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FROM HOLISTIC THEOLOGY TO IN-BETWEEN THEOLOGY:  
THE ETHIOPIAN EVANGELICAL CHURCH MEKANE YESUS

Even though the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus has a Lutheran background embedded in the Western context, I argue that the EECMY is both Western and an indigenous Ethiopian church. Fekadu Gurmessa, in *Evangelical Faith Movement in Ethiopia*, argues that the mission organizations and the missionaries who attempted to come to Ethiopia did not intend to evangelize Ethiopians. Their goal was to reform the Ethiopian Orthodox Church so that both the Ethiopian and the Western churches could work together to reach the unreached people in Ethiopia and other parts of Africa. The Western churches believed that the Eastern churches, including the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, compromised the pure gospel of Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup> In Ethiopia, Christianity is syncretized with African religion and Judaism, so the missionaries attempted to enter Ethiopia to renew the church through Western reformation and counter-reformation practices and belief systems. Gurmessa writes:

The missionaries were particularly concerned that the EOC was teaching the erroneous belief that human effort rather than faith in Christ was sufficient for salvation. Instead they sought to teach that fasting, veneration of Mary and the Saints, prostrating before religious images, and other rituals were inappropriate and insufficient practices to salvation.<sup>2</sup> From the 16th to 18th century many European Protestant and Catholic missionaries entered Ethiopia; however, they were not successful, because the Ethiopian emperors' interest towards the missionaries was to get material, not religious, support. Due to their inability to reform the EOC, the missionaries changed their mission strategy from renewing the EOC to evangelizing the Oromo people who were not Christian. What led to the

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<sup>1</sup> The Ethiopian Orthodox church has a non-Chalcedon understanding about the nature of Christ.

<sup>2</sup> Fekadu Gurmessa, *Evangelical Faith Movement in Ethiopia*, trans. and ed. Ezikiel Gebissa (Minneapolis, MN: Lutheran University Press), 77.

shift to the evangelization of the Oromo was the failure of revitalizing the Ethiopian Church.<sup>3</sup>

The missionaries hoped that the Ethiopian emperors who resisted being evangelized or reformed could use their help to evangelize the unevangelized people in Ethiopia's western and southern parts. However, the Ethiopian emperors refused to accept the missionaries' invitation to evangelize the Oromos.<sup>4</sup> Gurmessa quotes Emperor Yohannes I, who criticized the missionaries for their attempt to reform the Ethiopian church: "Go and convert first the Muslim Egyptians and the Turks instead of coming to Abyssinia where we are all Christians."<sup>5</sup> Though the missionaries were not able to penetrate the Ethiopian borders and emperors, they were able to stay in Eritrea, which was under the colony of the Ottoman Empire and, later, the Italians. Gurmessa writes, "Despite the setback to the primary objective of evangelizing the Oromo, the SEM [Swedish Evangelical Mission] missionaries were able to make considerable ports in converting the people around their mission station at Massawa."<sup>6</sup>

After trying for a long time, the Swedish Evangelical Mission was able to send missionaries from the station in Massawa, Eritrea. The missionaries who were sent from the SEM Eritrean station were Eritreans and freed Oromo slaves who became converted to Evangelical Christianity. The converted Eritreans and Oromos led the mission initiative to evangelize the Oromo people, which opened the door for the missionaries to enter the western and southern parts of Ethiopia. At the same time, Emperor Haile Selassie was known for permitting missionaries to work in Ethiopia. He wanted to support the missionaries' work due to their focus on medical care and literacy. The missionaries also believed that literacy work would lead the people to the truth of Jesus Christ, so they worked according to the emperor's policy. Before the Italian occupation of Ethiopia, Evangelical Christianity was growing, and there were more than ten mission societies in Ethiopia. When Italians occupied Ethiopia, the missionaries left Ethiopia. However, the mission and evangelical work that the missionaries started was not in vain. Gurmessa writes, "During the five years of Italian occupation, the method of chain reaction evangelism matured, led by the indigenous evangelists who took over the work of the evangelical enterprise."<sup>7</sup> After the Italians left Ethiopia, the evangelicals in Ethiopia believed that coming together and creating a

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<sup>3</sup> Gurmessa, *Evangelical Faith Movement*, 99.

<sup>4</sup> Gurmessa, *Evangelical Faith Movement*, 100-1

<sup>5</sup> Gurmessa, *Evangelical Faith Movement*, 131.

<sup>6</sup> Gurmessa, *Evangelical Faith Movement*, 131.

<sup>7</sup> Gurmessa, *Evangelical Faith Movement*, 185.

council was necessary, so they met in 1944 to build a unified church in Ethiopia. After the emperor came back from exile, the missionaries also returned to Ethiopia. So, Gurmessa argues that the return of the former missionaries impacted the Ethiopian Evangelical Churches Council (EECC) which was working toward creating a unified evangelical church in Ethiopia.<sup>8</sup>

Because the missionaries' original target was to reform the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, they failed to realize that the converted Ethiopian evangelicals aimed to create their own Ethiopian evangelical church. So, according to Gurmessa, indigenous evangelical Christians forced the missionaries to change their view towards the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. After the post-war era, most mission societies changed their perspective toward the EOC. Despite the indigenous evangelicals' interest in establishing a United Ethiopian Evangelical Church, the mission societies organized evangelical Christians based on their doctrinal teachings.

