The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church as Religious Other in Contemporary Ethiopia: Discursive Practices of Three Selected Religious Authorities

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Abstract: Through critical discourse analysis of widely circulated and debated video speeches by three selected religious authorities in Ethiopia—representing the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC), Islam, and Protestantism—this paper examines how religious authority and social media complimentarily help to reach geographically and religiously diverse audiences and to draw politico-religious boundaries. It shows how the politicisation of religion, mainly by a supportive Protestant and calculative Muslim groups, with different intentions, on the one hand and a religiously motivated and repressive government on the other have created a “religious other” (i.e., the EOTC). Perceived discourse of historical marginalisation is used to justify both supportive and calculative tendencies of continued religious repression in the reconstructed new Ethiopia. On the other hand, a struggle for justice to curb this development is religiously justified by the EOTC, which elevates tensions to the level of a holy war against the religious other.

Keywords: religious othering; religious authority; existential threat; cleansing; holy war

1. Introduction

The circulation of ideas, images, and narratives between different creeds does not mean that religions necessarily grow more appreciative or tolerant of one another. Instead, they appropriate aspects of other creeds and use them to fortify the boundaries between “us” and “them” or between believers and unbelievers. (Juergensmeyer et al. 2022, p. 6)

As the above quote suggests, religious othering is becoming one of the challenges facing contemporary societies. In the book’s introduction, which illustrates religious othering with extensive empirical evidence, Juergensmeyer et al. (2022, p. 1) argue that religious othering becomes a cause of “ethnic cleansing” and “strident anti-minority hostilities”. They also highlight the role of religious authorities in creating and intensifying violence as a means of drawing a homogeneous political sphere that marginalises the religious other. This paper uses three video messages from the Ethiopian public sphere—an Ethiopian Orthodox religious teaching, a Protestant sermon, and a Muslim religious speech—as cases to discursively examine how traditional religious authority is complemented by the possibilities offered by the media to draw a politico-religious boundary based on religious othering.

Since the 2018 political reform that brought the outspoken Pentecostal Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed—who is very public about his faith—to the political forefront, religion has become increasingly contested in the Ethiopian public sphere (Haustein and Feyissa 2022; Haustein 2022; Mulatu and Skjerdal 2023). Abiy has been accused of embedding the political leadership style in the philosophies of the “Prosperity Gospel” (DeCort 2022; Mulubrhan 2021). Some writers also argue that the prime minister and his supporters believe he is on a divine mission (The Economist 2018). In line with this, his religious rhetoric is said to envision a “new Ethiopia” under his religious rhetoric (Jansen 2018, p. 42 cited in Østebø et al. 2021a, p. 343).
Consequently, the three dominant religions in contemporary Ethiopia—Orthodox Tewahedo, Islam, and Protestantism—have entered a more conflictual situation where religious groups clash in their attempts to extend symbolic and concrete boundaries as a means of establishing or protecting new dominance or regaining lost positions (Østebø 2023). As a result, Østebø (2023, p. 738) observes that Ethiopia is now “a country in flux”. The EOTC was the state church for some 1700 years before it was disestablished by the communist government in 1974. In the years following this transformation, the EOTC has faced a seemingly never-ending epistemic and physical challenge (Solomon 2021). These attacks intensified with the arrival of the ethno-linguistic government in 1991 with the political agenda of neutralising the EOTC and its legacies in Ethiopian society (Aregawi 2008; Solomon 2021). This has also been exacerbated after the 2018 reform. According to a comprehensive report published by the International Orthodox Tewahedo Alliance (IOTA) in May 2023, which details the brutal killings, church burnings, property demolitions, and displacements of EOTC adherents over the past three decades, using extensive photographic, local, and official documents, media reports produced at the time of the attacks, and first-hand information from those who witnessed the attacks, the years after 2018 have clearly become one of the most debilitating moments for the Church in its recent history. The report concludes that attacks on the EOTC by the combined forces of extremist Muslim religious groups and Protestant leaders working in government structures at the local, district, regional, and national levels have significantly intensified since the election of Prime Minister Abiy.

On the other hand, the two relatively growing religions in recent years, Protestant Christianity and Islam, found the policies of the ethno-linguistic government (which ruled the country between 1991 and 2018) favourable as it allowed them to mobilise power and negotiate social and political boundaries (Haustein and Østebø 2011). The Protestant population in Ethiopia grew from 5% in 1960 to 18% of the total Ethiopian population in the last census (Population Census Commission 2008). The Pentecostal branch of Protestantism has become particularly influential in Ethiopian politics, allowing both the current and previous Ethiopian prime ministers to come from this religious group (Haustein 2013, 2022). Islam remains relatively stable in its growth, accounting for approximately 31% of the total population in the most recent census. However, Muslims in Ethiopia have been increasingly successful in mobilising the masses to both stop government interference in religious affairs (Ficquet 2022) and to develop narratives and assert agency in Ethiopia’s socio-political and religious dynamics (Feyissa and Lawrence 2014; Feyissa 2013). The post-2018 political dynamics also brought Muslim-dominated political groups in the Afar and Somali regions to the political centre and created a situation where Muslims became more visible in high government political positions (Ahmed 2023). The developments also structurally strengthened Muslim institutions by providing legal recognition on an equal footing with the historically influential EOTC.

Using “religious othering” and “religious authority” as theoretical frameworks, this paper aims to examine how different discourses on religion, history, and politics are linguistically constructed and disseminated by religious authorities through social media in an attempt to create a politico-religious boundary based on othering. It also examines how religious authority is semiotically represented through clothing and titles presented in writing. The analysis of three videos aims to provide examples of how different positions and strategies are textually manifested.

The following sections present the meaning and application of the concepts of religious othering and religious authority, followed by an explanation of the methodology used in this study. The selected speeches are then presented one by one, followed by an analysis of the speeches in terms of the state of religion and politics in the context of Ethiopia’s history, present, and future. The final part presents some conclusions of the study.
2. Religious Othering

Religious othering refers to “attitudes, assumptions and positions that connect religious phenomena with individual and collective identity formation in ways that are dismissive, belittling and dehumanising” (Juergensmeyer et al. 2022, p. 8). This kind of othering often occurs not because of underlying differences between religious groups but, rather, because of the perceived threat of assimilation. Religious othering can be exercised through marginalising practices such as social exclusion and other systemic and structural oppressions. In addition to politicians, those involved in religious othering practices often include “priests, imams, shamans, monks and nuns, and they frequently used forms of religious expression ranging from sermons to prayers and chants” (Juergensmeyer et al. 2022, p. 8). In a situation where different rival groups compete to gain, maintain, or regain political power, religious groups use exclusionary rhetoric to marginalise the other. This happens when a powerful group draws a boundary of national identity on the basis of a particular homogeneous cultural group, placing the other religious or ethnic group in a position of “existential threat” and the risk of “ethnic cleansing” (Juergensmeyer et al. 2022, p. 9).

