In Search of *Cura Vitae*: A Theology of Healing and Hope for Ethiopia

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Abstract

This article argues that Ethiopia has seen an increase in ethnic-based atrocities and killings, creating a "society of enmity" which is in need of *cura vitae,* healing. The failure of the Church to minister healing and hope in this context has been largely brought about by political motives. This article examines and challenges the position of the Ethiopian Church amid a society of enmity and argues that the Church ought to search for *cura vitae*, healing of life, through the theology of lament and *metanoia*. A lamenting and *metanoic* Church would be able not only to enter the space of the sufferer and partake in naming what is going on, but would also enable self-questioning for authenticity that leads not only to healing but also to taking new action towards transforming the self and society for the better.

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1. Introduction

Human history, though surrounded with remarkable discoveries, often correlates with hideous conflicts, war, and destructions. World War I and II, vivid examples of the worst nightmares of human history, led to the death of 12–22 and 70–85 million people, respectively (Kaldor 2012, 27–31). The twentieth century entertained the most excruciatingly ugly encounters of ethnic-based cleansings and genocide where six million Jews were executed during the holocaust for being Jewish; one third of the Tutsi population in Rwanda, 800,000 people, were massacred within only one-hundred days, mostly with machetes (Katongole and Rice 2008, 75). Still, in the twenty-first century, conflicts are common in most parts of the world; the war between Ukraine and Russia, and the conflict in Sudan, Congo, and Ethiopia are only a few examples. Thus, the world is in a state of

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continual yearning for healing, *cura vitae* from the entanglement of terror, atrocities, and enmity.

Cura vitae is a blend of two Latin words, *cura*, meaning care, concern, and thoughtfulness and *vitae*, meaning life. *Cura vitae* is a concept borrowed from Daniël Louw (2008, 211) "about a theology of life and the healing of life from the viewpoint of Christian spirituality." This article will focus on search for *cura vitae*, particularly for Ethiopians who are in grave danger of ethnic-based atrocities. Ethiopia is home to multiethnic people—often characterized as, though contested, "Museum of peoples" (Levine[1] 1974, 21), signifying not merely communality but also cultural, religious, and ethnic heterogeneity (Hailu 2021, 31). Diversity often seems to display an aesthetic quality, but unfortunately this is not the case for Ethiopians; rather, monstrosity dominates. The political, religious, cultural, and social space is engulfed by inflated ethnic consciousness, ethnic-based tensions, conflicts, hatred, and enmity. Two main reasons stand out for this, the "divergent historical narratives" (2021, 31) and the use of ethnicity as a political weapon (Abbink 2011, 3; 2017, 2–45).

Hailu (31–32) discusses this in depth: the country's socio-political history exhibits contrasting historical narratives of the "assimilationist, Ethio-nationalist" thesis on the one hand and an "exclusivist, ethno-nationalist antithesis" on the other that exert not only a "political culture" of "ethnic-based hostility in Ethiopia" (Teklu 2021, 1, 9), but also shake the "bond of togetherness and create[s] insecurity of life" (1–2). Furthermore, Abbink (2011, 3) argues that the 1991 new state of order, ethnic federalism, which uses ethnicity as a political weapon, is the other cause of tension. The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front party (EPRDF) government utilized ethnicity as an instrument of power, politics, religion, culture, and economics. Such a political system fueled not only ethnic-based favoritism, but also exacerbated the ethnic-based hostilities and conflicts in the country.

Currently, the recent political shift from the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front party (EPRDF)[2] to the Prosperity Party (PP) brought widespread political, economic, cultural, and religious upheavals. Even though the majority looked at the change with much optimism, others did so with massive suspicion. However, the long-awaited change was overshadowed within a blink by escalated ethnic tension and unrest in different regions. The mushrooming of ethnic-based powers created instability in various parts of the country resulting in death, homelessness, starving, and an increase in rape. In the same way, the recent war between the ruling Prosperity Party (PP) and the Tigray People Liberation Front (TPLF)[3] has brought vast damage in terms of refugees, mass displacement, mass killings, ethnic-based atrocities and enmity, and countless instances of destruction and despair in the country. Thus, the country is in search of *cura vitae* now more than ever. Mohammed Girma (2021) best described it thus: "Ethiopia is at war with herself—all over again." It is thus important that she focusses on her healing.

