
A Publication to Foment Interfaith Dialogue between Orthodox and Evangelical Christians in Ethiopia

Abenezer Shimeles Dejene

Ethiopia is one of the earliest nations to have embraced Christianity. The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) dates back to the fourth century, Catholicism to the sixteenth century, and Evangelicalism/Protestantism to the mid-seventeenth century. Religious conflict and tension have been integral to Ethiopia's history, despite the nation's portrayal as a symbol of religious tolerance.¹ Although a few efforts have been made to foster an interfaith dialogue among various Christian denominations,² the polarization between religious communities, especially among the EOTC and Evangelical/Protestant Christians, is escalating rather than declining. Even as polarization grows, adequate and productive ecumenical dialogue is not occurring.³ One source of the problem concerns the information available to members of each tradition. With the sole providers of theological and religious education being seminaries and Sunday schools,⁴ the scholarly writings and publications produced by and for these

Abenezer Shimeles Dejene is an MDiv-biblical studies student at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary (Elkhart, Indiana).

1 See Hussein Ahmed, "Coexistence and/or Confrontation? Towards a Reappraisal of Christian-Muslim Encounter in Contemporary Ethiopia," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 36, no. 1 (2006): 4–22; and Terje Østebø, "Religious Dynamics and Conflicts in Contemporary Ethiopia: Expansion, Protection, and Reclaiming Space," *African Studies Review*, 2023, 1–24, <https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2023.11>.

2 Tibebe Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia: Resistance and Resilience* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009), 232; Daniel Seblewengel, *Perception and Identity: A Study of the Relationship between the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and Evangelical Churches in Ethiopia* (Carlisle, Cumbria: Langham Monographs, 2019), 405.

3 Eshete, *Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 315. See also Desta Heliso, "Theological Education in Ethiopia," *Handbook of Theological Education in Africa*, eds. Isabel Apawo Phiri and Dietrich Werner (Oxford: Regnum, 2013), 173.

4 Heliso, "Theological Education in Ethiopia," 172.

traditions focus, for the most part, on distinctive theological teachings and apologetics rather than mutual understanding.

The purpose of this study is threefold: (1) First, I will briefly review the historical interactions between Orthodox and Evangelical Christians in Ethiopia, exploring reasons for the need to develop more enduring or substantive interfaith dialogue between these communities. (2) Second, I will argue that theological publications and theological education can play an important role in promoting ecumenism. (3) Third, I will sketch a publication strategy that reduces antagonism and encourages dialogue.

Early Christianity in Ethiopia

The primeval genesis of Christianity in Ethiopia is linked to various tales of its origin.⁵ Most scholars agree that the prominent one is the story of the Aksumite emperor, Ezana, who played a significant role in leading his kingdom to embrace Christianity in the fourth century.⁶ Archeologists have found fourth-century coins of Emperor Ezana with inscriptions of Jesus as his and his kingdom's savior.⁷

In the middle of the fourth century, when a Syrian trader vessel was plundered and its crew died on the coast, two youngsters—Frumentius and Aedesius—survived and were taken as captives to the Aksumite King, who ruled in Axum, an ancient city in the Tigray region of Ethiopia. Eventually, they were freed by the queen and her son. Frumentius then traveled to Alexandria and met Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, to whom he reported the state of Christianity in Axum

5 Dale H. Moore, "Christianity in Ethiopia," *Church History* 5, no. 3 (1936): 271–84, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3160789>. See also Dale T. Irvin and Scott Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001), 216.

6 The king's conversion to Christianity in the first century cannot be the only means by which Christianity was introduced into Ethiopia. Since the nation's contact through trade and culture with Egypt and the Greco-Roman world, Christianity was introduced to Ethiopians before the fourth century through various means. Christian individual merchants commingled with the local people so that a small community of believers began to form in the urban areas. See Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 315. However, the king's acceptance of Christianity contributed to broader acceptance among the people. Unlike most other places, Christianity in Ethiopia gradually spread from the royal court to the ordinary people. This helped Christianity influence and shape the culture, politics, and education for centuries afterward.

