

'Silence gives consent.' : The tragedy of Ethiopia and Ethiopians

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

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

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

— **Roxane Gay, Bad Feminist**

(1) Point of departure

Ethiopians are currently affected by untold misery and agonizing national muffled sorrow. The country’s fate is in the hands of ethno nationalists, ethno fascist mobs and murderous groups of people within and outside of the current leadership. Atrocity crimes, murder, slaughter, and inhuman treatment and arrest of zealous Ethiopians are a common scene. At the time of writing this paper, the killings go on in particular in the Benshangul and Oromia regions¹. Just like Oromo region, Benishangul Gumuz is the part of Ethiopia where ethnic Amhara experienced recurring attacks and killings. The very recent one is on October 11 2020² where tens of people were massacred, “residents in the region confirmed that attack when they spoke to Amhara Mass Media Agency (AMMA). The state media source in the Amhara region said an unspecified number of people had been killed by the attack”³.

BBC reported on 05 July 2020, quoting Government sources that 166 people have been massacred in Shashamane, West Arsi and Lake Zway area, 1,000 residential houses and 240 business organizations, including factories and schools were burned down to ashes. Among the destroyed businesses, there is four-star hotel that belonged to world renown, Athlete Haile Gebreselsassie, the World and

¹ <https://borkena.com/2020/07/29/benishangul-gumuz-security-incident-claimed-at-least-14-civilians/>

² <https://mobile.reuters.com/article/amp/idUSKBN26Y1VK>. At least 12 people were killed in the Metakal zone of Ethiopia’s Benishangul-Gumuz region, regional government spokesman Melese Beyene told Reuters on Tuesday. The killings, which happened on Monday night, followed two attacks in the same zone last month when 45 people lost their lives, and Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed’s government is faced with rising insecurity in many parts of the country.

³ <https://borkena.com/2020/10/12/a-new-attack-in-benishangul-gumuz-region-killed-at-least-12-people/>

Olympic long-distance champion. 10,000 people were displaced and took refuge in churches, in a wave of attack after attack. All these took place in two days following the murder of the singer on 29 June. In that that same week, Aljizira DW German Radio and Washington Post reported that the death toll had risen to 239, again quoting government sources. Ever since the death toll has been rising although we don't have the recent number. On Sunday, 13 September more than 80 people were gunned down including children according to eyewitnesses in Benishangul Region of Metekel Zone. Names of the dead were read on media, mainly Amharas and Agaw ethnic groups and Christians. On VOA Amharic government spokesperson from the region confirmed the killing by what he called anti-peace forces. On 25 September VOA Amharic service reported from the location interviewing the local government that 14 people were killed and 4 abducted in the same area⁴.

But where is the anguished outcry of our spiritual and religious leaders? Where are their voices? Where are the voices of humanitarian organizations? Why don't we hear them condemning the murder of young and old Ethiopians? One expects the leaders of Ethiopian churches and mosques — all the centers of holy worship where the most fundamental law of humanity are preached: that murder is wrong, that causing suffering to others is the deepest profanity of God? As we all know there is no “military” solution to the current murder business and genocidal acts in Ethiopia. Ethiopian religious and spiritual leaders both at home and in diaspora need to come out, loud and clear and repeatedly so, that we are all — every single one of us — children of God and that to murder is to profane the very God they claim to glorify. It's hard to miss the news today.

It is sad that Ethiopian religious leaders and establishments make no effort to make this particular slaughter of innocents a priority. Continued overwhelming silence on the part of our religious leaders is always wrong and will be a catastrophe in the struggle to defend the unity of Ethiopia and sanctity of the lives of Ethiopians.

In a disaster or national tragedy, religious leaders are frontline, trusted caregivers to whom people look for assistance and support for healing. They are also expected to be the voice of the voiceless. Although the primary function of religious leaders is the care of the soul, which involves showing compassion and empathy for people in times of crisis by offering comfort, support, clarity, direction and spiritual resources, they are also expected to condemn killings and inhuman treatment and admonish political leaders. Now the situation in Ethiopia requires their leadership and guidance primarily to stop the madness orchestrated by the political elites' intent on destroying Ethiopia and creating civil war; and secondly they can help create a forum for national reconciliation, stability and

⁴ <https://borkena.com/2018/10/01/death-toll-from-benshangul-crisis-rose-to-over-60-over-60000-displaced/>

sustainable peace. The leaders have unique position to respond to people who are impacted by the injustices and man-made national disaster because they are already in an established role, have a core of relationships, and bring a faith perspective that speaks to the need for meaning that is so pervasive in the human experience of suffering that most Ethiopians find themselves in.