Gurmessa writes:

The story of the CEEC is a vivid reminder that the original vision of the local evangelical leaders was the formation of a national evangelical church that included all Ethiopian evangelical Christians regardless of the denominational differences of the expatriate missionaries among them.<sup>9</sup>

On the other hand, the Lutheran World Federation focused on empowering Lutheran churches and believers worldwide. LWF invited the Evangelical Mekane Yesus congregation in Addis Ababa to attend the African LWF, which prepared its first all African conference in 1955 in Marangu, Tanganykia (Tanzania). The Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus in Addis Ababa was not viewed to be made up of confessional believers under an organized Lutheran church, but they were considered to be Lutheran due to their connection with SEM and GHLM missions.<sup>10</sup> After the African LWF meeting, the Addis Ababa Mekane Yesus congregational leaders were empowered to establish a national Lutheran church in Ethiopia. Gurmessa writes, "Thus, the All-Africa Lutheran Conference spurred Ethiopian evangelicals to pursue the goal of establishing a national evangelical church based on Lutheran confession."

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<sup>8</sup> Gurmessa, *Evangelical Faith Movement*, 205-215.

<sup>9</sup> Gurmessa, *Evangelical Faith Movement*, 231.

<sup>10</sup> Gurmessa, *Evangelical Faith Movement*, 234.

The Lutheran, Baptist, and Presbyterian congregations were willing to come together and create one evangelical church in Ethiopia; however, they could not come to a consensus on one confession of faith. For this reason, the Ethiopian evangelicals who had a connection with Lutheran missionaries and LWF decided to establish a church based on the Lutheran confession.<sup>11</sup> The second general assembly of the EECMY met in Addis Ababa on January 21, 1959, ratified and approved the bylaws and constitution of the EECMY, and declared the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus to be a one and unified Lutheran church in Ethiopia. The EECMY was established through the mission organizations and converted indigenous believers, and that gave the church a complex background. Conversion and authentic experience to one's ethnic, linguistic, and cultural experience conceived the EECMY's holistic theology and reflection. I would argue that the foundation of the EECMY is in-betweenness that demonstrates its hybrid existence with both Western and African roots. The in-between approach of the EECMY could be a model to demonstrate how one organization, nation, church, or community may be able to flourish with intercultural competence beyond either/or identities. The church may be able to use its complex and in-between identity to resist identity politics in the age of neoliberalism.

### **The EECMY's Holistic Theology**

In African countries, churches and theologians constructed contextual theologies of God, human beings, and nature to resist Western colonial powers and normative theological definitions of the West. In the Ethiopian context, the situation is different since Western colonial powers have never colonized Ethiopia geographically. However, the Ethiopians' internal and external relationship and diverse ethnic groups struggling and groaning under the weight of the domestic political and religious oppression prompted the churches and theologians to construct a theological praxis that invites Ethiopians to resist oppressive powers. One of the leading theologians who has invited Ethiopians to a new theological conversation is Gudina Tumsa.<sup>12</sup> The EECMY's cultural and theological anthropology challenged the Western pietistic missionaries' approach that exclusively engaged with the spiritual needs of individuals. Tumsa, in his presentations, writings, theological seminars, and workshops, emphasized the importance of contextual

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<sup>11</sup>Gurmessa, *Evangelical Faith Movement*, 238.

<sup>12</sup> Gudina Tumsa, the late Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus General Secretary, was kidnapped by the Ethiopian Socialist Government, *Derge*, and killed on July 28, 1979. Øyvind M. Eide, *Revolution & Religion in Ethiopia 1974-85* (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press, 2000).

theological reflections to demonstrate human dignity in the Ethiopian context and beyond.

Tumsa's personal, academic, and cultural context impacted his holistic theological reflection. Tumsa was born and raised in the Oromo ethnic group, which claims to have been oppressed by the Ethiopian feudal emperors. Some radical Oromo politicians emphasize the exclusive Oromo identity that does not nurture the Oromo's hybrid existence in the history of Ethiopia. There were times that the Oromos were dominant in Ethiopian political spaces. However, radical politicians use the victim approach without articulating the broader image of the Oromo ethnic group in the pre modern and modern history of Ethiopia.<sup>13</sup> Tumsa, as a theologian, focused on social justice and the hermeneutical interpretations of Reinhold Niebuhr. He tried to respond to the communities' struggle through theological reflection and action. As a theologian who studied abroad, his work was affected by the Black American movement and liberation theology and the broader liberation theology and postcolonial discourses.<sup>14</sup> Tumsa believed that the primary needs of the Ethiopian society include the spiritual, material, and political. So, a theological approach from the African holistic perspective of life and belonging enabled the church to propose a new way of doing theology.