Recent research shows that othering is practised in a variety of ways that affect the religious other in different contexts (Juergensmeyer et al. 2022). The use of rhetoric as a means of creating an inside–outside dichotomy during the Nazi regime and in contemporary European and American political movements are just two examples (Aho 2022). The othering of Islam can also be seen in sections of American right-wing politics (Moore 2022), in the practices of far-right political parties in Austria and Germany (Hafez 2022), in the stereotyping of non-Buddhists by Buddhist traditions (Jerryson 2022), and in the case of Albanian Muslims who have been victims of religious othering from the 19th century to the present (Ferati-Sachsenmaier 2022). Although Muslims are portrayed as victims of othering in several examples, they are also seen to exercise othering against other Muslims—as in the cases of Sunni Muslims in Iraq and Syria against followers of the Shia branch of Islam—and against others, including Jews and American Christians (Juergensmeyer 2022) and secularists (Schneider 2022). The othering of Catholics by the Chinese secular state (Zimmer 2022) and of European and American Christians in Hindi films in India (Dimitrova 2022) are also examples of studies in this area.

3. Religious Authority

People from different religious traditions use their religious authority and individual charisma to endorse violence by portraying other religious communities as sinister, devilish, and hostile others. Authorities use the opportunities provided by the media to exercise hatred, hostility, and violence against the religious other. Drawing on Max Weber (1978), Horsfield (2016, p. 40) defines authority as “a situation in which people cede their full autonomy and accept the direction of another, on the grounds that what is being required is accepted as a legitimate expectation, given the circumstances.” This definition is based on the idea that authority has two interdependent elements: coercive power and legitimacy. Coercive power arises from the intention to dominate with “the ability to force, coerce or compel people to act in a particular way” (Horsfield 2016, pp. 39–40). Legitimacy, on the other hand, supports power by compelling people to obey it voluntarily and with interest. Using these criteria, Weber (1978) identified three types of authority: legal, traditional, and charismatic. While legal authority is based on an impersonal system of rules and laws agreed upon by the communities themselves, traditional authority both empowers a person or group on the basis of a sacred, established belief and tradition and requires the authority to operate within the limitations granted for the specific position held. Charismatic authority allows for the exercise of power legitimised by observers who revere or recognise the authority as exceptionally endowed with qualities that allow them to exercise power. Charismatic authority, Weber (1978) argues, is more influential but also more transient than the other two because it lacks external validation and is legitimised only by
those who recognise it. It therefore changes as circumstances change, allowing it to either disappear or transform into one of the other two forms of authority.

Recent studies have also included ideas about religious authority that challenge and extend Weber’s conception. Kertcher and Margalit (2005) are notable in this respect. They replaced Weber’s traditional authority with “constructed legitimacy”, arguing that what confers legitimacy is not the tradition itself but the way it is seen to be right and important. They also replaced charismatic authority with what they call “performance-based authority”, arguing that legitimacy for this kind of authority is conferred not only by the personal qualities of the authority but also by how these are translated into the achievement of the interests of the group giving recognition. Heidi Campbell (2007) has also identified a new set of impersonal authorities that include hierarchy (roles or perceived roles of religious leaders), structure (official institutional arrangements, community structures, and organisational practices), ideology (commonly held religious ideals, dogmas, and canons), and texts (canonised books) that stand the test of time in a religious context (Campbell 2007).

Religious authorities may, in some contexts, have singular forms that allow them to exercise sole authority over religious matters (Bunt 2018). They may also have plural forms that allow individuals or groups to simultaneously exercise “multiple loci, layers or claims to religious authority” at different levels (Horsfield 2016, p. 45). In the predominantly secular Nordic context, new claims to religious authority also challenge the more static and traditional forms (Hjarvard 2016). Some researchers argue that the media offer the possibility of constructing a new type of religious authority, defined more by media audiences than by religious institutions in the religious marketplace, requiring researchers to first understand the relationship between media and religious authority in order to understand the relationship between media and religion (Horsfield 2016).

In the era of the “internet of things” and artificial intelligence technologies, the status of religious authority is widely contested in different social contexts, and research in this area falls into three domains (Cheong 2022). The first strand shows that religious authority can be forged by individuals or groups on the internet to challenge traditional authority (Scheifinger 2010). The second body of scholarship reveals that online spaces can work in a complementary way to sustain and transcend offline religious authority in the context of wider geographical and religious boundaries (Burge and Williams 2019; Guzek 2015; Klüver and Cheong 2007; Rajan 2019). A third strand of scholarship focuses on the dialectical relationship between religious authority and technology, where tensions occur simultaneously, both supporting and challenging offline authority, and thus requires researchers to understand the negotiations and ambivalences they encounter both online and offline (Ess and Cheong 2012; Cheong 2017; Kołodziejska and Neumaier 2017; Lövheim and Lundmark 2019). This research shows how the selected Ethiopian religious authorities use social media together with their offline religious authority to exert influence within and outside their religious circle—in line with the second strand of research mapped by Cheong (2022).

4. Methodology

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough 1993) is used to address the research objectives of how the semiotic representation of religious authority in social media and the content of the speeches of the three religious leaders contribute to drawing a politico-religious boundary that creates a religious “other” in Ethiopia. CDA is the study of the causal and determinant relationships between discursive practices and broader socio-cultural factors. It seeks to understand how power relations and power struggles help to construct and ideologically shape discursive practices and how this relationship underpins the acquisition and maintenance of power and hegemony (Fairclough 1993).

