Understanding Religion and Social Change in Ethiopia
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Toward a Hermeneutic of Covenant

Mohammed Girma
Dedicated to my mother Bizunesh Dekeso
Aache, you will always live in my heart!
# CONTENTS

_Preface_  ix

_List of Abbreviations_  xiii

_Introduction_  xv

One  The Hermeneutic of “Wax and Gold”  1

Two  The Hermeneutic of Demystification  45

Three  The Hermeneutic of Compartmentalization  91

Four  Toward a New Hermeneutic of Covenant  137

_Notes_  187

_Bibliography_  193

_Index_  209
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 *fereha-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.

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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 encomium 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: Problematization

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 ascendency (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 is 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 millenniums, 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,
Introduction

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-massaging 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.
CHAPTER ONE

The Hermeneutic of “Wax and Gold”

Introduction
This chapter attempts to analyze and evaluate the interplay between religion and social change in the wax and gold paradigm. I will, therefore, be engaging with several questions that emerge regarding the role of religion in engaging change and continuity in Ethiopia. What is the wax and gold paradigm? What are its basic philosophical and theological assumptions? What are the historical origins, if any, of these assumptions? Most importantly, what are the merits and pitfalls of this paradigm? Does this paradigm still have something to offer that can trigger a healthy social change in Ethiopia? In the first section, I will analyze some key elements in the wax and gold worldview by way of discussing its metaphysics, philosophical anthropology, and conception of society. In the second section, I will briefly trace the roots of the philosophical tenets that might have shaped the wax and gold worldview. In the third section, I will try to make critical observations before moving on in the fourth section to show the practical implications of the wax and gold tradition to social practices focusing on communication.

The Wax and Gold Worldview
What is the wax and gold tradition? What does it amount to? In a material sense, wax is a natural secretion of gold, produced during the process of purification. Wax therefore is an element that covers gold. In order to get the purest gold, it needs to be melted in fire. This metaphor is applied to a literary system known as sem-ena-werq (wax and gold) in
Ethiopia (Girma 2011a, p. 175). Donald Levine, who wrote the only notable scholarly book on wax and gold tradition and its sociocultural implications, defines this tradition as a “poetic form which is built on two semantic layers.” The apparent literal layer is called wax, while the hidden and “actual” layer is known as gold (Levine 1965, p. 5). Messay Kebede elaborates: “The prototype being the superposition within a single verb of the apparent meaning in the hidden significance, ambiguity, or double-entendre pervades the whole style” (1999, p. 180).

So permeating is the literary system that it is a part of the curriculum in secondary schools. Let us consider an example of this literary system in order to have a better understanding of it. Aleka Gebre-Hana, an Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC) priest, was also a famous Bale-Qene (= poet). Once, he was invited to his friend’s house for dinner. While waiting for the meal to be served, he was revolted to see a rat jump out of the mesob (= a traditional breadbasket) where they put enjera (= an Ethiopian pancake), which is usually served with diverse stews and sauces known as wett. Aleka Gebre-Hana was known for unleashing scathing criticisms, even over the authorities, when displeased. The hosts, however, were not aware of the fact that the priest had seen the “party crasher”—ayt (= a rat). At the end of the dinner, he, as a priest, had to say words of blessing. He then went on to employ the wax and gold approach in his blessing and said:

Bellanew tettanew ke enjeraw ke wetu
Egziabeher yestelegne ke mesobu aytu

The hebere-qal (the double-layered word) in this poem is aytu. Its manifest meaning (wax) renders: I have enjoyed your food; and I pray that you may have plenty on your table. The intended (surplus) meaning (gold) however is far from an innocent blessing—the word aytu can also mean “that rat.” The gold rendering is therefore: I have eaten your food but do not think that I did not see that rat jumping out of the mesob. In fact, the main intention of the priest was to criticize his friend for serving him unhygienic food (Girma 2011a, p. 175).

Employing the language of the paradigm to the wax and gold tradition as a literary device might appear to be confusing. This is simply because the wax and gold tradition as a literary system is far from limited to one epoch in history. However, I will not be using wax and gold in a strictly literary sense. I will, instead, borrow the term “wax and gold” from the literary domain and reinterpret it to characterize the knowledge system¹ that covers the time in which the church and the state were working as twin holders of political power in Ethiopian history. I reinterpret the term
for two reasons. First, because the wax and gold trope, even as a literary system, has had a lasting impact on Ethiopian culture. This tradition is more than just a literary system; it is an expression of a way of thinking. Second, I de-regionize the meaning of “wax and gold” from the literary domain to a knowledge system, precisely because the literary system has analogical value, in terms of portraying the dualistic nature of Ethiopian metaphysics, understanding of the human person as well as of society in the times of kings. As a knowledge system, this tradition made society understand reality as a divine ordination surrounded by mystery. It sees the material dimension of reality as an obstruction to understanding reality in its truest sense. As such, it is a paradigm in which the spiritual and hidden meaning has an upper hand over the manifest meaning. The role of a philosopher, therefore, is to peel off, as it were, the “wax” (the manifest meaning) in order that the “gold” (the hidden and true meaning) be discovered (Gerard 1971, p. 274; Messay 1999, p. 181; Maimire 2010, pp. 74–76).

Making an in-depth analysis of every element in the wax and gold worldview, I have to admit, is beyond the scope of this study. It is important, therefore, to limit myself to some critical aspects of the paradigm that are helpful with regard to grasping the religion-society nexus in this paradigm. In what follows, I try to explore briefly its metaphysics, philosophical anthropology, and its understanding of society.

**Metaphysics: Dualism, but Monism**

*Monotheism*—Monotheism has had a considerable influence on the metaphysics of the wax and gold paradigm. However, before discussing its influence, I intend to explore the question of how monotheism came to Ethiopia. A number of primary (or traditional) sources claim that monotheism was practiced in Ethiopia, long before the advent of Christianity. I shall discuss this point by way of analyzing the claims of Sir William Budge, Brahana Selassie, Archbishop Yesehaq, and Edward Ullendorff.

William Budge claims in his book, *A History of Ethiopia*, that “Abyssinians were never at any time pagans, and that they always worshiped the One God of Noah and his descendants” (1970, p. 142). What is intriguing about his remark is the assertion that monotheism in Abyssinia is a legacy of the claim that Ethiopians are descendants of Ham, the second son of Noah, whose family was monotheistic. He, however, also hastens to add that non-Semitic people of Abyssinia worshiped gods other than the God of Noah.

On the other hand, Brahana Selassie, an EOC scholar of Caribbean origin, drawing from another tradition, claims that there was widespread
snake worship in Abyssinia before the reign of Angabo, the father of Makeda, who was the Queen of Sheba (2000, p. 68). The snake, which was said to have ruled Abyssinia for 400 years, was considered a monster. A person by the name of Angabo promised the Abyssinians to kill the serpent—which was known as Zainaba—if they agreed to make him king, to which the Abyssinians assented. Eventually, tradition claims, Angabo became the king of Abyssinia by killing the snake using both spiritual tactics and political skill. It is from this claim, therefore, that the story (or better still the myth) of the Ethio-Jewish blood connection unfolds as the Queen of Sheba, the daughter of Angabo, inherits the throne of her father, becomes the queen, and gives birth to Menelik I, from King Solomon.

Other scholars (including Budge) argue that Judaism did not become the official religion of Abyssinia immediately after Makeda’s conversion on meeting King Solomon, even though it must have had a marked effect on her people when she returned to Ethiopia. They claim that it was when Menelik, her son, brought the Ark of the Covenant to Abyssinia that the worship of Yahweh was introduced with a significant vigor and the state adopted the laws that were laid down by Moses (Budge 1970, pp. 145–46).

Archbishop Yesehaq tries to synthesize both traditions (which Budge and Brahana Selassie followed) when he claims “no doubt elements of all forms of worship were practiced in Ethiopia” (1997, p. 3). He claims that Axum, the starting point of the Ethiopian civilization, was founded after the flood and the division of the earth after the sons of Noah: Ham, Shem, and Japheth. Following Budge, Yesehaq argues that Ethiopia once was familiar with the worship of the one True God through the Noahic descent. However, unlike Budge who considers monotheism to be an alternative to paganism, Yesehaq stresses that “the belief in the True God disappeared when a segment of the population strayed to all forms of worship, and the most widely practiced was that of sun god. Serpent worship was also widespread” (1997, p. 3).

There is no easy way to adjudicate on these lines of argument, for two reasons. For one, most of the arguments do not come from factual and concrete historical incidents but from stories, even though they might contain some factual elements. For instance, Yesehaq tries to substantiate his argument for the presence of serpent worship in Axum using archeological evidence (1997, p. 4). However, the stories are largely tales and myths. For another, it seems naïve, on the face of it, to water down the stories by assuming that they are just collections of myths. This is precisely because their impact, not only on
the worldview of the EOC but also on the Ethiopian social fabric as a whole, is beyond contention.

We must, therefore, try to evaluate each claim on its own merits to see its impact on the wax and gold metaphysics.

First, I want to discuss Budge’s view. He claims that monotheism was introduced in Ethiopia as the result of the Axumites’ belief that Axumawi, their forefather, was descended from Noah’s son, Ham. This claim is hard to believe in the absence of any historical warrant. Even according to the biblical picture, a strong emphasis on monotheism was a phenomenon that came into play at the time of Moses, especially with the process of institutionalization of Israel, both as a nation and as a distinct religious unit. Even though this is far from suggesting that the patriarchs before Moses were polytheists, explicit stipulation to worship Yahweh as the only God, was something that originated at Mt. Sinai. So, the assertion that Abyssinians, by virtue of descending from Noah, had such an (over-realized) revelation of monotheism even before the formation of Israel as a nation leaves one with a huge burden of proof.

In the second place, I will discuss Brahana Selassie’s views on the story of the Queen of Sheba and the introduction of monotheism to Ethiopia. According to Brahana Selassie, Queen Makeda’s trip to visit King Solomon, the birth of Menelik, the son of Solomon, and the coming of the Tabot (=Ark of the Covenant) to Ethiopia was how monotheism was introduced to Ethiopia. This argument might enjoy the benefit of popularity among ordinary Ethiopians. As delightful a literary piece as it is, this story, however, also suffers the lack of the cutting edge of factuality.

Next I will take up the third point: to evaluate Yesehaq’s position on the worship of the one True God in Ethiopia. Yesehaq argues that the worship of one True God was practiced among a limited number of families, and that it disappeared later as the people strayed on to all forms of worship. The contention that monotheism vanished as a result of being absorbed by another form of religious practice seems logically possible. However, this does not mean that this was what actually happened, or it does not explain why. Once again, the view that Ethiopians inherited monotheism as the result of descending from Noah appears farfetched.

Edward Ullendorff’s proposal seems more credible. He argues that it was Arabian immigrants who introduced monotheism, in the form of Judaism, to Ethiopia around the first century BC. This view has a strong factual appeal, not only because its claims are historically detectable, but also because it gives insight into the origin of the “impregnation”
of wax and gold’s metaphysics with “pagan residua” (Ullendorff 1968, p. 97). That is, according to Ullendorff, when Hebraic and/or Semitic belief systems arrived in Ethiopia, they did not find Abyssinia in a religious vacuum. Rather, there existed indigenous religious practices such as the worship of sprits and genii (zar) associated with trees, mountains, animate and inanimate objects. On top of that, according to Ullendorff, it was not the purest form of Judaism that was brought to Ethiopia. Rather, the Arabian immigrants were also responsible for bringing other forms of religious practices (Ullendorff 1968, p. 98). Even when Christianity came, it did not wipe out either traditional religions or Semitic elements. Instead, Christianity itself was “impregnated” and buttressed with other religious practices. This amalgamation of diverse religious elements shaped the metaphysics of wax and gold paradigm.

Our analysis therefore suggests that monotheism, which has a grand impact in the metaphysics of the wax and gold paradigm, is not monotheism in its purest sense. Although the purest form of monotheism is detectable at the confessional level, the EOC as one of the main role players of the paradigm was in practice open for the domestication of different elements from various worldviews. EOC is the church in which the Old Testament (OT) religious practices—such as Temple rituals, laws of purity, the Ark of the Covenant, observance of Sabbath, dietary laws, to mention just a few—are very much alive. However, it is also a church that is eager to entertain human politics, magic, and rituals (as materialized in the story of Angabo) that contain elements that are foreign to “mainline” Christian thinking.3

In what follows I shall try to explore what this amalgamation means to specific metaphysical matters such as the understanding of God and his relation to created reality.

God and the World—The EOC officially adheres to the mainline Christian view on God. For example, its confession on God partly reads: “God is one. He is the maker of all things [...]. Although eternal and transcendent, He reveals Himself and exercises His supreme authority all over the creatures” (cf. Samuel 1970, p. 45). V. C. Samuel adds some steel to this confession in the context of EOC in his book, The Church of Ethiopia (1970), when he writes: “God is not a passive perfection or an abstract idea, but a dynamic reality who is ever active in bringing all that exists to the final destiny which he has for each of them as well as for whole created realm” (1970, p. 45). When it comes to the Creation, it declares, “All creatures of God are good and there is nothing in them to be rejected” (1970, p. 44).
This starting point seems to imply that all of Creation is of the same value. But the actual understanding of God and the world is more complex in the EOC and wax and gold paradigm. This becomes clear when we look at an intriguing concept of God as implied in the lived practice of believers. This starts with the understanding of the transcendent God whose will is not always transparent.

The ambiguity resulting from the understanding of God is never without benefit though. One benefit, in fact, is that it provides the believers with a hermeneutical grey area. This grey area allows a space to fill the supposed disparity between the transcendent God and the material world with creative individual interpretations as well as religious activities. Hence, at the practical level, God himself is perceived to have a fundamentally dual nature. In other words, in spite of the fact that everything that has happened shows his active will, his will, nevertheless, is never understood as transparent (Messay 1999, pp. 182–83). Hence, as Levine crafts in his *Wax and Gold*, “the Abyssinians view God above all as a mystery” (1965, p. 64).

As Messay also elaborates, first, the active role of God in bringing about Creation is never subject to doubt. This is precisely because it is deemed that *his will* has been revealed by the way he set up Creation. Second, in the meantime, his will is thought never to be transparent. Third, the lack of transparency in his will pushes the visible world toward independence and self-sufficiency (Messay 1999, p. 183). It has to be noted, however, that the notion of independence and self-sufficiency should not be understood in the Western fashion—that is, in the sense of replacing God with human beings at the center of everything. The idea here has to do with believing in God, and yet retaining an interpretive freedom with regard to making the connection with God possible. That is why some suggest—probably with some warrant—that the EOC does not have a clearly construed dogma and theology. Rather, its dogma and theology are wrapped in liturgy and rituals. Why? It goes without saying that, for one, enveloping theological and philosophical concepts within liturgy and rituals would give room for interpretive plurality on the “nontransparent” will of God. For another, it would give room to people to maintain their own individual way of relating to God without violating the notion of God as the Creator. In what follows, I will try to show how this affected the understanding of created reality.

Dualism, but Monism—It seems worthwhile to qualify the sense in which I am using the term “monism” here, before discussing the concept. Monism can mean different things, depending on the way that
one uses it. Some, for example, use the term to mean absolute unity (devoid of diversity) of something. I do not use this meaning here. By using monism, I refer to the richness of created reality, and yet, its integrity as coming from one absolute source and ultimately pointing to the Origin.

The understanding of God as transcendent and the lack of transparency of his will, as noted, were never considered as threats to faith. In fact, they were deemed to nourish faith by making space for individual (or even certain communal) creativity with regard to bridging the spiritual void between God’s greatness and human insignificance. In this way, the wax and gold worldview could embrace practices that might lend themselves to traditional religiosity, in which a dualistic concept of reality was very much intact. Consequently, the relation between God and the world was understood as a combination of, on one side, dualism of sacred and profane and, on the other side, religious and political monism.

This dualism exists between the spiritual areas of life deemed to be “sacred” and the materials deemed to be “profane.” The church tends to romanticize the ascetic way of life over and against engaging in created reality. Traditional schools aim at boosting the spiritual aspect of their students’ lives to overcome the desire for material gain. Prayer, fasting, and other spiritual activities dominate their daily life as ways of escaping the “evil” supposedly embedded in the material reality.

The distinction between the spiritual as sacred and the material as profane might suggest that politics is connected with the profane because it is concerned with earthly power. That, however, is not the case in the wax and gold metaphysics. Politics is closely linked to religion, indicating the unlikely combination of dualism and monism. Mythologies support this combination. Angabo’s act of killing a serpent, for example, was simultaneously a political as well as a religious act. It was a political operation because he was bidding for kingship and power; at the same time, however, he paved the way for the firm establishment of God’s covenant with Ethiopia through his daughter—the Queen of Sheba. Since then Ethiopia has never been conceived of as a secular nation; nor could the nation be understood apart from its relationship to the EOC.

To sum it up, the metaphysical concept of the wax and gold paradigm is very complex. The complexity results from different influences shaping the paradigm as well as from the practical, especially political, agendas behind the formulation of the concept. Consequently, an odd combination of dualism and monism function in various departments
of life. That is, while many domains of life are dominated by dualism, there is a monistic connection between religion and politics. It has to be stressed, however, that the espousal of monism was intended to justify a dualistic goal. This is clearly exhibited in the imperial history of Ethiopia, where political leaders legitimized their political power on the basis of divine ordinance. Because of the alleged connection to the “spiritual” realm, this mechanism denied citizens from the “material world” access to scrutinize the political power.

**Philosophical Anthropology—Human Person as a Battleground**

In this section, I discuss how the human person is understood in the wax and gold paradigm. Special attention will be given to *Gadel* (=heroism), both its historical development and the view of the human person that it presents. Then I deal with the historical background of this view, before concluding with a discussion of its practical implications. The notion of the human person and his/her relation to the spiritual realm in the wax and gold worldview is nowhere as clear as in *Gadel*.

It might be helpful to have a brief look at the origin of the *Gadel* book (or *Gedel* genre) itself, before going on to the conceptual analysis. Some Ethiopianists claim that Ethiopia was introduced to biblical and other Christian literatures with the introduction of Christianity to the country in the first quarter of the fourth century AD. Basing his view on the works of Cerulli and other prominent Ethiopianists, Samuel W. Yohannes of Addis Ababa University points out that “among the first renderings in Ge’ez of Christian Greek literatures, there should be included ‘the Life of Saint Paul in the Hermit’, and the ‘Life of Saint Anthony’ by Athanasius the Great” (1997, p. 212). These two literatures are believed to give a certain model for the invention of the Ethiopian form of *Gadel* precisely because they were the part of the Eastern Christian hagiography. However, it was only during the thirteenth century that the *Gadel* was fully developed.

According to W. Yohannes, in that period Ethiopic literature enjoyed a significant revival—through the Ethiopian monks who lived in the Near East for long enough to be acquainted with Arabic Christian literatures. *Sinaxarium*—a huge collection of the lives of saints to be read each day of the year—was one of the great genres to appear at this period. After a short while, however, Ethiopian monks integrated the stories of the *Gadels* of the foreign saints not only with the local cultural heritage, but with local saints as well. So, as W. Yohannes rightly claims, these *Gedels* are not simply translations of foreign stories, but
they should indeed be “considered part and parcel of the Ethiopian literature” (1997, p. 212).

The fifteenth century was known as a golden period of Gadels. They not only demonstrated spiritual values but also dared to criticize the political and ideological atmosphere of the period. For example, Samuel Debra, Betselota-Michael, Wagag, and Aron of Debra Daret all dared to reprimand kings for their moral failures and demanded moral reform from the imperial court (W. Yohannes 1997, p. 214).

But, what are the Gadels about? It has to be noted that the word Gadel itself is a military metaphor showing a constant tension between two forces. Therefore, Gadel is the depiction of lives of holy men and women (especially monks) as they engaged in tegadlo (=battle). There seems to be two layers for tegadlo. The first layer has to do with admonishing the ungodly monarchs for their moral failure, even though this might have put the accuser’s own safety at risk. But the deepest—probably the most rigorous—layer of tegadlo takes place inside the human person. Yohannes seems to be right when he maintains that Tegadlo is aimed at gaining full control of the body by lessening to the maximum the power of physical passion. Thus, there is a presupposition that the human person is a locus of profound contradiction, which has for antagonists, the soul and the body (W. Yohannes, 1997, p. 214).

The main purpose, therefore, is to firmly imply that the tegadlo in the former layer is an outward expression of the latter, for two reasons. First, corruption and moral degradation in political and social domains gives an impression that the fight has been lost in the worlds within the individual person. This is precisely because it is very likely, according to such a concept, that there are two worlds within a person. Second, winning the latter is a determining factor to go about and do the same in the upper tegadlo, so to say. Moreover, gaining the upper hand of spirit over flesh is the main goal of the tegadlo. The most important way of achieving victory on the personal level is through prayer, fasting, and practicing the ascetic life. This is believed to play a significant role in attaining spiritual revival and subduing carnal desires by weakening the physical body.

Where did the dual understanding of the human person come from? W. Yohannes contends that the origin of the notion that body and soul constitute opposing entities in the human person is foreign to Ethiopia (1997, p. 214). According to him, it is most likely that the source of this notion is Hellenistic Christianity and classical Greek philosophy: “in Ethiopia, as for the Greek fathers, [a] dualistic […] conception of human being is predominant.”
Nevertheless, he adds: “It would be hasty to conclude that the terminologies are perfectly equivalent semantically in Ethiopic and in Greek; or that both share a common philosophical basis in their conception of human being” (1997, p. 214). Actually, his conclusion is that the writers of the Gadel tend to combine both Hellenistic and Hebraic anthropological concepts.

W. Yohannes then discusses a pair of two key terms, soma-psyche, to elucidate the combination of the Hellenistic and the Hebraic concept of the human person in Ethiopian philosophy. The soma-psyche pair, according to Yohannes, is taken directly from classical Greek philosophy and suggests a dualistic understanding of the human person. In Greek understanding, soma is dualistically portrayed in opposition to psyche; the soul is of higher value than the body, as exemplified in the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle and later, in Neoplatonism. But when this soma-psyche pair is used in Ethiopian literature there is also an influence of Hebraic thinking that emphasizes the wholeness of the person and the unity of body and soul.

The Ethiopic literature in general uses soma as sega (flesh), nefs (or nefse soul), and akal (body). These terms are used to describe the whole human person instead of making a dichotomy or trichotomy, for that matter. Even the Ethiopic concept of nefs does not appear to bear any Greek influence as it is used to render the same meaning as with the Hebrew word nefesh:7 the human being as a whole. There is more to the concept of nefs in Ethiopian philosophy and theology. The notion of nefs is sometimes loaded with existential meaning referring to human feeling as opposed to rationality (W. Yohannes 1997, p. 216). All of this seems to have some striking connection to Hebraic monism versus Greek dualism.

The Gadel writers tend to use nefs and sega, but not always with articulated allegiance to one of the two conceptual spectrums. At times, they use both in combination—nefse-sega (soul-body). In other instances, they use them with a clearly dualistic implication. For instance, when a woman fearing punishment declares: “Do what you wish with my flesh in order to save my soul from fire and damnation.”8

It has to be admitted that W. Yohannes’s approach is meticulous as well as enlightening in sorting out the origin of the concept of the human person in the wax and gold worldview and philosophy based on the Gadel. He employs a prudent approach in analyzing the semantic, literary, theological, and philosophical sources of the concept. Some of his arguments and conclusions are feasible. However, there seem to be two areas that are not given enough attention in his article. First,
W. Yohannes does not discuss the practical implications of Gadel vis-à-vis the understanding of the human person that results from the combination of Greek and Hebrew influences. For instance, Gadel reflects a tendency of resignation from work in the name of venerating saints and angels, and searching for higher spiritual value. This clearly is more the result of Greek rather than Hebraic influence.

The second point is closely intertwined with the first. He seems to ignore the question: Why, compared to others, is the Hebraic influence (monism) so dominant in the political domain in this worldview as shown in the close connection between politics and religion? Gadel seems to be echoing this line of thought—depicting politics as a spiritual, and therefore, a moral affair, and portraying justice as a manifestation of winning a spiritual battle. However, the very interest of monism in this matter appears not to be motivated by an integrative understanding of created reality, all spheres of life being of equal importance, instead, being triggered by an intention of assuring the superiority of spirituality over the political domain. Suffice it to mention that the main objective of tegadlo is persuading kings to consider justice as a spiritual exercise. The second cycle of Gadel was addressed to such monarchs as Lalibela, La’akuto Le’ab, Yemharena Kristos, and Meskel Kebra in twelfth and thirteenth centuries. They urged kings to look at their political activities as “the possibility of leading a saintly life while at the helm of a kingdom” (W. Yohannes 1997, p. 212).

In conclusion, the understanding of a human person in the wax and gold paradigm shows a strong preference for dualism. The spiritual battle in human life is often understood as a battle between the spiritual and the material. This finds expression even in the political sphere. It has to do with another fundamental assumption that I will discuss in the next section: the nation (Ethiopia) is considered as the new Israel and an object of God’s covenant. It was thought to be imperative, therefore, for the monarchs to pay the highest regard to the spiritual aspect of life as opposed to merely focusing on politics. It is likely then that there is a Hebraic influence in the wax and gold understanding of the human person. Ironically, the very essence of this influence (the unity of life before God) seems to be shaped by a dualistic interpretation.

**Society: Covenantal Centralization**

In this section, I will encapsulate the formation of social structure in the wax and gold paradigm and philosophical assumptions influencing the formation as such. My main source will be *Kebre Negest* (Glory
of Kings)—a book from which the notion of covenant and Ethiopian exceptionalism emanates. First, I briefly discuss its origin and composition; then I focus on two elements of its contents: the relation between the greatness of kings and the Ark of the Covenant, and the significance of the story of the Queen of Sheba.

First, Kebre Negest (KN henceforth) appeared in the fourteenth century AD. The origin and the time of the writing of the book are contentious points. Richard Pankhurst suggests that authorship was probably left obscure intentionally (1998, p. 54). While the colophon of the book was composed by Yesehaq, a lay governor of Aksum in the fourteenth century, it claims that the text was composed originally in Arabic. Some believe the work to have been translated into Arabic from a Coptic manuscript belonging to the throne of St. Mark (whom tradition claims to be the first Patriarch of Alexandria) and to have been found in Nazareth. However, any Coptic or Arabic versions are yet to come to light. Levine, however, places the origin of the work, in a form of oral tradition, as far back as the fourth century. Yet there are other claims that the work had been written around 1320 by Tigrean monks under the patronage of a Tigrean lord named Yaibike Igzi (Levine 1974, p. 100).

When it comes to its composition, KN is a somewhat intriguing piece of work in that it draws heavily from the literature of diverse religious traditions such as the Old Testament, the New Testament, Qur’an, apocryphal writings, Syrian books, and patristic writers including Origen, Cyril of Alexandria, Gregory of Nyssa, as well as many Ethiopic literatures such as the book of the life of Hanna. Levine therefore is right to characterize KN as “books within a book” (1974, p. 95). Wherever the truth about the composition and originality might lie, the impact of the book on the political and religious life of the nation can hardly be overemphasized. In Edward Ullendorff’s words, “The Kebre Negest is not merely a literary work, but—as the Old Testament to the Hebrew or the Koran to the Arabs—it is the repository of the Ethiopian national and religious feelings, perhaps the truest and the most genuine expression of Abyssinian Christianity” (1967, p. 144)

The crux of Ullendorff’s argument lies in the fact that the KN had seminal contribution in defining what Ethiopia is supposed to be. Therefore, the overriding agenda of the book seems to focus on redefining Ethiopian statehood. The historical context was inviting for the formulation of a lasting national consciousness: after the fall of the Zagwe Dynasty, the centralized government in Ethiopia was crumbling, mainly because of internal factions among the provincial lords.
As a result, the nation stood on the brink of disintegration. Moreover, political power was about to slip away from the ruling elites, who were inclined to think of themselves as having divine ordination to govern. Besides, Ethiopia's geopolitical standing in the world (especially in the Middle East) was faltering because of domestic disunity (Girma 2012, p. 122). In this vein, Messay points out that “The myth reflects a real situation by investing it with meaning, thus providing the Ethiopians with the much needed interpretive power over the world” (1999, p. 79).

Intriguingly enough, the writer picks up the theme of “greatness of kings” as a starting point. He then argues that the greatness of kings depends not on his multitude of soldiers, or in the splendor of his worldly possessions, or in the extent of his rule over cities and towns. Kings’ greatness, according to the author, is measured by the extent of the kings’ attachment to the “the presence of God” (KN 1995, p. 7). Anticipated in author’s notion of “the presence of God” is the Tabot—Ark of the Covenant. In paving the way for the incoming Christian Ethiopian kings, the author goes on to narrate how the Tabot, originally belonging to Israel, can establish this intimate relationship with Ethiopia. He does this by presenting a quasi-biblical narrative of the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon, especially in 1 Kings 10:1–13.

By way of recounting the narrative of the Queen of Sheba, first, he identifies the Queen of Sheba as Makeda of Ethiopia. As in the biblical account, Makeda goes to visit the famous King Solomon who was known as the wisest of men, and during her visit, she is virtually unable to hide her fascination for his wisdom and philosophy. Then the story of seduction unfolds. The Queen of Sheba is portrayed as a virgin queen of fabulous appearance, who considered losing her virginity a disgrace, not only to herself personally, but to her country. She courageously made an oath with Solomon that he must not take the wrong step to sleep with her, to which he agrees. Then, Solomon has to use a well-planned strategy to achieve what he wants—gambling on her promise not to take anything belonging to him under pain of having to submit to his wishes. Solomon then ordered his servants to prepare a spicy dinner that made her thirsty. At night, she drank the water that he has deliberately placed by her bed. The vow was broken and now she was left with only one choice: to sleep with Solomon. The outcome was happy in that she conceived a son, who later became the Ethiopian king, Menelik I. That was the basis of the Solomonic dynasty that continued until the last Ethiopian emperor—Haile Selassie.

How did this influence the formation of social structure in Ethiopia? Messay points out that, “The most important part of the myth resides
Hermeneutic of “Wax and Gold”

in the suggestion that Menelik I was heir to King Solomon not only naturally but in the eyes of God as well” (1999, p. 76). On the surface, this was a direct theo-political plea to the provincial warlords, who were threatening to tear the nation down into pieces, to unite under one monarch. It however had two related messages. First, it portrays the Ethiopian state as sacrosanct. Theological warrant for this is that Ethiopia is mentioned in the Bible, it possessed the Ark of the Covenant, and that it espoused Christianity as a state religion. No other country in the world, according to this tradition, has these qualities. The implication is that tampering with a nation attracting such a divine attention might generate divine wrath. Second, kings of the Solomonic line were supposed to get unconditional access to political power, and people owed submission and reverence to these monarchs. In fact, Fiteha Negest (the Ethiopia medieval constitution-like document) declares that kings are visible manifestations of divine power. In the typical fashion of medieval thinking, it was thought that no human being had the right to question God, and neither did anyone have the right to scrutinize kings. All these notions, precisely because they represent a state with a supposed sacred status.

This also gives a glimpse of the social structure. Ethiopian society, since the time that the state came into being until the end of feudalism in 1974, was structured based on the alleged divine election, the service that people rendered and the sacrifice that they made to the state. So Ethiopia under Solomonic rulers had a “pyramidal” social structure comprising three categories. Monarchs and messafint (noblemen) made it to the top. They are subsequently followed by warlords and soldiers, and then the gebbar (peasants). While the monarchs and noblemen get their social class by birth because of the supposed divine ordination, the rest had to earn theirs. The only way for upward mobility was through making a name in the field of war. The economic burden lies on the peasants. While ownership of land was only granted to the people in the upper echelons, the peasants had to rent it (in the northern parts), or work on the basis of sharing one-fourth of what they produced (in the southern part of Ethiopia) (Tirfe 1999, p. 90).

The role of the church here, is an important one. In fact, it is a well-known adage in Ethiopia that a viable state needs one negash (king), kedash (clergy), tekuash (soldier), and arash (farmer). The role of the kedash, therefore, was of crucial significance in Ethiopia. Besides providing constant theological justification of the role and the status of kings, the church played an important role in terms of disseminating the ideology. Messay therefore states: “[...] the church is at once distinct
from and wedded to the state” (1999, p. 80). Yesehaq, archbishop of the Western hemisphere (Europe and America), makes it even clearer in his book *The Ethiopian Tewahedo Church* when he writes, “The nation of Ethiopia cannot be defined without the church, nor can the church be defined without the government. In other words, the church and the state are as soul and body” (1997, p. xxii).

Moreover, the church provided theological backup for political decisions. For example, the concept of the sovereignty of God is given a very significant place during the coronation of the emperor. Blood lineage was also an important aspect of the crowning of an emperor. The theological concept (of the sovereignty of God) was played to portray the imperial election as having undisputed divine sanction. That is the main reason why all the emperors claim to have come from the Solomonic dynasty, whereas in fact, Tewodros was from Gonder, Yohannes was from Tigre, and Menelik was from Shoa. Therefore, it is partially true that that the notion of Solomonic dynasty is more about the formation of a certain ideology than about preserving direct blood lineage. Messay explains that the crux of the myth was “to ensure the fusion of the church and state only at national level,” without the church dragging itself into ethnic politics and conflict (1999, p. 81).

*KN* therefore is a “national epic” that defines the secular and religious foundations of Ethiopian nationhood (Messay 1999, p. 77). In other words, it depicts Ethiopia as one entity, not only in social terms, but also in religious and political terms. In doing so, it establishes religion, especially covenant-thinking, as the raison d’être of its people and its social and political systems. Hence, covenant-thinking is at once a religious notion, culture, way of life, and polity.

**Athens and Jerusalem, (Un)easy Marriage**

The foregoing parts highlighted a few tenets of the wax and gold worldview. Understanding the contour of the worldview is a complex journey. Not surprisingly, the task of tracing the factors that shaped the worldview is also complex. This has at times to do with the oddity of the combination of factors, while verifying the historicity of the cultural and religious influences is another issue that needs to be taken care of. This is because, as in the combination of seemingly implausible philosophical, religious, and cultural polarities, there is also a blend of myth and actual history in the factors that shape the wax and gold worldview. In this section, I attempt to sort out and adjudicate over
the historical links that function behind the wax and gold worldview. Although the sources may be multiple, I limit myself to Greek and Hebraic sources.

**Greek Connections**

The following part deals with three sources of the Greek influence in the wax and gold paradigm: pre-Christian Greek influence, Alexandrian influence coupled with Greek philosophy and the Nine Saints. I will give special attention to Platonic dualism because of its deeper influence on Ethiopian social hermeneutics.

**Pre-Christian Greek Connection**

Some Ethiopianists—like Richard Pankhurst and Donald Levine—claim that the Ethio-Greek connection might be traced back to Homer in the ninth century BC. Part of the argument is based on the view that the name Ethiopia—*Aethiops* (= the land of the burnt face)—was given by Greeks to signify the native’s skin color. The distinguished historian Pankhurst supports this claim by pointing out that Ethiopia was mentioned in ancient Greek literature like Homer’s *Iliad*. The Greeks, he remarks, had a high regard for Ethiopians. This is evident, according to Pankhurst, when Homer characterizes them in the *Iliad* as “blameless Ethiopians,” and Diodorus of Sicily “asserts that the gods Hercules and Bacchus were both awed by the piety of the Ethiopians, whose sacrifices, he claims, were the most acceptable to the gods” (1998, p. 18).

In spite of this interesting piece of information about the Ethio-Greek connection, even in antiquity, the nature of the connection remains unclear. It is worthwhile to make two observations, though. First, it is puzzling that Homer speaks of the Ethiopians as “the most distant men,” while he also speaks of their “blamelessness.” The question would be: If Ethiopia was that remote—which it conceivably was during his time—how did Homer know about the piety and blamelessness of the Ethiopians? Second, if the presumed distance was overcome by his contemporary means of transportation, the Homeric impression indicates that the influence was the other way around. In other words, there is no implication, whatsoever, that Ethiopians at this time were influenced by Greek worldview or philosophy. Conversely, it looks as though the Ethiopian way of life seemed to have had an impact on the Greeks, at least at this stage.

There seems to be more to the Ethio-Greek connection in later times. For one thing, Ethiopia was one of the destinations of Greco-Roman merchants who, at times, seemed to combine their professions
as traders and philosophers. This argument may be well founded, given the program of Hellenism that was aimed at promoting Greek culture, philosophy, and way of life using every possible means. Second, there is ample evidence that the Greek gods used to be worshiped in Ethiopia before the advent of Christianity. This fits Pankhurst’s claim: “The Aksumites, prior to the coming of Christianity, had a pantheon of gods, derived from South Arabia, which they equated in their inscriptions to the gods of the ancient Greeks” (1998, p. 24). Astar is the Ethiopian equivalent of Zeus, because he is attributed to be the king of the gods, Mahrem corresponded to the Greek Ares, the god of war, and Baher was the Ethiopian equivalent of Poseidon, the god of the sea. All of them were prominent in ancient Aksum (Pankhurst 1998, p. 24).

Another area in which the Greek connection could be felt was literature and language. The language of Aksum at the time was Ge’ez, the mother tongue of the Amharic—the present national language of Ethiopia, and Tigrigna, a language spoken by the Tigray ethnic group. Ge’ez is a Semitic tongue that largely belongs to the same family as Hebrew and Arabic. The Greek influence comes not in the language itself, but for example, in the form of writing (Pankhurst 1998, p. 24–25).

Apparently, the coming of Christianity in the fourth century occasioned a significant change and modification in the Aksumite languages. The reason is that the Bible had to be translated from Greek into Ge’ez. One of the things that had to undergo modification was the alphabet system: small marks were added to indicate the vowel system to make it more intelligible to the readers. The second change, in the Ethiopic literature under the Greek influence, was the direction of the writing itself. The boustrophedonic system was abandoned so that Ge’ez, like Greek, could be written exclusively from left to right.

To come to a conclusion, one might doubt that these early connections have any philosophical or hermeneutical significance. However, for one thing, the purpose of this section is not to rigidly draw philosophical concepts from the historical facts as such, but to try to lay a foundation for understanding the basic interaction between the Ethio-Greek culture and society. For another, these connections certainly signify that there were some economic, social, religious, and intellectual exchanges between these two societies as well as civilizations. Therefore, it is quite possible that some sort of philosophical influence took place in such a setting. Historical evidence supporting this philosophical influence on Ethiopia may not be as robust. However, it is necessary to remark that the lack of historical evidence might be due to a scarcity of well-
documented sources, rather than to there being no philosophical influences between the two civilizations and societies. The introduction of Christianity to Ethiopia, to which we will turn now, will shed more light on the philosophical influence of Greek culture in Ethiopia, because Christianity as it was introduced to Ethiopia came through Alexandria, which was faithful to Greek tradition and philosophy.

**Christian Connection—Alexandrian Tradition**

The effect of Ethiopia’s conversion to Christianity on the life of the nation can hardly be overstated, for several reasons. First, it made the country a part of the Christian world, despite the fact that it is surrounded by nations where Islam is dominant and is thus, rightly nicknamed “a Christian Island.” Second, the Christian faith had considerable influence in terms of molding the social, spiritual, and ethical values of the society. Third, it had a profound impact on the culture, literature, poetry, and art of the nation. Fourth and in our case more importantly, it remarkably strengthened a “diplomatic” (more sociocultural) relationship with certain nations—especially Israel and Greece. In this section, we discuss the Greek connection. In the next, we will look at Ethiopia’s relation to Jewish culture.

Some sources concerning the introduction of Christianity to Ethiopia might go back to the first century, according to the biblical narrative of the book of Acts (8:26–39), where the Ethiopian Eunuch was converted to Christianity on his visit to Jerusalem. Archbishop Yesehaq claims that the introduction of Christianity to Ethiopia took place in the beginning of the first century, specifically 34 AD with the baptism of the Ethiopian Eunuch. He goes on to contend that the Eunuch was a high-ranking man in Ethiopia as he was a minister of finance to Queen Candace of Ethiopia. On his return, Yesehaq claims, the Eunuch taught the doctrine of Christ to his countrymen. Irenaeus of Lyons also wrote that the Ethiopian Eunuch preached the gospel in Ethiopia. Job Ludolphus (1624–1704) holds that the Eunuch preached Christianity, and that in his time, the Ethiopian women began wearing crosses on their foreheads signifying their recognition of the Crucifixion of Christ. It might be difficult to write off completely this school of thought. Yet, espousing the view comes with the burden of proving the veracity of the place of Queen Candace in the milieu of Ethiopian history. Therefore, the questions surrounding the veracity of this story, exactly how and by whom Christianity was introduced, remain unsettled.
Reliable historical sources demonstrate that Christianity was introduced to Ethiopia in the fourth century. According to Rufinus Tyrannius—a noble church historian from Tyre—Meropius, a Syrian merchant, made a business trip to India to establish commercial trade (Budge 1970, p. 147). His trip was motivated by his friend, Metrodore, who is said to have been a philosopher in Tyre. Metrodore reportedly had had a chance to visit countries such as Persia, India, and Ethiopia and told his friend Meropius, not only about the wealth of collection of rare and precious stones that he had acquired on this journey only to have them taken from him by the king of Persia, but also regarding his positive impressions about the countries he had visited (Berhana Selassie 2000, p. 87).

Impressed by his friend’s account, Meropius resolved to undertake a similar journey. Described as both a philosopher and merchant prince, Meropius took with him two young Christians (who happened to be brothers)—Frumentius and Sidrakos Aedesius. Unaware of the bitter clash between Roman and Greek vessels and the natives, which had terminated the relationship with Greeks and Romans just a few years ago, the travelers moored at the sea port of Assab—which now belongs to Eritrea—to take on food and water. The merchant and his crew were seized by the natives, while the two young men were taken to Anbaram—the high priest of Aksum—who took them to King Al-Amida and his wife, Queen Sofya (reign: AD 294–325). The king ordered Anbaram to take charge of them and provide them instruction in religious life, especially the Torah. The tradition then indicates that these two young people studied the OT customs and the lifestyle of Ethiopia, including its language and traditional music (Brahana Selassie 2000, p. 88).

After a number of years of following a high level of education under Anbaram’s supervision, when the king died the two brothers were given liberty to return to their native country. However, Sofya, now queen regent, asked them to remain as her assistants in the government and tutor her sons, Abraha and Atsebeha, who would eventually become rulers. When her sons came of age, the former assumed the throne of Ezana—the first self-declared Christian king of Ethiopia—and the latter chose Saiazana. According to this tradition, this proved crucial to the introduction of Christianity to Ethiopia. The two brothers were known, not only for being instrumental to Christianity being declared the state religion of Ethiopia, but also for providing funds to restore and decorate places of worship with icons so that they could function as a remembrance of the life of Jesus Christ and the saints.
addition, many parts of the north country, that is, Begameder, Gojam, and Wollo, were thoroughly evangelized.

“As the Christian communities in these areas began to grow,” Brahana Sellassie writes, “the discussion began at the court of Ezana and Saiazana about the need to have a bishop who could perform the sacrament of ordination to make the other sacraments active again” (2000, p. 89). Frumentius then courageously posed a crucial question to Anbaram saying “My Lord, I admire the life and culture of the people. You Ethiopians practice Circumcision and confess a deep faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, but you do not practice Baptism or Holy Communion.” Anbaram replied to this statement, “Our fathers, the Levites, brought us Circumcision, and the Finance Minister of Queen Candace was baptized by St. Philip in the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit, yet we no longer have an apostle or bishop now to administer sacraments. So could we please arrange a trip for you to Alexandria so that you can be consecrated for this position?” (Brahana Sellasie 2000, p. 89). Tradition claims that early on in the initial period, Christian sacraments were administered by the Ethiopian Eunuch—Djan Daraba as he is known by Ethiopians—who was baptized by St. Philip. At this point, however, that had been discontinued for some reason, thus leaving the Christians in Aksum without a bishop as successor. Moreover, people seem to have reverted to the OT practices, even though Anbaram the high priest was familiar enough with New Testament literatures to be able to teach them.

While serving as the king’s treasurer and secretary Frumentius, who reportedly gave permission to foreign Christian merchants to establish churches in Ethiopia, was set to go to Alexandria for talks with Athanasius, the Patriarch of Alexandria. Athanasius, with a council of priests agreed to consecrate Frumentius, who hitherto had been known as Abba Salama (father of peace), as the first bishop of Aksum (Shenk 1988, p. 259). However, Abba Salama was not allowed to come straight back after his consecration. The Patriarch of Alexandria ordered him to undergo four years of theological and philosophical studies in the Alexandrian school. I should mention here that the Alexandrian school is generally renowned not only for blending Platonic philosophical categories with the theological conviction, but also for promoting the allegorical interpretive method as a legitimate hermeneutical theory. Included in this is Brahana Sellassie’s claim that Abba Salama was in Alexandria when some of these prominent controversies were taking place: such as the controversy over the Arian teaching and the legitimacy of the teachings of Origen—a controversial theologian/philosopher
widely known for being attracted to the ascetic and monastic lifestyle (Brahana Selassie 2000, p. 99).

The visit of Frumentius to Alexandria had an ambivalent impact on both the EOC, as a church, and on Ethiopia, as a nation. On the one hand, his visit reestablished Ethiopia as a Christian nation by effecting a resumption of the Christian faith that had been fading away and was being replaced by a certain mode of Judaism. This is true because since then, Ethiopia has gained its prominent place in the Christian world by having a bishop from Alexandria. On the other hand, however, for the next 16 centuries the Ethiopian church was not allowed to have its own native bishop. As a result, there was a constant struggle, which continued until the twentieth century, between Alexandria and the Ethiopian church to settle the question of independence. Actually, this relationship between Ethiopia and Alexandria is rather unusual, when compared to the usual Ethiopian approach of international relations—be it vis-à-vis the church or the nation. Though Ethiopia is not particularly known for being open to foreign cultures and ideas, when it is open, the openness is still very cautious. Interestingly enough, this appears not to be the case in relation to the church in this instance, because until 1959 the bishops used to be sent from Alexandria. Albeit deserving of the claim of being true to the Ethiopian culture and way of life, the church stayed under the foreign influence of the Alexandrian tradition. Doubtless, Ethiopians have a habit of accepting foreign notions on their own terms. However, the Ethio-Alexandrian contact indicates that this might have been one of the ways through which Greek thought made an impact on the Ethiopian way of thinking.