In the missionaries' pietistic tradition, social justice ministries were seen as a "means to an end."<sup>15</sup> Tumsa called the pietistic approach and tradition, which focused on spiritual salvation and gave less emphasis to the social and political development of human beings, the old imbalance. On the other hand, the new imbalance, the new missional approach of the missionaries, emphasized liberating human beings from dehumanizing activities such as racism. In this new imbalance, social and material development became a priority, and spirituality became less critical. The new imbalance was created by guilt that the mission organizations were not able to fulfill their Christian responsibilities due to their colonial practices or emphasis on the African nations. In the old imbalance, human beings' salvation was interpreted in a way that did not integrate the wholeness of human beings. The Western churches'

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<sup>13</sup> Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia 1855-1991*, 2nd ed. (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2001), 10-13.

<sup>14</sup> Øyvind M. Eide, "Integral Human Development: Rev. Gudina Tumsa's Contribution to the Understanding of a National Church, Partnership, and Interdependence in a Global Church, as Viewed and Developed in the EECMY" in *The Life and Ministry of Gudina Tumsa: Lectures and Discussions Missiological Seminar 2001*, 2nd ed. The Gudina Tumsa Foundation (Hamburg, Germany: WDL Publishers), 40-44.

<sup>15</sup> EECMY Officers, "On the Interrelation of Proclamation of the Gospel and Human Development (EECMY Letter to the Lutheran World Federation, May 1972)" in *Witness and Discipleship Leadership of the Church in Multi-Ethnic Ethiopia in a Time of Revolution* (Addis Ababa: Gudina Tumsa Foundation, 2003), 88.

participation in slavery and colonization initiated their need to construct a social justice-focused mission approach. Tumsa and the EECMY church leaders claim that both the old imbalance and the new imbalances are not appropriate and contextual for the Ethiopian context.<sup>16</sup>

Tumsa's holistic theology questions the neo-paternalistic approach of mission organizations' aid criteria that hinders the EECMY's self-reliance.<sup>17</sup> The EECMY's seventh general assembly passed a resolution to ask LWF to evaluate the mission organizations' aid criteria. In the resolution, Tumsa and the EECMY leaders question the anthropological and theological definitions of mission agencies. The EECMY believes that the mission organizations shaped their aid categories through the socio-economic classification that divides people as rich and poor, developed and underdeveloped in terms of material resources and technology. So, the EECMY calls for applying a holistic understanding that accepts human beings as material and spiritual, persons who have agency and subjectivity to frame their development. The central claim of holistic theology is that human beings are not objects of modern progressive thinking because they are subjective agents.<sup>18</sup> The officers write: "However, when we in effect are told, by virtue of criteria unilaterally decided by the donor Agencies, what we need and what we do not need, what is good for us and what is not good, then we feel uncomfortable and become concerned about our future."<sup>19</sup>

The EECMY document advocated for the recognition of human agency so that the EECMY could get support from the mission organizations to address the needs of human beings in their totality.<sup>20</sup>

Moreover, holistic theology also resisted the Ethiopian feudal emperors' governmentality, since religion and politics were integrated to colonize bodies of Ethiopians. Tumsa wanted a church and a theological approach that could liberate Ethiopians spiritually, materially, and politically. Tumsa believed that the church needs to have its independent voice without the imposition of the government. In the imperial government, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church was working with

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<sup>16</sup> EECMY Officers, Presented by Gudina Tumsa, "Serving the Whole Man; A Responsible Church Ministry & a Flexible International Aid Relationship (Lutheran World Federation Consultation, Nairobi, October 1974)" in *Witness and Discipleship Leadership of the Church in Multi-Ethnic Ethiopia in a Time of Revolution* (Addis Ababa: Gudina Tumsa Foundation, 2003), 121.

<sup>17</sup> EECMY Officers, Presented by Gudina Tumsa, "Serving the Whole Man," 120-121.

<sup>18</sup> EECMY Officers, "On the Interrelation of Proclamation of the GOspel and Human Development," 81-94.

<sup>19</sup> EECMY Officers, "On the Interrelation of Proclamation of the GOspel and Human Development," 85.

<sup>20</sup> EECMY Officers, "On the Interrelation of Proclamation of the GOspel and Human Development," 88-93.

the emperor, and that suppressed the church's independent voice. However, the EECMY and Tumsa focused on creating a church that speaks about politics and religion based on their own beliefs and teachings independently for the holistic development of God's people. So, when the socialist government and political ideology came to Ethiopia, the EECMY and Tumsa were supportive of the socialist political approach to the poor and the oppressed. According to Gerd Decke, who worked in the LWF and the EECMY from 1971-77, Tumsa's political perspective was incredibly progressive. One of the known workshops that Tumsa and the EECMY prepared with LWF was "Christianity and Socialism." According to Decke, the workshop participants were profoundly motivated and touched by socialist Ethiopia. The socialist approach toward the poor and the oppressed, land for peasants, and education for all encouraged them to see a different Ethiopia than an oppressive and feudal one. Decke writes: "The aim of these seminars was not academic study, but [was] meant to enable the Church leadership and eventually the membership to equip themselves for responsible participation in the Ethiopian revolution."<sup>21</sup>

