eritrea has remained intact for the next the next fifty years until 1941 where the Italy was defeated at the beginning of the Second World War and by which reason it was driven out from the country by the British. A very important point in this debate is that during the Italian colonial era the Eritrean Orthodox has also fall out of favour of the Italian colonial state machinery, understandably due to the fact that the Italians were chiefly Catholic.

On the other hand, during the pre- and post-Italian era the Eritrean Catholic Church has never enjoyed the kind of ardent contact its Orthodox counterpart enjoyed with old state structures in Eritrea – except for the brief empowerment by the Italian colonial state. Nonetheless, the throughout the Italian colonial era and after it the Eritrean Catholic Church has grown considerably in terms of the number of its followers. One major factor for the growth of the Catholic Church was that conversion to Catholicism “facilitated new social and political opportunities for Eritreans, including education, health services and job opportunities in the colonial administration.”⁴² Indeed, up to this date, the Eritrean Catholic Church is credited for its trademark social services which include the establishment of orphanages, clinics, and schools throughout the country. Perhaps two of the most important contributions of the Catholic Church (in addition to its primary mission of spiritual guidance) are the establishment of the first and only university in the country, the University of Asmara, and the first press (newspaper) of the country.⁴³

There is a third important of segment of the Eritrean Christianity. The history of this version of Christianity dates back to the introduction of Evangelism in 1863 by the Swedish

³⁹ Dirar, note **, p. 399.

⁴⁰ Dirar, note **, p. 398.

⁴¹ Richard Pankhurst, *The Ethiopians: A History*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, p. 190.

⁴² Dirar, note **, p. 406.

⁴³ Hepner, note ** above, pp. 272, 284.

Evangelical Mission (SEM).⁴⁴ At times, this segment of Eritrean Christianity was vying “with Catholics for converts among the Orthodox, and to a lesser extent, Muslims.” According to Hepner, the movement “was expelled by Italian colonial authorities in 1935 but returned again in 1941 to create a successful Protestant movement.”⁴⁵ It gained momentous popularity in the period starting from the last decade before Eritrea’s independence up to mid-1990s. Its expansion was further consolidated in the aftermath of the 1998-2000 border conflict with Ethiopia.⁴⁶ This version of Christianity, which traces its origins to the SEM, also never garnered considerable official support which could reach the level of official state religion. In contrast, and as will be seen later, followers of this “new” religious movement have increasingly suffered state persecution in proportions which are exceedingly unacceptable by the standards civilised states.

3.2. Islam and the state in Eritrea

Islam arrived in Eritrea at the same time when its founder the most iconic figure, Prophet Mohammed, begun preaching the religion. The following long quotation from Dirar provides a very clear picture of the arrival of Islam in Eritrea:

[T]he very beginning of Islam is associated in the Islamic tradition with the history of the Abyssinian coasts of the Red Sea. It is significant that in this tradition, the birth of the Prophet Muhammad is traditionally dated to the year 570. This is known as the year of the Elephant because of an Abyssinian military expedition against Mecca led by King Abreha, which included battalions with elephants and ended with the defeat of the invader due to a sudden outbreak of smallpox. Later, following the inception of persecution against the then small community of Muslim believers in Mecca, a group which included one of the daughters of the Prophet was sent to the Abyssinian shores of the Red Sea seeking asylum.⁴⁷

Resonating with the above observation, Abbink (citing Trimmingham 1952) opines that “the escapees were advised by [Prophet] Muhammad himself to seek refuge across the sea, in the empire of Aksum, where a ‘... righteous king would give them protection.’” He further discusses Islam as religion, which, from the very beginning, has been a trans-continental religion in that it arrived in the African Red Sea Coast from the Arabian heartland where it emerged. He went on to note that “the first converts to the new religion - outside the close

⁴⁴ Hepner, note ** above, p. 272.

⁴⁵ Hepner, note ** above, p. 272, 289.

⁴⁶ Abebe Kifleyesus, “Cosmologies in Collision: Pentecostal Conversion and Christian Cults in Asmara,” *African Studies Review* 49(1) (2006), pp. 76–79.