In all these upheavals, the Church's position has been seemingly ambivalent. It has been either to ally with the government rhetoric in most cases, or to remain silent as if nothing had happened. Therefore, the

1 Donald Levine is known for his rigorous work on Ethiopian history and social life. His 1974 *magnum opus, Greater Ethiopia: The Evolution of Multi Ethnic Society*, has significant influence and acceptance in Ethiopian studies.

2 The EPRDF, the Ethiopian People's Republic Democratic Front Party, ruled Ethiopia for twenty-seven years under Meles Zenawi's rule; then Haile Mariam Dessalegn succeeded him after he passed away.

3 The previous ruling party was defeated by Prime Minister Dr. Abiy Ahmed who was a member of the ruling party in 2019.

main objective of this article is not merely to examine and challenge the response and position of the Church in such a time of national crisis, but also to call for ways of searching for a theology of *cura vitae* for Ethiopia through lament and *metanoia*. The paper argues that a lamenting Church and a *metanoic* Church can entice the sparks of healing and hope for the country. A lamenting Church can see and name what is going on and can enter the space of the sufferer to grieve as well as to take responsibility; a *metanoic* Church is capable of questioning her authenticity and can turn for a new action towards constructing societal transformation. In searching for *cura vitae*, I will be conversing with prominent African scholars, Father Emmanuel Katongole and Theodros Assefa Teklu, both of whom wrote a theological analysis for ethnic-based hostilities in Africa—Rwanda and Ethiopia respectively. Systematically merging both *cura vitae* and *metanoia* will enhance the curative aspect of life, since without *metanoia*, a lament would not proceed to hope and transformation.

The article is organized into three main sections. The first section is describing, situating, and naming the current malice in Ethiopia via interrogating Emmanuel Katongole's examples from the Rwandan genocide, and Achille Mbembe's notion of "society of enmity." The next section contains an exposition of church praxis using Katongole's postures of the Church and evaluating the posture of the Church therewith. The final section engages the task of searching for *cura vitae*: healing, anticipating, and living in hope, and regaining solidarity through the theology of lament and *metanoia*.

2. Naming the Malice: Ethiopia as "the Society of Enmity"[4]

While I am writing this, the current escalated war between the federal government (PP) and TPLF has not yet come to an end. A recent mass weapon attack on Afar civilians in five districts left many dead, disabled, homeless, and more (Addis Standard, July 2021). Ethnic-based hatred, killings, cleansing, genocides, displacement, gender-based violence, destruction of public goods, and annihilation of sacred spaces have become common phenomena in the country. According to the Ethiopian National Displacement Report 2021, 4.2 million people were internally displaced among which 3.6 million were due to the recent war. Amnesty International reported than more than 600 civilians were brutally massacred with machetes and buried *en masse* in a place called *Mia Cadra*,[5] due to their ethnic otherness. Mass graveyards on the border of Amhara and Tigray, Benishangul Gumuz, and in many districts of Oromia have been discovered from time to time—as if a decoration for the daily news. This signals what Hatzfeld (2005, 1) called the "machete season" of/for Ethiopia—heralding Ethiopia as the "society of enmity" according to Mbembe (2019, 23–24).

Mbembe (2019, 23–24) states that the "society of enmity" is often characterized by "forms of exclusion, hostility, hate movements, and, above all, by the struggle against an enemy." Shreds of evidence here and there signal the birth, growth, and maturation of a society of enmity in Ethiopia. Some agree that such a society was birthed by the ruling political

4 "Society of enmity" is a term borrowed from Achille Mbembe (2016), who uses it to refer to an era marked by "forms of exclusion, hostility, [a] hate movement, and above all, by the struggle against an enemy."
5 *Mia Cadra* is a place in Tigray near the Sudanese border; many ethnic Amhara often go there in search of jobs as day laborers.

ideology of ethnic federalism for the past thirty years, where the fourteen self-administered regions of Ethiopia were divided based on their ethnic affiliations, despite the existence of ethnic others dispersed all over the country. On top of the ethnic federalism, fabrications of distorted, twisted, and one-sided historical narratives of victimhood and domination exacerbated the ethnic-based atrocity/enmity in the country.

