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BOOK REVIEW

A post-colonial political theology of care and praxis in Ethiopia's era of identity politics: Reframing hegemonic and fragmented identities through subjective in-betweenness

Molla, R. (Lexington Books, 2022), pp. 212, ISBN
978-1-66692-288-2.

This book is a revised version of the author's PhD thesis that was submitted to Denver University and the Iliff School of Theology. In the introductory section, the author discusses how her social location motivated her to research the topic of identity politics in Ethiopia. She argues that identity politics has been a major factor in Ethiopia's political instability and violence. Ethiopia experiences frequent identity-based violence. Molla indicates that identity politics has divided Ethiopian society and eliminated in-between spaces where people can coexist in equality, solidarity, and justice. She proposes a post-colonial political theology of care and practice to reframe hegemonic and fragmented identities and create new in-between spaces for dialogue and cooperation. She contends that post-colonial discourse and the praxis of in-between pastoral care can disrupt and challenge hegemonic definitions of culture, identity, home, and subjectivity.



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The book is divided into five chapters. The first chapter provides a brief historical overview of Ethiopia's political development from the *Zemene Mesafint*/"the era princes" (1769-1855) to the present day. It also emphasises how the quest for self-determination in the 1960s led to Ethiopia's current context of political violence, war, and fragmentation. The author employs post-colonial theory as a critical lens to read and analyse the interaction between politics and religion in modern Ethiopian history. She engages with the work of Donald N. Levine, who argues for Greater Ethiopia as a multicultural space, and Girma Mahmood, who considers covenant thinking to be an in-between consciousness. At the end of the chapter, Molla argues that there is a lack of in-between spaces in Ethiopian history. She defines "in-between spaces" as,

political spaces that enable Ethiopians to co-create and demonstrate their diverse and plural religious, political, social, and spiritual identities, cultures, practices, beliefs, values, and norms without needing to create object 'others' (p. 33).

She indicates that in-between spaces allow Ethiopians to assert their autonomy and identity through negotiation. In-between pastoral care leverages embodiment, belonging, subjectivity, and hybridity as features of care and praxis to forge intercultural and intersubjective identities that can co-construct and co-create in-between spaces.

The second chapter explores two key questions: How do religion and politics eliminate in-between spaces and consciousness in Ethiopia? How are hegemonic and fragmented identities created? The chapter also explains why Ethiopians need an in-between space. To do this, Molla draws on Michael Foucault's concept of biopolitics, rational understanding, and Theodros Teklu's fictive Amharic identity (*homoaethiopicus*).

Education in Ethiopia was used once to promote the emperor's expansionist policies and to reinforce his sovereignty. At the same time, Western educational and religious systems categorised African religious practices and myth as barbaric or primitive. The political and cultural context has historically suppressed Ethiopians' subjectivity and agency, and eliminates the in-between spaces that bring the diverse identities together.

While Ethiopia has never been geographically colonised, its people have been colonised internally by feudal oppression and externally by Marxist and neoliberal governments. These "inside" and "outside" colonial systems have created homogenised and fragmented identities, denying Ethiopians their agency and subjectivity. Molla argues that these identities should be decolonised through subjective in-betweenness.

Chapter three explores the holistic theology of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY), which was championed by Gudina Tumsa. He envisioned a church and a theological approach that could liberate Ethiopians spiritually, materially, and politically. This holistic theology emerged as a reaction against the pietistic approach of the missionaries. In his speeches, writings, and theological seminars, Tumsa stressed the importance of contextually grounded theology, in order to promote human dignity in Ethiopia and beyond.

According to Molla, holistic theology empowers many to speak for the poor. It helps the poor resist the feudal Ethiopian government, as well as imported and imposed socialism and imperialist ideologies. However, she argues that holistic theology failed to empower EECMY and Ethiopians to challenge the neoliberal era. Tumsa's theology, which seeks to empower Ethiopians to assert their autonomy and individuality through a comprehensive theological approach, was constrained by its emphasis on developing a multi-ethnic rather than an intercultural Ethiopia. This limited the scope of his theology and its ability to address the complex challenges confronting Ethiopia. The church's response to identity politics was ineffective, due to a lacking theological approach that went beyond multi-ethnicity. Molla uses Gudina's holistic theology as a starting point for a theological conversation about creating in-between spaces and consciousness for Ethiopians, but Gudina's theology is limited by its focus on multi-ethnicity rather than interculturalism.

