The troubled relationship of state and religion in Eritrea

*Daniel R Mekonnen**
Senior Legal Advisor, International Law and Policy Institute (ILPI), Norway

*Selam Kidane***
Director, Release Eritrea, United Kingdom

Summary

Eritrea is a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-religion country. The country does not have an official state religion. However, since the country's independence in 1991, the relationship between state and religion has been a troubled one. At least four religions are officially recognised by the state: Islam, of the Sunni rite; the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahdo Church, part of the worldwide Coptic Orthodox Church of the eastern rite; the Eritrean Catholic Church, part of the worldwide Roman Catholic movement; and the Eritrean Evangelical Church, part of the Lutheran World Federation. There are also a number of religious beliefs which are not formally recognised by the state. Members of these religious groups practise their belief clandestinely at the risk of insurmountable levels of persecution: If caught practising their religion in whatever form, they are treated harshly. The persecution of these groups takes place mainly in the form of coerced repudiation of one's religion. This is routinely accompanied by various forms of human rights violations, such as prolonged arbitrary detention and solitary confinement, including torture. In extreme cases it also entails extrajudicial execution. In this context, freedom of religion is severely restricted in Eritrea due to the excessive levels of state intervention in matters of personal belief or creed. As such, Eritrea has become a major example of religious persecution in the world. This has prompted, amongst other things, the description of Eritrea as one of the worst abusers in the world, along with North Korea. The relationship between the state and religion has been particularly problematic since the Eritrean government introduced a new policy in

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* LLB (Asmara), LLM (Stellenbosch), LLD (Free State); danielrezene@gmail.com
** BA (Westminster), MSc (London); selamkidane@hotmail.com

2002 ordering the 'closure' of all other religions except the four officially-recognised beliefs. This article critically analyses the troubled relationship of state and religion in Eritrea and, in so doing, it addresses the challenge from a human rights perspective.

1   Introduction: Religion and the pre-conflict, in-conflict and post-conflict state

This article discusses the troubled relationship of state and religion in Eritrea. Having obtained *de facto* independence in 1991 after a 30-year war of independence with Ethiopia, and *de jure* statehood in 1993, the country is the second youngest in Africa, the youngest being the newly-born Republic of South Sudan. In this contribution, we discuss the sad state of affairs in Eritrea through the lens of a historical overview of the relationship of state and religion, dating back to the ancient times.

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

Before 1991, Eritrea was a battlefield experiencing continuous hostilities that date back at least to the Italian colonial era, at which time the country was created as a modern polity. From 1991 to 1998 it saw a relatively peaceful transition to a much-anticipated democratic order which has as yet not materialised. From 1998 to 2000, it fought a devastating border conflict with Ethiopia. In the words of Cameron: 'From the ashes of this calamitous reversion to war, there arose a *dirigiste* state.'[2] The nation has already become 'a battalion state'.[3] Given its unimpeded high-speed course towards a

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1   BH Selassie *Wounded nation: How a once promising Eritrea was betrayed and its future compromised* (2011) 237.

2   G Cameron 'The Eritrean state in comparative perspective' in D O'Kane & TR Hepner (eds) *Biopolitics, militarism and development: Eritrea in the twenty-first century* (2009) 143.

3   C Bundegaard 'The battalion state: Securitisation and nation building in Eritrea' PSIS Occasional Paper 2, 2004, http://mercury.ethz.ch/serviceengine/Files/ISN/20600/ipublicationdocument_singledocument/3cb39359-b77b-4042-a6c6-f99d9e897f83/en/PSIS-OccPap-2_2004-Bundegaard.pdf (accessed 31 January 2014).

'militaristic garrison state',[4] the nation is just an inch away from becoming another failed state in the Horn of Africa. This region has already produced such a failed state in the last two decades, and it is likely that Eritrea will become another failed state.[5]

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

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

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4   TR Hepner & D O'Kane 'Conclusion: Biopolitics and dilemmas of development in Eritrea and elsewhere' in O'Kane & Hepner (n 2 above) 168.

5   D Mekonnen 'Drivers of fragility and the perils of state failure in Eritrea' paper presented at the International Conference on Human Security: Threats, Risks, Crisis 18-19 October 2012, Kadir Has University, Istanbul, Turkey.

6   D Bozzini 'Low-tech surveillance and the despotic state in Eritrea' (2011) 9 *Surveillance and Society* 104 110. Bozzini discusses the political crisis in Eritrea in the context of one of the most controversial government policies, which is mandatory and indefinite military conscription of virtually every adult member of society. For more on this, see G Kibreab 'Forced labour in Eritrea' (2009) 47 *Journal of Modern African Studies* 41-72; SM Weldehaimanot 'From prisoners to refugees: The right to leave and its ramifications in Eritrea' (2011) 17 *East African Journal of Peace and Human Rights* 230-261; N Hirt & AS Mohammad '"Dreams don't come true in Eritrea": Anomie and family disintegration due to the structural militarisation of society' (2013) 51 *Journal of Modern African Studies* 139-168.

Eritrea. Finally, we conclude our article by summarising the main findings of our research.