In this study, the three-dimensional framework proposed by Fairclough (1993) is used to analyse the speeches of the three religious authorities. The dimensions are the textual (the three video messages, in this case); the discourse practice (the spread of the messages through social media); and the social practice (the wider Ethiopian socio-political, religious, and political context).
5. Presentation of the Textual Dimension

Three video messages by religious authorities representing each of Ethiopia’s dominant religious traditions—the EOTC, Islam, and Protestantism—with content that includes their views of Ethiopia’s past, present, and future are selected for analysis. The three videos are selected on the basis of four criteria. The first is the degree of debate that the video has generated in the Ethiopian public sphere—especially on social media—regardless of the religious and political orientation of the audience. All three videos are highly debated by Ethiopian social media users and satellite TV channels broadcast to Ethiopian audiences from abroad in different contexts. Parts of the speeches of the three were taken from different sources by individual users and shared as they were, sometimes edited and posted together with users’ comments on social media. The second is that the speeches were delivered by senior religious authorities. Given the position that each religious authority holds in their respective tradition, their speech can be seen as representative of the power struggle between the three religions and illustrates what is at stake in the struggle for legitimacy of authority. The third is that the content of the speeches includes quotations about the past, present, and future of Ethiopia from the perspective of their own religious tradition. And the fourth is the language. They are all delivered in Amharic, the language spoken by the dominant political elites and the majority of the Ethiopian population. For the purpose of analysis, the researcher translated all the speeches. All the screenshots (images) of each authority shown on the following pages were taken from the social media sites where these videos were circulated.

5.1. Instance 1: Mezgebekal Gebre-Hiwot—Justice Is in Our Hands!

The first video is a four-minute sermon given in May 2023 by an EOTC scholar named Mezgebekal Gebre-Hiwot in a church in the Amhara region, where EOTC scholars and followers met for a religious Q&A session (Figure 1). He is currently serving as an educator in the four schools/Matshaf-Bet (House of Books) of the EOTC (Books of the Old Testament, Books of the New Testament, Scriptures of the Church Fathers, and Books of Monasticism). He has written two religious books that can be used as a reference for teaching in the EOTC and for those who want to know about the EOTC faith. The video was recorded and released from there by an unknown source. The video went viral in May 2023 as it was shared and discussed among Ethiopians on social media. It turns out to be difficult to find the main source where this video first appeared. One of the sources where this video went viral was the prominent US-based YouTube page (Ethio 360), which also broadcasts critical programmes against the government to the Ethiopian audience—via satellite—on a daily basis. Surprisingly, Ethio 360’s YouTube page has been shut down by YouTube for the 21st time so far (with the alleged intervention of the Ethiopian government), but each time YouTube shuts down the page, the journalists come up with live streaming by registering on a new YouTube page (Minalachew 2023). As a result, it is impossible to track the number of viewers from there. But it was widely shared and discussed among Ethiopians on social media. It turns out to be difficult to find the main source where this video first appeared. One of the sources where this video went viral was the prominent US-based YouTube page (Ethio 360), which also broadcasts critical programmes against the government to the Ethiopian audience—via satellite—on a daily basis. Surprisingly, Ethio 360’s YouTube page has been shut down by YouTube for the 21st time so far (with the alleged intervention of the Ethiopian government), but each time YouTube shuts down the page, the journalists come up with live streaming by registering on a new YouTube page (Minalachew 2023). As a result, it is impossible to track the number of viewers from there. But it was widely shared and discussed on other individual social media platforms.

The preacher is responding to a question in a meeting of EOTC scholars and supporters. His speech is about the situation in which Ethiopia as a nation and the EOTC as a church find themselves and compares it to the “new Ethiopia” that the government’s narrative keeps telling people about in the state media. He also spoke about the role of each member of the Church in bringing order to the problematic situation he described. He speaks so emotionally that his speech seems to captivate everyone who hears it.

As the picture above shows, his dress code is also different from that of the ordinary believers seen in the background. He wears a white robe on his head and a black clerical cassock. Both the title and the dress code give him a position and authority from which he speaks and exerts influence.
He begins his speech with a question. He asks, “What do you think when you hear “new Ethiopia”?” Then, he answers himself: “It means a country where there is no Orthodox Tewahedo, where there is no commentary and no zema (religious song). This is what they call ‘new’”. He goes on to say that “the new Ethiopia means a country where these scholars (pointing to scholars in the room) do not exist. The new Ethiopia means a country without commentary, without the Bible, without culture, without tradition, without rules and laws. It is a soulless, dead nation. Do you understand?”

For him, the most important thing that the EOTC has lost in today’s Ethiopia is “justice”, and he maintains that the duty to bring justice is for the people and that it should be under the guardianship of God. He appeals to followers of Orthodox Christianity by saying: “If you are Orthodox, it is your duty to preserve your religion. We have lost justice. We get it with our hands, by placing ourselves on the side of God”. He argues that the “new Ethiopia” cannot bring this justice. He says:

If you kneel down and beg them to keep you alive when they come to kill you on Sunday, they will come and kill you the next day. So, justice is not something you beg or cry for. Enforcing justice is our duty. The scholars and the laymen should be taught this. It is over!

The “them” in the above statement is perhaps meant to refer to those who are perceived to be killing the Ethiopian Orthodox Christians and demolishing the churches. He also relates this to history where Ethiopians have fought to preserve their country. He says, “What kind of justice do you want from a dead body? Enforcing justice is your job. This is what our ancestors did in the past.” He goes on to explain what Ethiopians did in the past:

Our ancestors never deviated from three principles: The first is love of God. To love God who was before the world, who created the heavens and the earth. Our forefathers promised not to depart from this with all their hearts and minds. They don’t deny God; they don’t break the law; they keep his commandments. God says, if you love me, keep my commandments. The Ethiopians kept this promise. That is love of God. The second is love of neighbour. This means loving people, not pushing them. There is no one you can single out and push down because of their faith and their place of birth. You love people. If someone is victimised, you serve him/her with justice. If he is pushed or ousted, you give him back and compensate him. Loving people is the primary duty. The third characteristic
of Ethiopians is righteousness. It means that you will enforce secular rules on someone who does not understand spiritual law.

In explaining the concept of justice, he interpreted the idea of turning the other cheek to the one who strikes the right cheek. He says:

This means that if your brother gets angry and hits you, you turn around and preach the gospel to him, because he is already a believer. He is your brother. If one of your hands cuts your other hand while you are chopping onions, you do not say that the other hand should be cut. If a Christian oppresses another Christian, he will bear it and not strike back at his brother. Turning the other cheek is for your brother.