Calvin Shenk might be spot on when he writes, “Ethiopian Christianity adapted beliefs and symbols which were reflected and reinforced in indigenous African traditions. The church either absorbed or transfigured elements which suited its purpose. Sometimes one of the three strands—Christianity, Judaism, primal religion—seems to dominate more than another” (1988, p. 268). Indeed, Shenk’s observation is to the point, especially with regard to identifying the method of domestication that the EOC is accustomed to undertake. He seems, however, to completely neglect the Greek influence as one of the strands that has a strong grip on the wax and gold worldview. This is because it would be naïve to think that this paradigm would be immune from the Alexandrian influence while receiving one bishop after another for 1600 years. Coming to the issue at stake, though bishops of Alexandrian origin were received and worked in Ethiopian terms (starting from their very names), this was one of the few setbacks that the EOC had
to struggle with as an indigenous church. In any case, it was one of the ways that the Alexandrian theology and philosophy, as a perception of reality, found its way into the Ethiopian culture.

Setting forth at least a couple of examples might suffice to bring my argument home. First, the EOC followed the Alexandrian church in rejecting the Council of Chalcedon held in AD 451, which approved the doctrine of the two natures of Christ. Accordingly, it opted to endorse the position commonly known as Monophysitism, which denotes that Christ's human and divine nature are merged.

Even then, the EOC preferred to call itself a tewahido—literally meaning “made one”—church. Interestingly, the adoption of the Monophysite position may indicate, at least on the face of it, that the EOC philosophically tilts toward monism as opposed to dualism. However, practically speaking, that is hardly the case. There is a strong belief in the domination of the divine nature of Christ. Therefore, the significance of his human nature is seldom raised or taught. This is true not only theologically—as is exhibited in Christology—but also the whole perception of reality is influenced by this conceptual frame. Second, sources make it abundantly clear that the EOC adopted the peculiar Alexandrian system of jurisdiction after Frumentius was succeeded by Bishop Minas, an Egyptian (Shenk 1988, p. 261).

To wrap up this discussion, it does appear that Greek dualism was never intentionally planted in Ethiopia. No evidence points to a direct and conscious exchange of philosophical ideas between these two cultures. Greek thinking seems to have come to Ethiopia enveloped in social interaction through merchants, literature known as angara-falasfa (the sayings of philosophers), theological doctrines from the Alexandrian tradition, and the way of life of the Nine Saints. Whichever way it came to Ethiopia, its influence is far-reaching.

Hebraic Connection

The impact of Hebraic thinking on the wax and gold worldview is hardly a subject of contention. It, in fact, can predate the introduction of Christianity in the fourth century and the translation of the Bible into Ethiopic language—Ge'ez. This may have to do with the high regard that Ethiopians have for the OT, probably by the virtue of the fact that the OT mentions Ethiopia several times, mostly in a positive sense. However, after the introduction of Christianity, the interpenetration of religion, politics, and culture might have played a significant role in terms of elevating the importance of the OT in the
Religion and Social Change in Ethiopia

wax and gold worldview. Ullendorff seems to be accurate when he writes, “Abyssinian Christianity constitutes a store-house of the cultural, political, and social life of the people” (1968, p. 15). Therefore, the importance of the OT to Ethiopia rests on the fact that it is a scripture providing a rich ideological venue that keeps religion, politics, and culture together. The richness of the OT books combined with the ambiguity in interpretative trajectories as discussed earlier makes it interesting to political leaders as well as to religious scholars.

In the following part, I discuss the Hebraic roots of the wax and gold tradition. I will do this by discussing the influence of the OT and the notion of covenant as a surplus history emanating from both biblical texts and myths in KN. I should note, however, that in my discussion of the OT, I am not always discussing OT texts per se. Instead, I discuss OT rituals and religious practices that are evident in the EOC and their influences on the wax and gold way of thinking. My discussion on KN is treated separately, even though KN is heavily influenced by the OT. Partly this is because, albeit the evident influence of OT, KN is an Ethiopian book with an Ethiopian agenda in its heart.

Old Testament: Scriptural Roots of Covenant-Thinking

Now let us have a closer look at specific elements of the OT that, based on the broad historical background mentioned above, left ideological or philosophical marks on the wax and gold worldview, the Ark of the Covenant, and the philosophical implications of the structure of the EOC “temples.”

The place of the Tabot (the Ark of the Covenant) in the EOC is of great importance in understanding the wax and gold worldview. Ullendorff seems to be correct when he writes: “The concept and the function of the Tabot represents one of the most remarkable areas of agreement with Old Testament forms of worship” (1968, p. 82). The details of its appearance and related celebration were described well by Abu Salih, an Arab writer of the thirteenth century, when he points out that “[. . .] the Abyssinian possess also the Ark of the Covenant, in which are the two tables of stone, inscribed by the finger of God with the commandments which he ordained for the children of Israel.” After making a detailed description of the Ark of Covenant, he adds that “the Ark attended and carried by a large number of Israelites descended from the family of the prophet David…” (cf. Ullendorff 1968, p. 83).

It would not be surprising if one doubted some components of Abu Salih’s description, such as: the factuality of the Ark’s presence in Aksuma-Tsion (the second Zion in Aksum); trustworthiness of the
Ark’s being the same Ark that belonged to the Temple of Jerusalem; the veracity of his claim that a large number of “Israelites” descending from the family of King David attended the Ark, and so on. Conversely, however, the centrality of the Ark of the Covenant, whether real or imaginary, in the life of both nation and church cannot be overestimated. The Tabot blended not only church and state for more than one-and-a-half millennia, but the same concept of Tabot brought the sacred and secular together. The Tabot played a tremendous role in creating an ideological category in which Ethiopians understand and conduct themselves. For Ethiopians, the Tabot also created a benchmark by which they should be understood by others as well. This is because the notion of covenant, in one or another way became their most important hermeneutical mark, so that without taking this into account one cannot unlock what it means to be Ethiopian. The Ark as sign of the covenant was also what it meant to the Israelites. Yet, there is a remarkable difference: it is customary in the EOC to have a Tabot for almost every congregation and even the idea of church planting is linked to it: Tabot tekele (planted a Tabot) is synonymous to planting a church.

The second important component of Hebraic influence concerns the similarity between the structure of the tabernacle and the EOC “Temple.” EOC buildings have a threefold division. The innermost chamber of the church is called Mekdes (=Temple). It in the center of holiness and is sometimes called Qedesta Qedussan (=Holy of Holies). Here rests the Tabot, upon the Menber (=seat), which corresponds to the altar. The sanctity of the place hinges on the presence of the Tabot, without which holding services is impossible. Only senior priests and kings may be admitted to this part of the church (Samuel 1970, p. 65).

The middle chamber is known as Keddist (=holy place). Only priests and those who can celebrate the Holy Communion may stand there. Needless to say, neither entering this chamber nor celebrating the sacrament is a rightful act for everybody. The right to have a place and celebrate service are given to only those who fulfill the requirement of “purity”, and for those who faithfully fast and pray and are confident of conducting themselves blamelessly.

The outer court is known as Kine Mahlet—the place where cantors (debeerras) sing traditional hymns for the congregation who may also stand here. This court is divided in three parts: One part of the ambulatory area is reserved for women whereas the other is set aside for men; the western part is occupied by the hymn-singing cantors. However, any congregants who feel unclean can keep themselves outside the church or even, at times, outside the compound. Churches are
usually built on high hills overlooking a village, where the inhabitants can easily hear the calls for prayer (Shenk 1988, p. 263; Ullendorff 1968, p. 88–89).

Let us now make a few observations. First, in the EOC conception, the inner court of the church is holier than the churchyard. Yet again, this indicates how the material aspect of reality is associated with uncleanness. Second, Kiddist seems to have a special significance. It is also called enda ta’amer (=place of miracle) to signify that this is where miracles supposedly happen. Though the performance of miracles (such as healing) in this section is not customary, it is commonly believed that celebrating Holy Communion is as much a miracle as healing because it is believed that in this event elements of the Holy Communion—bread and wine—are “changed” into the true flesh and blood of Christ.

That is not the main issue here, though. This place is significant in the EOC theology because it is where Qine Mahlet, a symbolically less mysterious and spiritual activity, and Qedesta Qedussan (=Holy of Holies) are connected. Mediation (of priests and spiritual activities such as sacraments) also plays a crucial role in terms of bringing these two realms together. Therefore, this is a noteworthy allegory of disowning supposed material uncleanness with the miraculous act of mediation and the administration of the Holy Mysteries. Third, the EOC retained the understanding of the Temple and its rituals after the coming of Christ. Apparently, this is because, if the church espouses this theological change, it is thought that it would have sociological implications. Namely, this may diminish the role of clergy as mediators, the portrait of kings as beings anointed by God, and the image of Ethiopia as the nation of covenant—“the new Israel.”

Covenant—a Surplus History
As we have discussed in relation to KN and Tabot, the notion of covenant is basic to Ethiopian identity and way of life. In what follows, I summarize the origin and discuss the impact of this notion. Covenant-thinking has two interrelated origins. First, the notion of covenant that Ethiopians claim comes directly from biblical literature. This notion takes the advantage of the fact that Ethiopia is mentioned in the Bible more than 40 times. The foundational text giving rise to the notion of Ethiopia as a nation of covenant is Psalms 68 that states “Ethiopia will stretch her hands unto God.” Second, the KN has played an additional role of domesticating the notion of covenant in Ethiopia. That is, KN’s interpretation of the biblical story of the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon, as discussed earlier, owes a great deal to the OT. By creating
Hermeneutic of “Wax and Gold”

a legend and relating it to the Ethiopian political and religious setting, KN portrays Ethiopia as a nation with a special place in God’s eschatological program.

As to impact, however superfluous the interpretation of KN might be presumed to be, this does not take anything away from the fact that covenant-thinking created an Ethiopian story that transcends time, ideology, and ethnic background. Despite significant social and political changes, the fact that Ethiopians consideration of themselves as the people of the covenant refuses to fade away. It stays pervasive throughout time as a restraining power as well as a unifying force. It constrained those regimes intending to opt for Ethiopia as a secular state (the Dergue) and intending to divide people along ethnic groups (EPRDF) (see an in-depth discussion of this in the next two chapters). Besides the fact that the notion of covenant was a unifying force that glues the mosaic of ethnic groups together enabling to see themselves as one nation, it has its own moral discourse under the name of fereha-egziabiher (the fear of God). From the background of the notion of fereha-egziabiher come social concepts: mekebabel (reciprocity and acceptance), mechachal (toleration or recognition of one’s individual, social, and religious boundary), and metesaseb (willingness to share one’s boundary with the other).14

Covenant therefore creates what Maimire calls “surplus history” and “the ensemble of subjugated meaning, values and practices.” It also provides society with “surplus meaning” of their national consciousness as well as sociocultural identity (Maimire 2010, p. 74). Covenant, as surplus history, can be placed in contrast with actual Ethiopian history. That is, from a surplus meaning perspective, actual history is not satisfactory. According to Maimire, actual history is a history of failure, repression, and forced unity. Surplus history, in contrast, is not a history of what has happened, but rather an account of what is possible (Maimire 2010 p. 78).

It is this sense of covenant that shapes a unique kind of Ethiopian consciousness that has domestic and international outcomes. Domestically, it was used by the political leaders, especially by kings, to legitimize their political power claim—portraying themselves as “God’s elects,” divinely appointed to rule the nation of covenant. Moreover, based on this claim, they set themselves up as beyond the criticism of ordinary folks for their political missteps. At the grassroots level, however, covenant-thinking created an Ethiopian identity that runs throughout diverse ethnic groups generating an atmosphere of not only peaceful coexistence but also of having a common goal. Internationally, the
surplus meaning created a sense of exceptionalism. Ethiopians would not consider themselves Africans; neither would they see themselves as similar to Western society. Ethiopians see themselves as a unique people because of the supposed unique attachment to God and of having a unique place in his eschatological purpose. Social and political experiences, both good and bad, are interpreted from the exceptionalist point of view that gives divine order and/or intervention a special place.

**Philosophy and Politics: Odd Sources**

In the previous sections I discussed the worldview of the wax and gold paradigm and its historical roots, both in Platonic dualism and in Hebraic monism. In this section I make some critical observations concerning how this paradigm tried to combine these seemingly irreconcilable ways of thinking. I start with a short characterization of Platonic dualism and indicate how it was adapted to the Ethiopian context. Then I give a short summary of Hebraic thought and its practical implications. These short characterizations will serve to point out the problems resulting from the combination of the two influences on the wax and gold paradigm. In the final section I show that these problems are of both a conceptual as well as a practical nature.

**Philosophical Dualism**

Platonic dualism can be characterized roughly as a doctrine that claims the objects of our thoughts (ideas, i.e., noumena) constitute the ultimate and eternal reality, and the reality we physically perceive (phenomena) is but a shadow of that. I will elaborate on this dualism by giving a short impression of the cosmology, the concept of the human person and society in Platonic philosophy. This is followed by a discussion of how this could have influenced the dualistic conception of reality in the wax and gold paradigm and an indication of the practical consequences.

**Conceptual Characterization of Platonic Dualism**

_Cosmology_—In Platonic cosmology the physical world is not the handiwork of a divine intelligence or a personal ruler. The Platonic creator of the universe, the Demiurge, is portrayed as a “manual labourer” (Vlastos 1975, p. 26). The Demiurge is not an inventor of new form, or a Creator ex nihilo, but an imposer of preexisting form on purportedly “formless”
Hermeneutic of “Wax and Gold”

material. According to Plato, therefore, matter stands in opposition to the Demiurge. This is because matter has an “irrational” motion inherent in itself and independent of the Demiurge. For Plato, this world is good as it relates to the eternal ideas or forms used by the Demiurge to install order. But the irrational matter has never been perfectly managed by the “craftsman”—Demiurge. Therefore, matter is the cause of evil and imperfection in the physical world (Allen 1985, pp. 3–4). This is how Plato understood reality as having two realms—the eternal and real, on one hand, and the changing and reflecting the real, on the other.

**Human Person**—This dualistic understanding of cosmology also impinges upon Plato’s philosophical anthropology (cf. *Phaedo* 79A). In Plato’s understanding, the soul is the eternal part of the human being that has joined the body only temporarily. The soul exists before joining the body at birth, and it is meant to survive death. The soul is related to the eternal Ideas, to which the soul is attracted by a transcendental love. Even more interesting, the body is considered to be an obstacle to the philosopher in his attempt to gain a clear view of the ideas. It is therefore imperative that he should seek deliverance from the body (Wedberg 1982, pp. 75–76). In his work *Timaeus* (cf. 7A) Plato adds to this dualistic picture by describing the human person as a microcosm. The world is portrayed as the prearranged and well-structured home of men and gods; the human person is a small image of the world that is framed to function as well as possible.

**Society**—Plato gave a comprehensive presentation of his political views, especially in his *Republic*. His understanding of society is directly linked to his cosmological demarcation between the ideal or noumenal world and the material or phenomenal world, as well as to his dualistic philosophical anthropology. In his conception Plato wanted to see society as a material (earthly) reflection of the eternal cosmic order—a cosmic order of the unchangeable eternal forms beyond this changing and destructive world. As such, Plato thought that the actual state as an institution should reflect the ideal and exemplary state in which goodness and justice prevail. He divides society into a hierarchy of three classes: the guardians, the auxiliaries, and the workers. The guardians, also known as philosopher-kings are the wise men endowed with the art of governance. The auxiliaries, the second class, are the soldiers and minor civil servants who are there to support the ruling elite. The third and lowest class, the workers, consists of farmers, artisans, and mostly unskilled laborers (Hacker 1961, p. 32).

The dualistic dimension of Plato’s political philosophy is clear in two areas. First, it is clear when it provides grounds for the hierarchical
understanding and organization of society. Society has basically two “classes”: the rulers and the workers. One might wonder: What about auxiliaries? Then, as Karl Popper pointed out, the existence of auxiliaries says more about the rulers than themselves. In other words, rulers need them as an imposing force not only to rule the workers, but also “to stay unchallenged and unchallengeable” (Popper 1966, pp. 147–48). Second, the dualism is clear between those that understand what justice is because they direct their mind to the eternal ideas and want to establish the ideal state as far as possible in the actual state, and those whose mind is directed to the material world because they are controlled by their senses and not by their intellect or reason. That is probably why the workers deal with the material needs, and the rulers or guardians with the higher or social needs of humankind. This view of society implies that the work of manual laborers is viewed as being of an inferior nature. Preferably, it was to be done by slaves.

Domestication of Platonic Dualism in the Wax and Gold Paradigm

The influence of Platonic dualism is evident in the wax and gold paradigm, which influences Ethiopia to this day. However, it is not pure Platonic dualism that is found there. As a paradigm very much attuned to using foreign elements with the intention of domestication, the wax and gold paradigm used the generic Platonic frame to, among other things, formulate its own understanding of cosmology, the human person, and society. Let us have a closer look at the resulting dualism in the wax and gold paradigm by way of discussing the three elements treated in the foregoing section.

Platonic cosmology does not fit conceptually well in the wax and gold cosmological framework. This is because, unlike Platonism that depicts the creator, Demiurge, as finite, imperfect, and subordinate to the Good (Taliaferro and Jeply p. 6), the wax and gold paradigm, conditioned by the EOC, subscribes to the mainline Christian story of Creation. Therefore, the claim of the independence of the material world in relation to the Creator is not evident in EOC teachings. As we saw earlier, its creed shows that God is the source of the created world, visible and invisible. Despite the differences, the wax and gold paradigm shares a cosmological framework with Platonic dualism. While depicting the Creator as transcendent, perfect, and as absolute source of everything, it espouses a hierarchical understanding of the cosmos where the spiritual realm is elevated and material reality receives a negative reading.\textsuperscript{15}
When it comes to the concept of the human person, there seems to be a holistic understanding, indicating the influence of the Hebraic concept of human person. This is because *nēfs* is often used not as opposed to flesh but to describe the whole person. For example, when one says, “I saved a soul,” it usually means, “I saved a person,” not his soul over or against his flesh. However, it is very important to add that practical life in this paradigm is heavily biased towards dualism. It is believed that the soul and the spiritual aspect of the human person should be separated from the material reality including the body. The ways of the disowning include refraining from involvement in the material world by leading an ascetic life, fasting and observing a number of days dedicated to saints and angels, and by distancing oneself from the pursuit of material wealth.

As in Platonism, a hierarchical understanding of society is very much evident in the wax and gold paradigm. Society was generally classified as royalty/clergy, nobility, and the rest. The role of the nobility in the wax and gold paradigm and auxiliaries in Platonism seems strikingly similar. The nobility are the kingmakers and the ones who make sure that the rulers stay unchanged and unchallenged. Besides, as in Platonism, there was a sense that kings should let themselves be guided by the eternal and/or divine order of idea in the wax and gold paradigm: they are not mere human beings. The “throne” always had a divine attribution to it: kings were thought to be anointed by God. However, there are some important differences. Compared to the wax and gold paradigm, there is the freedom to move from one social class to another in the Platonic understanding of society, because in Platonism ruler-kings emerge on the basis of intellectual merits and educational superiority. However, that was not the case in the wax and gold understanding. It is restricted to a few families who allegedly were descended from the “Solomonic dynasty.” There would be a very rare chance that people outside the purported dynasty would manage to climb to the rank of nobility. Nevertheless, the class of the royalty is theologically and ideologically restricted to certain ethnicities, where educational and intellectual merit meant almost nothing.

Dualism makes its way to the practical life of people through two channels. First, children going to traditional schools are encouraged to lead an ascetic lifestyle and avoid the temptation to join a modern one with a better life. Second, dualism registers its impact on practical life through the imposition of religious regulations (especially on EOC followers) as to when or not to work. For example, believers are meant to refrain from working several days a month for the sake of venerating saints and the angels.
Hebraic thought can be characterized as monistic in the sense that it combines recognition of the rich diversity of created reality with the belief that it all comes from one ultimate origin: the Creator, God. In this section, I first briefly discuss the Book of Sirach (The Book of Ecclesiasticus) to illustrate this integral view of reality. My choice of this book is based on not only on its familiarity in the Ethiopian context, but also for its ability to represent Jewish thinking on the matters being discussed below. Following this, I discuss the practical implications of this view as shown in the history of Israel.

Ben Sira: Wisdom as Philosophy of Integrality
Clearly “philosophy” has hardly been one of the important terms in Jewish vocabulary. Still, that is far from asserting that Jews have no philosophy at all. Probably the best equivalent term for philosophy is found in the Hebraic nuance of “wisdom.” Wisdom has a far greater place than the mere practice of intellectual gymnastics, so to speak, because it is very closely tied to one’s deeper commitment, namely the fear of God and impact on everyday life. Taking a brief look at the Book of Sirach, Jewish literature of the Second Temple Period that may have influenced the EOC as part of its open canon, will shed some light on the argument. Ben Sira attempts to make a case for true wisdom. As his book contends, true wisdom should not be sought in books and teachings of the Greeks. Rather, the abode of wisdom is to be found in the writings and instructions of the Jewish tradition. He demonstrates this by identifying wisdom with Torah—the Law of Moses.

I will extract his understanding of metaphysics, philosophical anthropology, and society from his discussion of wisdom.

Metaphysics—There are several aspects of metaphysics that can be contrasted with Platonic dualism. First, according to Ben Sira, God is one and there is no other besides him (36:5). There is no independence between the Creator and Creation. Instead, for Ben Sira, God is the only Creator of everything and each of his creatures has the stamp of his greatness as well as goodness (42:15–43). Second, the complexity between his transcendence and accessibility (immanence) is presented in a balanced way. Ben Sira claims, God’s greatness transcends all human comprehension and yet he makes himself known to the world through his wonderful deeds (16:18, 23; and 18:4). Contrary to dualistic thinking, the implication is that since wisdom originated in a transcendent God, it lends itself well to be used (by human persons) to rule
the world. The aspect of ruling is attributed to God. Yet, it also plays a role in maintaining, ruling, and managing the creational dimension pertaining to material reality. Wisdom is praised throughout the book as being greater than everything except God himself (23:20; 42:15–20; and 43:33). This implies in the Book of Sirach—a book known to be one of the best reflections of Jewish thought—that the dual tension between the sacred and secular is not characteristic of Jewish thought because of its integrationist approach to reality rather than of elevating the spiritual over the material. Its claim that God is the source of Creation implies the idea that everything created (spiritual and material) bears a stamp of God’s goodness and the notion of human beings as abodes of God’s wisdom carries a monistic integrality.

Human Person—According to Ben Sira, the human person is not marked by the dualism of trying to “disown” his soul from the material world. The human person is a handiwork of God created to reflect God’s glory. Furthermore, the human person is created to be a “king” over the rest of Creation (17:1–8). Besides the ability to rule, the human person is bestowed with a will to choose between good and evil (15:14–12) and accordingly will be held accountable for his or her deeds (17:9–16). Ben Sira’s thinking on the human person is also implied in his discourse on wisdom. Wisdom comes, he contends, from the Lord and was created before everything else—an echo of Proverbs 8 where wisdom is depicted in anthropomorphic language. Despite being available to everyone, only those who love “her” will gain wisdom. Ben Sira goes on to say: “If you desire wisdom, keep the commandments, and then the Lord will lavish her upon you. For the fear of the Lord is wisdom and discipline, fidelity and humility are his delight” (1:26–27). That means, for a person to be wise, it is not sufficient to have an inward or spiritual desire. The inward desire should be expressed outwardly, for example, in the form of fidelity or humility. Fear of the Lord or wisdom, according to Ben Sira, is not some sort of abstract spiritual exercise; it exercises spiritual and ethical virtues in the context of ruling over “all other creatures.”

In contrast to Greek dualism, which he opposes from the outset, coherence, rather than continuous struggle between spiritual and material aspects of the human person, is evident in the Book of Sirach. According to Ben Sira, the inward self fears the Lord, whereas the outward one obeys the commandments; and therefore, inasmuch as it is inconceivable to make a rigid dichotomy between fear of the Lord and obedience of the commandment, it is equally implausible to make a dichotomy between the inward and outward self.
Society—Ben Sira acknowledges the existing social order. But his thoughts on society do not intend to give spiritual justification to the hierarchical understanding of society; nor does it attempt to trigger an utopian revolution against it. Instead, he introduces important ethical issues, especially the issue of justice, into interclass social relationships. Let us unpack this by way of discussing Ben Sira’s understanding of family and political leadership, starting with the family. Incorporating parents, children, and slaves, the family is the foundation of society, the basis of moral values. Ben Sira goes on to advise the leader of the house, the man, to choose his wife on the basis of her moral worth. Although men are vested with more power in the household than women, in the Book of Sirach man is subject to moral obligation and accountability. Strikingly, Ben Sira ties the issue of justice to two members of the family: to children in general, but particularly daughters and slaves. This is because in a hierarchical society the welfare of women can easily be neglected (7:26–28). As to the other, he advises slave owners: “Let a wise servant be dear to you as your soul” (7:23). In turn, he advises children and slaves to obey their parents and masters, respectively. He encourages hard work and respect and admonishes idleness (33:25–30) and disrespect (7:29).

Outside the household, Ben Sira recognizes the importance of political leadership. He claims that it is God’s will for one person to be “exalted” while others stay in a “humble” station (33: 7–15). Therefore, he does not speak against those in power, and yet, he stresses that they are not unchallengeable. They can be resisted or criticized by their subjects. But, beyond their subjects (people), the leaders are accountable to God—a higher horizon than people or themselves. According to Ben Sira, the sense of accountability looms large in the context of social classes such as rich and poor, or “learned” and “ignorant,” to use his own words. He emphasizes that by virtue of being human, all classes are endowed with an ability to become wise (35:21–29). He then urges the prince, a political leader, to bear in mind that he is in God’s hand, and should therefore do equal justice to all: poor and rich (5:18; 10:1–13). On the other hand, he insists that the lower class should be submissive to those who are in power, and deal patiently with the leaders and powerful men who might not be safely confronted (8:1–13; 9:18–21; and 13:1–8).

Ben Sira’s understanding of wisdom as a philosophy of integrality is monistic in its nature. For one, it recognizes God as the only source of existence and the transcendent being, points that square well with that of the EOC. His understanding of wisdom adds, however, that the
abode of wisdom is not limited to spiritual realms; by also dwelling among human persons, it enables human persons to manage and rule the surrounding reality. Instead of making a hierarchical difference between spiritual and material, Ben Sira’s understanding recognizes that both are in the realm of God.

Covenant, Political Power and Material Reality

I have maintained that covenant, in Ethiopia, is more than a theological concept. It is a conceptual framework that helps one to see and aspire beyond actual history by providing surplus history and meaning. However, surplus history and meaning were both used and misused in the social and political context. Here I focus, first, on the relation between kings and covenant in the OT. Specifically, I take the example of King David in 2 Samuel 7 and elaborate on it in light of the Ethiopian situation. Second, I discuss the relation between covenant and Torah and relate it to the Ethiopian understanding of covenant.

In the OT, political leadership used to be bestowed on the basis of blood relationship. In 2 Samuel 7, God promised David that there will always be a son of David on the throne of Israel. Theologians would like to believe that this promise has come to ultimate fulfillment by the coming of Christ. Ignoring what happened to Christ, the Ethiopian ideologues of the Solomonic dynasty took a rather “telescopic” approach to transpose the issue of bloodline from Solomon directly to Menelik I. The issues related to theo-political legitimacy of such a claim aside, the connecting political power grip to Solomon, nevertheless, is very important, even though the Solomonic dynasty did not always follow a strict blood relationship between the incumbent and heir. Albeit in different ways (from that of Jewish kings), Ethiopian kings claimed to have a special assignment from God to lead and the political and national life is based on the consciousness that Ethiopia is a covenant nation.

Tabot, symbolizing both religious and national identity, was an important aspect of this covenant. EOC buildings are structured and organized in such a way that they can reiterate the Temple rituals of the OT. Religious leaders, as in the OT setting, were active in the political domain and played an important role in shaping the political features of Ethiopia.

However, there is, at least, one fundamental difference in how political power was understood in these two traditions. The Jewish kings were never beyond criticism and accountability as shown in the case of David in 2 Samuel 12. There are many instances, in the book of Kings and Chronicles, where kings were directly confronted by prophets like
Isaiah and Jeremiah for apparently wrong decisions they made and the actions they took as political leaders. Even more important, there are ample evidences in the same stories mentioned above that kings had shown remorse and repented for the wrongs they had done. They were accountable, not only to God and the Torah, but to the prophets, as “civil society,” and to their own people, who could hold their leaders accountable on the basis of the written law: Torah.

The implication is that the claim of covenant in the OT did not play in favor of kings. The effect was the reverse. Kings were under constant scrutiny. They were held accountable even by less powerful people, like Nathan in the story of David. In Ethiopia, however, covenant seems to have played to favor kings. By elevating politics from a public service to the level of spiritual exercise based on divine election, covenant was construed in such a way that it helped kings to insulate themselves from the scrutiny of the ordinary folks. Instead of playing the role of civil society and demanding justice in the fashion of OT prophets, religious leaders kept their constant alliance to political leaders. They, in fact, had a lion share of political power together with the state.

Now let me elaborate on the connection between covenant and Torah and its implications for the understanding of material reality. The fact that the prophets critiqued the kings implies that covenant in the OT was not limited to the king of Israel. Basically, it is a covenant with the people of Israel as a whole. True to its nature, covenant always comes with a sense of responsibility from the covenanting parties. And, as such, it implies a blessing that extends to all of life, if the commandments are kept. Covenant establishes that a blessing has been promised for Israel. But this blessing can only be realized on the condition that Israel lives according to the Torah. Blessings are not strictly “spiritual” in nature, but neither are responsibilities and conditions. Justice (to the poor, the fatherless, and widows) is a necessary condition. The blessings also include material prosperity and peace. Instead of being limited to the spiritual dimension of human life, these things also concern the material dimension of life. One then can surmise: “Levites (priests belonging to the tribe of Levi and descended from Aaron who formed a special group) were ordered by God to avoid engaging material reality.” True, but this order never legitimizes a negative way of engaging in the material world, such as farming. Actually, the protection of the possession of the land was an important part of the Torah.

The wax and gold paradigm, however, (mis)appropriates the notion of covenant in two ways. First, conditioned by its historical connection to Alexandrian tradition, the wax and gold paradigm mainly
interpreted created reality with a Platonic lens. Not surprisingly, such an interpretive method elevated “spirituality” over the material dimension of reality. Second, as a result of a deep-rooted belief in disowning the human soul from the material world, covenant was played in such a way that it discourages engaging the material world, and instead, sits back and banks on the divine promise to deliver the long awaited eschatological blessing.

To conclude this section, in the Hebraic tradition covenant is understood as a binding agreement that links heaven and earth, metaphorically speaking. Politically this binding agreement assumes responsibility and accountability on the leaders’ part. The fact they were open to scrutiny by prophets indicates that it is not the intrinsic nature of covenant to help insulate kings from being held accountable. Second, in relation to material reality covenant indicates that the promise is earned by fulfilling the conditions of covenant. This does not discourage hard work and innovation, but encourages healthy economic development. Our analysis indicates that covenant, in the wax and gold paradigm, was misappropriated by the political establishment in both political and economic senses. Politically, leaders used it to avoid criticism and strengthen their grip on power. Economically, in relation to material reality, human innovation and hard work were discouraged in preference to a reliance on the covenantal promise to deliver social and economic betterment without human effort.

**Implications and Problems of the Combination**

In what follows, I try to show the implications and problems of combining monism and dualism. After discussing the conceptual difficulty, I focus on how an amalgamation of the apparently irreconcilable thinking traditions might have contributed to political, economic, and social problems.

First, let me start with a conceptual problem. Ethiopia is a society where Platonic dualism is dominant but, in the same breath, it holds covenant-thinking in high regard. This presents a conceptual difficulty: How is it possible to combine dualism with an integralist concept such as covenant? The source of difficulty might not be the combination of two ways of thinking per se. But what brings the conceptual difficulty is the fact that the paradigm made an attempt to combine two irreconcilable ways of thinking in such a way that it pervaded the holistic dimension of the human person and its relation to surrounding reality. As a result, one can argue that the unity of Creation
was compromised as spirituality was elevated over material reality. The obvious obstacle for the comprehensiveness of dualistic hermeneutics is the danger of sliding into reductionism. This is because it ends up by reducing the rich vein of created reality to spirituality. In other words, several spheres of reality and human fabric itself suffers as the significance of the material aspect of reality is consistently downplayed. Instead of permeating all areas of life, the integrality that we saw in Hebraic covenant-thinking was limited to linking politics and religion and was a tool to stifle social change and maintain the status quo.

Second, the conceptual confusion is evident in the political thought of the wax and gold paradigm. Hebraic integralism was critically important to the paradigm—it offers the notion of covenant as a political concept. As a result, it helped the claim that Ethiopia is the nation of covenant to shape Ethiopian identity and culture. However, the notion of covenant as interpreted in the wax and gold paradigm is closer to a Platonic understanding of society. This has had practical consequences. As our analysis of the wax and gold worldview indicated, the paradigm classifies society into classes: royalty and clergy with divinely granted access to political power, nobility as guards to royalty and with the lion’s share of the wealth, and the rest of the people relegated to show unconditional servitude to the upper classes. Therefore, this indicates that the concept of covenant was hijacked by political power seekers and ideologues to legitimize imperial self-interest and deny the people any political right to pose a meaningful challenge and demand social change even when corruption, nepotism, and mismanagement were evident. This allowed little or no space at all for the critical and positive participation of the people in shaping public agenda, thereby jeopardizing their natural rights. This is because anointing kings was perceived as God’s duty and, true to form, kings could only be chosen from the Solomonic dynasty.

Third, economically, the wax and gold paradigm failed to capitalize on the Ethiopian ingenuity exhibited in Ethiopian civilization. The cause, as our analysis shows, is that the wax and gold paradigm is dominated by Platonic dualism, and the positive appreciation of material reality in Hebraic monism is either downplayed or underexplored. Thus, the paradigm’s interpretation of created reality is characterized by a strong dichotomy between what is thought to be “sacred” and “profane.” The spiritual dimension of created reality, in this view, has the upper hand over material reality. Consequently, this led to socio-economic stagnation. In other words, there seems good reason to wonder whether the hermeneutical framework of the wax and gold paradigm
has left the Ethiopians in a state of spiritual hibernation not to wake up and react to the ever-deteriorating economic scenario. Practically speaking, the elevation of soul over body and the perpetual preparation of young minds for asceticism as opposed to engaging with material reality seem to have frustrated the innovative prowess that once created the rock-hewn churches of Lalibela, the castles of Fasilades in Gondar, and the obelisks in Axum.

This is even clearer when Aba Gebre Selassie of St. Paul Theological College in Addis remarks: “My old generation was dedicated to religion; we had no time to think of the world. Nowadays, the new generation is different” (Chaillot 2002, p. 93). Memher Berhane Mesqel Ar’aya, a teacher of the Old and New Testaments in St. Stephen’s church in Addis, laments the fact that the numbers of begging students are dramatically declining in Addis Ababa as the result of the Western system of education. This is because “begging and going through all kinds of hardship is also seen as a way of strengthening the students (sic) spirituality” (Chaillot 2002, p. 97).

Fourth, socially, it has to be admitted that Hebraic monism created a culture of toleration and peaceful coexistence among the ordinary people. However, the hierarchical understanding of society, with its Platonic influence, seems also to have created a culture of mistrust, not only towards the political leaders, but also among the ethnicities that used to come from both the ruling and ruled classes. The culture of sem-ena-werq created a mentality of duplicity that often underlies communication, social interaction, and even art and literature. Admittedly, ambiguity might have aesthetic value. However, it might bear sour fruit, as it were, when it becomes something that characterizes society because ambiguity seems to have created a kind of mentality often expressed by a famous proverb: seven mamen kebro ... (trust a fellow only after you have witnessed his funeral).

**Social Practices: Ambiguous Public Space**

In this section I draw on the practical implications to explain how some areas of life are influenced by the dualistic worldview discussed in the first part and that found its way through the aforementioned historical links. I focus on gene (poetic tradition) in relation to social practices (especially of communication) in the public sphere. I do not evaluate poetic tradition per se, but limit myself to unraveling the deep-seated hermeneutical assumption behind it.
In the absence of politically negotiated public space, literary devices provide the means for ordinary people to channel their say to the public domain. Philosophical reflections on life, ethics, marriage, and sex were an integral part of the wax and gold education system. The establishment of the schools of poetry—Ye Qene bet—appears to have helped students to reflect on philosophical matters from a “Christian perspective.” After undergoing extensive training on the methods of memorization and meditation, qene becomes a crucial aspect of the students’ academic journey because qene gives them a chance to construe their own perception of reality using religious conviction as a foundation and individual poetic skill as a methodological device. As a result, qene, especially the sem-ena–werq trope plays a pivotal role in the Ethiopian way of communication. I will start this discussion by briefly unpacking its philosophical significance. Messay, an Ethiopian philosopher, and Levine, an American sociologist, have wrestled with philosophical significance of wax and gold tradition as well as its implications to social practices. Both Levine and Messay agree that the sem-ena-werq phenomenon is a highly distinctive contribution of the Amhara (ethnic group) to Ethiopian culture. However, these two scholars, one an American anthropologist and the other an Ethiopian philosopher, disagree on the social significance of the wax and gold tradition.

Levine lists at least four social purposes of the wax and gold phenomenon. First, he points out, it provides the medium for an endless source of humor. Second, it is a means to insult one’s neighbor in a socially tolerable manner. Third, it is a device by which one can defend privacy against excessive intrusion. Fourth, it could be a means to direct veiled criticisms toward authorities (Levine 1965, p. 9). Portraying the wax and gold literary trope as a “poetic style deemed to be the crowning achievement of erudition in the traditional society,” Messay criticizes Levin for failing to acknowledge the place the literary trope occupies in Ethiopian social practices (1999, p. 180). Levine tends to stress the pivotal place of authority and individualism as opposed to its poetic nature. Besides, Messay points out, Levine’s list of the social functions of the wax and gold tradition does not replicate the Ethiopian way of life, neither does it reflect the true nature of the literary tradition. Despite the difference in the time period, James Bruce—an eighteenth-century Scottish traveler who reportedly spent a number of years in North Africa and Ethiopia—seems to have added some fuel to the disagreement between Messay and Levine. In his *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile* (1790) Bruce points out that dissimulation and ambiguity are as natural as breathing among all ranks of people in Ethiopia (1967,
All Levine’s argument can accomplish, Messay comments, is support for Bruce’s unfairly presented perception of Ethiopian social practices. Two reasons are in order: first, Messay explains that deep religiosity in Ethiopian society means that the notion of individualism as described by Levine is unsuitable. He adds: “the very survival of Ethiopia, this unfailing commitment to Christianity and to a long-standing socio-political system, militates against the importance attached by Levine to the ‘cult of ambiguity’” (Messay 1999, p. 181). Second, Messay argues that authority in Ethiopia is displayed and affirmed with great ostentation, and ambiguity and dissimulation do not fit very well in this scenario.

Messay then subscribes to Albert S. Gerard’s understanding of the wax and gold tradition in Ethiopia. A specialist in comparative literature, Gerard describes the Ethiopian trope as “a unique kind of wisdom, dark and deep” (1971, p. 274). It, according to Gerard, has a unique philosophical significance “affording exercise in fathoming secrets which open the mind and thereby enhance the student’s ability to approach the divine mysteries.” In doing so, Gerard connects the wax and gold method with the Aristotelian claim that “metaphor is the essence of poetry” (1971, p. 274). Messay then takes advantage to make further elaborations on the manifest meaning (wax) not only veiling reality, but also usurping the place of reality by passing itself off as the truth. In contrast, the dark and deeper meaning is thought to be “propaedeutic” to exploring the religious truth. Messay then argues that the wax and gold system is no different from methods of attempting to grasp truth in Western thinking (1981, p. 181). His illustration comes from Platonic thinking in ancient Greek. The simile of Plato’s cave for example, “presents the visible or the physical world as a projected and distorted image of the true world.” “Knowledge,” he adds, “consists in the ascent of the mind from appearance to reality.” The main objective of knowledge, according to Messay, therefore is to restore the truth by way of “denouncing the usurpation and recovering the veiled, hidden reality.” The wax and gold trope, according to Messay, is no different (1999, p.182)

Messay’s rejection of Levine’s suggestion that wax and gold tradition is all about protecting the individual sphere and consolidating authority by using ambiguity and dissimulation devices seems to have some warrant. Certainly, the tradition of wax and gold is more complex than just promoting individualism. Still, Messay’s romanticized characterization of the wax and gold tradition as a “crowning achievement of erudition” has its own reductionist dimension. Doubtless, this poetic tradition has originally been used to display erudition. On the other hand, the social functions listed by Levine, such as using it as a means
of humor, avoiding intrusion, making socially accepted criticism, and reinforcing authority—do not seem completely foreign to the wax and gold tradition. Nevertheless, the observations of both of them appeared to be colored by their cultural upbringing as well as by academic interest. That is, Levine, as an American sociologist with especial interest in Amhara culture, seems to have a taste for simple objectivity and an appetite to see the divisive aspect of the wax and gold tradition. In sharp contrast, Messay, as an Ethiopian philosopher, seems to have exhibited a desire to talk of a more coherent dimension of place for the wax and gold tradition. Moreover, his perceptible patriotic defensiveness seems to have made him turn a blind eye to the adverse implications of the tradition (Girma 2011a, p. 178).

Lying beyond the stark divergences in their conceptions of wax and gold tradition is their failure to make an inquiry into social significance of the philosophical category underlying the tradition. It is clear in Messay’s argument that “gold,” as opposed to the supposedly destructive “wax,” is noble. In this vein, he portrays the hermeneutic task as “denouncing the usurpation” caused by the presence of the wax. Levine observes that coming from the wax and gold tradition, the Ethiopian way of life is characterized by ambiguity and duplicity. However, he never questions the otherwise “no positive approach to life,” to use Messay’s words, neither does he makes any suggestion as to how to transform this tradition in such a way it can be more fruitful in the context of social practices. The dualistic nature of gene is beyond contention—it is about sacrificing the manifest meaning on the altar of the “deeper meaning.” However, when it comes to its social and political consequences, one cannot help but be filled with a sense of ambivalence. On the one hand, gene is a concept providing a cultural basis for indirection, duplicity, and, subsequently, mistrust. On the other hand, it gives ordinary people an opportunity to communicate veiled criticism of political and ecclesiastical leaders, who are otherwise “untouchable.”

Suffice it to give an example from the post–2005 national election public ethos. There was an air of freedom before the election. The opposition leaders were allowed to campaign using the state-owned media. There was an unusual enthusiasm and energy behind the whole process. In fact, there was a certain expectation of witnessing the birth of democracy in Ethiopia for the first time in its long history. After the actual election, however, the opposition party claimed to have won the election, but, they added, the voice of the people had been stolen by the ruling party. This triggered a massive protest that resulted in the
killing, harassment, and imprisonment of many. The ethos of freedom gave way to suspicion, fear, and even resentment toward the ruling elites. The promise of the freedom of expression was undermined by the crackdown by the regime. However, the people still had to invent a way to air their discontent toward the authority. One of the safest possible options was using the wax and gold trope and to infuse the message in the disguise of entertainment. This time they singled out Bereket Simeon, minister of information and personal adviser for Prime Minister Meles Zenawi. This is because he, in the entire process, was the public face of the regime. Using the wax and gold trope, the azmaris (local singers) sang:

**Bereket** besew bet sigeba siweta  
Enem bet alqere mergem yezo meta

The double-layered meaning is *bereket*, which, on the surface, means “a blessing.” There is a touch of irony to the message even taken at the level of wax. The reason is that the manifest meaning of the poem renders, “when blessing comes in and goes out of the houses, it also came to my house but, alas, with a curse in its hand.” The gold is targeted toward this individual at the helm of power and it renders as follows. Bereket, the minister, was supposed to be a blessing as his name suggests, but, alas, he has proven to be a “curse” by becoming a cause for the suffering of many Ethiopian families.  

*Qene* has indisputable aesthetic value. Beyond that, however, its ambiguous nature can create a space for ordinary people to air their discontent toward both political and ecclesiastical leaders, who, otherwise, are not criticized. Ultimately, however, because of the spirit of negation attached to it, *qene*’s contribution to coherent communication and fluid social practices is also mainly negative.

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**Concluding Remarks**

My analysis indicated that the notion of covenant is basic to the hermeneutic because it is a concept that provided (and continues to provide) surplus history and meaning. Yet, although covenant has Hebraic roots, my analysis indicated that this paradigm espoused both Greek dualism and Hebraic monism. While monism was often expressed in the language of covenant—the concept used to link religion and politics—dualism still has the upper hand in shaping the culture and way of life.
Moreover, whenever monism is used to relate religion and politics, the ultimate purpose is legitimizing the divine origin of kings and their power. On the positive side, it created a unified national consciousness under one monarch. Based on such a unified national consciousness, first, the political elites were able to mobilize people to maintain their independence amid rampant effort at colonization. As the result, while other African nations struggled to redefine their identities after the twilight of colonization, the Ethiopian identity remained intact. In contrast, African academia was in search of conceptual venues—such as the concept of liberation in both theological and philosophical discourses—to make sense of their political, cultural, and religious state of affairs at the end of colonization. Courtesy of the identity created by the notion of covenant, Ethiopians were proactive, not reactive, towards colonization. In fact, for many nations, Ethiopia became the symbol of freedom against the background of colonization.

On the other hand, this paradigm also presents the problems and weaknesses that were obstacles for positive social changes. For instance, the dualistic nature of its philosophy and understanding of reality made the paradigm reduce the rich vein of created reality to spirituality. The obvious illustration is the suffering of several spheres of reality and social fabric in this paradigm, as the significance of the material aspect of reality is consistently downplayed.

Socially, the hierarchical structure of the society means that people were unable to hold to account someone of a higher class for their political decisions as well as unbecoming behavior. Disapproval of the higher classes had often been channeled in a veiled and ambiguous appreciation, using literary tropes. As a result, social practices are still characterized by secretiveness, indirection, and duplicity. Ambiguity, in the domain of art, might have aesthetic value. However, its adverse social effects carry more harm than benefits when it characterizes society as such. Hence, these deficiencies, not only in the social sphere, but in the overall interpretation of created reality, call for an alternative reconceptualization of the notion of covenant—a notion that not only has been of utmost importance to the wax and gold paradigm, but also to Ethiopian society to this day.
CHAPTER TWO

The Hermeneutic of Demystification

Introduction

This chapter is an attempt to analyze the role of religion in social change in the paradigm of “demystification.” The choice of this term is inspired by the characteristics of the wax and gold paradigm and the varying, even opposite, philosophical trajectories that the demystifying agents I will be discussing in this chapter followed. This is because demystification has to do with unveiling mystery. Deeply connected to the underlying dualistic worldview, mystery had a profound impact on Ethiopian society. It not only legitimized the political status quo, it also frustrated social, political, and economic changes because of its negative perception of the material side of reality. As a result of lack of social mobility, it incubated a hierarchical social structure. The paradigm of demystification, therefore, not only reacts against the worldview of the wax and gold paradigm, it also is concerned with the understanding of social order. It can be called modern because it opposes the traditional religious view of reality with a newly found appeal to science and rationality. It is related to modernization as far as that implies a strategy for changing the political, social, and economic order.