7 Steven Kaplan examined the conversion to Christianity of the fourth-century Ethiopian ruler Ezana. One of the inscriptions reads: "The might of the Lord of Heaven, who has created me, of the Lord of all by whom the King is beloved." See Steven Kaplan, "Ezana's Conversion Reconsidered," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 13, no. 2 (1982): 101–9; Sergew Hable Sellassie, *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History to 1270* (Addis Ababa, Ethiopia: United Printers, 1972), 103.

and suggested sending a bishop and priest. Athanasius convinced Frumentius to return to Ethiopia himself as a bishop. Frumentius did so and became the first bishop of Axum. He is known as *Abba Salama* (Father of Peace) or *Kesate Berhane* (Reveler of Light) in Ethiopia.⁸ From that point on, the tradition of sending patriarchs from Alexandria continued for over a millennium until the Ethiopian church became autocephalous in 1959.⁹

In the fifth century AD, persecuted Syrian monks—widely known as the *Teseatu Keddusan*, or “Nine Saints”—arrived in Ethiopia. They had been persecuted in Syria because of their anti-Chalcedonian theological stance.¹⁰ The Nine Saints engaged in missionary activities, translated parts of the Scriptures into the Ge’ez language, and formed an Ethiopic liturgy. The Ethiopian and Egyptian churches were Monophysite, which means they did not accept the Chalcedonian Council’s decision that Jesus had two natures—divine and human—in one person. Instead, they believed in a single divine nature. From its inception, the Ethiopian church was theologically distant from the other Christian traditions, except for the Alexandrian church. The church followed Egypt in rejecting the Chalcedonian council, and the Nine Saints played a crucial role in spreading non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite theology in Ethiopia.¹¹

The expansion of Christianity into the south and west continued in the medieval period, from the seventh century to the seventeenth century. This period saw magnificent church constructions, evangelism, and the creation of a vision of Ethiopia as the second Jerusalem, or Zion. Further significant growth in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church happened when King Zara Yaqob was simultaneously a figure of the church and the state. Zara Yaqob is perhaps one of the most significant figures who shaped the church’s theology and praxis. He adopted an aggressive policy of evangelization and proselytization, made the Book of the Miracle of Mary part of the liturgy and dedicated holidays for her, helped to publish numerous hagiographical works, and made symbols like the cross to identify Christians.¹²

In the modern history of Ethiopia, which began in 1855, Christianization and unification of the church took place largely through the efforts of the kings. Kings such as Emperor Menelik envisioned expanding the empire and unifying the country; the church also expanded into the new territories that the emperor occupied. Because of its alliance with the emperors, the church functioned as a

8 Irvin and Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement*, 215–19.

9 Hable Sellassie, *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History to 1270*, 95–104.

10 Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 17.

11 Calvin E Shenk, “The Ethiopian Orthodox Church’s Understanding of Mission,” *Mission Studies* 4, no. 1 (1987): 4–20.

12 Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 18–22.

political tool to take over the sociopolitical power in the new territories.¹³ The Ethiopian Orthodox Church played a critical role in the country's state formation and remains a central part of its culture, identity, politics, and education. Even the nation's flag is rooted in Orthodox theology and history.

Evangelical Protestant Christianity in Ethiopia

In contrast to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, Evangelical Protestantism has a much shorter history in Ethiopia; its origins are most often traced to the mid-seventeenth century with the arrival of German missionary Peter Heyling in Gondar in 1634–1635. Heyling aimed to rejuvenate the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and worked within the church to introduce a new evangelical life focusing on the Scriptures and evangelism.¹⁴

Missionaries from the Church Missionary Society (CMS) arrived in 1825 to “revitalize the ancient church” by distributing the Scriptures and other Christian literature. CMS missionary Samuel Gobat and his successors, C. W. Isenberg and Johann Krapf, focused on preparing literature in Amharic and other vernacular languages, multiplying copies of the Bible, and instructing the people in the Scriptures.¹⁵

Beginning in those early Protestant mission efforts in the seventeenth century, various missionary bands arrived in Ethiopia. The Pilgrim Mission, a group that combined Protestant mission and technical aid, arrived in Gondar. However, because of resistance from the emperor and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, they did not do significant mission work.¹⁶ The Swedish Evangelical Mission (SEM) established a mission base at the coast of the Red Sea. SEM was successful in working with the local Orthodox priests and training and sending ex-slaves as indigenous missionaries to the southern part of Ethiopia.¹⁷

The peak period for many Western Protestant mission organizations' arrival in Ethiopia was between 1918 and 1931.¹⁸ According to Tibebe Eshete, most of

13 Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 33–34.

14 Gustav Arén, *Envoys of the Gospel in Ethiopia: In the Steps of the Evangelical Pioneers, 1898–1936*, Studia Missionalia Upsaliensia 75 (Stockholm, Addis Abeba: EFS förlaget; Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus, 1999), 34.

15 Olav Sæverås, *On Church-Mission Relations in Ethiopia 1944–1969: With Special Reference to the Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus and the Lutheran Missions*, Studia Missionalia Upsaliensia 27 (Oslo: Lunde, 1974), 15–16.

16 Donald Crumme, *Priests and Politicians: Protestant and Catholic Missions in Orthodox Ethiopia, 1830–1868*, Oxford Studies in African Affairs (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), 142.