The society of enmity inevitably leads towards exterminating the ethnic other—the enemy. Teklu (2021, 12–20) best theorizes and illustrates such enmity using the example of the man lynched publicly by a mob. The young man was accused of carrying a bomb, which later proved not to be the case, and was hanged upside down and killed in the midst of a public rally in a place called Shashemene. According to Theodros (2021, 12), the lynched man signifies what Mbembe and Agamben's sovereignty and bare life represent. The former, sovereignty, is "the power and capacity to dictate who is able to live and who must die," (Mbembe 2019, 66). And the latter, "bare life," illustrates "a sub-human category far removed from his/her human and political rights" (Teklu 2021, 20). Nobody is held accountable for the death of the lynched man, until today. Thus, the lynched man, the mass graveyards, and the people who are still dying affirm the malice of the society of enmity in the country.

To add more, a video was recently circulating on social media which shows a person burned alive by police forces for being from a different ethnic group, political ideology, and on suspicion of spying for the TPLF.[6] In the video the police are seen not only filming using their mobile phones with a sense of patriotism, but they are also heard mocking the live burning man for taking more time to die. To add one more excruciating story, a teen boy was killed in front of a rally by police for his ethnic otherness and for being accused of showing affinity to another political group. The police carrying out the execution were telling the community that anyone who repeats the same mistake will suffer the same fate of the boy.

Teklu (2021, 9–13) conceptualizes Ethiopian politics as the "hatred of the ethnic other," characterized by a "political culture of alliance/enemy-making." According to his (16) analysis, "the political culture of alliance/enemy-making implemented in its modernized form transformed the friend-enemy distinction in politics, not merely dominating but exterminating the perceived enemy." Such political ideology has long roots in the history of Ethiopian politics. However, it intensified during the "student revolutionary movement" (18–22) and culminated in the EPRDF regime and under the Prosperity Party, where the political ideology of enemy-friend distinction fused with ethnic federalism (Abbink 2011, 3; 2017, 59).

Thus, the political act of enemy-making and enemy-naming has contributed to the society of enmity in Ethiopia. The government categorized and named the TPLF as *Junta* (organized traitors), a name given after a sudden attack made on the Northern defense force. Later, the name *Junta* was used by many to describe those who have a different political stance from the ruling party. Those who oppose the ruling party are referred to by this name. These are mostly people who adhere to or are sympathetic to the ideologies of TPLF. This marks what Bell (1975, 145–148) calls the "politicization" of ethnicity. Enemy naming is not only associated with the TPLF sympathizers, mostly Tigrayans, but is also common while addressing Oromos who are against the ruling party, labeling them *ONEG Shene*.[7]

6 The video was reported on by the Guardian in March 2022.

7 *ONEG* is the Amharic name for the OLF (Oromo Liberation Front) party starting from the 1970s which has been struggling for the liberation of the Oromia people, who according to them, have been oppressed by the Amhara, *Neftegna*, for quite a long time.

People from the ethnic Amhara have been referred to as *Neftegna*, where thousands and thousands were massacred in Oromia region just for being of the *Neftegna* ethnicity. Enemy naming, such as *Junta*, *ONEG Shene*, *Neftegna*, as Abbink (2017, 59) would argue, brought about the creation of various ethnic rebel movements and contributed vastly towards the society of enmity in Ethiopia. People labeled as *Junta* and *ONEG Shene* were characterized as bandits, terrorist, and anti-Ethiopia, fit to be ostracized and killed (Teklu 2021, 21). According to Teklu (2021, 24) "such a growing hatred will eventually develop into tragic episodes of an apocalyptic doom unless people change their evil ways," which at the end will lead to "a total degeneration of politics into necropolitics in which killing an ethnic enemy becomes a moral good and an end in itself."