The theological conversations that were raised in the conferences included: how to use biblical interpretation to resist hierarchical and paternalistic political perspectives and leadership in the Ethiopian context and how a Christian can participate in the class struggle while it is required to love those who do not love us.<sup>22</sup> Tumsa was able to overcome the confusion that many African leaders and liberation theologians felt as they struggled to apply socialism as a tool to understand the social and political context of their countries and churches. Decke writes, "Gudina Tumsa saw the church not only acting for lack of another institution but saw it a prophetic role, pointing out structures of injustice and oppression, as well as acting as an active agent of social change."<sup>23</sup> Even though Tumsa supported the political aspect of socialism that focuses on liberating the poor and the oppressed, he did not support the constitutive approach of socialism that opposes all religious beliefs and practices. Tumsa's critical engagement with socialism focused on the church needs to a model for empower its members to end class struggles, and demonstrate peace, reconciliation, and social justice for all people in Ethiopia. Tumsa challenged the church to follow its doctrine and teachings and to engage Ethiopians'

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<sup>21</sup> Gerd Decke, "The Role of Gudina Tumsa in a Critical Dialogue between Marxism/Socialism and Christianity" in *The Life and Ministry of Gudina Tumsa: Lectures and Discussions* Missiological Seminar 2001, 2nd ed. The Gudina Tumsa Foundation (Hamburg, Germany: WDL-Publishers), 105.

<sup>22</sup> Decke, "The Role of Gudina Tumsa in a Critical Dialogue," 105.

<sup>23</sup> Decke, "The Role of Gudina Tumsa in a Critical Dialogue," 105.

experience while working with socialist political practices and approaches.

Tumsa believed that holistic theology that addresses the spiritual, social, and political could liberate human beings from their total oppression. However, the totalitarian dictatorship of the Ethiopian communist government was not willing to accept the ideological and political challenges that the EECMY and Tumsa presented. As a result, Tumsa was killed by the Ethiopian communist government, and his prophetic voice was silenced. Decke writes: "In 1976 Gudina took up the quasi-religious holistic philosophical challenge of Marxism, as a competitor to the Christian faith trying to attract people's complete allegiance. He clearly rejects any such claim of Marxism as valid, while he still appreciates its political and social challenges, which he takes as an opportunity for the church to live up to its own best impulses of justice, democracy and human rights."<sup>24</sup>

I would claim that Tumsa and his prophetic voice were historic in-between theological responses that the Ethiopian community still needs today. His radical approach for integrating material and spiritual, religion and politics, and Ethiopian and Western contextual theologies resists "purity" of spiritual ministries and gives a voice for hybridity. Tumsa's critical approaches toward imposed Western theological and religious perspectives nurture theological and political dialogue. Tumsa was against fundamental and totalitarian religious and political regimes. Despite his call for justice and inclusivity, Tumsa's voice was silenced by the communist regime and by the church that focuses only on the social and material without integrating justice and politics into holistic theology. I claim that Tumsa's holistic theology might be a steppingstone for starting a theological conversation to create in-between spaces and consciousness for Ethiopians.<sup>25</sup>

Holistic theology affirms that human dignity and rights need to be elevated through language, economic, social, and political equality, and development beyond the imposed political ideologies and governmentalities of the feudal emperors and the Derge. As a church that claims holistic human development, the EECMY maintains its indigenous theological, cultural, economic, and missional identity while maintaining its national and international relationship with Western churches. The church focuses on theological and cultural reflection that uses the language and the culture of Ethiopians. The EECMY supported

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<sup>24</sup> Decke, "The Role of Gudina Tumsa in a Critical Dialogue," 127.

<sup>25</sup> Decke, "The Role of Gudina Tumsa in a Critical Dialogue," 127.

cultural and linguist studies. Likewise, local Bible schools and theological reflections empowered contextual theologies to start self-reliance and self initiated mission and ministry works.

### **Beyond Holistic Ministry's Multiethnic Approach**

Tumsa's holistic theology that focuses on empowering Ethiopians to claim their agency and subjectivity with a holistic theological approach was limited due to its emphasis on creating a multiethnic rather than an intercultural Ethiopia. The establishment and growth of the EECMY and its theology empowered the multiethnic approach through Bible translation, literacy, education, and theological beliefs and teachings on human dignity and rights. Along with the peasants and other working-class Ethiopians, the university and high school students resisted the Ethiopian feudal emperors' governmentality that employed the Amharic language as a central identification for Ethiopians. Tumsa and the EECMY also constructed a theological response that resisted the imposed and fictive Amharic identity. According to Hofmann, in 1973, the imperial government of Haile Selassie reviewed educational programs and gave more privileges to the Amharic language and Amharic speakers. The new program created much resistance among diverse ethnic groups in Ethiopia. For Tumsa, ethnic identity, being Oromo in his case, was central to his existence as human; he questioned the imposition of the Amharic language by claiming his ethnic identity as central to his humanity.

