

Roles and Challenges of the Ethiopian Orthodox ‘Tewahido’ Church in Ethiopia

Getachew Kebebew Abate¹

Lecturer of Sociology, Debre Markos University, Debre Markos, Ethiopia
Email: getachewkebebew77@gmail.com

Mekuria Asaye

Lecturer of Sociology, Wollo University, Wollo, Ethiopia
Email: mekuriaasaye21@gmail.com

Temesgen Eyilet

Lecturer of Social Anthropology, Debre Markos University, Debre Markos, Ethiopia
Email: temesgen21eyilet@gmail.com

Abstract

The Ethiopian Orthodox ‘Tewahido’ Church (EOTC forthwith), one of the oldest Christian Churches in the world, is home to invaluable contributions to the world and is a founder member of the World Council of Churches. The study was carried out to assess the ancient and contemporary contributions of the EOTC in Ethiopia and the ancient and contemporary challenges that the Church has encountered. The study was carried out using a qualitative research approach, particularly descriptive. Online desk research methods with eligible sources of data were employed. As the data found from different sources show, the EOTC has a remarkable contribution to Ethiopia and the world in many ways. The church has numerous contributions, such as country formation and sovereignty, literature, architectural discoveries and developments, knowledge, innovations and civilization, tourism, social networking, solidarity and collective life, creating disciplined and decent citizens, biodiversity conservation and forest management, the route of paradise and heaven for believers are just a few roles of the EOTC. Despite the EOTC’s numerous roles, it has faced historical and continuous challenges. Local troubles and the invasion of Yodit, the jihad of Ahmad Gragn, oppositions and structural attacks by other religions, particularly from Islam, Protestants and Catholics, and the contemporary ethnopolitics challenges of anti-Orthodox attitudes are some of the internal challenges which the EOTC has confronted.

Keywords: Roles, Challenges, Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church,

Introduction

Ethiopia is one of the world’s most religious countries and is known for deep religiosity, in which about 98% of the population claims a religious affiliation. Ethiopia is an ancient country in Africa and the second most populous country in Africa after Nigeria, with a population of approximately 120 million. More than 50 per cent of the population adheres to the EOTC (Alemayehu, 2011). Ethiopia is an ancient poly-religious African country that boasts of rich

¹ Corresponding author

traditions and affinities of religious habits and culture (Getnet, 1998). EOTC² is one of the largest, and the oldest of the Oriental Orthodox ‘Tewahedo’ Churches (Tsegaye, 2020). EOTC is an ancient, historic, national and apostolic church (Alemayehu, 2011). Tewahedo³ is an Ethiopian word meaning, “united as one”, the best expression conveying the faith of the church (Ghelawdewos, 2017). Hence, EOTC is universal, one, Saint, and universal. Christianity in Ethiopia was anchored following Ezana, the first Christian king, in the first half of the 4th century (ibid.). Some historians have a slightly different view and attribute the coming of Christianity to Ethiopia to one Ethiopian eunuch ; a treasurer for Queen Hendake, the treasurer of Queen Hendake was the first Christian convert (Shenk, 1988). Christianity was widely thought in Ethiopia by the Axumite rulers in the 4th century by the Syrian missionaries Edesius, and Frumentius, who would become the first Patriarch (Marcus, 1994).

EOTC is considered to belong to the One, Holy, Universal and Apostolic Church founded by Jesus Christ (Aymro & Joachim, 1970). As one of the ancient churches, EOTC is a founding member of the World Council of Churches (WCC), the all-African Conference of Churches (ACC), the Joint Relief Partnership (JRP), the Christian Relief and Development Association (CRDA) and has good relations with other faith-based development organizations and various humanitarian institutions both abroad and in the country (Alemayehu, 2011). The EOTC is one of the ancient and numerically the largest of the five Oriental Orthodox Churches⁴ and the EOTC (ibid.). Although the EOTC is part of the Five Oriental Orthodox Churches, it is unique in many ways. The EOTC is unique and characterized by celebrating different religious Festival of the True Holy Cross or Meskel,⁵ Epiphany or Timket,⁶ and the multitude of fasting observations, including Hudade⁷ a total of 55 days in three separate periods; TsomeHerka,⁸ eight days, TsomeArb’a,⁹ forty days to Lent and TsomeHimmamat,¹⁰ seven-day holy week another fasting (Ghelawdewos, 2017; Shenk, 1988)

The doctrines of the EOTC are unique in that the faith and teachings of the church emanate from the Judea-Christian tradition by which the Church accepted the Old Testament¹¹ and the New Testament, and the latter two books that make up the Ethiopian Bible. The complete Ethiopian Bible has been in existence since the founding of the Ethiopian Church (ibid.). The introduction of Christianity as the state religion marked a turning point in Ethiopian history. The Church is not only a religious institution but has been the repository of the cultural, political and social life of the people for many centuries (Sergew, 2003). The process had already started in the Zagwe period, but it was considerably intensified with the rise of the new dynasty founded by Yikunno-’Amlak in 1270. These outward movements of expansion of both Church and State were most active in the reigns of ‘Amde-Slyon (1314-44) and Ylshaq (1413-30) (Tadesse, 1968). Many scholars argued that Ethiopia was a Christian empire for 1,600 years before 1974 (DeCort, 2022).

² Amharic: የኢትዮጵያ ኦርቶዶክስ ተዋሕዶ ቤተ ክርስቲያን, Yäityop’ya ortodoks täwahedo bétäkrestyan

³ Ge’ez: ተዋሕዶ

⁴ the Coptic Orthodox Church of Egypt, the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church, the Syrian Orthodox Church, the Malankara Orthodox Church of India