17 Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 70–71.

18 Western Mission Organizations arrived in Ethiopia between 1918 and 1932: United Presbyterian Mission (1918, US), Swedish Mission BV (1921, Sweden), Mission to the

the mission organizations that arrived during this period attempted to work with the Orthodox Church, except for the few that emphasized building independent Protestant churches.¹⁹ Yet the Italian Occupation (1936–1941) brought an end to foreign Protestant mission activities. The Italians expelled the missionaries and tried to establish the Roman Catholic faith, which was unsuccessful. On the other hand, the termination of most of the Protestant foreign mission movements in Ethiopia brought the era for the emergence and growth of indigenous Evangelical Christianity. As Eshete noted, Evangelical Christianity grew remarkably in the period of the Italian Occupation.²⁰

In the 1960s a new indigenous Pentecostal impulse emerged from urban and university-educated youth from various regions, especially in Addis Ababa.²¹ The new Evangelical movement served as a bedrock for the later Pentecostal movement that spread like wildfire. The Pentecostal movement has multiple origins, both indigenous and from foreign missionary work. The movement's rise in the 1960s changed the landscape and shape of Evangelical Christianity in Ethiopia; it sprang up in the wake of a hostile sociopolitical situation. As Eshete notes, the movement was a youth-oriented fundamentalist response to the traditions and norms of the established church (the Ethiopian Orthodox Church) and the mainline Evangelical churches. The most significant aspect of the movement was the “baptism of the Holy Spirit,” expressed through speaking in the tongues and other gifts of the Holy Spirit.²²

The Protestant Missionaries' Encounter with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church

In this section, to understand the Orthodox perception of Western mission, it is appropriate to begin by looking at their encounter with the Jesuit missionaries who arrived in Ethiopia early in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The reason for beginning here is that the Protestant missionaries' arrival took place with those earlier encounters as a backdrop. The Jesuit missionaries attempted to evangelize Ethiopia and spread the Roman Catholic (Chalcedonian) faith. Their attempts to change the culture, language, and liturgies rapidly led to a bloody civil war in Ethiopia. The emperor was defeated, and the Jesuits were expelled from Ethiopia in 1632.

Jews (1923, UK), Sudan Interior Mission (1927, US), Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (1928, UK), Hermannsburg Mission (1927, Germany), and the Bible Churchmen's Missionary Society (1932, UK). See Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 75–76.

19 Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 83.

20 Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 77.

21 Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 124.

22 Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 145–47.

The consequences of this incident were long-lasting. Ethiopia passed through prolonged internal instability and isolated itself from the rest of the world, especially the Western world.²³ This historical incident helped to nurture a xenophobic attitude among Ethiopians toward missionaries and Westerners.²⁴ Catholics were often labeled as *tsere-Mariam*—literally, anti-Mary (or the enemy of Mary), and eventually this label was used for anyone who was a non-Orthodox Christian “other.” Even until the late twentieth century, individuals who had a close relationship with Westerners were accused of abandoning the Orthodox faith and labeled as Catholics. *Koteleke* became a generic tag summoning up apostasy and the name *tsere-Mariam*.²⁵

Later in the nineteenth century, during the Italian Occupation, the Italians attempted to spread the Roman Catholic faith for the second time but were unsuccessful in Catholicizing the nation. Even so, they paved the way for the Protestants by weakening the influence of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in the southern and southwestern parts of Ethiopia.²⁶

The Catholic mission activities, beginning from the early Jesuit missionaries, had set the tone for how all Western missionaries would be seen in Ethiopia. Unfortunately, that mission activity was not solely about religious matters but also involved political and social issues. This left Ethiopians suspicious about underlying missionary motivations and influenced their perceptions of later Western mission activities. This is one of the backdrops to the Protestant missionaries’ later arrival and operations.

One of the significant tones that echoed among all Protestant mission endeavors was the reformation of the established church. The missionaries’ conviction of their calling to revitalize the Ethiopian Orthodox Church arose from their common perception that the established church had syncretized true doctrine. They believed that spirituality had become paralyzed and that the church was only nominally Christian. In addition, they accused the church of having become just a tool for the emperor’s colonial desires.²⁷ For instance, Samuel Gobat’s perception of the Orthodox Church was that “little . . . of Christianity [had

23 Crummey, *Priests and Politicians*, 7.

24 Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 25.

25 Bahru Zewde, *Pioneers of Change in Ethiopia: The Reformist Intellectuals of the Early Twentieth Century*, Eastern African Studies (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University, 2002), 71.

26 Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 38. See also John H. Hamer, “The Religious Conversion Process among the Sidāma of North-East Africa,” *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 72, no. 4 (2002): 598–627, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3556703>.