In this chapter therefore, we evaluate two institutional agents of this paradigm: the Dergue\(^1\) (Ethiopian Marxist regime), and the Protestant movement. The main criterion for the selection of the aforementioned agents is that they had (and still have) a notable place, though to varying degrees, in some of the historical epochs of the nation in terms of undertaking the “mission” of demystification.
Demystification, a Surprise Leap?

Doubtless, there were social and political problems in the feudal system. There may have been indications that sociopolitical problems might force the existing system toward a considerable social and political reform. Still, Ethiopia is known for being a deeply religious society. Therefore, even these problems did not suggest that a sudden leap into a full-blown secular system (that I am here calling “demystification”) was in the horizon. However, behind the seemingly unchanging public face, there was something brewing in some pockets of society. This chapter aims to trace only a few of these historical epochs, and discuss the agents who were instrumental in demanding change.

The Dergue—an “Explosive” Modernizer

In the foregoing sections, I pointed out that there was continuing uneasiness and internal tension in the Emperor Haile Selassie’s regime. Regardless of his efforts to modernize the country, young elites and university students remained unimpressed with the reform effort that was going at a snail’s pace. Instead, there was continuing political and religious hegemony, exploitation of the peasants that they thought was resulting in backwardness. Yearning for a breath of political fresh air, students opted to pursue an alternative ideological venue, where they could escape apparent social and economic stagnation. Students who had managed to study overseas were already attracted to Marxist ideology. However, there is no strong historical warrant that Marxism was brought to Ethiopia by foreign-educated students. Ironically, it was the purported archaic nature of feudalism that gave birth to Marxism in Ethiopia. Deep frustration among peasants and especially among local students, with the hierarchical structure of society and an economic system that only benefited the higher classes made the nation a fertile ground for the application of a dialectic approach to deconstruct a feudalistic understanding of society.

The interesting question, then, is: Given Ethiopia’s critical and suspicious attitude to the influx of foreign values and philosophy, how did the “Kremlin ideology” manage to have its way in Addis Ababa? This takes us to the question raised in the introduction.

History indicates that, in pre-Dergue times, Ethiopia and the Soviet Union (as it was then known) were not great friends, but neither were they ideological or political opponents. Some authors
James A. Phillips and Richard A. Fisher) would argue that Russia has always kept a close eye on Ethiopia, with an opportunistic eye because of Ethiopia's economic and political significance. An American foreign policy analyst, Phillips argues that economically the Horn of Africa is valued, primarily because of its proximity to the oil-rich Persian Gulf and oil transport routes from the Gulf, not to mention the fact that Ethiopia is the source of the River Nile on which Egypt and Sudan are heavily dependent. Politically, Ethiopia was one of the key countries in the Horn of Africa, with its own share in the power balance in which the West and the Soviet Union were locked. As internal tensions loomed on the horizon and the impact of the EOC's political theology grew thinner, Ethiopia's position as a swing nation in the global ideological battle turned out to be even more conspicuous.

Given the geographical significance and internal political disenchantment, the Soviet Union found the Ethiopian situation too attractive to stay out of. Ethiopia appeared to be a fertile ground to plant Marxist-Leninist philosophy and Russia was just waiting for the right time to seize this opportunity. Then came the famous Ethiopian Revolution, started by students and backed by a number of military officials, who called themselves the Dergue, against the feudalist regime of Haile Selassie. This was later followed by social upheaval and drought around 1974. While the West was reluctant to lend a hand in both cases, the Soviet Union reached out systemically and steadily. When Haile Selassie was removed from power, Moscow was quick to congratulate the Dergue leaders. Nevertheless, beyond repudiating feudalism, the revolution did not have an articulated ideological trajectory. As a result, different factions engaged in bitter and bloody disputes that ended with the so-called Red Terror. In the meantime, besides recruiting Ethiopian students in Europe and the United States, Russia started (indirectly) to support some groups showing a significant interest in scientific socialism.

When Mengistu Haile Mariam emerged as the undisputed leader, he came up with the notion, Etiopia Tekdem (Ethiopia First!)—a slogan that paved a way for socialism as the next trajectory of the Ethiopian political system. Given the patriotic spirit of Ethiopians, the fact that he retained the long-cherished nationalist stance from the imperialist period should not come as a surprise. However, how could the Dergue come up with scientific socialism that, foreign to the Ethiopian setting, accentuates materialism as opposed to religion or idealism?
Bahru characterizes his dramatic leap from theologically backed imperialism to scientific socialism as follows:

Ethiopia, largely unaffected by the modernizing effects of colonial rule, was in many ways the most traditional of the African societies. Yet, African socialism, which purportedly tried to inject traditional African values into a post-colonial process of nation building and economic development, had little resonance to Ethiopia. On the contrary, by a twist of historical irony, it represented a situation where Marxism–Leninism gained perhaps the highest degree of ideological ascendancy. (2003, p. 3)

After describing the irony of the abrupt change in the Ethiopian political scene, Bahru attributes the spectacular shift in direction to the University Student’s Union of Addis Ababa (USUAA). According to Bahru, scientific socialism first gave birth to this movement, which later became the national creed. Though he mentions the parallel movements of Ethiopian students in foreign countries (Europe and North America), it is not immediately clear how they pushed forward to ensure that Marxism–Leninism became “the only ideology” to bring about an end to societal malaise in Ethiopia (Bahru 2003, p. 3).

Harold G. Marcus, a well-known Ethiopianist, argues that while the Dergue borrowed its philosophy from competing Marxist parties, the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Party (EPRP) strongly believed in civilian rule. While Marcus’s contention might contain grains of truth, his interpretation that the Dergue borrowed its ideology from the student movement is simplistic. The issue is far more complex than Marcus’s interpretation. First, foreign-educated students were lured by Marxist–Leninist ideology as a remedy for the ills of the feudal system. Second, in the meantime, Addis Ababa University students were demanding the abolishment of the class system and ratification of land reform, because, at that time, a sizeable portion of land was owned by the feudal hierarchy and the church (Bahru 2002, p. 211). Third, the Soviet Union and Cuba were showing overwhelming willingness to offer military and economic assistance to Ethiopia to counteract the “pre-modern” and presumably idealistic philosophy consistently held by the state as well as the church. Given the domestic upheaval and need for resources to silence any competing ideology, for the Dergue, resisting the Kremlin’s offer was apparently inconceivable. In fact, Mengistu’s diplomatic trip to Moscow, in 1976, was a gesture showing that Ethiopia was bringing an end to a religiously colored political
system. His visit was to herald the emergence of Ethiopia as a new secular state with an ideological preference for Marxism. As a result, Marxism became a crucial part of the curriculum of academic institutions, starting from the primary level. Moreover, people (such as women, youth, farmers, etc.) were thoroughly and forcibly coached to enter several associations so that they could be indoctrinated by the new ideology.

Protestantism—a Reluctant Modernizer

In this section, I try to capture the historical situation of the modernizing effort of Ethiopian Protestantism, giving special attention to its historical background and message.

Let me start with a brief sketch of the historical setting. Western missionaries began knocking on the Ethiopian door from the dawn of the seventeenth century. Notably, Peter Heyling, a Lutheran German missionary, arrived in Ethiopia in 1633. Slowly but surely, Scandinavian missionaries—such as the Swedish Evangelical Missions that began in 1866—started to enter Ethiopia. The then Sudan Interior Mission, now known as Serving In Missions (SIM), came to Ethiopia in 1928. Later on, it was from these missionary movements that two prominent churches—Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY) in 1959 and Qale Heywet in 1971—emerged in Ethiopia.

Interestingly, the missionaries began coming to Ethiopia when Ethiopian leaders were registering interest in the technological aspects of modernization. The constructive outcome of modernization in the West tempted Ethiopian leaders to apply aspects of modernization in Ethiopia. For instance, Zedingle and Suseneyos, between 1604 and 1632, showed interest in the European legal system, firearms, and military discipline (Crummey 1998, p. 87). The nation did not have a local educated force to undertake the arduous task of modernizing Ethiopia; neither did the kings have a strong link with Western nations. Among the very limited links to the modernized world were Protestant missionaries as well as a few from the Catholic side. But the main intention of missionaries was not to modernize the Ethiopian legal system, military, and firearms. Indeed, missionary organizations are probably the last place to go to for military and legal modernization—although it would be naïve to dismiss the possibility that some missionaries did have legal and military training. Their intention was to reform the time-honored EOC worldview, its theological and philosophical stance,
through evangelism and re-evangelism, and eventually, make Ethiopia the ally of the West, over and against advancing Islam in the neighboring countries (Tibebe 2009, pp. 48–50).

On the other hand, Ethiopian leaders were wary of any idea of reforming the EOC or introducing another form of Christianity, especially in the religious and political stronghold of the northern part of the country. This was a delicate matter for both Ethiopian political leaders and missionaries. For the leaders, EOC was an essential part of Ethiopian identity as well as being an institution that provides the state with theo-political backup. As Tibebe aptly summarized, the EOC is “a religion that embraces, culture, politics, flag, identity and nationalism, all put in one package” (2009, p. 35), and therefore, exposing the church as “reformed” by foreign agents is exposing almost everything about Ethiopia. For the missionaries, it is clear from their own history that reformation comes before modernization. They knew, therefore, that reforming the EOC was key to this.

For a long time, this hide-and-seek game characterized Protestant missionaries as reluctant modernizers. On the one hand, while stubbornly—at times for good reasons—defending Ethiopian culture, values, and religion (EOC), Ethiopian emperors clearly registered their interest in modern scientific progress. On the other hand, though their primary purpose for coming to Ethiopia was not to repeat the Western scientific success story in an African land, Protestant missionaries had no option but to revise their direct evangelistic and reformist approach in Ethiopia. This is nowhere stated more dramatically than in Emperor Haile Selassie’s decree is that missions “shall not direct their activities towards converting Ethiopian nationals from their own form of Christianity, but concentrate on non-Christian elements of the population” (cf. Eide 2000, p. 36). This brought the effort of reforming the EOC to an end.

Being diverted from the northern stronghold of the EOC to the southern and western peripheries, because these were considered to be pagan and uncivilized, Western missionaries were welcomed with less suspicion and more openness. Moreover, they amassed numerous converts to Protestantism from EOC as well as from indigenous traditional religions. These peripheries are arguably still dominated by Protestantism.

Now the questions are as follows: What message did Western missionaries bring to the southern and western peripheries? Even more interesting: Why did the Protestant message resonate more in the peripheries than the EOC’s?

The missionaries approached the southern and western ethnicities with a message of “freedom.” Interestingly, the message of freedom was designed
to target oppressive traditional religious practices—without challenging the political status quo. Yet this message had wider political implications than merely being “religious good news.” On the one hand, the message of freedom signaled that the politically backed EOC (north) and traditional religions (west and south) would not stay as dominant ideological forces. On the other, it became a conceptual matrix through which people filtered the elements of political ideologies that would not sit well with their religious conviction. The memorandum written by Gudina Tumsa, just before his execution by the Marxist regime, was a sharp example of the extent of Christian freedom:

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is God’s power to save everyone who believes it. It is the power to save from eternal damnation, and liberates from economic exploitation, from political oppression etc. Because of its eternal dimension the gospel could never be replaced by any of the ideologies invented by men throughout the centuries... It is too dear a treasure to be given up. (cf. Eide 2000, p. 119)

The reverberation of the message was by no means limited to the numinous cosmic struggle between good and evil. It had its roots in the daily experience of society. For one thing, traditional religions have their own sociopolitical and economic systems. Failure to comply with religious demands had grave social consequences, to say the least. For another, Eide is right when he writes: “Religious expression... takes on a meaning within the political realm” (2000, p. 22). A few examples may illuminate the argument. The long history of inter-ethnic tension, slavery, and suppression was fresh in the minds of the people in the peripheries (Donham 1986, p. 13). Not only that, they had, at times, been forced by military power to undergo Christian baptism to espouse the EOC (Tolo 1998, pp. 87, 266). In the meantime, the Italian invasion seemed to add yet another insult to the injuries of the southern ethnicities. Hence, in addition to their nonviolent evangelism, they found the missionaries’ message of freedom too appealing to ignore.

The education introduced by the missionaries was different from the traditional EOC system. The missionary educational system had a modern edge to it. The contrast is stark: the EOC system of education strives to maximize traditional values and sees modernization as a demoralizing force. The modern system asserts the superiority of reason over custom and sees traditionalism as an enemy to progress (Levine 1965, p. 11). This difference tends to produce sharply contrasting
cosmological conceptions, although it appeared impossible to totally eradicate the influence of dualism from traditional religiosity and the EOC. Compared to the EOC tradition that takes (theological and philosophical) dogma as a rigid interpretive device, the rationally colored modern missionary approach opened the way for a different understanding of cosmology. Though it would be pretentious to depict rationalism as if it were always warmly welcomed, its impact was nevertheless strong enough to demystify some of the supposedly over-spiritualized traditional, religious, and social practices.

How does the EOC fare with Protestantism? The EOC is suspicious, if not hostile, towards Protestantism. Above all, Protestantism is considered to be a representation of what is alien, and as such is seen as a threat to indigenous values. Protestants, on the other hand, consider the EOC to be archaic, more a traditional symbol than a proper church. Despite this, the EOC paradigm is highly visible in the Ethiopian Protestant philosophy. This simply has to do with the fact that most Protestant believers have some EOC background. For another, the EOC worldview is deeply entrenched in national and cultural identity through centuries of interpenetration between church and state as well as between the sociopolitical philosophy and theology. Even when the Protestants appeared to be losing confidence in the nation (especially in the Marxist era) for theological and philosophical reasons, the dualistic metaphysics seems to refuse to leave the homilies of the Protestant churches. Hence, Getachew Haile, an Ethiopian professor of Medieval Studies at St. John’s College (USA), appears to have a point when he writes: “If we ask the Africans... ‘what is good for you?’ I think the frequent answer would be ‘what my ancestors gave is good for me’.” “Heritage is powerful,” Haile continues, “It is what makes us; it forms our identity” (1998, p. 2).

In Ethiopia (and perhaps in Africa at large), the believers’ ideological adherence is not always based on well-articulated doctrinal statements and dogmas. What is produced as theological or philosophical blueprints may not have a far-reaching impact outside a given denominational headquarters. This is mainly because there is a cultural preference to holistic social interaction as opposed to analytic tradition. Ideas are more effectively transmitted via oral traditions: folklore, tales, stories, poems, music, sermons, rumors, and so on. As efficient devices of communication as oral traditions may be, they are not tamed by copyright law, nor do they strictly reflect theoretical adherence to any one religious or philosophical wing. At this point, one might argue that the EOC had no theological and philosophical interaction with any denomination because
it had (and still has) a suspicious attitude towards Protestantism. Yet, the EOC retains numerous religious practices and rituals borrowed from Judaism or from indigenous traditional religions.

Thus, regardless of the degree of lack of sympathy for Protestantism, the EOC’s philosophical impact on Protestant believers is incontestable. Theologically, Protestants may register as major points of divergence with the EOC’s veneration of saints and angels, the notion of the Ark of the Covenant and its rejection of the Chalcedonian creed on the nature of Christ. It is more important to note that most, if not all, of the theological positions of the EOC are consistently backed by a dualistic philosophy that elevates the spiritual over the material. Interestingly, Protestant believers—who have little interest in theological controversies and less knowledge of the Chalcedonian creed—still seem to be much in thrall of dualism. However, compared to the EOC conception of reality, the Protestant are more individual oriented, more tuned to progress and more at ease with egalitarian social structure. We will explore this in more detail in the following section.

Demystification Worldview

In the wax and gold paradigm, the whole notion of cosmology was laden with a dualistic conception with hierarchical overtones. The spiritual state of affairs had a clear upper hand over the material domain. At times, the spiritual and material realms were portrayed as antagonistic, with a firm preference for spirituality. This had direct bearing on metaphysics, philosophical anthropology, and the idea of society. Against this background, in this section I try to capture the worldview of the paradigm of demystification in its various representations. I limit myself to the cases of Marxism and Protestantism. In the latter, I take Protestantism as a unity and ignore possible differences between different denominations. I also focus on the recent period in Protestant history. With these qualifications in mind, I discuss the metaphysics, philosophical anthropology, and the understanding of society in the paradigm of demystification.

Ethiopian Protestantism

Metaphysics—On the face of it, one can assume that the metaphysics of the Ethiopian Protestantism is no different from that of mainline Protestant thinking. They claim that God is the only source of Creation
Religion and Social Change in Ethiopia

and also assert that God created ex nihilo. Creation, according to Protestantism, can only be fully grasped in relation to its Creator. In fact, in the same line as Max Weber’s description of Protestant worldview in post-Reformation Europe, “the world exists for the glorification of God and for that purpose alone” (1958, p. 108). However, it is only by observing the day-to-day life of the followers, not necessarily doctrinal documents, that one might come to terms with the complexity and delicacy of their understanding of metaphysics. In practical life, Protestant metaphysics is not singularly shaped by mainline Christian thinking. It incorporates elements inherited from traditional, religious, and social realities. In this vein, the other players giving shape to Protestant metaphysics are Western modernist thinking (via missionaries), the EOC, and traditional religions.

For example, Ethiopian Protestantism shares with mainline Western Christian thinking the notion that things created by God, in principle, are good. Yet, it inherited from the EOC the notion that the spiritual dimension of reality should be given greater importance than that of the material realm. However, they break away from the EOC in that they hesitate to consider politics as having divine sanction. In fact, after their hostile run in with Marxism, unlike the EOC, there is a clear tendency to insulate themselves from political engagement. This is because after initially gaining the support of Protestant churches, the Dergue turned into their worst persecutor. Politics is often associated with unfaithfulness, lending one’s faith for compromises and appearing to be loyal but eventually reneging on promises. While few managed to combine Christian faith and a career as a politician, converts from this domain were often regarded more highly for having denied “worldly pleasure.”

As to ATR, life under traditional religious experience is often portrayed as being “under the yoke of slavery.” Still, the day-to-day lives of the believers are more or less colored by traditional religious metaphysics. In rural areas of southern Ethiopia, nature is to be used not only for material needs. It has special significance in that it is thought to give hermeneutical clues to understanding what the future holds. In most of rural Protestant society, the songs of birds, howls of hyenas, and celestial appearances, to mention a few, are never ignored. They are thought to hold a message: bad or good. Therefore, they are subjects of careful interpretations in order to access the divine agenda. It is believed that such activities of nature offer a glimpse of the organization of God’s time (future).

From exposure to Marxism, Protestantism somehow has assimilated the importance of education that, eventually, gives way to a new
appreciation of the material world. Because of the attitude of anticipa-
tion that Western (missionary) teaching created, “Protestants saw the
revolution as progress toward a distinctly new and hopeful future”
(Dohman 1992, p. 50). They wanted to consciously disassociate them-

selves from the wax and gold metaphysics (Eide 2000, p. 92). Although
deeply apprehensive of the Marxist slogan that humans can bring nature
under control, clearly, or at least in hindsight, Protestantism felt at home
with the Marxist emphasis on economic progress, the abolition of class
system, and the message equality.

Seen against the backdrop of the wax and gold paradigm, it is difficult
to determine whether Ethiopian Protestantism can be categorized as dual-

istic or monistic. Monism subscribes to a metaphysical understanding of an
underlying fundamental law that unifies nature.6 This may sit well with
the Protestant theoretical framework. However, Ethiopian Protestantism
cannot be identified as a strongly monistic strand of Christianity when it
comes to practical life. Its appreciation of created reality comes not only
from Christian tradition but as indicated from indigenous cultural sources
as well. Even so, compared to the wax and gold paradigm, the contrast
becomes clear as soon as we glance at the measure of dualism in the wax
and gold paradigm. For example, veneration of saints, asceticism and use of
mediation as a way of maintaining contact with the spiritual realm is sel-
dom seen in Protestantism. God is portrayed as accessible through the
sincere prayer of individual believers.

Philosophical Anthropology—In this section, I analyze the Ethiopian
Protestant concept of human person, concentrating on the contempo-
rary situation. There were two contexts to examine. First, the EOC
philosophical anthropology is more community oriented, emphasizing
the spiritual dimension of human person. Second, Marxist regime was
pushing the theory of evolution as the main explanation of the exis-
tence of reality including human kind, especially stressing hard work
and productivity as the main framework to define human personhood.
In relation to the former, Protestants tendency was to define the human
person as an individual. This is a major break away from both the EOC
and traditional way of understanding of a human person. While the
EOC tends to understand a human person as a part of Christian com-
munion, traditional society conceives a person only under the ethnic
and religious umbrella. This is because in both constituencies the indi-

vidual was hardly given any significance. In fact, in both, individuality
is considered a deviation and often results in excommunication and
even persecution. For Protestants this was very crucial because their
teaching puts particular emphasis on conversion as an individual; faith
is considered a personal matter and so is accountability for one's decisions. Christ himself is designated as ye gel adagne (personal savior). In essence, therefore, human person in this tradition is considered to be a rational individual who can make his or her own decisions with or without the approval of the community. Such an understanding of human person was a challenge in that it had the potential to upset the social structure and traditional chain of life. In this view, assertion of one's individuality (especially in following one's preferred religious commitment) often met with harsh treatment.

In relation to the latter, Protestants defined the human person as Imago Dei. I will discuss this by way of using one of the songs by Dereje Kebede. These songs became the “chief avenues by which the Evangelical Church assumed its indigenous identity” (Tibebe 2009, p. 302). For Ethiopian Protestantism, humanity is part of the created order. Yet, the human person is distinguished from all Creation by its possession of unique identity and role as divine image-bearer. Thus, the human person is an especially privileged and responsible being; the human person must rule over the rest of Creation and maintain a responsible relationship with the Creator. Let me illustrate this by analyzing a song by Dereje composed in response to the Darwinist construct of the human person, first situating the song in its historical setting.

Being aware that the place of song and poetry was crucial to popularizing dominant ideology, the Marxist regime turned to abundantly talented and highly regarded young Protestant gospel singers—including Dereje. He was asked to renounce his Christian conviction and write songs promoting the theory of evolution. Although the consequences of rejecting this offer would have been perilous, Dereje chose to counter the Darwinist understanding of the human person in his song Zingero Aydelehum (I'm not an Ape).7 Dereje approaches the theory of evolution vis-à-vis human identity from three perspectives: the Christian cosmological argument from design, the superiority of human authority and intelligence over animals, and the inadequacy of evolution theory itself. Clearly, for Dereje, far from being a product of blind chance, the human person was carefully and thoughtfully designed after God’s council: “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over [...] all the creatures that move along the ground.”8 Unlike Darwin’s theory of evolution that postulated the notion of one tree of life, Dereje tries to defend the claim that different groups of organisms were created, rather than evolved, separately. He does this by repudiating the notion of having “an ape-grandfather.” Second, the superiority of humankind in
comparison to the rest of Creation is at stake when he appeals to the peculiarly human wisdom and authority over Creation as a sign of *Imago Dei*. Consequently, Dereje rejects what he calls the “mindless” process of natural selection as a cause of adaptation in life. Instead, he contends that the adaptive nature of humanity is intentionally designed by the Creator.

Third and interestingly, Dereje points out that the theory of evolution is inadequate. His argument, for one thing, is that he is yet to see an ape evolving into a human being. Hence, “modern science,” as Dereje would call it, is far from proving its alluring theory with the actual fact of an ape turning into a human person. For another, Dereje implies, the theory of evolution has little if anything to contribute to the good of human society, except to act as a plot to demote human identity to the level of animals by linking human origin to the apes.

One can safely argue that Dereje’s view on the human person is popular among the Protestant Christians. Part of the reason is that he made himself into a hero in that he went through the ordeal of persecution by the Marxist regime for his repudiation, rather than promotion, of the theory of evolution.

In Protestant’s philosophical anthropology, one can observe openness to change and progress and yet suspicion toward the tendency of secularization. By asserting the human person as the bearer of God’s image, Protestantism also accepts the essential goodness of the human person and also its creative power and ingenuity. Meanwhile, however, the secularist move coupled with radicalism and violence made Protestants cling to their preference for the superiority of the spiritual dimension, discouraging them from engaging in public agendas.

*Society*—The understanding of human person had a direct influence on the Protestant understanding of society. In a communal and tightly knit society, changing religion is a major decision. This is precisely because, far from being a mere individual commitment, religion in these societies is the glue, as it were, that keeps them together through rituals and diverse sorts of covenant. If it happens at all, changing religion is a decision that is made by the head of a clan or extended family. The emergence of Protestantism ushered in a time where individuals would make a decision of that importance. This means that the social structure as understood in traditional society could not be sustained. For example, in pre-Protestant times, it was hardly possible for a head of a clan to sit with women and children at the same meeting. It was only the advent of Protestantism that made the time-honored social hierarchy obsolete and created a more egalitarian understanding of
society. This also resulted in a significant shift of power. Leadership in a community is no more considered a matter of inheritance, rather it is something that is earned. Education played an important role in acquiring leadership position both in ecclesiastical as well as social settings. By creating emergent elite groups, the new understanding of social structure significantly undermined the role of shimagilewoch (traditional elders), dagnas (local kings), and traditional “prophets.” Instead the role of leadership was taken by the “new elites”—progressive youth, incorporating both men and women.

The arrival of the Dergue and subsequent imposition of an ideology that supposedly did not mesh with the Christian conviction created a particular context where a new Protestant view of society, semayawi zeginet (=heavenly citizenship) emerged or became clear. After situating this concept in its historical context, I try to analyze it by discussing its view of ethnic and denominational plurality, the economy and the poor, and its attitude to politics.

As noted above, Protestant believers are reported to have participated in the initial stage of the Marxist social reform. They were sanguine about the abolition of the class system, land reform, and the egalitarian accent of the revolution. However, things started to become tense when it came to the “cult of motherland.” The regime’s demand of ultimate commitment to enat ager (= motherland), did not sit well with their commitment to God. As tempting as social reforms were, the church chose to turn down the regime’s demand to sing and recite patriotic songs and slogans every now and then for it was awkward, to say the least, for them elevate enat ager above God. They had several reasons:

First, elevation of the nation over God came at the cost of disconnecting Ethiopia from the divine covenant. When Marxists abandoned the notion of Ethiopia as nation of covenant, they felt the nation was cut off from its spiritual roots. This left them wondering, with a secular regime at the helm of power, how could they stay connected to the expectation of the “eschatological blessing.” Secondly and more devastatingly, elevation of the nation to the level of what Protestants conceived as an “idol,” required unconditional loyalty from citizens. Then Protestant churches had the arduous task of (re)constructing their identity. Even when the churches were closed, there still was enough space to forge a unique (underground) solidarity. Interestingly, by this time, denominational boundaries became slight, if they existed at all. The new identity was formed under the umbrella of semayawi zeginet—heavenly citizenship.
What does the notion of *semayawi zeginet* constitute? Admittedly, *semayawi zeginet* is not a notion borne out of careful academic articulation. Obviously, the Marxist regime was far from allowing an academic space for the Protestant churches to reflect on their identity. It was the underlying theological notion of “invisible church” that seemed to permeate into a new social concept in the shape of “citizenship.” This citizenship constitutes acceptance of people regardless of ethnicity, social class, and economic status solely by virtue of a denial of “this world and its way” and accepting Jesus Christ as personal savior. In a context where, because of their refusal to endorse the “cult of motherland,” their “earthly citizenship” was in serious doubt, *semayawi zeginet* was the only concept that could provide the Protestant community with a viable construal of identity.

Now, what was the consequence of the Protestant conception of society? On a positive note, the emergence of *semayawi zega* as a social concept meant that Protestant churches were able to overcome denominational, ethnic, and economic differences.

At the denominational level, it created an atmosphere where the churches shared and learned doctrinal and practical dynamics from each other. As far as *semayawi zeginet* was supposed to surpass organizational differences, churches concentrated on what they thought would really matter: strengthening their unity and “winning souls” to new citizenship and equipping them to be “proper citizens.” Sharing experiences and “impacting” doctrinal matters were essential manifestations of this dynamic.10

Ethnically, such a social concept helped the church to overcome a delicate problem. If someone was perceived to be a good Christian, that person was eligible to join the community without mentioning his or her ethnic background. The basic assumption was that “heavenly citizenship” transcends earthly ethnic and cultural boundaries. Overcoming one’s own ethnic biases and joining the new community under a new identity was part of “deliverance” and freedom. The communities who lived in marginalized pockets of society found the message of freedom, unconditional love, and justice resonating with them. To those repeatedly branded as *anasa* (= minority) as a way of demeaning them, a sense of equality in the eyes of God, and now under new citizenship, was just as relevant. For those stigmatized because of their special skills—blacksmiths, potters, and weavers—Jesus’ humble background as the son of a carpenter was more than consoling. When people came together as a Christian community, the ethnic, professional, and some social biases dramatically diminished, albeit not entirely. Protestantism seemed to
serve as a venue where people from varied cultural and ethnic backgrounds could practice social “glossolalia”—a language that was diverse, yet intelligible and redeeming.

Economically, the cause of poor peasants gained precedence on the Protestant agenda. It signaled an ideological shift away from imperialism (highly concentrated in one church and on upper-class citizens from a few ethnic groups) to a pluralistic and communitarian pietism. A former lecturer at Mekane Yesus Theological Seminary, Johnny Bakke portrays this as “a way of meeting challenges from the Enlightenment without abandoning the faith in the Bible as the word of God” (1998, p. 156). Bakke's interpretation of the Protestant move, as striking a balance between biblical faith and enlightenment, might be true to the missionary intent. Yet, despite the fact that Protestant churches were more open to Enlightenment ideas than the EOC, their immediate conceptual need did not strike this balance. There was no time and space for such a nuanced concept. If there was any element of balance between Enlightenment ideas and biblical message, then this was unwittingly triggered by the intention to meet immediate needs in the framework of semayawi zeginet.

Politically, the church developed what can be called a “politico-phobic” attitude. The alleged “godless” attitude of the Marxist regime had consequently led to the belief that any involvement in politics was considered a betrayal of Christian faith and indulgence in worldly matters. This, in turn, made the church create its own island. Spiritual exercises were limited to activities in the church and private life. Any integrationist approach was associated with diluting Christian faith with secular state of affairs and therefore considered profane. Making any conscious attempt to exert a meaningful impact on public discourse—for instance, issues related to public ethics, social and economic justice—seemed fairly distant from the vision of Protestant churches. Even in their relationship to the Marxist regime, as Tibebe rightly portrays, Protestant churches “chose the path of suffering, the catacomb road [...]” instead of making “deep theological reflections on itself and its wider role in the socioeconomic and political environment of Ethiopian society [...]” (2009, p. 304).

Still, it is worth mentioning the different but short-lived approach of Gudina Tumsa—an EECMY theologian allegedly martyred by the Marxist regime. On the one hand, Gudina far from rejecting the notion of semayawi zeginet when he argues, “The Christian is made a citizen of the kingly rule of God.” However, unlike other Ethiopian Protestant concepts, his notion of citizenship of God’s Kingdom is not the end of
story. He urges that Christians should take “the spiritual and physical together in an inseparable manner.” Despite being a theologian and prominent leader of the Ethiopian Lutheran church, he went to the extent of rejecting the idea of “Two Kingdoms” in Lutheranism. He contended that the separation is “inappropriate” in the Ethiopian and African situation, for, in his view, separation is contextually irrelevant here. Culturally, these things are rarely seen as separate. Even then, according to Gudina, allegiance to Christ has to be the main hermeneutical device to interpret created reality. Commitment to Christ as a hermeneutical tool, Gudina argues, might go deeper to the extent that we might pay the highest price—death. Therefore, “a Christian is a citizen of a given country and as such under the laws and policies of that country. Because he is under the laws of the country of which he is a citizen, it is his duty to pray for the peace of that country and cooperate with his fellow-citizens for its well-being.”

The Dergue—Ethiopian Marxism

In this section, I discuss the worldview of the Dergue—Ethiopian Marxism—giving special emphasis to its relation to Darwinism (metaphysics), socialism (philosophical anthropology), and the notion of hebretesebawinet (new politico-philosophical concept) in society.

Metaphysics—As Tibebe (2009, p. 209) rightly pointed out, Ethiopian Marxism did not have a well-formulated view on religion, nor did it have a single document that clearly delineated its understanding of religion, making it a difficult task to extract its metaphysics. Nevertheless, I will discuss this using two sources: Clapham’s comparison of festive scenes in imperial and Marxist regimes, and the general approach of Marxist thought itself.

Despite the lack of clear documentation concerning religion, Marxism was certainly less sympathetic to religious understanding of reality than any other ideological paradigm Ethiopia has seen. An actual festive scene captured vividly by Christopher Clapham has telling metaphysical implications. Clapham points to the sharp contrast between the wax and gold paradigm and the Marxist display of pomp in celebratory settings: During the imperial regime, Clapham observes, “it was common to see pictures in which Father, Son and Holy Ghost, enthroned on a cloud, projected a beam of light onto the emperor (symbolically situated at mid-point between heaven and earth), who in turn diffused it to a waiting people.” “At the tenth anniversary celebrations [of the Ethiopian revolution],” Clapham continues, “along
with the official decorations provided by the North Koreans, it was also possible to find homemade tributes in which the gift of grace, embodied in a celestial trinity of Marx, Engels and Lenin, similarly descended to the grateful masses by way of Mengistu Haile Mariam” (1988, p. 79).

Given the religiosity of Ethiopian society, the fact that the EOC was the state religion for centuries, and the claim that Ethiopians took their nation as having a special relationship and covenant with God, replacing the portrait of the Holy Trinity with three ideological engineers indicated a clear intention of inaugurating a new metaphysics with an unambiguous message: the God, who had occupied the center of everything in Ethiopian life and culture, was now replaced by human beings. In doing this, the regime abstracted itself from a religiously conditioned understanding of reality, and willfully expunged from the public space the acknowledgment that God was the Creator and sustainer of the universe. They (re)oriented schools to teach the theory of evolution and imposed the superiority of Marxist-Leninist ideology, as opposed to traditional Christian cosmology.

Thus, the famous Marxist revolution in Ethiopia had the intention of exorcizing the religiously conditioned metaphysics. The revolution used modern scientific materialism as a weapon to demystify other worldviews. Both high school and college students were sent to several parts of the country for zemecha\textsuperscript{14} to promote this ideology in the name of modernizing Ethiopia and bringing about progress in the Ethiopian society. This method was effective for two reasons. First, education (including some achievement at the high school level) was a way of climbing to higher status and thus endowed students with a sense of power. Young students (even those aged between 16 and 18) had the right to exercise their newly found social and interpretive authority over the religious and uneducated masses.\textsuperscript{15} Second, it gave them a sense of “emancipation” from allegedly one-sided metaphysics that were imposed by religious and political leaders, and thus provided the students with what I would call a “hermeneutical excitement.” This is because they were introduced to a different (or new) tool to interpret reality, and could now look at reality from a philosophically atypical orientation.

Emancipation seems to have made both excited young students and political leaders feel that they, in the true Marxist sense, were evolving from under the shadow of a religiously laden paradigm to a new paradigm that, they thought, would give space for human material, social, and political self-realization. Let us listen to the valedictory address at
Karl Marx’s funeral service by one his friends, Friedrich Engels\textsuperscript{16} to gain some insight into this.

Just as Darwin discovered the law of development of organic nature, so Marx discovered the law of development of human history: the simple fact, hitherto concealed by an overgrowth of ideology, that mankind must first of all eat, drink, have shelter and clothing, before it can pursue politics, science, art, religion etc.; that therefore the production of the immediate material means, and consequently the degree of economic development attained by a given people or during a given epoch, form the foundation upon which the state institutions, the legal conceptions, art, and even the idea of religion, of the people concerned have been evolved, in the light of which they must, therefore, be explained, instead of vice versa, as had hitherto been the case. (Cf. McGrath 2004, p. 61)

This gigantic and nearly impenetrable sentence is pregnant with metaphysical tones. To highlight just a few: first, Marxism acknowledges a law of development of human history. By linking it to the Darwinian law of development of organic nature, Marxism asserts that this development is evolutionary and self-perpetuating—an important step to abstract from the notion of God as the Creator ex nihilo. Second, in a culture inclined to suppress the material body to boost spiritual strength, Marxism gives priority to material needs (food, drink, shelter, and clothing) over the pursuit of religion. Third, in the public domain, the core appeal of Marxism was labor as a way of self-realization in actual conditions—sharply reducing the relevance of God to mere human imagination as a way of coping with human alienation and failure to master one’s future; for example, by way of fulfilling basic economic needs. The human person, in Marx’s teaching, is an animal because it has a similar physical organization and needs. But it has features distinguishing it from other animals—a potential to be a human being. What does this mean? Marx writes in his \textit{The German Ideology}:

\begin{quote}
Men can be distinguished from animals by consciousness, religion or anything you like. They themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they produce their means of subsistence, a step which is conditioned by their physical organization. By producing their means of subsistence men are indirectly producing their actual material life. (Marx and Engels 1987, p. 7)
\end{quote}
In Marx’s conception, animals are products of natural history for, he believed, they are produced by a natural process. A “real human being,” not just a potential one, is a product of him- or herself because, unlike animals, one can “distinguish himself from action; can choose between specific actions, actions and non-actions” (Wood 1987, p. 212).

By way of reacting to the religiously laden paradigm of wax and gold that, according to Marxist thinking, frustrated the healthy development of the Ethiopian society, Marxism aimed at turning society from linking itself to an “abstract and ideal entity” to focus on itself as an important step towards modernization. By bringing the human person to the center and highlighting his or her creative ability, the regime intended to “bring nature under control.” Fulfilling the material needs of the human person became a framework to understand a host of issues. For example:

Historically the evolution of mankind is seen as the outcome of the dialectic between the means and modes of production that ultimately determines the nature of each historical epoch, such as its current forms of property and class structure. The tension between classes is conceived as being determined by the production mode that ultimately decides the social struggle. This struggle is thought to provide the impetus for change. All history is the history of the class struggle; revolution is thus inevitable.

Politically, therefore, Marxism can be approached as a perception of the social world in terms of the classes that are basically created by economic and productive processes, yet taking ideological, and practical strides towards the abolition of the class system as such. This ideology starts with a commitment to the exploited class, proposing a way of developing society that goes beyond capitalistic accumulation of wealth in the hands of a few, and moving toward the revolution of the working class. This motive was clearly defined when Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels wrote their famous pamphlet, The Communist Manifesto: “All that we want to do away with is the miserable character of this appropriation under which the labourer lives merely to increase the capital, and is allowed to live only in so far as the interest of the ruling class requires it” (1964, p. 84).

Economically, the idea of labor and surplus values seems at the center of Marxism. In the initial premise, Marxism maintains that the value of a commodity is determined by the amount of labor required for its manufacture. If the value of the wages of the workers is less than that of the commodities they produce, then the surplus must be doing no good to the working class, and is only helping to fill the pockets of the capitalists (Aaron 2002, p. 66).
To conclude this section, Marxist metaphysics was a radical reaction to the wax and gold metaphysics that put immense emphasis on the significance of the spiritual dimension of reality often over and against the material, and thereby, provided a basis for the political establishment to be not open to scrutiny and critique. The constant link of the spiritual realm to political power and, somehow, to economic reality created dissatisfaction among the elite and students, not to mention ordinary folks, because all of them thought that it frustrated the modernizing efforts. In response, Marxist metaphysics removed God and religion from the center and placed the human person on the ultimate horizon, to free society from its religiously laden ideological grip and trigger the modernization of Ethiopia.

**Philosophical Anthropology**—Despite the apparent effort from Zará Yaeqob to define the human person as a rational being, the wax and gold paradigm’s philosophical anthropology remained intact, if not dominant, in Ethiopia. This continued until the arrival of Marxism. Similar to Zará Yaeqob’s notion of human intellect, Marxism emerged in Ethiopia with a completely innovative conception of the human being. In agreement with the wax and gold tradition, Marxism attempts to answer the deepest question—what the human person ultimately is. Several slogans were written for or recited at public meetings and schools. One of the famous (or notorious) slogans recited everyday was: “Sewen sew yaderegew sera new!” It is difficult to render it literally, but the idea is that the essence of the human being is determined by what it produces in economic terms. In other words, there is a chance for someone to be more or less human depending on productivity because the notion of personhood and work or labor are closely tied. In the Marxist concept, ownership of products was important: production should be for self-expression or self-realization, not just for the owner of the capital (Girma 2009a, p. 485). The Dergue understood the human person as essentially a worker.

What is the background of such a conceptual shift in understanding of human person? According to scholars such as Donald Donham, the Dergue’s understanding of human person was not borne out of philosophical commitment; neither did it come about because of geopolitical shifts such as decolonization. In fact, according to Donham, for Ethiopians the meaning of Marxism itself lies “in its utopian vision of human fulfilment” (1992, p. 35). He contends that since Ethiopia had no Western cultural and ideological intrusion in the form of colonization – having successfully defeated the colonizing power – Ethiopians had smug confidence in future development and progress. However, he
continues, the small minority of Ethiopian intellectuals who had traveled to Europe realized that in comparison to colonized African countries “Ethiopia’s political independence meant little in the context of her relative economic backwardness” (Donham 1992, p. 36). He alludes to an Amharic book by Gebrehiwot Baykedagne, who allegedly warned that Ethiopians “would be ruined if they did not adopt European culture” (cf. Donham 2002, p. 36). Along the same lines, Donald Levine writes:

The discrepancy between the growing desire for aspects of modern culture and the persistence of many old customs and problems has generated much impatience, anxiety, and ennui among the modern-educated. Their sense of inadequacy vis-à-vis Western “metropolitan” standards is no less painful for their having escaped a long heritage of colonial domination, and in combination with a sense of failure to move rapidly towards aspired goal has created in many of the modern-educated marked self-destructive tendencies. (1965, p. 92)

Both Donham’s and Levine’s assertions carry substance when they grasp that the economic progress of Western nations and the backwardness of Ethiopia are partly why the Ethiopian elite were attracted by modernism. Levine has gone so far as to say, “The peasant culture has nothing of substance to contribute to an Ethiopian (sic) in transition” (1965, p. 92). However, both seem to miss a fundamental point: the rigid social stratification under imperial rule that ended up in a grave distortion of human identity. Certainly peasants may not have had exposure to the wider world and its progress. They might, indeed, have been paralyzed by local aristocrats and landlords so that they were unable to forge an organized front. Nevertheless, they were far less than sanguine with the imperial concept of the human person. The peasants were also initially attracted to Marxism. After all, the primary quest of the students, or the elite, was also the quest of the peasants—meret larashu (Land for the tillers!)—the right of land ownership for peasants (subsistent farmers), because in Ethiopia land and human identity were tightly related.

In such a context, Marxism was enticing because, unlike the imperial concept, it tried to understand the human being not by race and status but by what it could produce. Free and creative labor is a fundamental and universal human need in Marxism. Labor cannot be done without. It is a “social activity in the material world, potentially comprising notions of self-expression, rational development, and aesthetic
enjoyment” (Donham 1990, p. 55). This seemed to have sounded like a tender melody in the ears of peasants, especially the potters, blacksmiths, and other highly skilled but consistently dehumanized minorities. Labor and production provide a matrix to define the human person in the Marxist regime because it was a means of self-realization, achieving equality, and, most importantly, of development of society.

Society—Kebre Negest (KN) was an attempt to unify the nation not only under one king, but also under one religion and one binding covenant due to the real threat of disintegration of the nation caused by the provincial leaders in the north fighting one another. Centuries later, Menelik II continued the attempt to expand and unify the country under the same ideology but with more force, this time including the southern ethnicities. The use of religion as a means of unifying the nation under one king continued until Haile Selassie. On the demise of his regime, Ethiopia became a loosely connected collection of ethnic groups, each with their own language, history, culture, and identity. The Solomonic dynasty had lost its grip, as had the church under Ethiopian Marxism because both were perceived as detrimental to the process of modernization. We have to wonder, then, what kind of social concept did the revolution use to keep a profoundly diverse nation with dozens of ethnicities, cultures, and languages together. The Dergue could not fully avoid covenant, but it brought the notion of covenant in a radically secularized form known as *hebretesebawinet*. After briefly sketching the contextual scenario, I try to grasp how *hebretesebawinet* came to replace covenant-thinking as a national social concept.

In the twilight of imperialism, Ethiopia was in an ideological vacuum. According to Zenebe Feleke, two options were on the horizon. On the one hand, the military leaders were leading the revolution with no awareness of an ideological goal. Their only known ideology was nationalist commitment, expressed by their motto and slogan “Ethiopia First!” What was this “ideology” all about? According to Zenebe, above everything else, it stood for the rights of the peasants: namely abolishing the class system, granting the right to the tiller of the land, and bringing the exploiting nobles and royals to justice. The question whether the revolution should follow left wing (Communism) or right wing (capitalism) ideology, Zenebe notes, was an unfamiliar one, especially, to the military (1996 E.C., pp. 22–28).

On the other hand, however, there were educated elites who were aware of the global ideological fever between then East and West and thus saw scientific socialism as the best, and also fashionable, remedy for the problems associated with the hierarchical system in the wax and gold
paradigm. On the other hand, given traditional Ethiopian resistance to foreign ideas, there seemed to be a realization that scientific socialism could be too foreign to Ethiopia because of its secularist stance. There had to be some conceptual framework that could at least combine the patriotic spirit of the military, and the need for modernization and progress on the side of the elite. Shrewdly, after some reflection with intellectuals on Ethiopian history and the emerging situation, the Dergue came up with a new concept of society called *hebretesebawinet*.