It is to be noted that individual brave religious leaders have come out and condemn the atrocity crimes. To mention, one or two Bishops of the Amhara region and Sheikh Haji Omar Idris, the grand mufti of Ethiopia and the president of the country's Islamic Affairs Supreme Council have expressed their concern on the gloomy situation in the country in relation to atrocity crimes. It is possible that some others have expressed their agony in private or limited circles. Here I am demanding a stronger condemnation from these institutions.

(2) Religious beliefs in Ethiopia: Tensions, Conflicts and Government subversion/control

I have some theories on this issue. I expect the reader to contribute to the discussion. I have yet to corroborate my assumptions with a corpus of data. The most important here in this article is how we should mobilize religious leaders and organizations to attend to the needs of their followers. Ethiopians need guidance from respected community leaders than ever before. I do not intend to blame any groups of leaders and religious organization. I just want to stress the importance of their *presence* in this critical period of Ethiopian history. I have little doubt that the overwhelming majority of the Muslims and Christians are against the genocide and the political elites' divide and rule strategy.

I want to believe that, the majority of Catholics, orthodox Christians, the Muslims and Ethiopian Protestant Churches (including Pentecostals as organizations and individual Christians) had fought and are still fighting for justice, truth, and the rule of law in Ethiopian history. However the manifestation of the resistance and protest varies. Compared to the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church which is one of the oldest churches in the world, the Protestant sects – the Evangelical Churches, the Pentecostal Churches, the Methodist Churches, the Lutheran Churches, the Baptist Churches, the Episcopalian Churches, the Mennonite Churches, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, the Seventh Day Adventist Churches, and many other fragmented Protestant Churches – have put their feet in Ethiopia recently. Therefore their roles in the politics of Ethiopia differ accordingly. According to Haustein (2014) there is a new religious factor in Ethiopia, which attracts considerable public attention, invites dispute, influences social behavior, and has produced new Amharic phrases. It is visible in the multitude of church signs in any town or even small villages, displaying names like “Full Gospel Believers

Church” (መሉዎንጌል፡አማኞች፡ ቤተ፡ክርስቲያን, *Mulu Wängel Amañočč Betä-Krəstiyan*), “Paradise Church” (ገነት፡ቤተ፡ ክርስቲያን, *Gännät Betä-Krəstiyan*), “Light of Life Church” (አይወት፡ብርሃን፡ቤተ፡ ክርስቲያን, *Həywät Bərhan Betä-Krəstiyan*), “Deliverance Church” (አርነት፡ቤተ፡ ክርስቲያን, *Arənnät Betä-Krəstiyan*), and many more.⁵ (There are even some unsubstantiated but widely held assumptions/ claims that these protestant sects *passively collaborate* with the regime because the regime offered them a larger space to practice their religion). Another equally unsubstantiated claim is that *because the regime (EPRDF or Prosperity Party or the political elite) is actively anti-orthodox establishment and its very traditions, these religious groups are elated as their rival establishment is being weakened*. Article 27 warrants freedom of religion, belief, and opinion, which includes the right of believers to “establish institutions of religious education and administration in order to propagate and organize their religion.” Based on these constitutional provisions, the legal framework for the registration of associations, already set up by the 1960 Civil Code and the “Legal Notice No. 321” of 1966, was now put into practice, allowing and mandating the official registration of all religious bodies.

The expansion of *protestant sects* is visible. However their relationships with other well-established religious organizations such as the Ethiopian orthodox church and the Muslim community is not unproblematic. It is high time that these groups of churches the Muslim organizations and the Orthodox Church take concerted initiatives to condemn the atrocities in Ethiopia and frame a *peaceful transition*. Internal strife and dispute on trivial differences in doctrines are just prolonging the dictators’ or ethnofascists’ hold on power and thereby the sufferings of the faithful. Although religious organizations are to be independent of political control in a healthy, just and inclusive society, the situation in Ethiopia is different. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church is controlled by the TPLF/ODP. And currently by sympathizers of extremist and ethnicist elements emerging from anti Ethiopia forces. A closer observation of the power structure at the Ethiopian orthodox patriarch office shows that 90 % of Department heads were and are TPLF members or currently members of the ODP (Unfortunately I have no exact figure on that). That is why the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido church is in trouble both financially and freedom wise. The regime violates religious freedom or intervenes, in particular, in orthodox religion affairs.