He explains this concept in terms of an “enemy”:

We do not have such a saying for someone who slaughters, destroys religion and defiles the Church, my dear! Do you understand? You see, once again! This is a spiritual battle. Christ has told us about your brother. There is no joke in religion and country.

For the preacher, Ethiopia as a country, the Church, and eternal salvation are one and the same.

If you do not have a country, you do not have a Church. If you have no Church, you have no faith. If you have no faith, where will you live? You will not be saved. To have eternal life, you must live by faith; for faith to exist, the Church must exist; for the Church to exist, the country must exist. It is to prepare oneself to make the country run with justice. This is it!

He ended his short speech with a biblical quote that Gideon proclaimed to the Israelites when God told him to keep the number of fighters to a minimum so that they would not think that the victory was theirs when, in fact, it was God’s: “Whoever trembles with fear may turn back and leave Mount Gilead”.

5.2. Instance 2: Tolossa Gudina—Age of Visitation

The second is a sermon of 36 minutes and 47 seconds, delivered in August 2023 by a Protestant reverend, doctor, and pastor, Tolossa Gudina, from a studio in the USA (Figure 2). He is a leader and priest in the Ethiopian Evangelical Church of Atlanta. He is known for his extensive use of the media to reach audiences. The Evangelical Church is the largest Protestant group in Ethiopia, with over 10 million followers (Gudeta 2022). The sermon was uploaded to the Church’s official YouTube page—EECAtlanta TV—on 14 August 2023 (Figure 2). This channel has 12,900 subscribers. From this page, the sermon has received 6114 views and 131 likes (by 14 November 2023). One day earlier, the same sermon was also uploaded to the Elshaday Television network Official (Figure 3). This channel has 82,500 subscribers, and the video has received 3385 views and 134 likes from there.

The video was widely discussed on social media, and parts of the speech were cut out and shared on Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and TikTok. Ethio 360 Media also broadcast selected parts of the sermon, along with the journalists’ critique of the sermon.

Unlike the previous video of the Orthodox scholar, this sermon was recorded in a studio. As the preacher also lives in the USA, it seems to have been recorded there and uploaded to the official YouTube pages. His clothes are not unique either. However, both his title and his current position in his congregation give him an authority that lends a high degree of credibility to his speech. Viewership is also high.

The preacher looks at the situation Ethiopia is in now and the complications and solutions. He relates the story of the liberation of the Israelites from Egyptian Pharaonic slavery under the leadership of Moses to the present situation of Ethiopia. Speaking of where Ethiopia is now in relation to the history of the Israelites, he says:

The tears of our people have been counted, and recently our turn has come. At a time when no one thought or expected it, the eternal God has opened the door of mercy to
Ethiopia and she is beginning a journey that will bring healing, reconciliation, liberation, development, prosperity and deliverance from her age-old diseases.

Figure 2. Rev. Dr. Pastor Tolossa Gudina, leader of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church of Atlanta, preaching in a studio about the current state of Ethiopia and the problems and solutions.

Here, the preacher presents the history of Ethiopia as “age-old diseases”. The mechanism the preacher sees as God’s way out of this sickness through the opening of the door of mercy is the emergence of a “meek” leader who can lead the Ethiopian people and “the Church” in the right direction. He is referring to Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed.

In the meantime, the preacher is calling on the Ethiopian people to accept the era of mercy, warning that failure to do so will bring a catastrophe comparable to the price the Jews paid for their failure to understand the purpose of Jesus’ visit to Jerusalem in the Bible story:

It is not wrong to say that the time of mercy has come for the Ethiopian people and the Church. Listen, Ethiopian people! We have never seen with our eyes or heard with our ears when the leader of the country serves as priest, mediator and mentor. But today we are seeing all this. This is one of the signs that the time of reconciliation, healing and visitation has come for the people of Ethiopia. But we must believe, accept and support that the era of mercy and healing has come for Ethiopia. If we spend this time without properly understanding and accepting it, we must all know that we will pay the price.
Reading the biblical story in Luke 19:41–44 about what Jesus said to Jerusalem (the Israelites) about his coming for peace but their failure to understand and the price they paid, he warned that, if Ethiopians do not accept the reform initiative launched by Prime Minister Abiy, they will face the same fate. He says the Israelites were wiped off the map of the world because they did not listen to the message of peace and, in comparison, he says, “if we do not accept the mercy and compassion that God has sent us, the enemy will come: the enemy that destroys, persecutes, invades and overthrows”. In his sermon, he identifies threats that could hinder the project of bringing the Age of Visitation to a comfortable conclusion. One group is what he calls the “cadres of destruction”. These groups are clearly critical voices of the government. He says:

Although the work is done day and night, there has been nothing that has not been tried to close the door of mercy and hinder the reform process through propaganda, media, war, espionage and bribery. The reform is still being tested in various ways. They do not seem to understand that what they are doing is destroying and weakening the country and are in a nightmare to take it back to the past.

Needless to say, the above statement reiterates that the past is bad and no one needs to return to it. In addition, criticism of the government through the media is considered “destructive”.

The other groups he identifies as threatening the political project are those government officials who affect the people through bribery. He says that these groups are working to make the government look inefficient in the eyes of the people. He also says that these groups do not represent the government or the people. He reminds these groups that they should learn from past corrupt political leaders who have disappeared from the political space.

Priest Tolossa warns both groups, the “cadres of destruction” and the bribing officials, that they will pay the price of their actions both on earth and in heaven. He says: “You will pay the price of your deeds both on earth, in hardship and humiliation, in death and after life.”

The last but most critical group he identifies as a threat is the spiritual community. He argues that “the most important problem of the Ethiopians is spiritual” and he links this to “the lack of a proper understanding of Jesus”. He says:

The sickness and problem of Ethiopia is spiritual and mental. Most people in Ethiopia know the Lord Jesus by name and history, not by His life, truth, and spirit. If they did, no one’s blood would be shed in a so-called Christian country. The blood of hundreds of thousands of people would not be shed.

The preacher’s primary and only viable solution is related to the repentance of the Church (the EOTC).

It will be solved when the spiritual condition of the Church in the country is fixed. But the Church itself is in great confusion and captivity. First of all, it should enter into a nation-saving repentance of its own. For the war, the insults, the misunderstandings, the criticisms, and the violences that the country is currently experiencing are shameful. This requires repentance.

