God’s Wrath in the Era of the Digidemic: Religious Interpretations of Covid-19 in Ethiopia

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During the first phase of the Covid-19 pandemic, many Ethiopians viewed the pandemic as an expression of God’s punishment for sin. Although such interpretations reflect historical continuity, an analysis of these sentiments and of how the pandemic unfolded in Ethiopia reveal an interesting conundrum. Whereas the Covid-19 pandemic clearly has had devastating impacts all over the world, the very experiences that historically generated interpretations of divine punishment and judgement—violent human suffering and mass deaths—have been close to absent in Ethiopia. To understand why many Ethiopians interpreted Covid-19 as an expression of God’s wrath, we develop the concept of the *digidemic*, allowing us to recognize how the circulation of images, norms, ideas, and goods, via global and digital networks—in addition to fueling fear—created connectedness and a felt proximity, wherein far-away hot-spots and phenomena were made real and near as threats to people’s livelihood and religious worldviews.

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“COVID-19 is definitely an expression of God’s anger, his punishment for all the wrongdoings and sins done by humans.... God has throughout history sent pandemics and natural disasters like earthquakes, floods, and locusts to show us his power and presence when our wrongdoings continue.”¹ These words by a senior priest in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC) reflect how many Ethiopians interpreted the Covid-19 pandemic. Many Muslims and Christians shared this sentiment, that is, that the virus was an expression of God’s wrath.

Religious responses to Covid-19 have received considerable attention during the current pandemic. Numerous news stories, articles, webpages, and reports have documented the many ways religious leaders and institutions have responded to the pandemic and its attendant mitigating efforts. Some of the reporting has highlighted how religious communities—in times of lock-down and strict social-distancing rules—have found alternative ways of worshipping. Others have focused on the supportive role religious communities have played for those who have been struggling during the pandemic² or, in this journal, on religious communities whose responses to the pandemic are characterized by conspirituality (Parmigiani 2021). Few studies, however, have paid attention to religious interpretations of the Covid-19 pandemic. The ones that do often fail to provide in-depth analyses (e.g., Egunjobi 2020; Akwa et al. 2020; Olapegba et al. 2020; Husni et al. 2020). Furthermore, researchers are often from the natural science disciplines and tend to dismiss religious beliefs and sentiments as irrational and non-scientific. One notable exception is the study by Alexander P. Isiko, a religious studies scholar from Uganda who reports findings similar to ours (Isiko 2020).

In this article, we explore the role religious interpretations played in Ethiopia during the first phase of the Covid-19 pandemic. More specifically, our focus is on how many Ethiopians, from all walks of life and from all the major religions, viewed the pandemic as an expression of divine judgement and punishment. Such sentiments are not particular to Ethiopia. One poll, for example, revealed that 63 percent of “religious Americans” believed that the pandemic is an expression of God’s punishment,³ pointing to how Africa or other contexts in the global south should not be lumped together and labeled “irrational” and illustrating

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¹Interview, Adigrat, June 27, 2020.
²Much of this is recorded by the Religious Responses to COVID-19 Project, which was initiated by the Berkeley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs at Georgetown University. The project has developed an extensive 120-page-long resource repository in the form of a living Google Docs document: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1FLxwvN6iCTxWWYOWrF9sBGLgf7v0vstS2sV7_o_1-88/edit.
³It is not entirely clear what is meant by “religious Americans.”
how so-called secular and religious epistemes co-exist, often rather seamlessly (Schor and Fingerhut 2020). Actors do not necessarily view them as mutually exclusive opposites. The secular/science-religion divide is, however, not the topic of this article, and is something we discuss elsewhere (Østebø et al. 2021). Suffice it to say that the religious interpretations that surfaced in Ethiopia—and most likely in many other places—during Covid-19 reflect how diseases often are interpreted within an episteme where the transcendent remains integral to the mundane. This is not to say that biomedicine or science more broadly have no relevance for people in this context, but rather that they do not necessarily see any contradiction between the worlds of religion and science. People’s inclusion of divine agency in making sense of the virus was for them intuitive and obvious, and it did not mean the denial of scientific knowledge.

Throughout history, interpretations that accentuated divine judgement and punishment have flourished during pandemics. Although the interpretations surfacing in Ethiopia during the Covid-19 pandemic therefore reflect historical continuity, a careful analysis of these interpretations and of how this particular pandemic unfolded in Ethiopia reveals an interesting conundrum. In the past, interpretations that featured references to God’s punishments and wrath typically emerged in a context where disasters were intense, brutal, and visceral—deeply affecting people in their everyday lives. Whereas the Covid-19 pandemic clearly has had devastating impacts all over the world, the very experiences that historically generated strong sentiments of fear—large scale public human suffering and mass deaths—have been close to absent in Ethiopia, where official Covid-19 mortality rates have remained low.  

In order to understand why interpretations that highlighted God’s wrath and anger figured so prominently among Ethiopians during the first phase of the Covid-19 pandemic, we need to look closer at some of the particularities of this pandemic. We do this using the concept of the digidemic. Although the concept of the digidemic on a few occasions has been used to explain the rapid widespread digitalization of learning (McMillan 2020), it has more recently been employed in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic. In a webinar organized by the Arne Næss Program at the University of Oslo, Anthony Giddens claimed that “we are living through the world’s first digidemic—a reflection of the age in which we now live, the digital age” (Giddens 2020). Giddens never defined the concept, however. Inspired by assemblage thinking derived from the

