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# The Interplay between Religion and Society: Towards a Hermeneutic of Covenant

## Summary and Conclusion

The intention of this study was to make an inquiry into the notion of covenant as a hermeneutical tool that offers a framework to rethink the society-religion nexus in Ethiopia. This inquiry arose from a socio-political and cultural dilemma in the Ethiopian history. On the one hand, Ethiopia is a deeply religious society whose worldview is greatly shaped by religious beliefs and practices. Moreover the application of religion in social and political reality has left some positive legacies. On the other hand, history has proven, time and again, that the application of religion in the social and political reality of Ethiopia has produced as many problems as benefits.

I therefore started wondering: What would be a suitable conceptual framework to resolve this apparent tension evident in the religion-society nexus in Ethiopia? Because the notion of covenant appears to be of basic importance to the Ethiopian identity I later rephrased this question as: How could we reformulate this concept which is already deeply embedded in the culture in such a way that it addresses the insufficiencies in Ethiopian conception without radically disentangling ourselves from Ethiopian culture and identity? Before answering this question, I asked: what actual models of interplay between religion and society were and are there in Ethiopia?

In order to answer this question, I made an in-depth exploration of three paradigms of the interplay between religion and society in Ethiopia. I try to unravel each paradigm in terms of its historical background, worldview (paying especial attention to metaphysics, philosophical anthropology and the idea of social organization), before subsequently making some critical and hermeneutical observations.

The first paradigm I discussed is the paradigm of wax and gold. This paradigm takes its name from a literary motif – *sem-ena-werq* tradition – which plays with a double layered meaning. Central to my analysis is a dualistic understanding of the created reality that this paradigm takes as its philosophical basis. As to the metaphysics of its worldview, I showed the complexity of its nature. The understanding of the relationship between God and the world has both monistic and dualistic features. God is seen as the creator of everything. At the same time the material world has a certain degree of independence over against God. As a result, a dualistic dichotomy between what is thought to be sacred and profane is the hallmark of the metaphysics of the wax and gold paradigm. Connected to this is the nature of its philosophical anthropology. The human person is thought to be a battleground between the sacred and profane. In the paradigm which elevates the ‘sacred’ over the ‘secular’, the main *gadel* (battle) of the human person has to do with the disowning of him or herself from the secular. This requires partially, and at times, totally, refraining oneself from involvement in the material reality, and enriching the spiritual aspect of human life by suppressing ‘worldly desires’ such as a pursuit of *tigab* (satiety) which is often associated with autonomy. The paradigm presents a unique understanding of society. Given its dualistic philosophy, one expects the dualistic thinking to characterize its social understanding. However, one can identify in its understanding of society an odd combination of dualism and monism. Namely, politics – a seemingly secular endeavor – jumps its secular boundary to be considered as sacred. The reasons are that, for one thing, the nation is considered to be a nation of covenant having a unique relationship with and receiving a special promise from

God. For another, the kings are considered to be anoints of God and the church has also reckoned itself not only to be the custodian of the spiritual well-being of the nation, but also to be a powerful role player in influencing public agendas.

While tracing the historical background of the paradigm of wax and gold, I have discovered that such an enigmatic understanding of society could have been caused by two seemingly irreconcilable religious and philosophical traditions: Platonic dualism and Jewish monism. The Jewish influence connects with the fact that Ethiopia is mentioned in the Bible several times. For its later development of great importance is an influential myth – Kebe Negest. This takes the biblical story about the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon as a starting point but then embellishes it to fulfill its own agenda: linking the Ethiopian royalty to that of Israel and the church to Judaism with the aim of cementing the supposedly Solomonic Dynasty in Ethiopia. The Greek influence on the other hand derives from the origin of the EOC: the Alexandrian tradition in which Platonic philosophy made a considerable influence in terms of shaping their theology. Instead of trying to cancel the one tradition by espousing the other, the wax and gold tradition opted to maintain pragmatism to combine both Judaic and Greek philosophical elements and use them depending on the situation in question.