Tumsa's multiethnic approach opposed the Amhara fictive identity through a hereditary ethnic approach or singular identity. I, however, argue that the multiethnic approach did not enable the EECMY and Ethiopians to resist the fictive Amhara identity. The multiethnic approach of Tumsa did not tell us how diverse ethnic groups could live together in Ethiopia or in the EECMY beyond declaring their diversity. A multiethnic approach focuses more on the self determination of each ethnic group rather than articulating the subjective identity of Ethiopians in the postcolonial context. The political application of ethnic politics divided and created war and violence resulting in the current identity politics in the Ethiopian context. The church did not effectively respond to the crisis of identity politics because it lacks a theological response beyond the multiethnic approach. In the era of Ethiopian identity politics, the EECMY needs a theological response that could enable Ethiopians to live in the in-between spaces with in-between consciousness. In-between theology may enable Ethiopians to transcend ethnic hereditary identity and fictive Amhara identity with a consciousness that demonstrates in-between spaces for all Ethiopians in

schools, religious organizations, and regional states. In between spaces are socially, politically, and spiritually just and liberating spaces that demonstrate Ethiopians' ability to live with self-dignity that accepts the other, whether that other is like no other, like some others, and like all others.<sup>26</sup>

Tumsa's holistic approach resisted pietism; however, the impact of pietism is an inevitable reality among Ethiopian evangelical believers including the EECMY. The EECMY is not only impacted by Western missionaries but also by the EOC's ascetic approaches to spirituality. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church's focus on ascetic life and spirituality comes from the church of Alexandria and the Greek theology that the church incorporated through the centuries. Tumsa resisted the imported pietistic approach, and he was clear in articulating the colonial nature of the EOC concerning the feudal emperors. However, he did not question EOC's ascetic spirituality. I would imagine a different evangelical Christianity and Mekane Yesus if Tumsa had focused on questioning the EOC's ascetic spirituality and its impact on Ethiopians' holistic development. On the other hand, the liturgy and worship focus of the EOC impacted evangelical Christianity enabling it to resist an exclusively dogmatic and conceptual approach to the religion of the West. Worship gives evangelical Christians embodied agency to live their Ethiopian identity by creating songs and worship rhythms that connect to their cultural reality.

Still, I claim that Tumsa's prophetic voice was an important initial place for creating in-between spaces and consciousness for Ethiopians. It calls for the integration of religion and politics to create a just society that flourishes holistically. However, Tumsa's voice was not only silenced by the communist government, it was also silenced by the church that was unwilling to continue his legacy. The main challenge that the church faced in the time of the Derge was persecution. Many churches were closed, their leaders were executed and imprisoned.<sup>27</sup> Of course, Derge's persecution did not stop evangelical churches from following their faith and preaching the gospel message. However, the political and critical engagement that Tumsa initiated with the political powers was silenced to create peace with the communist government. As Decke mentions, some of the EECMY leaders became part of the Derge's cabinet, compromising Derge's oppressive policy.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Emmanuel Y. Lartey, *In Living Color: An Intercultural Approach to Pastoral Care and Counseling* 2nd ed. (London: Jessica Kingsley Publisher, 2003).

<sup>27</sup> Øyvind M. Eide, *Revolution & Religion in Ethiopia 1974-1985* (Oxford: James Currey, 2000), 183-200

<sup>28</sup> Decke, "The Role of Gudina Tumsa in a Critical Dialogue," 116-118.

After Tumsa died, the EECMY did not speak for social justice and equality. In the communist regime and even after the current EPRDF came to power, the EECMY applied holistic theology's spiritual and social aspects, but not the political. Since the EECMY's development office focuses on social development, the political and spiritual aspects are divided from the original concept and practice. The church never speaks against the political oppression and injustice that the EPRDF and the current Prosperity Party is implementing in Ethiopia. Instead of speaking for social justice and political issues, religious organizations in Ethiopia prefer to work under the Ethiopian Religious Council, which originated with and is organized by the EPRDF. They speak about peace without justice that would normalize the political struggle and questions of Ethiopians. So, the holistic theological approach that Tumsa started in the EECMY was silenced by the church leaders who prefer to approach the political aspect as a minor issue by focusing only on the social and spiritual aspects of holistic theology.