⁴⁷ Dirar, note ** above, p. 393. Dirar cites the following sources in support of his narration: Sergew Hable Selasse, *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History*, Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press, 1972; John S. Trimmingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*, London: Frank Cass, 1952.

circle of the Prophet Muhammad - are assumed to have been Ethiopians.”⁴⁸ However, since there was no place called “Ethiopia” at that time (as we know it now), Abbink was definitely referring to the old ancient Abyssinian empire (known as the Kingdom of Aksum) and which consisted of mainly the northern part of Ethiopia, and some parts of current day Eritrea. Since Islam entered the continent via the Red Sea, which is today’s Eritrea, plausibly the latter is the first African country to welcome the religion in its incipient years. The time when the first escapees from Mecca arrived in Aksum is known as the first *Hijra* or migration and it is believed to have taken in the year 615.⁴⁹

The above shows that like Christianity Islam has also a very long history in Eritrea. In spite of such a long history, it never attained the level of favouritism Christianity has enjoyed from state structures, particularly in the era of Abyssinian monarchs. While this observation may hold true for the highlands of Eritrea which remains predominantly Christian, in the lowlands of Eritrea Islam has always been a dominant religion regulating every aspect of life even in the absence of centralised state-like or other political institutions. There is however one important stage in the spread of Islam in Eritrea and Ethiopia which is vital for our understanding of some aspects of the relationship between Islam and Christianity. This stage represents the campaign launched by Ahmed Ibrahim known as Gragn (left-handed) in the sixteenth century, a campaign which is characterised as a full scale *jihad* and was accompanied by widespread havoc and destruction of a great number of centres of Abyssinian Orthodox Church civilisation. With a stated aim of rooting out Christianity, this campaign had far-fetching ramifications which shaped Christian perceptions of Islam in the region.⁵⁰

In spite of rare instances of religious conflicts, the status of the Abyssinian Orthodox Church has always been elevated due to its cultural and political dominance creating a sense of subjugation on the part of Islamic communities, particularly in those areas of today’s Eritrea where the Orthodox Church has a strong presence. The impact of this sentiment is particularly visible during the liberation struggle era and the immediate years before this era. At this time, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church was regarded as a helper in the legitimisation of

⁴⁸ Abbink, note ** above, p. 111.

⁴⁹ Abbink, note **, p. 111.

⁵⁰ Abbink, note **, p. 114; Dirar, note **, p. 393; Ghada Talhami, *Suakim and Massawa under Egyptian Rule*, Washington DC: University Press of America, 1979, as a cited by Dirar.

Ethiopian rule in Eritrea. This is so due to the church's controversial role in the political developments of the time. For example, when the Ethiopian propaganda machinery denounced Eritrean liberation struggle at the early years of its inception as an "Islamic separatist" movement, the denunciation has strengthened the feeling on the part of Eritrean Muslims that the Orthodox Church was indeed an instrument of the state.⁵¹ Given the outright support to the Orthodox Church to the unionist movement, this sentiment was rightly justified.

A very common factor about the two religions is however their long history in Eritrea which equated with antiquity. In such a long history, both religions have become constitutive elements of Eritrean local identity, functioning "both as a basic instrument of social cohesion and as a source of legitimacy for political authority."⁵² Another striking element about the relationship between Christianity and Islam is that while Islam is a religion practiced by all Eritrean ethnic groups, such is not the case about Christianity. For example, the Afar and Rashaida ethnic groups are entirely Muslim societies with no traces of Christianity within their communities.⁵³

4. State-religion relationship in Eritrea: post-independence era

In the post-independence era there has never been an officially prescribed state religion in Eritrea. By law, state and religion are separate in Eritrea as is clearly stipulated in Proclamation No. 73/1995, which is known as *Proclamation to Provide for the Activities of Religions and Religious Institutions* (hereinafter "the *Religious Proclamation*"), promulgated on July 15, 1995. This is the most relevant law in Eritrea as far religious matters are concerned.

The *Religious Proclamation* starts by recognising the right to freedom of belief and conscience, which the preamble describes as one of the *raisons d'être*s (main justifications)

⁵¹ Hepner, note ** above, p. 272.

⁵² Dirar, note ** above, p. 393.