2   Historical overview of the relationship between state and religion

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

2.1   Christianity and the state: Global overview

As far as the church-state relationship is concerned, the most important point of departure is the era of the Greek and Roman empires, especially when Christianity was assigned the status of state church of the Roman empire, following a period of intense persecution.[9] Whilst this status enabled the church to gain certain privileges, it also led to a loss of the church's autonomy, as Constantine and his successors sought to impose their views on the church, increasing the prominence of the emperor in the life of the church. This was particularly the case in the eastern parts of the Roman empire, where the emperor tended to rule over both church and state, heading church councils and deciding on theological controversies. In the west, where the empire was declining, the Bishop of Rome was the single strongest figure, having usurped many prerogatives ascribed to both the church and the state.[10] The confusion continued in different forms well into the medieval period,

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7   See, generally, M Cosgel & TJ Miceli 'State and religion' (2009) 37 *Journal of Comparative Economics* 402-416; P Hamburger *Separation of church and state* (2004) 342.

8   J Fox 'World separation of religion and state into the 21st century' (2006) 39 *Comparative Political Studies* 537.

9   W Huber 'Church and state: Theological aspects' in *The encyclopaedia of Christianity* (1999) 502-508.

10   AD Strange 'Church and state in historical perspective' http://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=43 (accessed 8 January 2013). See also, generally, HJ Berman *Law and revolution: The formation of the Western legal tradition* (1983).

where both collusions and confrontations were prevalent, most notably the Crusades and the Investiture Controversies, respectively.[11]

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

The European religious establishments of the period remained intact, well into the eighteenth century, when the French Revolution disrupted some of them.[14] However, some, including the Church of England, to date remain intact, although various principles that took root subsequently – for example, religious tolerance – have put a check on the exclusivity of the establishment.[15] Even in the United States, colonists brought with them some of their religious establishments, many of which were retained well into the nineteenth century, when the Bill of Rights limited the blurring of the state-church relationship. Political scientist Jonathan Fox notes that of the 152 countries surveyed in his research, the United States is the only country in the world which has full separation (or a 'wall of separation') of religion and state in the strictest sense of the term.[16] Speaking about the state-religion relationship in the US context, one notes that the famous phrase 'wall of separation' is attributed to Thomas Jefferson, the third President of the United State. Believed to be part of a letter[17] Jefferson sent to the Danbury Baptists Association,

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11   M Hughes *Early modern Germany: 1477-1806* (1992) 5; JM Riddle *A history of the middle ages: 300-1500* (2008) 315.

12   E Simon *Great ages of man: The reformation: A history of the world's cultures* (1966) 120-121.

13   'History of Europe: Demographics' *Encyclopaedia Britannica* http://www. britan nica.com/EBchecked/topic/195896/history-of-Europe/58335/Demographics#ref= ref310375 (accessed 4 January 2013).

14   See, generally, F Tallett *Religion, society and politics in France since 1789* (2003).

15   See, generally, SE Ahlstrom *A religious history of the American people* (2004).

16   Fox (n 8 above) 537.

17   J Hutson '"A wall of separation": FBI helps restore Jefferson's obliterated draft' (1998) 57 *Library of Congress Information Bulletin* http://www.loc.gov/loc/lcib/ 9806/danbury.html (accessed 4 January 2013).

the phrase is very much associated with the religion clause of the American Constitution which, in its First Amendment, provides:[18]

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

Yet, it was only by the middle of the twentieth century that the religious clauses of the US Constitution were extensively interpreted by the US Supreme Court as the basis for a religiously pluralistic society, and even then the disentanglement was not straightforward due to controversies such as religious observance in public schools and the influence of religious groups on public policies.[19] By contrast, nations such as India and Japan often emphasise the separation of religion and politics even while religious leaders and groups play an active role in politics.[20]

From the above it can be concluded that, although our era of 'secularism' has not attained the full separation of the two institutions, the limited separation has resulted in religious bodies losing much of their power to assert exclusivity, as governments increase their focus on aspects of life traditionally considered within the domains of religion. Whilst the above description can serve as a useful framework for observing the relationship between church and the state, the following sub-sections will look at regional differences and the differences across religions in order to ensure a more comprehensive overview.

2.2 Islam and the state: Global overview

As the central religious text of Islam, the Qur'an is the main source of understanding of the relationship between the state and Islam. In addition to the Qur'an, the Hadith (jurisprudence emanating from the teachings of Prophet Muhammad) is regarded as a source on several issues of government and state in Islamic societies. Issues of governance are also resolved by making reference to the wisdom of the *ummah* (community).[21] Lapidus asserts that, in classical Islamic society, there was no distinction between the religious and political aspects of communal life, because:[22]

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18 First Amendment (Amendment I) to the United States Constitution of 1791.
19 Some of the most important American cases on the relationship between state and religion are *Reynolds v United States* 98 US (8 Otto) 145 (1878); and *McCollum v Board of Education* 333 US 203 (1948).
20 EO Reischauer & MB Jansen *The Japanese today: Change and continuity* (1988) 215; P Swami 'Protecting secularism and federal fair play' (1997) 14 *Frontline* http://www.frontlineonnet.com/fl1422/14220170.htm (accessed 4 January 2013); *SR Bommai v Union of India* [1994] 2 SCR 644 AIR 1994 SC 1918 (1994) 3 SCC1.
21 UK Centre for Legal Education 'Sources of Islamic law' http://www.ukcle.ac.uk/files/.../797.6c9011e8.SourcesofIslamicLaw.pdf (accessed 4 January 2013).
22 IM Lapidus 'The separation of state and religion in the development of early Islamic society' (1975) 6 *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 363. See also,

