



UNDERSTANDING RELIGION AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN ETHIOPIA

Toward a Hermeneutic of Covenant

Mohammed Girma



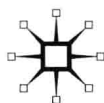
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Understanding Religion and Social Change in Ethiopia

*Dedicated to my mother Bizunesh Dekeso
Aache, you will always live in my heart!*

P R E F A C E

It was my dream to ponder on Ethiopian religiosity as an important aspect of the society that constitutes alternative public discourse. Even amid dreaming, I was always aware of the trickiness of the issue because religion-society nexus is often tenuous matter that is laden with many cultural and identity conundrums. From the outset, therefore, it is important to set some records straight to soothe any unnecessary “hermeneutic of suspicion.” One thing I found to be important is to shed some light on my cultural orientation as author. This is because, in the process of writing this book and discussing it with a number of Ethiopians as well as non-Ethiopians, I came to the realization that the issue of covenant-thinking can have ethnic and ideological undertones. For example, it can easily be linked to the religious ideology of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and/or to some sort of ideological nostalgia toward the political system of the Solomonic dynasty.

To momentarily subscribe to ethnic language, I do not belong to the ethnic groups that singularly held political power in the Solomonic dynasty; neither do I adhere to the EOC. I am a Dutch citizen of Ethiopian descent. My father is a Gurague. My mother is half Hadiya and half Oromo. My wife happens to be an Amhara, and I have a son who is a mixture of every race I have just mentioned. In a narrower sense, I can safely claim to be a “typical Ethiopian.” In a broader sense, however, I am a global citizen. By virtue of differentiation and mobility, my identity has become diverse and intricate. However, I do see some coherence and beauty about who I am. Even though I am “all Oromo,” for example, my contention is that there is no one single ethnic element that can fully contain my identity. Neither will there be one ethnic concept that can do justice to my personal interwovenness. My belief, as I will argue later, is that the claim of “pure nativity” is a fallacy as is forced assimilation or compliant unity.

The fact is that, as I get deeper into unraveling the place of covenant-thinking in the Ethiopia way of life, I cannot help but appreciate—positively as well as negatively—the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC) and the political entrepreneurs who introduced us to the notion at the national scale. This project, however, is not a result of a particular ethnic urge. I do not have a particular ideological incentive that makes me passionate about promoting covenant-thinking to achieve religious or ethnic goals. It is rather my fascination with diversity in Ethiopia, and the ordinary Ethiopian people's commitment, and even resilience, to advance covenanted lifestyle with "others" that has led me to make this inquiry. With all the shortcomings attached to its historical use and with all the susceptibilities to be misinterpreted as a tool for ideological consumption, I could not find a better concept that captures the ontology of Ethiopian-ness.

Moreover, while ideologies that used this notion as a political tool have been subjected to the force of time, the covenant-thinking itself is reserved as a transcendent concept albeit being concealed in cultural methods of reconciliation, toleration, indigenous ethical matrix such as *ferha-egziabeher* (fear of God), and peaceful coexistence. On a covenantal basis, differences (ethnic and religious in nature) have been bridged, conflicts have been resolved, reconciliations have taken place, and peace restored. Moreover, under the umbrella of covenant-thinking a common goal has been set, based on trust. I can mention a legendary *Ariy-ana-Hegan-ana* reconciliation (which transformed the former archenemies into sworn brothers) in the Hadiya of southern Ethiopia and traditional resolution of Afar-Amhara border conflicts in the north, and so on, as examples of cultural embeddedness of covenant, albeit in varying forms and at various levels. However, this concept has increasingly become vulnerable, but also extremely important, in the face of heightened ethnic consciousness. If it is not nurtured, conceptualized, and reconceptualized, the chances are great that it can lose its meaning and fall prey to polarization.

Realizing the dream of pondering on this preeminent issue could not have come about without the support of a number of people and institutions. Very special gratitude goes to Jagtspeolfonds for providing me with research funds to work on this book at Yale University. My utmost gratitude goes to H. G. Geertsema for his commitment to this project and for his meticulous comments, without which bringing this book to this stage would not have been possible. Sander and Dorine Griffioen played various roles in this project. To mention, just a few, they provided academic, social, and financial support. Govert Buijs has

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ABBREVIATIONS

ATR	African Traditional Religions
EECMY	Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus
EOC	Ethiopian Orthodox Church
EPRDF	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front
EPRP	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party
ICG	International Crisis Group
KN	Kebre Negest
OLF	Oromo Liberation Front
OT	Old Testament
SIM	Serving In Missions
USUAA	University Student's Union of Addis Ababa
TPLF	Tigray Peoples Liberation Front
ONLF	Ogaden National Liberation Front

INTRODUCTION

Background: Why Religion in a “Secular” State?