⁵³ However, it should be noted that if the claim of the Jeberti community (which is currently regarded as a sub-group of Tigrinya) for recognition as a separate ethnic group succeeds, the Tigrinya ethnic group will become entirely Christian community.

for the promulgation of the law.⁵⁴ The right to freedom of belief and conscience is also one of the fundamental rights recognised by the 1997 Constitution of Eritrea (article 19). However, the Eritrean Constitution remains “unimplemented” since its ratification in 1997 and this has made the country the only in the world without a working constitution or operational constitutional framework.

In the second preambular sentence, which is another underlying principle of the *Religious Proclamation*, the law provides that the state and religion should exist separately.⁵⁵ This principle is repeated in article 1(1) of the *Religious Proclamation* which reads as follows:

In Eritrea, the state as a political system, and religion and religious institutions as a spiritual system should exist separately; the state shall not interfere in religious affairs and religion and religious institutions shall not interfere in political affairs.⁵⁶

On paper, the principle of separation of the state and religion appears very interesting but in practice this principle has become a victim of the government’s oblivion as is the case in many other issues of governance and human rights. While the preclusion of religious institutions from political matters can be seen by some as controversial, it would have been more than enough if the government respected its own self-restraint provisions which proscribed itself from interfering in religious affairs. Conversely, the Eritrean government interferes in religious affairs beyond what can be described as a desirable instance of intervention, thereby making Eritrea one of the worst places in the world in terms of religious freedom. Starting from the US Department of State’s annual report on religious freedom to other periodic reports on this topic, Eritrea is normally mentioned on the top of violators of religious rights.⁵⁷ In many other international surveys measuring the protection of

⁵⁴ The first preambular sentence of the *Religious Proclamation*, which is promulgated only in Tigrinya, reads as follows: “ናይ ነፍሲ-ወከፍ ኤርትራዊ ዜጋ ናይ ሕልናን ሃይማኖትን ነጻነት ብሕገ ዝተረጋገጸን ስሩት መሰል ምዃኑ ብምግንዛብ፡፡” The English equivalent would be: “Recognising that the right to freedom of belief and conscience of every Eritrean is right guaranteed by law.”

⁵⁵ The original Tigrinya wording reads as follows: ““መንግስቲ ከም ፖለቲካዊ ስርዓት ሃይማኖት ከኣ ከም መንፈሳዊ ስርዓት ከልቲኣም ዝተፈላለዩ ምዃኖም ብምርዳእ ... እዚ ዝሰዕብ ኣዋጅ ተኣዊጁ ኣሎ።”

⁵⁶ The original Tigrinya wording reads as follows: “ኣብ ኤርትራ መንግስቲ ከም ፖለቲካዊ ስርዓት፡ ሃይማኖትን ሃይማኖታዊ ትካላትን ከኣ ከም መንፈሳዊ ትካላት፡ ነንቢይኖም ስለዝኾኑ፡ መንግስቲ ኣብ ሃይማኖታዊ ጉዳያት፡ ሃይማኖትን ሃይማኖታዊ ትካላትን ድማ ኣብ ፖለቲካዊ ጉዳያት ኣይኣትዉን።”

⁵⁷ US Department of State, *International Religious Freedom Report*, available at <http://www.cfr.org/human-rights/international-religious-freedom-report-2011/p25853> (accessed 22 March 2012).

fundamental rights, Eritrea competes for last place with other notorious countries such as North Korea and Turkmenistan.⁵⁸

Excessive government interference has affected all Eritrean religions. Nonetheless, there is a very clear pattern in the intensification of the unwarranted interference and this is very much related to the momentous growth Pentecostalism in the aftermath of the 1998-2000 border war with Ethiopia. As noted by Mekonnen and van Reisen, this period has seen a jovial revival of Pentecostalism in Eritrea which was not likeable by the government for a number of factors.⁵⁹ Two elements of the Pentecostal movement are apparently in contradiction with the established political culture of the Eritrean government. These are: (1) the fact that conversion to Pentecostalism takes place in the context of a conscious break with traditional practices; and, (2) the fact that the movement attracts a growing number of Eritrea's middle class. From the view point of the political elite, a conscious break from the status quo is seen as a serious threat to its continued political hegemony. Undoubtedly, the tendency 'to break away from past practices' is interpreted by the Eritrean government as breeding dissent and spreading discontent within the larger Eritrean society and hence considered incompatible with the political ideology of the ruling elite. The fact that Pentecostalism has enjoyed wider acceptance among Eritrea's middle class makes the threat, from the government's point of view, more imminent. Kifleyesus also notes that the growing attraction of Pentecostalism among Eritrea's middle class was resented by the traditional Eritrean Christian churches.⁶⁰