27 Faqāda Gurmésā Kušā and Ezekiel Gebissa, *Evangelical Faith Movement in Ethiopia: The Origins and Establishment of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus* (Minneapolis, MN: Lutheran University Press, 2009), 75–79.

been] preserved” and the church had fallen entirely into superstition.²⁸ Similarly, Thomas Lambie thought that “the Ethiopian Church faith was a mixture of the Old Testament and African traditional religions . . . distant from the genuine Christian doctrine.”²⁹

The missionaries were optimistic that reawakening the Ethiopian Orthodox Church could lead to reaching the surrounding Muslims. Various missionaries were sent with this conviction. Some were successful in their efforts, but their actions were significantly hampered because they did not understand the complex history and culture of the nation. Donald Crummey’s analysis is that the failure of the missionaries’ vision to utilize the established church came from an inability to continue their conviction to keep working with the church and sustain its strategy; instead, they diverted their strategy to proselytization. As a result, the mark of the strategy to utilize the established tradition is no longer visible among the Christian traditions.³⁰ However, Eshete disagrees with Crummey in this matter; although the marks of the missionaries’ ecumenical efforts are not visible at this time, that does not necessarily mean they did not attempt to work with the established church. On the other hand, Eshete agrees that the missionaries’ attempts to reform or work with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church did not leave an enduring mark.³¹ Instead, the legacy of their inaccurate perceptions of the church is visible among Evangelicals. Contemporary Evangelicals are also keen on reforming the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

The drawback of the approach to reform the Orthodox Church is that it does not have a consistent objective of what kind or in what areas or doctrines of the church that reformation should happen. The reformation initiatives that arose within the Ethiopian Orthodox Church³² and the Evangelical churches that

28 Tadesse Tamrat, “Evangelizing the Evangelized: The Root Problem between Missions and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church,” *Missionary Factor in Ethiopia: Papers from a Symposium on the Impact of European Missions on Ethiopian Society*, eds. Getatchew Haile, Aasulv Lande, Samuel Rubenson (Lund University, August 1996, 1998), 24.

29 Thomas A. Lambie, “Pioneer Missions in Abyssinia” (St. Louis, MO: Bibliotheca Sacra Company, 1928), 32.

30 Crummey, *Priests and Politicians*, 151.

31 Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 54.

32 In the fifteenth century, Aba Estifanos and his followers (who are called *Daqia Estifanos* or *Estifanosites*—the Stephanites) began a reformation movement in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Aba Estifanos was a monk, preacher, and martyr who was nonconforming to the reformation that King Zara Yaqob (1434–1468) and the church leaders at the time introduced to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Zara Yaqob was one of the most significant figures in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. He authored and encouraged others to publish hagiographical books and introduce holidays for the saints for the church. Aba Estifanos and his followers raised strong

majorly support those movements do not have a similar objective. Besides that, the Evangelicals and the current reformation movements inside the Orthodox Church consider themselves the heirs of the renewal efforts that arose in the fifteenth-century Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Most Evangelical historians and missionaries equate the fifteenth-century renewal movement's theological differences in the Orthodox Church with the sixteenth-century European Protestant Reformation. Even though it requires a detailed study of the similarities and differences between the two movements, it is evident that the sociopolitical contexts in which they arose are entirely different. Getatchew Haile has called the idea of a "Protestant Reformation of the Orthodox Church" a myth.³³ Even the Ethiopian Orthodox Church clergies have strong disagreement and reservations about the reformation impulses, as they feel that the missionaries have underestimated their wisdom, religious knowledge, and religious traditions. As a result, they have tended to mock the missionaries and create lengthy bureaucratic procedures that have slowed down their activities.³⁴

Gradually, a change of strategy occurred among the newly arrived missionaries from 1918; they started to establish new Evangelical congregations. The new community resulted from a combination of missionary interest and of excommunicated Orthodox Church members looking for a new religious identity.³⁵ The Orthodox Church considered the new converts as *Menafek*, or heretics, and *tsere-Mariam*—the enemy of Mary. This implied that the new congregations were attempting to diminish the tradition and the church.

In the early stage of this missionary work, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church's bitterness toward the missionaries sprang from the perception that their

questions about the practice of prostration (*segdat*—prostration to the ground) in front of the images of Mary, angels, and saints, which was a new tradition introduced to the church at the time. For Aba Estifanos and his followers, prostration as an act of worship is only for God; they refused to bow down in front of the king and the rulers. They are also well known for their teaching of the Scripture over tradition, and for being against the king. The Stephanites faced unspeakable persecution under King Zara Yaqob and his descendants, including being stoned and dragged to death. See Getatchew Haile, trans. *Deqiqa Estifanos: Behigg Amlak* (Collegeville: Getatchew Haile, 2016).