The other limitation of holistic theology is its focus on conversion. Tumsa believed that contextual and African theology is important for Ethiopians and Africans. Even though Tumsa resisted imposed Western theologies, the conversion-focused approach of holistic theology did not enable evangelical Ethiopians to create in-between consciousness. The evangelical faith tradition explicitly focuses on evangelizing and converting non-believers to the evangelical faith tradition. Eide argues that evangelical Christianity gave the Oromo and other oppressed groups an authentic voice due to its focus on Bible translation and preaching the gospel in the ethnic tongue. Eide writes, "To Oromo, whilst being subjugated and humiliated under Amhara rule, the Bible in the Oromo language offered an unprecedented rallying point."<sup>29</sup>

The comparison between evangelical Christianity and EOC Christianity is their approach to the language. The Westerners use the mother tongue to translate Christianity to the Oromo and other ethnic groups to be converted to evangelical Christianity. The Amharas use the Amharic language and liturgical language Geez, the liturgical language of the EOC, to evangelize and dominate the Oromo and others. Many believe that even though the evangelical faith tradition requires conversion as a practice to join the Christian community, it was a liberating experience, not a dominating one. However, I argue that the exclusivist approach of evangelical Christianity towards traditional and other religions,

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<sup>29</sup> Eide, *Revolution & Religion in Ethiopia*, 74

including the EOC, did not enable Ethiopians to live in the in-between consciousness and spaces. Evangelical Christianity that focuses only on spiritual salvation could not make it possible for Ethiopians to connect to their lived experiences in their respective contexts. So, I believe that evangelicals in Ethiopia need a theology that will enable them to be welcoming of all people through its direct response to political, social, and spiritual needs for agency, wholeness, and salvation, liberation and connection to God.

The development-centered approach of holistic theology makes Ethiopians objects. Most of the EECMY's development activities were started by the missionaries. The missionaries came to Ethiopia with their Western religious and race categories that focused on developing the Other. Tumsa resisted the material development of the Western neo-paternal approach of the missionaries. However, holistic theology was not critical towards the systemic theological and racial categories that were integrated in Western theological studies. The fundamental theological beliefs and practices were in conformity with the missionaries' approach, and they did not question the progressive worldview of the Protestant tradition that integrated conversion with oppressive colonial practices.

However, Tumsa and the EECMY leaders never criticized the Ethiopian church's failure to address sexism and gender discrimination in the Ethiopian context. Tumsa and the EECMY's approach of integrated human development was critical to the political and missional challenges that the EECMY and Ethiopians faced. However, they never mentioned the Western and Ethiopian churches' participation in racism, sexism, and gender discrimination and oppression. Since Ethiopia's political and social arena was influenced by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church that focused on the patriarchs and only ordained male bishops and ministers, the EECMY's holistic ministry should be clear about these issues. At the same time, the missionary and development activities of the Western churches are associated with racially discriminatory and sexist ideologies that categorize black and brown bodies as female and powerless. However, the holistic theology of the EECMY was not critical enough to address the issues of race, gender, and sexism in the Ethiopian context and beyond. I think holistic theology has not been applicable for Ethiopians in identity politics because it cannot articulate how identities were shaped by gender, sex, and race issues from the West and the Ethiopian context. It focused on keeping the identity and mission work of the EECMY, and that made holistic theology irrelevant to address the ongoing racial, ethnic categories and identities that create a social and political crisis for Ethiopians.

Moreover, I would argue that its resistance towards imposed Western and feudal ideologies was not holistic since it imported Protestant Bible translations and higher education as the main tools. Both the Bible translations and higher education exacerbated identity politics by emphasizing hereditary ethnic identity. Holistic theology did not enable Ethiopians to oppose a fictive Amharic identity but, instead, created an over determined hereditary ethnic identity. So, the EECMY and Ethiopians need a theology that will empower them to live in the in-between consciousness with intercultural and hybrid competencies.

### **Toward In-Between Theology**

I identify as African, Ethiopian, Protestant, Amhara, and a female religious leader, so I have faced most of the challenges that identity politics created for Ethiopians. I am very much aware of the violence and conflict that ethnic fragmentation has created in the lives of Ethiopians. I have seen ethnic conflicts in religious organizations, regional states, families, and community groups. I am from the Amhara ethnic group and speak the Amharic language, which is the federal language of Ethiopia, and that makes me privileged. On the other hand, as a Protestant who was raised in a regional state dominated by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, I was always an outsider and a minority to my culture and community. And in the EECMY, my synod, which is from the northern part of Ethiopia, has small numbers and little representation. In my journey, I have learned that my diverse identities co-exist together. Of course, after I moved to the United States, I learned that being Protestant or Amhara do not make me privileged here, since my only categories were black and African, and a powerless woman from a developing country. However, articulating my in-between theology enables me to resist the colonizing powers that make me feel powerless here in the United States as well as in Ethiopia. Identity politics that emerges from racism or ethnicity creates a sense of fundamental purity; in contrast, in-between theology elevates hybridity, interculturality, and plurality.

Before developing intercultural competence, I struggled to feel empathy for the people who resisted the Amharic language and all cultural identifications and impacts of Amhara identity. On the other hand, I felt excluded and minoritized due to a lack of belonging in my community. When I started my theological studies at the Mekane Yesus Seminary, I learned about the importance of diversity, inclusion, and justice for all Ethiopians. The life stories and experiences of my peers who came from different regions of Ethiopia challenged my life. Hearing the pain and the frustration of diverse ethnic groups in Ethiopia empowered me to

feel my own pain that I had carried for a long time. My experience in the United States gives me a more diversified worldview about my racial, gender, sexual, class, and economic status. It helped me to learn about my diverse and intersectional identities. As I was raised in the EECMY, my reflection continues to construct a theological reflection that could enable me, the church, and Ethiopians to resist foundational identity fragmentations. The more I became aware of who I am, the more I was convinced that Ethiopians need theological reflection to resist Ethiopia's era of identity politics. So, what I term "a theology of in-betweenness" comes from my own personal struggles and the experiences that I have faced as an individual within my community and church in Ethiopia and the United States.