The strong resentment felt by the Eritrean government is traced to the Marxist-Leninist background of the government, which dates back to its liberation struggle era. The Marxist-Leninist tendency is derived, among other things, from the formal one year training given to senior liberation struggle leaders by the Chinese Communist Party in the 1960s (Mekonnen 2009: 98). This Marxist-Leninist tendency is evident, for example, from the statement of an army commander given in relation to a punishment meted out to a member of a Pentecostal movement: "Like in North Korea, this type of religion should never be allowed to spread in

⁵⁸ Dan Connell, "Notes from a Speech Given at a CIDRIE Symposium in London on 12 May 2012," available at http://www.cdrie.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=274:eritrea-2012&catid=34:english-articles&Itemid=53.

⁵⁹ See generally Daniel R. Mekonnen & Mirjam van Reisen, "Religious Persecution in Eritrea and the Role of the European Union in Tackling the Challenge" in Niamh Reilly & Stacey Scriver Furlong (eds) *Religion, Gender and the Public Sphere (co-authorship with Mirjam van Reisen)*, London, Routledge Publishing, 2013 (forthcoming).

⁶⁰ Abebe Kifleyesus, "Cosmologies in Collision: Pentecostal Conversion and Christian Cults in Asmara," *African Studies Review* 49(1) (2006), p. 87.

our country because this is a religion of the CIA and accordingly no one should be allowed to read and preach the Bible” (EriWengel.com 2007). According to historical records, Hepner also traces this kind of anti-religion tendency of the government to article 7D of the 1977 *National Democratic Program* of the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (the current government) which explicitly committed the Front to fight “all the imperialist-created new counter-revolutionary faiths, such as Jehovah’s Witnesses, Pentecostal, Bahai, etc.” While Hepner notes that the government has remedies its archaic position on religion in its 1987 congress, the recent repression of religious freedom signals a relapse to the old position.⁶¹ This time, it has manifested itself in the worst form of religious persecution the world has ever seen in recent history. This takes us to the next section which discusses some prominent case studies of religious persecution that we believe are the outcome of excessive state interference on religious affairs.

5. Excessive state interference as a major cause of religious persecution⁶²

As we noted in the previous sections, for a greater part of its history, Eritrea has been identified as a symbolic place for religious tolerance and the acceptance of all religious paths as equally valid. Generally speaking, the relationship between Eritrean religious communities has predominantly been one of accommodation and compromise, not of antagonism and strife. To a certain extent, this also holds true about the relationship of the state and religion. This was the main foundation for a long of history coexistence of the country’s major religions, except for the rare instances of religion-induced conflicts. From recent history, the only such major instance is the Eritrean Civil War of the 1970s and 1980s, which is sometimes discussed as a conflict involving religious animosity (although there has never a semblance of national consensus on the real and underlying causes of this particular conflict).

In the post-independence era, the country has seen a brief respite between 1991 and 1998 when fundamental rights and freedoms, such as freedom of religion and worship, were relatively respected. This does not mean however there were no instances of religious persecution during this time. The crisis of religious persecution reached disproportionate level after 2002 when the government ordered the closure of all but the following religious

⁶¹ Hepner, note ** above, p. 291.

⁶² The case studies discussed in this section heavily rely on Mekonnen and van Reisen, note ** above.

groups: Islam, of the Sunni rite; the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahdo Church, part of the worldwide Coptic Orthodox Church of the eastern rite; the Eritrean Catholic Church, part of the worldwide Roman Catholic movement; and the Eritrean Evangelical Church, part of the Lutheran World Federation.⁶³ According to the 2002 order, several religious institutions and groups, including those which had been active for many years, were arbitrarily ordered to close. Many of these religious groups are now condemned to practice their religion clandestinely at the risk of serve penalty if caught practicing their religion, as will be discussed in the latter parts of this section. However, as a matter of historical categorisation, the Jehovah's Witnesses are the first victims of religious persecution in the post-independence era as discussed below.