The sad thing is these churches (Lalibela, Axum Zion etc.) generate huge amount of income through tourism. However, they have not benefitted from the income. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church bears the brunt of this biased treatment since the

⁵Jörg Haustein (2014) Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity in Ethiopia: A Historical Introduction to a Largely Unexplored Movement. Hatem Elliesie (ed.): *Multidisciplinary Views on the Horn of Africa*. Studien zum Horn von Afrika, 1, Köln 2014, pp. 109–127.

TPLF came into power. The most common explanation for the governments' attack on the orthodox foundation has to do with the deep orthodox tradition of upholding Ethiopianism. The church is famously known to raise the flag, the banner of Ethiopia proudly⁶. (By the way, I have never seen the flag being waved in festivities or services or ceremonies of other religious foundations in Ethiopia. I am ready to be corrected). In particular, the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido church maintained, affirmed and defended against any *encroachment* on the just liberties of the people and the nation's border. It also provided moral support or inspiration to Ethiopian patriots during foreign invasion of Ethiopia.

The ruling party has since its inception organized and operated anti-Ethiopian Orthodox Church and anti-Muslim community activities in clandestine. It infiltrated and 'contaminated' these important establishments that are the very fabric of Ethiopianism. The establishments are perceived as a threat to their ruling of the country that is centered on *unethiopianism*. The commitment and zealotry —to their religion and to the integrity of Ethiopia— of the Orthodox followers has been documented by international observers and researchers⁷. According to Jeff Diamant (2017), a senior writer/editor focusing on religion at Pew Research Center,⁸ Ethiopia has the largest Orthodox Christian population outside Europe, and, by many measures, Orthodox Ethiopians have much higher levels of religious commitment than do Orthodox Christians in the faith's heartland of Central and Eastern Europe. The country in the Horn of Africa has over 45 million Orthodox

⁶ A combination of factors made relation between the TPLF/EPRDF/ODP and the church difficult. Firstly, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church had been at the center of the villages' social life for centuries. Weddings and Christenings (baptisms, burial rites and meditation in conflicts between neighbors all took place via the church, and there were substantial numbers of priests in every parish who performed church services. Each household had a priest as its religious "father" who took care of the spiritual life of the family and was called for special life-cycle events to give his blessing. In every community the church was connected to each household in this way. Secondly, the church constituted a link between the people and the state. It had always stood on the side of the past Emperors, who furthered the existence, expansion and unity of the Ethiopian Church. It was organized hierarchically from the village to the national center and as an embodiment of spiritual and socio-cultural life. The institution of the church had always played a crucial role not only in community life, but also in mediation between rival forces and even between the state and rebels. The church taught its followers to respect their allegiance to the Ethiopian state and was, in effect, a school for national consciousness, using national symbols such as the flag in all religious and social events. No church ever conducted major ceremonies without hosting the Ethiopian flag—an act also regularly observed in the Ethiopian army. Thirdly, the church was the core legitimizing body for any emperor who ruled over Ethiopia. (Our longtime grievance against TPLF for Hijacking the Orthodox Church was Proven Correct on Aregawi Berhe's New book, "A Political History of TPLF" by Getachew Redda. <https://ethiopiansemay.blogspot.se/2009/07/our-longtime-grievance-against-tplf-for.html> (Access date 2018-02-08) .

⁷ Orthodox Ethiopians are more likely than Orthodox Christians in Central and Eastern Europe to wear religious symbols (93% vs. median of 64%), to say they believe in God with absolute certainty (89% vs. 56%), to fast during holy times such as Lent (87% vs. 27%), and to tithe (57% vs. 14%). Indeed, these gaps between Orthodox Christians in Ethiopia and Europe mirror broader differences in religious commitment between people living in sub-Saharan Africa, where religious observance is relatively high among all major religious groups, and those in more secular societies in Central and Eastern Europe (see below for reference). Access date 2010-02-08.