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4This is in no way meant to downplay, as so far has been the case within far-right circles, the seriousness of a virus that has infected over 250 million people and killed over five million, but it is clear that Covid-19 in the Ethiopian context has been far less visible and visceral than viruses in the past.
works of Gilles Deluec and Félix Guattari (1987) and Tony Sampson’s (2012) resuscitation of Gabriel Tarde’s social epidemiology, we define the digidemic as a transnational and highly contagious and affective socio-technical and biological process and a constellation of bodies, viruses, things, and ideas (Østebø 2021). Although this concept also encompasses the rapid flow of disinformation and rumors—what has been termed an infodemic (Zarocostas 2020)—the digidemic allows for a much broader analytical scope. The “demic” (meaning “people”) part of the concept is a play on the term pandemic, pointing to how not only diseases and viruses but also bodies, things, ideas, and affect spread rapidly in a digital age, transcending boundaries and “infecting” people at a global level. The “digi” prefix allows us to pay particular attention to and recognize the important role that numbers, mathematical models, and digital media have played during the current pandemic. Hence, the concept of the digidemic reminds us that Covid-19 is a biological, technological, and emotionally driven global phenomenon (cf. Peters et al. 2020, 7). We would like to emphasize, however, that the rapid spread—or the virality—that characterizes the era of the digidemic is not unconditional or universal. As we discuss at the end of this article, a careful analysis of how the Covid-19 pandemic unfolded in Ethiopia illustrates how “discourses and practices of mobilities... can be contradictory” (Costas, 2013, 1468).

The article is divided into two main parts. In the first part, we discuss how religious interpretations have surfaced during pandemics in general, and in Ethiopia during Covid-19 in particular, demonstrating how the perceptions of pandemics as expressions of God’s wrath reflect historical continuity. In the second part, we relate the current pandemic to the concept of the digidemic and highlight three phenomena that triggered fears and anxieties, fueling interpretations of Covid-19 as divine punishment in Ethiopia. The first pertains to “prophetic modeling” and digital visualization of the pandemic and its constant presence and transnational spread through conventional and social media. The second is the strong interpretation of the pandemic as a punishment for homosexuality that surfaced in Ethiopia. The third relates to the uncertainty and anxiety caused by the socio-economic impact that the pandemic and lock-downs had in a country deeply immersed in and dependent on a global economy. In the conclusion, we summarize our argument and suggest that the concept of the digidemic, in addition to being a useful concept for understanding religious interpretations of the Covid-19 pandemic in Ethiopia and elsewhere, also is of relevance for understanding how a pandemic evolves in the twenty-first century more broadly.
METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

In this article, we draw on findings from a larger, qualitative, multi-scalar, and partly digital research project conducted over a period of three months (June to September 2020) as part of the USAID-funded project: Covid-19 Impact Tracing in Ethiopia: Social, Economic, Political, and Security Ramifications. It is important to underscore that the study captured a particular moment and that dramatic changes related to the conflict in Tigray (since November 2020) and general instability are beyond the scope of this article. The study was carried out by a Norwegian-based research and advisory company in collaboration with researchers at ten universities in Ethiopia. The research team altogether consisted of sixteen members: four women and twelve men. With a focus on what was happening on the ground in the Amhara, Tigray, and Oromia Regional States, we organized the project participants into three regional teams. Each team was led by an international coordinator based outside of Ethiopia and an in-country regional coordinator based at regional universities—all of whom have decades-long field research experience in Ethiopia and in-depth knowledge of the socio-economic, political, ethnic, and religious dynamics of the country. All the field researchers, except for one who had a position within the health system, worked as lecturers or assistant professors at local universities in the three regions and had training in the social sciences or the humanities.

The initial project document contained an overview of research objectives, a breakdown of the different sectors and levels of administration we planned to assess, and a detailed list of research questions. The project took an unexpected turn when the funding organization encouraged us to leave aside our preconceived questions and rather adopt an exploratory approach. As scholars with a strong foundation in anthropology, we welcomed this opportunity. In communication with the field researchers, we emphasized the importance of anthropological methodologies such as participant observation, informal conversation, and self-reflexivity. The latter informed the way we conducted the very first round of data collection: We asked all of our field researchers to draw on and reflect upon their personal experiences during the first months of the pandemic and write about the impact of Covid-19 in their respective communities. At this initial phase of the project, we did not provide fixed questions, nor did we identify specific areas of concern. It was this very flexible and open approach that revealed the centrality of religious beliefs and practices among many Ethiopians during the Covid-19 pandemic. Although this explorative turn did not prevent us from developing question guides for semi-structured interviews, it did allow us to be flexible, to go with the
flow of information, and to let the cues from our respondents decide what to focus on and which data to collect.

In total, our field researchers conducted more than 400 interviews with a wide range of informants, including but not limited to government officials, religious leaders, business owners, public servants, health professionals, farmers, taxi drivers, and people living on the streets. In terms of religious affiliation, our informants reflected the religious landscape of the three regions. Whereas most of our informants in the Tigray and Amhara regions were Orthodox Christian, informants in the Oromia region were Muslims, Orthodox Christians, and Protestants. In addition to interviewing religious leaders from the three dominant religious traditions, we also conducted interviews with clergy from the Catholic Church.

It is important to underscore that the religious interpretations that circulated so widely among many Ethiopians during the first phase of the pandemic were not, as it is too often assumed, limited to those with a low level of formal education, to people in the rural areas, or to particularly religiously active people. Rather, these interpretations were shared by most of our informants from all religious communities—regardless of age, gender, social class, and educational level. For example, one of our informants was a man with a doctoral degree in physics, and another had a master’s degree in public health—they both adamantly claimed that the virus was sent from God. All Orthodox clergy and nearly all the Muslim religious leaders we interviewed held similar views, reinforcing such attitudes.

As already mentioned, the project also had a digital component, and through internet and social media platforms, we approached these virtual worlds as spaces where people enacted their social and political lives, as field sites conducive for social and political analysis. Prior to starting the project, we conducted preliminary assessments of social media use in Ethiopia and identified Facebook and Telegram as our main platforms and social media field sites. We encouraged all the members of our research team to follow the Facebook pages of friends, political activists, religious actors, interest groups, and local government institutions, and the information collected from these sites often became points of departure for qualitative interviews. We also established a Telegram group primarily as a methodological and collaborative tool to facilitate direct communication and sharing of data and observations between the sixteen members of the research team.