5.1. *Jehovah's Witnesses: the first victims of religious persecution*

The earliest case of religious persecution since 1991 is that of Jehovah's Witnesses. The incident dates back to 1993, when Jehovah's Witnesses refused to vote in the referendum for national independence and participate in the National Military Service Programme (NMSP) on religious grounds. The 'punishment' for this was harsh. By an executive order issued by the state president on 25 October 1994, Jehovah's Witnesses were prohibited from employment in the public sector; refused permission to engage in any commercial enterprise; and were deprived of the right to obtain relevant documentation such as national and identity papers. The executive order was not only morally abhorrent but also legally repugnant. As far as the refusal to vote in the national referendum is concerned, there is no clearly defined Eritrean law upon which the punishment can be based. However, the law which introduced the NMSP has set clearly defined punitive provisions for those who refuse to comply with the requirements of the NMSP. The punishment is two years imprisonment or a fine of Nakfa 3000, or both,⁶⁴ without prejudice to graver penalties provided by the Transitional Penal Code of Eritrea. None of the punitive prescriptions in the executive order are based on law.

Amnesty International reports that as a result of the executive decree several Jehovah's Witnesses have been subjected to arbitrary detention, some 250 families have fled the country and sought asylum elsewhere, 100 families have been dismissed from government

⁶³ Amnesty International. *Eritrea: Religious Persecution*, AI Index: AFR 64/013/2005., p. 1.

⁶⁴ Articles 20 and 37 of Proclamations No 11/1991 and 82/1995, respectively.

employment, and at least 36 families have been evicted from their homes.⁶⁵ An important point in the case of the Jehovah's Witnesses is that they did not reject non-military alternatives to the requirements of the NMSP. According to Amnesty International, the NMSP does not recognise international standards and best practices on the right to conscientious objection to military service, especially those based on one's religious, moral or ethical conviction. The law also does not offer alternatives for those who refuse to do military training on the basis of their beliefs. This, by itself, is a flagrant violation of international standards and best practices.

5.2. The persecution of Eritrean Muslims

Eritrean Muslims have also suffered persecution in the early years of independence. Some instances are difficult to portray as examples of religious persecution, because they involve other persecutory factors, such as perceived allegiance of the victims to armed opposition groups operating from neighbouring country. One example in this regard is an incident reported by Amnesty International as having taken place on 5 December 1994. Government forces arrested hundreds of young Muslim teachers who were reportedly extra-judicially executed in May 1997.⁶⁶ There is a stark similarity between the report of Amnesty International and what some writers call "the Dirfo Massacre," an incident that allegedly took place in June 1997. As reported by the Awate Team, the incident involves the extra-judicial execution of some 150 Eritrean Muslims by Eritrean security forces operating under orders given by the chief of National Security, Brigadier General Abraha Kassa and the state president.⁶⁷ The Dirfo Massacre can be described as one of the most shocking en masse killings in post-independence Eritrea.⁶⁸

Another example of religious persecution against Eritrean Muslims took place in September 2004. The incident involved the arrest of a dozen Muslim students belonging to a new Islamic religious tendency, known as Wahhabism. Amnesty International recognises the believers as

⁶⁵ Amnesty International 2005, note ** above, p. 7.

⁶⁶ Amnesty International 2005, note **, pp. 14–15.

⁶⁷ Awate Team, "The 'Executed': No Smoking Gun, but Plenty of Circumstantial Evidence," available at <http://www.awate.com/cgi-bin/artman/exec/view.cgi/11/1090> (accessed March 13, 2003).

⁶⁸ Daniel R. Mekonnen, *Transitional Justice: Framing a Model for Eritrea*, Saarbrücken: VDM Publishing, 2009, p. 110.

victims of ‘incommunicado’ detention because their whereabouts have remained unknown.⁶⁹ Compared to the persecution of Christian minority groups, the persecution of Wahhabis or other Islamic groups remains a hitherto under-researched area. Academic discourse on this particular topic is also quite scarce.