In the Critical Observations I elaborated on this odd mixture of two different traditions. First I briefly discussed the characteristics of platonic dualism and how they were adapted to the Ethiopian situation. Then I discussed the nature of Hebraic monism as exemplified on the one hand in the thought of the Jewish thinker Ben Sira and on the other hand in the relationship between politics and religion in the history of Israel. Although the kings in the line of David and Solomon had a special promise from God, they were never beyond criticism as the Old Testament shows time and time again. At the same time the blessings of the covenant with God did as much about the material as the spiritual realm of life. I end by pointing out the conceptual problem involved in the combination of a dualistic worldview, in which the material part of the world was downgraded to elevate the spiritual, with the emphasis on the integrality of the world as God's creation, which is characteristic of Hebraic monism. I showed also how this leads to negative consequences in a practical sense. Firstly, the strong espousal of covenant in the political and social faculties based on a dualistic metaphysics has created a hierarchical society in which the kings are supposed to be beyond criticism because they are supposed to be chosen by God. Secondly, the hierarchical structure of society in a wider sense created mistrust among the social classes. Third, overemphasis on the spiritual dimension of society hindered the unfolding process of Ethiopian ingenuity which was highlighted in the creation of unique Ethiopian civilization.

In the last part of this chapter, Hermeneutical Observations, I focused on the influence of the wax and gold philosophy on the understanding of education, communication and literature. I showed that the educational philosophy emphasized denying 'this world' and, instead, espousing an ascetic lifestyle as the most 'spiritually' suitable way of life. Communication, true to the same dualistic influence, bears the signature of duplicity and indirection as its hallmarks, while literature and their interpretation often subscribe to what I call 'dogmatic allegorization'.

In the conclusion of this chapter I summarized its merits as well as hazards. Its merits include the creation of a national metanarrative (surplus-history), which keeps this ethnically and culturally diverse nation together, preserves a unique Ethiopian civilization and shapes the ethical principles under *fereha-egziabeher* (fear of God). Yet, there are also untenable points which have to be overcome. These include, but are not limited to, the almost

dogmatic dualism between the 'sacred' and the 'secular', a tendency to romanticize the past, a suspicion towards change and progress and a tradition of ambiguity clouding social practices and communication.

In Chapter Two I analyzed and evaluated the Paradigm of Demystification. This paradigm is characterized by its attempt to limit the role of religion in influencing public agendas and to undermine the notion that Ethiopia is the nation of covenant. It as well is closely connected with modernization.

Because of the complex nature of the paradigm of demystification I started this chapter with a discussion of its historical background. In terms of time, the effort of demystification in Ethiopia goes back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century when Zará Yaeqob preferred rationality to dogma and tradition as a guiding matrix. In terms of agents, it includes, besides Zará Yaeqob, the 16<sup>th</sup> century philosopher, Protestant movements from the 17<sup>th</sup> unto the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as well as the Dergue, the Ethiopian form of Marxism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This complexity derives not only from the span of time they covered, but from the diverse agendas and ideologies that the agents had. For example, Zará Yaeqob appealed to the rationality of the human heart as a means of adjudicating truth, the Marxism of the Dergue aimed to bring about radical modernization while Protestantism became skeptical about progressivism.

Besides, these modernizing efforts had not been carried out in a well-organized manner. Zará Yaeqob's refusal to succumb to tradition and dogma was very much an isolated event. Modernizing Ethiopian society was not the main agenda of the Protestant missionaries of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Their main agenda was reforming the EOC. However, the emperors tried to use them as agents to modernize the country. However a clear interest to modernization came from emperor Haile Selassie in 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, his cautious attempt on modernization which aimed to bring about technological improvement without changing philosophical and sociopolitical dynamics did not sit very well with the newly emerging generation which was impatient for change. The Dergue therefore emerged as an opportunist movement which tapped into the desire for change on the ground. However, because of the lack of a well construed conceptual matrix that can keep the Ethiopian identity and the desire for change together, the Dergue adopted Marxism. This gave the movement a radical face; and, as such, it brought about not only a fundamental challenge to the religiously laden wax and gold paradigm, but also it introduced a radically secular paradigm for the first time in the Ethiopian history.

In the second part of Chapter Two I analyze the worldview of the paradigm of demystification. As could be expected from the Historical Background this is also complex. There are general elements though: all the agents of demystification react against the paradigm of wax and gold and its focus on mystery and put much more emphasis on the use of reason. As to metaphysics, Zará Yaeqob opted to maintain the notion that God was the giver of creational order, while appealing to the 'rationality of human heart', instead of dogma and tradition. Protestantism tends to retain Scriptures as a source of authority, and yet, it gives considerable recognition to the role of individual reason in understanding reality. The Dergue, meanwhile, considered the application of religion to understand reality as superfluous, and so, it adopted a radical demystification. In stead, science and rationality became the only standards by which to approach a wide array of created reality. The human person also was understood quite differently by each of the agents. For instance, Zará Yaeqob understood the human person as a being whose essence lies in his or her rational faculty, while *Imago Dei* becomes crucial for a Protestant understanding of human person.