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

The *al-sahifah al-Medina* (the Constitution of Medina) speaks of all of the significant tribes and families of Medina as forming one *ummah* (community) in order to act collectively in enforcing social order and security and defending against enemies.[23] However, after the death of Prophet Muhammad, in 632 CE, the first challenge faced by the *ummah* was in fact the problem of government and specifically how to select a successor to the Prophet. The first disagreements that emerged within the Muslim community, which led to the eventual division of Islam, can thus be traced to this challenge.[24]

Given the limited nature of political guidance in the Qur'an, Muslims had to innovate and to improvise with regard to the form and nature of government. They drew on Qur'anic principles such as Shari'a and the heritage of the regions that they conquered. Islamic political theory took shape much later, subsequent to the historical development that it addressed, and indeed most major political concepts did not develop except during periods when the political institutions about which they were theorising were on the decline.[25] Up to the beginning of the nineteenth century, Muslims thought of politics in terms of the *ummah*, and of a caliphate or a sultanate. The term *dawlah* was indeed used by medieval Muslim authors and generally meant 'to turn, rotate, or alternate', but gradually the word came to mean 'dynasty' and then, very recently, state. The concept of Islamic state emerged as a reaction and response to the demise of the last caliphate in Turkey in 1924.[26]

Contemporary states that call themselves Islamic states are very different from each other and particularly so in their political forms and constitutional arrangements. Saudi Arabia, the earliest

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generally, IM Lapidus 'State and religion in Islamic societies' (1996) 151 *Past and Present* 3-27.

23   RB Serjeant 'Sunnah Jami'ah, pacts with the Yathrib Jews, and the Tahrim of Yathrib: Analysis and translation of the documents comprised in the so-called "Constitution of Medina"' (1978) 41 *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 1-42. See also, generally, Q Khan *Political concepts in the Quran* (1982).

24   R Firestone *Jihad: The origin of Holy War in Islam* (1999) 118; M Watt *Muhammad at Medina* (1956) 227-228.

25   As above. See also, generally, B Lewis *From Babel to Dragomans: Interpreting the Middle East* (2004).

26   M Haddad 'Arab religious nationalism in the colonial era: Rereading Rashid Rida's ideas on the caliphate' (1997) 117 *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 253. On the concept of *dawlah*, see F Rosenthal 'Dawla' in B Lewis *et al* (eds) *Encyclopedia of Islam* (1965).

contemporary Islamic state, is a monarchy. Iran, by contrast, is a republic with a constitution, a president, systems and institutions that are not particularly Islamic. In Sudan, the establishment of an Islamic state was through a 'socialist' military regime, and in Pakistan the establishment also came via a military *coup*. Whilst this makes a definition of an Islamic state difficult, the failure of secular systems in many secular states in Muslim majority states always makes the idea of an Islamic state an alternative that many continue to contemplate.[27]

2.3   Africa and the state-religion conundrum

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

3   State-religion relationship in Eritrea: Pre-independence era

The relationship between the state and religion in Eritrea is best understood in the context of the religious composition of Eritrean society, which is an example of religious pluralism. Eritrea's religious pluralism is attributed to at least two major factors: (a) the pluralistic nature of the Eritrean society, which constitutes at least nine officially-recognised ethnic groups;[29] and (b) the long and successive history of

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27   See, generally, AA An-Na'im *Islam and the secular state: Negotiating the future of Shari'a* (2008).

28   AM Ahanotu (ed) *Religion, state and society in contemporary Africa: Nigeria, Sudan, South Africa, Zaire and Mozambique* (1992).

29   The nine officially-recognised ethnic groups, proportional to size, are Tigrinya (ትግርኛ); Tigre (ትግረ); Afar (ዓፋር); Saho (ሳሆ); Hidarib (ሕዳርብ); Bilen (ቢለን); Nara (ናራ); Kunama (ኩናማ); and Rashaida (ራሻይዳ). However, there are at least two small communities which request official recognition as distinct ethnic groups and whose claim has never been officially addressed by the government. These are the two Muslim communities of Jeberti (ጀበርቲ) and Tekurir (ተኹሪር). The Jeberti speak Tigrinya and the government considers them as part of the Tigrinya ethnic group. The Tekurir, who are believed to be recently-settled descendants of the Hausa tribe in Nigeria, speak Arabic with an accent. On the question of Jeberti and

colonialism and trans-continental migration which dates back to the early history of the two most prominent religions in the region: Christianity and Islam. But Eritrea is not a land of only Christians and Muslims. Often forgotten in mainstream discourse are adherents of indigenous belief systems, which include the veneration of ancestral saints and other supernatural forces or agencies. Within the broader category of Christianity, there are many sub-classifications which include Orthodox Christianity, Catholicism, Jehovah's Witnesses, Evangelicalism, Pentecostalism and other Protestant denominations. Under the category of Islam, the most dominant segment is Islam of the Sunni rite. Wahhabism, which is regarded as a conservative branch of Sunni Islam, is also practised in Eritrea. Another religion practised in Eritrea is the Bahá'í Faith. Some reports indicate that Judaism is also practised in Eritrea, albeit in a very small or insignificant proportion compared to other religions.

