

Religion and Urbanization in Ethiopia

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Abstract

The essay has a twofold objective: First it gives a general background about the evolution of the author's academic interest in religion and urbanization in Ethiopia. The author recounts how his upbringing in one of the biggest cities of Africa and his religious background have combined to generate his academic interest. Second, it describes a preliminary conceptual framework that the author proposes to understand the involvement of religions in tackling perhaps the most severe challenge associated with urbanization in Ethiopia; namely, the problems of orphans and vulnerable children (OVC). The framework suggests that faith based service to OVC in urban Ethiopia be characterized in terms of the types of services, and the contexts and manner in which the services are given. These are, in turn, embedded in a web of interactions among various stakeholders. Thus, faith based service to OVC in Ethiopia's major cities appears to provide a social space in which these diverse stakeholders are in constant interaction, vying for influence. The author finally theorizes that underlying these interactions are negotiations and compromises of religious and secular worldviews and values. The author expects to refine and elaborate this framework during his forthcoming doctoral fieldwork to be conducted as of November 2008 for 8-12 months.

The present essay falls into two parts. The first gives a general background about the evolution of my academic interest in religion and urbanization. Under this broad research agenda, a specific theme that captured my attention currently is religions' involvement in the provision of social service to marginalized groups located in such pluralistic social milieus as urban Ethiopia, which is now a subject of my doctoral research. In anticipation of my doctoral fieldwork, I conducted, in the summer of 2008, a preliminary study on the nature of faith based service to orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) in three of Ethiopia's major cities. The second part of the present essay describes a preliminary conceptual framework that has emerged out of the qualitative data gathered during this study.

I. Evolution of My Research Interest

I was born in the capital of Ethiopia, and one of the biggest cities of Africa – Addis Ababa. In over three decades I have known it, Addis Ababa has grown significantly. Its growth has been so dramatic particularly over the past 10 years. As in many other places, the unprecedented increase in rural-urban migration due to various push and pull factors has been responsible for this growth. This means that Addis Ababa has increasingly become a melting pot of Ethiopia's diverse cultures and religions. My city is also a bridge that connects Ethiopia with the rest of the world. It has always been the seat of the African Union. As a result, Addis, as we fondly call it, is regarded as the capital city of Africa. It also houses United Nation's Economic

Commission for Africa. Numerous international aid agencies have also established themselves in Addis. It is also an entry point for a growing number of tourists that flock to the country every year. All these have served to increase the interaction of Ethiopians with peoples of other nations. However, nothing may be more powerful in exposing Ethiopians to the rest of the world than the modern means of communication and mass media. For better or worse, Addis has always been the first to make use of these technologies. In my view, the net effect of all these is that Addis has become a ground where the religious and collectivist values of Ethiopians encounter western secular, individualistic and consumerist values.

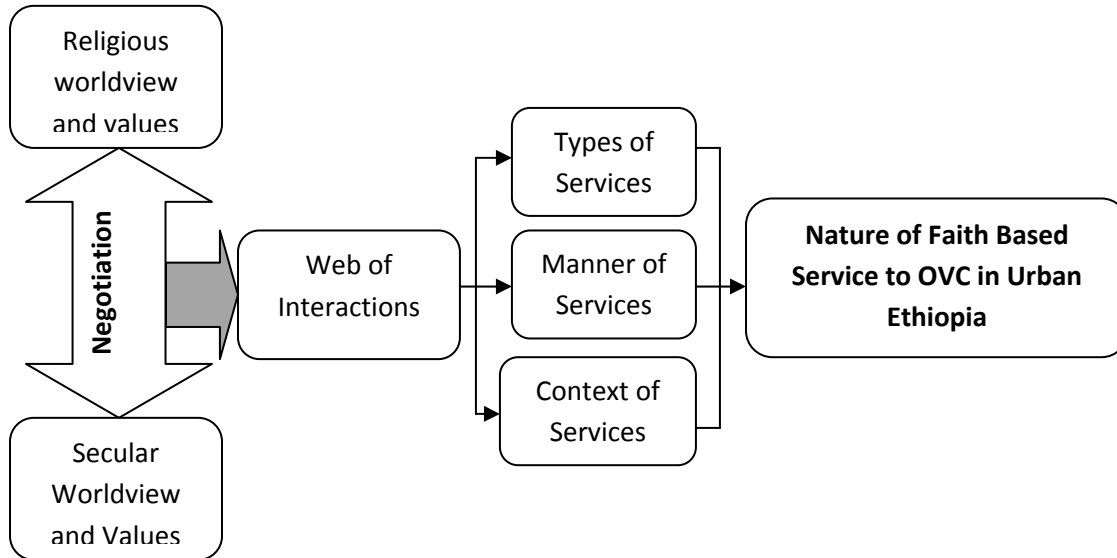
Now, being a religious person myself, I have always been curious about the extent to which this encounter has challenged the survival, long standing authority and role of religion in urban Ethiopia. This curiosity has shaped my research interest in the broader area of religion and urbanization. How particular religions survive in big cities in the midst of pervasive secularization and diversity and, at the same time, play proactive roles in these rapidly changing settings has been my pet subject for many years now. One such role that has captured my attention currently is religions' involvement in the provision of social service to marginalized groups located in such pluralistic social milieus as urban Ethiopia. Unfortunately, I have found no systematic study done on the history, particular characteristics, challenges and best practices of the involvement of Ethiopian religions in social action. I feel this serious academic neglect is quite regrettable considering the richness of the history of religion in the nation and its pervasive role in shaping the spiritual, social, political, economic and cultural life of its peoples.