Ethiopia is an ancient society with a population of 80 million, more than 80 ethnic groups and as many languages. Rich in history and culture, both natives and strangers describe it as a unique country in the African continent. Resistant to cultural and philosophical changes, its uniqueness is often tied to a special interplay between religion and politics. John Markakis, a Greek political historian, writes: “The enco-mium of its uniqueness traces a long past that reaches back to classical times, covering a gloriously turbulent history rendered especially illustrious by the cultivation and preservation of an indigenous form of Christianity dating from the early Christian era.” Markakis adds: “Christianity became a *weltanschauung* of a refined, literate culture which remained distinct and isolated from its neighbors in the Horn of Africa.” (1974, p. 1).

One might surmise: That time is gone, it is history. Ethiopia now is a secular state with a secular government. The nation has taken several steps towards modernism, or even postmodernism, in some cases. These modern (and apparently postmodern) moves have introduced different worldviews and new forms of interplay between religion and society. Out of the “new” way of understanding the world comes a new philosophy of life and a new vision of society. The Dergue (the Ethiopian version of Marxism) and the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF)—an ethno-federalist regime that initially took its inspiration from Albanian socialism—are good examples. Therefore, it is absurd to talk of Ethiopia as a religious nation in which covenant-thinking is of crucial importance.

That these two Ethiopian regimes are born out of secularist worldviews is beyond contention. This is also clear from their constitutions, which make an unmistakable distinction between the state and religion.

In doing so, it appears as though the emergence of these two secular worldviews effectively relegated religion to the private domain and cleared the public space of religious influence. However, such a sweeping assumption fails to account for the existential dilemma that Ethiopia has been struggling with since the beginning of the twentieth century. This dilemma can be perceived as an ancient society versus new state conflict. The aforementioned assumption about Ethiopia being emancipated from a religiously colored way of being is only representative of the state, not the society. The cardinal culture of the society is still content with the religiously conditioned continuity of the past and is resistant to change. Therefore, one could still argue that secularization efforts engineered by the ever-changing state remain far from being rooted in the Ethiopian soil. Despite the efforts of the state apparatus to move away from its “old way of being,” its society remains deeply religious. Numbers do not lie: according to census 2007, of the entire Ethiopian population, 43.5 percent are Orthodox Christians, 33.9 percent Muslims, 18.6 percent Protestant Christians, 0.7 percent Roman Catholics, and Traditional Religions, Judaism and others share the rest. Covenant-thinking, which previously used to link the state and the society by creating unitary national consciousness, is still deeply ingrained in the Ethiopian way of life. It has both theological and social manifestations. On the theological side, supposed divine favor is assumed as the Bible mentions Ethiopia, hosting the Ark of the Covenant and accepting Christianity early on, elevating it as a state and civil religion. However, its social ramifications, the main interest of this research, are far reaching. People use this notion to address social crises such as interethnic and interreligious tensions and conflicts and to foster peaceful coexistence in an abundantly plural society.

Covenant-Thinking and Mixed Legacies: Problemization

Covenant-thinking in Ethiopia has two layers. These layers can be unraveled using Maimire Mennasemaye’s concept of “manifest history” and “surplus history” (2010, p. 74). To wit, manifest history is the “actual history” often written, especially in Ethiopia, by the winners. The Solomonic dynasty is a case in point here. Surplus history, in contrast, is a history often concealed in actual history but stands as antithetical to manifest history. Unlike manifest history, which is consciously steered by state apparatus, surplus history finds its expression in the subconscious implementation of ordinary people in their daily lives.

Even though it might not achieve political ascendancy (by being espoused by political entrepreneurs), it remains critically important to social interaction and practices on the ground. As the result, the role of covenant-thinking in creating Ethiopian national consciousness is enigmatic because it is interpreted and applied in two layers of history in different ways. It was one of the main factors that helped maintain Ethiopian independence. At the same time, it was the creator of an ideology that isolated Ethiopia from the rest of the world. On the one hand, it was the principal means of keeping the nation unified; on the other, it is one of the reasons behind the growing interethnic and inter-religious mistrust. It is a major factor behind the unique civilization, rich culture, and distinct traditions of the nation; at the same time, it has shaped the philosophical and theological contours responsible for creating a social psyche that is too comfortable with dwelling in the past. It is the root of a unique schooling system (in monasteries and traditional schools), inimitable literary styles, and distinct ways of communication, but it is also a source of a curricular philosophy that promoted asceticism at the expense of innovative engagement with material reality, contributing to poor national economic performance.