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

3.1 Christianity and the state in Eritrea

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

The Eritrean Orthodox Church is the oldest embodiment of Christianity in Eritrea. This version of Christianity is part of what anthropologist Jon Abbink describes in the Ethiopian context as an 'indigenous form' of Christianity,[31] although the validity of Abbink's terminology remains somehow questionable. Antiquity is a distinctive feature of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, which was very strongly influenced by the other oldest African Orthodox Church, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Citing other sources, historian Uoldelul Chelati Dirar traces the introduction of Orthodox Christianly into

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Tekurir, see, generally, SM Weldehaimanot 'Eritrea: Constitutional, legislative and administrative provisions concerning indigenous peoples' in International Labour Organisation and African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights *The constitutional and legislative protection of the rights of indigenous peoples: Country reports* Pretoria, 2009 3-4.

30   The late Eritrean scholar, Alexander Naty (himself from the Kunamaland), writes that '[t]he Kunama adhere to Christianity and to the traditional belief system but also include some Moslems'. A Nati 'Environment, society and the state in Western Eritrea' (2002) 72 *Africa* 573.

31   J Abbink 'An historical-anthropological approach to Islam in Ethiopia: Issues of identity and politics' (1998) 11 *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 110.

Eritrea to 320 CE, a time which is known as the early apostolic era. Dirar adds:[32]

> The local Christian tradition attributes this to the missionary efforts of a group of nine monks who came from different areas of the Oriental Christian world at the end of the fifth century.

From that time, throughout the medieval and post-medieval period up to the mid-eighteenth century, Orthodox Christianity not only enjoyed 'a long season of fervid proselytism' but also 'provided spiritual guidance' and 'a framework for the maintenance and reproduction of the existing social order'.[33]

Throughout history, Orthodox Christianity was predominantly practised in the highlands of Eritrea which, for all intents and purposes, were part of the ancient civilisation of the Aksum and later Abyssinia. As a result, the Orthodox Church always maintained a very close relationship with the ruling class, particularly with the kings and emperors of Abyssinia. This long history of a strong relationship between the Orthodox Church and state was further strengthened in the mid-1800s as can be gleaned from the following observation of historian Tricia Redeker Hepner:[34]

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

What followed was an elevated rank of the Orthodox Church, compared to other religions. During this time, the status of the Orthodox Church was equivalent to a state religion, particularly in the highlands of Abyssinia (which also included parts of Eritrea), where this particular religion was practised predominantly. With reference to the ancient Abyssinian state, which also includes parts of Eritrea, Abbink says that Christianity has never been officially prescribed as a state religion.[35] However, the relationship between the Orthodox Church and the ruling class (the monarchs) was very close. From Abbink's own observation, an emperor of the old Abyssinian state had to be always Christian and he was regarded the 'protector' of the church, while priests have officiated in the crowning ceremony of the emperors. In fact, since the period of the Aksumite Kindgom, the Abyssinian 'state has been defined partly through its association with

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32   UC Dirar 'Church-state relations in colonial Eritrea: Missionaries and the development of colonial strategies (1869-1911)' (2003) 8 *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 392.

33   As above,

34   TR Hepner 'An historical-anthropological approach to Islam in Ethiopia' (2003) 10 *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 271; see also Dirar (n 32 above) 393.

35   Abbink (n 31 above) 115.

Christianity'[36] and the ideological framework of the state was framed according to the theological construction of the Orthodox Church. Such has been the practice until the downfall of the last Ethiopian emperor, Haile Sellassie I, in 1974. Ever since the role and function of the Orthodox Church have dwindled considerably. But in both countries, Eritrea and Ethiopia, the church still remains the biggest Christian denomination.

A very important aspect of Christianity in Eritrea is that of the history of Catholicism and Protestantism. While the history of the Catholic Church in the region is traced to the early 1500s, the Protestant church landed in Eritrea only in 1837, a time which also marked the arrival of the Jesuit missionaries, later followed by Lazarists. According to Hepner, the arrival of the Catholic Church in Eritrea can be described as an enabling step for Italian colonial rule.[37] Indeed, as the official religion of Italian colonisers, Catholicism was soon to assume a very instrumental role in solidifying Italian colonialism in Eritrea. Eritrea was officially declared an Italian colony only in 1890, at least half a century after the arrival of Catholic missionaries. However, the arrival of the Catholic missionaries has played a crucial role in accomplishing a successful Italian settlement policy. This was evident, according to Dirar, from the level of understanding that was reached, as in so many other missionary scenarios, between the Italian state and the Catholic Church, via its Congregation of Propaganda Fide, the main missionary body of the church. This agreement is believed to have finally led to the substitution of the French Lazarist fathers, the first Catholic missionaries in Eritrea sent by the Vatican, by the Italian Capuchin fathers in 1894.[38] Dirar further explains the scenario as follows:[39]

> It also led to the reorganization of the mission which, in keeping with colonial boundaries, was transformed into the Apostolic Prefecture of Eritrea and was thus separated from the previous Mission of Abyssinia. This process was finalized with the expulsion, in 1895, of all French Lazarist Fathers from the territory of the colony. After the Italianization of the mission, the *Associazione nazionale* played a crucial role in trying to make the settlement policy successful. It became directly involved in the selection of candidates from the Italian countryside and, in some cases, even covered part of their initial expenses.

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36   As above.
37   Citing T Killion, Hepner writes: 'Catholic missionaries had been present in Ethiopia since the 1500s but attracted more resistance than converts. In 1632, they were expelled by Emperor Fasilidas for their role in the civil strife between Catholic converts and local Orthodox adherents.' TR Hepner 'Religion, nationalism, and transnational civil society in the Eritrean diaspora' (2003) 10 *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 271. See also T Killion *Historical dictionary of Eritrea* (1998) 132.
38   Dirar (n 32 above) 398-399.
39   Dirar (n 32 above) 399.