⁵ መስቀል

⁶ ጥምቀት

⁷ ሁዳዴ or ዓብይዳም

⁸ ጾመህርቃል

⁹ ጾመኣርባ

¹⁰ ጾመሕማማት

¹¹ generally referred to as Orit -ኦሪት in Ethiopia

Christianity became the state religion, continuing as a main scenario of the Ethiopian monarchy, and its glory continued until the Derg regime (Tsegaye, 2020). Hence, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is rooted deeply in the culture of Ethiopia (Shenk, 1988). Until 1974, the hegemonic meta-narrative of Ethiopia was that of a Christian nation, and the only state in Africa to have successfully resisted European colonization, in which the church took the highest role (Boylston, 2012). The legacy of the country's independence, sovereignty, and overall aspects of Ethiopia and the EOTC are very important to Ethiopians' sense of national pride, sense of morality and cultural refinement (Tsegaye, 2020). Thus, it attests to the key place the Church holds in the Ethiopian state system and her crucial role in the process of remoulding the history of what is now known as Ethiopian society (Getnet, 1998). Hence, Ethiopia cannot be seen in isolation from the EOTC and vice versa (ibid.). Furthermore, the EOTC as an indigenous institution has human and financial resources and institutional structure and working procedures. From its very nature and historical point of view, the EOTC has a strong contribution to the perception of the people about the religion, culture, politics, economy, spirituality and administration of the country (Alemayehu, 2011). Despite its valuable achievements and remarkable contributions to the continuity of Ethiopia as a country, the EOTC has faced different challenges at different times by different organized bodies, which are characterized by obstructions, as a result of internal and external intrigues, wars and conflicts (Tsegaye, 2020). What motivates the authors to write this paper is that the Ethiopian Orthodox Church has received little attention in academic and religious journals, perhaps because it has been so far removed from the main developments of the Church in the rest of Africa and the world community. The other major reason that motivated to write this paper is to provide the right information about the roles of the EOTC for the world community. Because, even though there are journals which have been written on EOTC, most of them were written by authors who depended on EOTC, hate/ animosities and false narratives, wrongly accused the Church as to oppressor, and overlooked the Church. Hence, the authors believed that most of the articles could be considered too irrelevant to that which leads the global community in the wrong ways. Therefore, there are wrong perceptions and knowledge gaps regarding the roles and challenges of the EOTC in Ethiopia. This paper attempted to articulate the contributions and challenges of the EOTC from their historical and contemporary contexts.

Theoretical Framework:

The authors of this paper used the functionalism theory, which is one of the fundamental sociological theories, to theorize the possible institutional contributions of the EOTC religion, and explore the historical and contemporary challenges that the church has encountered. The perspectives of the theory on religious institutions aim to understand the functions religion serves, and the possible challenges that particular regions face (Emerson et al., 2011). According to functionalism theory, religion is a strong social institution, which is necessary for the survival of society and the continuity of a country (Okon, 2013). For the functionalism theory, religion is often held up as a vessel of peace, both inner and social well-being. Religion serves several contributions, including;

- i. giving meaning and purpose to life,
- ii. reinforcing social unity and stability,
- iii. serving as an agent of social control of behaviour,
- iv. promoting physical and psychological well-being, and
- v. motivating people to work for positive social change.

Likewise, Durkheim is one of the functionalism theoreticians, who argued that religion is an expression of the unity of society and that its function is to ‘recreate’ society by strengthening the sentiments on which social solidarity depends (ibid.). Max Weber was also one of the classical sociologists who analyzed how religion traffics in the ultimate meaning of life, which can refine, consolidate, and sacralize status honour, thereby sharpening group alliances and boundaries that share a sense of honour and solidarity (Weber, 1978). However, EOTC has faced martyrs and attacks both in early and modern times. For instance, the Crusades and Inquisition, the Islamic Jihad,¹² and other challenges from religious bigoted and anti-religious leaders have openly attacked EOTC. Likewise, the functionalism theory argues that religious institutions could face challenges when there is a need for maintenance and expansion of religious commitment; affirmation of religious beliefs through culturally normative practices of violence; struggles for independence from the regime of an established social order by nationalist, anticolonial; and oppositions and attacks from other regions (Hall, 2001). In the same vein, the major contributions and challenges of the EOTC are the focus of this study by applying functionalism theory.

Methods and Materials:

The study is carried out using a qualitative research approach, particularly a descriptive study. The descriptive study is very important to get detailed pictures of the roles and challenges of the EOTC. The study is mainly carried out through online desk research using the available published and unpublished sources and materials. The design is very useful for getting multiple sources¹² of evidence to investigate issues under study in detail. Eligible sources of data such as research journal articles, books, media, YouTube, and government and non-government reports were employed. The author used various search engines, such as Sci-Hub, Bookfi.net, Library Genesis, www.freefullpdf.com, and Google Scholar.com. Finally, the collected data were analyzed thematically in line with the contributions of the EOTC and the historical and contemporary challenges of the EOTC.

Results and Discussion:

Roles of EOTC:

EOTC has constituted invaluable and priceless contributions to the country and the world in many ways. Some of the contributions of EOTC have been presented and discussed below:

- i. **Country Formation and Sovereignty:** The EOTC takes the lion’s share in nation buildings, sovereignty and developments in Ethiopia’s history. As a church of Africa, the EOTC became an inspirational ideology and symbol of the liberty of Pan-Africanism, blacks’ struggle against white colonialism, and the reference to the foundation of the early and modern form of the ecclesiastical realm of African theology, possessing the early form of inculcated African Christianity (Tsegaye, 2020). The religious orientation represented by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is a unifying factor in Ethiopia throughout the centuries (Shenk, 1988). The contribution made by the Church to Ethiopia’s peace, unity, sovereignty, development and independence has occupied a special place in the history of the country (Alemayehu, 2011; Kefyalew, 1999).

¹² or holy war

The Church has consistently and without wavering stood against all enemies of Ethiopia by sending ‘Tabot’¹³ to war fronts and in some instances by sacrificing its leaders while vociferously advocating for Ethiopian sovereignty and independence (Steward, 2020). On many occasions when external aggressors threatened Ethiopia’s national unity, peace and independence, the Mother Church has instilled a spirit of patriotism in Ethiopians, urging them to rise in the union, thus contributing a great deal to the effort to safeguard the country (Alemayehu, 2011). In this regard, an Ethiopian army led by Emperor Menelik II dealt a shocking defeat to the invading Italian forces in the Battle of Adwa On March 1st, 1896. In this victory, the Ethiopian In this regard, an Ethiopian army led by Emperor Menelik II dealt a shocking defeat to the invading Italian forces in the Battle of Adwa On March 1st, 1896. In this victory, the EOTC takes the lion's share and advantages. The egalitarian nature of the victory united the various peoples of Ethiopia against a common enemy, allowing Menelik to create a new Ethiopian nation. Hence, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is generally considered the religion of the land and is closely correlated with the national sovereignty, almost synonymous with the identity of Ethiopia itself and the country's establishment and continuity. Many scholars argued and said that the EOTC is a nation”. However, the authors of this paper highly believe that the EOTC is beyond a nation. This is because the overall aspects of Ethiopia and Ethiopia itself are formed by EOTC.