Searching for *cura vitae* seems timely and vital in such a society of enmity, but what sort of cure will heal the deep wounds, give hope, and enhance the societal cohesion in Ethopia? In all this, the main question is in what ways Ethiopia will come out of such atrocity, a "society of enmity," to live together as one nation and people? What is the role of the Church in all these happenings—who is going to be the herald of hope, a beacon of healing, and an instrument of social re-cohesion? These questions will lead us to the next discussion, evaluating the position and response of the Ethiopian church in this adverse situation.

3. The Church at the Crossroads

Ethiopia is a "Christian island," an ancient claim referring to the 1700 years of Christian heritage, since the fourth and fifth century. The Ethiopian church kept her faith confession in spite of the various challenges and persecution throughout church history. The church was known not only as a center of excellence in education but also as a space of resilience, reconciliation, and solidarity. However, in spite of the country's long religious history, ethnic-based enmity currently abounds.

Girma (2021) identified four reasons through which religion contributed to the current escalated war and ethnic-based atrocities in the country. The first one is, since religious institutions are sources of a "moral compass in society," lack of peaceful "cohabitation and reconciliation" is a reflection of "moral decay in religious institutions." The second reason is the internal crisis of religious institutions concerning ethnicity; over-extended adherence to one's ethnic group is evident in most cases. The other is that "religion could be used as a mobilizing factor…. Supporters of the warring groups use their pulpits to demonize their perceived enemies and paint their leaders in a messianic light. This comes with the risk of dogmatizing ideological position and desensitizing conscience when atrocities are committed by those who are supported by a particular group." And the final point Girma identified is "religious laced conversation pushes politics from ideas that can be challenged to dogma that should be defended at any cost."

Building on Girma's analysis of the role of religion in the current situation, the Tigray war, I am going to evaluate and analyze the Church's position and response towards the current situation in the country. Limiting my scope to the evangelical churches of Ethiopia, I analyze the position, response, and attitudes of the Church using Katongole's (2008) "postures of Christianity."

Katongole in his book, *Mirror to the Church*, identified three important characteristics of Christianity while evaluating the position of the Church's engagement within a troubled society. He analyzed and evaluated the Church of Rwanda's response before and at the time of the Rwandan genocide which resembles the current state of Ethiopia, and he also gave a comprehensive evaluative framework that helps to explain the position of

the Church. The postures include the pious, the political, and the pastoral, which are the dominant postures Christianity adopts in relation to politics and economics (Katongole and Wilson-Hartgrove 2009, 90–96).

Even though Katongole asserts the inadequacy of the three postures in the African context, the strength lies in locating the stance of the Church on societal engagement. Such analyses will help to describe the current state/position/location of the Church of Ethiopia. It will help not only to locate the position of the Church but also to provide critical evaluation, thereby indicating and proposing better ways of societal engagement in a time of crisis. Katongole's (2009, 94) observation is apt:

> I have noted that the failure of the church in Rwanda—both before and during the genocide—was made possible, in part, because the church located itself neatly within the dominant story of Rwanda. Having done so, it was unable to question (let alone provide any bulwark against) the demonic formation of Hutu-Tutsi tribalism.

The first posture Katongole argues is the pious posture. This posture expresses doing right and being faithful to self-spirituality, yet being insensitive to the surrounding social ills. This posture mainly focuses on the gospel message in the heart of believers, but it fails to question the reasons for the occurring injustices. Katongole uses Mark 15:21, the story of Simon the Cyrene who carried the cross of Christ. According to Katongole, Simon is an obedient and pious Christian who obeyed the officials' order to carry the cross to Golgotha; however, he neither dared to question the reason behind the crucifixion nor was interested in knowing why it was happening. He rather kept on obeying what he was told to do by the officials (Katongole and Wilson-Harrtgrove 2009, 96–99).