**PANDEMICS AND COVID-19 AS GOD’S PUNISHMENT**

The world has seen numerous smaller and larger epidemics throughout history and has recorded several major pandemics over the last two
millennia: The Plague of Justinian, the Black Death, the Pox or the French disease, the Asiatic cholera, the Spanish Flu, and the AIDS pandemic. Historical accounts paint grotesque pictures of these pandemics—of mass mortality, overfilled graveyards, and corpses rotting in the streets. It is estimated that the Black Death in the fourteenth century wiped out two-thirds of Europe’s population, while the Spanish Flu caused twenty million deaths in a period of seventeen weeks. In South Africa, for example, approximately 300,000 people died over a period of merely six weeks (Phillips 2008, 34). In Ethiopia, the first record of a severe epidemic dates back to the thirteenth century, and sources tell about recurrent epidemics nearly every century, with the most deadly occurring in the middle of the fifteenth century (Pankhurst 1972). Major influenza epidemics took place in 1706, in 1839, and in the aftermath of the massive rinderpest in 1889–1890. The Spanish Flu in 1918 was particularly severe, killing 10,000 of Addis Ababa’s population of 50,000. The sources depicting the Spanish Flu describe “people dying like flies,” and churches reported that “from 100 to 150 were buried daily” (Pankhurst 1975, 103, 121; 1977, 199).

Historically, the sheer violence of epidemics, their abruptness, the lack of knowledge and uncertainty about their origin, and the fact that there was no cure produced, as indicated in the introduction, were part of why these brutal events were interpreted as God’s punishment for sin. This was particularly the case among Christians. Although God was viewed as benevolent, he was nevertheless understood as omnipotent, a sovereign God whose wrath over people’s transgressions could compel him to send diseases. Many Christians also saw epidemics as a sign that the Last Day was approaching (Cunningham 2008; Cunningham and Grell 2000). Although Muslims also have interpreted pandemics and major disasters as God’s intervention, their understanding of punishment was somewhat different from that of Christians. A common view was that epidemics were decreed by the sovereign God as punishments directed at the infidels. In cases where epidemics affected Muslim societies, they were understood as something the faithful had to endure and viewed as martyrdom (Akasoy 2007, 398). Muslims, moreover, tended to view epidemics as non-contagious, causing rather passive behaviors (Dols 1979, 164; cf. Dols 1977; Stearns 2009, 1365).  

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5A disease is often defined as an epidemic when the mortality rate is higher than 10 percent, and whereas epidemics are locally confined, pandemics—as pan (Greek: “everything/everywhere”) points to—are epidemics reaching all parts of the world at a given time (Cunningham 2008, 29).  
6It should be noted that the question of contagion was discussed by the ulama (Muslim scholars), often referring to the dilemma of the Prophet Muhammad’s denial of contagion and his order not to enter a territory that was affected (Akasoy 2007, 396).
The sins and transgressions that people believed caused God’s anger were usually rather generic and typically included drunkenness, immorality, corruption, and religious laxness. Sin was moreover understood in a collective sense, as sins of the people, although there were instances where a disease outbreak was seen as punishment for particular individuals’ sins (Stearns 2009, 1366; Cunningham and Grell 2000, 261). There were also occasions where more “contextualized” transgressions were mentioned as causes for disasters and epidemics, usually connected to particular social developments or emerging phenomena. During the Spanish Flu in South Africa, for example, clergy of the Dutch Reformed Church lamented the trend of “worshipping science” instead of believing in God. The Spanish Flu was also interpreted against the “backdrop of horrendous, mechanized bloodshed” of World War I, which again was perceived as a result of “sinful science” (Phillips 2008, 34).

Such religious interpretations have also been common throughout Ethiopian history. For both Christians and Muslims, the sins that caused God’s anger were framed within local moral frameworks. On several occasions, Orthodox Christians, for example, understood epidemics as “executed through the intervention of Archangel Mikaël” (Pankhurst 1972, 37). One story tells about how an epidemic was spread by mystical beings receiving “orders from Archangel Mikaël instructing them to leave their country and [travel to] kill” (Pankhurst 1972, 48). There is, in other words, a clear historical continuity from the past to religious interpretations of the current Covid-19 pandemic. In the following sections, we will discuss the particularities of the religious interpretations in Ethiopia, focusing on what we call Ethiopian exceptionalism and the types of transgressions that were considered causes of the virus.

Ethiopian Exceptionalism

When news about Covid-19 started circulating in early 2020, interpretations that highlighted divine punishment and judgement soon emerged in Ethiopia. At first, many Ethiopians remained certain that the country would be spared from the new, rapidly spreading disease. People in the northern Tigray region thought that the Ark of the Covenant, which they believe rests in a sanctuary in the town of Axum, would protect them.7 Throughout history, the Ark has been seen and used as a protective shield against evil forces and invading armies. As one of our informants put it, “The people thought that the virus would not enter into Ethiopia because

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7Field report from Axum and Shire, Tigray region, June 16, 2020. Ethiopian Orthodox Christians believe that the Ark, or the tabot, as it is referred to locally, was brought from Jerusalem to Ethiopia by King Menelik I, the son of King Solomon (see below).
she is God’s country” (*Itiopia y’egzabihier hager nat*). Such notions point to the continued salience of an Ethiopian exceptionalism and its deep religious roots.

Ethiopia is home to one of the oldest churches in the world—the EOC—but also to a significant ancient Muslim population. The pre-Ethiopian polity of Axum was Christianized in the fourth century. Some few hundred years later, in 615, the first followers of the Prophet Mohammed sought asylum with the Christian King of Axum, and Muslim principalities were established in the region from the eighth century. Protestantism started to make inroads in the late nineteenth century as Western missionaries evangelized adherents of local Ethiopian religions.9 There is a small Catholic community (mainly in Tigray), and the main religious demography of Ethiopia is made up of approximately 34 percent Orthodox Christians, approximately 34 percent Muslims, and approximately 18 percent Protestants (Central Statistical Office 2007). Orthodox Christianity tends to dominate in the country’s northern part, in the Amhara and Tigray regions; Muslims are largely found in the eastern parts of the Oromia, Afar, and Somali regions; whereas Protestants are mainly found in the south and southwest of the country. Although the previous Marxist Derg government (1974–1991) sought to curtail the role of religion, it nevertheless continued to play an important role in people’s lives. Ethiopia has also, since the fall of the Derg government in 1991, seen an increased revitalization of religious adherence and practice—a process driven by vibrant religious reform movements within all of the major religious communities (Østebø 2008; Meron 2015).