- ii. **Literature and Architecture:** The church has its history of writings, church schools, fine arts, works of arts, numbers and figures (Abeselom, 2018; Alemayehu, 2011). EOTC lies at the very core of Ethiopian art, literature and architecture (Adamu and Belaynesh, 2003). EOTC has wide and diverse contributions to arts, language, songs, poems, dramas, folklore, calendar, buildings, history etc. in Ethiopia and Africa (ibid. ; Steward, 2020). According to (Alemayehu, 2011), the EOTC in its era has contributed a lot to making Ethiopia the only country in Africa to have its alphabet for reading and writing, which equals in rank with other countries that have their alphabets. The church occupies a unique place among African countries, having evolved her literary language, Ge’ez, in very early times, and grew from the fifth century A. D. onwards (ibid.).

Use Ge’ez language for its Church services, and have a liturgy style with its own peculiar “notes” for Church songs and music, which was composed by St. Yared in the 6th century and was developed to be the source for spiritual and secular songs (Alemayehu, 2011). A great period of cultural renaissance followed upon the restoration of the Solomonic dynasty about 1270, and the fourteenth century was the beginning of what has been termed the “Golden Age” of Ethiopian Literature. From 1314-44 onwards, royal chronicles became a regular feature of the Ge’ez literary development in Christian Ethiopia (Adamu & Belaynesh, 2003). The EOTC has also greater contributions to ancient architecture having unique styles; ark, clergy, and worship¹⁴ (Shenk, 1988). EOTC religion has monasteries and churches with their paintings, precious manuscripts, sacred objects and hymns, which show how the church is an ancient architectural advancement (ibid.). An architectural

¹³ replica of the Ark of the Covenant

¹⁴ religious songs, vestments, symbols, gestures, language, and liturgy

history of EOTC has the unique features of these basilicas and explains how they developed over time. For instance, the establishment of prominent monasteries like the rock-hewn churches of Lalibela, Aksum obelisks monuments and the Fasiledise Building are some of the remarkable contributions of the EOTC. This contribution was made by devoted monks, hermits, Christian kings and lay Christians of the church. Above all, the EOTC was able to contribute greatly to teaching the people of Ethiopia the art of making parchments, the preparation of local inks, inkstands and pens, bindings and decorations of books. That is why some historians assert: “If you want to learn much about Ethiopia, the EOTC holds the key to the main gate (Kefyalew, 1999).

iii. **Sources of Knowledge, Innovations and Civilizations:** The EOTC inherited both worldly riches and spiritual significance that are manifested in terms of medicine, architecture, literature, education, governance, environmental preservation and rural development (Tsegaye, 2020). The Church has massive and great contributions to the material and intellectual facets of the Ethiopian civilization. In the span of its long history, ETOC) has registered several deeds of knowledge creation, innovations and civilization for the well-being of humankind and the glory of God (Alemayehu, 2011)The ETOC has been the main provider of indigenous education and medicine for centuries and has continued with the development of modern education and medicine in the country (Robso, 2021). The Church is the source of medicine, and spiritual healing is an important treatment for many Ethiopians (Cultural Atlas, 2022). The Church also has its own Calendar system with sets of days, weeks, months, years and eras with different saints’ days and orientates itself around the date of the birth of Christ (Alemayehu, 2011; Appleyard, 2007; Boylston, 2012). Based on the calculation of 5500 years from Creation to Incarnation, it differs from the Gregorian calendar by seven or eight years, even-day in a week etc. (Alemayehu, 2011; Boylston, 2012). According to Tolossa (1992), the major contributions of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church to Ethiopian civilization include the fields of architecture, art, music, education, poetry, literature, law, theology, liturgy, philosophy, environment and medicine. The EOTC has played a great part in influencing and shaping what is believed today to be the Ethiopian culture (Abate, 2018). The EOTC has a very great role in the history of the country and civilization, like literature, architecture, technology, astronomy etc. The Church is the guardian of the history, culture and museum of the country (Abeselom, 2018). There is no country like Ethiopia where thousands of churches and monasteries have been established and flourished, just indicating the deep-rooted history and practice of Ethiopian Christianity which shows the level of knowledge, innovations and civilization of the church (Tsegaye, 2020). These are the major reasons that many scholars argue that there would not have been Ethiopian civilization without the Ethiopian Church.

iv. **Tourism Attractions:** Historically, the EOTC has been the guardian of the country’s heritage since its foundation in the 4th century (Abeselom, 2018). The EOTC has numerous monasteries and churches with their unique paintings, precious manuscripts, sacred objects and hymns, which are the most tourist attractions. Because of this, the church holds tourism potential (ibid. ; Melese,

2015). Ethiopia has many precious tourist attraction sites, of which the EOTC is the major one. It is true, that the tourist resources of the EOTC are immense (ibid.).

The basilicas in Ethiopia symbolize the history of Christianity in Ethiopia; FasilGhebbi, Gonder in Amhara (1979), Rock-Hewn Churches, Lalibela in Amhara (1978), and Aksum Monument, in Tigray (1980), are some of the tourist sites/places are properties inscribed or registered in UNESCO heritage which are the major tourist attraction and are the major sources of income for Ethiopia. In addition, there are many EOTC tourist attraction places such as Entotost Mariam, Paissa St, Georges Church, holy trinity cathedral and Be'atale Mariam, Axum Tsion Mariam, Lake Tana monasteries, Dima Georges monastery etc. (Abeselom, 2018). Hence, the Church is not only an institute of religion but also a national museum (Kefyalew, 1999). However, only a few are recognized and visited by international and domestic tourists. The heritages are also damaged by moisture, mice, bats, and robbed by national and international robberies etc. Today, the EOTC religion makes a great contribution to the promotion of tourism in the world. It is true in Ethiopia, 60 % of the country's tourist sites belong to the EOTC. The EOTC has an 80 % contribution to Ethiopia's economy through its tourism potential (Abeselom, 2018). Despite 60 % of Ethiopia's, tourist sites belonging to the EOTC, the Church has no tourism development program. The Church is known as the main tourist site ; unfortunately, the Church has no tourism program and is no tour agent or tourism department in the Church until today. Furthermore, tourism's benefits are unknown to the Church.