Many Christians in Ethiopia seem to have a pious posture. In spite of all the atrocities and enmities that divide the country, the killings of innocent civilians, the rape and all sorts of misery, the response of the Church has only been silence upon silence. The Church was reluctant to raise her voice against the injustices in the country; rather she was busy holding press conferences and meetings that were initiated and organized by the government. Without objection, the church was feeding the displaced, as requested by the government without asking the why question, and without being bothered by the injustices and the sufferings the people were enduring. The pious posture best describes the Ethiopian Church's social engagement in the time of this grave danger.

The second posture Katongole discusses is the political posture. This posture is demonstrated by the Church's loyalty to the authority in case of social injustices. He used the example in John 18:19–22. This biblical text is about Jesus being asked by the high priest about his teaching and his disciples. Jesus's answer was that the priest knew and had heard what Jesus taught since he was speaking about it openly. However, one of the official's guards slapped Jesus for his disrespectful reply to the high priest. Using this incident, Katongole analyzed the response of the Church and its relationship with the authorities. According to Katongole (2009, 102), the political posture considers loyalty to the state/government by getting involved directly or indirectly, like the guard. "The political posture takes responsibility for the world as it is and does not worry about compromising itself by getting involved in the systems and processes of this world." Even though the execution of Jesus was political, carried out by the authorities, the religious leaders worked hard towards its fulfillment.

In addition, Katongole (2009, 104) argues that the political posture is patriotic and "stirs up religious conviction to motivate citizens of nation states to promote political ideology." This posture is an exact fit to the

Ethiopian Church. The Church of Ethiopia was patriotic and vividly allied and showed her affinity with the government in power. The Prime Minister, Dr. Abiy Ahmed, is from a known evangelical church which led many Protestant churches to believe he is God sent, the Ethiopian Messiah, as an answer to their prayer for Ethiopia's redemption. Thus, the Church was patriotic and supported the government with all the power it has, including supporting the war with TPLF. The Church has her own share in fueling the society of enmity by making allies with the government, praying for the victory of the government, justifying the war, and naming the enemy as *Junta*, *ONEG Shene*, and so on. Furthermore, a good example that illustrates the political posture of the Ethiopian Church could be the president of the Ethiopian Kale Hiwot Church (EKHC), which claims to have nine million members, who ran for election representing the ruling PP. Such closer affinity with the government, as Girma argues (2021), does not merely blur the neutral space between religion and politics but also "comes with the risk of dogmatizing ideological positions and desensitizing conscience when atrocities are committed by those who are supported by the particular group." The question is, as Bishop Kolini (Katongole and Wilson-Harrtgrove 2009, 133) asked, "How do we become a church of people who can say no to killing?"

The third posture Katongole discusses is the pastoral posture. The pastoral posture is about performing compassionate service to the afflicted, drawing from John 19:38–42 (Katongole and Wilson-Harrtgrove 2009, 99–106). In the narrative, Joseph of Arimathea requested Jesus's body and together with Nicodemus cared for the corpse, washed, aromatized, and buried it properly without asking why, and by whom he was killed. The pastoral posture is busy doing good work, the work of mercy and fulfilling immediate needs, but lacks the bravery to say no to injustices, killings, and oppression.

The Church in Ethiopia predominantly has this posture, doing mainly humanitarian work, and yet is silent and inactive to raise her voice against injustices and killings. The Church of Ethiopia is at the crossroads of either continuing to be silent and being part of the government's decisions, or to make herself a weapon of "interruption" (Katongole 2009, 114) to the "*necro-politics*" (Mbembe 2019). Interruption for Katongole and Wilson-Hartgrove (2009, 114–117) is having a "rebel consciousness" which questions the social, political, and economic situation, accompanied by timely action. Thus, from these analyses of the posture of the churches in social engagement, the Ethiopian Church fulfilled all the criteria of the three postures: the pious, political, and the pastoral posture. The Church positioned herself with the ruling party in many ways and contributed her share towards "the society of enmity." One can boldly claim that the current Ethiopian Church resembles the Rwandan Church in the wake of the 1994 genocide.