Covenant-thinking as employed by political entrepreneurs of the Solomonic dynasty has become effectively outdated. However, albeit being enveloped in the daily lives of the masses, covenant-thinking as practiced in the surplus history is still intact. Furthermore, as a concept that provides this profoundly plural society with an indigenous forum for reasoned discussions and negotiation, covenant-thinking in surplus history is still of utmost importance for Ethiopians. Nevertheless, the history of the concept makes academic and public discussion of covenant-thinking a delicate matter. It is often laden with religious, cultural, and ethnic undertones. However, in an increasingly divided Ethiopia, it is a rare conceptual frame that helps to weave together the "mini-narratives" of ethnic and religious groups to create an Ethiopian metanarrative. Culturally, the rejection of covenant-thinking might come with the risk of disintegration and more volatility. This is because covenant-thinking is often considered an essential aspect of "Ethiopianness," often characterized by peaceful coherence of its plural society. On the other hand, endorsing covenant-thinking as understood in Ethiopian manifest history comes with two risks. For one, even though unlike apartheid South Africa in which covenant was used for divisive reasons, Ethiopian covenant-thinking is expansive in nature, and in manifest history it is exclusive and divisive in terms of power sharing. That is, it reserves power only for the Solomonites.

For another, despite its initial promises, Ethiopian covenant-thinking has missed its opportunity for change and progress. The promise of ingenuity and creativeness that gave birth to Ethiopian civilization has aborted at some point. Because of apparent stagnation, it takes social organization, such as the class system, as a divine ordination. So in this system, power transition and reconfiguration of social organization could be considered as violating the highest order. Therefore, the questions of utmost importance for this study are as follows: How is it possible to transform and retool covenant-thinking in such a way that it can be a tool to negotiate between continuity and change? What is the interpretive device that can help us use covenant-thinking in a culturally resonating way that, nevertheless, lends itself to positive change in the society?

Purpose and Methodology

This research has two main interconnected purposes. The first and immediate purpose is to address the challenges that the religion-society nexus poses in Ethiopia: negotiating change and continuity. There are two criteria for addressing this, as indicated under problematization: contextual relevance and positive disclosure for change and progress. The second and more general purpose is that, by way of making an inquiry into covenant-thinking, I try to make my own contribution to fill a clear scholarship gap in the exploration of the interplay between religion and society in Ethiopia. There is an abundant source of literature on Ethiopia, especially in the areas of history, politics, and anthropology. However, despite the Ethiopian Orthodox Church being the most powerful institution in this society, next to the state, for nearly two millennia, Ethiopian political theology remains underexplored, if not unexplored. This study aims to take a very modest step in narrowing the scholarship gap in this particular area.

As to methodology, Ethiopia is a context in constant, if slow, change and relentless tension between change-driven modernization and religiously colored cyclic traditionalism. Religion and religious ideas in Ethiopia are always important catalysts in advancing or stifling change. Once I heard someone typifying religion, rather jokingly, as a beautiful wife with whom one can enjoy intimacy only in private. The analogy is a disguised appeal for a religiously “naked” public space. Conversely, time-honored wisdom tells us to praise our wives in public as well. Note that praising is an important part of “intimacy.” From the outset,

this study refuses to succumb to the idea of praising wives only behind locked doors. The question of utmost importance then is this: Is there any other acceptable method where one can praise his wife in public without offending or demeaning the wives of others? Or, more specifically: Could there be means by which we can transcend religious and ethnic divides so that we are able to negotiate continuity and change?

Different kinds of methodologies have been applied to resolve the tension between the efforts of modernization and traditional way of life. As Donald Levine (1965, p. 12) indicated, traditionalists, principally concerned with maximizing indigenous values, are inclined to strengthen the homegrown pattern of life and view of society. They argue that the problem of religion in public space can be overcome not by introducing a radical scientific methods but by maintaining the social interactions and organizations as understood and practiced in indigenous societies.