5.3. *The persecution of the Pentecostal movement*

Relatively, the most publicised aspect of religious persecution in Eritrea is that of minority Christian groups. These groups are interchangeably referred to as evangelical or protestant Pentecostals. In this regard, there is a limited academic literature such as that of Kifleyesus,⁷⁰ who traces the earliest introduction of Pentecostalism to Eritrea to the second half of the nineteenth century. The movement gained enormous momentum in the aftermath of the 1998–2000 Eritrea-Ethiopia border conflict. As a resident of Asmara from 1991 to 2001, one of the current authors (Mekonnen) clearly remembers how the movement was growing noticeably in the capital city during and after the border conflict with Ethiopia. Kifleyesus observes that in different historical contexts, Pentecostalism proved to be responsive to the predicament of Eritreans and its increasing influence is owed to this particular feature. In deciphering the hostility of the Eritrean government towards Pentecostals, it is important to understand how the growth of this movement is perceived by non-Pentecostals. Kifleyesus offers insightful perspective in this regard.

A characteristic feature of the new Pentecostal movement is the repudiation of traditional hierarchies and sources of authority. Kifleyesus notes that compared to traditional Christian establishments, the new Pentecostal movement provided young Eritreans with spiritual and material networks extending beyond ethnic and class considerations.⁷¹ The Pentecostal movement’s lively, convivial, fraternal, spirit-filled, and empowering worship and prayer sessions have also “revitalized and to some extent revolutionized Christianity” in Eritrea. In addition to bringing about radical cultural transformation, conversion to Pentecostalism makes “born-again persons more industrious and more socially mobile than many of their [counterparts].” Kifleyesus in particular notes that “the Pentecostal movement in [Eritrea] is made up of young educated men and women, secondary school students and teachers,

⁶⁹ Amnesty International 2005, note ** above, p. 15.

⁷⁰ Kifleyesus, note ** above, pp. 77–79.

⁷¹ Kifleyesus, note **, p. 76.

university students and professors, and health-care professionals,” which in other words means the most conscious part of Eritrea’s working and middle classes.⁷²

Two elements of the Pentecostal movement are apparently in contradiction with the established political culture of the Eritrean government. These are: (1) the fact that conversion to Pentecostalism takes place in the context of a conscious break with traditional practices and, (2) the fact that the movement attracts a growing number of Eritrea’s middle class. From the view point of the political elite, a conscious break from the status quo is seen as a serious threat to its continued political hegemony. Although Kifleyesus did not put it this way, the tendency “to break away from past practices” is interpreted by the Eritrean government as breeding dissent and spreading discontent within the larger Eritrean society and hence considered incompatible with the political ideology of the ruling elite. The fact that this tendency has enjoyed wider acceptance among Eritrea’s middle class makes the threat, from the government’s point of view, more imminent. However, Kifleyesus correctly notes that the growing attraction of Pentecostalism among Eritrea’s middle class was resented by the traditional Eritrean Christian churches⁷³.

What Kifleyesus misses is that the resentment is also deeply felt by the Eritrean government by reason of which the government has adopted a very hostile policy towards Pentecostalism. True to its Marxist-Leninist background, the government’s ambivalence to religion dates back to its liberation struggle era. The Marxist-Leninist tendency is derived, among other things, from the formal one year training given to senior liberation struggle leaders by the Chinese Communist Party in the 1960s.⁷⁴ This Marxist-Leninist tendency is evident, for example, from the statement of an army commander given in relation to a punishment meted out against a member of a Pentecostal movement: “Like in North Korea, this type of religion should never be allowed to spread in our country because this is a religion of the CIA and accordingly no one should be allowed to read and preach the Bible.”⁷⁵ The story underscores the fact that religious persecution is perpetrated as a premeditated government policy focusing on certain categories of people.

⁷² Kifleyesus, note **, pp. 79–84.

⁷³ Kifleyesus, note **, p. 87.

⁷⁴ Mekonnen, note **, p. 98.