v. **Social Networking and Solidarity:** The Ethiopian Orthodox 'Tewahido' religion plays a major role in the life of the average Ethiopian. As one of the religious institutions, the EOTC is so much a part of public and private life, and an integral part of a functioning society, providing society with core values and norms that serve as the bases from which laws of the state could derive legitimacy (Kebede, 2020). The EOTC has the greatest role in building social relationships and interactions, collective lives, strong social networking and solidarity. These include not only funerals but also weddings, christenings, and times of childbirth in members' families, and supporting each other during both good and bad times (Flemmen, 2016). The celebration of saints' days, social-religious institutions,¹⁵ other holidays, and pilgrimages weld the religious community together. The corporate value of Orthodox worship fits beautifully with African understandings of corporate celebration (Shenk, 1988). The most important social functions identified in EOTC are creating a social network, social lives, collaborating, helping each other, exchanging information, conflict resolution and reconciliation, entertainment, and finally social insurance (Flemmen, 2016). As Beatitude and Holy Archbishop Matthias said, "Social life and social networking is the base for peace, love, unity, care some, reverence, sustenance; being fence for eternal conflict and having big contribution in creating green surrounding and developed country" (Hiwot, 2017). In line with this, "societal expedition could be for a blessing if it is based on faith and truth; obliging us to do our work with diligence, politeness and faithfulness. If our marriage is vowed with GOD's will, build a good family, visit

¹⁵ Senbete, Mahaber, and ZikreKiddusan

those who are sick and needy, feed the hungry, provide commemorative banquets for the deceased, organize meetings in union to eradicate our problems, praise Saints, Righteousness, Martyrs, celebrate holidays at Buhe¹⁶ and Demera in unanimity can strengthen our social life (Rom. 12:15).

vi. **Creating Disciplined and Decency Citizens:** The Ethiopian Orthodox ‘Tewahido’ Christians believe in the full Divinity and the true Humanity of Jesus Christ and are therefore, perfectly Orthodox in their Christological teaching, and in creating disciplined, ethical, role model and decency citizens (Getnet, 1998). The Church is an embodiment of moral and ethical teachings as well as values rooted in solid Ethiopian values, mores and traditions (Cultural Atlas, 2022). The church teaches the values of respect, fairness, and honesty, such as tax should be paid if it is due, duty shall be performed, and what ought to be respected ought to be respected (Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church Addis Ababa Diocese, 2018). The EOTC is still playing, a significant role in the social and cultural life of the Ethiopian people (Abate, 2018). The Church teaches about the unconditional love of human beings, engaging in a noble act, avoiding any distinctive and evil behaviours and leading life through purified and holy spirits. The church has thought that humans preach to have a good concise, to avoid indecent words and thoughts, to be far away from arrogance and undo pride, to forgive and forget to have an acquaintance with God and to do all good things (Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church Addis Ababa Diocese, 2018). Generally, the church has thought that human beings should be faithful to their country and their fellowmen, respect the rules and regulations, engage in noble and good deeds, carry out their activities without prejudice, and discharge their responsibility with the required one, which the church is successful and effective in creating a well disciplined and decency citizens.

vii. **Biodiversity Conservation and Forest Management:** The Ethiopian Orthodox doctrine and tradition is entrenched in Biblical teachings of the Old Testament and New Testament, in which forest biodiversity and all natural resources are revered as God’s creation intended to get due care from human beings (Abate, 2018). The EOTC theological teaching and traditional practices entrenched in the Sacred Scriptures¹⁷ - including the Holy Bible, the Acts and Hagiographies of Saints¹⁸ - contribute to the survival and maintenance of those ancient forest remnants and biodiversity habitats (Abate, 2018). The EOTC and monasteries are built on hills, mountains and high places with dense forests and trees. This practice and tradition have come from Eden. The place had all the best and choicest trees and plants (Tulu et al., 2017). From its immense contributions, the EOTC has a significant role in ecological management, forestry conservation, natural resources management, biodiversity conservation, and carbon emission reduction in the changing world (Abiyou et al., 2015; Tulu et al., 2017). These practices have a long history in EOTC to the sacred grounds of most of these ancient churches, monasteries contain natural resource management, and the conservatives have been rich in biodiversity for many centuries (Abate, 2018). For instance, the Bible says

¹⁶ Debre Tabor

¹⁷ Kidusat Metsaheft

¹⁸ Gedle Kidusan

“The Lord has made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground, trees that are pleasing to the eye and good for food” (Genesis. 2:9). Forests are more than trees and complex biological systems that provide far more for human society than mere fruits for food, timber for building or pulp for paper. Trees and other biodiversity are integrated with Christian religious life, and their mere existence reminds us of all the ups and downs of human beings from creation until the end of this world. These have biodiversity and resource management for spiritual, economic, aesthetic, cultural and scientific reasons, medicine, plant, animal, and a variety of species, habitats, ecosystems, microbial, and spiritual values (Ghelawdewos, 2017). These preserving and protecting resources are also used for food production and recycling nutrients, fertilizing the soil, healing practices, controlling erosion etc. This indicates that the Church has remarkable and cumulative knowledge of spiritual mediums in managing and conserving resources.

- viii. **The Route of Paradise and Heaven for Believers:** Christian meanings have been given to ritual purification, holy springs, and holy water. Customs of Epiphany¹⁹ may well reflect this concern for purification (Shenk, 1988). The EOTC has taken root in African soil, developed its character and traditions and flourished over 1,600 years, and the main purpose is to lead the believers to the right way to paradise and heaven (Cogavin, 2008). As an institutional setup, the EOTC believes that the Church is a community founded by God in the crucified, risen and glorified Christ the incarnate Son of God, and guided and bound by the Holy Spirit. Its members accept the faith in Jesus Christ and unite under the teaching and the administrative rules of the Patriarch through the Council of Bishops. The EOTC has a system of administration by which its members are to be guided (Alemayehu, 2011).

Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity involves many rituals and good practices that can qualify for paradise and heaven. There is a strong focus on orthopraxy, demonstrated in the practice of fasting. There are between 200 and 250 days of fasting in the Ethiopian Orthodox Calendar, including every Wednesday and Friday, during which people are expected to abstain from meat and animal products due to their beliefs in paradise and heaven (Cultural Atlas, 2022). The church norms are recognized in that most Ethiopian Christians have rigorous fasting, praying, and having faith (Boylston, 2012; Crummy, 2018). Only those who feel pure, have fasted and parried regularly, and have generally conducted themselves properly may enter the middle ring to receive communion (Alemayehu, 2011). Generally, the Church has the following practices, hoping for paradise and heaven for believers who apply baptism,²⁰ confirmation²¹ takes place immediately after baptism, and holy communion²² is received by ritually clean people. Furthermore, the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido believers receive Penance²³ is the Sacrament which a Christian receives from priests and other religious leaders; Matrimony²⁴ is the holy service through which a man and a woman are united and given the divine grace that

¹⁹ Timket

²⁰ Timkat

²¹ Kibataàeron

²² Qurban

²³ Nisha

²⁴ Teklil

sanctifies their union; Anointing of the Sick²⁵ is a service offered to persons who are on their death bed are the practices that lead to heaven.

Challenges of EOTC:

Despite the EOTC has aforementioned and other remarkable contributions, it has encountered internal and external challenges at different periods by different bodies. These challenges have their consecutive impacts to the extent of weakening and destroying its religious, cultural values and institutional base in Ethiopia and threatening its unity.

The Internal Challenges of EOTC:

Historically, the EOTC has faced different internal problems. These challenges include false narratives and defamation, opposition and attacks from Islam and other regions and ethnopolitical challenges of anti-Orthodox attitudes presented and discussed as follows.

- i. **The Defamation and False Narratives:** The EOTC has faced misrepresenting, defaming and disestablishing in both ancient and contemporary times. The EOTC has been wrongly accused and labelled as the oppressors and exploiters of other religions, and community members (Terje et al., 2021). The term Orthodox Tewahido, which elaborates on the doctrinal nature of the church, is also wrongly defined as a mythical construction of the Abyssinian²⁶ religion. They define the church's identity as a cultural element of Abyssinians. In this perspective, the baptism and conversion of societies²⁷ into Christianity is perceived as Amharaization (Tsegaye, 2020). The EOTC is commonly identified as an Amhara ethnic group and an Amharic-speaking people institution. The attacks could emanate from longstanding grievances and political narratives about supposedly privileged Amharic-speaking highland 'settlers' who are perceived to be the descendants of beneficiaries of an imperial system that, for example, strongly promoted the Amharic language, suppressed local identities, had Orthodox Christianity as the state religion, and where tenant farmers were largely at the mercy of landlords (Jeffrey, 2019). The ETOC has long been associated with favouring the Amhara and is often identified as the church of the privileged Amhara people. It was during this time that the church burnings spread to this region. The ETOC is falsely accused and defamed as an oppressor of other religions and different religious followers (Kebede, 2020).

Furthermore, the God of the Orthodox Christian is perceived as a "White God," an attempt to create racial difference and misleading theological perception among the Orthodox Church followers. The anti-orthodox extremists also labelled the Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity borrowed as "a form of devil worship and disseminated wrong doctrines and thoughts" (Tsegaye, 2020). According to multiple sources, the EOTC is the religion of the Abyssinian, and thus, Abyssinian priests never came to as the messengers of God and peace for the Oromo people.

²⁵ Kendil

²⁶ Amhara and Tigrian

²⁷ except the Amhara

Rather, the priests came as conquerors and destructors with Menelik's generals, 'blessing' the Abyssinian soldiers who inflicted upon the Oromo People. Furthermore, there are misperceptions from Muslims and Pentecostals that the EOTC is there to attack and undermine them. These animosities and false narratives are highly accepted by religious extremists and ethno-patricians as well as anti-orthodox groups, particularly by the Muslim and Protestant extremists, which result in the opening of structural and systematic attacks and destruction on the church and its believers. This was particularly highly intensified and legitimized after Prime Minister Abiy rose to power in 2018 (Terje et al., 2021).

Furthermore, the starless red, yellow, and green flag of the EOTC has resurrected and became a militant symbol of anti-Oromo in Ethiopia after Abiy came to power. The EOTC is under the continuous influence of the ethno-politics and an attempt is even made to negatively portray the Church in the mind of Ethiopian youths, mainly through the country's education system. For instance, a "Module for History of Ethiopia and the Horn," a course prepared for higher education students, had a statement of false premise referring to the evangelization process of the EOTC taking place by the church's monopolization of burial sites. Accordingly, this situation forced people to convert to Orthodox Christianity.

- ii. **Local Troubles and the Invasion of Yodit:**²⁸ The fall of the Aksumite kingdom of Ethiopia toward the end of the 10th century A.D. was attributed to a queen who invaded from the south, a non-Christian queen called Gudit/Yodit. This queen is said to have laid waste on the city of Aksum and the countryside and destroyed churches and monuments (Muse, 2014). According to popular belief, especially among Ethiopian Christians, Yodit Gudit is described as a rebellious woman, and even as a prostitute who raised an army, invaded Aksum, and burned its palace and churches (Steyn, 2019).

The invasion of Yodit had profound effects on the EOTC in one or another way, such as economic decline, lack of spiritual guidance and absence of bishops and resulted in the decline of the Aksumite Christian Empire (Tsegaye, 2020). Numerous accounts in Aksum recall her destruction of churches, monuments, artefacts, and monoliths, and that shattered the church and religion by her attacks as she laid waste to the countryside (Steyn, 2019). Yodit persecuted Christians and burnt churches in and around Aksum, and during this trouble, the famous church of Aksum Tsion was partly damaged (Tsegaye, 2020). She also burned most of the monasteries of the nine Saints that came from the Byzantine or Eastern Roman Empire in Ethiopia (Muse, 2014). As for a place in Ethiopian history and from a sociocultural viewpoint, one may perhaps Gudit as a destructor of Orthodox 'Tewahido' Churches, and the believers and rebellious woman who destroyed the Solomonic line.