Of course, in 1890, by declaring Eritrea to be a 'colony', Italy was trying to use Eritrea 'as a gateway to penetrate into Abyssinia',[40] a dream which never materialised due to the defeat of the Italians in the famous African resistance against European colonialism, the Battle of Adwa of 1896.[41] However, the Italian influence on Eritrea remained intact for the next the next 50 years until 1941, when Italy was defeated at the beginning of World War II and by which reason it was driven out from the country by the British. A very important point in this debate is that, during the Italian colonial era, the Eritrean Orthodox Church also fell out of favour with the Italian colonial state machinery, mostly because of the fact that the Italians were chiefly Catholic.

On the other hand, during the pre- and post-Italian era, the Eritrean Catholic Church never enjoyed the kind of close contact its Orthodox counterpart enjoyed with old state structures in Eritrea, except for its brief empowerment by the Italian colonial state. Nonetheless, throughout the Italian colonial era and after it, the Eritrean Catholic Church grew considerably in the number of its followers. One major factor in the growth of the Catholic Church was the conversion to Catholicism, which 'facilitated new social and political opportunities for Eritreans, including education, health services and job opportunities in the colonial administration'.[42] Even today, the Eritrean Catholic Church is credited for its social services, which include the establishment of orphanages, clinics and schools throughout the country. Perhaps two of the most important contributions of the Catholic Church to date, in addition to its primary mission of spiritual guidance, have been the establishment of the first and only university in the country, the University of Asmara, as well as the country's first press service and newspaper.[43]

There is a third important segment of Eritrean Christianity. The history of this version of Christianity dates back to the introduction of Evangelism in 1863 by the Swedish Evangelical Mission (SEM).[44] According to Hepner, this segment of Eritrean Christianity vied 'with Catholics for converts among the Orthodox, and to a lesser extent, Muslims'. Hepner further notes that the movement 'was expelled by Italian colonial authorities in 1935 but returned again in 1941 to create a successful Protestant movement'.[45] It gained popularity in the period starting from the last decade before Eritrea's independence up to the mid-1990s. Its expansion was further consolidated in the aftermath of the 1998-2000 border conflict with Ethiopia.[46] This

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40   Dirar (n 32 above) 398.
41   R Pankhurst *The Ethiopians: A history* (2001) 190.
42   Dirar (n 32 above) 406.
43   Hepner (n 37 above) 272 284.
44   Hepner (n 37 above) 272.
45   Hepner (n 37 above) 272 289.
46   A Kifleyesus 'Cosmologies in collision: Pentecostal conversion and Christian cults in Asmara' (2006) 49 *African Studies Review* 76-79.

version of Christianity, which traces its origins to the SEM, never garnered official support to reach the level of official state religion. Rather, as will be seen later, followers of this 'new' religious movement have increasingly suffered state persecution in proportions which are exceedingly unacceptable by the standards of civilised states.

3.2 Islam and the state in Eritrea

Islam arrived in Eritrea at the same time that its founder, Prophet Mohammed, begun preaching the religion. The following long quotation from Dirar provides a very clear picture of the arrival of Islam in Eritrea:[47]

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

Resonating with the above observation, Abbink states that[48]

> the escapees were advised by [Prophet] Muhammad himself to seek refuge across the sea, in the empire of Aksum, where a '... righteous king would give them protection.'

He further discusses Islam as a religion which, from the very beginning, has been a trans-continental religion in that it arrived in the African Red Sea Coast from the Arabian heartland where it emerged. He goes on to note that 'the first converts to the new religion – outside the close circle of the Prophet Muhammad – are assumed to have been Ethiopians'.[49] However, since there was no place called 'Ethiopia' at that time, Abbink was definitely referring to the old ancient Abyssinian empire, known as the Kingdom of Aksum, which consisted mainly of the northern part of Ethiopia and some parts of present-day Eritrea. Since Islam entered the continent via the Red Sea, through what is today's Eritrea, Eritrea was plausibly the first African country to welcome the religion in its incipient years. The time when the first escapees from Mecca arrived in Aksum is known as the first *Hijra* or migration and it is believed to have taken in the year 615 CE.[50]

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47   Dirar (n 32 above) 393. Dirar cites the following sources in support of his narration: SH Selasse *Ancient and medieval Ethiopian history* (1972); JS Trimingham *Islam in Ethiopia* (1952).
48   Abbink (n 31 above) 111.
49   As above.
50   As above.

Thus, Islam, like Christianity, also has a very long history in Eritrea. In spite of this long history, it never attained the level of support that Christianity enjoyed from state structures, particularly in the era of Abyssinian monarchs. While this observation may hold true for the highlands of Eritrea, which remain predominantly Christian, in the lowlands Islam has always been a dominant religion, regulating every aspect of life, even in the absence of a centralised state or other political institutions. There is, however, one important stage in the spread of Islam in Eritrea and Ethiopia that is vital for our understanding of some aspects of the relationship between Islam and Christianity. This is the campaign launched by Ahmed Ibrahim known as Gragn (left-handed) in the sixteenth century, a campaign which has been characterised as a full scale *jihad* and was accompanied by widespread havoc and destruction of a great number of centres of Abyssinian Orthodox civilisation. With a stated aim of rooting out Christianity, this campaign had far-reaching ramifications which shaped Christian perceptions of Islam in the region.[51]