But what does *hebretesebawinet* amount to? Desalegn Rahmato, an Ethiopian economist, defines *hebretesebawinet* as “[t]he political philosophy which emanates from our great religions which teach the equality of man, and from our tradition of living and sharing together, as well as our history, so replete with national sacrifice” (cf. Donham 1992, p. 41). But Desalegn’s definition of *hebretesebawinet* seems to be a bit misleading for several reasons. First, he uses a seemingly inclusive language by speaking of “our great religions” instead of talking about the religion that shaped the social and political trajectory of the nation. As a matter of fact, the implied religious inclusivism (at the level of shaping the social structure) was not common in Ethiopia, although interreligious tensions were not prevalent. Second, despite *hebretesebawinet* possibly having a distant religious background, it was not immediately motivated by any local religious thinking. For one, the term itself is foreign to the religious domain. For another, the Marxist regime had been openly atheist and was thus antagonistic toward bringing religions into dialogue with public agendas. More importantly, the pre-Marxist Ethiopian unity was not based on secularist communal ties, as in *hebretesebawinet*. Further, it is not immediately clear if he is alluding to the influences of covenant-thinking as understood and practiced by the masses to foster peaceful coexistence. In this case, the covenant-thinking of the Dergue is devoid of any metaphysical assumptions, in that its basis is scientific materialism.

A better definition of *hebretesebawinet* is from Bahru Zewde, previously a historian at Addis Ababa University. In his article “Intellectuals and Soldiers” (2003), he defines the term as “communalism, the Ethiopian version of African socialism” (2003, p. 4). African socialism connected in one or another way to a certain form of African religious life and practice. Julius Nyerere and Kwame Nkrumah also tried to apply such a “hybrid socialism,” based on their indigenous religiosity. Admittedly, *hebretesebawinet* might betray some contextual and cultural flavor, for example, of sharing and taking care of the poor without recognizing religions as a source of those virtues. One can say with
reasonable certainty that *hebretesebawinet* was founded on its own version of socialism than on any pre-Marxist religion. Hence, connecting the new ideology to the religious past seems to leave the argument with very little credibility. Instead, there might be a better justification if *hebretesebawinet* were characterized as a new religion in its own right. The main reason is that it was a notion brought in to fill the ideological vacuum of patriotism that the EOC had filled earlier. Besides, it was a way of exorcizing any notion of divinity from the concept of society, and yet build a strong sense of “motherland.” “Ethiopia Tekdem,” as a motto, was introduced before *hebretesebawinet*, to be followed by slogans such as “Revolutionary Motherland or Death!”

The basic principle of *hebretesebawinet*, Bhaduri and Rahman explain, comprises equality, self-reliance, dignity of labor, supremacy of the common good, and indivisibility of Ethiopian unity (1982, p. 62) In a way, *hebretesebawinet* is an “opportunistic” concept, to quote Edward Kissi, construed in such a way that it appeals to both international and local politics. Internationally, while the Dergue was hesitant to readily subscribe to a foreign ideology, it intended to pay lip service to the Communist bloc as well as to local elites enchanted by Marxist ideology. Using the notion of *hebretesebawinet* helped the Dergue to survive in a volatile international political culture (Kissi 2006, p. 57) and to resonate with the local culture of communality.

Diplomatically it gave the impression that Ethiopia was committed to Communism. Locally, *hebretesebawinet* was meant to accentuate nationalism and populism under the leading principle of “Ethiopia Tekdem!” Although *hebretesebawinet* was often rendered as “Ethiopian socialism,” as an indigenous social ideology, its accent lay on the commitment to the “common good...to take precedence over prevailing ethnic and regional interests which threatened to tear Ethiopia apart” (Kissi 2006, p. 58). Not surprisingly, for those suspicious of Marxism, *hebretesebawinet* was a concept based on traditional practices of justice, fairness, equality, and sharing.

**Modernism or Modernization: An Ethiopian Dilemma**

In the concluding remarks at the end of the first chapter, I observed that, on the one hand, the wax and gold paradigm provided Ethiopia with a deep sense of identity that in crucial times helped the country to defend its independence. On the other hand, because of its dualism and the way it connected religion and politics, this same paradigm stifled
the development of Ethiopian society. At the beginning of this chapter, I noted that the paradigm of demystification was a reaction to the wax and gold paradigm and its religiously colored understanding of society. After discussion of the historical context and worldview of the various agents of the paradigm of demystification, the question now is whether or not these opened the way to a healthy social change in Ethiopia.

This brings us again to the issue of modernization as mentioned in the introduction to this chapter. The term “modernization” is used to characterize the development of the Western world from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries up to the present day. Often it is also applied to similar developments in other parts of the world. That raises the question of how far development in these parts should be similar to that in the Western world. Is modernization identical to Westernization? How far does it depend on following the example of the Western world?

This last question is especially important because modernization in the Western world is often seen as connected to secularization, in the sense that religion can no longer have any influence on public life, politically, socially, and economically. Naturally, these questions are relevant to the Ethiopian situation with its sense of a strong religious identity.

I start the next section by defining my use of “modernization” and, in order to gain a clear understanding of the issues involved, I discuss two Ethiopian scholars who wrestled with them: Gebrehiwot Baykedagne and Afework Gebre Yesus. In the following sections, after discussing the dilemma of modernization, I critically assess the contributions of two agents of demystification discussed so far: Marxist Dergue and Protestantism, asking specific questions in each case.

**Fleshing Out the Dilemma**

Modernization is not an easy concept to define. In his widely quoted article “Modernization Theory and the Comparative Study of Society” (1967), Dean C. Tipps suggests in compelling fashion that the meaning of modernization “should not be sought in its clarity [but] in its ability to evoke vague and generalized images which serve to summarize all the various transformations of social life attendant upon the rise of industrialization and the nation state in the late eighteenth and nineteen centuries” (1967, p. 62). Nevertheless, conceding that its meaning is contingent on the perceptions and preconceptions of the people who use it, Bahru writes: “Yet the concept, by reason of its practical utility, has permeated writings about the recent history of what is variously called ‘the developed world’, ‘the Third World’ or ‘the South’” (2002, p. 1).
Perhaps unconvinced by this concept of modernization against the background of the “West vs. the rest” disparity, several Japanese and American scholars came up with a more inclusive portrait of modernization, including “urban orientation of society,” “intensive interaction among members of society,” “penetrative network of mass communication,” and “bureaucratization of social and political institutions and emergence of nation state and the growth of international relations.”

These definitions have helpful elements. While Tipps rightly associates modernization with “all transformations of social life,” Bahru highlights the developmental aspects. The American and Japanese scholars are even more concrete when they bring in urbanization, mass communication, and development of social institutions as aspects of modernization. But these descriptions also have certain limitations. For one, there is an underlying agreement that modernization originated in Western society and civilization. For another, this understanding elevates technological and/or mechanical aspects above other aspects of modernization. In contrast, I define modernization as follows. First, because it is human nature to explore opportunities to better human society, modernization should not be regarded as purely a Western import. Instead, it should be seen as deriving from the intrinsic nature of human society, and its potential to unravel new possibilities. Second, modernization should not be limited to technological progress and urbanization because such improvement is no guarantee for the development of a healthy society. Even technological aspects should take into account social and political reality. That means modernization should be undertaken in such a way that it enhances the freedom and rights of individuals as well as that of wider communities. Third, learning from the secularist and consumerist attitudes of Western modernization, a healthy modernization should be based on indigenous cultural currents that contribute to a disclosive attitude (being open to progress) and yet trace their roots to religious commitment.

Before I move on to discuss how these two Ethiopian scholars dealt with the question of modernizing Ethiopia, let me first mention how Cyril Black assessed the position of Ethiopia in terms of modernization. Interestingly, Black, whose work is praised by Bahru as a “more graduated appraisal of modernization,” ranks Ethiopia fifth in his scale of seven patterns of modernization—above other African countries and on equal footing with Japan, Russia, China, Iran, Turkey, and so on (Black 1967, pp. 90–94). This ranking might raise the eyebrows of more than a few and leave people wondering about Black’s rationale because, after all, Ethiopia is known for its notoriously defensive attitude towards
modernization. Qualifying his analysis, Black argues: “What these societies have in common is...that their traditional governments were sufficiently effective, because of long experience with centralized bureaucratic government, to enable them to resist direct and comprehensive foreign rule for prolonged period in modern times” (1967, pp. 119–20). Given the conscious attempt to preserve their versions of civilization, Black’s appeal to the experience of “centralized bureaucratic governance” and resistance to foreign rule could make sense. Still, it remains unclear how a tendency to cling to the past, typical of Ethiopia through the ages, and a refusal to have fluid social and cultural intercourse with the outside world could assist modernization, in the sense that I have just described.

To provide an understanding of the problems involved in modernizing Ethiopia let me discuss the approaches of Afework Gebre Yesus and Gebrehiwot Baykedagne. Both wanted to combine modernization with keeping typical Ethiopian identity intact. Both were also of the opinion that Ethiopia would be unable to find the resources for this modernization within itself. The problem both faced was how to combine the modernization of Ethiopia through external resources, while keeping Ethiopian religious, cultural, and social values.

An Italian- and Swiss-educated linguist who served in Haile Selassie’s regime as a diplomat, Afework was clearly frustrated by the apparent “backwardness” of his nation. He thought that forging a strong political relationship with Italy, which he regarded as modern and thus highly advanced, could be a solution. Yet, he was aware that the Italians would care more about what they could gain from Ethiopia than any improvement to its economic and intellectual life. According to Afework, for modernization to succeed and bring about an end to intellectual and economic deprivation in Ethiopia, one or the other side had to be willing to compromise: either the Italians had to change their exploitive attitude, or the Ethiopians had to give up their pride of independence and, more importantly, the covenant that had been dear to them for so long.

Afework then had to come up with a conceptual framework to undo this either/or deadlock. From the outset, Afework maintains that Ethiopia had the capacity to “seduce, change, absorb [...] and domesticate the might of the invader” (cf. Messay 1999, p. 284). He designed two possible ways of domestication. First, Afework contends, “if Italy took over Ethiopia, civilized it and made it prosperous, the day will then come when the civilized Ethiopians, having become civilized, strong and prosperous, will free themselves from Italy, just as the United
States did with England” (cf. Bahru 2002, p. 56). The underlying philosophical makeup of this move is intriguing. A modernized state of affairs, according to Afework, is where people get enlightened and prosper. He depicts modernization as worth a momentary sacrifice of national liberty for at the end of the day, it will prove to be an instrument of (re)gaining not only prosperity but also lost liberty. In his understanding, the fact that modernism by nature is a package of liberty and prosperity means that it will not sit well with Italian occupation. As he sees it, modernization is bound to backfire on the Italians supposed to introduce it to Ethiopia. Ironically, therefore, by introducing modernity, the Italians would assist Ethiopian liberty.

Second, Afework reminds his readers that Ethiopia had an ideological secret weapon that America did not have: the covenant. He goes on to construct this ideological key from a deliberate allegorization of the myth of Queen of Sheba and King Solomon to explain a possible Ethio-Italian partnership. Nowhere is this more illuminating than in Messay’s observation of Afework’s poem in his novel, *Tobbya*:

> Just as King Solomon was seduced by the beauty of Makeda, as the result of which Ethiopia became the elect of God, Europeans might too be bound for the same purpose of promoting Ethiopia. In this sense, *Tobbya* is a new, modernized version of *Kebre Negest*. In the same manner that Ethiopia became the heir to Judaism and the guardian of Christianity, it will make the best of Western might and technology, provided it welcomes the West and uses its God-given gift to tame the mighty invaders. (1999, p. 284)

Although empirically dangerous, Afework’s approach was hermeneutically shrewd. First, he suggested that modernization and its agents (Italians) should be welcomed in Ethiopia. Nevertheless, in a typically appealing manner to the monarchical fathers, he suggested that their introduction to Ethiopia should be approached with serious scrutiny. This hermeneutic of domestication, therefore, is a part of exorcizing the unwanted influx of Western values as well as of Ethiopianizing (nationalizing) the functional part of modernism, possibly, including the invading Italians themselves. Second, after carefully indicating the pros and cons of the situation surrounding modernization, he (re)establishes Ethiopia as a nation of covenant and guardian of Christianity. He then goes on to use a familiar, and yet gripping, symbolization—connecting the Ethio-Western relationship to the myth of Queen of Sheba.
This deliberate allegorization seems to have had two purposes. First, it affirms that the covenant is sacrosanct, and thus untouchable and not something to be brought to roundtable negotiations with Western powers. Second, joining the global metanarrative of modernization is indispensable in terms of reversing “backwardness.” Instead of polarizing Ethiopians, Afework thought, they would be better off taking on the arduous task of showing that covenant and modernization are not conceptually incompatible. Simply put, the covenant presupposes that Ethiopia is (going to be) a great nation, and modernization and intellectual advancement, as such, are crucial in terms of realizing this sought after greatness.

Now the question is: What about the hidden intention of the colonist? Afework contends that the nature of modernization is intrinsically incompatible with domination and inequality because it is a process of enlightenment and empowerment. Nonetheless, despite its promise of reversing backwardness, Afework seems aware that using the Ethiop–Italian colonial relationship was potentially treacherous. Even so, he strongly believed that this hazard would not be beyond the taming power of the Ethiopian Mahteb—a piece of fiber (cloth) worn by EOC believers as a symbol of covenant. In other words, his contention seems to be that covenant should not act as a barrier between Ethiopian society and modernization. It should be considered a spiritual power by which Ethiopia can subjugate the venomous intention of the invader and domesticate its intelligence.

Understandably, Afework’s theory of modernization generated mixed reactions. Some accused him of crossing the “threshold of treason” for considering foreign rule as a way out for his country’s backwardness. However, many agreed that he was as patriotic as the people who fought Italian occupation, except that his patriotism was backed by a considerably liberal attitude that put a rare emphasis on future progress as opposed to firmly defending the legacies of the past at any cost.

Being wary of the danger of “flirting with colonial power,” to use Messay’s words, some Ethiopian intellectuals of the twentieth century tried to fashion Ethiopian modernization after that of another advanced country—Japan. The most famous of these “Japanizers” was Gebrehiwot Baykedagne, a German–educated diplomat praised as “the most celebrated of the early 20th century Ethiopian intellectuals” (Bahru 2002, p. 49). Faced by devastating “backwardness,” Gebrehiwot also contended that the only means of salvation for Ethiopia was espousing modernization or “European civilization,” but he added that following the example of Japan, a country that managed to modernize itself
without upsetting its traditional roots, it is essential to preserve Ethiopian identity (Beletu and Bureau 1993, p. viii). Like Afework, Gebrehiwot’s urge to modernize Ethiopia was born out of discontent with the lack of both intellectual and economic progress. While eager to preserve Ethiopian identity, he was also critical of Ethiopian ways of thinking that, from his point of view, had caused this lack of progress. Among other things, he identifies: values that he thought would promote war (in the name of heroism) above knowledge, reflection, and work; “archaic” beliefs and customs that successfully prevented modern education and social reform; and conservatism of the nobility and clergy (cf. Beletu and Bureau 1993, p. vii). By “values that promote war above knowledge,” Gebrehiwot alludes to the successful campaign of Ethiopian political leaders to stimulate ordinary folks to go to war against the foreign occupiers or invaders. From his point of view, however, the alleged values failed to exert a similar impact with regard to bringing economic and social betterment to Ethiopian society. Instead, they created a “war mentality” in the name of “heroism,” which was used to protect the land of covenant.

But what did Gebrehiwot propose to do to replace the allegedly outdated “conservatism” with a fluid progress? Education, Messay points out, was “the keynote of his program of reform” (1999, p. 285). Starting the reform with education aims at producing elites who are focused on the tasks of the state (Beletu and Bureau 1993, p. vii). Interestingly, instead of top-down, he focused on bottom-up reform. Education should not be directed to the existing elite of clergy and nobility, but to students from ordinary backgrounds who could form a new elite. Part of the reason seems to be that he was convinced that nobility and clergy, at the top of the status pyramid, were helplessly archaic. It is thus difficult to divorce them from the old philosophy of dualism backed by theological dogma.

Gebrehiwot then moved on to propose a governance that would accelerate the Ethiopian modernization process. “[T]he sort of ruler Ethiopia needs,” Gebrehiwot argues, “was a man of order, energy, intellect [...] who is both a friend of Progress and Absolutism” (cf. Caulk 1978, pp. 572–73). At face value, as a comprehensive process of realizing progress at many levels of society, it may seem like autocratic governance and modernization are at odds with one another. Nevertheless, Gebrehiwot prefers the Japanese model of modernization—moving society forward without dramatically upsetting the incumbent system. On the other hand, the combination of absolutism and progress seemed crucial in his philosophy. Namely he could see
Religion and Social Change in Ethiopia

absolutism as functional in terms of applying a gentle nudge to wake up a society that apparently was enjoying philosophical, and therefore economic, hibernation. Progress, Gebrehiwot thought, would help society to move on from a philosophical comfort zone of dualism, which he considered is “bound to perish,” and perceive reality in a new way that would enhance a comprehensive development of the nation.

From my discussion of Afework and Gebrehiwot, it will be clear that their proposals for the modernization of Ethiopia had problems. First, Afework’s suggestion that temporary colonization by Italy might do the job was clearly risky, if not impossible. The consequences of political and military occupation would have been detrimental to Ethiopian society as a whole, since the colonists would not have in mind the improvement of Ethiopia but the exploitation and control of the fabric of Ethiopian society. Second, comparison with the relationship between England as colonizer and the United States as a colony that achieved independence does not readily suit the Ethiopian situation, since most American and English citizens shared the same background. This is not the case with Italians and Ethiopians. Gebrehiwot’s proposal to apply the Japanese model had its own pitfalls, especially because he deemed an autocratic government necessary for Ethiopia’s modernization. Government can indeed stimulate and achieve modernization in the realm of economics and technology as can be seen from the examples provided by Malaysia and China. Yet, if modernization is taken in this way, the free development both of society and individuals is still limited and underneath it there is a deeper problem. Both Afework and Gebrehiwot wanted to combine modernization with maintaining Ethiopia’s basic identity. However, their proposals make evident that modernization cannot find its origins or foundation within Ethiopian identity. It needs to come from outside. It remains in the dark how the deeper identity of Ethiopia can really be integrated with the modernization they have in mind. The connection between modernization and Ethiopian identity remains external. I will elaborate on this in the following two points.

First, it seems that both Afework and Gebrehiwot take modernization in the sense of development in the Western world, not sufficiently accounting for the fact that this form of modernization is rooted in certain deep-seated worldviews and as such is a complex process. A secular worldview plays an important role as a guiding map in the process of forming a new culture and a new attitude toward their environment. For example, it is believed in pre-Enlightenment Western culture that the good of the society should prevail over private interests.
Conversely, in the post-Enlightenment world, the very existence of society is called into a question. The modernist view of the world puts more value on consumption and entertainment than binding social norms. The fact that Afework and Gebrehiwot intended to maintain religious values as a source of important guiding principles, of course, shows they are aware of this danger. However, this dilemma is not sufficiently developed in their ambitious pursuit of modernization. This leads to my second point: Can a Western kind of modernization be integrated with the existing Ethiopian worldview and its notion of covenant as Afework and Gebrehiwot suggest? In chapter one, I analyzed the worldview of the wax and gold paradigm and its notion of covenant, concluding that, dominated by the EOC, the paradigm hindered the healthy and open development of Ethiopian society. How, then, can modernization by means of healthy and open development be combined in a true sense with the Ethiopian identity, without questioning the wax and gold paradigm itself? Looking at the proposals of both Afework and Gebrehiwot against the background of this initial analysis, it appears that the real problem is the wax and gold paradigm itself, with its understanding of covenant. In spite of its value in giving Ethiopian identity a foundation, it leads to a view of politics and religion that stifles open and healthy development of the Ethiopian society. Chapter Four takes up this challenge to see if there is an alternative that maintains the strength of Ethiopian identity as determined by the EOC and overcomes its weaknesses, both exemplified by its understanding of covenant. But first, let us look at what the three agents of modernization, as discussed previously in this chapter, can contribute to such a solution.

_Utopia and Ethiopia—the Battle for the Heart_

In this section, I try to answer why the Marxist attempt at modernization did not win the hearts of the Ethiopian people. At face value, after the demise of feudalism, various social, political, and economic facts seemed to indicate that Ethiopia was indeed a fertile ground for Marxism that captured the interest of many followers. Because of their disillusionment with the prior system, many among the elite, as well as students, endorsed Marxism readily, even before they read the famous _Manifesto_. For a few of the elite, as sources show, Marxism was an ideological fashion because it was one of two dominant ideologies the world over. The unvarnished fact, however, was that it was unable to win the hearts of the majority of Ethiopians. This makes us wonder: in spite
of all the socioeconomic and political conditions that appeared to necessitate Marxism, how did the disconnection between the Ethiopian heart and Marxism occur?

Markakis argues that the disconnection happened because the Marxist regime followed a path of “garrison socialism” that was formed by a group of soldiers (the Dergue) to legitimize their new power after the fall of Haile Selassie’s regime. This version of socialism, for Markakis, was not founded on a well-articulated path of modernization but on “a mixture of idealism, naivety and opportunism” (1974, p. 235). This path eventually failed, according to Markakis, because instead of reforming the state it opted to preserve the state against the forces that demanded decentralization and ethnic autonomy. It employed socialism only to buttress the state with an ideology supposed to bind ethnic and relational disparities using popular unity and solidarity as a ploy (1974, p. 270).

Clapham hesitates to buy into Markakis’ term “garrison socialism” because he thinks such a characterization may present an element that is innate to any modernizing revolution even if it is an anomaly. Still, he agrees with the idea of continuity of the centralized state that goes back to Tewodros in 1855 (1990, p. 15). Given this lengthy centralization, Clapham points out, it was only natural for ethnic groups at the periphery to resist it. The modernization attempts of the Dergue failed, Clapham argues, because, instead of seeking some liberal options, it chose to employ brutality to continue the logic of a unitary state in Ethiopian history and culture (1990, p. 39).

Certainly, as Markakis argues, preserving the state without reforming it did not sit well with the Dergue’s modernization efforts. Clapham also has a valid point when he indicates the lack of a liberal option as the main drawback of this effort. What both scholars fail to tell us is what kind of reform the Dergue should have undertaken, where it should have started, and how liberal options would have worked out in a nation deeply divided among a few elite, a cohort of power-seeking soldiers, and the religious and conservative masses, not to mention all the ethnic factions.

On the other hand, Messay argues that Ethiopian society was disillusioned with the Marxist regime because it prescribed the wrong medicine for the “social sickness.” The Dergue, he claims, inherited from Haile Selassie a “sick society” that was “so estranged and torn by internal contradictions that it was ready for a surgical solution involving monstrous ablation” (1999, p. 351). What is the nature of the alleged social problem that Messay characterized as “sickness”? He describes it as “ethnicity and the demand for autonomy.” Elsewhere, Messay blames
the Dergue for taking the view of a unanimous working class against the ruling ethnic group, Amharas. They were supposedly taken as the “culprits of all evil,” because they were associated with the feudal period. Instead of pursuing suitable means of healing, Messay claims, the Marxist regime took radicalism as the only option. Radicalized pursuit of change was bound to fail because a “sick society” that Marxism inherited from Haile Selassie “can be neither creative nor far-sighted.” Lacking imagination to conceive and execute a viable solution, Messay goes on to argue, the Marxist Dergue subscribed to preserving the idea of the state as perceived in the time of Haile Selassie. Unable to distinguish between the valuable and what was worth preserving from what deserved to be changed, the Dergue applied Communism in order to modernize Ethiopia. Worse, it added brutality and radicalism to result in the continuance of a “sick society.”

Messay felt this was a problematic move. For one, Communism was introduced in the context of land reform. But, the idea of land reform stands in opposition to modernization because, Messay reasons, its egalitarian stance stifles individualism and kills the competitive spirit. For another, this “ill-conceived egalitarianism” prevented social mobility, whereby it made the northern peasant skeptical of the reform and withhold their support (1999, p. 353). For Messay, the Communism and egalitarianism applied by the Dergue were not only “highly un-Ethiopian,” but also a move against modernization.

The salient points of Messay’s argument includes identification of societal “sickness” (ethnicism), a scornful approach to traditional values and its legacies, and the alienation from religion as well as from religious communities. His recommendation that any pursuit of modernization must account for the Ethiopian identity and way of life is incontestable. His claim that modernization cannot succeed without the support and social mobility of the grassroots is true to the reality in society. Messay is unassailable in pointing out that the pitfalls of the modernizing effort in the Dergue period. However, his approach towards tradition and its legacies remains ambiguous at best. First, he says that the Marxist regime inherited a “sick society,” and he suggests that this sickness calls for major “ablation.” Doubtless, there was ethnic discontent rising from the class system of feudalism. The question however is: Does the sickness owe anything to the legacy of tradition, which beyond doubt, was resistant to change and modernization? If that indeed is the case, then Messay does not say anything about which part of the past legacy, or traditional establishment, should have been ablated.
Second, Messay, blames “ill-conceived egalitarianism” for undermining the modernizing effort, adding that it is “un-Ethiopian.” True, egalitarianism might have been detrimental to the value of competition and social mobility. However, one must wonder: Was the hierarchical stance of the previous regime able to assist the modernization of the Ethiopian society? If so, why did Ethiopia have to struggle so much in its attempt to modernize in the time of feudalism whose hallmark was a rigid class system?

Third and importantly, Messay repeatedly mentioned the role of religion in the process of modernization. However, it seems that he underestimates the role of religion himself, when he considers the application of atheist ideology as having a positive contribution to “social mobility” and “cultural legacy.” Given that, traditionally, religion used to preside in almost every aspect of Ethiopian life, it would make better sense to argue that the application of atheism to govern a profoundly religious society is the main reason why the Marxist modernization effort failed.

Despite the complexity attached to the Marxist effort of modernization, I contend that the problems associated with the modernization of Ethiopia, in one way or another way, have their roots in one important element of Ethiopian identity: religiosity. This was true in the regimes of both Haile Selassie and the Marxists.

First, the fundamental problem with Ethiopian Marxism arguably has to do with an attempt to radically secularize a deeply religious society. Haile Selassie’s regime had an astute awareness of the role of religion and used it as a political tool as well as a social skill. Politically, it tied its power to Solomonic roots, while socially it allowed religion as an interpretive tool for any socioeconomic contingency. For example, while victory in battle and economic success were considered God’s blessings, the opposite would be considered as God’s wrath, insulating human agencies from accountability. In stark contrast, the Dergue took up a secularist stance opting, as Charles Taylor points out in a broader global context, to create a new sense of self and place in the cosmos such that it is no longer open to the world of spirits and powers (2007, p. 27). This goal was meant to be attained by two strategic actions: economic self-reliance and gaining confidence in human moral ordering. Unfortunately, both strategies failed to live up to expectations in Ethiopia, when the Marxist notion of economic self-reliance was exposed by catastrophic famines. This failure seemed to prevent the ideology from becoming deeply entrenched in long-cherished beliefs and cultural practices. Evidently, Marxist ideology was completely disengaged, not only vis-à-vis the
deeply religious tradition, but also with respect to the psyche that steered the outlook and decisions of individuals.

Second, after demystifying politics, the Dergue applied the same stance to nature. It put the human person, instead of God, at the center, and interpreted nature or created reality as void of inherent and normative values, claiming it would “put nature under control.” The “nakedness” of nature meant the Dergue created unintended animosity between nature and human persons, as was true between fellow human persons. Consider an example. Studies indicate that 40 percent of Ethiopia was covered with forest just four decades ago. Recent research is most shocking: only 3 percent remains. Deforestation, soil erosion, land degradation, and water scarcity, according to Okbazghi Yohannes, define rural Ethiopia today (2008, p. 83). James McCann seems convinced that Ethiopian environmental degradation has to do, again, with politics. He notes: “The story of Ethiopia’s diminishing forest is not just a pearl of didactic wisdom for policy makers, but also a politically visible judgment about Ethiopia’s past and how its people have allegedly mismanaged resources” (1999, p. 80). This study does not reduce environmental problem in Ethiopia to only man-made causes. Nature has also played a role. Very little can be done—even more so in Ethiopia—to control “mother nature.” The reasons seem diverse. Initially, four decades ago, the overriding belief was that nature was a part of the divine order; it had but one owner—the Creator. On the other hand, instead of being targets of attack, trees, rivers and mountains were revered, even worshiped, in some parts of society. Then with the coming of Marxism, people were taught that nature is under human control and belongs to the government. With nature left unprotected by the omniscient Creator, the people tended to attack it as a way of expressing their anger about the regime as well as to use it for survival. The roots of alleged “mismanagement” seem to lie buried in the Dergue’s denial of the religious identity of Ethiopia.

Also, one cannot create a dichotomy between the political and religious past of a country and its present and future. They are inseparable. In Ethiopia, this means that a political strategy can never ignore its religious past because of the deep interpenetration of religion and politics. The Ethiopian style of Marxist ideology preferred a typically utopian disconnection from the past, implying a political future without religion. After reviewing written material (including the award-winning Notes from the Hyena’s Belly by Nega Mezlekia), as well as drawing on personal experience in Ethiopia, Brissett makes a striking observation: “The materialist account of political tragedy of modern Ethiopia
is as finally insufficient in explanatory power for the past as it is impo-
tent to heal deep cultural fissures that shaped cultural and political
morass” (2005, p. 148). The past, admittedly, holds both the bad and
the good. Therefore it would be naïve to leave both unaccounted for in
an ambitious run to bring about a prosperous future. For Ethiopia, this
means accounting for the close connection between politics and reli-
gion, even when both need a critical but also continuous review.

Protestantism

A critical assessment of Ethiopian Protestant thinking is a daunting
task. First, it has diverse origins. Second, once again, their philosophi-
cal persuasions have not yet undergone proper theoretical construal.
This, however, does not imply that they do not possess a persuasive
philosophical idea. Rather, they live their philosophical conception
without being aware of it. Thus, I focus on generic conceptual features
that might run through them all, setting my critical observations in the
light of the overriding purpose of this part: How to maintain Ethiopian
identity in combination with a proper process of modernization.

Can the Protestant movement fulfill the modern requirement? It is
hard to come up with a clear answer. It has some attributes that sit well
with the modern stance. For example, Protestantism made its own
modernizing efforts, triggered by discontent with the traditional, reli-
gious, and political establishments. After more than a millennium of
the ideological influence of the wax and gold paradigm over nearly
every aspect of national life, people in the religious and political
periphery—alongside some among the elite—felt the impact of
religious and philosophical stagnation. They felt as if history was mov-
ing in cyclic fashion with minimal room, if at all, for change and
progress.

The notion of social change often systematically withered in the wax
and gold tradition. The overall tendency was that change and the
orthodoxy are not compatible. This has a philosophical basis: human-
kind does not change in piecemeal fashion. They would rather wait for
a divine encounter to experience full and dramatic transformation at
once. Against this background and with other modernist agents,
Ethiopian Protestants grew in their appreciation of social change, eco-
nomic progress, and educational enlightenment. Abandoning the wax
and gold philosophical mantra that “we undergo full transformation in
a divine encounter,” the Protestants opted to espouse a view that, so
long as history is in motion, we change in piecemeal fashion. Needless
to say, this included looking at nature positively, trying to explore it, approaching the future with optimism, and a willingness to leave the usual comfort zone of their previous worldview.

At the same time, in contrast to Ethiopian Marxism, Ethiopian Protestantism clearly recognized the importance of religion and the religious nature of Creation. Yet, their understanding of reality stands against two traditions: theologically backed national consciousness that gave birth to class system and ethnically based religious understanding of society. Against the former, they opted for more egalitarian social structure, while, against the latter, they employed more inclusive, albeit abstract, forms of social organization on the basis of semayawi zegenet (heavenly citizenship). The downside in both cases is that they risked alienation. These supposed deviations, coupled with missionary roots, led to them being considered as the representation of what is foreign. Indeed, they are often given the derogatory name mettie (alien). They are often subjects of social excommunication and marginalization. Economically, it was a decision only few dared make: to send their children to modern schools, hoping that after a dozen years it would lead to a better career, instead of succumbing to struggling in the cycle of subsistence farming. People who did make the decision seem to have recognized something new: that history moves and progress is normative. Modernization and this new knowledge system, for them, were awkward, but all the more alluring.

As the result of alienation caused by some radical differences from the indigenous knowledge systems, Protestantism was unable to deliver as much contribution as it should have to Ethiopian social development. Emphasis on semayawi zegenet and consequent resignation from public discourse rendered Protestants as second-class citizens, accused of lacking patriotic passion and the desire to influence public agendas. This latter point shows that, even if they did have an awareness of history as linear or progressive as opposed to cyclic, other attributes of Ethiopian Protestantism did not sit well with a modernizing stance. As noted above, their one-sided emphasis on spiritual matters led Protestants to resign from the public domain, especially from politics. To some extent, the pursuit of material success was conceived as incompatible with spiritual well-being. This led some to resign from public office and seek “spiritually appealing” careers.

Due to their exclusive focus on the “spiritual,” as Tibebe aptly notes, their disengagement from politics exhibited their distance from the wider culture and public arena. As it immersed itself in spiritualist abstraction, “social and political agendas were put on the back burner”
limiting “the church’s capacity to broader theology of social concern and economic development [...]” (2009, pp. 303–05).

The one-sided emphasis on the spiritual dimension of life had another consequence: education (including theological training) at the level of nurturing critical thinking was, and still is, not fully appreciated. This negative attitude to academic and/or theological education is reflected in a well-crafted but clearly discouraging proverb: “Theology is like cooked grain. It might taste good when you eat it, but it cannot grow when you plant it.” When the church looked for guidance for the future, Protestantism used spiritual resources as the only means. Instead of a proactive formulation of sociopolitical and economic matters in relation to Ethiopian culture and way of life, it relied on social, economic, and political contingencies. As such, it far from supported a helpful strategy for Ethiopian modernization.

### Social Practices and Controlled Public Space

The process of modernization in Ethiopia was sporadic and unsteady, as was the hermeneutical trajectory of demystification that formed its background. The Dergue tried, unsuccessfully, to rewrite the complete hermeneutical trajectory by stripping the society off any religious significance and redefining it in terms of material productivity. Less utopian than Marxism, Protestantism, on the other hand, intended neither to radically innovate nor rewrite the existing narrative. The first intention may have been reformation. The hermeneutical trajectory the two agents employed seems “situationist”—practically oriented, and yet, extremely sensitive to whatever ideology appears on the horizon. These two modern hermeneutical approaches in Ethiopia seem to have served as “paradigms within a paradigm.” Despite their obvious differences, there seems to be one crucial overarching element behind them all: their discontent with the wax and gold philosophy, especially the socio-economic system. Each in its own way criticized the religiously colored and ambiguous public domain of the wax and gold tradition. In this section, I discuss the implication of the demystification effort to social practices. Again, my overarching focus will be communication and public space at different levels.

I have previously made clear that the wax and gold tradition is more than a literary genre. It is a reflection of a psyche rooted deep in a dualistic metaphysics that undergirds sociopolitical intercourse as such. It has huge aesthetic value—it helps to say things in a tongue-in-cheek manner.
Indeed, it is fascinating to see ideas presented under the guise of apparently innocent and polite veil of words to channel sharp criticisms toward individuals who otherwise are thought to be beyond any reproof from ordinary citizens. It is intriguing to be able to communicate two equally important things at the level of wax but also at the level of gold. However, language, so goes the saying, can also be used for deliberate miscommunication. In other words, language can be used not only to uncover meaning or intent, but also to hide them for the purpose of deception. This is where the flip side of the wax and gold tradition comes into play. As Levine rightly points out, treachery, suspicion, secrecy, and domination are the palpable byproducts that ultimately shaped societal interactions in the wax and gold public sphere (1965, pp. 250–56). A somber example is an observation of an Amhara schoolteacher who apparently confided to Levine during his field work:

Our people always speak indirectly, in secrets. For example, a man will come asking for a glass he loaned another man. The debtor says he will bring it in a week, that it has been broken and he will send for a new one. The man may say: “Oh, never mind. It does not matter to me; don’t bother.” The debtor will then be scared; thinking that the owner of the glass is in his stomach quite angry and ready to kill him, he will take his gun and get the man first. (1965, p. 252)

To my taste, there is a considerable hyperbolic touch to the illustration. Obviously, a glass is too insignificant a motive for murder. But, consider sensitive sociocultural issues such as race, religion, identity, language, and political affiliation. As we saw in chapter one, the hermeneutic of wax and gold, at its best, is a philosophy that gave birth to class systems and ethnic hierarchy. One can only imagine the outcome of ambiguity and duplicity in a context where there is fragile interethnic relationships and volatile political interaction among the ranks of political entities and agents.

The Dergue was a radical reaction to many aspects of previous system. It opted for open and more transparent public space. It, at the outset, tried to initiate conversations among its own core, as well as in pockets of wider society such as student unions. Ironically, however, the Dergue itself fell prey to the wax and gold knowledge system, as they were haunted by the apparently undiminished psyche of the past. Mengistu Haile Mariam explains in his recent book Tiglachen (2011) (Our Revolution) that, even though there was a general consensus on the
oppressive nature of the previous government and the need for change, it was often difficult for the Dergue members to set an agreed-upon trajectory for the nation. The main reason was internal mistrust and betrayal. This apparently led them, especially Mengistu, to pen down the words *Etiopia Tekdem* on a blackboard during a Dergue meeting. This is to say, “even if we disagree on a number of different things, one overriding agenda that should guide us through is our patriotic commitment.” Later on, in order to overcome the ambiguity invested in words, they had to make a “covenant”: “if I am found doing something on the contrary to the leading commitment to my country, I swear in God’s name that I will be a subject to the sword of Revolution” (Mengistu 2011, p. 171). As astonishing as bringing God back to this important political decision is, deep mistrust among the Dergue means that they had to re-subscribe to acknowledging an ultimate horizon outside human agency. Interestingly, those among them who have been assassinated and murdered have been described as the ones who have been consumed by the sword of the revolution. The cliché, in fact, was “the Revolution consumes its own children.” This despite the fact that the initial commitment of the revolution was to reform the nation with no bloodshed.

On the other hand, however, its direct nature seems to have made people react to the Dergue in a significantly open manner rather than using full-blown duplicity of the wax and gold. Fekade Azeze, in his captivating article on how Mengistu Haile Mariam, the Marxist junta, was depicted in oral literatures of modern times, characterizes the wax and gold tradition as a “hide-and-seek game.” Fekade adds: “This tradition was not completely eliminated, but the nattering between government officials and peasants using the wax and gold literary device was drastically reduced in modern times” (2002, p. 151). People used oral art, songs, jokes, and poems to have their say on social and political matters. But subscribing to the dualistic wax and gold tradition diminished as a preferred medium; the trend of communication becomes more direct and literal. Fekade offers several jokes, poems, and songs to illustrate his claim. It might suffice to have a look at one joke and one poem from Fekade’s collection.

Teferi, Atnafu, and Mengistu (three prominent Marxist leaders) were travelling in a helicopter. Teferi looks down at the farms below and says: “If I drop ten birr (an Ethiopian currency) from here I will make ten farmers happy.” Atnafu follows the lead and says: “If I drop fifty birr it will make fifty farmers happy.” Mengistu says with an air of confidence and commitment: “If I drop a
hundred birr a hundred peasants will be happy.” The pilot turns around, looks at them, and adds: “If I drop the three of you the entire population will be happy.” (2002, p. 152)

Ye-Mengistun memria eyetekebelen  
Ezeh ga bet seran ezeh ga aفرنس  
Dergu beteshome be asra-ande ametu  
Bet afresu yelal ende leginetu. (2002, p. 165)

Following Mengistu’s instruction,  
We build a house here,  
Tearing down another there  
It is eleven years since the Dergue came to power  
Yet it still says, “Demolish the house”  
Just like in his childhood.

There are two cases at stake here. The former has to do with the economy whereas the latter is related to village resettlement policy. In the former case, Fekade rightly comments that the pilot represents the voice of opposition that felt the innate cause of the economic problem was the leaders themselves (2002, p. 152). Instead of formulating a viable economic policy to alleviate the economic problem, the leaders chose to elevate their egos above everything. The degree of literalism is even more striking in the latter case. On the one hand, it shows how ill-planned the village resettlement policy was. On the other, it laments that in spite of being 11 years old, the regime is still childish, showing no signs of maturity.

Strikingly, in both cases, the allegorical tendency of the wax and gold paradigm is evident—they still have to use typologies and fictitious tales. Even then, it is equally evident that the society is moving toward directness and literalism. This seems to be why Levine, in his article “An Ethiopian Dilemma: Deep Structure, Wrenching Processes” (2007) argues that the old culture of wax and gold is still functioning. After listing five “missed chances of democratization” in Ethiopia, he spotlights the wax and gold culture as one of the problems. This culture continues to function in two ways. First, the ambiguity of wax and gold propels political leaders to use the grey area of communication as a tool of exploitation, as well as of intimidation. Second, people would use the same media to communicate their sentiments and frustrations with political leaders, for a literalist voicing of their stand might prove to be dangerous.
Two common trends are discernible. First, unlike the feudal system where the royalty and clergy got all the attention, political issues now are related more to the poor, that is, peasants and ordinary people. Second, the paradigmatic shift seems to indicate that the people want to move on from the adhesive culture of wax and gold to a more clear-cut literalism. And yet, the long tradition of a “hide-and-seek” mentality seems to be dragging them back—or at least slowing the march forward.

**Concluding Remarks**

It is an arduous task to try to make sense of the interplay between religion and society in the paradigm of demystification. Two reasons stand out. First, the process of modernization, including the three modernizing agents, did not have a unified shape. Despite fitting in the bigger picture of modernization, each agent had/has its own especial emphasis: Zará Yaeqob, rationality; Protestantism, biblically grounded change; and the Dergue, abolition of the class system. The modernizing agents’ worldviews seem to be as diverse as nearly anything else. Zará Yaeqob was a theist thinker who was critical of ecclesiastical order and sacred writings, while the Marxist regime was self-confessedly atheistic. Protestantism, on the other hand, is a “Bible-believing” group of churches sharing elements from the wax and gold tradition and indigenous traditional religions as well as modernizing agents.

Second, because of the surplus meaning that covenant provided (for good and not so good reasons), it is hard to witness a total shift, especially among ordinary folks, from the wax and gold paradigm to a new one. With all the differences and grassroots resistance, the players in this paradigm did have salient points in common. They introduced a new matrix, other than tradition and dogma, to understand reality. They introduced the question of rationality in a context where mystery and faith were the only devices providing people with meaning, and they came up with the notion of progress in a culture, where everything else seemed to be standing still.

By pursuing rationality, metaphysically, the paradigm brought the goodness of nature into philosophical discourse and forcefully contended that it is absurd to fail to appreciate the goodness of the material dimension of reality. Theologically, the paradigm brought an end to the totalitarianism of dogma and tradition, demonstrated by the fact that nothing is as static or cyclic as it was thought to be in the wax and gold paradigm.
because God, the provider of reason, is dynamic in human action, and employs an attitude that strives to open up future possibilities to bring about healthy development in human society and nature. The paradigm revealed the importance of individual political liberty and unmasked the atrocious nature of the class system and the irrelevance of dogmatic dualism. Further, and most importantly, it brought an end to the amalgamation of church and state that according to the Marxist regime was the source of imperialism. Socially, it introduced a new sense of telos and purpose by replacing the old ascetic contentment with a vision to achieve a better, albeit uncertain, socioeconomic future. Admittedly, these seem to be mammoth achievements.

Nevertheless, the players in this paradigm also have their weaknesses. Perhaps the most glaring shortcoming is that its agents failed to varying degrees to root their thinking in the cultural and belief systems of Ethiopia, and consequently, failed to bring an enduring solution to the Ethiopian problem. Each had their own reasons. For instance, Marxism took root in Ethiopian soil out of frustration with the previous paradigm; therefore it was deeply entrenched in an ideologically and socially violent reaction. Fear and deep mistrust instead of peace and harmony was what it ultimately produced. The process of Ethiopian modernization and its hermeneutics is like a “mad man’s farm”—to borrow Kedamo Mechato’s analogy. As the story goes, one person comes in one day and sows some grain in a well-prepared plot of farm. Another person comes in the next day and sows a completely different grain in the same plot, and so on and so forth. Eventually the plants grow, but at the end of the day the produce remains hard to substantiate, unattractive to look at, and is probably unhealthy to eat, if taken all together. Now we are left with one further discussion in chapter three before I present a new alternative—a hermeneutical matrix suitable for Ethiopia.
CHAPTER THREE

The Hermeneutic of Compartmentalization

Introduction

This chapter is devoted to analyzing and evaluating the interface between religion and society in contemporary Ethiopia. Characteristic of this paradigm is an ethnic federalism and identity politics where despite living in the same country, people are distinguished according to ethnic, linguistic, cultural, even religious divisions. Therefore, I characterize this paradigm in terms of “compartmentalization.” I prefer the term compartmentalization to fragmentation because of the organizational dimension of the paradigm. This organizational aspect comes from two sources. First, despite the ethnic division, the underlying unitary historical consciousness created by the notion of covenant still links the ethnic compartments. Second, the organizational dimension comes from the fact that the system is set up in such a way that the federal government can control the regional governments. The question will be asked as to whether or not this paradigm espouses any philosophical assumption underlying its political ideology and social order. Of especial interest is the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front’s (EPRDF’s) intention to use the issue of “marginalized people groups” as its moral discourse. I will make an inquiry into the potential of the new system to solve the problems left open by the paradigm of demystification. The first section gives a brief characterization of the paradigm in relation to the postmodern worldview. The second section deals with liberationist thinking—historical phenomena that seem to contribute to the paradigm of compartmentalization. I then make practical observations on the paradigm in relation to social practices, before formulating some concluding remarks.
Compartmentalization Worldview

This section looks closely at four important matters in the paradigm of compartmentalization. First, I try to briefly characterize postmodernism. In the following sections I explore how far these postmodern ideas can be found in the paradigm of compartmentalization vis-à-vis its metaphysics, philosophical anthropology, and view of society. As an illustration, I give special attention to the Gada religious system among the Oromo in my discussion of metaphysics, and the Ethiopian constitution in my discussion of philosophical anthropology; Gada is one of the traditional religious systems that is flourishing in the context of EPRDF’s ethnic federalism and hence is significant. Finally, I evaluate various texts surrounding the EPRDF to gain a fuller picture of the social structure in this system.

Postmodernism: A Brief Characterization

Postmodernism is complicated. Some dismiss the term as meaningless—simply as opaque jargon. For instance, a US newsletter stated that postmodernism basically has no meaning and therefore, it went on to advise its readers with a touch of irony: “Use it as often as possible” (cf. Sampson 1994, p. 29). The complexity lies on the fact that it does not have single normative definition and it covers diverse subjects—including literature, aesthetics, theology, philosophy, fiction, culture, and architecture—and this is not an exhaustive list. Then, discussions surrounding postmodernism often seem value laden. Namely, some definitions are impregnated with pejorative sentiment while others are permeated by uncritical endorsement. For instance, Ian Gregson of the University of Wales defines postmodernism as an attitude dominated by disbelief. According to Gregson, it aims at unscrewing the belief system and uncovering their whirring cogs (2004, p. 1). On the other hand, a more charitable reading of postmodernism is that it is a self-conscious expression of the inherent paradox in human life. This is because, as Linda Hutcheon argues, it “uses and abuses, installs and subverts convention in parodic ways” (1987, p. 180). In this way, it provides an improved and alternative approach to read reality, precisely because postmodernism signals a “contradictory dependence upon and independence from the modernism that historically preceded it and literally made it possible” (p. 480).