- iii. **The Jihad of Imam Ahmad Ibn Ibrahim:**²⁹ With the Ottoman conquest of the whole year and the Middle East, Islam was given a special impetus in the Red Sea area and the Horn (Tadesse, 2003). The leader of the Muslim forces during this time was Imam Ahmad Ibn Ibrahim or Gagn, as he is known in Ethiopian

²⁸ Gudit

²⁹ Ahmad Gagn

Chronicles. His Chronicle, entitled *Futuh al-Habasha*,³⁰ relates how the Muslim invasion was particularly aimed at destroying the EOTC, properties and believers in the Ethiopian highlands between 1529 and 1543 (ibid. ; Tsegaye, 2020). The Jihad of Imam Ahmad Ibn Ibrahim is considered an internal challenge in such an event. Despite its international contact with the Ottoman Turks Islamic rulers, the domination of the militaristic Islamic members of Arab settlers and their support to the conflict against the Christian empire was occurred after Islam became gradually and peacefully penetrated into the Horn of Africa and Ethiopia (Tsegaye, 2020).

Following this, the Muslim communities of the Ethiopian region began to be more and more aggressive, particularly in their relations with the Christian Empire at the beginning of the sixteenth century (Tadesse, 2003). This great jihad led by Ahmad Ibn Ibrahim, popularly known as ‘Gran’³¹ brought devastating destruction to EOTC and its believers (Crummey, 2018). Islam’s invention brought the greatest impacts upon the EOTC in terms of the loss of life of Christians and the destruction of the spiritual and material culture of Orthodox ‘Tewahido’ Christianity, and many of the inhabitants in the Muslim-occupied areas were forced to renounce the Church and adopt Islam (Tadesse, 2003). The Muslim troops killed Christians, burnt and looted, dazzled by the riches of the churches and monasteries for about fifteen years, and almost destroyed the medieval heritage of the EOTC (Tadesse, 2020). All churches and monasteries accessed by the Muslims were destroyed and plundered. Among these churches and monasteries, Debre Libanos, Zequala, Mekane Sellasie, Atrons Maryam, Gennete Giyorgis, Haiq Estifanos, Aksum Tsion Maryam, Mertu Lemaryam, were some of the well-known destroyed by the Muslims (ibid.). The churches and monasteries of Aksum, Gondar, Gojjam, Wollo and Shewa, which were the main centres of the Christian Empire, were the main destruction targets of Muslim warriors.

- iv. **Attacks Form of Other Religions:** While the new religious and faith groups have proliferated in Ethiopia, Ethiopians in general and the EOTC in particular are tolerant of other religions. However, the EOTC has been ridiculed and attacked by these religions, particularly Islam, Protestantism, and Catholicism (Ghelawdewos, 2017). Meanwhile, Islam was establishing itself on the western side of the Red Sea, on the coastlands below the Ethiopian highlands, and has started the conflict against the EOTC and created Muslim extremists and anti-orthodox (Crummey, 2018). Those who felt Muslims’ marginalization in the Ethiopian past have attached a misperception to EOTC that the emperors towards Islam have been taken to convince the oppression of Muslims in the past (Tsegaye, 2020). In the 1980s, different radical Islamic literatures were produced in Egypt, identifying Ethiopia as an illegitimate state and an enemy of Islam. These have contributed to the crises in Ethiopia, particularly since 1991, the time when ethnic politics openly came on the scene (ibid.).

The burning of Churches in Ethiopia is organized and supported by foreign countries, and the extreme view has been exported to the country. “It is horrific and unbelievable to think monks and priests were burnt alive in such a holy place as a

³⁰ meaning “The Conquest of the Abyssinians”

³¹ the left-handed

church. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and his administration have legitimized the targeting of killing of Orthodox Tewahido Christians, and church burnings, throughout the country. Aggressive protesters across Ethiopia and in the Oromia region, in particular, there were several violent attacks against Orthodox Christians, displacing millions, killing thousands, leaving thousands seriously wounded, and burning numerous homes and business ventures (Addis Ethiopia, 2020). The ethno-religious extremist Muslims in the Oromia region have been killed in horrible ways, and Orthodox Churches have been destroyed. These extremists have alleged that outside forces, particularly Arab countries, Turkey, Egypt and Sudan, support these radical elements within Oromia (Desta, 2020). This large-scale and horrific attack has never happened in Ethiopia since the 16th century (Addis Ethiopia, 2020). Furthermore, the newly constituted Pentecostal recalcitrant variety and the so-called Tehadso³² group are the main religious contenders that are creating havoc and opened organized attacks on the EOTC at different times (Ghelawdewos, 2017). Protestantism has grown rapidly in Orthodox strongholds since the fall of the Derg (Boylston, 2012). The more and more the Tehadso became vociferous in their deceptive preaching and toxic activities, the Tehadso group's objective is to infiltrate, take, and destroy the EOTC and is convinced that they must be confronted with via teaching the congregation the true nature, doctrine, and order of the EOTC particularly at the current time. They call them “fifth columnist patriots with the sole aim of disturbing and destabilising the fundamentals of the Orthodox Tewahido Church’s “faith” (Ghelawdewos, 2017). Besides, the threats and attacks on the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido religion emanated from the Catholic region. The Jesuits had first arrived in Ethiopia in 1557 on the misunderstanding that the Ethiopian rulers were prepared to submit to Catholic belief and practice. In 1622, ZaDengel made an open, formal submission to Rome, establishing Catholicism as the religion of the court and country. Rebellion mounted, in 1622, and Susenyos abdicated in favour of his son, Fasilad, who directly restored ‘Tewahido’ Orthodoxy, expelled the Jesuits, and cut ties to Portugal and Spain (Crummey, 2018). At the current time, the EOTC and Christian communities have felt that there are systematic and organised attacks and destruction by Protestants and Islamic religions and their followers.

- v. **Ethno-Politics Challenges and Anti-Orthodox Attitudes:** The EOTC has relatively flourished, and the Church underwent an unprecedented transformation, which indigenized its leadership and elaborated its institutional capacities before 1974. Many scholars argued that Ethiopia was a Christian empire for 1,600 years before 1974 (DeCort, 2022). However, the church has been subjected to Ethno-politics challenges of anti-Orthodox attitudes, which have dimensional impacts on its religious and social roles and lives of the followers since the disposal of Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974 (Terje et al., 2021). The main goal of the ant-Orthodox movements and ethnopolitical segments led to views inclined to destabilize the strong base of the EOTC and to decline the bond between the Church and the Ethiopian communities.