⁸ Ethiopia is an outlier in the Orthodox Christian world <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/11/28/ethiopia-is-an-outlier-in-the-orthodox-christian-world/>

Christians⁹, the world's second-largest Orthodox population after Russia. Nearly all Orthodox Ethiopians (98%) say religion is very important to them, compared with a median of 34% of Orthodox saying this across 13 countries surveyed in Central and Eastern Europe. About three-quarters of Orthodox Ethiopians say they attend church every week (78%), compared with a median of 10% in Central and Eastern Europe and just 6% in Russia. Orthodox Christians do not make up a majority of Ethiopia's overall population: 43% of Ethiopians are Orthodox, while approximately 19% are Protestant and 35% are Muslim. Still, in 2010, the 36 million Orthodox Christians in Ethiopia made up about 14% of the world's total Orthodox population (compared with a 76% share in Central and Eastern Europe), up from about 3 million in 1910, when Orthodox Ethiopians made up 3% of the Orthodox total. This increase is owed mainly to natural growth in Ethiopia's population, which rose from 9 million to 83 million between 1910 and 2010. Ethiopian Orthodoxy is part of the Oriental branch of Orthodoxy, which accounts for approximately 20% of the global Orthodox population and is not in communion with Eastern Orthodoxy, the larger branch, largely due to theological and doctrinal differences.

For this reason the EPRDF and the current rulers consider the establishment as a threat for its divide and rule policies. There are some rumors or belief 'that evangelical Protestantism (or Pentecostalism)¹⁰ is making aggressive attempts at converting members, and fundamentalist Islam is becoming more and more assertive in the country and the region'. I think we need to have substantial data and empirically based studies before we definitely claim this statement. I believe this is not the right time to discuss this thorny issue or create division in our society through different schism. This only prolongs the regime's merciless attack on Ethiopians, Ethiopia and *Ethiopianess*. It is high time that our young people stop being cannon fodder. It is high time that our religious establishments stop being just passive attendees or catalysts of burial services for the murdered unarmed citizens. The schism with respect to religion should stop in particular in diaspora.

In his Letter to Germany's Minister for Foreign Affairs, Dionasios reiterated that

'the Hutu extremists massacred more than one million Tutsis and other moderate Hutu's in less than one hundred days. The incident validated that the genocide can happen in anytime and anywhere. The United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide defines "genocide" as killing and certain acts "committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group." Extensive and irrefutable evidence supports a finding that the Oromo extremists groups mistreatment of Orthodox Christians and other vulnerable minorities, meets this definition. In

⁹ The third Population and Housing Census of Ethiopia of 2007 puts 62.8% of the Ethiopian population are Christians (43.5% being Orthodox Christians). 42.8 of the Oromia region population are Christians.

¹⁰ Jörg Haustein (2014) argues that despite its fairly ubiquitous presence, there are hardly any academic publications about this new religious factor. The standard Amharic dictionaries do not yet include the term ቅንጥ (pāñte) and its correct spelling is not solidified. Obviously, the word is derived from the Amharic term for Pentecost (ቅንጥቆሎ, pāñtäqostē), or the English "Pentecostal," and as such it points to the Pentecostal movement. But how did Pentecostalism come to Ethiopia in the first place? Why has it become such a notable phenomenon only now, whereas in other African countries, such as neighboring Kenya, it has been around for much longer³⁶⁵? Why are mainline Protestants, such as Lutherans and Baptists labeled as pāñtes as well? What is the significance of these developments for the religious landscape of Ethiopia as a whole? These are interesting questions that I would like to come back with a new article.