The Dergue, on the other hand, defined the human person as *homo-economicus*, whose humanness is measured by what he or she could produce.

On the concept of society, Zará Yaeqob took an egalitarian approach on the basis of rationality, while the Protestants abstracted themselves from the earthy activities and defined themselves in terms of *semayawi zega* – heavenly citizens. The Dergue, on the other hand, introduced a cunning concept – *hebrete sebawinet* (a unique brand of socialism). They chose this brand of socialism to make it appealing to the Ethiopian way of thinking as well as to geo-political situation, especially communism.

In the third part, Critical Observations, I started with the problem of modernization in Ethiopia. I discussed the different meanings of the term and gave my own definition in terms of an integral development of the rich potential of creation which at the same time does justice to the social and cultural identity of the society to which it is applied. Then I discussed Afework and Gebre-Yesus to illustrate the challenge which modernization presents to Ethiopia. This is because, on the one hand, Ethiopians, especially elites such as Afework and Gebre-Yesus, wanted to join the chorus of progress with other nations. On the other, they understood the hazard that modernism could bring to the Ethiopian identity. But their proposal to allow colonization (Afework) and ‘Japanization’ (Gebre-Yesus) as a way out of ‘backwardness’, did not materialize. The main problem of their proposal was originated from trying to stimulate the technological aspect of modernization without realizing a comprehensive development of the Ethiopian frame of mind. When it comes to the ‘three agents of modernization’, we saw that Zará Yaeqob made some contribution in terms of re-discovering the goodness of material reality without much deviation from the religious roots. This is because he claimed that rationality is a part of the creational order, but the fact he was a lone voice meant his effort did not have a ‘game-changing’ influence. The Dergue came with the denial of religion and replaced it with scientific socialism as the sole answer to the Ethiopian problem. This total deviation from the Ethiopian identity and subscription to violent methods such as ‘red terror’ made it fail to win the Ethiopian heart and fail to deliver modernization. While Protestantism had a better balance in terms of combining spiritual and material, its emphasis on *semayawi zeginet* (heavenly citizenship) made it isolated from wider society and made it unable to espouse an integralist approach.

In the Hermeneutical Observation, my analysis indicates that, like in the paradigm of wax and gold, education, communicative method and literature were used to reach ideological goals. In slight contrast to the wax and gold paradigm, a degree of directness and appreciation of material reality was shown in an understanding of education, communication and literature. This nevertheless does not mean that the duplicity and indirection of the wax and gold paradigm was totally overcome. While education was totally controlled by the state, literatures and ways of communication still bore the marks of allegorization and indirection.

In conclusion, I identified strengths as well as weaknesses of this paradigm. I paid special attention to the Dergue because of its great influence and the pervasive action it took to transform Ethiopian society. Its strengths included a forward-looking attitude and emphasis on progress, rejection of dualism and appreciation of the goodness of material reality, the maintenance national unity and integrity and an attempt on reconnecting land and identity. Its weak points were its failure to account for the religious nature of Ethiopian society and its failure to see the importance of the notion of covenant, and as a result, its disengagement from the cultural roots. Failure to explore and reinterpret the indigenous notions, such as

covenant, that created surplus-history, underneath the actual history, caused a lack of understanding between the political elites who wanted makeshift progress and change, and the people as the grassroots level whose identity and way of life was shaped by religious commitments. Hence, its explosive nature and adoption of violent methods to reach its goal did not help but exacerbated the Ethiopian problem.

In the Third Chapter, I went on to analyze the Paradigm of Compartmentalization. This paradigm emerged from the indigenous social and political dynamics. However, I posed the question whether the paradigm of compartmentalization betrayed some elements from the postmodern worldview. In pursuit of this question, I came up with evidence that there are some overlapping issues in the paradigm of compartmentalization and postmodernist thinking. For example, in the same vein with postmodernism, the paradigm of compartmentalization is suspicious and even bitter about the application of meta-narrative, and as the result, it takes the concern of marginal voices and ethnicities as its moral discourse. As a result, ethnic identity is considered to be an important basis to understand society, its organization as well as its social practices. This stance has wider implications that include its worldview.