The Ethiopian religious exceptionalism is particularly evident in the EOC. The church has always been very protective of its doctrinal particularity, producing xenophobic attitudes towards other forms of Christianity and advancing the isolation of the church and the historical Ethiopian kingdom. This isolation spurred much speculations from its European co-religionists, who referred to it as Prester John, a mysterious Christian kingdom hidden somewhere in Africa (cf. Beckingham and Hamilton 1996). Particularly important for this notion of exceptionalism is the story about Queen of Sheba’s relation to King Solomon and their offspring, Menelik I, found in the national epic *Kebre Negast* (Brooks 1996).10 The story depicts how Menelik I, by

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8 Field report from Bale, Oromia region, June 26, 2020.
9 Recent decades have seen the arrival of numerous Pentecostal churches, which increasingly have attracted members from the EOC (Haustein 2011).
10 The book was most likely written in the thirteenth century and translated into English in 1996.
snatching the Ark of the Covenant from the temple in Jerusalem and bringing it to Ethiopia, laid the foundation for the divinely ordained Solomonic dynasty, where Ethiopia replaced Israel as the promised land, and where Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity was said to be superior to other Christian confessions.

As indicated above, the early interpretations of Covid-19 in Ethiopia were clearly reflective of this Ethiopian exceptionalism. A general sentiment shared by interviewees from the three major religious communities was that Covid-19 was a “white man’s” disease that struck the Western world due to their immorality and sin. One interviewee declared that “God wouldn’t let us [Ethiopians] die by this virus, because this is a disease created by God to punish the ‘sinners.’” More specifically, the pandemic was, as we will return to in detail later, interpreted as “God’s punishment upon gays and lesbians” in the Western world, a reaction to the acceptance of homosexuality and the promotion of LGBTQ rights. Only a few of our informants argued against the view that Covid-19 was God’s punishment directed only at the West. For example, one Orthodox priest in the Tigray region claimed that the pandemic was a result of transgressions by “humans around the world who had upset God.”

Sins and Transgressions

When the first Covid-19 case was registered in Ethiopia on March 13, 2020, it became clear that God’s punishment was not limited to the Western world, making it necessary to adjust the initial interpretation of the virus as a “white man’s” disease. Ethiopia was, in other words, no longer exempt from God’s wrath and punishment. When community transmission was confirmed, a new set of sins—both generic and context specific—emerged to explain the spread of the virus. One Orthodox priest in the Tigray region pointed to how the virus attacked people indiscriminately and argued that this proved Covid-19 was an act of God: “It affects people regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, age, social status, wealth, or educational background. Such pandemics are sent from God... to show us his power and his presence when we sin against him.”

As in the past, people generally referred to sins causing God’s anger in rather generic terms. The aforementioned Orthodox priest mentioned issues such as “lies, gossip, drinking too much alcohol, killing each other,

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11 Field report from Bahr Dar, Amhara region, June 16, 2020.

12 Field reports from Adigrat, Tigray region, June 16, 2020; Bahr Dar, Amhara region, June 16, 2020; interview, Gimbi, Oromia region, July 3, 2020; interview, Nekemte, Oromia region, July 5, 2020.

13 Interview, Adigrat, Tigray region, June 27, 2020.

14 Interview, Adigrat, Tigray region, June 27, 2020.
disrespecting each other... chewing khat, women being immodestly dressed, and people having sex before marriage.” Another priest blamed consumption of food that is prohibited in the Bible, reflecting the strict— and Judaic inspired—dietary taboos among Orthodox Christians. One Muslim leader in the Amhara region argued that the virus was “God’s punishment for young people not respecting their elders and parents.”

Other informants blamed the lack of piety, laxness, and failure to attend prayers in mosques and churches for triggering God’s anger. The question of God as a punisher, yet a benevolent God, occasionally emerged during our interviews. One Orthodox Christian emphasized God’s unyielding love for humankind:

When God brings punishment for humans, it is an act of love, intended to benefit us. God does not take revenge like humans do when they are angry. The end-goal of God’s actions is love. For example, when God attacked the people in Sodom, he did that because he knew they would not repent. Corona is a wakeup call to humans to come back to their faith and repent and confess. So, God brought corona to help us come to our senses before it is too late.

Our informants also referred to more “contextualized” sin, and many mentioned ethnically motivated killings and conflicts that have haunted Ethiopia over the last years. For example, informants in the Amhara region related the Covid-19 outbreak in Ethiopia to the inter-ethnic clashes between minority groups and the majority population in the region and to violence between Christians and Muslims. A Protestant minister from the Oromia region made similar references, making a connection between God’s anger and the churches’ silence when it came to human rights violations.