The theology of in-betweenness resists identity politics and its fragmentations in the lives of individuals and communities. At the same time, in-between theology empowers people to live with an intercultural competence that allows them to co-create in-between spaces. I define in-between spaces as political spaces and public spaces that enable Ethiopians to claim their subjectivity and agency (and to live peacefully together without ethnic oppression/erasure). So, the move to in-between theological reflection is not fixed and universal because theologies are local and contextual. Local theological reflection allows those communities to respond to their embedded and embodied experiences with an authentic voice.

Brian Bantum, in his book *Redeeming Mulatto: A Theology of Race and Christian Hybridity*, invites us to participate with and in the mysterious nature of Christ's humanity and divinity. His main claim is that Christ's body is mulatto, a body that negates the racial, sexual, and gender-fixed definitions and categories of the 19th and 20th centuries. To prove the mulatto nature of Christ, he uses the formula of Chalcedon. In the Chalcedonian formula, Christ's nature is articulated as "neither/nor, but."<sup>30</sup>

Bantum claims that the discipleship journey that starts by following the body of Christ creates disciplined bodies that go beyond the racial categories. The disciples become part of the body of Christ that creates new bodies and possibilities. "To claim that Christ is mulatto is to interpret humanity Christologically."<sup>31</sup> The "neither/nor, but" identity of Christ bypasses fixed possibilities and expectations of being human, and invites humanity to participate in the new way of being human. As

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<sup>30</sup> Brian Bantum, *Redeeming Mulatto: A Theology of Race and Christian Hybridity* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2010), 89

<sup>31</sup> Bantum, *Redeeming Mulatto*, 88.

Chalcedon and other early church councils affirmed, the humanity and divinity of Christ is “the impossible possibility.” Bantum writes: “In this way mulatto/a identity is both discursive and embodied. The mulatto/a is not a positive identity, but rather a tragic identity of negation wherein its existence is marked by “neither/nor,” left to negotiated and perform itself into an illusion of purity thereby participating within a wider vision of national or racial hope”.<sup>32</sup>

Incarnation resists a fixed humanity by negating borders of pure and impure, human and divine. The new way that Christ invites the disciples negates fixed racial categories.<sup>33</sup> Jesus’s mulatto body invites and welcomes others to his “neither/nor, but” identity and body. In the modern world, mulatto bodies are excluded due to their inability to be labeled in one category, which is seen as impurity. However, when we accept the mulatto identity and body of Christ, we all are invited to be and live in the body of Christ, because “Christ gives birth to a mulattic people.”<sup>34</sup> The cultural, racial, and ethnic diversities and neither/nor identities become a possibility for creating new possibilities. Being in the body of Christ is an invitation for human beings to perform living and being in the new possibilities. Baptism is one of the main praxes that Bantum articulates to show how the disciples and the believers of Christ could participate in and with the mulattic body of Christ. He also uses prayer and discipleship as political praxes to empower people to continue being and participating in the new possibility of Christ’s body and identity that invite all to live beyond fixed identities.

Bantum’s mulatto or hybrid theology emphasizes the racially mixed or hybrid bodies. However, the hybrid bodies that I want to address are not only people who are racially mulatto. In the postcolonial context, hybridity is not only racial but social, spiritual, and political. The postcolonial people become hybrid due to imposed Western religious, theological, racial, and political praxes and ideologies. Their hybridity was created due to their exposure to Western worldviews and colonial ideologies. Homi K. Bhabha claims that the postcolonial hybrid people use the in-between spaces to claim their agency and subjectivity to resist imposed and fixed racial categories and identification. I argue that the hybrid body of Christ also invites and empowers the postcolonial bodies to become “neither/nor, but” mulatto bodies so that they can resist imposed and fixed identities with new hybrid possibilities. Jesus models a new possible identity that does not match fixed identities. I also

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<sup>32</sup> Bantum, *Redeeming Mulatto*, 91-92.

<sup>33</sup> Bantum, *Redeeming Mulatto*, 97.

<sup>34</sup> Bantum, *Redeeming Mulatto*, 112.

contend that the in-between identities surpass imposed ethnic and cultural identities to create a third possibility and space that empowers all to live into new possibilities. The invitation of Christ to hybrid and mulatto body is a liberating praxis so that the colonized bodies could be free to claim their agency.