⁷⁵ EriWengel.com, “The Story of Wedi Asmara in His Own Words,” available at <http://www.eriwengel.com/content/view/90/107/lang.en/> (accessed on 22 October 2007).

5.4. Intensity of violations

According to rights groups, there are currently thousands of Eritreans who are kept in detention without trial simply because they belong to religious groups which are not officially sanctioned by the government. For example, between 2003 and 2005, at least 26 pastors and priests, and over 1750 church members, including children and 175 women, and some dozens of Muslims, were detained because of their religious beliefs. During this period of time, Amnesty International documented 45 separate incidents of religious persecution involving at least the closure of 36 churches. In August 2005, in an unprecedented violation in the history of the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahdo Church and in contravention of canonical laws, the government dismissed the highest spiritual leader of the church, Patriarch Abune Antonios. A new patriarch was arbitrarily appointed on 27 May 2007.⁷⁶

While a number of reports have described numerous barbaric treatments of Pentecostals, the following examples can be cited as most representative. In 2007, the BBC reported what can be cited as one of the most authoritative accounts on religious persecution. Interviewed by the BBC, Paulos said he was tied up by security agents for about 136 hours in the notorious torture method known as ‘helicopter.’ As is done with many other victims of religious persecution, Paulos was asked to sign a document in which he was required to recant his belief and agree to not participate in church activities or express his faith in any form.⁷⁷ Another example is that of Nigisti Haile, who was allegedly tortured to death on 5 September 2007 after she refused “to renounce her faith in Jesus Christ” by signing a letter to that effect.⁷⁸ Similar violations are reported by other rights groups such as Release Eritrea and the US Department of State.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Amnesty International 2005, note **, pp. 1, 10.

⁷⁷ BBC News, “Eritrean Christians Tell of Torture,” available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/7015033.stm> (accessed on 27 September 2007).

⁷⁸ The Christian Post, “Young Woman Killed in Eritrea for Refusing to Renounce Jesus Christ,” available at <http://www.christianpost.com/news/young-woman-killed-in-eritrea-for-refusing-to-renounce-jesus-christ-29233/> (accessed on 8 September 2007).

⁷⁹ Release Eritrea, “The Testimony of Helen Berhane,” available at <http://cs.asmarino.com/index.php?blogid=15&archive=2007-12> (accessed 8 December 2007); US Department of State, note ** above.

6. Conclusion

Eritrea is a major part of the ancient civilisation of the Axumite Kingdom, during which time Christianity and Islam were introduced to the African continent from their birthplace, namely the Arabian subcontinent. Historical records indicate that due to its geographic proximity to the Arabian subcontinent, Eritrea is actually the first entry point of Christianity and Islam to Africa. Since time immemorial, save rare instances of violent conflicts instigated by religion, Christianity and Islam have coexisted in Eritrea for many centuries, making the country an island of religious tolerance. Eritrea is also home to indigenous African beliefs which are practiced by a small minority of the Eritrean people, such as the Kunama ethnic group

In spite of its long history of religious tolerance, the country has now become one of the worst places in the world for religious freedom. The history of post-independence religious persecution in Eritrea is comparable with only few instances in the world and none in the African continent. The practice started with the persecution of the Jehovah's Witnesses in the early 1990s. It then went in to affect some segments of Eritrean Muslims, finally affecting disproportionately the new Pentecostal movement in Eritrea. The persecutory practice of the government does not even spare the biggest and dominant Christian denomination in the country, which is the Orthodox Church. With the unlawful dismissal of the highest spiritual leader of the church, the Orthodox Church and several of its followers have also become victims of the government's anti-religion practice. The overall human rights crisis in Eritrea, including the religious persecution in Eritrea, has reached extremely alarming levels, rendering Eritrea all sad descriptions, such as the *dirigiste* state, the militaristic garrison state, the battalion state, the North Korea of Africa, etc.

As has been emphasised in several occasions, the country needs urgent change of course in its political direction. Eritrea is indeed in a dire need of a political transition, be it in the form of revolution or negotiation, which should facilitate the establishment of constitutional democratic order at an earliest opportunity. Only then can the challenges of religious persecution, which make part of the overall human rights crisis, be addressed in a way that ensures the protection of fundamental rights and freedoms once and for all.