Radical modernists are inclined to think that the superiority of reason and scientific method should be maintained over beliefs, customs, and rituals, and try to locate the noblest human values on material nature and social environments. This method takes nature as an instrument of self-realization. Seeing metaphysical presuppositions and tradition as obstacles for unbiased understanding of nature, it astutely looks for latent elements by which the force of pre-scientific assumptions can be overcome. In doing so, it aims to replace the old with the new, using both coercive as well as persuasive methods. Even academics with deep religious commitment, in this scheme, are forced to espouse "methodological atheism" to conform to the academic ethos.

This research sees the both traditionalist and modernist methods as polarizing. Ethiopia is a good example of traditionalism. In its endless search for conventionalism, tradition often resulted in "(vicious) circularity of historicism" (Watson 1997, p.27). On the other hand, in spite of its promise of enhancing the effort of reaching a common consensus, methodological atheism is not inclusive enough. This is because, not only does it force religious groups to step out of their historical and theological situatedness in order to be able to participate in reasoned discourse, it also splits individuals between the metaphysical self and rational self.

This study therefore opts to employ an "ontological approach"—it aims to unearth the nature of covenant-thinking as an underlying philosophical matrix behind the Ethiopian social intercourse. Ontological aspiration is inspired by, among other things, one important factor.

This factor is covenant-thinking, which is a historical phenomenon in Ethiopian society. But it was “buried over,” to borrow Martin Heidegger’s words about phenomenon (1962, p. 160), in pre-scientific and subconscious social practices. Therefore, ontology, as theoretical inquiry into the meaning of being, promises to bring embedded pre-reflective conducts and ways of life into conceptual light. Attention will be given to the contours of engagement in Ethiopian social life before putting these contours in a conceptual framework, namely covenant-thinking. Ontology might use array methodologies ranging from intuition-messaging to scientifically articulated generalizations (Blattner 2006, p.24). This study also employs mythological analysis (the story of the Queen of Sheba), linguistic analysis (such as the wax and gold tradition), poems, and the results of scientific researchers from other areas of humanity. Without necessarily eschewing the aforementioned methods, the primary methodology used in this study, however, is phenomenology.

There could be an objection here: There is a consensus that ontology is a study of an object or an entity as it is, whereas phenomenology is a study of an object or an entity as it appears. So, so one might think that phenomenology is not a suitable method for ontological inquiry. In order to overcome the apparent unsuitability, I have to subscribe to the Heideggerian solution of redefining phenomenon. Phenomenon, as Heidegger argues, is not a mere appearance; rather it is “*that which shows itself in itself*” (his italics) and the manifest totality of what lies in the light of day (1962, p. 51). Doubtless, appearance could be something that “indicates itself by way of a surrogate phenomenon” (Blattner 2006, p. 29). For example, a blush in the face can be a surrogate phenomenon to fever. However, phenomenology, far from the study of appearance, is a tool to expose the temporal structure of phenomenon in order to extract what lies hidden.

In this vein, phenomenology gives a window into meaning. For instance, when I delve into sources from other areas of social sciences, the intention is not to study the objects of natural phenomena—what in fact is on the ground. Instead, the goal here is to go beyond the bare facts and explore meaning and intentionality. Part of the reason for the choice of this method is that covenant-thinking has never been conceptualized in Ethiopian scholarship. It, rather, is enveloped in myths, for political ideology and naïve (pre-scientific) experience. Another reason is that the ontological approach, by delving into the pre-reflective (pre-scientific) state of life, does not discriminate between, for example, the religious and cultural identities of people. Neither does it

overwrite differences; however, it aims to open up itself to what Nicholas Wolterstorff would call a “dialogical pluralism” (2008, p. xi). It is a dialogical interpretive method that helps to understand social forms of life, webs of meaningful (pre)interpreted activities and relationships. Besides, by allowing pluriformity of voices, it aims for maximum realization of values found in religiously buttressed traditions as well as in modernist thinking in a given context. In doing this, it intends to highlight the possibility of harmonizing rather than sharpening the relation between continuity and change.

Therefore, in the process of achieving the ultimate goal of this study—a harmonious public space—this pragmatic approach strives to maintain traditional values wherever they are useful for the purpose and hermeneutically transform them when it is practicable, and also to provide a nonconfrontational reason for rejection when they are found to be inherently flawed. In the process of hermeneutically transforming traditional values, this study gives attention to discerning the most enduring beliefs and values, identifying the aspects of modern culture that could possibly appeal to a traditional society, establishing possible ways in which those modern and culturally suitable values are accepted in traditional society.

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