Bantum uses prayer and discipleship as the theological praxes which could empower people to relate to their hybrid nature and relationship with the mulatto body of Christ. Bantum's theological approach helps me to articulate how the mulatto bodies could be empowered with the incarnation of Christ, but it is not relevant for those who are not Christians. So, instead of focusing on prayer and discipleship, I would focus on the ministry of care and praxis. This focus enables me to empower people to live in the in-between spaces. The theology of prayer and discipleship may include only people who are baptized and also part of the church community. In-between spaces include churches, but the churches are not the only space that people could participate in their hybrid identities to resist fixed and fragmented identities. As a Christian, I use Christian theology to show how hybridity is theological and supported by the theology of incarnation. Still, I do not want to use an exclusive praxis that does not allow all Ethiopians to participate in their political and public space. Therefore, I would focus on care, which is and could be applied for all to be empowered and to live their hybrid identity to resist imposed colonial and political ideologies and practices.

Moreover, Bantum uses early church sources to show the hybrid nature of Christ. However, most of the early church decisions were made by the church fathers and silenced the voices of women and the diverse traditions associated with Christianity. Especially after Christianity became a state religion, it adapted the holy, universal, catholic teaching and image of the church. Postcolonial theologian Kwok Pui-lan writes: The most hybridized concept in the Christian Tradition is that of Jesus/Christ. The space between Jesus and Christ is unsettling and fluid, resisting easy categorization and closure. It is the "contact zone" or "borderland" between the human and the divine, the one and the many, the historic and the cosmological, the Jewish and Hellenistic, the prophetic and the sacramental, the God of the conquerors, the God of the meek and the lowly.<sup>35</sup> Kwok claims that the New Testament images of Jesus Christ are hybridized and plural and can bring people together.<sup>36</sup> However, in the second century, the church offices and

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<sup>35</sup> Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination & Feminist Theology* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2005), 171

<sup>36</sup> Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination*, 172.

ministry became patriarchal, and the offices of bishop and deacon were limited to men, and the emperor led most of the church councils. Men became holy and transcended their carnality by focusing on creeds, doctrines, and liturgy. Hypertranscendental masculine decisions and teachings differentiated themselves from the feminine orders of virginity and maternity. And the female body became the example of carnality, sex, and evil.<sup>37</sup>

As David Chidester claims, the modern world authenticated and justified colonization, slavery, labor, and resource exploitation in South Africa and other African countries through theological and religious teachings. The imperial colonial theorists and the missionaries fed each other for the development and the growth of their empire.<sup>38</sup> In both the early and later modern world, theological claims, and knowledge were the source of oppression and colonization. For this reason, I contend that it is always important to articulate how other voices such as black, feminist, African, liberation, and global southern nations use the hybrid image of Christ to articulate their in-between identities and their belonging in the in-between spaces. The in-between identity that Jesus Christ manifested by being human and divine transgresses fixed and universal ways of being and knowing. It empowers us to live in the in-between spaces. The in-between spaces allow people from diverse perspectives to come together and celebrate their diversities beyond the cultural, political, and social differences.

## **Conclusion**

Even though the EECMY is mostly addressed as a church that was imported to Ethiopia, I claim that the EECMY is a church that demonstrates a hybrid identity of being Western and Ethiopian at the same time. Western missionaries and converted Ethiopians created and established the EECMY. The Protestant faith tradition or evangelicalism in Ethiopia is different from the traditional and historical Ethiopian Orthodox Church that has a deep connection with the feudal Ethiopian emperors and kings since the theology of the church affirms and assigns the kings to be the leading voice of Ethiopians. The evangelical tradition in the Ethiopian context starts by being a voice for the voiceless, especially for the ethnic groups in the Western and Southern parts of Ethiopia. It opened doors for education and progress for Ethiopians and oppressed ethnic groups to learn about their ethnic and cultural

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<sup>37</sup> Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination*, 3-13.

<sup>38</sup> David Chidester, *Empire of Religion: Imperialism and Comparative Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 161.

identification. The holistic theology that Gudina Tumsa fashioned with the EECMY church leaders was one of the leading theological responses of the Ethiopian and African churches to resist imposed internal and Western theological, cultural, and religious practices and norms. The holistic ministry of the EECMY resisted imported political ideologies such as socialism and communism, which exclusively rejected Ethiopians and Africans spirituality. At the same time, holistic ministry resisted a Western pietistic theological approach that focused on saving the soul by excluding the physical and material needs of Ethiopians and Africans. The integrated human development vision and theological claim of the EECMY invited all to be the voice for the poor and the oppressed. However, in this paper, I argue that holistic ministry and theological reflection that enabled the EECMY to resist imposed socialist and feudal ideologies and practices did not work for resisting the identity politics that expose Ethiopians to ethnic conflict and war.

My main theological response comes from my own embodied experiences about my own diverse identity and need for in-betweenness. The theology of in-betweenness resists fragmented identities by focusing on empowering bodies to claim and negotiate their hybrid identities in the in-between spaces. I used a theology of incarnation to show how God's presence among and with human beings becomes a way for demonstrating hybrid identities. The humanity and divinity of Christ that creates a new incarnational being of the divine and human in Jesus Christ opens and invites a new way of being human for all nations.