³² Renewal

The ethno-politics and anti-Orthodox views have been rooted back to the Western Catholic and colonial intrigues, which are widely propagated by ethnopolitical and religious movements, which have prejudice towards the EOTC (DeCort, 2022). The politics of ethnicity and ethno-nationalist discourses have affected the EOTC (Terje et al., 2021). These Ethno-Politics challenges of anti-Orthodox attitudes are mainly exercised by ethnically associating the church with the Amhara ethnic group³³ (Tsegaye, 2020). The periods of Communism, 1974-1991, were banned under the anti-religious policies of the Communist regime that curtailed the activities of the EOTC (Kebede, 2020; Lee, 2021). After Derg came to power in 1974, the regime worked to disestablish the EOTC. The atheistic ideology of the Derg regime politically persecuted the highest officials³⁴ of the church, nationalized its properties, and condemned the church as old age wished to collapse (Shenk, 1988; Terje et al., 2021).

Ethnic-based nationalism and religious fundamentalism movements have been actively opened and intensified following the disposal of the Derg regime from power by ethno-political segments led by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democracy Front (EPRDF), dominated by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) came to power³⁵ (Lee, 2021; Tsegaye, 2020). Following this, different ethno-politics and anti-Orthodox Tewahido attitudes have arisen, resulting in complex impacts on the Church. For instance, 'renewal' groups,³⁶ the 'Pente' or Protestant Churches, extremist Muslims and other anti-orthodox groups have expanded and become the major enemies of EOTC. Besides, the EPRDF government exerted high pressure by interfering in all the church's issues and appointing its spy groups who follow the day-to-day activities of the EOTC (Lee, 2021). The structural and organised attacks on the EOTC have greatly intensified in the last five years after Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed came to power in 2018 (Addis Ethiopia, 2020). Abiy became Ethiopia's first Evangelical Prime Minister, who is the advocator of the Gospel ideologies (DeCort, 2022). This rapid growth is strongest in Oromia and the southern regions of Ethiopia, where many have felt oppressed and impoverished by Ethiopia's Orthodox empire. This movement has injected the "prosperity gospel" into popular Ethiopian culture. Since Abiy came to power in 2018, there was a large-scale attack in which a thousand Orthodox Tewahido Christians, priests, bishops and believers were murdered, and more than 50 churches burned down, which forced the country to be evangelicalism (Addis Ethiopia, 2020; DeCort, 2022).

During Abiy's regime, the shock over churches belonging to the EOTC being burned to the ground, sometimes with their priests, and the believers inside them. The genocidal crimes on EOTC have been implemented horrifyingly in the Somali region, Oromia, Beni Shangul Gumuz, the Southern Nations, Nationalities and People's Region State (SNNPR) the EOTC has been exposed for structural and systematic attacks. Although Abiy is considered the one who tried to unite the two Synods for political purposes and masquerade, he has worked day and night to

³³ who are most dominantly Orthodox Christians and played a key role in state formation of Ethiopia

³⁴ including the murder of Patriarch Tewoflos

³⁵ 1991- 2018

³⁶ the ተሐድሶ, Tāḥadäso

divide and disestablish EOTC. These are confirmed by the continuous movements to establish the independent regional church in the Oromo and Tigray regional states. For instance, a clergy movement, led by Belay Mekonnen, attempted to establish an independent Oromo clergy contrary to the practices of the Holy Synod. In the same vein, a patriarch and Bishops have appointed illegally in Haro Beale Wold Church located in Woliso Town, South West Shewa zone of Oromia on Sunday 22 January 2023, led by Abune Sawiros illegally nominated himself as Patriarch, and appointed 25 bishops, without the involvement of the Holy Synod, creating widespread shock on Sunday 22 January 2023. This division within the Church has been proposed and supported by Abiy and his government. Hence, the authors believed that the EOTC has not faced internal and external challenges in Abiy's regime in history.

External Challenges of the EOTC:

Historically, the main external challenges of the EOTC were mainly associated with the expansion of Islam along the Red Sea, the intrigues of European missionary activities and military conquest of foreign powers, which are briefly explained as follows.

- i. **Expansion and Attacks of Islam:** The expansion of Islam into Ethiopia and the Horn initially took place smoothly. After Prophet Mohammad and his fellowships were peacefully received by the Aksumite king, they were changed into tensioners the Muslim leaders became interested in conquest and attacking the Aksumite king, and EOTC, which led to the bloodiest war due to different foreign interests, such as Turkey (Tsegaye, 2020). The centuries-long conflicts between the Christian emperors and the Muslim sultans over control of the long-distance trade routes usually ended in a victory for the Christian forces. Since the 8th century A.D., the main trading outlets of Aksum along the Red Sea have become under the control of the Arab traders and settlers. A new Muslim leader, "Imam Ahmad Ibn Ibrahim" more popularly known as Ahmad Gran took control of the Sultanate of Adal. In 1529, his forces inflicted a major defeat on the Christian army, which forced the retreat of Emperor Lebne Dangle. When Emperor Lebne Dengil died in 1540, his son Galawdewos succeeded him. The Portuguese sided with the Christian kingdom and the Ottomans with Imam Ahmad Ibn Ibrahim (Cogavin, 2008). It was in the 16th century that an Islamic jihad was employed against Christian Ethiopia. This has brought devastating impacts on the EOTC (Tsegaye, 2020). The Imam Ahmad Ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi ravaged the Ethiopian realm, killed the Orthodox 'Tewahido' Christians, sacked its cities, pillaged its churches and monasteries -including Aksum's Church of Mariam Zion and other churches and monasteries- and forced thousands to submit to Islam. Nowadays, the geopolitical outside forces, such as Turkey, Egypt, Sudan and Arabia seek to clandestinely cement the fictitious claim to disestablish the EOTC and Ethiopia to be the land of Islam.
- ii. **The Intrigues of Catholic and Protestant Missionaries:** European interest in Ethiopian Christianity already existed in Luther's era. Western missionaries began knocking on the Ethiopian door from the dawn of the 17th century. Notably, Peter Heyling, a Lutheran German missionary in 1633, the Swedish Evangelical Missions in 1866, and the Sudan Interior Mission arrived in Ethiopia with different missions