Perceived heresies have historically also emerged as an explanation for God’s anger. During a cholera epidemic that took place in Ethiopia in the fifteenth century, conversion from Orthodox Christianity to Catholicism was perceived to be the “sin” that caused God’s punishment (Pankhurst 1972, 54). Similar interpretations circulated among Ethiopians during the Covid-19 pandemic. An Orthodox priest in the Tigray region argued that Covid-19 was God’s punishment for people leaving “the mother church,” lamenting over how Orthodox Christians were flocking to Protestant

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15Khat is a light stimulant and widely used in Ethiopia.
16Interview, Axum, Tigray region, beginning July 2020.
17Interview, Kelela, Amhara region, July 8, 2020.
18Interview, Bahr Dar, Amhara region, July 1, 2020.
19Interview, Western Shoa, Oromia region, July 15, 2020.
and Pentecostal churches. A Muslim leader in the Amhara region connected the pandemic to people leaving old religious practices, making implicit reference to the expansion of Muslim reform movements such as Salafism. \(^{21}\) In the Oromia region, where ethno-nationalist sentiments and the question of using the Oromo language in church services have created divisions with the EOC, some Orthodox priests argued that this was the reason for God’s anger and that he had sent the virus to punish those who were working to split the church. \(^{22}\)

The only exception to the interpretation of the virus as God’s punishment for sin came from the Catholic clergy we interviewed. One priest argued that “according to the Catholic doctrine, God has no intention to punish people through pandemics.” \(^{23}\) He further claimed that no religious leader within the Catholic Church believed that Covid-19 was sent from God as punishment for the sins of human beings. Another Catholic priest said that the local church followed the directives from the Vatican, which called the congregations to adhere to public health guidelines. \(^{24}\)

The Protestant clergy we interviewed were more ambiguous, and many struggled to reconcile the idea of a benevolent God with the notion of God as a punisher. Although they did not rule out that Covid-19 could be an expression of God’s wrath, some Protestant clergy’s emphasis on a loving God who had sent Christ as a sacrifice for sin created a dilemma. A pastor from one of the largest Protestant churches argued that it was not God who brought the pandemic. Rather, he said, Covid-19 was a result of “man’s wrong-doings.” \(^{25}\) The Protestant clergy we talked to were also more open to bio-medical explanations, reflecting their exposure to secular education. As noted by Donald Donham, European and American missionaries, with their emphasis on secular schooling and health care, played an important role in introducing a so-called modernist episteme in Ethiopia (Donham 1999). It is, at the same time, interesting to note that the above-mentioned pastor also argued that the spread of Covid-19 in the West was a result of the Western world’s “misuse of wisdom and technology to maximize their pleasure without considering the will of God.”

In correlation to divine intervention and punishment, some of the Orthodox clergy claimed that Covid-19 was a sign that the Last Day and time of judgement were approaching. Such eschatological sentiments

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\(^{20}\) Interview, Adigrat, Tigray region, June 27, 2020.

\(^{21}\) Interview, Kelela, Amhara region, July 8, 2020.

\(^{22}\) The liturgical language in the EOC has been Amharic—and the ancient Geez—regardless of the language of the local congregation. Field report from Robe-Bale, Oromia region, June 16, 2020.

\(^{23}\) Interview, Adigrat, Tigray region, July 2, 2020.

\(^{24}\) Interview, Mekelle, Tigray region, July 4, 2020.

\(^{25}\) Interview, Gimbi, Oromia region, July 3, 2020.
were shared by Christian Orthodox informants across the three regions, who frequently related the virus to the coming of the Anti-Christ and the number 666, the biblical number for the Anti-Christ. Interestingly enough, Muslims also referred to the number 666. One Muslim informant explained that there were six letters in the word corona, and that the sum of all the letters added up to 66 (C = 3, O = 15, R = 18, O = 15, N = 14, and A = 1). In combination, these numbers would become 666.

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Prophetic messaging has been relatively common during epidemics in the past and has also been reported in a few cases during the Covid-19 crisis (Isiko 2020). In Ethiopia, however, it has nearly been absent. One exception was Israel Dansa, a Pentecostal preacher, who told his followers, “When I was praying last night, I saw the Spirit of God putting the coronavirus in my hand just like this water. Then when I put the word out, I saw the virus completely burned into ashes.” This prophecy gained much attention and was widely spread on social media (Yibeltal 2020). In addition, a few Pentecostal preachers initially prophesized that the pandemic would end in April 2020, but as the pandemic continued to surge, such prophecies disappeared. Such incidents are not particular to Ethiopia; the American tele-evangelist Kenneth Copeland declared that the “wind of God” would destroy the virus (Woodward 2020), and the late President Magufuli of Tanzania proclaimed he had crushed the virus with the help of God (BBC News 2021).

DIGIDEMIC INTERPRETATIONS

Although the religious interpretations detailed above reflect historical continuity, Ethiopia did not experience widespread visceral suffering and deaths during the first phase of the Covid-19 pandemic. Reflecting the country’s limited testing capacity, confirmed cases remained low, with the first death registered on April 6, 2020. In early June, the number of detected cases had reached 1,000 and by the end of our research period (September 8), the reported number of Covid-19-positive cases and deaths were approximately 52,000 and 809, respectively. Although these numbers do not reflect the actual prevalence of Covid-19 in Ethiopia, considering that Ethiopia’s population is estimated to be over 110 million, they do indicate slow spread. The visceral impacts of the virus—in the form of morbidity and mortality—were also low. None of our researchers reported

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26 Similar references were also made in other parts of Africa (Isiko 2020).
27 Interview, Bishoftu, Oromia region, July 15, 2020
28 The demographics of Ethiopia, where over 70 percent is under the age of twenty-nine and only ca. 3 percent is older than sixty-five, partly explains what appears to be a low COVID-19 prevalence in Ethiopia. The fact that young people tend to be asymptomatic is an indication that transmission was much higher than recorded – and largely undetected.
overfilled hospitals, and there were no indications of a dramatic increase in deaths and burials.

This means that few Ethiopians had direct experience with the virus. Yet, deep-seated fears of transmission were quickly spreading. Rumors and alerts about potential infections—submitted via social media and an emergency hotline—were submitted to the police or health authorities and were investigated by so-called Covid-19 rapid response teams. Accompanied by the police and fully dressed in personal protective equipment, the rapid response teams arrived at the residences of Covid-19-positive or suspected individuals in ambulances with flaring sirens, and stirred much fear, suspicion, and stigma. Suspected and confirmed cases were ostracized by their local communities. People who were forced to quarantine at home were left on their own, often without food, as neighbors and family were terrified of coming close to them.