A good illustration for its pervasive implications is that its emphasis on ethnic identity brought an end to a metaphysics that is based on one religion. Instead of being considered as primitive or animistic, the tribal religions reemerged into national arena. In spite of seeking one religion, that makes one story and creates a national meta-narrative, this latest paradigm has made 'nations and nationalities' which supposedly find their identities in ethnic and traditional religious systems. Instead of believing in one transcendent God who created everything, now mountains, rivers and trees have started to be venerated as tribal ways of inducing god's favor. This paradigm does not put an emphasis on the human person in terms of universal human values; nor does it relate human personhood to economical production. It, however, sees the human person mainly as a product of ethnic, and even sometimes clannish interaction – *homo ethnicus*. This basically comes from the rejection of metaphysical coherence, the individual emancipation on the basis of individual creativity and innovation. Moreover, it is based on the rejection of the national metanarrative that gives homage to every Ethiopian without necessary identification of ethnic group to which one belongs.

The understanding of social organization in the paradigm of compartmentalization is closely related to its metaphysics and philosophical anthropology. That means, ethnic federalism was taken as the point of departure for the reconfiguration of the Ethiopian society. Disillusioned with the role of the EOC in political life of the nation in the past, the paradigm of compartmentalization rejected the notion of covenant as a notion that created a surplus-history. This rejection of covenant as a unifying factor has given a way for an ethnic self-realization to take the political stage. Besides, this also brought about a considerable revival of traditional religious practices – a phenomenon some thought to be a back door attack on the EOC and on the notion of covenant as a major roleplayer in the Ethiopian history. This is because it tried to bring an end to the notion of covenant by deconstructing the Ethiopian meta-narrative and replacing it with ethnic mini-narratives.

Trying to explore historical elements providing a background for the paradigm of compartmentalization I discussed African liberationist thinking and globalization. African liberationist thinking has to do with the struggle to emancipate groups of people who are under repression under colonialism. Because of the fact that liberationist thinking is concerned with the people whose identity is undermined by the colonial forces, it uses re-

drawing the marginalized groups to their past as way of remaking it. Although Ethiopia has never been colonized by external forces, it had its own form of liberationist thinking. Some would say that there has been internal colonization by the ruling group. Others emphasize that Ethiopian theology has been liberationist by nature because of its importance for the defence of Ethiopia's freedom. In both forms a connection with liberationist thinking can be observed in general. Globalization on the other hand created a platform where people who are complaining of being repressed and marginalized may exchange ideas and experiences. In doing so, these phenomena also have enhanced the process of compartmentalization and/or ethnic federalism in Ethiopia.

In my Critical Observations, I give special attention to ethnic federalism, African liberationist thinking and the concept of time in the paradigm of compartmentalization. I then come to the conclusion that there are important interconnections between ethnic federalism and African liberationist thinking. Firstly, both try to take the issue of marginal voices as their moral discourse, and secondly, they both are past orientated. This past orientation, albeit having some values in terms of dealing with injustices of the past, makes an awkward orientation with regards to going forward. This is because it tries to take the society forward with its face turned to the past. That means that instead of transforming the painful past into something productive to the future, it re-channels the pains and resentment of the past to generations coming.

My Hermeneutical Observations indicate as well that education is used in this paradigm as a way of re-orientating the self to the past, while communication is supposed to take place in such a way that it is void of 'logos' in order to entertain multiplicity. In the opposite vein, critical literatures are lamenting a 'nothingness' that has come about as the result of a lack of unifying elements in this paradigm.

In the conclusion, I list the strengths and drawbacks of the paradigm of compartmentalization. The main strengths of this paradigm are making marginal voices a part of its moral discourse and trying to account for the diverse nature of Ethiopian society. The drawbacks of this paradigm come from the fact that it has rejected the unifying role of religion, especially the notion of covenant, in society. The problems with this include lack of a framework to bring diverse society together, unconditional negation towards the past failing to appreciate Ethiopian history as a unified society, the superficiality of ethnic freedom that constitution appears to be granting and wanting to go forward while the face of the society is turned to the ethnic and tribal past.

Chapter Four picks up the main question of my research: is it possible to use the notion of covenant to provide a perspective for Ethiopian society that is true to its identity and open to healthy developments in the future? In this chapter I attempt to present a positive answer to this question. In order to do so I summarize in the first part the strengths and weaknesses of the three paradigms discussed in the earlier chapters and give an argument why at the one hand the notion of covenant is so important for the Ethiopian identity and way of life and on the other hand why the need for rethinking it is so urgent. For the first point I try to show that the notion of covenant is deeply engrained into Ethiopian religiosity, social practices and the understanding of time, especially of ordinary folks. For the second point I only need to reiterate the influence of the paradigm of wax and gold on its traditional understanding.