In order to call attention to this neglected subject, I went back to the graduate school to do a doctoral research on the subject. To render my research a degree of focus, I now intend to look into the role of religions in addressing the problems of OVC, which is perhaps a category of population most affected by accelerated urbanization. The category includes, but is not limited to, unaccompanied orphans, abandoned children, children exposed to abuse and exploitation, children in extremely poor households, street children, children with disabilities, youth engaged as commercial sex workers, children that are infected or/and affected by AIDS and HIV. Even a cursory investigation into the challenges of the major cities in Ethiopia can put the problems of OVC at the top of its list. HIV/AIDS, poverty, disability, conflict and famine have among others caused an alarming increase in the number of OVC in all the major cities in recent years. My city, Addis, is said to have been affected the most by this problem.

The main fieldwork of my doctoral research is planned to begin in 11 months and will last for 8-12 months. However, as a prelude to the main fieldwork, I had already conducted, in the summer of 2008, a preliminary review of three faith based projects that provided various services to OVC in three of the Ethiopia's major cities. These projects were run by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, Kale Hiwot Church and Mulu Wengel Church. The review had also benefited from interviews with relevant personnel in responsible offices of the government, faith based organizations (FBOs) and some of their secular counterparts at national and district levels. The interviews were significantly complemented by review of key documents. The qualitative data thus generated was manually coded and analyzed, out of which emerged a preliminary conceptual framework to understand the nature of faith based service given to OVC in urban Ethiopia. In what follows, I will describe this framework, which I expect to refine and elaborate during the upcoming fieldwork of my doctoral research.

2. The Nature of Faith-Based Service to OVC in Urban Ethiopia – a Preliminary Conceptual Framework

The diagram below attempts to depict the preliminary conceptual framework I propose to understand the nature of faith based service to OVC in urban Ethiopia.



Below is a brief description of each of the three major elements of the framework; namely, aspects of faith based service, web of interaction and negotiation of worldviews and values.

Aspects of Faith Based Services

As depicted in the diagram faith based service to OVC in urban Ethiopia has three aspects; namely, types of services, context of service and manner of service. Types of service refer to a list of goods and services that religious institutions and communities in the cities provide to OVC of diverse religious affiliations. Among the most common types of services they provide are shelter, food, cloth, educational, psychosocial, spiritual and legal supports and health services. As will be noted later, the most contentious type of faith based service to children in pluralistic context has been provision of spiritual support.

Manner of service refers to the competencies i.e. the reservoir of knowledge, attitude (qualities) and skills that caregivers (frontline workers or volunteers) have developed and the extent they utilize them in their service to children. By knowledge is meant the caregivers' understanding of the developmental needs and the biopsychosocial and spiritual challenges that the child is subjected to. It also refers to the caregivers' awareness of appropriate interventions. Skill refers to the caregivers' capacity to plan and execute appropriate interventions. Caregivers' attitude towards children and their valuation of the act of caring are also crucial factors in meeting the various needs of the child. An in-depth investigation into the extent to which social workers and volunteers in various faith based projects have acquired these competencies is planned for the main fieldwork. However, the preliminary study indicated that empathic attunement, compassion and religious passion have often distinguished faith oriented services to OVC.

The context of service refers to the social milieu in which the services are given. Three contexts of faith based service have been identified during the preliminary review: institutional, community based and home based care. Unlike secular institutional services that I personally know, the reviewed FBOs have a much better record in raising OVC to become successful and responsible citizens. This may be attributed to their commitment to balancing the moral/spiritual with the psychological, biological, intellectual and social needs of OVC. With the growth in the rate of urbanizations, the size of OVC has significantly increased, which has rendered faith based institutional care less cost effective. In order to reach larger number of OVC, FBOs are mobilizing families and communities in home and community based services. These families and communities they collaborate with in urban setting are diverse in their cultural and religious backgrounds. These programs have focused on the capacity of these families and communities to mobilize local and international resources for the care and support of OVC. Often, the content and methods of capacity building have covert or overt spiritual elements.

