



## CONTENDING RELIGIONS, IDENTITIES AND SPACE

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**PAPER'S TITLE:** THE PASTORAL LETTER OF ERITREAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS: A GROUND-BREAKING TREND IN STATE-RELIGION RELATIONS IN ERITREA

### ABSTRACT:

Eritrea is a one-party state with an appalling record on human rights violations, including the suppression of freedom of belief. Due to its long history of forced migration, Eritrea is also a country equally lived in its national borders and its vibrant diaspora communities that constitute a sizable part of the total Eritrean population. Inevitably, what happens in Eritrean diaspora communities has profound impact on political developments inside the country. This paper analyses a very important political development that was received with heightened interest in Eritrean diaspora communities in May 2014. This relates to a publication of a well-received and very critical pastoral letter, addressing fundamental issues of social justice in Eritrea, and published by four Eritrean catholic bishops. The letter was the first of its kind since the publication of the last similar pastoral letter in 2001. It also comes as the most daring public pronouncement since the establishment of a full-blown authoritarian regime in Eritrea, a development that started with the political crisis of September 2001. This paper analyses the contents of the 2014 pastoral letter, and it does so using the theoretical framework of human rights and state-religion relations. In so doing, the paper assesses the impact the pastoral letter has made in the on-going fight against impunity in Eritrea, which is characterized by a widespread and systematic violation of human rights, including a pervasive practice of religious persecution. The paper will also examine the extent to which the pastoral letter was influenced by Catholic "liberation theology," as was widely experienced in a number of Latin American countries during the 1960s and 1970s. Of particular relevance to this paper is the likelihood of the pastoral letter in facilitating the long-awaited transition of the country into a democratic system of government. The paper will conclude by summarizing the major challenges and suggesting practical recommendations for improvement both in the area of human rights protection and religious freedom in Eritrea, including the ideals of "living together" in multi-religious, multi-lingual and multi-ethnic societies, such as that of Eritrea.

### AUTHOR'S SHORT BIO AND ACADEMIC PROFILE:

Dr. Daniel R. Mekonnen is a scholar of human rights with more than 15 years of experience in teaching, research, advocacy and adjudication, as well as a proven track record of academic publications. His most recent work is a co-authored book, *The African Garrison State: Human Rights and Political Development in Eritrea* (Oxford: James Currey, 2014). At the peak of his professional achievement, he has provided world-class legal service to Linklaters LLP (between January 2010 and May 2012), one of the top ten law firms globally, headquartered in London. In this regard, his input was instrumental in securing an international arbitral award of USD 85.6 million that was ultimately executed by the District Court of Zurich in Switzerland. Dr. Mekonnen obtained his primary legal education in Eritrea, where he served, among other things, as Judge of the Central Provincial Court in Asmara. His LLM in Human Rights and LLD in Public International Law are respectively from the University of Stellenbosch and the University of the Free State. Having already worked in nine different countries and several European universities, colleagues and friends call Dr. Mekonnen "an international working nomad," a befitting description to his ever-mobile life of the last few years.