He also says:

There is no human medicine for this. It is only in the hands of the Lord Jesus Christ. Politics and diplomacy cannot solve this. The Amara, the Oromo, the Tigrayans, the East, the West cannot. It is repentance that can. We must forgive those who have harmed us. When we do that, we will be saved.

To make the project a success, the preacher made a final remark about protecting the government from danger and working closely with it.

Let us hold the government that God has given us like a diamond. Let us work together. Let us bring change. We are the ones who have to bring the change.
we fail to do so, we should not forget that we ourselves are responsible for the failure and the misery that will come.

5.3. *Instance 3: Ahmedin Jebel—Beware! Unite, Strategise and Move Forward!*

The third is a 16-and-a-half-minute video speech delivered on 3 June 2023 by the social affairs advisor to the president of the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (EIASC)—Ahmedin Jebel—at a funeral for Muslims killed by government security forces following a Muslim demonstration against the demolition of some 32 mosques around the capital, Addis Ababa, in connection with the Oromia regional government’s Sheger City project (Figure 4). In addition to his position as an advisor, Ahmedin currently works as an Ustaz (teacher) and activist. He wrote three books critical of the history of Ethiopian Muslims and their relationship with Christian kings and two other books on Islam and contemporary issues. He was one of the 17 Muslim leaders selected to serve on a committee called the Muslim Arbitration Committee, which was established in January 2012 to resolve the problems of the Muslim community in Ethiopia in relation to the leadership of the Mejlis and government-sponsored religious interference in 2011–2012 (Mohammed 2016, p. 260). He was arrested along with all the members of the Muslim Arbitrary Committee and faced multiple charges of terrorism, including conspiring to establish an Islamic state (Fasil 2016). He was later released following government reforms in 2018. His speech was streamed live from his own official Facebook page and has so far attracted over half a million viewers, 47,000 reactions (likes and loves), and 6100 comments. It was also edited and shared on other social media sites. It was also presented and discussed in media such as Ethio 360.

![Figure 4. Ahmedin Jebel speaking to a crowd of young and old Muslims at the burial site of Muslims (whom he called “Shaheed” (martyrs)) killed by Ethiopian security forces in and around Anwar Mosque.](image)

Ahmedin’s speech comes from a Muslim graveyard, after the burial of the killed Muslims, whom he calls *shaheed* (martyrs). He is dressed casually. He speaks so loudly and with emotion that he can be heard by hundreds of people surrounding him without the use of a microphone or loudspeakers. His speech was also accompanied by chants of *Allahu Akbar*, meaning “Allah is great”, from the crowd who sat on the ground of a cemetery following his remarks. His current position and his role in the recent Muslim struggle gave him an authority from which to speak and attract an audience. The attention his speech received on social media also shows how influential his speech is (Figure 4). In his speech, he made three points. The first is what he calls “the unresolved dilemma of Muslims in Ethiopia”: recognition. He says, “There are many unanswered questions for us to truly live with dignity as Muslims.”
The second is the multifaceted approach that the Muslim struggle must take to achieve the stated goal, rather than insisting on demonstrations as the only viable way. The main focus is on empowering and strengthening the Mejlis (EIASC), led by Haji Ibrahim, and uniting and rallying Muslims behind it. He stresses that “the Muslim struggle should no longer rely on individuals, as the serious struggle of Muslims has already produced a Mejlis that must be supported at all costs from the local to the national level.” He says:

If the institution has a system and an owner and can march sixty to seventy million Muslims behind it, Wolahi [which means, ‘I swear to God’], there are many miracles that we will do. I am not lying, Wolahi, we have the capacity to do a lot.

But he also revealed other innovative methods. He gave the example of the Muslims in Medina, who were about to be attacked and wiped out by a combined force of three different ethnic groups from the surrounding area during the time of the Prophet Muhammad. He explained that the planned attack was stopped and effectively dispersed by the arrival of a non-Muslim man from one of the ethnic groups supporting the Muslims’ cause and his conversion, followed by the Prophet’s wise decision to send him back to the three groups to be used as a divider, which he succeeded in doing. Following this, Ahmedin says:

See what a genius the Prophet is! What did he do first? If this person comes with a mission, claiming to be a false Muslim, and if the Prophet just mixes him up, what will he do? He will spy. Is that not right? But what did he do? If your coming is true, then go and try to divide the unity (of the enemy); and if you come with a false conspiracy, then go with it. You see, he succeeded in both ways. In this way, the Prophet saved the Muslims. Even today, there are many ways to fight. The way to fight is not only through demonstrations.

The third is where he warned Muslims not to be used by others, who he said wanted to use the Muslim struggle as a stepping stone to their own ends. Perhaps this refers to the EOTC, which is not on good terms with the government. He says:

There are many elements who want to turn us into mountaineers. And we are fighting for our country, not to be a steppingstone for others. We are ready to give not only our money but also our lives to fight for our religion, our country and our people in our own way.

Standing on the graveyard, Ahmedin talks about being calculative and focused, not being used for the causes of others. He seems to be referring to not co-operating with the EOTC followers, who were in deep trouble with the government because of the threat of schism the Church faced from within and the government’s alleged role in initiating it and supporting it from behind by the Church’s highest authority, the Synod (Solomon and Tesfa-Mikael 2023).

6. The Discourse Practice: Social Media Reinforcing Religious Authority?

In the Ethiopian context, the three cases presented above show that traditional religious authority is thriving amidst media and technological developments—in line with complementary trends observed in other research (Burge and Williams 2019; Guzek 2015; Kluver and Cheong 2007; Rajan 2019). Using social media technologies, the three religious leaders delivered their messages to religiously diverse and geographically distant audiences. Given that the issues raised by these authorities concern the religious other, the government, and Ethiopian society as a whole and that they are spoken by “high”-level authorities in the three religious traditions, perhaps Ethiopians of all kinds dare to hear from them. With this in mind, the Protestant and Muslim authorities posted their messages on their own social media sites—YouTube and Facebook, respectively. The Protestant preacher is also known to rely heavily on the media to spread his messages. As noted above, the speeches of the two religious authorities were taken in whole or in part from their websites and have been critiqued, discussed, and disseminated in various media, including satellite and YouTube channels operating from abroad to audiences in Ethiopia. This shows that the two religious authorities (Islam and Protestantism) seem to take the
media seriously and complement their religious authority with the possibilities offered by the media. The two cases also show how the two groups are committed to furthering their goals of drawing not only a religious line but also a political one by reaching out to a wider mass on issues that concern most Ethiopians.