It might help to have a brief look at its philosophical foundations before trying to probe as to how it might apply to the contemporary
situation in Ethiopia. Postmodernism, according to Christopher Butler of Oxford University, is about resisting grand narratives (2002, p. 13). It is believed that the assumptions behind the grand narrative are: first, that history is progressive; second, that progress and eventually knowledge will liberate us; third, that all knowledge has a secret unity (p. 13). Modern philosophers attracting major criticism from the postmodernist camp are Descartes, Kant, Hegel, and Marx. This is precisely because they all believe that history is progressive, knowledge liberates us, and that there is a common anchorage for all knowledge. The two main ideas of grand narrative constantly repudiated by postmodernists are the notions of progressive emancipation of humanity (from Christian redemption to Marxist utopia), and the triumph of science (p. 13). They argue that these ideas have lost their credibility after the Second World War. This is the reason why Jean-Francois Lyotard, one of the standard-bearers of postmodernism, writes in his well-known book The Postmodern Condition (1979): “I define postmodernism as incredulity towards meta-narrative.” Moreover, he expresses his clear disillusionment with Cartesian love affairs with scientific certainty when he adds: “This incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences: but that progress in turn presupposes it” (1984, pp. xxiv–xxv).

Such a move seems to directly affect many philosophical branches, if not all. Let us take a brief look, for instance, at metaphysics. Richard Rorty, another outstanding postmodernist, argued in his Spinoza lecture at the University of Amsterdam that it is not desirable to love truth. But why not? Rorty’s response has a metaphysical touch to it. He contends that postmodernists (or better, pragmatists, as he would prefer to identify himself) would no longer recognize truth, as long as it is perceived as the accurate representation of natural order (1997, p. 8). For Rorty and proponents of postmodernism, any idea of order that transcends human language and history is not valid. To put it differently, they reject what Derrida branded as “the metaphysics of presence”—the intellectual tradition maintaining that there is something to which humanity owes respect, which is beyond humanity, immune to historical and cultural change, and which can be grasped by reason.

Not surprisingly, Rorty praised Derrida,1 in his speech at Stanford University for “breaking the crust of convention, questioning assumptions never before doubted, raising issues never before discussed.”2 In support of Derrida’s characterization of the metaphysics of presence as
“a fixed presence beyond the reach of play,” Rorty remarks: “Sometimes this thing is called God, sometimes the intrinsic nature of physical reality, sometimes the moral law, and sometimes the underlying structure of all possible human thought.” He recommends disentangling oneself from this metaphysical posture because, Rorty believes, this distancing is “a move into an intellectual world which would be humanistic in a far fuller sense [...]”. He concludes, “For such a humanism, there would be no source of authority, and no proper object of respect, save products of the human creative imagination.”

Anthropologically, it is understandable that the postmodern view of humankind emanates directly from its metaphysical acuity. For instance, Nietzsche started formulating his vision of the human person by reducing traditional metaphysics (which considers God as the architect and guardian of order in Creation) to an illusion. Therefore, he suggested that it should be unmasked. The unmasking process involves “emptying it of its epistemological certainty and metaphysical pretensions, leaving it a will in the shell of a self” (Lundin et al. 1999, p. 12). This is best known as a genealogical method, by which we know how values originate, and later on becomes something that appears decisive in the whole of human reality. That something is called a “will to power” (Stoker 1996, p. 93). According to Richard Rorty, it is the will for power that propels human persons to self-creation (1989, p. 25).

For opponents of postmodernist promotion of self-creation, such a tendency involves “repudiating any notion of pre-given inner directives or objective values as inauthentic ‘bad faith’ ” (Bishop 2007, p. 109; Turner 1994, p. 122). And not only that. As Fred Hutchinson points out, each postmodern individual is supposed to invent his/her own private world, values, and his own preferences. This self-created or personally invented world, according to Hutchinson, is supposed to be immune from outside criticism, social norms, and moral laws.

However, Rorty’s formulation of self-creation is far more complex and ambiguous than that. Language is an important tool in self-creation, according to him; it helps one to describe oneself in original terms. He argues: “To create one’s mind is to create one’s own language, rather than to let the length of one’s mind be set by the language other human beings have left behind” (1989, p. 27). Rorty is also aware of the paradoxical nature of using language in self-creation because of the sense of continuity in language, and because one depends on society for the language that he/she uses in the process of “self-creation” (1989, p. 186). He then introduces the idea of solidarity because of its moral appeal. Self-creation is thus connected to freedom, an element that
postmodernism shares with modernism. At the same time, “freedom” becomes more ambiguous because postmodernism rejects the idea of the autonomous subject as defended by modernism, and realizes that this “freedom” is at best relative. Then self-creation—which indeed has the characteristics about which Hutchinson is critical of Rorty—strives to promote solidarity, although it does not attempt to integrate solidarity with self-creation.

Regarding its view of society, Norman K. Denzin typifies postmodernism as a purposeful rejection of understanding society as a totality, interpreted from within the metanarrative theories of Marx, Weber, and Durkheim (1995, p. 24). Vehemently shunning what some of its proponents would call “nostalgia to whole and one” (Lyotard 1984, p. 81), it instead strives to produce theoretical interpretive analyses that illuminate the assorted compartments of the social network.

Now for the questions of utmost significance to this study: Do these postmodern ideas relate to the contemporary Ethiopian worldview? How do they affect the efforts for positive social change?

**Metaphysics**

The wax and gold paradigm was shaped greatly by deep religious conviction in which the “metaphysics of presence” is abundantly clear. In contrast, the Dergue brought the notion that any idea of God is at the very least, superfluous. However, the ideas of historical progress, hope in science as a means of human emancipation, and knowledge as the only tool to avert the supposed backwardness was immediately clear. As matter of cultural relevance, the metaphysics of demystification did not strike the right note with the fundamentals of the Ethiopian psyche. First, the abruptness of philosophical change means that people could not leave the comfort of indigenous belief systems, social practices and values and orientate themselves within the new metaphysical matrix. Second, for a society that has been singing covenant (both figuratively and literally) for centuries, adopting the idea that spatiotemporal reality is all we have is less than comforting, if not scary. This is partly because the overwhelming majority of Ethiopians believe in the teaching of Haimanot Abaw (religious fathers): deviation from time-honored teachings of the father would unnecessarily attract the wrath of God. Third, there is a feeling that the modern move of demystification that our cosmos is self-contained, as Arnold Meiring argues, was far from scientifically and philosophically convincing (2005, p. 27) because it fails to adequately account for the beauty, design,
Religion and Social Change in Ethiopia

and intelligibility of Creation. Both violent and methodical attempts to convince Ethiopians to subscribe to a secular belief system did not strike the right note with the religiosity of society. It is generally assumed that nothing, including ethics, justice, and social interactions, work without religious point of anchorage. Indeed, in such a context, Ethiopians often are seen to use the notion of fereha-egziabiher (fear of God) as a point of adjudication.

Doubtless, the metaphysics of the wax and gold tradition had been denied its presence in the public square for 17 years before EPRDF came. However, there was no contention that it still was a dominant view among the masses. At the outset, given the sociopolitical problems and the failure of the Marxist ideology, there seemed to be three options at the disposal of the new paradigm: going back to the wax and gold tradition and to re-legitimize the “metaphysic of presence,” applying a new philosophical tool to solve existing problems, and trying to internally transform Ethiopian culture and philosophy using indigenous tools.

The new paradigm seems to have opted for the second option: it deconstructed the underlying assumptions behind former paradigms and applied ethnic metaphysics. But what does deconstruction amount to?

John Lechte’s standard definition seems to yield some help in analyzing the Ethiopian case. Deconstruction, he argues, has to do with undoing the dominant traditions in order to bring new alternatives to the fore (1994, pp. 107–09). In the Ethiopian situation, therefore, one dominant aspect of Ethiopia is subject to immediate deconstruction: national metanarrative. This, albeit based on different ideological stances, was supported by both wax and gold and demystification paradigms. These paradigms had their own adaptations of universalism. The former draws its universalistic stance from a religious notion of covenant, whereas the latter takes it from scientific materialism. Both had their own ideological goals that made them, somehow, turn a blind eye to what was brewing at the grassroots level. Although both seemed to have undergone an identical course of development and decline, as depicted by Goudzwaard, both were very much alive. Inevitably, some elements of ideological development, especially the tendency of domination and repression, caused major disillusionment among vast intersections of society. This helped the new paradigm to depict the national metanarrative held by both of its predecessors as oppressive and damaging, especially, to minorities. True to this sound bite, the Ethiopian past, as Bahru points out, was replete with authoritarianism and dogmatism, falling short of tolerance and moderation. Therefore,
from a social justice point of view, both imperial autocracy and military dictatorship made Ethiopia a nation with no golden age to revive (Bahru et al. 1994, p. 156).

Admittedly, the deconstruction process focused on what is common for both: the national consciousness or *Ethiopiawinet*. The difference between the Dergue and EPRDF is not so much ideological: they both grew up as Marxists. Their differences emerge in their understanding of the nation. The former created a new communal consciousness using *enat-ager* (motherland), while the latter portrayed each ethnic group as “mothers” in themselves. Unlike the Dergue, it did not reject religious constructs, myths, and legends. However, it systematically dismantled unifying legends by making sure that the legends are ethnically rooted. Despite the apparently severe socioeconomic and political consequences, its metaphysical stance is culturally open and friendly because it had a definite religious commitment. Ethnically and regionally based mystical practices are often accompanied with a sharp sense of religiosity and newly found determination to legitimize religious or ethnic identities. Clearly, this aligns with the postmodernist approach. The supposed God of Ethiopia is replaced by gods of ethnic constructions. As a result, the analogy of Ethiopia as an all-embracing mother seems to be outdated. Instead there are multiple “nations and nationality” being mothered by none other than themselves, but controlled by federal government.

Thus, a fundamentally different understanding of religion comes to the fore. The traditional notion of unchangeable laws beneath the appearance of reality is barely tolerated. This has a crucial metaphysical implication. That the wax and gold tradition and the Marxist scientific certainty era lost their grip on power means there is no normative, acceptable understanding of God, and therefore, there is no normative and acceptable origin and function of nature. God and his relationship with nature apparently become whatever a religious group—traditional or nontraditional—depict God to be.

The Gada system of the Oromo religion is a good example. I will define the Gada system, before proceeding to a brief discussion of its metaphysics. Asafa Jalata, one of the best-known advocates of the system as a means of realizing Oromo nationalism, defines it as an “economic, social and religious institution.” Asafa asserts that it is “the pillar of Oromo culture and civilization” (1998, p. 18). In the religious concept of the Gada system, humans, spirits, and the physical world are perceived to be interconnected with their existence and function ruled by *Waaqa*—the high God. Three concepts explain this
interconnectedness: *ayaana* (= spirit), *uuma* (= the nature), and *saffu* (= ethical and moral codes) (Asafa 2001, p. 68). The Gada system teaches that God is the Creator of earth and sky (not heaven). Asmarom Legesse, a Harvard graduate and a specialist in Oromo culture and religion, points out that the god of the Gada, unlike the Judeo-Christian God, is “not angry and vindictive” but a “kingly figure” (1973, p. 45). Even then, the god of Gada seems far from being fully trusted. According to Enrico Cerulli, some intersections of Oromo people are highly skeptical about the god of Gada, and the way he set up Creation. To justify his argument, Cerulli presents a view of God from certain “descriptive literature” by Shoa Oromo, who is a Gada follower. This literature states:

> In the whole world there are three misfortunes. Of these one is wealth, when it is great and increases. The second is wife. [...] She falls in love with a valiant warrior, and then if this warrior loves her, he kills thee, marries her, and flees away to another country. The third misfortune is God, who has created us [...] white, red and black as coal. [...] If he had made us all of the same aspects *sic* we should have not killed one another, we should not have sold one another, we should not have destroyed one another. (1922, pp. 190–91)

According to Asmarom, the same attitude of suspicion and skepticism is true with respect to their conception of rituals, authority, and community. When he was attending the Gada celebration of fertility rites, Asmarom was apparently astonished by an unexpected comment from a Boranan old man, an adviser to the celebration. While overseeing the dances and rituals, the old man remarked: “People sometimes would behave like children,” in response to the believers’ uncritical approach to the Gada rituals. Based on his empirical experience, Asmarom then observes:

> Several ethnographic facts lead me to believe that the Oromo conception of authority is not as awesome as it is among their monarchic neighbours to the north and west. Neither God, nor the Kallu, nor the Abba Gadas (the priests of the Gada system) are conceptualized in the language of pious dependence that is pervasive in monarchic cultures. (1973, p. 44)

As John Mbiti points out in the general context of African Traditional Religions (ATR), in the Gada system, nature is religious. Furthermore,
nature as a religious object is used to bridge the gap between humanity and God, who is often depicted as remote. Mbiti’s claim seems to be justified when he remarks: “The invisible world is symbolized or manifested by these visible and concrete phenomena and objects of nature. ... This is one of the fundamental religious heritages of the African peoples” (1990, pp. 56–57). What is even more profound about Mbiti’s characterization of the African conception of nature and spirituality is his argument that the “universe is religious” is not just an academic proposition. He contends: “It is an empirical experience which reaches its highest in acts of worship” (1990, p. 57). This assertion seems strikingly in line with the Oromo conception of nature. For instance, Asafa points out, it is not by accident that the odaa (sycamore) tree is on the Oromai/OLF (Oromo Liberation Front) flag as a symbol of democracy. He argues that the odaa is more than just a generalized symbol of democracy (1998, p. 13). Sisai Ibssa is even more specific: “The odaa,” he claims, “has been a sacred meeting ground for the enactment of many Oromo ceremonies which re-enforce the political philosophy of Gada. By honouring the flag which bears an odaa, the Oromo are honouring the principles which are ritually upheld” in the Gada system (cf. Asafa 1998, p. 13).

The spirit world is thus not completely separate from material nature. Other examples are that in Oromo religion the sun, moon, and firmament are considered to be the eyes of God (Mbiti 1990, p. 49). Importantly, dead ancestors, an essential part of the spirit world, are believed to be still around the living. It is taken that at times they appear to relatives as flying animals (Mbiti 1990, p. 49).

The Gada notion of ethics—saffu—is even more intriguing. The original Oromo religion does not subscribe to the notion that heaven and hell exist. This (belief) has direct implications for the Gada legal system. Keeping a balance or moiety in the representation of age, class, and clans in economics, lawmaking, and labor is crucial. Distorting the socioeconomic balance is a serious transgression. Interestingly, unlike many traditional societies, appealing to judgment in the afterlife does not seem evident among the Oromos. Instead, if a person is found guilty of distorting the balance of nature or mishandling others, it is up to society to stipulate punishment, while the offender is still alive. This is not to imply that other societies would leave lawbreakers to be judged in the afterlife. Other ethnicities, such as Hadiyya believe strongly in “binding” the offender in this life, so that he or she can be bound in the afterlife.

Instead of being classified as “primitive” and animistic, traditional religions are obtaining wide media coverage, astute promotion, and open practice—all in the name of liberty. Unlike the time of the wax
and gold and demystification paradigms, where the practice of traditional religions compared to organized religions was held in less esteem, the postmodern paradigm seems to be ushering in a time where people can espouse this religious system as a way of affirming their ethnic and cultural identities. The council of the OLF proudly affirms on its website that the Gada system is “a key to the unique heritage of Oromo political, social and cultural life.”9 The notion of God as transcendent seems transformed when rivers, trees, and certain places are given special reverence as objects of worship. Offering blood sacrifices to placate gods and manipulate their decisions has replaced dominant religious liturgies that some people thought were imposed on them by modernizing agents. In this paradigm, religion is recognized as being part of people’s identity. However, it is clear that understanding of religion has changed: traditional religions are no longer considered primitive. They have become expressions of ethnic and/or tribal identity, giving the appreciation of religion a postmodern flavor: the claim of universal truth has been quietly abandoned; it is connected with the postmodern understanding of “freedom” (or “liberty”) as an expression of unique identity.

**Philosophical Anthropology—Homo-ethnicus**

Modern news media is hardly accessible in rural parts of Ethiopia although that does not mean there is no news in those areas. There indeed are some very important “traditional” news media that effectively portray the spirit of the day—the public ethos. In bygone days of the emperors, as Fekade rightly asserts, kings, governors, and local officials used to ask: *erregnaw men ale?* (= what did shepherds say today?) (2002, p. 149). Being a shepherd is not regarded as a noble profession. However, shepherds were important social actors. As improbable sources of news as shepherds may appear to be, their songs, catchwords, and aesthetically veiled rumors express the misdeeds in the community, the ideological shift, and predictions of its effect. Certainly Menelik II, for example, benefited politically from paying close attention to these marginal yet critical voices. One might question whether or not more recent regimes were or are paying the same amount of attention. Nevertheless, similar trends in spontaneous portraits of the spirit of the day are still very much alive. Then the question becomes: How does this traditional “news media” express human identity in the Ethiopian contemporary public ethos of compartmentalization?

In Marxist times, a catchphrase defined the human person: *Sewen sew yadergew sera new* (= The ability to produce is what defines humankind!).
As we saw in chapter two, philosophically, in the Marxist paradigm, the human person was valued by what he can produce economically, as opposed to what he is. Self-creation, web of desires, historical contingency, and self-determinations are the buzzwords in the compartmentalization paradigm. Namely, this paradigm brought its own widely known catch phrase: *yersen iddel beras mewessen, eske megentel* (= Self-determination up to cessation!). Covenant and motherland are not viable analogous venues to define oneself any more. Instead, the reference point to define is the self. How do we understand a leap from nation and covenant (both with unifying touches) to the self as reference point?

After the demise of the Dergue, the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) introduced itself as a self-styled nonreligious political party. In fact, the whole story starts with the demarcation that EPRDF made between state and religion. From the outset, the (re)structured Ethiopian constitution boldly proclaimed Ethiopia as a secular state, whereby “there shall not be a state religion” (Article 11.2) and “the state should not interfere in religious affairs” and vice versa (Article 11.3).

This legal step means that there is no comeback for the theo–politic notion of the state in the wax and gold paradigm. Then one would surmise: “The stance of consigning religion from the political domain is comparatively identical to that of a Marxist state of affairs.” Indeed, according to Theodore Vestal, Meles Zenawi and his comrades regarded Enver Hoxha, an Albanian dictator, as a role model. Specifically, the concept of cadre-controlled mass organization to achieve political goals was used by EPRDF as a means of tightening their grip on power (1999, p. 145). It seems that EPRDF took a politically smart turn when it introduced itself as a devotee of liberal democracy, a political philosophy that, according to Francis Fukuyama, is the last evolution of the human political system. Unlike the rather totalitarian Marxist regime, EPRDF’s constitution declared the freedom of adopting religious beliefs according to one’s choice (Article 27.1).

Now I will explore the implications of this to the concept of the human person. The constitution (Article 10.1–2) proclaims: “Human right and freedom, emanating from human nature, are unavoidable and inalienable; and human and democratic right shall be respected.” This was followed by the controversial declaration: “Every Nation, Nationalities and People in Ethiopia has unconditional right to self-determination including the right to cessation” (Article 39.1).

There are some postmodern twists to the understanding of the human person in the paradigm of compartmentalization. For one thing,
EPRDF does not have any religious commitment. However, it gives
constitutional protection for people who opt to commit themselves to
the religion of their choice, as opposed to the religions that are imposed
by the society or institutions. This became the grounds for religious
plurality to mushroom, and as a result, provided people with alterna-
tive ways of looking at their identity as individuals, as well as being a
part of society. Meanwhile, the notion of ethnic “self-determination to
the extent of cessation” coupled with ethnic metaphysics became the
reason for ethnic compartmentalization.

Second, the end of metaphysical coherence coupled with the demise
of the national metanarrative and the irrelevance of the individual
leaves us with only one choice to define the human person—search-
ing for ethnic roots, tied with multiple religions, to define oneself.
Intriguingly, the constitutional statement on human nature is very
short, as well as being ambiguous. Unlike the Universal Declaration of
Human Rights and the US Constitution that appeal to human intel-
ligence, conscience, and the fact that human beings are born free as
particular features of human nature, the Ethiopian constitution does
not specify what constitutes “human nature.” This part of the constitu-
tion seems to have been formulated to avoid the inevitability of relating
human nature to human rights (or justice) and freedom. Furthermore,
there seems a stark contrast between the statement about human nature
and the reality of ethnic emancipation. Although controversial (in the
Ethiopian context), Article 39.1 is lucid and unambiguous. “Every
Nation, Nationalities and People in Ethiopia has unconditional right to
self-determination including the right to secession.” Later political and
philosophical developments showed that independence and autonomy
are not meant for individuals—but for ethnic groups. And if people
have to claim their individuality (especially in the political arena), it
goess without saying that they have to claim it after finding their orien-
tation in a small tent of ethnic warmth.

In this vein, in the paradigm of compartmentalization the human
person is defined as *homo ethnicus*—an ethnic animal. The constitu-
tion seems intentionally ambiguous to create a space for each ethnic
group to define human identity in its own terms, although this might
be complicated. Jon Abbink’s research indicates that personhood in
Surma—an ethnic group in Southern Ethiopia—is a construct of local
culture. According to Abbink, yielding to such a construction of per-
sonhood might at times “translate into violent behaviour when mate-
rial interest and competitive economic and social relations with other
groups are involved” (2000, p. 96). Especially the men (women are
believed to derive their identities from men) are deemed to be protectors of their natural and human environment from encroachment by surrounding ethnic groups. In Surma culture, an ethnically legitimized understanding of personhood may reach beyond the life span of the individual, according to Abbink. To live on beyond the grave, people would try to make their name by becoming either a warrior, a public speaker, and/or ritual expert (Abbink 2000, p. 84).

Hadiyya, another southern ethnic group, is a further example. Manna, in Hadiyya language, is a term interchangeably used for man (as opposed to woman), as well as for a human being. Being identified only as an individual person is not fitting in this culture. Thus, if a person in question is unknown, people would immediately ask: “aye mancho?” (= which Manna is he/she from)? In a culture in which the individual without ethnic identification, does not amount to anything, people have to take shelter under an ethnic umbrella to define their human personhood.

Ulrich Braukämper, a German anthropologist who has done extensive research on Hadiyya, indicates that this definition changed shape from time to time, depending on the religious and political situation. For instance, when Protestant believers started to cross the ethnic border to form a new coalition, it only resulted in their being branded pejoratively: Yesus Mana (= Jesus’ ethnic group), because it is difficult for them to define the human person apart from ethnic associations. Now (in the time of ethnic compartmentalization), Braukämper’s research indicates an even further divide among Hadiyya clans (Booyaamanna and Agara Hadiyya). The compartmentalization mentality made them compete fiercely to be identified as “the noblest” clan even among Hadiyya (Braukämper 2002, p. 369). In such a culture, the person is defined on the basis of association with a certain ethnicity, or even a clan. There is a good possibility that one can be elevated or demoted as a human person, depending on the ethnic group to which one belongs.10

This analysis makes it clear that the understanding of the human person in the paradigm of compartmentalization has similarities to the postmodern understanding. The emphasis is not on a universal human nature in the Christian sense of Imago Dei, nor in the Marxist sense of homo economicus, but on a particular ethnic identity. Even when the process of self-creation is more individual in nature than ethnic, it is clear that ethnicization is used as a way of getting recognition. For example, even if one has to excel in mathematics, conditions such as quota, representations, and image always affects the individual’s progress, either in frustrating or encouraging the progress.
Ethiopia is known as a mosaic of ethnic and cultural diversity. Even then, the nation has long been a centralized unitary state. The imperial regimes, especially Haile Selassie’s administration, “judged that stable Ethiopian state could only be realized by the creation of a centralized state apparatus which was supported by ‘ethnic hegemonization’ policy” (van der Beken 2012, p. 146). The Dergue abolished the class system of the feudal times and exorcized religious attributions of the nation as well as of the imperial throne. The issues of the peasants, such as “land to the tiller,” were its battle cry. For the Dergue, as such, the question of utmost urgency was of socioeconomic nature as opposed to an ethnic one. The socioeconomic problems, they think, could be averted by education and economic growth. Addressing questions pertaining to ethnicity was not something that was properly absorbed by the Dergue. In fact, they espoused the imperial ideology that was based on the notion of “Greater Ethiopia”—a centralized unitary state. Even though there was recognition of multiethnic composition of Ethiopian society and proposals made to address imbalanced ethnic representations (van der Beken 2012, p. 146), it failed to bring an end to what some insinuated as major sickness in Ethiopian political dynamics (Messay 1999, p. 351). Therefore, notwithstanding the abolition of the class system, interethnic discontent persisted in some pockets of society, which continued since the Ethio-Italian war (Paulos and Maimire 2011, p. 403). Some, like Roza Ismagilova (2006, p. 962), consider “Amharization” policy of feudalist regimes as the root of ethnic dissatisfaction. This is because, according to Ismagilova’s account, Amharas have always occupied highest positions in politics, military, and even religious institutions. Amharic language and culture were language and culture par excellence.

Paulos Milkias discusses two theories set forward to address the ethnic problem in Ethiopia. “Nationalist intellectuals,” such as Mesfin Wolde Marian, propagate a view that, even though Ethiopia has diverse ethnicities, Ethiopia should be understood as one nation with an Amhara core and other ethnicities in the periphery. Their argument is that the linguistic Amhara group at the core is not an actual ethnic group. It rather is a blend of ethnic nationalities who speak Amharic language. Interestingly, the proponents of this view concede that there is ethnic power unevenness in the nation. However, they suggest that the way to wither ethnic conflict is to rectify the apparent lop-sidedness in political power share and prevention of economic deprivation (Paulos and Maimire 2011, p. 403).
Another alternative view comes from what Paulos calls “national repression thesis.” It is this view that was promoted by the paradigm of compartmentalization. Ethiopia, according to this view, has been a prison house of nationalities since Emperor Menelik II. Ethiopian history, they claim, is tainted with political repression, cultural hegemony, and economic exploitation of the minority ethnic groups. While few ethnic groups have a privileged position, others were denied a space for political and cultural self-realization. The solution, therefore, is that the state should be decentralized. Ethnic federalism as a philosophy of social organization therefore is a derivative of this school of thinking. If there has to be a nation, they argue, it should not be built on the foundation of a centralized unitary state; neither should this nation be supported by a single dominant ethnic group. Every nationality (ethnic group) has to be given the right to self-determination including cessation, like Eritrea (Paulos and Maimire 2011, p. 403). Interethnic cooperation should not be forced on anyone except by the free will of the “nationalities” themselves.

Doubtless, the EPRDF opted for the latter theoretical trajectory. In effect, the last two decades have seen Ethiopia implementing this ideological stance. The question now is: How, according to them, will ethnic federalism solve Ethiopia’s ethnic problem? Ideally, federalism provides a given society with a share of power and civil equality for the subjects of federation. Can ethnic federalism deliver this effect? Fasil Nahum, Meles Zenawi’s legal adviser, argues that this ideology is bound to put Ethiopia in a new political trajectory, one that he tipped would propel the nation toward the mainstream of world civilization. According to Fasil, EPRDF’s political trajectory is based on an evaluation of the failure of monarchical feudalism and the Marxist dictatorial type to meet the expectations of society. The main area of their failure is deemed to be the inability to bring about constitutional order without sacrificing fundamental societal values (Fasil 1997, p. 49). In order to protect what Fasil considered as “fundamental social values,” the newly formed constitution grants “nations and nationalities” self-determination. This (Article 39), as van der Beken rightly pointed out, is an article interpreted from diverse angles. On the one hand, it could mean that the nations and nationality have the right to self-administration including cessation. On the other hand, it leaves one with enough room to form a joint administration as symbol of “unity in diversity” (van der Beken, 2012, p. 148).

Based on the practical autonomy of the ethnicities and regions, one might argue that the notion of self-determination is a recipe for the disintegration of the once functioning unitary state. In this vein, Solomon Gashaw argues that politics dominated by ethnic solidarity
can challenge the nation-state. This is because, he continues, ethnically polarized communities have divided political loyalty, and their primary allegiance is to their own ethnic group as opposed to the nation-state. So, according to Solomon, the contribution of ethnically based politics to the political stability of the Ethiopian society is being greeted with increasing skepticism (2006, p. 983).

As a way of avoiding possible disintegration, the system introduces federal structures. Federal structure, they would argue, is meant to not only support diversity, but it also is set up to keep the nations and nationality united. Furthermore, they are convinced that it gives room for ethnic participation in both regional and central government (van der Beken 2012, p. 148), and such an ethnically based negotiation of the Ethiopian statehood would be instrumental in resolving ethnic conflict and reducing the volatility in the Ethiopian political landscape (Young 1998, p. 203).

What is the role of religion in an ethno-federalist system? Some scholars (Grim and Finke 2011, p. 174) think that conflation of religion and ethnicity is misleading. According to the latter, the argument in support of religion–ethnicity conflation is misleading because not all members of an ethnic group belong to the same religion or vice versa. Besides, they add, religion and ethnicity are separate identities. Others (Abbink 2004, p. 133) argue that religion is an important aspect of identity politics: it defines power, cultural politics of prestige, and community formation. A more relevant delineation of the Ethiopian situation of the overlap between religion and ethnicity comes from John Yinger. He argues that there is a natural affinity between religion and ethnicity. This affinity, however, is even closer where primordial attachment with ancestor and tradition is most deeply entrenched (Yinger 1994, p. 255). In such a society, religion, he points out, is a belief system and practice by which group of people struggle with ultimate questions of life—suffering, injustice, and meaninglessness. Based on the analysis of Reinhold Niebuhr and Erick Erickson he concludes: “Faith is first of all a product of trust a child learns from loving parents” (Yinger 1994, p. 257). Religion transforms that inherited trust of faith into the social principle of certain ethnic groups.

For a long time in history, Ethiopian identity was more national than ethnic (Kaplan 2009, p. 297). Religion, as we discussed in chapter one, had an important role to play in the formation of a national consciousness that transcended ethnic borders. Inseparable from national identity, religion provided the philosophical foundations for national metanarrative as well as a theologically colored justification for the ruling elites. As a result, rightly or wrongly, Ethiopia for long time has been nicknamed as a “Christian Island.” Christianity was used
as the main instrument in the expansionist project that did not allow room for ethnic expression. Even though people tend to take covenant-thinking at meta (national) level, the ethnic expressions of religion was not totally overwritten. In fact, in many cases people hold ethnic religion as a form of deputation to covenant-thinking whenever they face problems that are ethnic in nature. The Dergue denied religion of any public influence by way of privatizing and even through persecution. The EOC, once a metareligion that constituted national identity, was also transformed itself into a grassroots movement that is tied to the identity of ethnicities where it is historically dominant.

**Conclusion**

In chapters one and two we saw two major storytellers—the combination of church and state in the wax and gold paradigm and Marxism in the paradigm of demystification—both claiming their own form of
universalism. The new paradigm, betraying some elements from post-modernism, has shown that neither is immune from deconstruction given their absolutist claims and alleged repressive attitudes associated with this tendency. Using the postmodernist element in the form of ethnic federalism has helped the EPRDF to invest in the emotions, nostalgia and painful experiences of the ethnic past. Now, typical of postmodernist thinking, we have several stories with as many narrators. Interestingly, none can claim superiority or greater truthfulness. The worldview of the paradigm of compartmentalization was shaped largely by the gradual irrelevance and subsequent disappearance of the church from the public domain. The twilight of the once uniquely powerful church has created a breeding ground for traditional religions, which are readily espoused by ethnic groups as a way of consolidating their constitutional right. This provides a context in which metaphysics, society, and human personhood can be understood, not from the fixed point of political theology or scientific materialism, but from pluralist points of view where tribal religions can make conceptual contributions as well. In other words, the splintering of metaphysics seems a harbinger of the demise of the national metanarrative. Consequently, the human person has become nothing more than ethnic species, who cannot survive outside ethnic shelters.

**Cotextualized Liberationism: Background**

In this section I discuss African liberationist thinking\(^1\) and its influence on the Ethiopian situation. First, I present Western perception about Africa because this is what establishes the background of recent African thought about Africa. Next, I try to characterize African liberationist thinking by distinguishing between issues, features, and motives. Finally, I discuss the specific form of liberationist thinking in Ethiopia.

Masolo rightly remarks: “The birth of debate on African philosophy is historically associated with two related happenings: Western discourse on Africa and African response to it” (1994, p. 1). This is the result of an apparently polarized understanding of the African identity. Liberation philosophy is about the West creating a certain image of Africa, as well as about Africans trying to counter it. Let us try to flesh this out by exploring first how Africanness was defined by precolonial Western scholars, before moving on to the African response.
Hegel, many African scholars claim, is notorious for laying a foundation for probably a largely unhelpful perception of Africa in the West. For example, he characterized Africa as

the land of childhood, which lying beyond the day of self-conscious history, is evolved in the dark mantle of Night, [...] for it is no historical part of the world... it has no movement or development to exhibit[...]. What we properly understand by Africa is the Unhistorical and Undeveloped Spirit, still involved in mere condition of mere nature, and which had to be presented here only as threshold of the World’s history. (Cf. Moses 1995, p. 107)

Hegel attempted to demonstrate an important distinction between a prescientific mentality of “primitive” society (Africa) and a highly “civilized” mentality (of the West). In Hegelian thinking, Africa is not a part of “Universal History” because Africans are considered “the people without history” (cf. Jones 2006, p. 155). In sharp contrast, Europe is both the culmination of historical development and the zenith of human achievement. For Hegel, Europe can be considered the author and embodiment of the “universal,” though some consider its idea of being universal very particular, and its notion of what is global very local (Jones 2006, p. 156). We shall come to this discussion later on.

Maurice M. Makumba points out that Lucien Lévy-Brühl (1857–1939), a French anthropologist-philosopher, carried Hegel’s theory forward to the next level. In the same vein as Hegel, Lévy-Brühl classifies human societies into two categories: civilized and primitive. “Civilized society” is marked by scientific institutions whereas “primitive society” is typified by its tendency to use supernatural experience to explain reality (Makumba 2007, p. 44). For both Hegel and Lévy-Brühl, Western or “civilized society” is characterized by logic and aptitude of objective observation. Conversely, African (“uncivilized”) society is characterized by interpreting reality using religious experience—a method Western scholars perceived as naive and immature. Though Hegel is always identified as the architect behind the depiction of Africa as land of “underdeveloped spirit,” both he and Lévy-Brühl seem to have had their own share in shaping the Western attitude toward Africa.

The perception of Africa as “the land of childhood of mankind” has had a telling effect on human history, which may be worth a closer look. From the outset, this kind of Western perception of Africanness seems responsible for prompting the Western powers to a crucial historical adventure—that helped the West to assert itself as the economic
and political leader of the world. At the same time, this adventure was/is considered a cause of immense humiliation to the indigenous people, not to mention one of economic exploitation.

Though Hegel might have laid the foundation for this far-reaching philosophy of history, Branwen Jones argues that the moral and ideological antecedents of colonialism can be traced back to the Renaissance and its idea of the conquest of the “New World” (2006, p. 156). The idea of possessing scientifically proven “universal” truth seemed to endow the West with a sense of triumphalism and the desire to expand its frontiers. Colonialism might also have an “innocent-looking” side. Some missionaries who worked alongside colonists might have seen the need for education and introducing the good news—the Gospel—to the landmass branded by so-called explorers (especially Henry Morton Stanley) as a “dark continent.” Even so, this move seems to have been clouded by two perceptions. For one, some African scholars—such as John Mbiti—claim that “some” missionaries were more willing to listen to Hegelian universalism, which became “a conservative accommodation for status quo,” rather than listening to biblical teachings and engaging the indigenous culture and values (Prokopczk 1980, p. 82; Mbiti 1990, p. 226). For another, the superiority of colonists was taken as an “inevitable and pre-established order” (Haddour 2001, p. 36).

However, colonists put no significant effort into converting the colonized to their own image, for instance, by helping the colonized to join the economic and technological metanarrative. According to the account by Azzedine Haddour, colonists tended to supplement the logic of colonization with racism to create a gulf between the culture of the colonist and the nature of the colonized (2001, pp. 36–37). Colonists apparently had good reason to maintain this difference. First, it was a way of presenting themselves as personifications of absolute and standard facts. Second, as Albert Memmi pointed out: “What is actually a sociological point becomes labeled (sic) as being biological or preferably metaphysical.” In other words, the colonists pretended that their superiority (and African inferiority) is a part of the creational order that should be maintained as such, deeming that to be ruled belongs to the basic nature of the colonized (Memmi 2003, pp. 71–72).

“Unfortunately,” Makumba regrets, “this attitude persisted even after independence with negative effects on the continent, a situation [...] that undermines the very drive towards national consciousness and promotes racism even among Africans themselves” (2007, p. 45). Frantz Fanon, a well-known French anticolonial liberationist, echoes the same sentiment in his *The Wretched of the Earth* (1967) when he writes: “In
certain regions of Africa, driveling (sic) paternalism with regards to the blacks and the loathsome idea derived from Western culture that the black man is impervious to logic and science reign in all nakedness [...]” (1967, p. 21).

So, how did African academia respond to colonialism? To start with, several issues were at stake for African scholarship in the twilight of colonialism. First, in the process of colonization, many African vernaculars were weakened or lost. As Ruth Wodak and David Corson rightly point out, when new languages—such as English, French, and Portuguese—were imported to Africa and became the medium of education and legal system, local languages became anonymous. “Doubtless noteworthy,” Wodak and Corsan continue, “is the fact that the great majority of the colonized peoples, long after their liberation, have continued to employ the language of their colonial powers [...]” (1998, pp. 2–4). Vernacular in Africa (as it might be the case even beyond) is more than a way of communication—it is a part of human identity. This does not mean that learning foreign languages for the purpose of wider communication is not important. Vernacular, however, is close to the human heart. This seems to be why, as the well-known African scholar Kwame Bediako argued in his Frumentius Lecture in Addis Ababa, we often unwittingly subscribe to our vernacular whenever we mean to bless or curse somebody.

Second, colonialism paved the way for a political ideology that takes racial and cultural identity as a point of departure. While branding the colonists as Eurocentric, the indigenous movement seems to be taking the converse position of so-called Afrocentrism—a philosophical stand that tries to understand the world from an African perspective. There is an undeniable countervailing element in this process. One would think that the apparent poles would have one thing in common: reducing diverse ways of looking at reality according to their own respective standpoints. Afrocentrism, compared to Eurocentrism, is given a considerably different nuance, though. While Eurocentrism is an ideological stance that tends to make the European point of view absolute and promote “culturism,” Afrocentrism is multicultural in its nature (Mazrui and Laremont 2002, p. 22). Unlike the Eurocentric stance, an Afrocentric approach may not consider its perspective as superior to others—Europeans, for example. Indeed Afrocentrism strives to realize cultural and racial equality.

Nevertheless, it seems difficult for African thinkers to wash away resentment and suspicion toward any encounter with Western culture and values. Because of the continuing postcolonial influence of
Western culture, it is hard for them to abate existential uneasiness, even when their theoretical position is more balanced.

Third, ironically, the colonial imposition of a monolithic view of Africa seems to have resulted in creating an even greater plurality of religious directions than what existed before. When the colonists tried to impose their worldview on the indigenous people, the local people reacted by turning to their tribal ways of perceiving the world. The Tanzanian scholar Grant Kamenju states: “[Colonization] compelled all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt bourgeois modes of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilization into their midst [...]” (1973, p. 175). Robert D. Hamner goes even further:

Colonialism and its latter day version, neocolonialism, are primarily economic and political exploitation, but they have a cultural/psychic counterpart which is both cause and consequence. Colonialism, in this counterpart sense, meant imposition of one worldview on peoples of another. Colonialism was justified at home as civilizing the savage. (1990, p. 218)

The alleged imposition of the Western “universalistic” worldview does not seem to have produced the intended result. Instead of being content with the colonial (Western) worldview, people felt more nostalgic for their past tribal religion, or at times, blended the new worldview with the old one. The setback to such a reaction is, the more multiple the religious directions are, the greater will be the tension between religious fault lines.

Until now I have discussed three issues involved in the response of African scholars to colonialism: the concern about language as basic to identity, an Afrocentric political ideology as opposed to Eurocentrism, and an emphasis on plurality. In what follows I look again at the African response to colonialism, this time in relation to its background in the earlier discussed universalistic view of history. Several scholars (including James D. Le Dueur, Neve Gordon, and Lawrence Hogue) suggest colonialism employed a universalistic conception of history. Other scholars are not content with that assertion. For instance, Patrick Hogan, defining universalism as “the view that all humans and all human society share fundamental cognitive, emotive, ethical and other properties and principles,” argues that colonialism is anti-universalism. Racism and ethnocentrism, as parts of colonialism, do not sit well with universalism. According to him, the conceptual framework carried on by the colonists is instead absolutism (Hogan 2000, p. xv).
Abiola Irele, a professor of language and literature at Harvard, smartly maps out three postcolonial contexts that he thinks would bring out the proper dimensions of the African discourse: racial reference (blackness), economic status (the notion of Third World), and currents of Western thought (modernism) (1995, p. 16). Interestingly, none of the above contexts have a constructive history behind them. In fact, all seem to be either products of racism or economic impoverishment, or ideological repression. So, what kinds of features did such contexts give to African scholarship? Let us consider three features.

First, since colonization African scholarship has become heavily conditioned by historical grievances concerning the colonial experience. As Norbert Hintersteiner points out, African writings, including biography, poetry, history, and metaphysics became “adversarial in posture, polemical in significance and combative in form.” The adversarial posture of African scholarship comprises interrogating colonialism and critically assessing Western civilization itself, including its historical claims, beliefs, and place in the world (Hintersteiner 2007, p. 93). Instead of a forward-looking constructive motive, African scholarship seems to have been driven by what Aime Cesaire calls “a true operative power of negation” (cf. Irele 1995, p. 17).

Second, as Abiola Irele argues, African scholarship is characterized by a form of romanticism that aims at aesthetic traditionalism, collective will, historical recollection, and reaffirmation of indigenous language, culture, and worldview (1995, p. 17). Once again, the act of romanticism takes an “opposing” attitude. The African intellectual endeavor tends to make a sharp dichotomy between “aggressive Western civilization and a humane African sensibility” as having implications for African scholarship (Irele 1995, p. 18). (Re)affirmation of indigenous cultures, ethnical codes and values, and nostalgia for the past are expressed as a means to denounce their Western counterparts. Yet, as liberating as this might feel, romanticism can make a society blind to its own weakness and result in a lack of self-critical scholarship.

Finally, there is a famous conceptual feature that sums up everything about colonial experience and consequent independence: the notion of liberation. The main objective of liberation philosophy is to bring about political, social, and economic freedom to indigenous people. However, in the face of a weakened mother tongue, an exploited economy, and diluted polity, achieving this goal appeared to be a mammoth task. Immediately after the end of colonialism, the so-called fathers of African liberation had two assignments to carry out: academic and political. Politically, it was for them to lead their nations into a new
era, while, academically, they had to conceptualize their future social
and political trajectory. Consider two examples: Kwame Nkrumah and
Julius Nyerere, both powerful leaders and accomplished scholars as well.
Nkrumah studied a wide range of subjects, including theology, phi-
losophy, law, and economics at the University of Pennsylvania and the
London School of Economics. Julius Nyerere, who studied economics
and history at the University of Edinburgh, was often called *Mwalimu*
(= teacher), a nickname referring to his profession as a teacher.

The theme of liberation as a typical feature of African thought brings
us to our third way of characterizing African liberationist thinking.
Rufus Burrow’s book *James H. Cone and Black Liberation Theology*
(1994) succinctly captures the central motives of liberation philoso-
phy/theology as pioneered by Nkrumah and Nyerere. First, according
to Burrow, black liberation thinking strives to take the lived-story of
blacks seriously. Black liberationists contend that if black scholarship
is to be undertaken effectively, it must account for their lived-pain,
struggle, and periodic victory. This requires academics and scholars to
participate in and commit to the lived-story of the black community
(Burrow 1994, p. 49). Interestingly, if a student of liberation philosophy
has not been directly involved in the historical pain, Burrow suggests,
“efforts must be made to include the heretofore absent voices, experi-
ence of black women, youths and senior citizens” (1994, p. 49).

Second, liberationists argue that the language and tone of liberation-
ist scholarship must remain passionate. Inexpressive academic language
seems to be out of favor here because it is thought inadequate to reflect the
rhythm and feelings arising out of the struggle for freedom. Instead, songs,
sermons, testimonies, and prayers are used to keep the rhetoric alive—and
also to resonate with the ordinary people (Burrow 1994, p. 50).

Third, liberationists maintain that reason is an important method-
ological tool for theoretical analysis. Insofar as there must be theoretical
analysis of black experience, reason is essential, but not only for getting
that job done. Liberation theology and/or philosophy are based on the
black heritage of literature, sermons and prayers, and songs and folk
tales. If they must fight for public attention, then they need to stand the
test of reason and logic. However, as liberationists qualify: reason must
be redefined differently from that of dominant cultures. Reason should
be flexible enough to accommodate not only scientifically proven facts
but also socioreligious experiences. According to liberationists, only
by striking a balance between black heritage and scientific veracity is
it possible to engage in a passionate, reasonable scholarship (Burrow
1994, p. 51).
Finally and interestingly, liberationists think that the discourse of liberation must be derived from and informed by black religious data. They call this the “contextual dialectical” method, in which ongoing tension and interplay between black theology and black sociocultural experience shape the discourse. What is the significance of contextual dialectical methodology? Mainly, it is believed that it accentuates the African perception of truth. This conceptualization rejects the view that truth is out there to be discovered by human agents. In sharp contrast to Hegelian universalism, it portrays truth as a process or divine event that invades human history from outside and at the same time is contingent on the concrete historical context. James Cone’s assertion seems revealing:

Truth is a happening, a divine event that invades our history, setting slaves free from bondage. This divine truth is not abstract or objective but is contextual and dialectical. To understand its meaning, we must be in the sociopolitical context of the liberation struggle. (Cf. Burrow 1994, p. 51)

In conclusion, this analysis has indicated that liberation philosophy is characterized by a painful memory and cultural and religious reintegration of the past using passion and pain as a vehicle. The image it portrays is perplexing: espousing full-blown liberation philosophy is like trying to set off toward the future by turning one's face to the past.