To make sense of why interpretations that highlighted God’s wrath and anger nevertheless figured so prominently among Ethiopians, we draw on the concept of the digidemic. It is a concept that destabilizes common assumptions about clearly demarcated, separate domains, allowing us to rethink common binaries such as religion-science, local-global, and rational-emotional and to recognize the messy world we live in—a world where people, things, ideas, beliefs, viruses, numbers, and advanced technology are affectively tangled together as if they were a mélange of multiple, interdependent threads. A particularly important aspect of the digidemic is that of simultaneity and how the digidemic effectively transcends spatial and temporal boundaries and erases distance. Constant and unrestricted flows make that which is distant near and real as well as producing notions of “not yet here” as potential threats. An in-depth analysis of the many ways the current Covid-19 pandemic operates as a digidemic is beyond the scope of this article, and we have limited our focus to the role of the media and the modeling and visualizing practices that have flourished during the Covid-19 pandemic, the idea that homosexuality is a sin and potential threat, and how the pandemic’s effect on the global economy produced local anxieties.

Media, Models, and Dashboards

In Ethiopia, as in the rest of the world, conventional and social media played a key role, acting as one of the many “modes of transmission” (Østebø 2021, 100) or vectors for the Covid-19 digidemic, enabling its rapid spread. The virus became a fixed feature of daily news, and updates about the spread and consequences of the pandemic constantly and instantly crossed the globe. Similar to how academic journals allowed open
access to research on the virus (Peters et al. 2020), major news outlets removed paywalls and granted access to news about the pandemic. The purpose was, in other words, to actively spread Covid-19 information. And it was in the form of news reports that the Covid-19 virus first reached Ethiopia. Pictures of overfilled hospitals in countries such as Italy were transmitted via TV and other media, visualizing a disaster emerging thousands of miles away. Distance was, in other words, manipulated by the digidemic’s ability to create proximity and simultaneity, bringing the virus and its destructive capacity within virtual reach. Such simultaneity was further accelerated by how digitalization of media consumption allowed for a nonstop flow of news and information. Social media further intensified this, all creating and exacerbating strong sentiments of fear.

Another aspect of the flow of information through social media, mainly due to their decentered nature, was the flourishing of conspiracy theories. The appearance of such theories has been common during pandemics in the past (Kaufman 2020), but the role of the digital media has enabled the production of a global conspiracy discourse—reaching Ethiopia through the internet and social media platforms. Such theories were further spread through stories told and retold, and added a new element to the religious interpretations of the pandemic. Intrinsic to them was the question of who had created the virus, with blame and accusations being directed towards specific individuals situated beyond the immediate Ethiopian context. Although these actors also have invested in, and in various ways have asserted influence in Ethiopia, they are first and foremost known for their global involvement. Prominent figures like Bill Gates and Jack Ma, the owner of the Alibaba online shopping site, were accused of creating and spreading the virus to reduce the world’s population. Some informants also argued that Bill Gates was trying to develop a vaccine containing a microchip that would later enable him to control the world’s population. Others claimed that Bill Gates was using the virus to prepare the way for the anti-Christ/the false Messiah, and one Orthodox priest explicitly claimed that the microchip “would totally diminish the consciousness of humans to fear God and register new members to the kingdom of anti-Christ.”

Again, it is important to emphasize that the Bill Gates conspiracy theories that circulated in Ethiopia reflect a widespread global phenomenon (Thomas and Zhang 2020). For example, a poll conducted in the United States in May 2020 found that that 44 percent of Republicans and 19 percent of Democrats believed that Gates was linked

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29 Interview, Gondar, Amhara region, July 3, 2020; interview, Western Shoa, Oromia region, July 15, 2020; interview, Nekemte, Oromia region, July 5, 2020.

30 Interview, Nekemte, Oromia region, July 5, 2020.
to a plot to use vaccinations as a pretext to implant microchips into people (Romano 2020).

The potential spread of the virus in Ethiopia and elsewhere was, to a considerable extent, based on mathematical modeling. Visualized through graphs, maps, and tables, this “digital reality” conveyed “visions of a catastrophic future” (Caduff 2015, 7). Although various forms of models throughout history have been used to explain and predict “real-world” phenomena, inform policy, and govern human behavior, indicators and mathematical modeling have, over the past decades, emerged as a hegemonic form of knowledge and a tool of governance. Mathematical models are highly complex and depend heavily on big data and computer simulations. In many cases, the mathematical formulas and the codes used in modeling are so intricate that the scientists who themselves are part of the interdisciplinary teams that produce the models cannot fully understand them. Nevertheless, the power, prestige, and authority of such modern-day prophets and the “imaginative enactments” that they produce in their modeling prompt “people to lay their lives into the hands of such experts.” As “prophets,” modelers “claim to see what others cannot see” (Caduff 2015, 3). The Covid-19 pandemic has, perhaps more than anything else, revealed the effects of this model reality, and despite the high degree of uncertainty and the “black box” nature of the models, their predictive power remains strong. They have become “domesticated” (Montgomery and Engelmann 2020) and gone viral during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The virus’s spread and its impacts were moreover visualized on colorful dashboards and communicated through the internet or social media platforms. Different from the models’ pandemic prophecies, these dashboards were real-time digital displays of transmission and death. Although they enabled everyone to follow the trajectory of the virus in every corner of the world, the dashboards conveyed numbers—numbers that remained disembodied and abstract.

Ethiopia, like the rest of the world, created its own national dashboard. Managed by the Federal Ministry of Health and the Ethiopian Institute of Public Health, the dashboard featured the number of national daily COVID-19 tests, new positive cases, deaths, and recoveries, and provided information about the number of patients in treatment centers and intensive care units. Daily updates about the virus were also made available on the Ministry of Health’s Facebook page and Twitter feed. 31 Many of our informants preferred the social media platforms, arguing that they were

31https://www.covid19.et/covid-19/; https://www.facebook.com/EthiopiaFMoH; https://twitter.com/ethiopia_health.
more accessible and provided updated and timely information. Daily reports were posted around lunch time, and informants told us how they were eagerly waiting for the release of the numbers. Most of our informants mentioned social media, particularly Facebook, as their main source of Covid-19 information, emphasizing the readily available and variety of information. Some also said that they did not trust the mainstream media, which they viewed as being under government control. As a result, the constant flow of news reporting on the virus's spread exposed people to a simultaneous transmission of a phenomenon that encapsulated the whole country, creating an imagined destiny for all.