In spite of rare instances of religious conflict, the status of the Abyssinian Orthodox Church has always been elevated, and its cultural and political dominance has created a sense of subjugation on the part of Islamic communities, particularly in those areas of Eritrea where the Orthodox Church has a strong presence today. The impact of this sentiment was particularly visible during the era of the liberation struggle and the immediately preceding years. At this time, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church was regarded as a helper in the legitimisation of Ethiopian rule in Eritrea. The church's role in the political developments of the time was controversial. For example, when the Ethiopian propaganda machinery denounced the Eritrean liberation struggle in the early years of its inception as an 'Islamic separatist' movement, the denunciation strengthened the feeling on the part of Eritrean Muslims that the Orthodox Church was indeed an instrument of the state.[52] Given the outright support of the Orthodox Church for the unionist movement, this sentiment was justified.

A common feature of the two religions is their long history in Eritrea, dating back to antiquity. In light of this history, both religions have become constitutive elements of Eritrean local identity, functioning 'both as a basic instrument of social cohesion and as a source of legitimacy for political authority'.[53] Another striking element of the relationship between Christianity and Islam is that, while Islam is a religion practised by all Eritrean ethnic groups, such is not the case with Christianity. For example, the Afar and Rashaida ethnic groups

51   Abbink (n 31 above) 114; Dirar (n 32 above) 393 (citing G Talhami *Suakim and Massawa under Egyptian rule* (1979)).
52   Hepner (n 34 above) 272.
53   Dirar (n 32 above) 393.

are entirely Muslim societies, with no traces of Christianity within their communities.[54]

4   State-religion relationship in Eritrea: Post-independence era

In the post-independence era there has never been an officially-prescribed state religion in Eritrea. By law, state and religion are separate in Eritrea, as is clearly stipulated in Proclamation 73/1995, known as the Proclamation to Provide for the Activities of Religions and Religious Institutions (Religious Proclamation), promulgated on 15 July 1995. This is the most relevant law in Eritrea as far religious matters are concerned.

The Religious Proclamation starts by recognising the right to freedom of belief and conscience, which the Preamble describes as one of the main justifications for the promulgation of the law.[55] The right to freedom of belief and conscience is also one of the fundamental rights recognised by the 1997 Constitution of Eritrea (article 19). However, the Eritrean Constitution remains 'unimplemented' since its ratification in 1997, and this has made the country the only one in the world without a working constitution.

In the second sentence of the Preamble, which is another underlying principle of the Religious Proclamation, the law provides that the state and religion should exist separately.[56] This principle is repeated in article 1(1) of the Religious Proclamation which reads as follows:[57]

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

On paper, the principle of separation of the state and religion appears very interesting, but in practice this principle has become a victim of the government's pervasive disregard of the rule of law, as is the case in many other issues of governance and human rights. While the

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

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

56   The original Tigrinya wording reads as follows: 'መንግስቲ ከም ፖለቲካዊ ስርዓት ሃይማኖት ከኣ ከም መንፈሳዊ ስርዓት ክልቲኦም ዝተፈላለዩ ምኻኖም ብምርዳእ … እዚ ዝስዕብ ኣዋጅ ተኣዊጁ ኣሎ::'

57   The original Tigrinya wording reads as follows: 'ኣብ ኤርትራ መንግስቲ ከም ፖለቲካዊ ስርዓት: ሃይማኖትን ሃይማኖታዊ ትካላትን ከኣ ከም መንፈሳዊ ትካላት: ነንበይኖም ስለዝኾኑ: መንግስቲ ኣብ ሃይማኖታዊ ጉዳያት: ሃይማኖትን ሃይማኖታዊ ትካላትን ድማ ኣብ ፖለቲካዊ ጉዳያት ኣይኣትዉን::'

preclusion of religious institutions from political matters can be seen by some as controversial, it would have been more than enough if the government respected its own self-restraint provisions, which proscribed it from interfering in religious affairs. Conversely, the Eritrean government now interferes in religious affairs beyond what can be described as a desirable instance of intervention, thereby making Eritrea one of the worst places in the world in terms of religious freedom. In the US Department of State's annual report on religious freedom and other periodic reports on this topic, Eritrea is normally mentioned at the top of the list of violators of religious rights.[58] In many other international surveys measuring the protection of fundamental rights, Eritrea competes for last place with such notorious countries as North Korea and Turkmenistan.[59]

Excessive government interference has affected all Eritrea's religions. Nonetheless, there is a very clear pattern of intensification of unwarranted interference, and this is related to the momentous growth of Pentecostalism in the aftermath of the 1998-2000 border war with Ethiopia. As noted by Mekonnen and Van Reisen, this period has seen a revival of Pentecostalism in Eritrea that was intolerable to the government for a number of reasons.[60]

Hepner traces the anti-religion tendency of the government through historical records to the 1977 National Democratic Programme of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front, who formed the current Eritrean government. Article 7D of the National Democratic Programme explicitly committed the Front to fight 'all the imperialist-created new counter-revolutionary faiths, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostal, Baha'i, etc'. While Hepner notes that the government remedied its archaic position on religion in its 1987 congress, the recent repression of religious freedom signals a relapse to the old position.[61] This time, it has manifested itself in the worst form of religious persecution the world has seen in recent history. This takes us to the next section, which discusses some prominent case studies of religious persecution that we believe are the outcome of excessive state interference in religious affairs.