33 Getatchew Haile, "Review of Evangelical Pioneers in Ethiopia: Origins of the Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus, by G. Arén," *Northeast African Studies* 6, no. 3 (1984): 55–58.

34 Lambie, *A Doctor without a Country*, 170. See also Tadesse Tamrat, "Evangelizing the Evangelized," 26.

35 Aasulv Lande, "Evangelical Mission in Ethiopia: Why an Ecumenical Failure?," *Missionary Factor in Ethiopia: Papers from a Symposium on the Impact of European Missions on Ethiopian Society*, eds. Getatchew Haile, Aasulv Lande, and Samuel Rubenson (Lund University, August 1996, 1998).

missionary purpose was to take the Orthodox Church's flock by offering social services like education and health care.³⁶ The rancor still exists; some people refer to the Evangelical faith as *be'erdata-yemeta haimanot*, a religion that came with aid. The bitterness and bureaucracy from the Orthodox Church and the government officials made proselytization the easiest way forward. Thus, the early vision of reformation failed, and the Evangelicals were unsuccessful in establishing a firm base within the Orthodox-dominated areas.

The wound in the early interaction between the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and Evangelical mission work has not healed and still hampers attempts at ecumenical dialogue. As Tadesse Tamrat puts it, it has effectively blocked a meaningful dialogue toward a mutual understanding about their differences in faith, worship, and issues of genuine Christian community. The history of Christian interaction in Ethiopia contains theological and narrative differences that demand in-depth studies and conversation.

Growing Polarization and Antagonism between the Two Christian Faith Traditions

As covered in the previous section, the beginning of the early encounter between the different Christian traditions in Ethiopia was filled with contempt, distrust, and suspicion. The polemic of the accusation of being heretical and schismatic has been mutual and contributed to the growing antagonism. The antagonism reached its peak at the end of the twentieth century when Evangelicals emerged from the margins into the public space.³⁷

For a long time, Evangelicals have been severely harassed by Orthodox Church clergy and believers. They have experienced ostracization, social/family exclusion, physical attack, imprisonment, and harassment both individually and as a community. The term "mission" was used to express the foreign missionaries' social services, and then it continued as a label to designate Evangelical Christians. The tag *metewoch* ("foreigners/newcomers") identified the Evangelicals as foreigners. As historian Tibebe Eshete has stated, the label *mete* is a politically loaded

36 Tadesse Tamrat, "Evangelizing the Evangelized," 30.

37 Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 305. In 1962, the total number of Evangelicals was 250,000—less than 1 percent of a total population of 26 million. Since the Communist government was overthrown in 1991, the number of believers has dramatically grown to 4 or 5 million. As Eshete explains, in the 90s Evangelicals became determined to enter the social and political arena of the nation with the vision of "redeeming" the nation for Christ (305–6, 310). Many Evangelicals have taken higher positions in the government, including the current prime minister. And Evangelicals are currently around 22.8 percent of a total population of 113 million. (See <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/ethiopia/>.) Evangelicals claim between 25 percent and 30 percent of the total population.

word chosen exclusively to attack the Evangelicals.³⁸ A heavily loaded term used to express the new faith as a white people's religion, implying that the Evangelical faith is not the authentic expression of Ethiopian Christianity.³⁹ Because of this, Protestants were ostracized from social groups, and Orthodox Christian parents kicked their young Evangelical kids out of their houses for fear of being excluded from society.

Evangelical Christianity has snowballed in the past half a century, with many agreeing that the persecution—including ridiculing and insulting—has been a major contributing factor to its growth.⁴⁰ Now Evangelicals are no longer on the periphery. Becoming influential in the nation, they have evolved into the attackers' side, ridiculing the Orthodox believers in media, evangelistic campaigns, one-to-one interactions, and theological arguments. Evangelicals consider themselves enlightened people and label the Orthodox believers who live in darkness under the law of the Old Testament as *Abzab*, or gentiles, denoting people lost without Christ.⁴¹ Evangelicals also view Orthodox Christians as idol worshippers because of the Orthodox doctrine of Mary, the ark, saints, and angels.⁴²

Ethiopia is often portrayed by Ethiopians as a unique case of religious tolerance and peaceful relations.⁴³ Although it's true there has been an experience of peaceful coexistence in the country, religious conflict has also, in parallel, been part of history.⁴⁴ Polarization among the two faith communities that includes violent clashes, assaults, ostracization, mockery, and insult toward one another has been increasing in the past decade. Orthodox and Evangelical Christians

38 Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 217.