a statement released by the Holy Synod of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC), detailed a grim report on, in attacks which lasted for three days, 67 Christians “were brutally beaten, chopped with machetes, stabbed with spear, cut down with scythes, beaten with bats and stoned to death.” The report also stated victims’ corpses were dragged through the streets [and] their body parts, which had been lying around for days, became food for animals.” According to the Church fact finding mission report “38 parishioners were permanently (severely injured), and 29 parishioners were hurt with minor injuries. In addition more than 7,000 parishioners, were displaced and have been subjected to various psychological crises.” Initial findings estimate they lost “more than five billion birr worth of property through looting and fire.” Emerging report proved that victims are at high risk of being subjected to systematic and horrific religious persecution. It was observed that their condition made them more susceptible to coronavirus and other infectious diseases. Sadly enough, the Oromia National Regional State and the Federal Government fail to ensure the safety and security of Orthodox Ethiopians and other vulnerable minority groups from extremists attack. The leading right groups such as Genocide Watch, Minority Rights Group and leaders of a broad array of organisations, along with the holy synod, and many others, have called the actions against Orthodox Christians in Oromia region, genocide. We are also calling on the German government, and the international community to do the same and take immediate action to stop it. We believe Germany must end its silence about the ongoing genocide against Orthodox Christians and other minority groups in Oromia regional state in Ethiopia. We implore you to speak up on behalf of these Orthodox Christians and brutalized minority populations. We therefore urge you to declare that Orthodox Christians, along with and other minorities, are targets of ongoing genocide. Sincerely, Aba Dionasios. Bishop , Germany and surrounding dioses

That is what I call an exemplary act by the Bishop that is standing up for justice, righteousness, humanity and human rights. In a similar letter Major Dawit W Giorgis ¹¹ (October 3 2020) rightly called on the international organizations to intervene because the stakes are high, in human lives, in regional stability and collapse of governments in the region. Ethiopians should be able to bring their case to the United Nations and its judiciary branch; the International Court of Justice (ICJ); the International Criminal Court (ICC); the people of the world; the media that has the monopoly of power to inform people and influence policies; the churches, synagogues and mosques; prominent figures like artists, writers and opinion makers; and unbiased think tanks that usually give early warning signs to disasters. The early warnings are there for all to see in Ethiopia. Let Ethiopians and friends of Ethiopia respond to the alarm bell and save a country from destruction and a region from the repercussions of a failed Ethiopia. If the world fails in this it will be a consequence of a folly with an enormous cost to all.

Summary and The Road Forward

What do we expect from our religious leaders and establishments irrespective of denominations, doctrine, sects or world views (ideology) at this critical period in Ethiopian history?

- 1) We should be well aware that that the political elites play with fomenting conflicts and tensions among our religious and spiritual leaders as well as ethnic groups. This kind of power games and domination should be admitted and openly discussed by the religious establishments, as these tensions might lead into ethnic-

¹¹ <https://borkena.com/2020/10/02/lessons-not-learned-from-history-the-silence-of-the-international-community-and-ethiopia/>

based violence and instability. The faithful demand honesty and integrity from their leaders

- 2) We need the voices of our religious leaders because they carry great power to galvanize our communities toward more effective and spiritually grounded action for justice.
- 3) It is unacceptable that our leaders are silent in the face of unspeakable atrocities. They should make their voice heard in a peaceful manner and call for the political leaders to address the matter and encourage the regime to respect the rule of law and bring the perpetrators to justice. The whole state and federal political, social and economic infrastructure are infiltrated by ethno nationalist cadres and dangerous forces. “Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.”¹²
- 4) I believe that there is a prominent role for religious authorities in present day Ethiopia NOT just only for the purposes of edifying a community but also calling out injustices, be they theological or civic.
- 5) Our major religious institutions and its leaders are controlled by the regime’s supporters, along ethnic lines, through a divide and rule policy that resulted in the overwhelming majority of Ethiopians being marginalized. So both middle level religious leaders and grass root active members must mobilize their followers to strive and fight for an inclusive and just society. Ethiopians are aware of the regime’s behavior and action as malicious and contemptible; and therefore our religious leaders have a duty to teach the public to stand against this dangerous agenda! Signs of internal colonization have been observed. Internal colonization is a theory that seeks to explain how persistent and pervasive inequality and domination in all aspects of life are maintained in a society when there is not necessarily a foreign power ruling. In Ethiopian history, religious leaders have always fought gallantly against colonizers and intruders both foreigners and homegrown bandits.
- 6) Despite differences over specific theological or doctrine issues, the religious leaders must find ways to build a movement that seeks justice for

¹² — Robert F. Kennedy

all Ethiopians. Surely it is time for the larger progressive religious movement to do just that.

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

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

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