The daily, graphic updates on how the virus was spreading across the world is a key feature of the digidemic, generating simultaneity and erasing temporal and spatial distance in ways that would have been unthinkable a few decades ago. Although this form of visualization does not display visceral death and suffering, the abstract disembodied representations of numbers, together with the potential futures models convey, nevertheless had the potential to evoke strong emotional sentiments. The dashboards displayed the virus’s unrelenting spread, constituted in many ways the confirmation of the predictive models, and served to create powerful notions of fear in Ethiopia and beyond. They created an impression of an unavoidable and immanent disaster. The virus was there, but not yet there, and although many Ethiopians hoped to be spared, one could never be certain.

The abstract, digital representation had, on the other hand, a numbing effect, making it hard for many to really grasp the reality hidden in the numbers. Interesting here is the media’s deliberate attempts to circumvent such effects by applying even stronger visualizing tools. For example, when the number of Covid-19-related deaths reached 500,000 in the United States, the Washington Post displayed an animation of all fatalities in the form of bumper-to-bumper busses stretching from New York to Philadelphia (Galocha and Berkowitz 2021).

The power that these colorful dashboards had in painting a picture of the Covid-19 pandemic in Ethiopia became apparent when the Ethiopian government—due to political unrest—completely shut down the internet. The shutdown, which lasted from June 20 to July 14, meant that the daily dashboard reports suddenly were unavailable. Although government TV and radio stations continued to provide daily Covid-19 reports, these were aggregated national reports and did not convey regional and locally specific data. Our informants described how the lack of daily alerts through social media led to less communication among community members and to reduced interest in the virus's trajectory. This ultimately decreased their understanding of the severity of the
disease, leading to a dramatic drop in compliance when it came to social distancing rules and other mitigating efforts. While new recorded Covid-19 cases almost doubled during this period (from 605 to 1068 cases), for most of the population, the pandemic ceased to exist. As one of our informants explained: “Since there was no flow of information, people completely ignored Covid-19.”

Fearing the Spread of Homosexuality

One of our most interesting findings was that nearly all our informants mentioned homosexuality as the key sin that had triggered God’s wrath. Although religious adherents historically have connected homosexuality to disasters (often with reference to Romans 1), the interpretation that surfaced in Ethiopia during the Covid-19 pandemic was somewhat peculiar. As we have discussed above, homosexuality as a triggering sin was initially related to the acceptance of LGBTQ rights and legalization of same-sex marriages in the Western world, when the virus was seen as the “white man’s disease.” In addition to reflecting the notion of Ethiopian exceptionalism, the emphasis on homosexuality could possibly be seen as a form of scapegoating. Scapegoating is an enduring historical phenomenon, which often is triggered by the social disruptions that pandemics and major catastrophes generate. Disease outbreaks have often been blamed on minority groups (such as Jews during the Black Plague). This has also been the case during the Covid-19 pandemic. Slurs such as “Kung-flu” or the “China-virus” have, for example, been used to put the blame on China.

The emphasis on homosexuality was, in the Ethiopian context, arguably something other than scapegoating. None of our informants placed the blame on members of the LGBTQ community themselves but referred to homosexuality in general as a sinful practice. Also important was that it was not the existence of same-sex practices within Ethiopia that triggered divine punishment. Rather, most of our informants believed, as noted, that it was the acceptance and legalization of homosexuality and same-sex marriages in the Western world that had caused God’s anger, causing the Covid-19 outbreak. The sinners were, as one of our informants explained it, “those peoples and countries who allowed the gays and lesbians to freely live this lifestyle.” There was only one informant, an Orthodox priest, who attributed the increase in community transmission

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32 Interview Gondar, Amhara region, July 15, 2020.
33 A similar emphasis on homosexuality as the cause for the spread of the virus has also been noted in other places in Africa, such as in Uganda (Isiko 2020).
34 Field report from Bahr Dar, Amhara region, June 16, 2020.
to the spread of same-sex relations in parts of Ethiopia. Notions of the foreignness of homosexuality were also echoed during a national prayer session at the presidential palace in early April 2020, where the head of the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council, Hajji Umar Idris, attributed the pandemic to, among others, homosexuality, which he condemned as a Western phenomenon (Borkena 2020a).

Although the focus on homosexuality demonstrates how an emerging and novel phenomenon contradicting accepted religious norms is imagined as the cause for God’s wrath, the interesting point is, however, how something beyond and outside Ethiopia figured so dominantly in local interpretations of Covid-19. Existing taboos and legal prohibition have made homosexuality and other forms of sexual diversity highly secretive. For many Ethiopians, homosexuality is therefore rather abstract. At the same time and as the above discussion reveals, there is an acute awareness about same-sex relations and the LGBTQ rights movement among Ethiopians, an awareness made readily available through people’s exposure to international human rights discourses, news, and global popular culture communicated through digital media. Although often assumed absent in Ethiopia, the very existence of homosexuality and the West’s acceptance of LGBTQ rights have made it real as a threat that, just as a virus, potentially could spread there.

The threat of something perceived to be absent, foreign, and distant has further been amplified by how LGBTQ advocacy efforts increasingly have targeted Africa and the broader global south. This has reciprocally intensified local resistance aimed at containing the spread of something viewed as inherently sinful. A 2007 Pew Research Poll revealed that 97 percent of Ethiopians believed the country should prohibit homosexuality. Religious leaders and religious institutions across the African continent have been particularly vocal in this battle, accusing human rights organizations and LGBTQ activists of Western overreach and neo-colonialism (Dreier 2018).