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58 US Department of State *International Religious Freedom Report* 2011 on Eritrea, http://www.cfr.org/human-rights/international-religious-freedom-report-2011/p2 5853 (accessed 22 March 2012).

59 D Connell 'Notes from a speech given at a CIDRiE Symposium in London on 12 May 2012' http://www.cdrie.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=arti cle&id=274:eritrea-2012&catid=34:english-articles&Itemid=53 (accessed 31 January 2014).

60 See, generally, DR Mekonnen & M van Reisen 'Religious persecution in Eritrea and the role of the European Union in tackling the challenge' in N Reilly & SS Furlong (eds) *Religion, gender and the public sphere* (2013).

61 Hepner (n 34 above) 291.

5   Excessive state interference as a major cause of religious persecution[62]

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

In the post-independence era, the country saw a brief respite between 1991 and 1998 when fundamental rights and freedoms, such as freedom of religion and worship, were in part respected. This does not mean, however, that there were no instances of religious persecution during this time. The crisis of religious persecution reached disproportionate levels after 2002, when the government ordered the closure of all but the following religious groups: Islam, of the Sunni rite; the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahdo Church, part of the worldwide Coptic Orthodox Church of the eastern rite; the Eritrean Catholic Church, part of the worldwide Roman Catholic movement; and the Eritrean Evangelical Church, part of the Lutheran World Federation.[63] According to the 2002 order, several religious institutions and groups, including those which had been active for many years, were arbitrarily ordered to close. Many of these religious groups are now condemned to practise their religion clandestinely at the risk of severe penalty if caught. However, as a matter of historical categorisation, the Jehovah's Witnesses are the first victims of religious persecution in the post-independence era.

5.1   Jehovah's Witnesses: The first victims of religious persecution

The earliest case of religious persecution since 1991 is that of Jehovah's Witnesses. The incident dates back to 1993, when Jehovah's Witnesses refused to vote in the referendum for national independence and to participate in the National Military Service Programme (NMSP) on religious grounds. The 'punishment' for this was harsh. By an executive order issued by the State President on 25 October 1994, Jehovah's Witnesses were prohibited from

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62   The case studies discussed in this section rely heavily on Mekonnen & Van Reisen (n 60 above).
63   Amnesty International *Eritrea: Religious persecution* AI Index: AFR 64/013/2005 1.

employment in the public sector, refused permission to engage in any commercial enterprise, and deprived of the right to obtain relevant documentation such as national and identity papers. The executive order was not only morally abhorrent, but also legally repugnant. As far as the refusal to vote in the national referendum is concerned, there is no clearly-defined Eritrean law upon which the punishment can be based. However, the law which introduced the NMSP has set clearly-defined punitive provisions for those who refuse to comply with the requirements of the NMSP. The punishment is two years' imprisonment, a fine of Nakfa 3 000, or both,[64] without prejudice to graver penalties that may be imposed by the Transitional Penal Code of Eritrea. None of the punitive prescriptions in the executive order is based on law.

Amnesty International reports that several Jehovah's Witnesses have been subjected to arbitrary detention by executive decree. Some 250 families have fled the country and sought asylum elsewhere, 100 families have been dismissed from government employment, and at least 36 families have been evicted from their homes.[65] An important point in the case of the Jehovah's Witnesses is that they did not reject non-military alternatives to the requirements of the NMSP. According to Amnesty International, the NMSP does not recognise international standards and best practices on the right of conscientious objection to military service, especially when based on one's religious, moral or ethical conviction. The law also does not offer alternatives for those who refuse to do military training on the basis of their beliefs. This, by itself, is a flagrant violation of international standards and best practices.

5.2   Persecution of Eritrean Muslims

Eritrean Muslims also suffered persecution in the early years of independence. Some instances are difficult to classify as examples of religious persecution, because they involve other persecutory factors, such as perceived allegiance of the victims to armed opposition groups operating from neighbouring countries. One example in this regard is an incident reported by Amnesty International as having taken place on 5 December 1994. Government forces arrested hundreds of young Muslim teachers who were reportedly extra-judicially executed in May 1997.[66] There is a stark similarity between the report of Amnesty International and what some writers call the 'Dirfo Massacre', an incident that allegedly took place in June 1997. As reported by the Awate team, the incident involved the extra-judicial execution of some 150 Eritrean Muslims by Eritrean security forces operating under orders given by the chief of National Security,

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64   Arts 20 & 37 of Proclamations 11/1991 and 82/1995, respectively.
65   Amnesty International (n 63 above) 7.
66   Amnesty International (n 63 above) 14-15.

Brigadier General Abraha Kassa, and the State President.[67] The Dirfo Massacre can be described as one of the most shocking mass killings in post-independence Eritrea.[68]

Another example of religious persecution against Eritrean Muslims took place in September 2004. The incident involved the arrest of a dozen Muslim students belonging to a new Islamic religious group, known as Wahhabism. Amnesty International recognises the believers as victims of 'incommunicado' detention because their whereabouts have remained unknown.[69] Compared to the persecution of Christian minority groups, the persecution of Wahhabis or other Islamic groups remains a hitherto under-researched area. Academic discourse on this particular topic is also quite scarce.