At this stage, we will ask the question about the significance of African liberationist thinking and its notion of liberation in the Ethiopian context. Did the notion of liberation have any impact on the paradigm of compartmentalization in Ethiopia? If yes, what were/are the circumstances that necessitate liberation?

Ethiopia has never been colonized—or so claim Ethiopians. Ethiopia has always been a staunch supporter of African independence, but the concept of liberation with regard to the intrusion of foreign powers was, until recently, a rare issue in Ethiopian academia or politics. Ethiopian history seems to be witnessing the emergence of a peculiar outlook on liberation.

Some Ethiopian elite and politicians seem to show a remarkable interest in liberation philosophy. Ethiopian liberationist thinking has at least one major element in common with African liberation philosophy. It is a response to imperialism. And yet, it is peculiar: it does not presuppose the intrusion of outside powers, but is rather a response to ethnic repression from within. It all seems to have started with a slow but
steady split in the national metanarrative. In imperial times the national metanarrative, as we have seen in previous chapters, was unquestionable simply because it was considered sacrosanct. The Dergue opted to preserve the metanarrative. But, it did so after draining its previous religious meaning and filling it with a secular worldview. In the meantime, demystifying the Ethiopian grand story seems to have given the elite among the oppressed ethnic minorities an opportunity to exploit the painful past of their groups. These internal ethnic grudges have produced an astonishing image of Ethiopia, not as the victim of colonization, but as a colonist who victimized its own ethnic minorities.

Eritrean liberationist politicians and elite painted Ethiopia as a colonist; accordingly, they struggled for freedom. Let us consider some examples. First, Tsenay Serequeberhan, an Eritrean scholar, who describes European colonialism as “the blatant denial of the humanity of the colonized [...]” in his book *The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy* (1994, p. 78). Tsenay laments that “the colonized is constantly reminded of his place; in this divided world no one can break the boundary with impunity” (p. 68); and “the affirmation that colonized has no history” (p. 68). After giving extensive examples of colonists—such as the apartheid regime in South Africa, the British in Kenya, and the French in Algeria—Tsenay comes up with the surprising term “African colonialism” to typify Ethiopia (p. 32). Eventually Eritreans declared independence, not only because of their decades of struggle but also because of the evident deal they had made with the EPRDF, their political ally in the struggle (Iyob 1997, p. 44).

My second example is the OLF and its scholarly supporters. They seem to characterize Ethiopia as an empire of Semitic ethnicities—especially that of Amharas. For instance, an Oromo scholar, Mekuria Bulcha, arguing against a claim that Ethiopia has 3,000 years of history, points out that Ethiopian nationality was established through the nineteenth-century act of colonization of southern Cushitic and Nilotic ethnicities. For Mekuria, the long history of the Ethiopian metanarrative is nothing but a myth (1988, p. 33). Gemechu Megersa goes further. Oromos were not directly colonized by the European powers, Gemechu concedes. However, he goes on to add, “They [Oromos] were indirectly colonized by them [European powers]... For it was these European powers who supplied Christian Abyssinia with all the necessary tools and political conditions including a legitimizing myth for colonization of the Oromo and other ethnic groups in the region” (1996, p. 102).

The question whether the conditions of these ethnicities can legitimately be branded as colonization is hotly disputed. Striking similarities
between the ideas of liberation within the Ethiopian political situation and that of Africa seem hardly contestable. In the first place, not unlike African liberation in general, language, culture, religion, and identity are very much at stake. Second, the attitude of an almost unconditional negation is clearly visible. Third, though Ethiopian liberation philosophy is reluctant to use theology as a tool, the motive to employ both logic and passion in scholarship and polity can easily be felt from their writings. Fourth, Christianity in one way or another is associated with subjugating the “colonized,” and therefore its claim of holding universal truth is questioned. Finally, suspicion toward any influx of value and culture, and striving for closure as opposed to openness to any outside critique seem typical characteristics common to both black liberation thinking and Ethiopian “liberators.”

In conclusion, the Ethiopian liberation movements have their roots partly in the African struggle for independence. The liberationists intended to employ a similar philosophical approach, the only difference being a shift to gain freedom from internal imperialism. Then, there is the intentional depiction of national metanarrative as repressive and modernist Ethiopian scholars as Eurocentrics ill-informed by Western anthropologists. Moreover, Ethiopian liberationists have had contact with certain liberationist individuals or institutions outside Ethiopia, such as Temple University in the United States. This also seems to have played a role in injecting the idea of liberation as a new hermeneutical tool to interpret Ethiopian history as well as polity. New directions in scholarship by Teshale Tibebru, Asafa Jalata, and Maimire are good examples of this. While it is likely that all of these Ethiopian scholars were informed of the idea of liberation and black consciousness in the United States and the Molifi Asante Group, some (e.g., Asafa Jalata) are influenced by Afrocentric, as opposed to Eurocentric thinking.

Nevertheless, there is something here worth elucidating. The notion of Ethiopian liberation is not homegrown, but imported. Especially the Ethiopian diaspora has served as a bridge to channel presumably foreign ideas of liberation to Ethiopia. Patronization of minority ethnic groups inside the country is indisputable. However, there seems no warranted indication that repressed Ethiopians see their oppressors as “others.” Normally the oppressed considered the oppressors as “bad brothers” (and fellow Ethiopians) rather than as outside intruders. It appears this feeling is subject to change once Ethiopians from oppressed ethnicities move away from home. When nostalgia becomes rampant, the closest they could get is to identify themselves with the African diaspora or black Americans. Notwithstanding Ethiopian history as
a country that has never been colonized, this intercultural encounter seems to be opening the eyes of the Ethiopian diaspora (especially the elite) to (re)interpret the Ethiopian history of interethnic relationship through the lens of global history.

**Going Forward by Way of Going Backwards?**

In the foregoing sections I discussed the question of how far the contemporary situation of Ethiopia betrays elements of postmodernism, and I showed how outside influences affected this situation. This section makes some critical observations. First, I assess the EPRDF’s emphasis on ethnic federalism. Second, I explore whether or not liberationist thinking can offer positive input to the much needed constructive social change in Ethiopia. Third, I evaluate the idea of time as implied in the paradigm of compartmentalization.

**Ethnic Federalism: Benefits and Hazards**

The application of ethno-federalism as a political ideology, as we saw earlier, has generated admiration as well as criticism. Kinfe (2001) hailed ethnic federalism as the dawn of a democratic state, while Chabal and Daloz (1999) took it as model for Africa’s multiethnic societies. Critics, on the other hand, point out this political order has an ill-conceived agenda: Machiavellian design of “divide and rule” mantra that allows ethnic minorities like Tigreans, to dominate every aspect of the Ethiopian state capitalizing on hegemony (Vestal 1999; Merara 2003). Nevertheless, Ethiopia continued to espouse this system for over two decades, and thus ethnicity became a basis for a state configuration. Besides following an ethno-linguistic trajectory to organize society, this paradigm has gone to the extent of allowing ethnic groups the right to self-determination, including cessation. Here I evaluate the merits and hazards of ethnic federalism in the light of my foregoing discussion.

My evaluation is anchored in two concepts: identity and power. Pre-EPRDF, Ethiopia had unitary identity founded on covenant-consciousness. Even though the Dergue tried to construe a religiously neutral identity alongside *hebretesebawinet*, it did not take a root in the Ethiopian heart. The main challenge for the ethno-federalist regime was not, therefore, Marxist socialism, but unitary national consciousness created by premodern political theology. Instead of construing new identity based on foreign philosophy, EPRDF opted to appropriate
indigenous sub-identities that were easy to tap into. Interethnic mistrust and historical injustices in the past made this all the more alluring. Hence, in order to deconstruct the unitary national identity, the new paradigm had to use historical pain as a launching pad. This is because amid reinventing the painful ethnic past among the minorities, it became self-evident that there were unanswered ethnic questions left for decades. In the early years of the EPRDF, three measures were taken to redefine identity. First, political parties along the ethnic lines were mushrooming. This created a sense of belonging. The ethnic political leaders could be addressed as “our leaders”—they were elected by them, from among them, and for them. Second, tribal religious rituals, customs, and cultural practices were used as social skills to highlight dividing lines when it was politically attractive, but also to bring about peace and reconciliation when violence loomed large. Third, regional languages were used as working languages to exorcise the feeling of estrangement and bring about a sense of being at home. Fourth, Ethiopian geographical map was redrawn along ethnic and linguistic lines. The underlying philosophy was that, before being able to negotiate the statehood of Ethiopia, one had to be able to define his or her ethnic identity, not vice versa. In a dramatic epistemological shift, ethnicity became an existential issue that one could hardly exist without. All these to find an answer for the question: If the unitary system made Ethiopia into a prison house of nationalities, who really are we?

The next step was being able to share political power, precisely because it is a means of social control (Aaron 2002, p. 19). In this vein, ethnic federalism aimed to alleviate ethnic tensions by making it possible to share political power with minorities in a multiethnic context. In doing so, ethnic federalism accounts for cultural, ethnic, religious, and linguistic pluralities. This, in principle, could ensure that national minorities were not outvoted by the majorities and gave a sense of political entitlement to protect themselves from socioeconomic injustices (Choudhry and Hume 2011 p. 365). Thus, minorities got legitimacy for political participation ranging from sub-unit and provincial governments to the level of federal government. Such a method of power sharing meant that the concept of government changed drastically. Ethnicities were promised the right to self-governance, ideally without unnecessary intrusion from the federal government.

Amidst the major political and ideological transformations, the supporters of the paradigm portrayed ethnic federalism as an all-cure formula for the nation’s socioeconomic and political ills; rectifying political lopsidedness was one of them. There was actually more fear than before
that ethnic federalism would create even more problems. Here is why:
First, there is uneven power sharing between the federal and regional
governments. As Abate Nikodimos rightly points out, on the one hand,
the constitution grants the nation, nationalities, and people the right
to self-governance and even cessation from “federation without any
condition albeit for procedural red tape,” giving the impression that
regional units are independent. On the other hand, however, the pow-
ers of the regional governments are kept weak and utterly dependent
on the federal system to execute their decisions (Nikodimos 2004, p.
73). The evaluation by the International Crisis Group (ICG) report
was even more negative. On the EPRDF it stated: “Its obsession with
controlling political processes from federal to the local level reflects
the former liberationist fighters’ paranoia and incites opposition groups
to consider armed struggle their only remaining option.”15 Despite
claiming to be federalist, the EPRDF stance was highly centralized and
tightly controlled by the federal government, which was dominated by
one ethnic group. The reports of intrusion in regional matters therefore
militated against the claim of decentralization.
Second, far from solving the Ethiopian problem, ethnic federalism
had become a recipe for more ethnic tension and conflict. For example,
a recent study of Dereje Feyissa on Nuer and Anywaak ethnic groups
and Solomon Gashaw’s study of southern Ethiopia indicated that the
relationship between ethnicities had not improved under the ethno-
federalist system. While Solomon (2006, p. 983) claims that ethnic fed-
eralism is responsible for even more communal violence in the regions,
Dereje (2011, p. 214) points out that interethnic intercourse is marred
by “multicasual” hostility, namely over resources, identity, and power.
Besides, the ICG study indicated that because of EPRDF’s inclination
to empower selected groups without taking dialogue and reconciliation
as the basis, ethno-federalism has generated an interethic fight over
political influence. As a result, the ICG report states, “ethnic federal-
ism for Amhara and national elites impedes a strong unitary nation
state, whereas for ONLF (Ogaden National Liberation Front) and OLF
it remains ‘artificial.’”16 The ICG’s observation on the adverse ethnic
consequence of ethnic federalism is plausible, but it must be stressed
that it is not only the Amharas who see ethnic federalism as a splinter-
ing of a strong unitary nation into ethnic pieces. With the exception of
few elite from some ethnic groups, the majority of ordinary folk seem
disillusioned with ethnic federalism.17
Third, there seems to be an ironic turn to the notion of self-governance
in this system. In principle, self-governance was an important part of
mitigating possible ethnic hegemony, and therefore, conflict. The existence of ethnic hegemony in today’s Ethiopia is palpable. Sources indicate that the state apparatus is dominated by Tigreans (Ismagilova 2006, p. 962). Ismagilova, an avid supporter of ethnic federalism, indicates that Amharas, formerly politically advantaged ethnic group, Oromo, the largest ethnic group and pockets of Somali all have resentment toward the regime, or especially Tigreans, because of systematic control of Tigreans over federal and relational affairs.

Fourth, the ethnic federalism of the paradigm of compartmentalization lacks a positive framework for unification of the nation. I add “positive” because there is also a “negative” mechanism to keeping the nation together. Despite their alleged absolutist and militarist stances, the previous regimes had used some positive ground to create a unified nation. For instance, emperors used the notion of covenant to keep the diverse nations glued together. Ordinary folks were enchanted with the notion that Ethiopians, despite their diverse ethnic backgrounds, are one and whole under one covenant. The Dergue, as well, had its positive notion, hebretesebawinet, in which it generated patriotism that ran across ethnic boundaries. The EPRDF has not provided Ethiopians with a notion that can bring them together. Since it has rejected both religion and unitary state, it is hard to foresee where the EPRDF will find such a positive appropriation for unifying the nation. As a result, Ethiopians, under this paradigm, lack a strong and unitary civil identity. As Ismagilova rightly suggested: “The soundest nationality policy in this setting is to maintain cultural diversity of the Ethiopian population, simultaneously encouraging the process of ethno-cultural integration in order to create an all-Ethiopian identity” (2006, p. 967). However, it is not clear as yet if the regime has the political will to ensure Ethiopia has a unitary identity.

Social Change and Liberationist Thinking: Friends or Foes?

African liberation thinking used postmodern elements in the process of developing the theoretical conception of its view. After colonialism left its largely undesirable mark on African history, liberationist scholarship seems to have become suspicious of any notion of “meta.” For instance, African thinking on liberation took the question of mother tongue, cultural identity, and social heritage as bedrocks for its conceptualization of society, culture, and economy. In a similar vein, African liberationist scholars and some postcolonial leaders have done their homework admirably with regard to subverting the curse of becoming
“other” in one’s own nation and culture. The academic arena has effectively articulated the painful past, held dialogues between Africa and the West, and proposed new trajectories. At the practical level, liberationist ideas have ushered in an era in which mother tongues are used with pride, tribal and/or traditional religions are openly practiced (some are contextualized and elevated to the status of “African Old Testament”), and political and legal matters are handled by local leaders, and so on.

Admittedly, the importance of reorientating the people whose mother tongues, identity, and sociocultural heritages were in question is beyond doubt. However, inasmuch as liberationist thinkers try to conserve cultural values and mores, progress, also a part of the modernist vocabulary, seems to have been replaced by mere survival. Hence, amid apparent optimism, one question refuses to fade away. Has liberationist thinking helped Africa in terms of stirring “the African Renaissance,” to use Thabo Mbeki’s words? Is the notion of liberation, as it is understood in African scholarship, compatible with progress? One might argue that the academic and practical steps, in their own right, should be considered as progress. Certainly, it is hard to contend with this assertion, simply because the steps are mammoth achievements. Even so, the question remains: In what direction is Africa progressing? To answer this, it may be imperative to elaborate on domestic affairs and international relations of African nations.

Domestically, apart from regaining independence the so-called liberating fathers have not achieved much with regard to taking their nations forward. In the twilight of his career, Nkrumah, liberator of Ghana, was considered a dictator and exiled to a neighboring nation. Despite being allowed to retire in his own country (without being forced into exile), Nyerere himself has conceded that his economic policy, based on indigenous philosophy, was a failure for Tanzania. Robert Mugabe stunned the world by claiming: “Only God who appointed me can remove me [...]” What is more, the incumbent leaders have had people killed, harassed, and displaced when they tried to question the legitimacy or competency of their leadership. Recent incidents related to the elections in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Zimbabwe, to mention but a few, are good examples.

The question now is: What is the real source of the problem? Some consider Mugabe’s claim of divine appointment to be sheer arrogance. But, there is more to his claim—a return to the traditional understanding of the sacredness of political power. Despite being the only one with the audacity to make such a public confession, Mugabe is far from alone
in the postmodern return of African leaders to the traditional (tribal) religious understanding of power. Steven Ellis and Gerrie ter Haar rightly claim: “It is largely through religious ideas that Africans think about the world today” (2004, p. 2). Gods or spirits, in African traditions, are the sources of power, the ultimate king-makers. Democracy as it is understood in the West has little or no relevance in enthroning or dethroning leaders. Once someone is granted authority, it is given for life. It is through the spirits or someone skilled in inducing and manipulating their world that political power is maintained. Ellis and ter Haar give valuable insights into this process:

Where communication with spirit world is common, it easily becomes subject to control by individuals or institutions whose prestige drives from the authority they have thought to have over access to the invisible world. While control of this interaction is likely to be the task of religious specialists, it is also a political resource inasmuch as it may give such experts a degree of influence over material life. [...] It is not surprising therefore to learn that politicians in Africa may, and often do, use all sorts of methods to derive advantage from the religious authority. (2004, pp. 66–77)

Ellis and ter Haar’s argument does need some qualification. Their conclusion that state and religion are interpenetrated in Africa does not mean that Africa has never moved toward their separation. René Lemarchand, a French social scientist and specialist on the Rwandan genocide, points to the traditional religion-based kingdoms that “have been obliterated from the political map of Africa long before Europeans even heard their names.” Interestingly, these African kingdoms were obliterated “in the name of progress and democracy” because they did not work, even before the advancement of the West to Africa (Lemarchand 1977, p. 1).

After the teaching of liberationist thinking, African understanding of power seems to be regressing instead of progressing. Refusal to pass on power to the next leader (or next generation) while incumbents are alive is one problem unwittingly re-created by an African traditional religious background. What is more, turning society back to traditional religious roots has also become a source of divisiveness and “inwardness.” Traditional and/or tribal religions are numerous, yet unlike major world religions (e.g., Christianity and Islam) there is little room for inclusiveness in their framework. The notion of universal or
invisible church (in Christianity) and the notion of *Umma*, for instance, indicate awareness of the notion of ethnic inclusivity. In contrast, traditional religions rarely transcend the ethnic borders or (extended) family networks, but work to maintain and protect them. They do not invite their followers to advance beyond the borders because they are past-oriented in nature.

This takes us to a discussion pertaining to international relations vis-à-vis liberationist thinking. John R. Pottenger argues, in his book *Political Theory of Liberation Theology* (1989), that liberation theology is an academic endeavor that ties the concerns of theology and social theory together (1989, p. 62.) Yes, liberation theology is a theological response to a painful social past, pain specifically inflicted on Africa by Western “advancement” (or better still aggression?). Latin American liberation theology focuses on blaming the dominance exercised by great capitalist countries for political and economic problems (McPherson 2006, p. 221). African liberation theology tends to constantly blame the West for Africa’s complex problems. But times are changing; and so are generations. It is crucial to teach the history of the painful past to new generations. Still, there is good reason to make the learning process intentionally cautious and not to prolong past trauma. This study has no intention to defend the West and its colonial program. The concern here, however, is that being overly occupied with past trauma did not, and will not, help Africa to go forward. Therefore, instead of dwelling in the past, liberation theology should make a positive ground to take the nation’s steps forward.

Because liberationist thinking both failed to neutralize the painful past and subscribed to an unrelenting negation of Western ideas, there is a real tension that basically emanates from colonial history. On the one hand, liberationist thinking aims at (culturally, religiously and economically) liberating the repressed. The act of liberation seems to start by liberating the brand of theology itself. Let us take an example from liberation theology. Alistair Kee writes in his article in *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology*: “The theology of liberation presupposes the liberation of theology. [...] Until theology ceases to identify itself with the values, interests and goals of those who benefit from structural injustice, then theology can have nothing to contribute to the liberation movement. But a theology which itself has been liberated can contribute to each stage [...] including foreign relations” (1983, p. 329). The next step, in fact, is regrounding society in the previous cultural, religious and traditional values, and painting Western universalism as inherently tyrannical.
On the other hand, in the process of regrounding, liberationist thinking seems to have allowed the resurfacing of apparently unconstructive traditional ideas and practices, which were already becoming irrelevant even before colonialism. In the search for the roots of indigenous values, social evolution, which demands a new way of conceptualizing power, seems to have been halted. Most importantly, traditional practices (e.g., the attitude of negation), which seem incongruent with foreign relations, still exist. Despite disguising themselves behind a modern veil, they are still dominant. More importantly, training people to face “inward” is not a good way of equipping a generation that should go out, compete and sell its product and knowledge on the global stage. A nation torn apart internally and unconditionally suspicious of diplomacy and negotiation seems destined for stagnation and isolation in the age of globalization. This is what stubborn, imbalanced attachment to the past and unrepentant inwardness can produce.

So far we have dealt with African liberationist thinking in general. Now let us focus on Ethiopia, basically a country that is not colonized by Western powers. Recent political and philosophical history shows two brands of liberation philosophy in Ethiopia: indigenous liberationist thinking and African liberation thinking. Let me start unraveling the Ethiopian liberationist thinking.

Indigenous liberationist thinking has domestic and global dimensions. Domestically, like African liberationist thinking, Ethiopian liberationist thinking was a tool used to resist foreign occupation when Italian forces made such attempts. Theology has also played a crucial part in the Ethiopian resistance to the colonial onslaught, though in a different manner from African liberationist thinking. Teshale Tibebu rightly argues that religion was a reason for the resistance. He writes: “In the sphere of religion the established Judeo-Christian culture, the sense of uniqueness and being God’s chosen people, together with the ideology of a Monophysite Christian island surrounded by religious enemies helped cement a distinct unifying identity.... This Christian nationalism was critical in mobilizing the population against foreign invasion” (2005, p. 507).

African liberationist thinking (both political and theological) was construed during and/or after colonization and is therefore inherently reactive. However, Ethiopian indigenous liberationist thinking and its use of theological material was proactive. Theology, especially the notion of covenant, was not used as a tool until Ethiopia realized it was under the Italian onslaught. It was a notion used previously to address internal issues (e.g., national unity under one king and one
religion). This proactive use of theological material made Ethiopian thinking globally relevant. That is, black people fighting for freedom in Africa and beyond used Ethiopia as a symbol of freedom. I will give two examples. First, the victory over the Italian force was considered not exclusively Ethiopian, but also as an African victory. Second, some indigenous churches in South Africa call themselves the “Ethiopian Churches” to denote they are free of Western influence, and the green, yellow, and red colors of the Ethiopian flag have been adopted by many African countries as well as in the islands of West Indies as symbols of independence.

Theology was effectively applied in Ethiopian liberationist thinking before the term “liberation theology” was widely known in (post)modern academia. I argue elsewhere that if African liberation theology were to gain a more plausible conceptual framework, it would have to start with Ethiopia, not only because Ethiopia exemplifies liberty for black society in the entire world, but also because of its proactive religiously nuanced defense of motherland, civilization, identity, and most importantly, covenant. But as well, it has its own hazards. Unlike African liberation thinking, which concentrates on colonial experience, Ethiopian liberation thinking takes the famous victory of Adwa over the Italians as its bedrock. Therefore, it does not set out to play the “hapless victim” as suggested by some Western scholars (e.g., Donald Levine). Rather, it starts with a sense of being the victor. However, both attitudes have the same outcome: tying society to the past and hindering new generations from looking to the future. The former dwells too long on the pain of the past, whereas the latter seems to waste so much time celebrating past victories that it forgets the future. Entangled by memories, both seem to devote their present to venerating the past, while there is too little or no progress to what the future holds for the Africans.

The African liberationist thinking in Ethiopia is a liberationist strand that strives to address internal problems by importing external solutions. The issues African liberationist thinking tries to wrestle with in Ethiopia are ethnic marginalization in the time of feudalism and the related question of identity, language, and political self-realization. It tends to rely on theoretical tools used by African liberationists to liberate the marginalized ethnic groups from the state, or “Habeshas colonization,” to borrow their term, to signify the dominance of Semitic ethnic groups. Using the same tools as African liberation thinking in general, it also suffers from the same weakness: an orientation to the painful past.
Commendably, however, some Ethiopian scholars are emerging with a new way of conceptualizing Adwa. For instance, Maimire Mennasemay and Mesfin Araya contend that “the uniqueness of Adwa lies not in the defeat of European power by an African country, but in the fact that Adwa is [ ... ] ‘a Truth-Event,’ a singular event that exceeds the circumstances out of which it emerges such that what appears impossible becomes real, giving rise to new radical political problems” (Maimire 2005, p. 253). Mesfin makes use of Maimire’s notion of “new radical political problems” by boldly urging Ethiopians to overcome the present ethnic divide and complementing the “military Adwa with intellectual Adwa” (Mesfin 2005, p. 225). The question is whether an Adwan victory can provide Ethiopia with an adequate conceptual framework. I explore this question in the final chapter.

A Concept of Time: A Search for Primordial Connection

Inasmuch as this study deals with the question of how the relationship between religion and society affects the openness to genuine development in Ethiopia, it has an intrinsic tie to the concept of time. Thus, there seems good reason to devote space to exploring this theme. I start again with the broader African context, before focusing on Ethiopia itself.

Mbiti asserts that time in Africa is a “two dimensional phenomenon, with a long past, and a present and virtually no future” (1990, p. 21). Interestingly, he made this argument while trying to show the irrelevance of Christian eschatology—as portrayed by the Western missionaries—in the African context. According to Mbiti, the missionaries’ conception of time has an epistemic frame reflecting Hellenized representations. This particular concept of time depicts history as the development of reason in time, “just as nature is the development of ideas in space” (cf. Masolo 1994, p. 110). In Mbiti’s view, the notion of development of ideas in time is incompatible with African culture because such an understanding of time puts a strong weight on progress and unraveling future possibilities. For Mbiti, this is hard to swallow for conceptual and historical reasons.

Conceptually, Mbiti is a proponent of ATR as practices that paved the way for the coming of Christianity—the African Old Testament. In traditional religious conception, Mbiti writes:

People expect the years to come and go, in an endless rhythm like that of day and night, and like the waning and waxing of the
moon. They expect the events of the rain season, planting, harvesting, dry season, rain season again, planting again, and so on to continue forever. (1990, p. 21)

In Mbiti’s view, this traditional concept of time is intimately tied to the life span of people and is the key to understand their thinking attitudes and actions. This, he insists, should not be washed away by the notion of future discovery.

Historically, it should be noted that the Victorian explorers branded Africa the “dark continent.” Colonization was understood as bringing light to the “uncivilized”—the Africans. Some missionary movements were also closely related to the colonizing effort. Besides, both missionaries and colonialists used the notion of expansion of ideas as history unfolds (Crang 1998, p. 71). With this apparently atrocious history still fresh in his mind, Mbiti is more than skeptical of introducing the concept of the future into the African understanding of time.

Mbiti’s claim has understandably attracted criticism from his fellow African scholars. Specifically, Joseph K. Adjaye accused him of overgeneralization of some particular cultural conceptions (1994, p. 56), while D. A. Masolo brands Mbiti’s claim as being founded on a weak, theoretical basis (Masolo 1994, p. 103).

Certainly, there is a considerable difference between the concept of time in Africa and in the West, and Mbiti should be credited for making that distinction. Yet considering the future as a notion that is “virtually non-existent” in the African philosophy of time is probably an unhelpful juxtaposition of Kikamba and Kikuyu cultures. Mbiti tends to take two cultures from two specific contexts and stretch them to the whole of Africa to fit his argument. Hence, his claim that the African eschatological understanding is tied to the distant past and present seems absurd. Several religious traditions, at least in Ethiopia, try to invest in their long-term future, at times even at the expense of their present. (I will come back to this later.)

Mbiti’s claim seems conceivable when it is applied to concrete situations, such as development. However, contrary to his claim, this occurs as a result of putting great emphasis on the traditional past and the ideal future, and a weak emphasis on the present. The main factor behind this seems to be social philosophy rather than eschatology. The argument here has four points beyond contention. First, Africa is a socially tight society. Second, a notion of sacrifice is always at the heart of a socially tight society. Indeed, it is used to strengthen social ties. Third, the African conception of society is not limited to living individuals
but also includes the dead and gone, as well as the ones about to come. Clearly, when they curse somebody (for wrongdoing) Africans also curse the target’s unborn children. Fourth, full engagement with past and future generations is crucial to avoid a curse—alienation.

What does all this have to do with the Ethiopian paradigm of compartmentalization? The Ethiopian context holds traditional past and ideal future in close proximity. The present suffers because of the four elements—social and cultural pressure, tradition of sacrifice, timelessness of community, and the need to overcome alienation. In contrast, the past is glorified, the future is anticipated without making progress in the present. As in many cultures, “tomorrow” is a very important day in Ethiopian cultures. Standing in the present, people invest in the past, while looking at the future. To put it differently, by investing in the past, they think they are investing in the future. For example, once there was a neighbor in Southern Ethiopia who had very little milk to feed his children. But when he did get milk, surprisingly, his first thought was to pour it on the graves of his forefathers because he thinks that “they might be thirsty.” If he fed his living children instead of his deceased forefathers, he believes that might adversely affect his afterlife. Past and future, in the African conception, are not as distant as they appear; they are intertwined.

When the paradigm of compartmentalization used ethnic federalism to reconfigure the state, people turned back to their primordial concepts of time, which had adverse effects on the healthy development of Ethiopian society. For example, a primordial concept of time is incompatible with a healthy economic and political development of society. The emphasis on the past and ideal future, coupled with a demand to live a sacrificial life for both the living and the dead, holds people back from embarking on innovation “today.” Trying on a new trajectory is “deviation” in traditional society with serious social consequences. Second, heavy emphasis on the past keeps the lingering pain of ethnic suppression fresh. The traumatic past of some of the ethnic groups was not beyond recall. Messay seems right on target when he stresses: “Ethnicized politics, once it is born, will not go away for the simple reason that it mobilizes strong emotional forces.”22 It can create a situation where ethnicities are always suspicious, if not hostile, of outside voices because relations with outside forces is considered competition whereas relationships within the community are considered alliances. Poluha assesses it fairly when she points out that the assumption behind the ethnicization of Ethiopia is based on the belief that primordial feelings alone determine a person’s interests (1998, p. 37).
**Conclusion**

In the paradigm of compartmentalization, ethnic federalism, liberationist thinking, and the concept of time are interconnected—all are in some way, past-oriented. This orientation takes ethnic history and experience as a launching pad for their theoretical formulation. Although this paradigm might have elements of postmodernism, the influence of traditional thinking is much more important. The orientation of this theoretical trajectory unhelpfully romanticizes the past and the traditional way of life and that makes developing a healthy Ethiopian society immensely difficult. The emphasis on ethnic identity and thinking of time in terms of giving greatest importance to the past and an idealistic future not only keeps rechanneling the painful experience of the past, it also comes at the expense of doing something positive in the present in terms of unearthing future possibilities.

**Social Practices: Divided Public Space**

First chapter showed that dissimulation and ambiguity are natural ways of communication in the wax and gold paradigm. Described as “dark and deep” by Albert Gerard (1971, p. 217), this style of communication has characterized the Ethiopian public space. Nevertheless, its expansive nature coupled with covenant-thinking helped the paradigm to create the “we” of Ethiopianness. The demystification paradigm opted to abandon the “dark and deep” ambiguity of wax and gold and adopt a more rational and constructivist approach. Even with its heavy reliance on scientific methods, the Marxist ideology could not do away with the culture of ambiguity. We have seen that even the central Dergue committee was haunted by dissimulation, forcing them to make an explicit oath at their own peril. Even so, a large segment of society was far from ready to leave ambiguity behind in social practices. Donald Levine is right therefore to claim that deep suspicion and distrust are still an acute social problem in Ethiopia.

Note that in both previous paradigms, Amharic was a lingua franca nationally used for administration as well as education. In these paradigms therefore, we were talking about a deeply entrenched philosophy of duplicity manifested in both Amharic language and daily social practices. The paradigm of compartmentalization comes with an extra challenge: linguistic multiplicity. True, federal government still uses Amharic as a language of administration. However, Amharic is no longer a lingua franca—most of the regional governments use their own
ethnic languages as the medium for administration as well as education. On top of this, the statehood is reconfigured along ethnic lines and so is identity. As a result, ethnic cultural identities that were once relatively fuzzy, because of several kinds of differentiations, have now become sharper. Collective identity is taking a primordial shape. Inevitable ethnic segregation, because of the relapse to primordial fashion of collective identity, in turn makes it very difficult to for fluid social practices. The reason is that it is very delicate and complicated for citizens to negotiate common public space. The reason is that blood, language, territorial demarcations, affective (sentimentally guided) membership, and even similarity in thinking are characteristic features of primordialism (Fenton 2010, p. 71). This might sustain fluidity of communication within a given ethnic group; it, nevertheless, becomes an obstacle when it comes to making interethnic communication possible.

Previous regimes have used their own fashion to create conducible public space based on transcendent consciousness. In the wax and gold paradigm, covenant-thinking created a collective national identity. *Ethiopiawinet* (Ethiopian-ness) therefore was a conceptual tool used to form some chemistry among the Ethiopians and craft a national consciousness. The Dergue emptied, as it were, the public space of any religious influence. Moreover, Dergue’s autocratic totalitarian nature means that there is very little, if at all, chance for the citizens to use public space to negotiate with the government. Still, it came up with a religiously neutral concept of *hibretesebawinet*—a philosophy that teaches “equality of man” (regardless of ethnic roots) and emanated from Ethiopian tradition of sharing and living together. Furthermore, it understood Ethiopian society as an extension of family rather than states within state (Andargachew 1993, p. 163). By doing so, it tapped into the culture cherished by ordinary Ethiopians: hospitality, sharing, and equity. Hence, despite limited political influence, there was room for citizens to use public space to learn, share experience, and have cultural exchanges without falling into ethnic consciousness.

The paradigm of compartmentalization has failed, or lacks political will, to craft a communal narrative that makes it possible for the mass to use public space to contest and negotiate on common good, virtues and obligation for collective and interethnic improvement. In contrast, the state owned media relentlessly promotes symbols and myths that strengthen ethnic identities and reinventing unique core beliefs. Whenever difference of identity is supported by unique core beliefs, the chances are high that misunderstandings and conflicts can occur. In EPRDF’s Ethiopia, interethnic consultations and negotiations
take place only where there is a crisis. The disadvantage then is, after the incidence of conflict, maintaining a meaningful communication becomes quite arduous. What is left is emotionally charged entities with a sense of some historical or immediate sense of injustice. This is because ethnic attachment mostly belongs to the realm of sentiment as opposed to that of constructive reasoning (Fenton 2010, p. 73).

The need to formulate a public space in such a way as to share visions, interpret ideas of diverse communities and to create and foster a sense of responsibility in this plural society is self-evident (Achieng 2012, p. 78). We have to wonder therefore, as to what option the paradigm has to make this possible. One way to fill the communication gap created by sensitization of ethnic identity in the society is allowing civil society to thrive. According to Asnake and Dejene, this seemed to be the case in the initial stage of the EPRDF when the policies of apparent liberalization seemed to strike the right note with the establishments of association (2009, p. 99). The changed political atmosphere however did not last long because of rising distrust between civil society and the state. In fact, due to hegemonic tendency of the government, they argue, the dialogue between the government and civil society organizations, at best, is poor. Akin to ethnically polarized political space, the civil space suffers the same fate as well (Asnake and Dejene 2009, p. 99).

There are other interethnic entities such as religious institutions and traditional self-help associations such as *eder* (intervention in times of crisis) and *iqub* (financial prudence). However, their ability of moderating public space is severely limited for two reasons. First, they, religious institutions, for example, seem to be internally struggling to sort out ethnic problems. Second, the federal government has put a clear and decisive restriction on them to restrain themselves from involvement in political matters. A controversial civil society law that the EPRDF controlled parliament passed was a symptomatic manifestation of tightening of public space in Ethiopia.

The only institution that made itself available to moderate public space and shaping interethnic communication is the state. The state however has ideological, strategic, and philosophical limitations to bring the much-needed chemistry in communication. Ideologically, the system is committed to ethnic federalism. Even though EPRDF is a collection of ethnic parties, the core of the party is dominated by the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF), a party representing the Tigre ethnic group. As Alemseged points out, the political accommodation of other ethnic groups, at best, is superficial. This is because, Alemseged adds, it is co-opted and invented ethnic leaders who have
access to political and public resource (2004, p. 604). There is therefore a general perception among the masses that the issues of Tigray stands more prominent than that of Ethiopia for the TPLF core who are leading the country. Therefore, credibility of the state to moderating public is often comes under scrutiny.

Strategic limitation is closely related to the ideological one. EPRDF is often accused of being a hegemonic system monopolizing the social and political landscape of Ethiopia. Despite its early promise, the critics claim, it has proven that majoritarian democracy is not its choice (Praeg 2006, p. 179). The system considers ethnic and religious conflicts and tensions, therefore, necessary evil. In fact, according to Getachew Metaferia, the government plays ethnic card not only as a strategy of staying in power, but also stifling united and strong demand for democracy (2009, p. 94). Akin to this, pivotal political decisions are not made in and after through public debates. Instead they are made “in the informal sphere, behind the façade, in circles and networks of a neo-patrimonialist nature, impervious to what institutions like parliaments or a high court say” (Abbink 2006, p. 178). In this vein, Samuel Huntington criticized the Ethiopian attempt to classify people in ethnic groups as reminiscent of experience that used to exist in the former Soviet Union and South Africa in that it divided people, and also makes a substantial portion of mixed races unsure of their identity (1993, p. 15). This confusion as well as division was used to strengthen TPLF’s grip on power. Among the adverse consequences of such a strategy is ending up with a divided public space and confusion in social practices. Needless to say, all of them are recipes for interethnic tensions and conflicts caused by lack of fluid social communication.

The philosophical limitation emanates from the fact that administering justice is the overriding task of the state. When there is breach of justice in any social sphere, it is the task of the state to intervene and administer justice. In Ethiopia, perhaps also in other primordial societies, conflict may not successfully end with the administration of justice. It is a cultural belief that reconciliation is the element that brings effective closure to conflict. Traditionally, religious institutions and shimageles (traditional elders) have resources to bridge the ethnic gap in public space. Compared to the Dergue, the EPRDF is better in using traditional resources of mediation and moderation. However, first, they are, again, used after the occurrences of certain crisis, and secondly, the government tends to have closer watch, if not manipulate, any entity (indigenous and modern civil society) that they thing can influence the society.
Concluding Remarks

This chapter started by asking whether the paradigm of compartmentalization would solve the problems that the other two paradigms had left unanswered vis-à-vis religion-social change nexus. The analysis, our critical observations indicated that the paradigm is critical of the idea of social change as defined by paradigms that promote the idea of “greater Ethiopia.” This is because the compartmentalizing agent, the EPRDF, accuses the two previous paradigms of trying to build one strong unitary nation without answering the question of “nations, nationalities and peoples” in Ethiopia. Combining elements of local dynamics, Marxist thinking and a postmodern worldview, the EPRDF introduced ethnic federalism to solve the social, political, and economic problems of this ethnically and religiously diverse nation. The EPRDF assumed that granting ethnic groups political autonomy, cultural and linguistic freedom in a federal system would tackle the problems holding back the healthy development of Ethiopian society.

The consequence is that metaphysics in a somehow postmodernist fashion has become a construct of individual ethnic and/or religious groups. The human person is defined as *homo ethnicus*—a being with no identity outside his or her ethnic shadow. And society is organized along the ethnic, linguistic, geographical demarcations.

My analysis indicates that despite answering some question, especially, pertaining to cultural identity of ethnic groups, the paradigm did not bring about solution to the major problems that the previous two paradigms failed to solve. On a positive note, its discourse on the marginal voices can be commendable. However, one has a legitimate ground to doubt if this discourse is translated into policies and meaningful actions that rectify the cause of the marginalized. Reconfiguring the nation along the ethnic fault lines helped ethnic groups, as well as their languages and cultures, to gain national visibility. The emphasis on freedom of marginalized ethnicities, despised vernaculars and overlooked tribal religions was alluring to some intersections of society with a difficult past. Moreover, it appears that people are comfortable with this emphasis on the past, as a concept of time. Interestingly, for an apparently conservative society, change is always uncomfortable. Because past-oriented thinking does not demand as much change; the EPRDF tried to reorientate them in the past. The traditional society seems relatively at ease with the reorientating aspect of postmodernism.

On a negative note, as a philosophy of the paradigm of compartmentalization, ethnic federalism is far from providing Ethiopia with a
comprehensive interpretive device that can glue the diverse aspects of Ethiopian society together. Besides being a method of negotiation of statehood of nation hardly proven anywhere else in the world, it fails to consider the Ethiopian way of life—especially the elements that provide surplus history and existential meaning of Ethiopian-ness. Ethiopian society also believes deeply in binding elements—covenant between the nations, nationalities and peoples. This emphasis on religious and ethnic compartments compounded with a strong accent on the past come as a challenge that confronts the effort of effectual social change. Despite sporadic appreciation of elements related to ethnic, especially, cultural and linguistic freedom, the paradigm is greeted with suspicion. Beyond being used for rhetorical consumption, the ethnic autonomy and freedom stated in the constitution often failed to materialize in social, economic and political reality. As a result, the talk of ethnic hegemony still characterizes the political landscape.
**CHAPTER FOUR**

_Toward a New Hermeneutic of Covenant_

**Introduction**

The first three chapters analyzed three different paradigms of the Ethiopian worldview and briefly indicated their strengths and weaknesses. In the wax and gold paradigm—still dominant in Ethiopia—we saw that historically, covenant-thinking is of basic importance. In the first chapter, I established that covenant is the main creator of surplus history, therefore of surplus meaning, in Ethiopia. It is a “transcendental” notion that has stayed undiminished despite several social and political changes, and it has also surpassed ethnic differences. However, this should not imply that the use of the notion is always plausible. As the analyses in the foregoing chapters indicate, it was used as a tool for the forceful expansion of the empire, creation of a culturally and ethnically hegemonized unitary nation, and the formulation of philosophy that stifled positive social change and development. However, since Ethiopian identity is largely shaped by this notion, it seems appropriate to rethink the notion of covenant as a starting point to formulate a framework that retains the salient aspects of the three different paradigms and overcomes their weaknesses. The leading question of this chapter therefore is: How can we use the notion of covenant to provide a perspective that is true to Ethiopian identity and open to positive social change in the future?
Several objections can be raised against the return to covenant-thinking. It is an archaic way of thinking, one might surmise, and therefore, it has little relevance, if at all, to the new Ethiopia, which has already shown some signs of emancipation from a religiously conditioned sociopolitical understanding. Others might point out that historically, covenant-thinking was played by political entrepreneurs to legitimize their own hunger for political power; it is nothing but an instrument of exploitation by political ideologues. Yet, objections might emerge on the basis that twenty-first-century Ethiopia is more conscious of ethnic identity than of unitary covenant-based national identity. This study takes the genuineness and reasonability of these objections into account. However, the objections and doubts surrounding the effort to reappropriate covenant-thinking, I contend, are not insurmountable. I, in what follows, try to present three arguments for the legitimacy of covenant-thinking in the Ethiopian social and political setting. My first argument emanates from the context, especially, the culture of memory in Ethiopian philosophy; the second argument comes from the nature of covenant itself; while the third argument comes from a concrete example of the influence of covenant in history.

**Argument from Memory**

As to the context, memory is a crucial aspect of Ethiopian philosophy. Ethiopian society, as it may be true for other societies as well, is a product of the world it has lived in. The past as such is not a distant and fossilized event in Ethiopian thinking. People summon the past as if it has occurred just yesterday. Therefore, the past in Ethiopian philosophy is “an on-going and active restructuring of bygone events.” “As such,” as Alemseged noted, “memory becomes the voice of the past and listened to in the present and sung to the future.” As a result, memory can be considered as the principal zone of political contest in Ethiopia (Alemseged 2004, p. 596). It is this memory that gives birth to what Maimire calls “surplus history” (2010, p. 74). In Ricoeurian fashion, Maimire defines surplus history as surplus meaning—the ensemble of subjugated meanings, values, and practices that are not fully accounted for in actual or manifest history. It is therefore in surplus history, according to Maimire, that we see the announcement of “victory of hope over poverty and oppression, anticipate a future liberated from shackles of the present” (2010, p. 87).
Metaphor, especially in a traditional society, is an important aspect of memory. True, the prima facie importance of metaphor might lie on the fact that it provides verbal signification. However, there is more than that to metaphors. Metaphor is a “poem in miniature,” argues Paul Ricouer (1976, p. 47), providing a bridge for the interplay of cognitive (literal) meaning and deeper significance. One of the metaphors characterizing Ethiopian culture is tezeta—a popular musical motif that deals with nostalgia. Nostalgia can be characterized as something that impregnates people with memories of a past that cannot be reborn. Yet, the past remains forever as a painful as well as a joyous burden (Ritivoi 2002, p. 157). In a society where nostalgia is rampant, the past is internalized and preserved as souvenirs or symbols. This is because, akin to Freudian thinking, in order to compensate the loss, the substitute of the lost object or identity is set up. In this vein, Maimire characterizes Ethiopian musical motif—tezeta—as an embodiment of the power of the nostalgia for the past in Ethiopian thinking. Tezeta is considered as “the real musical soul of the Ethiopians,” in that it is full of symbolism and allegory that enthralls all Ethiopians irrespective of their class, gender, age, and ethnic differences (Ayele 1997, p. 12). The way Maimire sees it, tezeta signifies “bittersweet nostalgia of the aborted hopes, audibly paints the present as exile into desolation, and evokes an ‘active memory’, or tezeta, that resides in the past, inflects the present, and projects itself into the future” (2010, p. 87). Tezeta embodies a militant promise entrenched in a restless memory, urging one to look for a better future. It craves the happiness that was interrupted, the desire that was left unquenched.

Parallel to Maimire’s portrait, there are other scholars who paint nostalgia in a positive light. For example, Fred Davis (2011, p. 5) associates nostalgia more with normal desires of love, cheerful remembrance of the past with minor regrets that it is gone, and revitalization of self based on the recollection of the past rather than serious medical conditions such as mental illness. In this sense, nostalgia can be defined as “an effort to discover meaning in one’s life, to understand oneself better by making comparison between the past and the present, and thus in integrating experiences into a larger schema of meaning” (Ritivoi 2002, p. 29).