In the second part I try to relate elements of the Reformational philosophy and Rabbinic Jewish thinking to the Ethiopian problems. I chose these traditions based on the criteria of relevance and plausibility. Reformational philosophy can provide tools to

overcome dualism because of its emphasis on the integrality of creation. It also provides a framework to integrate science and rationality with indigenous culture and norms because of its distinction between everyday and scientific knowledge. This is because the latter can never claim an encompassing knowledge of reality because of its abstract nature. Reformational philosophy also offers a means to overcome individual or state sovereignty because it points to the diversity of social spheres, each with its own character and norms, and it overcomes an orientation to the past because it shows how the original creation is meant to be developed in such a way that its creational potential is realized. Rabbinic Jewish thinking on the other hand, offers a conceptual framework to address unproductive exceptionalism, social divisiveness and hegemonic tendencies, by relating the notion of covenant to the social issues of contemporary society such as democracy and multiculturalism.

In the third part, I have tried to construe the hermeneutic of covenant in relation to the Ethiopian social reality. I discussed the concepts that I dealt with in the other three chapters: metaphysics, philosophical anthropology and an idea of society by combining the notion of call and answerability – the ideas I borrow from the Reformational philosophy – with some Ethiopian indigenous concepts. In relation to metaphysics I discuss *fereha-egziabeher* (fear of God), and connect it with the understanding of creation as answering to a promise-command to be. In this way the dependence of creation on the Creator, the integral goodness that is connected with it and its openness for development in time are emphasized. Regarding anthropology I connected the notion of *sew le sew* (human person for human person) to the understanding of the human person in terms of call and responsibility (*homo respondens*). In this way mutual responsibility in the context of communal relationships is connected with an emphasis on the creational potential of each individual. In relation to society the notions of *mechachal* (toleration) and *metesaseb* (mutual support) are shown to have a connection with the principles of differentiation and integration which were discussed as part of Reformational philosophy. While the integration of *fereha-egziabeher* (fear of God) with the notion of integrality from Reformational philosophy is aimed to show how dualism can be corrected, integration of *sew le sew* with *homo respondens* is intended to make a balance in the concept of the human person an individual as well as a social being. On the other hand, integrating *mechachal* and *metesaseb* (toleration and mutual support) with Reformational and Jewish thinking I tried to show how hierarchy, unhelpful exceptionalism and political hegemony could be overcome. This, according to my recommendation, can be done by applying a more participatory social and political system which at the same time respects the boundaries of the different social spheres, keeping them from an unhealthy intrusion by some others, especially from the state and the church.

I close the chapter by showing how the hermeneutic of covenant can be fruitful in terms of rethinking education, communication and literature. The relevance of the hermeneutic of covenant to Ethiopian educational philosophy is diverse: setting education free from the control of regimes and ideologues on the principle of sphere sovereignty, re-installing the sense of call and responsibility which helps students discover their vocation and execute their action with a sense of responsibility. It also gives Ethiopian history and identity a proper place, and yet gearing towards the future with a disclosive vision.

Emphasizing these points I argued that the notion of covenant understood in terms of call and answerability can be a more plausible tool than *tezeta* (nostalgia), a concept proposed by Maimire In the domain of communication, the hermeneutic of covenant takes



the *sem-ena-werq* (wax and gold) trope as an example of the disclosive vision of Ethiopian society in the past, and yet, I suggest covenantal thinking, especially in terms of responsibility and transparency, to reverse the unproductive outcome the *sem-ena-werq* (wax and gold) mentality has created. In the domain of literature, I point out that its rigid character as marked by indirection, dissimulation and duplicity, needs to be overcome by allowing other genres which give room to unique individuality and a more lucid style. Especially important is that literature is not controlled either by the state or the church, yet it should be able to address social issues. I argue for a covenantal approach which would not only free the authors, but would also provide the society with easily accessible meaning to propel them to the next action.

Based on this analysis, I have come to the conclusion that the notion of covenant as reinterpreted can indeed provide a framework that is able to resolve the apparent tension in the religion-society nexus in Ethiopia. Yet, it is important to state that the hermeneutic of covenant that I propose in this study is far from being a golden parachute. It may have its own limitations. However, I have tried to show that it is the most plausible tool not only to reconstruct the Ethiopian identity, but also to keep this society involved with political and economic practices. This is because the hermeneutic of covenant, in a way, is a double hermeneutics. This means it does not try to rigidly impose a ready-made interpretive concept that descends from the top to the bottom. Rather it strives to integrate the surplus meaning of the surplus history of Ethiopia (a hermeneutic of the grassroots) in the pursuit of meaning in such a way that it triggers a healthy development in society.