4. Searching for the *Cura Vitae*

Ethiopia needs healing now more than ever, in order to come out of the grave danger she is in. Agreeing with Girma's call (2021) "while diversity should be respected, and even celebrated, the religious teachings now should focus on healing and reconciliation," I will turn to searching for healing and hope for Ethiopia.

The previous sections brought the two main problems to the surface: Ethiopia as the society of enmity and the contribution and position of the Church towards such a society. What sort of theological move should the Church embrace to bring *cura vitae* amid a "society of enmity"—in the journey of "interrupting" and being the beacon of healing, hope, and togetherness for this country? The notion of *cura vitae*, borrowed from Louw (2008, 211), is described as being,

> about a theology of life and the healing of life from the viewpoint of Christian spirituality. It is about how new life in the risen Christ and the indwelling presence of the Spirit can contribute to the empowerment of human beings. It is about hope, care, and the endeavor to give meaning to life within the reality of suffering, our human vulnerability.

Thus, the search for *cura vitae*, the healing of life, will be analyzed using interconnected rubrics of healing and hope, drawing from the theology of lament and *metanoia*, according to Katongole and Teklu. According to Louw (2008, 75),

> healing implies the restoration of a loss and the search for integration and identity; to regain what has been lost or to attain new coping mechanisms, or the reframing of existing concepts and ideas. A holistic and comprehensive approach to healing includes physical, psychological, spiritual, contextual, and relational healing.

Thus, healing presupposes multidimensional aspects, it assumes the whole person's restoration from the loss, searching for integration and identity, and finding the means to cope and heal.

4.1. In search of healing via lament

The first step of searching for the healing of life, *cura vitae*, starts with admitting and accepting the loss and suffering: lament. As Katangole and Rice (2008, 94) aver, healing starts by learning to lament, and learning to lament is "to become people who stay near to the wounds of the world, singing over them, allowing the unsettling cry of pain to be heard." Lament is all about being ready to "become vulnerable," through sharing the wound, cry, and agony of others. In lament, not only do we learn to identify with the sufferer; we also experience a moment of self-recognition of both denials and arrogances. To lament, as Katongole (2009, 48–51) argues, is to see and name what is going on. In other words, the first step of lament is about opening our ears to hear the various voices of cries, feeling the pain and sufferings of the displaced, the raped, the diseased, the mourning, the orphaned, and the grieving.

Katongole (2009, 48–51) further explains that the cry of lament—*ekah*[8] in Hebrew and *weyo, weyene weyene* in Amharic (Ethiopian language)—is not a simplistic cry of expressing a mere emotion; rather, it expresses a multitude of emotions, questioning one's and God's existence. The Hebrew equivalent of lament, Katongole (2017, 50, 51) elaborates, is an "expression of grief and horror…a whole range of emotions—grief, guilt, anger, compassion, forgiveness, hope, despair, shame, are evoked contemplated, voiced, sifted through the cry of *ekah*." In hearing the lament, we not only hear but also partake in the lament, entering the space of the sufferer so that we can take responsibility, advocate, and cry with the sufferer. Such lament will remind us and our Church of our "tragic failure" (Katongole 2009, 48–51).

The tragic failure of the Ethiopian Church is the lack of such lament; a non-lamenting church not even aware of her failures. The cry of lament is not only concerned with being aware of failure but also of becoming vulnerable and opening a space for expressing grief as well as a space for forgiveness and hope, because in lament we share the wound and healing together. Thus, the only option for being the beacon of healing and hope

8 The cry of lament as Katongole (2017, 50, 51) describes it, unlike the English equivalent "oh, alas," the Hebrew term *ekah* has a broader aspect and the Amharic term *weyene, woyo* is equivalent to the *ekah*.

demands entering the grieving space. Entering the space of the sufferer, the Church partakes in lament via naming the pain, partaking in the cry, voicing, and advocating. Katongole (2017, 52) avers, in naming grief, "grief itself becomes owned, valorized, and thus ultimately consolable and healable." The Church must name the grief, raise her voice with the displaced, raped, the killed, the massacred, recognizing atrocities and enmities, thereby seeing the possibility of owning the suffering and eventually leading to consolation.