39 Daniel, *Perception and Identity*, 243.

40 Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 301–7. See also Jörg Hausteim, "Introduction," in *Writing Religious History: The Historiography of Ethiopian Pentecostalism* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2011), 1–36, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvc16prg.5>.

41 Daniel, *Perception and Identity*, 232.

42 Mega-church pastors and well-known singers call Orthodox believers "idol worshippers" in broadcast sermons or songs. One of the well-known young evangelical pastors recently called them "idol worshippers" in a televised sermon, leading to a nationwide controversy, even among Evangelical theologians. See ተክለ ሐይማኖት፣ ተአምረ ማርያም ዮናታን አክሊሉ 2015 (Marsil TV worldwide), YouTube video, 8:21, accessed April 26, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HGcnVqkCPcI&list=PLB3jB-nP7wWA0bSZxRfr2MEGV5OV254kg&index=1&t=245s>.

43 Zarihun Degu, "Inter Religious Tolerance and Peaceful Co-Existence in Ethiopia," accessed April 5, 2024, https://au.int/sites/default/files/newsevents/workingdocuments/30164-wd-tolerance_and_coexistence_in_ethiopia_by_pastor_zerihun_degu.pdf.

44 Hussein Ahmed, "Coexistence and/or Confrontation? Towards a Reappraisal of Christian-Muslim Encounter in Contemporary Ethiopia," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 36, no. 1 (2006): 4–22.

constitute 67 percent combined of the total population: 44 percent adhere to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, and 23 percent consider themselves Evangelical Christians.⁴⁵ Terje Østebø argues that religious tensions are increasing in Ethiopia as groups struggle for dominance and attempt to reclaim lost space. This has led to conflicts and mutual suspicion rooted in questions about political structures, national identity, and the meaning of Ethiopia. This, in turn, has sharpened religious boundaries and deepened interreligious tensions.⁴⁶

Theological Publication as a Bridge for Interfaith Dialogue

The concept of ecumenism among different religious groups in Ethiopia currently seems a luxury. Authentic interfaith dialogue in the Trinitarian Christian tradition—let alone ecumenical cooperation with wider religious groups—is almost becoming impossible. While a few attempts at ecumenical dialogue in history have taken place, broader ecumenical attempts have been unsuccessful.⁴⁷ Ecumenism in any meaningful and organized form is not present.⁴⁸

Yet somehow a solid ecumenical tie exists among the Evangelical churches of Ethiopia. The ecumenical relationship grew to establish an umbrella organization in 1976, and from that organization the Evangelical Churches Fellowship of Ethiopia (ECFE) was launched with nine founding member churches.

The ECFE currently claims to represent more than 90 percent of Evangelical believers.⁴⁹ One of the many factors contributing to the solid ecumenical tie for Evangelicals is a publication circulated across Evangelical denominational boundaries. The media and publication contributing to the ecumenical collaboration of Evangelicals was Yemserach Dimts radio,⁵⁰ which played a significant role since its inception in 1963 in disseminating Evangelical faith, contributing to disciple-making efforts, and consolidating the collaboration among Evangelicals. Publishers such as SIM (currently, Serving in Mission) have also contributed to this unity by publishing works by authors from various Evangelical denominations. Additionally, magazines like *Misiker Berhan*, *Hiwote*, *Berhan*, *Hebron*, and

45 “2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Ethiopia” (U.S. Department of State, Office of International Religious Freedom), accessed April 8, 2024, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/ethiopia/>.

46 Østebø, “Religious Dynamics and Conflicts in Contemporary Ethiopia.”

47 Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 232; Daniel, *Perception and Identity*, 405.

48 Desta Heliso et al., “Theological Education in Ethiopia,” in *Handbook of Theological Education in Africa*, ed. Isabel Apawo Phiri et al. (1517 Media, 2013), 164–74, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1ddcphf.24>.

49 Daniel, *Perception and Identity*, 409.

50 This radio station is no longer functional.

Misiker were published regularly by different denominations but had contributors from and circulated among all Evangelical circles. They served as a space to interpret the Bible together, with contributors representing different Evangelical traditions. In addition, those publications used to serve as a space for dialogue on theological differences, history, and issues arising among Evangelicals.