The EOTC teacher’s speech, on the other hand, appears to have been recorded and uploaded online by someone else. Nevertheless, it was shared and discussed in the same way. A search of his name on the internet shows that he does not use YouTube, Facebook, or other social media (at least not in his own name). Although Mezgebekal is one of the few religious authorities at the top of the EOTC’s religious school pyramid, he is still far from uploading media content of his own messages. But this does not prevent his message from being recorded, published, discussed, and debated on social media. His case shows that the media itself reinforces traditional, offline religious authority by providing access to it and connecting it to audiences, even when the authorities do not do so themselves. On the other hand, his case also shows that EOTC leaders and scholars like Mezgebekal seem less aware of or underestimate the social media battle in which the other two are mobilising their resources to create a politico-religious boundary.

All three cases show that, by providing access, social media seem to piggyback the position of religious authorities operating within their institutional apparatus onto a wider media and religious environment characterised by geographical, religious, and other limiting boundaries.

7. The Social Practice: Religious Othering?

7.1. Historical Ethiopia

Ethiopian history serves as a source of religious othering, as the Protestant and Muslim religious authorities define history in terms of the evil other and the marginalised self, while the EOTC preacher sees it as Ethiopia’s glorious moment. Both the Protestant preacher and the Muslim cleric agree on the need to destroy the previous order which, according to them, was built on other (Orthodox Tewahedo Christian) ideals. This past seems to refer to both the period before 1974, when the EOTC was the state church, and the period after it was removed from its position as the state church, and the period of successive governments thereafter. The EOTC was the state church from the 4th to the 20th century, except for two minor interruptions, when Islam was in state power for 15 years in the 16th century and Catholicism for seven years in the 17th century. The Protestant preacher referred to the historical moment when the EOTC was the state church as an agony that passed forever, stressing that the 2018 reform, which brought Abiy to power, answered all the questions that needed to be answered in Ethiopia.

Earlier contacts in the 17th century with Jesuit missionaries, who openly expressed interest in bringing the Ethiopian state and church under the papal authority of the Catholic Church, were met with strong negative sentiments from the Ethiopian state and people of the time, who by then were predominantly followers of the EOTC (Gorgorios 2004; Cohen 2009). Eventually, ordinary Ethiopian Orthodox believers developed a need for protection from missionary activities. Protestant missionary work was first allowed in Ethiopia during the reign of Haile-Selassie I (r.1931–1974) (Eide 2000). During and after Haile-Selassie’s reign, Protestant groups continued to expand underground, as successive governments constantly monitored the progress and mobilising power of religious groups (Haustein 2022). The Protestant preacher saw the time when Protestantism was not allowed and the time when religious traditions were under closer scrutiny by governments as a period of slavery, darkness, and a moment compared to the slavery of the Israelites under Pharaonic rule. But, for the Orthodox preacher, the past, the time when the state–church structure was functioning, was the moment when a just political administration was in place, where the ancestors played a great role in protecting even the minorities and the marginalised with the utmost care and legal possibilities.
On the other hand, Islam entered Ethiopia in 615 AD, during the time of the Prophet Muhammad (Trimingham 1952). Trimingham noted that the first Muslim groups, including the Prophet’s close relatives, came to Ethiopia to escape execution in Arabia at the direction of the Prophet himself, who told his followers that there was a just king who could host and protect the Muslims from extermination by rival groups in Arabia (Trimingham 1952; Sergew 1972). The Christian king, Armah, hosted and protected the Muslims. Since then, Islam has expanded in Ethiopia. For several centuries, the two religious groups coexisted, except for notable interruptions in the 16th century, which led the two groups into a civil war that involved foreign powers, Turkey on the side of the Muslims and Portugal on the side of the Orthodox Tewahedo followers. Meanwhile, the Muslim Sultanate of Adal, led by Ahmed Ibn Ibrahim Al Ghazi, also known as Ahmed Gragn, invaded the Christian highlands and ruled the Christian-dominated northern parts of the country for 15 years.

He was later defeated by Christian kings, but many Orthodox Tewahedo followers were forcibly converted to Islam and several churches were burnt, and the presence of Islam, which had been confined to the southern lowlands, expanded into central and northern Ethiopia (Molvaer 1998). Since then, the relationship between Muslims and Tewahedo Orthodox Christians has been one of peaceful coexistence, with the EOTC maintaining the position of the state church until 1974. Thereafter, the EOTC became the focus of epistemic and physical attacks, as the governments in power saw the church as having the potential to mobilise society against the state ideology and structure of the two governments that ruled the country between 1974 and 1991 and 1991 and 2018, which adopted scientific atheism and strict secularism, respectively (Abbink 2003). In particular, the religious policies of the government from 1991 onwards helped both Protestant and Muslim groups to gain an advantage and grow enormously both demographically and in terms of influence (Haustein and Østebø 2011). In the last decade, these newly growing religious groups entered into narrative wars, redefining themselves and their historical development in relation to the Ethiopian nation (Feyissa 2013). For example, one of the more recent controversial claims of some Muslim groups is the narrative of the conversion of the Christian king of Axum to Islam (Feyissa 2013). This has been rejected by non-Muslim Ethiopian and European scholars alike. Protestant groups also associate themselves with the local religious movements of the Stephanites, redefining the history of their origins in relation to the missionary activities from abroad (Feyissa 2013).

According to Ahmedin, Muslims in Ethiopia are still waiting for “dignity”. The Orthodox preacher, on the other hand, emphasised that the Ethiopia of the past was a country where Ethiopians lived in harmony with three principles: love and devotion to God, love of the other without discrimination based on religion or other identities, and justice. The discursive practices of the three religious authorities show that the history of Ethiopia is used as a source of religious othering.