Lament is not only the emotional, physical, psychological, and physiological cry but also theological: a cry for help, deliverance, and consolation (Katongole 2017, 52). Unless the Church laments, healing and consolation will not come. That is the only way for the Church to regain her ability to cry out to the Lord for deliverance, consolation, and restoration, singing a psalm of lament such as Psalm 10:1–2: "God, Listen! Listen to my prayer; listen to the pain in my cries. Don't turn your back on me just when I need you desperately. Pay attention! This is a cry for help! And hurry–this can't wait! (MSG)" As Katongole (2008, 78) explains,

> Lament is not despair. It is not whining. It is not a cry into a void. Lament is a cry directed to God. It is the cry of those who see the truth of the world's deep wounds and the cost of seeking peace. It is the prayer of those who are deeply disturbed by the way things are. We are enjoined to learn to see and to feel what the psalmists see and feel and to join our prayers with theirs. The journey of reconciliation is grounded in the practice of lament…. Over and again, lament teaches us about both what must be learned and what must be unlearned in order to live well in a broken world.

Therefore, the Church needs to lament, to cry, to enter into the space of the sufferer and start to learn, to see and feel what went wrong and also to unlearn so as not to repeat her mistakes of irresponsibility, ignorance, and arrogance. To lament is an invitation to see, hear, and feel; it is also an invitation to turn to God, yearning for the better; a turn to him who is going to reconcile everything in heaven and earth.

4.2. Anticipating hope through metanoia

Black (2005) asserts that, "the spine of lament is hope." Hearing, naming, and partaking in lament is entering into the *metanoic* space of repentance, which is conversion at the same time as a change of direction (Teklu 2014, 212). According to Katongole (2008, 88), lament is "a conversion towards authentic hope." However, Katongole did not give due emphasis to *metanoia*. Rather, he only briefly discussed it as a prerequisite for hope or as part of lament. I believe *metanoia* is vital for the Church not only to find authentic hope but also as a way to engage and transform the society for the better. In lament we forgive, forget, repent, and start to begin anew. According to Teklu (2014, 214), *metanoia* "is not understood in terms of a pietistic individualistic repentance but rather as a return to first principles that transforms Christians and the world."

Drawing from Russian theologian Sergius Bulgakov, Teklu (2016, 1–24) endeavors to articulate the politics of *metanoia* as a way of Christians fostering societal engagement and transformation. Teklu further argues *metanoia* creates not only the "*metanoic* space," a call for a new action, but also constructs an "imagination of alternative society." Towards this end, Teklu pointed out transformative principles Christians should turn to. First the *metanoic* way of life endeavors to turn away from the shackles of ignorance, arrogance, bias, and vice to a changed mind, heart, and action

of a new examined way of life. This life, *metanoic* life, is embedded in the eschatological realm of the already and the not yet, thereby entering into a new relationship in this world and the coming life. This eschatological outlook has a direct implication for the way Christians engage and relate with the society they live in that is both relational and transformational. Thus, according to Teklu (2016, 7–10), Christian social engagement demands conversion, a *metanoia*, that is comprehensive and multidimensional.

The other principle Teklu (2014, 212–214) explains is that the *metanoic* life presumes a process of "self-transcendence." In other words, conversion entails an examined life, "self-authenticity," and at the same time a "withdrawal from inauthenticity." Teklu (2016, 7–12) further elaborates the meaning and significance of *metanoia* for Christians using Rowan Williams's notion of *metanoia*, as "a comprehensive self-questioning" in order to have a meaningful social engagement. A self-critical church is attentive, learning, open-minded, reads the *kairos*, and acts accordingly. Moreover, a self-critical Church works towards a continual transformation of the self, the church, and society: thus, a self-questioning church brings the self and others to the place of hope, where transformative healing takes place in daily life (Katongole 2017, 169). Since in Christian hope, "the future is more important than the past, and waiting greater than remembering" (Moltmann 2019, 174), Christians find their hope of a new beginning on the cross, the crucified Messiah of the lamenting God crying, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34). Hope is found in the forsakenness, despair, and lament of the sufferer. In finding hope, we pass from the past/present agony to the future (Moltmann 2019, 175).