Though there are few studies of the history and contribution of religious publications, several religious books, magazines, and newsletters have been published in the Evangelical and Orthodox churches.⁵¹ However, publications aimed at interfaith dialogue and fostering ecumenical relations are nonexistent. Established publications focus on their respective faith community, with the aim of discipleship and evangelism; most follow an apologetic approach of protecting their constituents from others rather than attending to mutual understanding. A few were founded from the Evangelical side to instigate reformation and restoration in the Orthodox Church.⁵²

Starting in the past decade, print media targeting a general audience has been supplanted mainly by television and social media platforms. Publications that used to be owned by denominations placed restrictions on their content. Now, in comparison, individuals or independent churches operate the new religious television and social media platforms with loose accountability. Those platforms “have become important venues for religious activism, significantly contributing to intensified polarization and exacerbated tensions.” A number of faith-based online activists have created “their own blogs, YouTube channels, and Facebook pages, where they—in addition to religious preaching—often launch polemic attacks against each other, thus accentuating violent conflicts and deepening notions of hatred.”⁵³

Since most of the clergy who play a critical role in ecumenical relations are trained in theological education institutions, those institutions by default also play a critical role in shaping the discussions and ecumenical interactions. Theological education institutions are ideal places to foster ecumenical understanding. As Desta Heliso contends, “One task of theological institutions is generating ideas and starting and sustaining the debate and dialogue in an honest but sensitive, critical but constructive manner.”⁵⁴

51 Mulatu Moges and Terje Skjerdal, “Media and Religion in Ethiopia” (Addis Ababa, January 2024), <https://afromedia.network/latest/news/media-and-religion-in-ethiopia-a-research-report/>.

52 Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 46.

53 Østebø, “Religious Dynamics and Conflicts in Contemporary Ethiopia.” Østebø notes that minimal in-depth research has been conducted on the involvement of media sites and individuals in online activism and their contribution to intensifying religious polarization.

54 Heliso et al., “Theological Education in Ethiopia,” 173.

When seminaries and platforms owned by churches are the sole providers of theological and religious education, they should have room to contribute dialogue while maintaining their identity. Yet, currently, such effort is minimal or nonexistent. As briefly seen above, one source of the problem concerns the information available to members of each tradition from the trained clergy of the respective faith traditions. Those trained ministers' scholarly writings and publications focus on distinctive theological teachings and apologetics rather than mutual understanding between different faith traditions.

A new publication would develop resources that could be used in theological education curricula and church teaching materials. As publications circulating among the different Evangelical denominations contributed greatly to dialogue and unity in the past, I argue that a new publication today may have a similar effect across Orthodox-Evangelical relations. The publications among Evangelicals served as a space to reflect on biblical interpretation, theological differences, history, and issues among the communities. Similarly, a new form of publication could facilitate dialogue and serve as a space to reflect and reason for Ethiopian Orthodox and Evangelical believers and could also extend to other faith traditions.

Academic Journal: Creating a Space to Reason Together on Differences

In his address at a conference gathered to discuss the ecumenical initiative in Ethiopia, Father Petros Berga summarized the Ethiopian interchurch relations this way: "In Ethiopia, the 'Christian Other' tends to be seen as a rival; the enrichment of seeing ourselves through the conceptual lenses of the other is ignored. Thus, the potential benefit of seeing oneself in a wider perspective is lost." He recommended a genuine dialogue that helps "penetrate the world of the other while gaining a better understanding of self, which permits religious discourse to take its rightful place as a creative and liberating element in the public domain."⁵⁵

As briefly seen in the previous section, one source of the current lack of interfaith dialogue concerns the information available to members of each tradition from the trained clergy. A new publication could help the clergy and theologians "penetrate the world of the other." Furthermore, it could provide a space to see one's Christian identity, tradition, and theology from a broader perspective. Finally, it would contribute to developing resources for theological education curricula and church teaching materials to help address the community's

⁵⁵ Petros Berga, "The Objective of the Ecumenical Conference in Ethiopia" (An Ecumenical Initiative in Ethiopia—Preliminary Conference Proceedings, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, November 28, 2005).

current issues as Ethiopians rather than fueling the existing polarization among Christians.

An impartial academic journal has the potential to create a “public space” for dialogue for scholars, theologians, clergy, historians, and anyone interested in contributing from both traditions and beyond. Initiating the space for discussion helps to learn how others define themselves and enter the experience and world of others. In the words of Mikhail Bakhtin, language helps to “penetrate the world of the other.”⁵⁶

To develop such a journal, its purpose is a crucial question that should be clarified first. Sometimes ecumenical endeavors do not recognize differences, and instead they propose an overnight coming together or unity in Christ. In the conference mentioned earlier, Gemechisa Moroda and Father Petros Berga reasoned that the purpose of ecumenical relations should be to focus on the common threats that Christians are facing and tackling the problems of humanitarian and ecological crises and ethical and moral issues of the community.⁵⁷ To the contrary, tackling the common threats should be the benefits of coming together; it cannot be the driving purpose of the dialogue. The significance of inter-Christian dialogue should be beyond the common threats Christians face today, so that the relationship will not halt when those causes stop being a problem in the community.