7.2. “New Ethiopia”

When it comes to the views of the religious authorities in the politico-religious field of today’s Ethiopia, they seem to agree on the idea that Ethiopia is going through a huge demolition and reconstruction process that may have various consequences for their growth and survival. However, this “new” development is understood differently by the three religious leaders: for the Orthodox scholar, the new Ethiopia is the eradication of the EOTC and its resources; for the Protestant preacher, it is the opposite—the nation is in a unique glorious moment or zenith; for the Muslim activist and scholar, it is both an unfinished success and a time that needs a calculated move to complete it. While the Protestant and Muslim leaders seem comfortable with what is happening in the “new Ethiopia”, the Orthodox is demanding justice and resisting.

The Protestant and Muslim authorities have implied in their speeches that the EOTC has benefited in the past and whatever happens to the Church now is a process of bringing the nation to its right position. Thus, both groups seem to be refusing to co-operate with the EOTC’s call for justice. The Protestant preacher also seems to see no weakness on the
part of the government. The Muslim cleric also seems to refuse to co-operate with the Orthodox Tewahedo other, suggesting rather the wise use of the opportunity as a strategy to strengthen the Muslim cause and struggle.

This process of demolition and construction can be linked to the recent chaotic situation Ethiopia is going through: the devastating war in Tigray, Amhara, and Afar regions, the series of strikes orchestrated by “informal” and formal security agents against Orthodox Tewahedo Christians in central and southwestern Ethiopia, the burning of churches and the displacement and killing of Christians all over Ethiopia, and much more (IOTA 2023). The Protestant preacher and the Muslim activist seem to regard all these as “normal” processes in the construction of a “new Ethiopia”. This seems unpalatable to the Orthodox teacher—Mezgebekal—who argued that country, faith, and salvation are one and the same, integrated. This relates to Juergensmeyer et al.’s (2022) idea of the construction of a national identity based on selected cultural or religious ideals that place a religious other in a position of existential threat and religious cleansing. The EOTC appears to be in an existential predicament as the ongoing attacks are both ignored and denied support by the two groups.

The Orthodox Tewahedo teacher, Mezgebekal, opposes the idea of a “new Ethiopia”, as it is being built, he argues, on the silent demolition of the nation perceived to be built on Orthodox Tewahedo ideals, and he seems equally opposed to its reconstruction with other identities. This process, he says, is turning Ethiopia into a soulless, dead body from which no justice can be demanded, and he urges the people to rather unite and fight against it. And he calls on those who do not support this or are afraid to fight to “return from Gelad”—in other words, to stay away from those brave people who dare to tackle this problem. The scholar has inferred the role of God in the war, perhaps because he thinks that the war is just in spiritual standards. This idea raises the situation of the conflict to the level of a holy war (Steffen 2013).

The Protestant and Muslim leaders, of course, support the “new Ethiopia” to varying degrees. The Protestant preacher takes it to the extreme by comparing Ethiopia’s situation and the arrival of Abiy as prime minister to the biblical story of Jesus’ visit to Jerusalem. Prime Minister Abiy was, of course, raised and compared to the biblical Moses by some religious, military, and lay leaders in his early political career as prime minister (Thabet 2021). He also won the prestigious World Nobel Peace Prize in 2019. But many criticise him for failing to deliver on his promises as the country entered a state of unending conflict and he was labelled as autocratic as his recent predecessors, if not worse, who decided to stay in power at all costs (Messay 2023). Seeing his religious rhetoric and ambition, some even went so far as to accuse him of rejecting the constitutional secular order by trying to Pentecostalise Ethiopian politics (Le Fort 2020).

The government is also currently engaged in a civil war with the regional paramilitary force known as the Fano in the Amhara region, where Tewahedo Orthodox Christianity is relatively dominant. The government has used sophisticated technology such as drones and heavy artillery against civilians and Orthodox Tewahedo churches in its search for Fano fighters (AFP 2023; VOA 2023). As a result, Abiy Ahmed has come under increasing criticism in contemporary Ethiopia. Pastor Tolossa’s claim thus contradicts these popular reservations. Yet, a similar, if not bolder, claim was made by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed himself after Ethiopia’s registration as a member state of the BRICS in South Africa. Afterwards, he appeared in the state media (EBC) and said: “The world is recognising the victory, the investment and the progress that is being registered (in Ethiopia), although Ethiopians do not understand it properly” (EBC 2023a). The Prime Minister’s criticism of “Ethiopians” shows both his worry of losing support and his determination to continue in a dictatorial manner. However, the Protestant preacher—Dr Tolossa—remains faithful on the Prime Minister.

This may have much to do with the long yearning of Ethiopian Protestants for a born-again Christian figure who could repeat the success story of the numerical growth of Protestantism in Ethiopia in the political sphere (Haustein 2022). A recent experience
best explains the intention of Pentecostalism to seize power in Ethiopia. At the moment, Protestants are also dominating political positions in Ethiopia. According to Moa Tewahedo, which means Tewahedo Wins, a task force established in the EOTC to counter the recent developments in Ethiopia, there are now 92 positions in higher government offices in Ethiopia: 23 ministers, 35 deputy ministers, and 34 agency directors and commissioners. While Protestants hold 58% of these positions, the remaining 27% and 15% are shared by Muslims and Orthodox Tewahedo Christians, respectively (Moa Tewahedo 2023). The Task Force points out that, in addition to the disproportionate religious distribution of officials, at least compared to the most recent proportions of each religious group in Ethiopia’s population figures—44% Orthodox, 31% Muslim, and 18% Protestant—Orthodox believers in these government positions also work in stressful situations where they are required to hide or change their Orthodox Tewahedo identity. This reinforces Juergensmeyer et al.’s (2022) argument that religious othering aimed at drawing political boundaries in the auspicious use of creating a homogeneous national identity based on selected religious or cultural ideals seems to end up inciting violence against the marginalised group.