In Ethiopia, this resistance feeds again into the idea of exceptionalism and the national pride of having never been colonialized. Whereas the international NGO community, including major religious organizations, have been advocating for legislations that would de-criminalize homosexuality and recognize the rights of sexual minorities in Ethiopia, local religious leaders have remained persistent in their resistance. In 2008, the heads of the EOC, Catholic, and Protestant churches adopted a common

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35 Interview, Gondar, Amhara, July 3, 2020.
36 Under Ethiopian law, homosexual acts (sodomy) are punishable with jail terms of up to fifteen years, but not homosexuality as such.
resolution against homosexuality, condemning it as “the pinnacle of immorality.” Ethiopia’s national pride and sovereignty have also come to the forefront in the relationship between Ethiopian churches and their international partners. In 2013, the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY) marked its independence by severing its ties with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Church of Sweden—both long-time partners of the EECMY—as an expression of opposition to the inclusive and pro-LGBTQ policies that these churches had adopted (“Lutheran Church in Ethiopia Severs Ties with ECLA” 2013). The fact that these foreign churches had been instrumental, through their mission efforts, in the establishment of the EECMY and that the church benefits from continued financial support from them makes this severing of ties significant.

Part of a Global Economy

Although Ethiopia has been spared the visceral violence and death that characterized earlier pandemics, this does not mean that the pandemic had no impact on the lives of Ethiopians. The global efforts to mitigate and contain the Covid-19 virus, such as lockdowns and travel restrictions, have brought their own set of suffering and hardship in the form of mass unemployment and disruption of people’s livelihood, in turn causing significant stress among many Ethiopians.

Such global measures have been a stark reminder of how precarious and fragile the interconnected and global capitalist economy is. They also demonstrate that global flows are not “open-ended” and unlimited but go “hand in hand with closure” (Geschiere and Meyer 1998, 602). The flows and mobilities that emerge as part of the digidemic are fleeting and changing. It is a “virality that includes, welcomes, and benefits some, whilst excluding, exploiting and oppressing others” (Østebø 2021, 154). In other words, the movement of ideas, models, numbers, and goods are not frictionless, and there are economic, technological, and ideological barriers that prevent unlimited and uncontrolled transmission. These closures have both unveiled and exacerbated social inequalities and inequities, demonstrating that the virality that characterizes the era of the digidemic is conditional and uneven.

At the time of our research, the drop in income from export, tourism, and remittances were having devastating effects on Ethiopia’s economy. This led, in turn, to reduced household purchasing power, rising unemployment, and soaring inflation—reaching 22 percent in July 2020 (Borkena 2020b). Worst hit where those working in the tourism industry and its associated supply chain of curio-/craft-making and shops, entertainment, and restaurants. The booming urban construction industry was
also hurt. As many companies ceased their operations, tens of thousands of day laborers lost their jobs. The downturn also affected the informal economy—petty trade, street hawkers, shoe-shiners—and those employed in this sector were young and from out-of-town with no safety net in their temporarily urban location. In a country such as Ethiopia, with a very weak social welfare system, the uncertainty for those forced into unemployment was significant. As expressed by one of our informants, “We are living on our savings. For how long can we live in such a way? Only God knows! […] Hunger will kill us after we finish our money.”

Those affected turned to coping mechanisms, such as relying on loans and assistance from family and friends, cutting expenses, turning to begging, returning to their home villages, or, in some cases, even prostitution and criminal activities. Adding to this was the uncertainty created by the government’s decision to postpone elections—scheduled for August 2020—and serious inter-communal violence in parts of the country in July. This has been further exacerbated by the ongoing civil war and its dramatic economic consequences.

Coupled with dystopian forecasts for possible economic recovery, these political, social, and economic realities generated deepfelt anxieties. The fact that all this was brought upon them as a result of macro-economic forces that were incomprehensible and beyond one’s reach added to the sense of frustration and hopelessness. This reinforced people’s interpretations of the pandemic as caused by God.

CONCLUSIONS

As we have argued, the notion of Covid-19 as God’s punishment dovetails with similar interpretations during pandemics in the past. The scale and brutality of such occurrences have generated strong sentiments of fear that have also been noticeable in recent years, for instance during the 2015 Ebola epidemic (Robson 2020). The effect of the pandemic on Ethiopian society and religious beliefs can thus be understood as reflections of deep-rooted historical religious ideas where major disasters such as pandemics, droughts, and locust swarms always were interpreted in this way. There is nothing unusual about such interpretations, and as we also have argued, this inclusion of the supernatural in the mundane does not exclude other epistemes. In Ethiopia, as in many other contexts, the immanent reality is not a disenchanted one, but one where “everything is part of a single world, a continuum where there is no break, radical or otherwise. It’s all earth, no heaven. All here, no there” (Engelke 2015, 90).

37 Interview, Axum Tigray region, July 15, 2020.
However, the current pandemic itself has been far less visceral and brutal than many of those in the past, yet still has produced fear and visions of a catastrophic future. This can, as we have argued, be understood as the outcome of a reinforcing interaction between deep-rooted historical religious ideas, new phenomena produced by an increasingly digital and interconnected modern world, and a particular socioeconomic environment. By focusing on the digitalization and visualization of the pandemic, the fears and anxieties that the global LGBTQ movement have generated in Ethiopia, and the economic impact of global Covid-19 mitigating efforts, we have argued that the concept of the *digidemic* can serve as a useful analytical lens for understanding the religious interpretations that circulated in Ethiopia during the first phase of the Covid-19 pandemic. This concept allows us to recognize how the circulation of images, norms, ideas, and goods via global and digital networks creates unprecedented connectedness and a felt proximity wherein far-away hot spots and phenomena are made real and near as threats to people’s livelihood, well-being, and existence.

Although our study is restricted to a particular locality and captures a specific period of the Covid-19 pandemic in Ethiopia, we hope it spurs similar enquiries in other contexts. We moreover believe that the issues we have presented in this article and the theoretical framework we have suggested provides opportunities to seek alternative suggestions for the continued, and possibly enhanced, relevance of religion in a world that, in addition to privileging scientific explanations, is characterized by an increasing engagement with digital and virtual worlds.

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