Web of Interactions

The three aspects of faith based service to OVC may be conceived as social spaces in which various stakeholders are engaged in a continuous process of interaction. At national level, religious institutions, the government and donors interact as owners, regulators and financers of the services respectively. Religious institutions aim to apply religious values in their services by constantly appealing to their mandate of a holistic ministry – a ministry that aspires to integrate the spiritual and material dimension of human existence. The government is the main regulator of non-profit service delivery in the country including those that are faith based. It requires incorporated FBOs to secularize their services. International donors are the main sources of funding for the administration and interventions of faith based services. Donors may be categorized into ‘faith oriented’ and ‘secular’ depending on their orientation towards religion. Faith oriented donors are those that have a religious constituency at their country of origin. These often favor partnership with FBOs. A faith oriented donor may even have special affinity with those FBOs with which they have historical or theological connection. Major secular donors are international development agencies of Western governments, foundations or other international development agencies. These usually command much greater resources than ‘faith oriented’ donors do and are, in recent years, showing special interest in partnering with FBOs although they too require exclusion of religious content from faith based services.

At local level, local government, civil society organizations and OVC (and their caregivers) interact as supervisors, collaborators and consumers of the faith based services respectively. Each major city in Ethiopia but Addis Ababa is a district, locally called wereda. Because of its size, Addis Ababa is divided into 10 weredas. In any case, a wereda has an administrative council which is responsible for coordinating social services such as those for OVC given by various actors. In their interaction with FBOs, administrative councils are expected to ensure that the former are not using their services for the purpose of proselytization. Civil society organizations in Ethiopia are diverse in their ideological roots and their goals, and concentrate mainly in the major cities. Nevertheless, the sector is, I would say, emerging only in very recent years and appears to be highly fragmented at this stage. There is presumably little collaboration even among those civil society organizations that share similar goals and have some shared ideological orientations. FBOs of various religious affiliations have, for example, been operating largely in isolation. In the past decade, however, there are signs of collaborations among FBOs

in addressing shared social problems. In Addis Ababa, major FBOs in Ethiopia have taken a step to enhance the overall effectiveness of religious communities in social services by creating the Ethiopian Interfaith Forum for Development Dialogue and Action (EIFDDA). The aim of EIFDDA is to promote and systematize interfaith learning, collaboration, advocacy and synergy to address issues of common concern, such as care and support for OVC. FBOs in the major cities have long involved community based organizations in, among other things, identifying and prioritizing the most eligible beneficiaries and recruiting motivated volunteers, securing physical spaces and financial resources to be used for service provision. In the process of doing so, FBOs are also learning to listen to the population they serve before rushing to propose and often impose solutions to local challenges. In other words, they are learning to appreciate the value of indigenous knowledge, institutions and expertise.

Negotiation of Worldviews and Values

It appears that underlying the web of interactions just described are worldview and values of stakeholders particularly at national level that constantly vie for influence. On the one hand, underlying the policies of international donors and the government is a secular ideology which is believed to be suitable for pluralistic societies. Consequently, secularism claims not to give allegiance to any specific religion or religion in general. Hence, its holders have required FBO's to exclude religious elements from their social services. On the other hand, a core element of the worldviews of religious stakeholders is the belief that the root of most human suffering is spiritual alienation and that spiritual strength can help people cope with even the direst of life's condition. Hence, the tendency to include spiritual support in faith based projects is a natural outcome of this belief. It is, therefore, plausible to suggest that underlying faith based service to OVC is a constant negotiation of secular and religious worldviews and values which shape the policies and practices of the various stakeholders. In a given contexts of interaction, those stakeholders who wield greater command over instruments of power (whether financial, political or symbolic, moral) have been in a better position to influence faith based service. For example, as noted in an earlier section, some legal and donor policy restrictions in Ethiopia require commitment to secularization of service before they give any financial support. Some FBOs have completely submitted to this restriction. Others, however, employ a variety of avenues to compromise these restrictions with their need to maintain the religious character of their services. One such avenue identified in the projects reviewed is inclusion of optional spiritual activities such as prayers, spiritual counseling and biblical study. This means that entitlement for other benefits is not conditioned upon participation in these activities.

3. The Ultimate Goal of My Research Career – A conclusion

I have already stated my special academic interest in how faith (1) thrives in urban context where secularism appears to be increasingly favored for the governance of diversity, and (2) proactively engages in addressing problems associated with accelerated urbanization. My graduate studies in social anthropology (MA) and social work (PhD), and my close to a decade professional services in the faith based sector have positioned me well to pursue my research interest. The ultimate goal of my research career on religion and urbanization is to provide the evidence base that contributes to constructive dialogues that may eventually generate non-sectarian social service models that are, at the same time, rooted in shared religious worldview and value of the

great majority of Ethiopians. This, I hope, will help diverse actors overcome the present polarization between excessive secularism that has little regard for the religious worldview and values held by the great majority of beneficiaries and sectarianisms that aims to use social service as an instrument for obtaining new converts.