7.3. Future Ethiopia

In order to either sustain or curb the ongoing developments in Ethiopia, the approach suggested by each religious authority also varies. The EOTC scholar advises followers to enforce justice themselves, as there is no one to expect it from. On the other hand, the Protestant preacher warns Ethiopians to believe in the government and to support it firmly, as failure to do so will cost them dearly in the future. The Muslim cleric believes that Muslim unity is the top priority, while keeping an eye on the possibilities. He advises not to put pressure on the government while it is dealing with others (perhaps the EOTC) and to refuse to be used by “them” when “they” need Muslim support as a contribution to their own struggle. In doing so, the Muslim scholar seems to be thinking that there is an oppressed other who wants to challenge the government. Even if many mosques are destroyed and Muslims (called “martyrs”) are killed by the government security forces, he advises to stop the demonstrations and to try other strategies—because it can support the other. The cleric presented several other strategies that the Muslim struggle can use rather than relying on demonstrations alone. As an example, he cited the “wise” decision of the Prophet to use people from another group to destroy the “enemy” and implied that the same strategy could be applied in the Ethiopian case. One might ask how this can be translated in Ethiopia. In light of the recent dispute between the Prime Minister and the EOTC Synod and in light of the EOTC’s complaints against the government in general, Ahmedin seems to be suggesting the use of government officials to reinforce the Muslim struggle.

In February 2023, the highest authority of the EOTC, the Synod, accused Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed of interfering in church affairs to the extent of orchestrating a “Synod coup d’etat” following the “illegal” consecration of 26 bishops by three members of the Synod and their subsequent attempt to establish a breakaway synod called the Oromia and Nations and Nationalities Synod (Solomon and Tesfa-Mikael 2023). When the newly appointed “bishops” tried to enter the EOT churches, the faithful tried to protect these churches from them, leading to the chaotic events that followed. It is recalled that, at St Michael’s Church in Shashemene alone, more than 23 people were killed by government security forces as they tried to disperse demonstrators protecting their churches from the illegal group (Solomon and Tesfa-Mikael 2023). After a few days of silence, the Prime Minister made a half-hour speech on the conflict in which he recognised both the breakaway members and the formal Synod as equal and the demands of the breakaway bishops as legitimate. In a line-by-line response to the Prime Minister’s speech, the Synod accused the Prime Minister of siding with an illegal group and of failing to protect the Church from attack and invasion. Although the controversy ended when the Prime Minister brought the three bishops and handed them over to the Patriarch with the words “I have gathered the lost sheep and brought them back”, the rift between the two does not appear to be easily mended (EBC 2023b). This event was broadcast on the government-affiliated national
broadcaster, the Ethiopian Broadcasting Station (EBC), and other similar stations, perhaps to minimise the ongoing public outcry and anger (EBC 2023b).

In his speech, Ahmedin seems to imply this broken relationship as an opportunity to be exploited for the benefit of the Muslim struggle. This might imply that the arguments made by the scholars above about religious othering are heavily used to draw a political line that embraces the perceived enemy of the other as a strategic ally.

The Protestant preacher, however, blames the EOTC for the bloodshed of hundreds of thousands in Ethiopia and calls her to a nation-saving repentance, which will bring it to the knowledge of Jesus. This call also has a religious connotation: a call to know Jesus in one’s life, not in one’s mouth. This kind of practice is particularly associated with Juergensmeyer et al.’s (2022) explanation of “existential threat” and “cleansing” in the effort to draw a politico-religious boundary to the intention of a particular homogeneous cultural group. This call is a call for the transformation of the religious ideal of the other so that it resembles the self; this is a call for its elimination.

The idea that the EOTC must undertake a process of reform that will change both its tradition and its religious ideal so that it fits comfortably with other versions of Christianity, Protestantism, and Catholicism is not a new call. This is the reason why hundreds of missionaries went to Ethiopia (Getachew 1998; Rubensson 1998; Seblewengel 2019). In recent years, the coming of Abiy Ahmed as a strong religious and political figure has been seen as a great opportunity to engage the EOTC in a religious transformation arrangement, using him as an agent of this age-old project. Esler (2019) provides a “road map” for bringing the three Churches into an ecumenical agreement by first creating a conducive atmosphere in which the three develop a “common expression of identity, perhaps involving the establishment of an umbrella organisation to address a particular issue” (p. 251). He adds that the three can begin ecumenical discussions under the leadership of the Catholic Church, which, he argues, has little influence over the other Churches in Ethiopia, has theological proximity to the EOTC, and shares a Western outlook with Protestantism.

Esler’s claim of theological proximity between the EOTC and Catholicism is not true, as the two groups differ fundamentally in the debates that the two Churches have been engaged in since the creed of Chalcedon in 451. Recent findings from the field also show that the feelings of hatred, suspicion, and distance that were previously developed through the encounter of Ethiopians with the Jesuit and Protestant missionaries (Tibebe 2009; Seblewengel 2019) are still being perpetuated at the level of ordinary society. Some findings show that ordinary Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo believers still maintain negative resentment towards Western forms of Christianity (Catholicism and Protestantism) by insisting on protection from missionary activities that are considered “foreign, unfamiliar and heretical” (Chang 2022, pp. 193–94). Findings from Ethiopian respondents’ interpretations of COVID 19 also show that EOTC adherents believe that Ethiopia is a God-favoured, exceptional country that must keep its Orthodox identity intact (Østebø et al. 2021b). As such, distinctiveness from other forms of Christianity is a feature of the EOTC (Østebø 2020). The EOTC leader seems to respond to this old call to transformation by resisting it as much as possible.

8. Conclusions

Through a critical discourse analysis of widely circulated and debated video speeches of three selected religious authorities in the Ethiopian public sphere—from the EOTC, Protestantism, and Islam—this paper examines how the semiotic representation of religious authority is supported by the possibilities offered by social media technologies to reach audiences across both geographical and religious boundaries. This paper also shows that the politicisation of religion and the attempt to construct a homogeneous religious boundary, mainly by some supportive Protestant groups and some calculative Muslims who for different reasons seem to be joining hands with a repressive government in the “new Ethiopia”, has created a marginalised religious other (i.e., the EOTC) that calls for a divine and just war to resist an existential threat. Using the exclusionary rhetoric of his-
torical hegemony and oppression by the EOTC as a religious other, the two groups deny supporting the EOTC’s resistance and demand for justice. While the Protestant preacher wants to maintain the status quo at all costs, the Muslim prefers to adopt strategies that help advance the Muslim cause without simultaneously supporting the other (EOTC). While in a defensive position, the EOTC, as the religious other, is also called upon by the Protestant preacher and other commentators to transform its religious ideals and undergo a nation-saving repentance in order to cleanse itself of its “historical errors” and “religious misde-

ments”. The EOTC preacher, on the other hand, describes the new Ethiopia as a soul-

less, dead body that cannot serve justice and calls on the faithful and the elite alike to take justice into their own hands against what he calls the enemy.

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