5.3 Persecution of the Pentecostal movement

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

A characteristic feature of the new Pentecostal movement is the repudiation of traditional hierarchies and sources of authority. Kifleyesus notes that, compared to traditional Christian establishments, the new Pentecostal movement has provided young Eritreans with spiritual and material networks extending beyond ethnic and class considerations.[71] The Pentecostal movement's lively, convivial, fraternal, spirit-filled and empowering worship and prayer sessions have also 'revitalised and to some extent revolutionised

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67   A Team 'The "executed": No smoking gun, but plenty of circumstantial evidence'
       http://www.awate.com/cgi-bin/artman/exec/view.cgi/11/1090   (accessed
       13 March 2003).
68   Mekonnen & Van Reisen (n 60 above) 110.
69   Amnesty International (n 66 above) 15.
70   Kifleyesus (n 46 above) 77-79.
71   Kifleyesus (n 46 above) 76.

Christianity' in Eritrea. In addition to bringing about radical cultural transformation, conversion to Pentecostalism makes 'born-again persons more industrious and more socially mobile than many of their [counterparts]'. Kifleyesus in particular notes that 'the Pentecostal movement in [Eritrea] is made up of young educated men and women, secondary school students and teachers, university students and professors, and health-care professionals', who constitute the most politically-conscious part of Eritrea's working and middle classes.[72]

Two aspects of the Pentecostal movement are apparently in contradiction to the established political culture of the Eritrean government. These are (1) the fact that conversion to Pentecostalism takes place in the context of a conscious break with traditional practices, and (2) the fact that the movement attracts a growing number of Eritrea's middle class. From the viewpoint of the political elite, a conscious break from the *status quo* is seen as a serious threat to its continued political hegemony. Although Kifleyesus did not put it this way, the tendency 'to break away from past practices' is interpreted by the Eritrean government as breeding dissent and spreading discontent within the larger Eritrean society and hence considered incompatible with the political ideology of the ruling elite. The fact that this tendency has enjoyed wider acceptance among Eritrea's middle class makes the threat, from the government's point of view, more imminent. However, Kifleyesus correctly notes that the growing attraction of Pentecostalism among Eritrea's middle class was resented by the traditional Eritrean Christian churches.[73]

What Kifleyesus misses is that the resentment is also deeply felt by the Eritrean government, by reason of which the government has adopted a very hostile policy towards Pentecostalism. True to its Marxist-Leninist background, the government's ambivalence to religion dates back to its liberation struggle era. The Marxist-Leninist tendency is derived, among other things, from the formal one-year training given to senior liberation struggle leaders by the Chinese Communist Party in the 1960s.[74] This Marxist-Leninist tendency is evident, for example, in the statement of an army commander in connection with punishment meted out against a member of a Pentecostal movement:[75]

> Like in North Korea, this type of religion should never be allowed to spread in our country because this is a religion of the CIA and accordingly no one should be allowed to read and preach the Bible.

The story underscores the fact that religious persecution is perpetrated as a premeditated government policy focusing on certain categories of people.

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72   Kifleyesus (n 46 above) 79-84.
73   Kifleyesus (n 46 above) 87.
74   Mekonnen & Van Reisen (n 60 above) 98.
75   EriWengel.com (n 63 above).

5.4 Intensity of violations

According to rights groups, there are currently thousands of Eritreans who are kept in detention without trial simply because they belong to religious groups which are not officially sanctioned by the government. For example, between 2003 and 2005, at least 26 pastors and priests, and over 1 750 church members, including children and 175 women, and some dozens of Muslims, were detained because of their religious beliefs. During this period of time, Amnesty International documented 45 separate incidents of religious persecution involving at least the closure of 36 churches. In August 2005, in an unprecedented violation in the history of the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahdo Church and in contravention of canonical laws, the government dismissed the highest spiritual leader of the church, Patriarch Abune Antonios. A new patriarch was arbitrarily appointed on 27 May 2007.[76]

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

6 Conclusion

Eritrea is a major part of the ancient civilisation of the Axumite Kingdom, during which time Christianity and Islam were introduced to the African continent from their birth place, namely the Arabian subcontinent. Historical records indicate that due to its geographic proximity to the Arabian subcontinent, Eritrea is actually the first entry

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76   Amnesty International (n 66 above) 1 10.

77   BBC News 'Eritrean Christians tell of torture' http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/701 5033.stm (accessed 27 September 2007).

78   *The Christian Post* 'Young woman killed in Eritrea for refusing to renounce Jesus Christ' http://www.christianpost.com/news/young-woman-killed-in-eritrea-for-ref using-to-renounce-jesus-christ-29233/ (accessed 8 September 2007).

79   Release Eritrea 'The testimony of Helen Berhane' http://cs.asmarino.com/ index.php?blogid=15&archive=2007-12 (accessed 8 December 2007); US Department of State *International Religious Freedom Report 2006 on Eritrea.*

point of Christianity and Islam to Africa. Since time immemorial, save rare instances of violent conflicts instigated by religion, Christianity and Islam have coexisted in Eritrea for many centuries, making the country an island of religious tolerance. Eritrea is also home to indigenous African beliefs which are practised by a small minority of the Eritrean people, such as the Kunama ethnic group.

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

Eritrea needs urgently to change direction politically. It is in dire need of a political transition, be it in the form of a revolution or negotiation, in order to facilitate the establishment of a democratic constitutional order at the earliest opportunity. Only then can the challenges of religious persecution, which are part of Eritrea's overall human rights crisis, be addressed in a way that ensures the protection of fundamental rights and freedoms for all.