Molla argues that identity politics based on race or ethnicity creates a sense of essential purity, while in-between theology emphasises hybridity, interculturality, and plurality. Therefore, she proposes the theology of in-betweenness as a way to resist identity politics and its fragmentation of individuals and communities. In-between theology also empowers people to live with intercultural competence, which allows them to co-create in-between spaces. In-between theology is not universal, but rather locally contextualised.

Chapter four examines how identity politics has eliminated in-between spaces, which the author defines as

political, social, religious, and geographical spaces that enable Ethiopians to live as a diverse community with solidarity, equity, care, and justice (p. 97).

She argues that our pastoral care approach should be informed by African reality, as current pastoral care in Ethiopia is monocultural and focused on evangelisation and conversion. In contrast, in-between pastoral care is a post-colonial and feminist act that challenges hegemonic and fragmented identities, allowing them to be known, respected, and allowed to grow and flourish in the space of appearance.

Chapter five is the heart of the book. It explores potential in-between spaces for social change in Ethiopia. Molla argues that Ethiopians are more than simply ethnic beings; they are a nation with hybrid identities. This means that there are many potential spaces where people from different backgrounds can come together and build relationships, work for social justice, and create a more just and equitable society. Molla identifies several potential in-between spaces for social change in Ethiopia. Seminaries can foster dialogue and understanding between future religious leaders from different backgrounds. However, Molla also critiques Compassion, a humanitarian organisation that uses a universal curriculum in its schools, arguing that it deprives children of their agency and does not adequately reflect the diversity of Ethiopian culture. Yet, she views Compassion as a potential in-between space where children from different backgrounds can come together. EECMY congregations, which often hold worship services in multiple languages and have a long history of social justice work, are also potential in-between spaces where people from different backgrounds can gather to worship and work for a more just and equitable society.

Molla argues that Ethiopia offers unique potential for in-between spaces, where people from different backgrounds can come together to build relationships, work for justice, and create a more equitable society. She identifies *Timket* and *Buhe*, two important religious holidays, and Haile Selassie's liberation praxis as potential in-between spaces. She also views Wollo, a diverse region of Ethiopia, as a potential space for people to celebrate their diversity and work for a more just society. Molla concludes by arguing that in-between pastoral care can help create and sustain these potential in-between spaces.

In-between pastoral care resists internal and external colonisation, helping people break free from oppressive systems and live true to their identities and values. It also reframes fragmented and singular ethnic identities through subjective in-betweenness, recognising that identity is fluid and dynamic and helping people embrace their multiple identities.

In-between pastoral care empowers people to create and co-create in-between spaces, where people from different backgrounds can learn, share, and build relationships. It also empowers people to live their lives to the fullest, develop their agency, make their own choices, and challenge the status quo for a more just society. In-between pastoral care decolonises the field, by allowing for complexity, recognising that the world is not simplistic and that there is no one right way to live. It allows people to explore their own spirituality and find their own way to God.

In conclusion, in-between pastoral care is a new and innovative approach to pastoral care. It is based on the principles of resistance, reframing, creation, empowerment, decolonisation, and complexity. In-between pastoral care has the potential to transform the pastoral care field and to make it more relevant to the needs of people in the 21st century.

Molla argues that a postcolonial political theology of care and praxis can help address the challenges of identity politics in Ethiopia, and create a more just and equitable society where people of all identities can live together in peace and harmony.

Molla's book is a significant contribution to the understanding of identity politics in Ethiopia. It provides a comprehensive and insightful analysis of the challenges posed by identity politics and offers a hopeful vision for a more just and equitable society. The book is also a valuable resource for anyone interested in the intersection of religion, politics, and social justice. One may disagree with Molla's theoretical approach to identity politics in Ethiopia, especially her interpretation of Ethiopian history through a post-colonial lens. However, her book is a groundbreaking and valuable addition to the field. Academics and practitioners alike will benefit from her work.