However, as a church, finding hope through conversion demands knowing the time and situation very well. Moltmann is in favor of the term *kairos* rather than *chronos* since the former is about the way future "possibilities are seized and realized," and the latter is only confined to the moment. Thus, in searching for the *cura vitae* through *metanoia,* as Moltmann (2019, 174) best explains, "the *kairos* is very attentive to remembering the past to live the present but without remaining there. Rather it also culminates the future in the present as a way of starting life towards a new beginning." Teklu (2017, 175), in the same vein as Moltmann, asserted that "Christians are beginners." Such hope is endowed with the eschatological hope of the crucified God, the hope of the resurrection, and the coming God (Moltmann 2019, 175). The way of a new beginning is also a shift in identity, transcending from self-centered obsession to the metaphysical life; a shift to eschatological thinking and doing which leads to transformation (Louw 2008, 75).

Therefore, in searching for *cura vitae*, the Ethiopian Church needs to turn towards a continual self-examination to avoid becoming complacent with the *status quo*, marked by advocating not for the cry of the sufferer but for the rhetoric of the government. That way, she starts a new action of hope towards transforming the society for the better because such authentic conversion, *metanoia*, "fosters community (trans-)formation" (Teklu 2014, 7). Because as Louw (2016, 4) asserts, *cura vitae* starts with a vision, as "hope resides in vision."

If the spine of lament is hope, hope is found in lament where the constant look for healing, restoration, and eagerness for new beginnings emerges. Therefore, the search for *cura vitae*, the healing of life, is impossible without searching for healing that starts with lament. The Church should not only open her ears to hear the cry of lament but also enter the space of the sufferers and participate in the lament. The cry of lament is the anticipation of hope and a new beginning that is always founded in eschatological reality. The eschatological anticipation always leads the Church to a position of

lament and *metanoia* as she waits for the coming God while living in this world. This entails being sacrificed for others to be healed, having hope and remembering atrocities, and moving forward to "enjoy the hope of new beginnings" (Tariku 2021, 152–153).

5. Conclusion

To conclude, Ethiopia is a "society of enmity," characterized by rampant hatred, atrocities, killing, massacre, ethnic-based conflicts, and genocides, in most parts of the country. Ethnic-based killing and cleansing, either by the government or other liberators has been disrupting the country in every sphere: the economy, politics, religion, peace, and existence. The article examined and challenged the position/posture of the Church amid such atrocities and despair. The position of the Church's societal engagement has been more pious, political, and pastoral rather than prophetic. A prophetic position would say no to the social injustices, hatred, and killing in the country. On the contrary, the Ethiopian Church rather contributed towards the society of enmity either in one way or another, by allying with the government or by remaining silent. Therefore, this article calls the Church to regain her authentic self, of being the beacon of hope, healing, and solidarity, by a continual search for *cura vitae* for Ethiopia through unceasing lament and *metanoia*.

Lament not only lets the Church hear, see, know, and name what is going on, but it also reveals the Church's "tragic failure." Entering the space of the sufferer, the Church partakes in lament by naming the pain, partaking in the cry, and voicing and advocating. In naming grief, grief "becomes owned, valorized, and thus ultimately consolable and healable" (Katongole 2017, 52). But, lament is not enough; it should be accompanied with *metanoia*. Partaking in lament is entering into a *metanoic* space of repentance, conversion and, at the same time, a change of direction, since lament is "a conversion towards authentic hope." Through *metanoia*, the Ethiopian Church will engage in taking new actions, of both self-questioning and active hoping as a way to engage and transform the society for the better. A lamenting and *metanoic* Church would be able to find healing, hope, solidarity, and transformation amid hopelessness and despair. It is only then that the Lord will say, "I have seen his ways, but I will heal him; I will lead him and restore comfort to him and his mourners, creating the fruit of the lips. Peace, peace, to the far and to the near" (Is 57:18–19 NIV).

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