Indeed, the goal of interfaith dialogue among Christians is to obey Jesus’s prayer “that they may all be one” (John 17:21). As Bosch puts it, “It is not simply derived from the new world situation or changed circumstances, but from God’s gift of unity in the one Body of Christ.”⁵⁸ While the aim is unity, that does not mean letting the differences go away and becoming uniform. As Bosch states, the purpose of Christian unity is not “leveling differences, a shallow reductionism, a kind of ecumenical broth. Our differences are genuine and have to be treated as such.”⁵⁹

Ethiopia’s two Christian faith traditions have genuine differences in identity, history, theology, and liturgy. The new journal should serve as a space that facilitates ecumenical dialogue between these two faith traditions. The aim of the ecumenical dialogue should involve gradually unraveling the layers of the issues

56 Berga, “The Objective of the Ecumenical Conference in Ethiopia.”

57 Gemechisa Morodo, “An Evangelical Perspective on the Theme of Conference” (An Ecumenical Initiative in Ethiopia—Preliminary Conference Proceedings, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, November 28, 2005), 53–57. And Petros Berga, “The Objective of the Ecumenical Conference in Ethiopia,” 19–20.

58 David Jacobus Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, Twentieth-anniversary ed., American Society of Missiology Series, no. 16 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011), 475.

59 Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 464.

of the points of division. The end might not be agreeing on everything but getting the wisdom to understand each other, and looking for ways to come together on the agreed-upon issues.

As stated in the historical section above, the primary source of the difference between the Orthodox and Evangelical Christians arises from the political circumstances accompanying the arrival of Evangelicals and Protestants as religions associated with foreign powers and with foreign aid, in contrast with the much longer and more deeply locally rooted history of the Orthodox Church.

The polarity also extends to biblical interpretation and theological differences. As seen above, a new journal would aim to facilitate a discussion of those differences. Therefore, the suitable pathway for the journal to facilitate the conversation would be to follow the concept of “scriptural reasoning.” As David F. Ford posits, scriptural reasoning is a “wisdom-seeking engagement” within different faith traditions. It draws people of varying faiths into engagement with each other in conversation, utilizing Scriptures and interpretations.⁶⁰ The reason for placing Scripture in the center of the interfaith discussion is that “scripture is at the heart of each tradition’s identity.”⁶¹

Ethiopian Orthodox Church priest Fisseha Tadesse suggests starting the ecumenical dialogue from the question of identity, noting that “any communicated facts inevitably carry interpretations, which are influenced by who the interpreter is.”⁶² An attempt to deal with the identity and issues of the two faith traditions in Ethiopia certainly involves Scripture and its interpretation. As Ford states, the aim of scriptural reasoning might not necessarily be consensus but recognition of profound differences by being open to learning to argue with courtesy and truth.⁶³

Bosch reports, “Ecumenism or *ecumenical dialogue* is not a passive and semi-reluctant coming together but an active and deliberate living and working together.”⁶⁴ This journal should integrate ecumenical sensitivity and critique—sensitivity to the other tradition’s memories, history, sacraments, liturgical rituals, and critical interaction with theological commonalities and distinctives. As Jesus said, “The measure you give will be the measure you get . . . in everything do to others as you would have them do to you” (Matt 7:2, 12). This is a perfect

60 David F. Ford, “An Interfaith Wisdom: Scriptural Reasoning between Jews, Christians, and Muslims” in *The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning*, eds. David F. Ford and C. C. Pecknold (Malden, MA; Blackwell, 2006), 1–22.

61 Ford, “An Interfaith Wisdom,” 1.

62 Fisseha Tadesse, “An Orthodox Perspective on the Theme of Conference” (An Ecumenical Initiative in Ethiopia—Preliminary Conference Proceedings, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, November 28, 2005), 47–50.

63 Ford, “An Interfaith Wisdom,” 5.

64 Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 475–76.

principle for ecumenical mutual understanding and critique. The foundation for the journal and deeper interaction between the two Christian traditions should be established on Jesus's principle of doing to others as you expect from others.

Ethiopian Orthodox and Evangelical Christians: Facilitating Space for Dialogue

When I started this project, I thought I knew the history of Christianity in Ethiopia. But when I began reading in depth, I realized I needed to learn more. One of the significant benefits of this study is helping me understand the history of the country and how it is interpreted by different faith communities.

The growing extreme polarization among Christians in Ethiopia urgently needs a response and solution. I envision seeing a society that satisfies its soul from the fruit of being united as a Body of Christ. A community that comes together for prayer and reading the Scriptures together and respects others' interpretations and experiences. Publications that preach unity and critical engagements among the Ethiopian Orthodox and Evangelical Christian faith traditions rather than preaching hate. Generally, I suggest initiating a space that facilitates dialogue for believers from both faith traditions.