in 1928 (Girma, 2018). Interestingly, missionaries began to come to Ethiopia during a time in which political leaders were showing more openness to modernization, such as Zedingle and Suseneyos, between 1604 and 1632 (Crummey, 1998). The Catholic Church attempted to intervene in the EOTC via its missionaries who reached the country at different times. The Catholic Church had the intention to establish a relationship with the Ethiopian Church since the 15th century. However, as the Portuguese Catholic Kings sought economic interest in East Africa and the Indian Ocean, the Roman Church strengthened its relationship with EOTC and had a hidden interest in the EOTC (Tsegaye, 2020). The principal intentions of the missionaries were economic and political and to reform the EOTC and its religious dogmas (Eshete, 2009). The Catholics disguised the monastic practice of Ethiopians and accused the Church of “having almost destroyed all traces of Christianity” (Tsegaye, 2020). The Roman Catholic and other missionaries and colonial agents attempted the operation of ethnicization among the Ethiopian people, and anti-Abyssinian³⁷ attitudes were installed and publicized (ibid.). Hence, it was from these missionary movements that two prominent Protestant Churches emerged Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus in 1959 and Qale Heywet in 1971, openly threatening and attacking the EOTC (Girma, 2018). The approach of the missionaries in Ethiopia had not only religious concerns but also political and economic interests.

- iii. **Military Conquests and Wars of Foreign Powers:** Ethiopia, a country that has a long history of empire formation in Africa, was engaged in defending itself from foreign conquests and wars launched by the British, Egypt, Sudan and Italy. This independence and sovereignty of Ethiopia were strongly connected with the EOTC (Tsegaye, 2020). One of the challenges came from the Egyptian military expedition in the 1870s. This movement became a threat to Ethiopia following the Hiwot Treaty (1884) made between Yohannes IV and the British on the affair of Egyptians who tried to occupy Sudan. During the movement, EOTC and Christians were already identified as infidels or “Cross worshipers”. These Mahdists burnt churches like Mahbere Sellasie, one of the well-known monasteries in North-Western Ethiopia (Bahru, 2002; Tsegaye, 2020). Though the Ethiopians had successfully wiped out the Italian colonial ambition at Adwa in 1896, after forty years of preparation, the Italians appeared to take a revengeful attack on Ethiopia between 1936 and 1940 (Tsegaye, 2020). The Fascist State terrorized Ethiopians by employing mustard gas and bombs. During their five years of unstable occupation, the EOTC became the main target of the Italians, who considered it their core enemy, partly because of its active opposition to their invasion (Bahru, 2002). The impact was twofold: loss of life of the Christians and destruction and pillaging of Christian antiquities. In addition to languishing the educated generation of Ethiopia, members of the church, including bishops³⁸ and several priests, deacons, monks and others were tortured and massacred (Shenk, 1972).

The main victims of the Fascist terrorism were the communities of Debre Libanos. This loss of lives marks the second massacre of the Christian communities

³⁷ Orthodox Christian

³⁸ Abune Petros and Abune Michael

of the monastery in its history. Terrorism was also made at ZequalaAbbo Monastery and AradaGiyorgis Church. On the other side, the Italian religious policy was pro-Muslim, and they provided financial and moral provisions for the Muslims, which had the intention of weakening the EOTC and winning the support of Ethiopian Muslims. As their historic enemy, the Italians' approach towards the church was expressed by burning its churches and deteriorating its Christians (Tsegaye, 2020). The revenge of the Italians was also characterized by extensive destruction, looting and exportation of Christian antiquities and royal properties, partly to abolish symbols of the old-age statehood of Christian Ethiopia. They were engaged in removing symbols of Christian emperors, such as the statue of Emperor Menelik II, by the order of Mussolini. The exportation of the immovable Aksumite Obelisk, though it was returned after 60 years in 1998, is a good example to understand the ambition of the fascists to destroy the old-aged EOTC of historical significance was also pillaged during the soldiers' movement against Christians. For instance, they looted Debre Libanos during the attack they opened on the monastic communities.

Conclusions and Recommendations:

Ethiopia is one of the world's most religious countries, in which about 98 % of the population claims a religious affiliation. The socio-cultural and spiritual life of most Ethiopians is oriented towards the EOTC's deep engagement within society. It is a spiritual institution, which is administered by its own Synod that has been connected to communities through its clerical administrative structures. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church is one of the world's ancient Christian churches, which traces its foundation back to the early Christian era. The EOTC has constituted an invaluable and priceless contribution to the country and the world in terms of country formation and sovereignty, unique literature, architectural discoveries and developments, knowledge, innovations and civilization. Furthermore, tourism attractions, social networking, solidarity and collective life, creating disciplined and decent citizens, moral and spiritual values, biodiversity conservation and forest management, and the route of paradise and heaven for believers are just a few roles of the EOTC.

Despite its numerous contributions at national and global levels, the EOTC has faced various challenges that can be categorized into external and internal challenges. Local troubles and the invasion of Yodit, the jihad of Ahmad Gragn, oppositions and attacks by other religions, particularly from Islam, Protestants and Catholics, ethnopolitical challenges and anti-Orthodox attitudes are some of the internal challenges which the EOTC has confronted. Furthermore, the expansion of Islam along the Red Sea, the intriguing intervention of the Catholic and Protestant missionaries and wars and conquests waged by foreign powers were some of the main external challenges that the Church in its history. EOTC believers are killed, injured and the church's buildings and properties have burnt in planned and organised ways in contemporary times, and the believers are displaced and forced to stop religious celebrations. The challenges not only have brought the destruction of lives and properties of part of its vast and long-built religious and cultural legacies but also weakened the church's religious missionary role both at national and international levels. To this end, the administration and the followers have to have strong structures and connections to create a power balance with any threats and enemies coming to attack the EOTC and the believers. The authors of this paper strongly believe that the tradition which says "give your left while it is hitting your right" is workable only among the orthodox believers, which does not apply to others who are inhuman creatures, cruel and horrible and pagan. The other important

recommendation is empowering Orthodox Christians using different associations, creating active engagement of all Orthodox Christians in the affairs of the church.

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