In this edition of Focus on Horn of Africa, Hawd radio, Dr. Jon Abbink talked about religion's development in Ethiopia. In Ethiopia, as in other parts of Africa, relations between Christians and Muslims show a new dynamic under the impact of both state policies and global connections. Religious identities are becoming more dominant as people's primary public identity, and more ideological in the last twenty three years.

This development has ramifications for the 'public sphere', where identities of a religious nature are currently presented and contested in a self-consciously polemical fashion. This shared space of national political and civic identity may become more 'fragmented' and thus lend itself to conflict and ideological battle. This article examines recent developments in the polemics of religion in Ethiopia, and the possible role of the state as custodian (or not) of an overarching civic order beyond religion, as well as the emerging rivalries between communities of faith. A crucial question is what social effects these polemics will have on communal relations and patterns of religious coexistence. Polemics between believers have a long history in Ethiopia, but a new and potentially problematic dynamic has emerged which may challenge mainstream believers, their inter-group social relations, and Ethiopian state policy. Polemics in Ethiopia express hegemonic strategies and claims to power, and are rapidly evolving as an ideological phenomenon expanding in public space. The secular state may need to reassert itself more emphatically so as to contain its own erosion in the face of assertive religious challenges.