On the other hand, nostalgia has its roots in two Greek words: nostos = return, and algia = pain—in Davis’s own words, “a painful yearning to return home” (2011, p. 446). In fact, since 1755—the time the term made its way to academic discourse via a medical dictionary Onomatologica Medica—till the 1950s when it lost its pathological tinge,
Characterizing Ethiopian sociopolitical problem in medical metaphors is now becoming customary. It does not need presenting of a great length of references to recognize the social and political breakdown in Ethiopia—it is obvious. To mention but just a few, Alfred Nhema used terms such as cultural compulsion, political pathology, and moral malady to characterize the Ethiopian situation (2008, p. 26). As we noted in previous chapters, Messay portrays Ethiopian society as having a sickness that needs major treatment. In fact, Messay is very vocal in his identification of the Ethiopian illness as alienation coming from a radical political agenda, which is marked by contempt of the Ethiopian past (2010, p. 34). Even though he has voiced this in many of his writings, he specifically seems to give fuller attention to this matter in his book *Radicalism and Social Dislocation in Ethiopia* (2008). His point of contention is that alienation and the feeling of being uprooted, caused by elitist contempt for one’s own culture, caused the sociopolitical sickness in Ethiopia (2008, p. 188).

This way, political entrepreneurs did not give Ethiopians a chance to negotiate meaning, and then transition. Albeit pretending to take on the demands of the masses, the leaders neglected to take into account their culture and values. The ruling elites forced the hegemonic historical narrative—the national “we”—of Ethiopia into the masses. As
Maimire noted, the hegemonic national “we” was imposed through oppression, exploitation, and in treating its interests as the universal interests of Ethiopia, resulting in two opposite outcomes. First, it created a breeding ground for contesting ethnic identity or a mushrooming of “ethnic we,” and at the same time, it formed an emancipatory “we” of surplus history that cuts across ethnic identities, and still, rejects the imposed hegemonic “we” (2010, p. 77). *Ethiopiawinet* (Ethiopianness) is a very popular and time-honored notion. However, it is very difficult notion to come up with a concrete definition. Nevertheless, if one has to delineate *Ethiopiawinet*, it is only the shared Ethiopian “we” and subconsciously negotiated meaning of the Ethiopian masses, not of political elites, that can open a window on the notion.

**Argument from Concept—the Two Layers**

Both Maimire and Messay have diagnosed the ills of the Ethiopian society. Moreover, they both agree that the past holds a key for this illness. Furthermore, they both seem to concur, albeit using different languages, on the idea of recreating the “we” embedded in Ethiopian surplus history as an answer for the social malfunction influencing wide array of social practices. While the former talks of “surplus history and/or meaning” the latter used the language of “spiritual factor” (Messay 1999, p. xvi). There is also common awareness that the attack on negotiated “we” is not a recent phenomenon—the problem has its roots in Ethiopia’s long history. This is because ideologues by then constituted Ethiopia as a shared space, and then, the share was uneven, carrying fatal damage to the shared “we,” as understood by the bulk of Ethiopian society (Maimire 2010, p. 77). They both believe that exploring the ethnic problem is the right diagnosis; but they both hesitate to acknowledge ethnic federalism as better medicine than the forced hegemonic “we” of the past.

They both acknowledge the lasting influence of religion on Ethiopian philosophy. Messay has gone even further to construe Ethiopian history as “an unfolding of religious prescription,” because “the history of Ethiopia is essentially a religious venture from the start” (1999, p. xvi). It is this “spiritual factor” for Messay that can adequately explain Ethiopian life, including social intercourse, politics, economy, literature, and art. However, there is an important question that Messay and Maimire left unanswered: Where does the subtle conceptual anchorage of the “we” of surplus history lie? Are the symptoms of nostalgia in Ethiopian social practices tantamount to saying that we need to
revisit the past? If yes, how can we exorcize historical ghost attached to this influential notion forming the Ethiopian value system? I therefore introduce a hermeneutic that, I believe, would enable us to preserve constructive values without importing the historical ghosts.

Ethiopia is an “old society,” often confronted by new states curiously espousing new ideologies. Akin to any old society, Ethiopian way of life is anchored in a time-honored philosophy and a value system emanating from this philosophy. Therefore, abrupt and forced changes can only produce withdrawal and resignation, before nostalgia takes over. Our analysis has shown that covenant-thinking—based on religious texts, myths, and legends—is one of the concepts offering a philosophical parameter to Ethiopian identity. That, I contend, is where the anchorage to Ethiopian national consciousness lies. To begin with, Ethiopia ye qal-kidan ager nat (Ethiopia is a nation of covenant) is a cliché known to almost every Ethiopian. Moreover, it is evoked in the time of hardship as well as of success. It is sung to commemorate the past, to endure the hardship in the present, and to forecast the coming prosperity. Though it has been decades since this claim disappeared from political arena, nevertheless it did not disappear from the Ethiopian heart. The songs by both gospel and secular singers are an expression that this notion is of deeper significance than the political system that introduced it. Surprisingly, however, bar some sporadic mentions, there is no philosopher or theologian, to my knowledge, whose work sought social and political ramification of this transcendent notion in contemporary Ethiopia. So this study is just a small step to fill this gap.

To have a better appreciation of Ethiopian covenant-thinking, perhaps it is imperative to start with Ethiopian exceptionalism. The fact that Ethiopia is different from Africa and also the rest of the world is well-documented. However, the question of crucial importance for this study is: What is the root of the alleged exceptionalism? Ethiopian exceptionalism, needless to say, is not race based (Adejumobi 2007, p. 31). Ethiopia indeed is not one race; it is an amalgamation of ethnic groups. Some try to anchor Ethiopian exceptionalism on its independence and unique history (Clapham 1992, p. 116). That is putting a horse, as it were, behind the cart. Indeed, it was the consciousness of exceptionalism that prompted them to defend a predefined identity against foreign colonizers. The same idea holds for Ethiopian civilization. Ethiopian exceptionalism, instead, has its roots in Ethiopian religiosity—the spiritual factor that demands continuity of important elements of the past involving both elites and the masses—rather than sudden raptures designed by state apparatus.
I have already established that covenant-thinking is not something that swiftly emerged in one epoch of history. It is rather an evolution of ideas from sporadic and unsystematic recollections of biblical reference about Ethiopia to becoming a national ideological tool. It has three bases: the fact that Ethiopia is mentioned in the Holy Book several times, the claim that Ethiopia hosts the Ark of the Covenant, and the fact that Ethiopia accepted Christianity as a civil and/or state religion. I also maintained that it was *Kebre Negest* (KN), coupled with *Fietha Negest*, that transformed it into full-blown political theology, using “free-sized” hermeneutics. In the KN, the claim of covenant-thinking gathered speed to the extent of being considered as an Ethiopia Zionism. To this effect, the domicile of the Ark of the Covenant is named Axuma-Tsion (the Zion of Axum), a substitute to the actual Zion of Israel.

Is there any theological warrant for the divine election of Ethiopia, at the expense Israel? Can Ethiopia claim any better basis for divine favor, for example, than Kenya? Albeit very tempting, this study has no compelling reasons to delve into this inquiry; because theological exercise of disproving or proving Ethiopia as covenant nation is indeed beyond the scope this research. There is an irrefutable fact at our disposal though: with or without theological justification, covenant-thinking has shaped Ethiopia for better or, at times, for worse. With the exception of some prominent modern Ethiopian scholars, Munro-Hay points out, millions of Ethiopians still take divine election for granted (2006, p. 4). Further, covenant-thinking has shaped, albeit in different ways, the social and political behavior of leaders, as well as that of their subjects. A compelling question for this study therefore is: Can we reconceptualize the already embedded covenant-thinking in such a way as to address Ethiopian social sickness?

As I tried to demonstrate in the case of *sem-enawerq* (wax and gold literary trope), historical concepts in Ethiopia have two layers of meaning: as interpreted by political elites; and as interpreted by the masses. For example, the wax and gold trope is a literary method used by elites as an expression of erudition and display of intellectual competence (Messay 1999, p. 180). At this level, it might have been used to conceal the real meaning and for “defending the sphere of privacy” (Levine 1965, p. 9), while still sharing it with the elites of equal knowledgeable status. At the same time, it is a means of communication as well as miscommunication. The victims here are the less or uneducated mass, marginalized in the darkest area of the ambiguity and condemned to endless servitude. However, when slowly but surely people got a grip on the wax and gold trope, the understanding formed what Maimire
called the “polyphonic subterranean world of repressed ideas, values and practices that incubate new forces, identities, hope and ideas that mature imperceptibly” (2010, p. 75). The same trope used by elites to exercise their erudition, but also to hide meaning, was boiled down later on into […] “a safety value for certain social tensions, enabling, for example witty individuals to satirize the monarch himself and still live to repeat the witticism” (Levine 1965, p. 9). We have also seen in the third chapter that azmari (traditional singers) criticized Bereket Simeon, an EPRDF ideologue, using the wax and gold trope, for being not a “blessing” (the literal meaning of his name), but a curse (the opposite of his name) of Ethiopian politics.

The notion of covenant has identical appropriation (usage) in Ethiopian culture. At the level of “manifest history,” covenant-thinking is an invention of political elites, on the one hand, to inject the claim of divine election into politics. This “Ethiopian Zionism,” to use Haggai Erlich’s term, had two overarching purposes. First, it aims to create a unified nation under one monarch. This is because, as we noted in previous chapters, at the end of Zagwe Dynasty, the nation was on the brink of disintegration (Girma 2012, p. 122). Second, it was meant to maintain ethnic as well as religious homogeneity, in that other religions (except the EOC) and ethnic groups (except Amhara-Tigre composition) were systematically excluded from political self-realization. Political leaders coming from the aforementioned ethnic groups had no hesitation in claiming entitlement to power by divine ordination. Even though there was little room for the upward mobility of individuals from other ethnic groups, there was however an unwritten law that they have to espouse EOC as their religion and speak Amharic without a foreign accent to join “mainstream” society (Mekuria 1988, p. 222). This is covenant-thinking that is devoid of covenantal essence.

The nation of covenant in “surplus history” of negotiated “we” stands out as antithetical to covenant-thinking in “manifest history” in several ways. First, the ordinary people are the main actors here rather than the political elites or the state apparatus, or even the church. Second, the ordinary people’s understanding of covenant functions from a different epistemological framework. The reason is that because of its absolutist nature, the epistemic framework descending from state apparatus to the grassroots is either unacceptable or unclear. That is, for political elites, covenant-thinking is a superficial social skill with a political agenda, keeping an ethnically diverse nation glued together.

For the “real people” however, it is a “metaphysical imperative” shedding light on the conundrum of Ethiopian value system (Girma
What I mean by metaphysical imperative is that the world of “real people” is built on the web of relationship. Providing an anchorage to this web of horizontal relationship (social practices) is the bond with spiritual order—especially the notion of fereha-egziabeher (literally translated as fear of God). This has both social and ecological corollaries. I will concentrate on the former. As understood by real people, covenant-thinking is not about power, neither is it about providing any grounds for ethnic or religious contentions. Covenant, for them, is about transcending the racial and religious divides and forming the “we” composed of races and religious commitments. When clashes occur, it not only administers justice but also brings lasting peace by ushering in reconciliation.

Doubtless, covenant-thinking in surplus history has transcendental (theological) roots. However, it is here that subtle but profoundly creative interpretation of covenant-thinking is abundantly evident. It is this interpretation of covenant-thinking that calls for its valid continuity in Ethiopian social practices. That is, the reinterpreted form of covenant-thinking, though an extension of the claim of divine election of Ethiopia in a broader sense, is used as a metaphor typifying intersubjective relationships undercutting religious and ethnic borders. It is this unique breed of covenant-thinking that, I argue, is worth developing as a hermeneutical tool that mediates between continuity of traditional values and change.

**Argument from History**

There are several instances when such covenant-thinking has threatened to break into actual history. Interethnic marriage, peaceful and harmonious interreligious coexistence, and the formation of indigenous associations with little interest in ethnicity and religiosity are prevalent social practices in Ethiopia. I will however discuss two historical epochs where Ethiopia saw manifestations of covenant-thinking as understood in surplus history. I will discuss Zará Yaeqob, especially his notion of creational order, and Estephenites and their egalitarian understanding of authority. These can be referred to as the “rebels of deeper layer” of covenant-thinking in Ethiopian history.

Zará Yaeqob is a sixteenth-century Ethiopian philosopher enthusiastically characterized by some scholars as a modernizer and a forerunner—an Ethiopian version of René Descartes (Teodros 2005, pp. 17–18). Whether or not such a characterization can hold water is open for debate. However, from the documentation made available by Claude
Sumner, and also developed by Teodros Kiros, very few can doubt that he was a unique thinker well ahead of his time. Teodros identified “rationality of human heart” as the main crux of his philosophy. I nevertheless do think it is the notion of “creation order” that is more basic to his thinking. This is because “rationality,” the way he sees it, is also an aspect of creational order.

In a similar way to Descartes, his philosophical journey starts with doubts. He starts by recalling that one day he asked himself, “To whom am I praying? Is there a God listening to me?” Then he poses an even deeper question: “Where did I come from?” (Sumner 1985, p. 233). Conceding that nobody can outlive the Creator to fully understand the human origin, he established the Creator as a starting point. “He who created them from nothing,” Zará Yaeqob concedes, “must be uncreated, who is and will be for centuries, the lord and master of all things, without beginning or end, immutable, whose years cannot be numbered” (cf. Sumner 1985, p. 233). This consideration seems to bring closure to his metaphysical struggle when he writes: “I said: ‘therefore there is a Creator...who endowed us with a gift of intelligence and reason’” (cf. Sumner 1985, p. 233). For Zará Yaeqob, making sense of the goodness of the created order and the presence of evil in the social and political system of his time was not mere academic curiosity. They were part of an acute personal enquiry on which his very existence hinged. This is quite palpable when he laments being “invaded” by such questions, as they brought about immense “sadness” in his life (cf. Tassaw 2004, p. 2). This is because in light of the “good” creational order, hierarchy, social stratification, and oppression of the manifest history did not make sense to him.

In a neo-Calvinist fashion, Zará Yaeqob did not see how dualistic thinking can conceive of reality in terms of integrality. This is because dualism, especially Platonism, “...did hold that the world of becoming was the product of the formative activity of a divine, rational spirit; but under pressure from the ground motive of culture religion, this divine formation could only be understood according to the pattern of human cultural formation” (Dooyeweerd 1979, p. 29). Though Plato identified the Demiurge as the divine architect who granted the world its existence, he also believed that the Demiurge requires material for the process of formation just as with human cultural formation—for, as the Greeks used to argue, “nothing comes from nothing.” Accordingly, because of the Grecian cultural influence, for Plato this material world was utterly formless and chaotic. As a divine architect and furnisher, the Demiurge is a god of form; but matter has independent self-existence that is “hostile to the divine work of formation” (Dooyeweerd 1979, p. 29).
As for Plato, and Greek philosophers in general, “[…] the god of rational form was not the origin of matter.” Therefore, “the god of form was not the integral sole origin of the cosmos.” According to Herman Dooyeweerd, a Dutch philosopher and legal scholar, this is because the understanding of god in Greek philosophy was an absolutization of the relative that “arose from deification of either the cultural aspect or the movement aspect of creation” (1979, p. 29).

In a strict sense, Greek dualism might not be evident in the EOC because that would contradict its doctrine of Creation. Yet, the distinction between the “spiritual” as the higher and superior, and the “material” as the lower and inferior has deeply influenced social thinking. For Zará Yaeqob, the dualism resulting in hierarchical understanding of society was not evident in creational order. What is evident to him is the goodness of created order, and the harmony and cohesion in it. On the contrary, akin to criticism directed toward Greek dualism, what was presiding over the Ethiopian philosophical landscape in Zará Yaeqob’s time was absolutization of human culture veiled in theological dogmas.

What are the implications of his philosophy for social organization? Some scholars claim that Zará Yaeqob did not contribute much to the philosophical discourse concerning society. Messay laments: “Despite his determination to liberate the Ethiopians from the weight of tradition and to show them the road of happiness, peace and unity, his thought contains not one iota of social utopia, not even social reform” (1999, p. 176). True, Zará Yaeqob did not confront the political establishment of his time in political terms. Neither did he try to develop a clear alternative to the contemporary social and political order in his time. Yet again, there is no clear evidence indicating that he criticized the intimate love affair between church and state. He suggested no idea that militated against the social stratification of his time.

Nevertheless, it is absurd to dismiss Zará Yaeqob’s contribution to social discourse the way Messay did. Let me list three examples of Zará Yaeqob’s work that may have strong social and political implications. First, his critical opposition to the EOC in itself has political implications. EOC tradition and dogma were a very important part of social and political order in Ethiopia. Indeed, as was shown in chapter one, it is hard to understand Ethiopian politics and social organization without the EOC. As Tibebe points out, the church was “the most profound expression of the national existence […]” (2009, p. 35), embodying Ethiopian state, life, and culture. Therefore, Zará Yaeqob’s opposition to the church was tantamount to a strong, if tacit, political statement that demanded a new and modern trajectory of social organization.
Second, in a concrete life situation, Zará Yaeqob has proven to be an egalitarian thinker as opposed to the hierarchical understanding in society. For example, when he was given a maid by his master as a gesture of gratitude for his enlightening teaching, Zará Yaeqob preferred to take the woman as his wife. The reason was, for Zará Yaeqob, the order of Creation does not allow for a rational being to possess or own another rational being. This is because, he argued, the order of Creation has endowed both him and the woman with the same capacity of intelligence and rationality (Sumner 1976, pp. 20–22). Zará Yaeqob considered stratification of people into social classes and even physical attraction (also associated with class) to be contradictory to the coherent nature of Creation order. The master-slave relationship does not sit well with the universal nature of Creation order. This implies that the basis for understanding society is not social class, as upper and lower and/or master and slave. For Zará Yaeqob it is based on rationality, what is intrinsic to human persons.

Third, the very life of Zará Yaeqob stands in sharp contrast to contemporary social understanding in the society of his time. Suffice it to draw on an example from his own social milieu. Because of his unwillingness to accept social and cultural status quo, he had some inner contradictions as to how to conduct himself in public debate. On the one hand, an independent thinker, Zará Yaeqob had a hard time buying into the established norm and ways of thinking if it did not mesh with reason. His blatant refusal to endorse both EOC’s popular philosophy and apparently Eurocentric Catholicism (then backed by King Suseneyos) is a noteworthy example. On the other hand, wary of his own personal security, when he felt that he was in imminent danger if he expressed his convictions, Zará Yaeqob subscribed to silence and withheld his opinion (Sumner 1976, p. 4). However, he thought compromising his philosophy of life would have an adverse effect on his human personhood as well as have implications for society. He was convinced that emancipated individuals who believe in “critical self-examination” and those who refuse to fall prey to the “falsehood” of dogma and tradition are important to build a healthy society. It is in maintaining individuality, pursuing intelligence, and putting every perception to the test of natural reason, he contended, that one can come to terms with Creational order (Teodros 2001, p. 70).

Let us have a closer look at the previous points. In the first place, Zará Yaeqob’s opposition to dogma and tradition has to do with his assumption that they are not open to be critiqued by “inquisitive minds” and voices of reason. As Teodros (2001, p. 71) aptly explains, even this
opposition is not a rigidly dogmatic matter for Zará Yaeqob, but an intellectual activity that propels thoughtful and vigilant believers. This in itself is a political statement, in that it calls on individuals to put their beliefs, ideas, and doctrines under proper rational scrutiny before holding on to them.

Needless to say, the last two points mentioned have the individual at heart. In the former case, Zará Yaeqob refused to take human personhood in terms of social class and put it instead on the basis of Creation order while, in the latter case, he declined allying himself to one party against the other and maintained his independence. This suggests that his understanding of society hinges, to a large extent, on the way the individual is conceptualized. Interestingly, for Zará Yaeqob, there are two laws: the law of man and the law of God. The law of man, he thought, always leads to contradictions, falsity, and deception. There is no room for rationality and inquisitive inquiry. The law of God, however, enables people “to be self-governing in the realm of moral life” (Teodros 2001, p. 74). Contrary to the law of man, the law of God allows someone to be critical and different, thereby setting people free to maintain their unique individuality.

To sum it up, formulating a social and political theory was admittedly not a pressing issue for Zará Yaeqob. His main problem was to construe the notion of Creation order as a theoretical device by which one can adjudicate between truth and falsehood. However, the elements that tacitly imply his notion of society have emerged from his wrestling with the issue of truth. The elements implying his modernizing attitude are the place of the individual in society, and the voice of reason as opposed to dogma and tradition. Therefore, as implied in his discourse as well as by his personal life, Zará Yaeqob’s society is egalitarian, where individuals are judged by a God-given merit—rationality. Apparently, his attempt to instigate the emancipation of the individual did not gain instant momentum, and as the result, social utopia and/or reform did not occur in his time. It might be fair to say, he was a unique thinker, putting a seemingly static history in motion, albeit in a very difficult time.

Daqiqa Estefanos in Ge’ez was named after Estefanos, a fifteenth-century strong-willed monk, who opposed the introduction of what he thought to be cults into Ethiopian Christian thinking. It is believed that he was born in northern Ethiopian and joined the monastic community when he was 18. There he was proven a clever copyist as well as capable teacher (Ephraim 1973, p. 68). Perhaps because of his critical views, Estefanos and his followers were branded as heretics, exiled,
and forced to labor in Qoyesa monastery on one of the islands in Lake Tana—the place is still called Deqqa Estepha.

Aleksander Ferenc characterized Estephanites as a decentering movement with an ideology that combines elements of political and religious opposition (2011, p. 275). In a time when concerted opposition against the state and church was nearly unheard of, they mounted a challenge to protect what some would call the “sphere sovereignty” of social organizations. This is because monarchs were preoccupied with forcing new theological ideas and literatures into the church. Maimire aptly explains that they professed the “ideas and belief that are out of joint with their times and are fruits of their imagination and utopian visions” (2010, p. 85). In Ferenc’s words: “They opposed on the one hand the excessive centralization of imperial power and intervention of the state in the internal affairs of the church,” on the other hand, they openly denounced theological “cults” forced on the church by Emperor Dawit. The supposed cults imposed by the king were the worship of Mary and bowing before the cross as a means of accessing the transcendent God (Ferenc 2011, p. 275; Ephraim 1973, p. 70). By questioning the existing order for blurring institutional boundaries, they caused anxiety among the political as well as ecclesiastic leaders.

Their social and political vision has a striking similarity with the post-Reformation ethos in Europe. In the same vein as the Stephenites, the Calvinists, for example, “eliminated,” to use Max Weber’s words, intermediaries between God and human beings (Weber 1958, p. 61). No magic, no sacrament, no saint, and no spiritual force were allowed to be used as a means to attain grace. The basic assumption in the Reformation movement, especially Calvinism and Puritanism, was that social life shall be organized according to divine order. What it meant by this is that there is no hierarchy in divine order. Spiritual order is reached, in Reformation thinking, through individual trust in God. Ultimately, any social activity is consciously dedicated to majorem glorium Die. It is this sense of individual accountability, according to Weber, that provided them with a “psychological stimulus for the development of their ethical attitude” (1930, p. 62). The world is more rationalized, and consequently, the role of magic and superstitious mediation to reach God was resisted. This had direct bearing on the position of the state as well as the Catholic Church as institutions that were inclined to preside over every aspect of life. It brought a new philosophy of social organization in which every social sphere (family, church, state, etc.) can govern itself without the uninvited intrusion of the other. Weber’s account shows that it is such an understanding of
divine order that gave birth to a unique ethic that unleashed the “spirit of capitalism” in Europe.

Each social sphere has its own sphere of competence, a principle known as “sphere sovereignty” by neo-Calvinist scholars. Different social structures should respect one another; one social community should not control another. For example, “family” is identified by the biotic founding function and led by moral principles. According to its individuality structure, family is a moral community (children and parents) tied by love and structurally based upon biological blood relationship (founding function) (Dooyeweerd 1979, p. 269). The state is led by its juridical function (it should administer justice), while its founding function is historical (or cultural). Sphere sovereignty means, for example, that the state cannot tell a family to support a certain political party. Or the church should not meddle with business corporations or labor unions. Institutions have their own intrinsic principles that enable them to govern their domains, and at the same time, limit them from intruding into other societal domains.

The state has three purposes: adjudicating conflicting claims of diverse spheres of society to maintain mutual respect for each social boundary, protecting the weak from oppression by the strong within and across the spheres, exercising coercive power to make sure that citizens have personal and financial responsibility of maintaining national unity (Kuyper 1943, p. 97). The ontologically defined feature of the social spheres does not mean that society would be disintegrated. However, in this tradition, what brings harmonious unity is not force but self-initiated covenant bond. The reason is that spheres are organically connected to each other in such a way that they are able to develop mutual accountability, trust, and service for the common good (Lee 2010, p. 95).

Doubtless, Estephanites did not have the chance and resources to develop their philosophy with the same vigor as post-Reformation thinkers. However, they had an identical vision and intuition of Creation order and social organization. They challenged the supremacy of the church as well as the state for their excessive control. Despite living in medieval Ethiopia, they reject hegemonizing of meaning and called for public reasoning. Furthermore, they thought the oppression directed at the masses (by the church and state) emanated from the ontological confusion of the order of the church (which is limited to pistic exercise), and the state (which should be confined to administration of justice) (Tibebe 2009, p. 45).

They faulted the clergy for prostrating before kings. Further, they addressed the emperor with familiar “you,” rather than respectful
“You.” The social implication is that the king is nothing but a human being—one of the equals. In doing so, they de-sacralized the position of the kings, who saw themselves as the extension of God’s kingdom. Prostrating before the king had profound social and political meaning in traditional Ethiopia. As Maimire points out, the upright position of the king symbolizes his power of vision and the capacity to determine the life-horizon of his subjects. On the contrary, the prostrating subject with his face stuck in the ground, his eyes deprived of vision, and his voice unequal to set up dialogical posture, epitomized his powerlessness to determine the trajectory of his destiny (2010, p. 82). By refusing to bow down before the kings, they risked being flogged, mutilated, stoned, and even being killed. The king branded them as tsere-Mariam (anti-Mary) before carrying out a brutal act of extermination (Tibebe 2009, p. 44). However, as Maimire aptly noted, they preserved the uprightness of the human person endowed by Creation order.

Another mark of Estephanites was their understanding of the interwovenness of Ethiopian society and the use of egalitarianism to maintain equity. In a society that was marked by ethnic, religious, and gender stratification, their membership cut across ethnic boundaries. They had members from Tigre, Ahmara, Agaw, Hadiyya, Bosha, Wolaita, and so on. Their system of social differentiation and the chance for upward mobility was not based on social class, ethnicity, or even gender. They commended Negesta Mariam, a nun, as “deeply learned, courageous and beautiful,” and on another occasion, they praised another woman for challenging a man (Getachew 2004, pp. 127–35). In sum, they conceived of Ethiopia with a different social order, and discovered a meaning created by covenanted masses of ethnicities, genders, and so on, but also with a sense of fairness and equity. When Estefanos was once asked whom he was debating with, he replied: “My debate is with Ethiopia” (Getachew 2004, p. 227). In the same vein, Estephanites understood Ethiopia as a forum for rulers and subjects to create a participated meaning and covenant.

**Covenantalism and Negotiating Public Space**

We have seen, by way of dialoguing with Messay and Maimire, that nostalgia is one element that characterizes Ethiopian society. There is a feeling that Ethiopian society has an aborted hope of intersubjective commitment and a spirit of innovation that had been discontinued, which can only be traced from the archives of history. As we saw from
Ritivoi’s analysis of identity, nostalgia can be a poison or a cure. This study is borne out of optimism that there are still enough elements in Ethiopian nostalgia yielding to converting it into a cure before it becomes poison. One of the viable approaches to study such a society is employing a hermeneutic of subject with close attention to situatedness and cultural belonging (Ritivoi 2002, p. 5). Instead of imposing a created, by this I mean hegemonized, meaning on the society, such a method would give a chance for the people to consciously assimilate, to proactively engage (and create their own negotiated and collective meaning), to adapt to changing situations without risking or compromising their past. In doing so, a space is created to explain social experience based on historical investigation. It is this historical investigation that opens a window on defining the task of adjustment and strategization to accomplish it.

Social and political history of Ethiopia has proven, time and again, that abrupt change did not suit the cultural nature of its society. The reason, as previous chapters have shown, is that the ready-made changes tailored by the political entrepreneurs without the participation of the grassroots did not suit social memory of the masses. Messay laments that both the Dergue and EPRDF rejected the “nostalgic thesis.” Instead of tapping into the founding myth, they treated Ethiopia as a laboratory of ideologies, and as a result, they were bound to fail (1999, p. 397). Therefore, in order for fluid adjustment to be possible, what Ritivoi called a “strong” and “soft” interpretation of identity should be applied (2002, p. 7). In other words, one aspect of identity requires immutability requiring a realist approach. On the other hand, the soft side of identity is “inextricably tied up in a cultural context that propounds a view of personal identity with no claim to permanence, open to variation, degrees, and transformation” (Ritivoi 2002, p. 7). The question we should ask then is: How is it possible to negotiate public space while the influence of the past (nostalgia) still fresh? Before wrestling with this question, I will briefly unravel the notion of public space itself.

**Conceptualizing Public Space**

Seyla Benhabib, one of the influential thinkers of public space discourse, explains that there are three models of public space: the “agonistic,” “legalistic,” and “discursive” models. The agonistic approach is an overtly theatrical approach in which moral and political greatness, heroism, and preeminence are displayed and shared with others. Originated in the polis tradition of ancient Greece, such confrontation
usually takes place between the political elites, rather than between the political entrepreneurs and ordinary citizens. The standard bearer for the agonist model is Hannah Arendt. Her work is characterized as a great reminder of the adverse effect of modernism in the tradition of political thinking, especially in the “loss” of public space (Benhabib 1992, p. 90). Modernism, Arendt observes, brought about “the rise of the social” institutional differentiation that transformed societies into a narrowly political realm, on the one hand, and economic market and family, on the other (1959, p. 6). As a result, lacking its traditional richness, the public space in the modern age has been narrowed down to a superficial play between economic family and the state.

At the expense of economically dominated pseudospace of interaction in which individuals do not “act” but “behave” as economic consumers, Arendt sees more value in the classical Greek distinction between oikos (family) and polis (public). Both spheres, Arendt argues, should be governed by different principles. The distinctive trait of the family is that people live together because they are driven by wants and needs of a physical and material nature. Since the needs (hunger, for example) is involuntary, and cannot be dismissed, they should be governed by necessity (Arendt 1959, p. 30). Contrarily, the hallmark of polis (public) is freedom. However, absorption of family into the public in the modern age is a signal of the displacement of freedom from the public to society. Note here that freedom is defined as freedom from the state, which has a monopoly of force (Arendt 1959, p. 35). This has two important points of significance for modern society: first, freedom is no longer exclusively located in the public space, causing decline of the family, and second, state force and violence (instead of being contained in the public) are now invited to the household (Arendt 1995, p. 29).

Arendt’s notion of public space is criticized for two reasons. First, she is relentlessly negative about modernism and the consequent “rise of the social.” Second, she is accused of being extremely nostalgic about agonistic (confrontational) political space of Greek polis. Benhabib observes that modern readers might also be disturbed by the fact that political exercise in polis was leisure that only few could enjoy. For example, women, slaves, and non-Greeks were so trapped by daily necessity that they could not afford to confront the ruling power in public. But it is greatly misleading, Benhabib warns, to read Arendt as a merely nostalgic thinker. The crux of her conception of public space lies in her methodology—political thinking as “storytelling.” In her story, Benhabib adds, Arendt digs “under the rubble of history in order to recover the ‘pearl’ of the past experience, with their sedimented and
hidden layers of meaning, such as to cull from them a story that can orient the mind in the future” (Benhabib 1992, p. 91).

Liberal understanding of public space puts emphasis on dialogue. This is true to its nature precisely because liberalism is a political culture of conducting public dialogue based on “certain kind of conversational constraints.” The most significant conversational constraint in liberal tradition is the tendency toward neutrality (Benhabib 1992, p. 96). John Rawls is one of the exemplars of this school of thinking, albeit using the terms “thin” and “thick” instead of conversational constraint or neutrality. Rawls does not seem to be preoccupied with the notion of pluralism in his Theory of Justice—or at least, the term is does not occur frequently. Nevertheless, one can easily deduce from his notion of social order with “no dominant ending” that his treatment of public justice assumes plural voices in the public domain. Rawls repudiates the notion that social order can be maintained by way of subordination to one single homogenous meaning. Such an idea of social order, he argues, fails to account to heterogeneous nature of human good, and promotes intolerance and violence (1971, pp. 553–54).

He then goes on to delineate an idea of social contract that can accommodate diverse voices. At the outset, Rawls see the contracting parties as “primarily moral persons with an equal right to choose their own mode of life.” For Rawls, therefore, heterogeneity of human selfhood militates against subordinating human society or the individual to a single dominant end. The consequence of forcefully subordinating others is that it risks “disfiguring” the self (1971, p. 563). To drive his message home, Rawls uses the analogy of a game. When played fairly, Rawls reasons, a game epitomizes unity of self-interest and common objective as well as contention and collaboration. In the same way, members of a society can espouse the same spirit to strengthen togetherness in order to reach a common goal in such a way that is acceptable by principles of justice (1971, p. 527).

Despite stressing the heterogenic nature of public domain, it is clear that Rawls thinks that consensus is not out of reach. We have to wonder then what method can be used to this effect. The answer for this question lies in his idea of “thin,” as opposed to “thick,” conception of good. By “thin,” he means noncontroversial account of good, void of significant metaphysical undercurrent. Even though scholars, like Benhabib, associate liberal understanding of public space with Kant and Mill, Rawls intentionally refuses to associate his effort to that of the aforementioned thinkers, precisely because their conception of identity is allegedly rooted in metaphysical conjectures (1971, pp. 245–47).
It has to be stressed, however, that the conversational restraint that he proposes is not necessarily morally neutral. It rather is a tendency to trump and privatize certain conceptions of good in order to make public debate more accommodating. In a liberal state, members of religious groups aiming to convert others to their religious commitment and also nonreligious groups committed to radical change in a society are supposed to withdraw from the public domain.

Rawls has his own critics. For example, Richard Mouw and Sander Griffioen wonder whether or not his abstraction could succeed in generating a metaphysically neutral account of justice. “But,” they add, “we can also legitimately ask whether Rawls has made a convincing case that abstraction is itself necessary in order to provide a foundation for public justice” (1993, p. 37). Yet again, Basil Mitchell contends that liberal thinkers, by trying to universalize “thinness” in public interaction, “lack a sense of depth and strip off individual any sense of particularity.” Their attempt to find a moral framework that meets rich human objectives has made them prune to operate based on a moral base that is too meager (1980, p. 46).

The last model of public space we discuss is the “discursive” model of Jürgen Habermas. In his rare autobiographical description, Habermas explains that his conception of public space, Öffentlichkeit, was very much shaped with his own personal experiences such as dealing with illness and the consequent feeling of isolation in his childhood and in the two world wars. This experience, he recounts, “sharpened” his awareness of the dependence of one person on others. Highlighting the sensitivity to the social nature of human being, it apparently led him to a philosophical approach and hermeneutic tradition that emphasized the intersubjective constitution of human mind (Habermas 2008, p. 14).

In his Structural Transformation of Public Sphere (1989), Habermas sees the development of modern societies as extensions of the sphere of public participation. Modernity has given birth to social differentiation and an independent value sphere. Along with these two elements, according to Habermas, there is another threefold possibility that was brought by modernism pertaining to the realm of institutions, realm of personality, and realm of culture. In the realm of the institution, practical discourse was identified as the only viable means of generating an overriding norm. In the realm of personality, a reflexive and critical attitude was taken as a way of developing individual identities. In doing so, individuals weave together a “coherent life story beyond conventional role and gender definition,” and yet, in relation to established social practices, self-definition became increasingly autonomous.
(Benhabib 1992, p. 104). In the realm of culture, losing its direct legitimacy of being valid, appropriation of tradition becomes more reliant upon the creative interpretive philosophies of contemporary agents. The simple reason is that it is a thing of the past and holds very little direct relevance in the present context. Therefore, the assumption is that it needs mediation of creative and resourceful hermeneutics in order to make it relevant to the problem of meaning in the present.

From the perspective of the threefold fashion, the principle of participation is not antithetical to modernism, but it is a basic prerequisite. In all the aforementioned realms, public participation of individuals becomes a matter of crucial importance. This is because establishing functioning institutions, forming stable personalities, and continuing some cultural traditions all require the reflective effort of individuals.

Both agonistic and liberal models also emphasize participation. So what are the peculiarities of Habermas’s “discursive” model of participation? First, unlike the agonistic model, public space in the discursive model is not understood as a place of contest for political elites. Instead, it is a democratic procedure in which all the people affected by norms and political decisions, regardless of class, gender or religious commitment, can channel their opinions on their own formulation and condition. This is because one only becomes fully human when “entering the public space of a social world that receives him with open arms” (Habermas 2008, p. 14). Second, discursive conception as well is different from a liberal understanding of public space. Namely, while liberals take neutral public dialogue as a core of democratic society, Habermas argues that dialogue should not stand under the conversational constraint of neutrality. Instead, it should be “practical discourse” that should be used as means of adjudication, to validate the ideas that are channeled into public discourse (Benhabib 1992, p. 105). Giving the parameter, or normative constraint, to practical discourse are “universal moral respect” and “egalitarian reciprocity.” The application of these constraints help to avoid the problem of majoritarian brutality on the minorities.

Under the “Argument from History” we saw that the quest for the greater role of the ordinary citizens in an open public sphere was started in Ethiopia in sixteenth century. Doubtless, academic discourse of public space as we know it now was foreign for the likes of Zará Yaeqob and Estefanos; nevertheless, the quest for public reason over and against political and ecclesiastic domination was unmistakably evident. One example is the indigenous court system. Independent of the state, this court system provided an agonistic platform to make a
Religion and Social Change in Ethiopia

public inquiry into criminal cases. The sessions usually are known as tetyek-liteyekeh (here is my accusations, where is your defence!) and bela-lebeleha (let’s reason). Mediated by dagna (traditional chair or judge), this system is where poetic wit and persuasive rhetoric are displayed. Most importantly to win the case is not only what the person says, but also how he says. This is precisely because the aesthetic dimension is very important in order to entertain the audience.

However, in same manner as pre-Enlightenment Europe, Ethiopia’s feudalist history was dominated by what Habermas would call a “representational” culture—a political culture in which one party overpowers its subjects to “represent” itself as the only viable voice to be heard. Despite espousing some elements of Greek philosophy, there was no evidence of the agonistic model of public sphere in which political elites can display different views. True, there were public spaces created by the masses, sometimes, under the guise of dark and ambiguous literary tropes and musical motifs. Those civil spaces were also kept under the constant microscope of the ruling elites to ensure that they do not “contaminate,” as it were, the political view of the audience. In the silence of all the other voices, there was only one voice—the voice of the state apparatus—that could be loudly and constantly heard.

The Dergue came to power with a better promise, portraying itself as a standard-bearer of the subjugated and exploited peasants. There was an expectation that it would create a more vibrant and expanded public space. It started as a space for diverse ideological alternatives. In this space, the ethnic voices (such as from Oromo, Ererita, and Somali) became more assertive in questioning the legitimacy of the Ethiopian state (Adejumobi 2007, p. 117). Even more promising was its intention to create forums for the marginalized, such as the youth, women, farmers, teachers, and so on. However, this did not last long. The air of hope of ushering in a vibrant public domain was swiftly evaporated, as it were, to be replaced by the sweeping energy of a fearful ethos, injected by hegemonic military elites. Its dictatorial stance coupled with the infamous Red Terror painted the Dergue as a monster that consumes anyone and everyone who comes in its way.

EPRDF also came up with a promise to open up Ethiopia as a forum of plural voices. However, because of its ethnic commitment, the expected forum under the EPRDF had to take an ethnic shape. Political parties, if they have to join the chorus in public space, have to subscribe to the ethnic accent. Even though the masses greeted ethnofederalism with suspicion—they feared deconstructing elements that held Ethiopia together for centuries would be a recipe for conflict
and disintegration—the political elites did not hesitate to jump to the opportunity to quench their thirst for power. In fact, there were a few who managed to break into the public space using the same ethnic tenets, but with antithetical nuance to the ruling elites. Ethiopia witnessed even greater participation by the masses when the nationalist coalition party mounted a nearly successful opposition to the ruling party in the 2005 national election. The disputed result and substantial gain of opposition in the parliament alerted the ruling party to tighten the public space for alternative voices. In the following years, the parliament epitomized the agonistic fashion of public space—certainly with less wit and aesthetic display—in that the parliament was a place for a showdown between the political elites and the masses was significantly withdrawn because of harsh life conditions. Part of the problem for the masses is that EPRDF applies an odd type of “conversational restraint,” namely, carefully and decisively stifling the flow of different voices with political ramification.

Ethiopia now is a unique challenge—it is a divided country in many ways. Ethnic, linguistic, religious, and cultural diversity are its main features. The incumbent ideology lacks a myth that could possibly undercut these differences. Yet again, there is a significant gap between political entrepreneurs (belonging to both ruling party and opposition) and the people. Because of their privileged position, the politicians presume that they can use the masses as a vehicle for their pursuit of political power. Disenchanted with public discourse, people use tezeta as a means of transporting themselves back to “the glorious past.” There is some eagerness to go forward, and yet, the voice of the past is an important ingredient, conditioning whatever action is taken here and now. Covenant-thinking, we identified earlier, is an important tool to link not only the past and the present, but also bridge interethnic, interreligious and intercultural gaps. I, in what follows, discuss how covenant-thinking can serve as a platform to start a social contract and democratization in a culturally, religiously and ethnically plural Ethiopia.

Covenant and Social Contract

The main focus of this section will be on elucidating two questions—questions related to identity and participation. The Rawlsian conversational constraint or neutrality is not a viable option in Ethiopia. True to Rawlsian conception, the relationship between politics and religion is often full of discomfiture. The fact is that they remain as two sources of power
at two ends—spiritual and material—often overlapping as they share the same society. The proposal of neutrality might be alluring to cultures in which religion has already been in decline. The question pertaining to philosophical validity aside, the cultural nature of Ethiopian society does not seem to mesh with a tendency to neutrality. One can concede that interreligious relationship has not been perfect in Ethiopia—it had its own struggles. Yet, one can safely argue that it was elements of the religious concept of reality that historically fostered peaceful coexistence among the Ethiopians. Hence, by way of discussing David Novak, the first part of this section will deal with the “hard” side of identity—religion, culture, and ethnicity—while the second part, by way of discussing Jonathan Sacks, will unravel the “soft” side of identity, and the art of cogently using it in terms of negotiating change in public domain.

I-ness and Social Contract

In order to get some clarity on covenant-contract interplay, I will discuss the notion of social contract as delineated by David Novak’s *The Jewish Social Contract* (2005). The importance of this book lies in the fact that not only does he specifically deal with the nation of covenant, but it also deals with his formulation of social contract as corresponding to the practical living conditions of the Ethiopians. In this book, Novak argues for the value of using the idea of social contract as a gateway to one’s participation in democratic polity. However, Novak makes a departure from other theories of social contract in that, he argues “one enters into social contract not from a minimal point of isolation into greater sociality, but, rather, one enters into a social contract from a ‘thicker’ communal background and agrees to accept its ‘thinner’ terms in order to be able to live at peace with the persons coming from other communal backgrounds and develop some common projects” (2005, p. xvii). This is because social contract, after all, is designed to respect, defend, and even enhance prior rights. Societies in which prior rights are not recognized, whatever human rights recognitions they have are mere entitlements granted by the society at will. The reason is that individuals or groups of people themselves have not recognized anything prior (or beyond) themselves. Therefore, the chances are great that the rights granted by the society can, at some point, be rescinded—and without contradicting the founding mandate—from the citizens by the society that granted them (Novak 2005, p. 2)

The rights that are granted by the society, according to Novak, lack a metaphysical dimension. They, indeed, are only hypothetical. Therefore, it is imperative, he thinks, for Jews to “cogently formulate
an idea of social contract out of their own traditional source” (2005, p. 5). In this vein, Judaism—including their claim of divine election—is of basic value for the Jewish Diaspora, if they have to participate in the democratic process. Therefore, Novak insists, the social contract should not be conceived of in a hypothetical fashion. Instead, in the context of Jewish experience, social contract for Jews should be understood against the background of the notion of covenant. The contract and negotiating public domain must take into account the context of a concrete person with his religious commitment and cultural background.

Unfortunately, Novak laments, whether adopted by Jews or developed by Jewish scholars themselves, modern arguments for democracy are emanating from secularist and liberal ideologies. Novak criticized the secularist formulation of social contract for not being theologically and philosophically perspicuous. Theologically, he explains, the secularist scholarship has not shown how Jewish tradition allows Jews to participate in social contract without undoing their Jewish identity. Philosophically, the modern arguments for the justification of social contract are based on human nature. Human nature in turn cannot fully explain why any rational human person should enter into a contractual trust with another rational human (Novak 1995, p.5). Secularist appreciation of interhuman trust, according to Novak, is based on more of phenomenological interest than ethics. This is because, Novak notes, they are entangled in the question of how the social contract would benefit society instead of why people should trust each other. So he goes on to explain the why.

In his book, Novak aims to reconstruct Jewish legal thought in relation to Jewish identity. His thesis is that religious Jews (and, by extension, religious Christians) can make the best citizens of a pluralistic and secular democratic state if they understand their heritage. Novak starts his argument by asking: How can anyone actively and intelligently participate in a democratic polity in good faith? No one is merely “anyone”; he qualifies, to show that concrete persons, not abstract citizens, participate in democratic polity. When participating in civic activity as a concrete person, one’s public participation is inevitably colored by religious commitment. Novak then reframes the question: “How can I participate in my democratic polity with good faith?” (2005, p. xi). The answer is that I can participate in my democratic polity with good faith through social contract. For Novak that means I-ness is not something that stands against entering into a social contract; rather it helps to better conceptualize the social contract because, as Novak argues,
“a contract of any kind cannot be cogently initiated and maintained except by persons who know from where they originally come to the contract and for what purpose beyond the contract itself they have come to it and remain within it” (2005, p. xi).

What does Novak mean by social contract? Note first that the idea of social contract is a mechanism used to create a condition in which all people have the same rights and obligations irrespective of religion, ethnicity, and gender differences. A social contract is constituted on the basis of free decisions by equal individuals. Novak points out that there are two concepts of social contracts: one based on a hypothetical construct, the other, on practical experience. The former is hypothetical in that it is based on the pretense that one can act in public with no influence of “prior realms.” Novak advocates the practical view because, he argues, experience is a better foundation for decisions than hypotheses. Experience-based social contract takes the priority as the territory of life from which concrete persons actually enter into a binding agreement made “between people who have histories and do not want to forget them […]” Novak (2005, p. 235). The subjects of the social contract are not autonomous individuals but people who are “communal, socialized and historically situated.” For Novak, a more viable way to understand social contract is through actual experience.

To demonstrate the plausibility of entering into social contract in this way he discusses the relationship between the philosophical foundation of social contract and its theological legitimacy as founded in the idea of covenant in Jewish identity. He writes: “[…] Jews can be parties to a democratic social contract in good faith because of their Judaism, not in spite of it. […] Jews can cogently formulate an idea of the social contract out of their own traditional sources” (Novak 2005, pp. 4–5). For Jews, he argues, theological justification of democracy is crucial. However, that does not necessarily come at the expense of philosophical justification,2 because they are not at odds with each other. According to Novak, they correlate to each other. This integrative approach is basic to Novak’s thinking. In fact, he characterizes the agenda of his book as implicit polemics against those who theologically reject democracy due to their view of Judaism, and against those who philosophically reject Judaism due to their view of democracy (2005, pp. 4–5). Despite correlation, he warns, Judaism and democracy should not be put on an equal footing. Instead, the historical and theological priority over democracy should be maintained. Yet, Novak argues, this does not mean that Judaism (or any other religion) can be a sufficient basis of democratic order.
Jews have their own conceptions of Creation (metaphysics), revelation (divine interaction with Creation), and redemption (the ultimate restoration of created reality), which shape their identity. Putting these conceptions away, in order to participate in social contract, is implausible. This is because any notion of social contract and/or democratization ought to be true to their (Jewish) identity as construed in their claim of covenant with God, not vice versa.

The question now is: How can one give priority to one’s historical and theological commitments over democracy and yet secure a political alliance with “others”? Covenant, Novak points out, starts with “Jewish self-interest” before proceeding to “political alliance”—social contract. Novak suggests that when Jews face public policy, as custodians of the Torah, they should first ask: “Is this good or bad for the Jewish community?” But, Novak explains, though primarily given to Jews, the Torah does not end with Jews—it is inclusive to all of humankind. Therefore, the Jews should ultimately ask: “Is it good or bad for humankind?” (Novak 2005, p. 237). So Novak argues, first, by nature, covenant is never exclusive; it yields to social contracts. After being made aware of one’s difference, identity, and interests, it gives enough space for political negotiation and even possible alliances in the public domain. Second, covenant has an ethical dimension. Novak elucidates this using the ethically laden words “good” and “bad” demonstrating that covenant is not about what is good for one community against the rest; it is about what is good for the whole of humanity.

Participatory Covenant and Intersubjectivity

Jews have a self-understanding that Israel is a unique nation and a distinctive society. This self-understanding, they believe, is based on the claim that Israel has a singular history—inaugurated with the Abrahamic covenant and divine promise to bless all the nations of earth through his “Seed.” For many, the same notion of covenant today in the twenty-first century sets Israel apart as a unique nation. The question is: How unique is Jewish uniqueness? Jewish scholars claim that Israel came into a covenantal relationship with God through the interaction of divine will and human inspiration in the form of prophets and kings. Thereby they assumed a unique position with God that has remained intact through history. As Lichtenstein points out, Israel was and is considered a holy nation, a community dedicated both individually and collectively to God’s law—the Torah—because of God’s grace (2004, p. 3).

How does this claim of uniqueness affect their relationship with others? Covenantal uniqueness, Lichtenstein remarks, was not meant
to isolate Israel, but it did bring “unique responsibility” to Israel in its relationship with others (2004, p. 3). Interestingly, Lichtenstein introduces the notion of “responsibility” in an apparent attempt to tame the claim of uniqueness. Israel’s unique history entails “unique responsibility.” Evidently some contemporary Jewish thinkers believe that the uniqueness of Israel does not mean that Jewish society should be considered superior to non-Jews. Having a unique relationship with God, they contend, should remove the obstacle of Israel’s isolation from non-Jews. This is also clear when Novak notes in his *The Election of Israel* that the proper application of the doctrine of election should overcome the “temptation of chauvinism” (1995, p. 254). It is not in the nature of the covenant to say, “Israel (or Ethiopia, for that matter) is more human than anyone else.” Covenant does not place any nation (be it Ethiopia or Israel) above other nations of the world in any area of human interaction. Neither does the supposed election create any privilege that does not pertain to any other human society (Novak 1995, p. 254).

What does it mean to be elected, if that applies to Ethiopia, in the context of pursuing equality in relation to “others”? Unsurprisingly, Israel’s unique covenantal relationship with God is far less contentious, compared to Ethiopia’s. Novak says the covenantal relationship is an intimate matter between God and Israel. Instead of getting carried away by its purported uniqueness, Novak suggests, in its relationship with other cultures Jewish society should emphasize its universal aspects—those areas where common human issues of peace, justice, and righteousness are at stake. The eschatological horizon (of what God will do in redemption) is beyond us. It is mysterious. Instead of pulling the hidden horizon into the present life and causing needless isolation, Novak urges, Jewish society should live by consciously practicing what brings every human together: peace, justice, and righteousness. Such an understanding of the covenant shows that the claim of divine election need not support the isolation of claimants from the others. It can be a tool to bring about unity, harmony, and coherence among Ethiopia’s diverse society.

Jonathan Sacks drives the message of harmony and coherence home by way of crafting an intriguing parable in his book *The Home We Build Together*. His overarching contention in this book is that multiculturalism has failed. By emphasizing rights over and against responsibility, it has become a breeding ground for fragmented and segregated identity. His alternative, therefore, is creating a synthetic society by way of covenanted integration rather than by compliant assimilation.
Sacks, a British Jew, uses three parables to show how plural society should be kept coherent. The characters in his parables are “hundreds of strangers who have been wandering around the countryside in search of a place to stay.” In the first parable, the strangers eventually arrive at the door of a large country house. The owner is very kind: after listening to their story, he welcomes them into his house, telling them: “Feel free to stay here as long as you like.” “From now on,” the owner adds, “consider yourselves my guests.”

As lovely as the story may sound, according to Sacks, there is something seriously wrong with it: however generous the host, the house belongs to him, not to the strangers who remain with no sense of belonging. “That is society as a country house” (2007, p. 13).

In the second parable, the strangers go to a big city and find a large, comfortable hotel with amenities. With enough money to pay the bill, they book a room. Their relationship with the owner is contractual. Rules are simple: they can do whatever they want in the room, so long as they do not disturb other guests. This model gives the newcomers the freedom they lacked in the first house. They are still guests; “but,” Sacks adds, “so is everyone else.” The main problem with this model is that the guests feel no loyalty to the owner or the place. It will never form part of their identity—the place is a gathering of strangers with no intention to become committed coinhabitants.

In the third model, the strangers go to a town and are met by the mayor, councillors, and local residents. Welcoming them, the mayor tells them that there is no country house or hotel available in the town. However, there is enough land, material, and experts for all of them to build a house. The mayor urges: “Let us do this together.” In this case, unlike the country house, the strangers have to build their own long-term accommodations; unlike the hotel, this is not merely about paying. Their relationship with the place is not just contractual; they must invest their energies. Now they are attached to the place, because it is their own achievement, and it embodies something of themselves. In the meantime, the residents of the town made sure that the houses would be congruent with the architectural character of the town. “Not only they have made a home,” Sacks comments, “they made themselves at home, in this landscape, this setting, this place” (2007, p. 14). When the houses are complete, the residents of the town come together and celebrate. This is a symbolic act that binds diversity with a ritual of belonging. According to Sacks, this model is more demanding, but also more rewarding. Healthy and responsible interaction between diverse groups creates what can now be called a larger community. Sacks concludes: “Making something
Religion and Social Change in Ethiopia

together breaks down walls of suspicion and misunderstanding, even though that is not the aim of the project at all. That is society as the home that was “built together”’” (2007, p. 15).

The characters of the three parables, the homeless wanderers, might not readily fit the Ethiopian situation—at least not on the face of it. Ethiopia’s context is different from the United Kingdom, the immediate background to Sacks’ parable—in that, the cause of diversity in Ethiopia is not modern-age migration. But there are some fundamental elements that the United Kingdom and Ethiopia share: ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity. Besides, there is a common struggle to find the balance of social composition of shared meaning and the “we” of surplus history. The term strangers seem to characterize the Ethiopian society in both actual and metaphorical way. In its actual sense, there is no ethnic group—none—in Ethiopia that can claim nativity on any legitimate basis. Ethiopia, even with a long and “glorious” history, is still a nation of mette—an Amharic equivalent of strangers. People internally migrate in search of job, better opportunity, grazing land and water, and so on. In the meantime, this internal mobility of peoples opens a chance for various forms of social interpenetrations—including interreligious, interethic, and intercultural exchanges. This highlights the need for a hermeneutic that can bridge the inevitable meaning deficit caused by diversity of backgrounds. So far, the only options presented by political leaders seem to be extremes of either “centralization” or “regionalism.”

Metaphorically, as we discussed earlier, people are “uprooted,” to use Messay’s word, from their culture and value system by political systems routinely inclined to imitate external models and with a lack of appetite to build modernity in Ethiopian ways of knowing. Consequently, there is a feeling of estrangement in Ethiopian ethos despite living in the same geographical location.

Therefore the parables could help overcome the adverse effects of using coercive force to organize a diverse society and thereby address the “homelessness” of the Ethiopians. The parables imply that it is important to recognize ethnic, cultural, and religious plurality, and yet, they assume that the presence of plurality does not necessarily hinder the pursuit of coherence. For example, in the third parable, no one is a marginal figure, but no one is seen as central either. Everyone has something unique attached to his or her identity to contribute to the task of building. If conditions are met for a level-fielded participation, the subjective experience of “building a home together” could gear diverse society toward a common goal and a genuine sense of belonging to the home. This is because they have the right and entitlement
to make their own mark while sharing in the house-building process. Moreover, closer workmanship creates a forum in which they can self-critically deal with their own historical misconceptions, prejudices, and needless mischaracterizations of each other.

The three paradigms in Ethiopia came up with compliant ideologies often based on outlandish knowledge systems. Ethiopia is full of untapped cultural (and philosophical) resources. There are concepts such as *metesaseb*, *mechachal*, and *mekebabel*—compassion, toleration, and reciprocity. Culturally, these notions are often used in the context of difference, plurality, and even tension. Covenanted society geared toward one goal of social good, as characterized by Sacks, is what Ethiopians are nostalgic about. Culturally, it is in their reach, but politically it is agonizingly asleep. Under the EPRDF regime, Ethiopians seem to live in contracted ethnic “hotel rooms,” often careful not to offend their neighbors. Compartmentalization and political correctness are elements that characterized the public ethos. However, there is a chance that the contracted compartments can lead to a situation in which everyone would talk of the ill of their neighbors in their own room.

**Covenant as a Hermeneutic of “Answerability”**

In this section, I make an attempt to articulate my understanding of the hermeneutic of covenant by bringing together the results of the first three chapters and the first part of this chapter. I do this not by summarizing every point of the earlier sections, but by combining the framework of answerability together with some indigenous Ethiopian concepts. Some of these concepts have not been discussed thus far. This part consists of two main sections. After a brief general characterization of the hermeneutic of covenant, I will discuss its worldview by way of unraveling its idea of metaphysics in relation to the notion of *fereha-egziabiher* (fear of God), its philosophical anthropology in light of *sew-le-sew* (interdependence), and its view of society in relation to *mechachal* (tolerance) and *metesaseb* (mutual support). Next, I will illustrate this understanding of the hermeneutic of covenant by applying it to education, communication, and literature.
Religion and Social Change in Ethiopia

duplicity, and the resulting betrayal, are historical problems that still impinge upon Ethiopian political culture, especially. On the other hand, the cultural embeddedness of covenant-thinking has provided ordinary people with a form of social intercourse that transcends ethnic and religious divides. It is important therefore to redefine covenant before relating it to indigenous understanding of metaphysics, philosophical anthropology, and social organization.

We have already established that in the context of the world of ancient Jews, covenant was not exclusively about privileging of divine election. Rather, the notion has an irreducible dimension of responsibility involved in it. This is the reason why covenant is elucidated in terms of the dialectic between fidelity and betrayal. Honoring the pact is a symbol of fidelity, while breaking it a sign of betrayal (Habermas 1990, p. 325). Obviously the Ethiopian context presents us with a special challenge in the discussion about covenant as compared to the ancient Jewish context. It is therefore important to make a distinction between façades of covenant: covenant as an actual divine election, and covenant as metaphor. As to the former, traditionally, Ethiopians—or, at least, the majority adhering to the Christian faith—claim the divine election based on scripturally buttressed myth. Hasty rejection of this claim offhand might run the risk of alienating ordinary people. Worse, this might strip away coherent social intercourse among diverse peoples from its metaphysical anchorage. Covenant as metaphor does not take exclusive divine election as a point of departure. It rather puts emphasis on Novak’s second question: What is good for all human races? My conceptualization of covenant takes the second level as a point of departure for two reasons. First, it maintains the resonance of the concept in the Ethiopian context, and second, it avoids unnecessary theological squabble, which is founded on a murky ground, to put it mildly.

Am I trying, by pursuing the second option, to abstract my methodology from metaphysical assumptions? The answer, here again, is that abstraction could not be relevant; neither would it be successful. The question of relevance has to do, as noted repeatedly, with the context. The secularist articulation of covenant—namely hebretesebawint—was not relevant to Ethiopian social political realities. The fact is that, despite faintly connecting it to religious roots, the atheistic tendency alienated people from the notion. As to successfully abstracting from metaphysical assumptions, the complex nature of human person and of society—of which religiosity is an irreducible dimension—might make it tantalizingly attractive, but unrealistic. Even Habermas, with his commitment to “methodological atheism,” could not resist relating
reasoned discourse to religiously laden terms. Not only does he use covenant as metaphor to elucidate intersubjective human relations, but also he sees in it reconciliatory values achieving a binding relationship. Wary of subscribing to theological arguments, he defines covenant as a “confederation of reason” upon which modern states, which are marked by religious toleration, are founded (1989, p. 325). Even then, Habermas does not understand Enlightenment reason as a recent invention; it rather is a secularization of earlier covenant ideas (Swindal 2010, p. 205). He, for example, identifies C. S. Pierce and G. M. Mead as two scholars who developed and transformed this religious notion into philosophical discussion by using communication theory. Lending a hand to communication theory are elements of dialogue, reasoning, reciprocity, on the one hand, and elements of fidelity, deception, and betrayal, on the other, in the notion of covenant.

While violence, crime, and betrayal are associated with “mute-ness” or “speechlessness,” covenant is expressed as “a binding force of communication” (Griffioen 1991, p. 523). What is striking about his understanding of covenant as a “confederation of reason” is that there is unconditional inclusiveness. That is, in this model of dialectical inclusion, the door is open even for someone who was guilty of betraying the confederation. This is because for him betrayal is a sign of impoverishment and an insufficiently rationalized “live world.” Reason, therefore, is an instrument that can correct the covenant deficit, and that “redeems” the guilty agent as a partner in the process of solidarity-building (Kuipers 2006, p. 128). Sander Griffioen notes that Habermas employed religious term as covenant to formulate a theory of reason that is not vulnerable to postmodernist criticism of exclusivity. Instead, for Griffioen, Habermas’s concern is to develop a frame for rational conversations that demonstrates “a need for, as well as the possibility of, a basic solidarity that would exclude neither differences nor conflicts” (Mouw and Griffioen 1992, pp. 166–67).

Habermas’s view of covenant as a binding force of communicative reason is not only instructive, but also it is very relevant to the Ethiopian way of life. Its emphasis on dialogical reason, its unconditional inclusivity, and its attempt to soothe out religious and cultural militarism in public discussion without necessarily relegating it to the background are all fitting to Ethiopian reality. One, however, has a legitimate ground to doubt whether or not the shrewd insulation of his method from metaphysical assumptions is equally relevant. This is because, although allegedly having an account of nature closer to that of Augustine, he nevertheless prefers science over metaphysical ground
as a tool of explanation. As Nicholas Adams aptly points out, this puts him in a difficult position to explain how he learned about the nature of the world, and how he explains it to others (2006, p. 113).

As a way of overcoming religion, Habermas buys into the notion of “divine estrangements,” which he recognizes as having its roots in Protestant and Jewish mysticism, but also reinterpreted by Hegel. In Hegel’s account, “God goes to exile with himself, emigrates into the darkness of his groundless grounds” and “becomes his other—nature, that is, nature in God” (cf. Adams 2006, p. 117). Then, according to this account, humanity is abandoned to do the work of redemption of both itself and nature. Hegel reinterpreted this account to say that God comes back through humanity, in absolute Geist, to be the Lord of history again. Habermas shows some interest in “speculative metaphysics”—God’s descent into history advances his intention to make a way for human historical subjectivity that effectively replaces a remote heavenly divinity. However, dismissing the Hegelian conception of God’s relation to history as too docetic, he favors the Marxist account of the myth: Humanity discovers its meaning in the labor from which it was estranged. This is because Habermas thinks that the Hegelian triumphant resurrection of God into history via human agency ruins the crux of the myth—the autonomy of humankind (1993, p. 247).

Unlike the Habermasean God, in the Ethiopian account of myth, God has hardly been in exile. For many years, he was thought to be in indirect control of history. Even when the recent political situations seemed to have dethroned him, they did it at their own peril. The political paradigms that renounced metaphysical assumptions might have promised a shift from validity claim to “criticizable” validity claim—a supposedly major gain of post-metaphysical thinking. The Ethiopian history has proven, however, that the validity claim in religiously colored regimes was replaced by even more stringent validity claim of nonreligious rules. One can safely say that, methodologically, the post-metaphysical promise helplessly failed to materialize in Ethiopia. Worse, in the face of human brutality, the post-metaphysical paradigms denied Ethiopians of an ultimate reference point of adjudication. Note that Habermas is writing having in mind (post)modern Europe. In a different context, like Ethiopia, post-metaphysical thinking of society could be costly. As Adams observes, the breakdown of religion could cause a fragmentation of shared worldviews, and as a result, it could make the universally acknowledged and authoritative criteria of testing ethical claims unavailable (2006, p. 106).
The covenant model this study intends to advance is based on what Mouw and Griffioen would call “transcendental community of mankind” (1993, p. 171). Even though there could be different metaphysical interpretations, the notion of the organic unity of human race undercuts religious, cultural, and racial differences in Ethiopia. For example, religious groups of Christianity, Islam, and even Traditional Religions equally emphasize a unified organic root of human race. In Adam, the first human being, there is a unity of human race. It goes even further. In Adam there is a unity of material order precisely because every religious group in Ethiopia believes that Adam was created from dust. In fact, the name “Adam” both in Hebrew and Arabic means dust. It is from this background, years before the notion of public space merited academic and political attention, that people like Zará Yaeqob and Stephanites in Ethiopia defied the social and political system of their time by demanding equity. This is precisely because, for them, “the order of creation” did not suggest a boundless freedom that sets up all against all tension; neither did it imply the elevation of state apparatus beyond human reach. Understandably, as some scholars indicate, justice, as a primordial concern, is an Ethiopian passion. In this vein, Messay notes that in Ethiopia, “even religiosity is a manifestation of justice.”

**Metaphysics—the “Order” Factor**

The deep religiosity of Ethiopian culture is unmistakable. Therefore, as manifested in the thinking of Zará Yaeqob and Estephanites, there is a sense of order to Ethiopian spirituality. Akin to general African thinking, this order is based on chain of interdependence. At the top of the chain is God, the Creator and sustainer. The Dergue tried to inject a notion that nature is operated by secondary cause—natural law. Such a conception of nature only produced and sharpened antagonism toward the ideology. The reason is that this mechanistic view cannot fully explain the harmony and coherence in nature. Created order is not substance; neither do they have the *telos* of their own. There is a definite hierarchy to this order such as the world of spirits, saints, and then the ordinary people. Mainly, by virtue of claiming God’s anointment, the politicians are placed on an equal footing with saints. That explains the historical intertwining of the church and the state. Culturally, the hierarchy is meant to be respected. Indeed, Messay points out that among the chief religious concerns is the issue of how people become the clients of the “saints,” who are believed to be powerful and sensitive, in their prayers as well as in supplication.
I will unpack, in relation to order, three important notions: reason, power, and invitation. Zará Yaeqob, as we discussed earlier, sees rationality as intrinsic to order. For one, rationality is not seen as a human invention; it is rather a part of Creation order. As an order, it sets human persons apart from other created beings. However, reason can be an instrument to adjudicate between falsehood and truth. While reason is a vehicle or instrument of adjudication, the reference point itself is Creation order. For example, asceticism and celibacy are judged as practices associated to falsehood because, according to Zará Yaeqob, they contradict the created order. That is, while celibacy does not sit well with reproductive mandate instilled in human nature, asceticism contradicts the goodness of nature. He therefore argues: “Our intelligence tells us that he who says such a thing is wrong and makes the creator liar... that marriage springs from the law of the creator; and yet monastic law renders this wisdom of creator is ineffectual” (cf. Teodros 2005, p. 58). Rationality also helps to understand social ordering. That is, any social order that violates the equality of human persons fails to fulfill the rational criteria. In this thinking, the basis of ordering is not class, possession, or physical appearance. Zará Yaeqob argues that rationality and intelligence are elements that all humans share. This equality, according to Zará Yaeqob, is so obvious that all can understand. Social stratification that privileges some for lordship and others for servitude is inherently flawed. Again, such a social stratification violates the order of Creation, and in the meantime, falls gravely short of the criteria of rationality.

According to this thinking, power could be positive or negative. On the positive side, as Geertsema aptly points out, energy is a part of the core of physical order. Power, as an influence on behavior of the other, is everywhere because it belongs to the very nature of the world (2008, p. 82). When applied to human relations—such as politics, education, trade, and so on—power plays an important role in the formation of human history in one way or the other. It is here that human intention and responsibility come into play in the use of power. More importantly, power could be taken as a fortification that prevents evil from sweeping the weak away. Power, therefore, is constitutive of relationship, precisely because one person influences another to enable him to live, act, and flourish. Power is a structural given in human relations (Geertsema 2008, p. 83). In this sense, people who hold power are held in high esteem, precisely because they are fulfilling the responsibility given by a higher order.

On the other hand, power could be negative when its forceful use by one impinges on the freedom of the other. Answerability is an important
aspect of power. The person in power should be held accountable for the decisions that are made. When power loses this balance—the balance of answerability—it will lend itself for selfish use. Killing the spirit of competition and cooperation, it will become a means by which the power holder seeks his own gain. When a part of the hierarchy gets too much control and appears to be working for their own end (telos), Ethiopians would warn: “They are but accomplishing the divine will which animates and controls them” (Messay 1999, p. 194). In truest Ethiopian metaphysical order, politicians, albeit being at the top of the chain, are not necessarily delegations of divine power. Messay explains, the definition of emperor as the chosen of God is telling: “He is an instrument chosen to fulfill a divine assignment” (1999, p. 194). That is tantamount to saying that the peculiarity and specificity of his assignment does not allow him to dominate other institutions for his own ends. In the meantime, there is a sharper awareness of the presence of evil. In order to restrain the act of evil from causing chaos by disrupting the chain of interdependence, there are other notions that are introduced to maintain justice: the notion of *fereha-egziabeher* is one of them. We will discuss this in some detail under the section on public space.

The last element of created order that I would like to discuss is the notion of invitation. Invitation is one generic aspect of African philosophy. It starts on the assumption that God is the Architect, Excavator, Originator, and Inventor of all created reality. God, the grand architect, fashioned the earth with one thing in mind: invitation of human race into being. As Irele and Jeyifo point out, the physical existence of human persons in this designed place is limited. However, this limited physical existence is synchronic and complementary to the cosmic order maintained by the Creator of the universe (Irele and Jeyifo 2004, p. 313). Creation is God’s ambit, and therefore, as the Host, he always oversees it. Mercy Oduyoye, an ardent feminist, uses the typology of “mothering” to describe God as a host of human beings in Creation. The act of mothering, according to Oduyoye, includes caring and providing (2001, p. 46).

While the aforementioned are the responsibility of the Host, the invitees are answerable to the Host as well. The ethics of answering in Ethiopia is supported by both shame and guilt cultures. Shame culture kicks in when one tends to behave *be-chewanet* (in a good mannered way) because of fear of derision. This culture is known in Ethiopia as *yilugnta*. David and Frances Korten’s study shows that the apparent “pressure for conformity and concern for what others will think or say are a primary means of social control in the society” (1972, p. 54).
While the shame culture works at social level, the guilt culture works in individual’s relation to higher reality. In a word, invitation means that someone has to play according to the rules of the Host. If the guest is tampering with any aspect of the Host, one is answerable, individually, for disrupting the chain of intersubjectivity and interdependence.

**Philosophical Anthropology—The Sew-le-Sew Factor**

In Ethiopia, as it could also be true of Africa in general, human personhood is understood, not in terms of autonomous individuality, but in terms of interdependency. Individuals are not understood as single persons; but as “a one with all, for all just like all is for one” (Nkemnkia 2006, p. 100). In such a context, for a person to be fully human he or she has to live, not for and by him or herself, but primarily with and for others—family, friends, and community. This in Ethiopia is often expressed by the well-known proverb: *sew le sew medhanitu*, which literally means, “human beings are medicines to human beings.” Interestingly, this proverb seems to assume the presence of evil in human society, as implied in the metaphor of medicine, which can only be taken in the context of sicknesses. However, there is a strong sense that the cure comes, not from autonomy or isolation, but from interdependence. This means that human personhood can only be fully practiced when someone can offer him or herself as a cure for others.

How can we evaluate the *sew-le-sew* factor in light of a call and answerability? Certainly, a sense of call is evident here—seeing life as a call to live for others. There also is an evident sense of answerability to family, society, and ultimately, to a higher reality. Yet, if the *sew-le-sew* factor is taken as the grounds for the formulation of the concept of the human person, it also has its drawbacks. The heavy emphasis on communality often comes at the expense of individuality, thereby weakening individual identity as well as individual creativity. It might be helpful to revisit here the community-individual tension in the three paradigms.

The hermeneutic of wax and gold characterized the human person as a battleground of two purportedly opposite realms: the spiritual and material. In order to be on the victorious side, it is deemed that the humans ought to be “disowned” from “this world” by pursuing piety and spirituality. As a result, in this view, there is also little room for developing individuality and daring to be different. The Dergue tapped into the notion of communality of human personhood, when it shrewdly subscribed to the notion of *hebretesebawinet*. This is because the notion
has an appeal to ordinary people as it connects to the already existing indigenous social values. The Dergue also highlighted the importance of labor as a way to self-realization. Labor, however, was understood in a rigidly communal sense. Therefore, besides blatantly denying religiosity as an irreducible human condition, it alienated itself from the culture and the way of life in Ethiopia. The Dergue did not give real room for personal development and unique individuality either.

The hermeneutic of compartmentalization also used a sense of communality, but it limited communality to ethnic circles when it opted to define the human person as *homo ethnicus*—a species that derives its identity from its ethnic origin. Its appreciation of ethnic diversity is commendable; but, true to its nature, the understanding of human person in the hermeneutic of compartmentalization is community oriented in the sense of ethnicity. Its apparent obsession with ethnic plurality, therefore, does not allow the paradigm to create room for individuality. What is lacking in the understanding of the human person in the Three Paradigms, and what the hermeneutic of covenant can provide, is the fact that the human person is a uniquely “answering” being. What do I mean by this? I have maintained, using Geertsema’s framework, that Creation came about as an answer to God’s *promise-command to-be*. Human beings are products of the same divine covenantal ordination. The human person depends on his or her relation to God for his or her truest identity, but humans have also got an additional and unique dimension. Because of the fact that she or he bears the *Imago Dei*, the human person has the unique ability to answer with a sense of responsibility. Hence, it is fitting to define the human person as *homo respondens*—the responding species (Geertsema 2000, p. 61). An understanding of self, as Geertsema rightly argues, does not start with a sudden realization that someone is. Nor is it an act of awareness of oneself in isolation (the first person perspective). Neither does it emerge from the application of what has been learned from others about oneself (the third person perspective). Rather, it emerges by way of responding to someone who genuinely relates to the person in question (2000, pp. 61–62).

This has three implications in terms of creating room for individuality. First, the understanding of the human person as *homo respondens* places humankind in relation to God, which is both personal and communal. This means that while there exists a unique responsibility for each individual, this responsibility is never isolated from the social relationships in which people live. Second, *homo respondens* as derived from the image of God implies that the human person is responsible for created reality and its development. Instead of locking people into
a communal status quo, the hermeneutic of covenant ensures that individual responsibility comes into play when and where the development of created reality is at stake. Third, responding takes place within given structural or creational boundaries and within historical conditions as they are given. Yet, humans have the responsibility, individually and communally, to decide on how to deal with these conditions. The hermeneutic of covenant therefore fosters an environment where concrete individuals emerge with creativity, ingenuity, and with the intention to take their creational potential further.

To sum this up, yes, the human person cannot be fully understood outside relationships, as the sew-le-sew factor emphasizes. Humans live in relationships. They do not submerge in them, however. The perspective of call and answerability means that as much as being responsible to others, one has to be also answerable to the potential that is embedded in oneself. In this way, individuality can be interpreted in such a way that it overcomes individualism or autonomy, but at the same time retains one’s unique identity in pursuit of healthy development.

Society—The Mechachal and Metesaseb Factor

How does the answering nature of Creation, especially, of the human person reflect on an understanding of society? Before discussing indigenous notions—metesaseb and mechachal—I shall discuss two important elements of society in hermeneutic of covenant: historical development and interinstitutional relationship.

My analysis has indicated that there is an aborted hope of development and progress. Instead of building on them, we see the ingenuity that given a birth to Ethiopian civilization in the archives of history. There is a general consensus among the Ethiopian scholars that this potential needs to be unleashed. The following argument is a conceptual framework for the unleashing process. Hermeneutic of covenant, contrary to other paradigms, does not advocate historical development as rapture; neither would it endorse dwelling in the past. It however seeks historical continuation of development by way of hermeneutically transforming existing indigenous values to match the demand of an ever-changing world. This implies, first, a different understanding of Creation. Created reality is not meant to be static, but rather it is meant to develop in such a way that its potential is disclosed. This restless nature of Creation does not sit well with contentment with the past; neither does it mesh with a violent leap that does not account for being rooted in the culture. Created reality is marked by an inner
movement of progressive development. It is during this process that the hidden potential of Creation is gradually disclosed. Culture is the particular dimension of the opening up process that actively involves human persons.

Second, historical development has diverse modal aspects relating to various spheres of society such as economics, politics, and science. A crucial place is always given to the historical or formative aspect that has its core or “the nuclear moment,” as Dooyeweerd calls it, in power, control, and mastery. Power and mastery are used to mold or form a culture. This aspect is not content with the past or fixed pattern. It strives to exceed given patterns and disclose new possibilities. This formative power always seeks new roads to realize form-giving and endless possibilities of different kinds (McIntyre 1985, p. 90).

Two elements are crucially associated to power, control, and mastery as the core of historical development: freedom and responsibility. Freedom is crucial because, as a uniquely human dimension, it enables humans to create or form culture or disclose new possibilities as, for example, in technology. Humans realize new potential by using their freedom to create a new culture by using available material. This is totally different in the animal domain. For instance, a spider spins a web, not out of free will, but out of instinct (nature). Humans have ingenuity, will, and freedom to form materials differently. Yet responsibility assumes human limitation, insufficiency and, therefore, accountability to a higher reality. Responsibility places human formative power within the normative framework of Creation.

Third, the opening process is linked to three norms: differentiation, individualization, and (re)integration. Let me start by briefly describing these norms before relating them to the Ethiopian reality. Differentiation enables the distinction of different social institutions, such as family or clan, school, and business organizations. It does so by allowing each of these communities to reveal their proper inner nature, notwithstanding, “the fact that there are all kinds of interrelations between them” (Dooyeweerd 1960, p. 102). Each of these communities has its own typical historical and cultural spheres whose inner boundaries are determined by the intrinsic nature of the community. Individualization enables the historical task of individual cultural disposition and manifested talent. In other words, in the opening process, the individual makes an important contribution in unpacking the cultural aspect of human society, and in the course of time, in enhancing the cultural development of humankind. As Dooyeweerd fittingly said: “The individuality of cultural leaders and groups assumes
a deepened historical sense” (1960, p. 105). Unlike a primitive society sharply divided into ethnic units, the idea of (re)integration enables the organization of society as a national cultural whole “as a result of differentiation and integration in cultural formation of human society.” Put differently, this does not assume a formation of society on the basis of “natural product of blood and soil,” but on the “values of individual personality in the unfolding process of history” and free development of individual persons (Dooyeweerd 1960, p. 106).

How far has Ethiopia progressed in this aspect? This is a complex question, especially because under the wax and gold paradigm, Ethiopia was a highly traditional society, but also, at some stage, highly sophisticated. Sophistication assumes a very old nation state, employing functioning bureaucratic systems not to mention developing its own civilization. However, the general picture is that in Ethiopia people were still told by elders, clergies, and political leaders which religious tradition to follow, which ethical rules to observe, which political party to support, and so on. On the other hand, analysis (in chapter two) suggests that Ethiopia’s ranking among modernized nations is impressive. This ranking takes account of Ethiopia’s long history as the only nation-state in Africa with a bureaucratic system, its differentiated society, unique civilization, and rich culture, despite the domination of church and state. These realities indicate that there has been progress. What remains tricky, however, is that this progress does not always sufficiently address the three norms mentioned above. Because of the wax and gold worldview, there was no openness for development of the creational potential in its full sense. The norm of individualization was not enhanced, for there was not sufficient room for human creative potential in terms of freedom and responsibility. The norm of differentiation was stifled by limiting the room for different social spheres to develop according to their own nature, and reintegration was frustrated by the dominance of the state connection; again there was little room for individual freedom. This is why Ethiopia needs to reset differentiation, individualization, and reintegration as norms important to historical development. Differentiation occurs when individuals gain freedom. Individualization comes into play when a community allows individuals to realize their talents and potentials. Integration happens when people take new disclosures into their systems and strive to achieve unity in human history.

Now we proceed to our discussion of interinstitutional relationships. Social structure includes the internal principles of social entities such as church, state, school, family, labor unions, and so forth. According to Herman Dooyeweerd, similar to an individuality structure, each societal
structure has a qualifying and a founding function. Besides determining the internal destiny of the particular social entity, the leading function also characterizes the structural principles and guides the internal unfolding process—also called “opening up process”—in which an entity can achieve its ultimate meaning and fulfillment. Each societal relationship gets its identity from an internal structural law. This leading function (according to internal structural law), determines that the state and church, for instance, are what they are. The founding function determines the core individuality (Dooyeweerd 1984, p. 65). It deals with the foundation or typical origin of a social structure. Together the leading and founding function form “the structural type.”

As we discussed earlier, each social sphere has its own sphere of competence, a principle known as “sphere sovereignty.” Each societal structure has its own sphere of competence but this does not mean that societal structures live in complete isolation. For example, though marriage has its own irreducible internal law, the state legalizes marriage. “Encaptic” binding, to use a Dooyeweerdian jargon, brings marriage within the scope of civil law, and in this way creates state-family nexus and interdependence. This does not mean that the state (or other societal spheres) should cross and undermine the sovereignty of marriage. It is essential to preserve the independence of marriage; this principle must be maintained in intersocietal structural relationships.

Let us look at the role of state and the church (because both, at different times, are guilty of blurring the boundaries of societal spheres in Ethiopia). The church has a pistic leading and an historical founding function. Its main agenda in society should be to enhance faith, certitude, and commitment to ultimate reality. It is outside its intrinsic principle for the church to control other spheres of life. This is highly relevant with regard to the EOC, a church that did have the political and economic upper hand over other spheres.

The state has a historical founding function and a juridical leading function. Historical founding function means that the state developed as the result of its monopoly of the “power of the sword.” In a feudal situation, several groups might use armed power to achieve their goals. However, when a state develops, the use of weapons or coercive power becomes its right; without this power, a state cannot function properly. Governmental power, according to Dooyeweerdian thinking, is not held as a patrimonium, private property to be used for private purposes. Instead, the state is a res publica and should use coercive power in the process of organizing and administering justice for all its citizens (Dooyeweerd1984, p. 412).
What is the extent of this coercive power? First, state power should be used to maintain territorial integrity. It should be exerted when the national territory is under threat, for example, by a foreign force. Second, it should be used to break the power of private groups and protect the weakest from (internal) evil. However, the use of power for internal purposes should only be applied when there is a clear interest of justice.

Juridical leading function means the state is a differentiated institutional community qualified by juridical aspect. That does not mean that other institutions do not have their own internal legal sphere, just that they are never qualified by the juridical aspect. Agreed, the role of armed power in the state is also important. However, the state is not qualified by armed power. The qualifying function of the state is juridical and thus it needs the subordination of armed power to civil government to guarantee public order to its citizens (Dooyeweerd 1984, p. 434). The government might carry the sword, but it should not use it to intrude into the internal principles of other societal structures. This line of thinking consistently rejects a state as “all-embracing totality of which family, individuals, associations are just lower and dependent parts” (Spijker 2005, p. 29). The sphere sovereignty principle indicates that all societal structures—the state is no exception—are related in a horizontal fashion. They all have inviolable sovereignty (in their own spheres), and useful tasks to perform (in relation to others) in social reality.

Pulling this section together, first, the hermeneutic of covenant suggested determining the intrinsic principles of societal spheres to realize healthy social relationships between such spheres as the state, labor union, school, and family without violating their internal logic. To do this, I drew on the theory of individuality structure and applied these principles to societal structures. This is of a critical importance in terms of keeping the societal spheres free of intrusion by others. Second, to maintain healthy social relationships, hermeneutic of covenant philosophy applied the theory of *enkapsis*—a societal relationship where one sphere naturally intertwines with the other, and/or willingly permits the other sphere to perform its task in relation to itself. For example, in some contexts, the church legalizes marriage, which originally is the task of the state. The notion of *enkapsis* has especial relevance in the Ethiopian context, not only because Ethiopia needs this notion, but it is also similar to local concepts known as *metesaseb* (reciprocity) and *mechachal* (toleration).

At the social level, *fereha-egziabeher* has produced two sub-concepts: *Mechachal* and *Metesaseb*. *Mechachal* is a term favored by the media-owned
ethno-federalist regime. It denotes tolerating differences in an ethnically and religiously plural society. *Mechachal* is about one’s own social sphere and the willingness to accommodate other social spheres that are different in a cultural or even religious sense. To appreciate this, it is imperative to understand the nature of traditional society. Such a society is hardly tolerant of differences and deviations. Instead, it is a society where communality and similarity are cherished, with changes often being looked at suspiciously. Because of the notion of *mechachal* even within traditional Ethiopian society, this perception is, somehow, different. That does not mean that changes and deviations go unchecked; but once a different society gains its own identity, there is a general tendency to subscribe to *mechachal*. The essence of this concept is that it recognizes the pain involved in allowing plurality. And yet, it sees peaceful coexistence as something worth sacrificing for. The long and peaceful relationship between Islam and Christianity in Ethiopia owes a lot to the concept of *mechachal*.

*Metesaseb* even goes a step further. Unlike *mechachal*, it is not about setting the boundaries of social spheres. Neither is it about tolerating otherness. Rather, it is a concept that motivates people to open up their own social and/or individual boundaries to others. While there is a negative assumption—one being nuisance to the other—underlying toleration, the assumption lying behind *metesaseb* is that of pleasure. But both are important in different contexts. I discuss two old social organizations created by ordinary people and very prevalent in Ethiopia: *Eder* and *Equb*. While the former has a social function, the latter has a financial function. *Eder* is a religiously and politically neutral institution. It is an indigenous “safety net” system, or even an insurance system where families facing crisis, especially the loss of a loved one, can seek immediate help. The contribution includes material, financial, as well as psychological support. Interestingly enough, with the exception of some interference by the EOC, it is one of the indigenous social organizations that experience very little, if any, intrusion from the state.

*Equb* is a financial institution. It is an informal credit facility and works as follows: a group of people collect a certain amount of money together and lend it to a person who is in an immediate need for the purchase of a house, a plot of land, furniture, and so on. This lending is not done on a humanitarian basis. It is done on a contractual basis, where the lender who receives the money will pay back the money in several installments. Both *Eder* and *Equb* do not have particular political or religious agendas. They are simply social institutions addressing different needs in society in such a way that they keep their own
distinct nature, forming a social sphere within boundaries. Yet they bring people together from different ethnic, religious, professional, and political backgrounds. In this way, they provide an illustration of the differentiation and integration that is lacking in ethno-federalist system. The fact that both Eder and Equb function on the basis of metesaseb indicates that the notion of covenant has produced a sense of answerability among ordinary Ethiopians. Social interaction, at this level, is more or less characterized, not only by toleration, but also by a sense of call for reciprocity and acceptance.

The hermeneutic of covenant contends that these are social and cultural currents that need to be tapped into and hermeneutically transformed. In order to understand society, the hermeneutic of covenant starts with recognition of the crucial role of the answering nature of the human person. The unique answering quality of the human person is understood and is set against the background of the integral goodness of Creation. This means that the social outlook of the hermeneutic of covenant is shaped by an intention to uncover the embedded potential in society. Starting with the answering nature of the human person together with the two elements of call and answerability, I want to emphasize the importance of the three fundamental issues that in relation to an understanding of society: differentiation, individualization, and integration. In other words, the social organization as is seen in the hermeneutic of covenant strives to nurture, not hold down, the creational potential by permeating these three fundamental elements.

To develop such an understanding of society the hermeneutic of covenant starts from what is given in the indigenous concepts. In fact, it takes these indigenous concepts not only as signs of social development, but also as indicators of the disclosure of creational potential. When creational potential is released into society and social boundaries are respected, society will evolve from ethnically and tribally based organizations into one in which social differentiation takes place. Other elements will be seen as starting points, and these will show professional, religious, political alliance, and so on. As a result of this, the process of differentiation connected with new forms of integration takes place. As a third element together with differentiation and integration, individualization comes about as well. The development of a wider society needs room for individuals to apply their ingenuity and creativity.

There is yet another element that the hermeneutic of covenant links with indigenous notions. Eder and Equb can be seen as illustrations of the idea of “the house we live together” that I discussed in relation to Sachs: a diverse society builds a common house where everybody feels
at home. There are two benefits in building a “common house.” First, the house will be one. To build a nation it is of the essence to create a society with a common goal.

In their limited way Eder and Equb are able to do this, because they create bonds in the midst of a society that is riddled with suspicion and mistrust, both of the ruling body and of each other. Second, the house bears the marks and identity of each and every group. According to this standpoint, the house should not belong to one ruling establishment, one ethnic, or religious group—a situation that can condemn others to the level of being strangers in their own country. Instead, the standpoint strives to allow every part of society and every group to put their own mark so that they can call this “our house.” It is especially the notion of mechachal that illustrates this acceptance of diversity as it expresses the practice of toleration.

Let me try to draw a conclusion. What does this discussion mean in the light of Ethiopian social and political realities? The notion of mechachal and metasaseb are ideas that characterize Ethiopian society at the grassroots level. In a way, we can say that ordinary Ethiopians use these notions to account for what was earlier characterized by Griffioen as associational, directional, and contextual plurality. The ordinary folks not only want to promote peaceful coexistence among religiously and ethnically diverse groups, but are also willing to create institutional bonds with those who do not belong to their immediate ethnic, professional, or religious groups. This indicates that there were and are signs at the grassroots level of Ethiopian society that relate to the opening up of the creational potential. Even if the degree of the vigor of conceptualization might differ from that in the West, this is connected with the process of differentiation and integration. The hermeneutic of covenant with its emphasis on the rich potential of created reality taps into these indigenous concepts in order to formulate an idea of society that is culturally relevant, but also ready for future disclosure. For that reason, it promotes a healthy development in terms of differentiation, integration, and individualization. At the same time, it emphasizes the importance of a common goal for Ethiopian society as a whole—to support the sense of a basic unity in the midst of the given diversity.

**Concluding Remarks**

In this study, I set out to propose a solution to religion-social change dilemma in Ethiopia. This is because the “old society, new state”
scenario still persists in Ethiopia. Even though religion has a prominent place in shaping Ethiopian political agenda for long time, the last two regimes have successfully relegated it to the private domain. However, albeit in subtle ways, religion influences the quest for social change by being both stifling and encouraging, depending on how it is interpreted and appropriated. Instead of producing a public space that is an “empty shrine,” to use Michael Novak’s words, we came to know that relegation of religion and religious values has made Ethiopians smitten by nostalgia: a condition that could be a curse or a cure. On the other hand, political entrepreneurs are often change driven—an attitude that could be very important. However, there is a clear meaning deficit and a hermeneutical gap on both sides. That is, politicians crave for rapturous and sudden change often using imported philosophy because they think it is fashionable, but also effective in terms of alleviating material need. The religiously conditioned masses often want to take change on their own terms—as a continuation of Ethiopian ingenuity that seemed to have been aborted at some stage—rather than on terms that are imported from abroad. This clearly calls for a hermeneutic that can bring these two polarized understandings of change into some bargain about social change.

I started this study wondering if the enigmatic notion of covenant could provide a perspective for Ethiopian society that is true to its identity and open to the healthy possibilities of the future. There are criteria by which covenant-thinking as a possible mediatory hermeneutic was chosen. The first and foremost criterion is its cultural embeddedness. Its relevance at this level is that it helps to deal with the nostalgic condition of the Ethiopian society. This is because “covenant” in Ethiopia is not a silly colloquial term. In a socially tight-knit society, covenant is about truth-telling and upholding social, ethnic, and family obligations. Unlike in the Western world, the fact that covenant-thinking is anchored in metaphysical assumptions does not mean that people are isolated. Conversely, people are enchanted with it because of its metaphysical foundations. In Ethiopia this means that the obligation to society emanates not only from spatiotemporal reality, such as biological birth, but from the ultimate horizon that surpasses any difference one can imagine.

The second criterion is that it provides a rich ambit to accommodate ethnically and culturally plural society. Some would think the medieval-like Ethiopian political system failed because of employing covenant-thinking. The fact, however, is the opposite. The monarchs failed Ethiopia because they did not use covenant-thinking
appropriately. As I established in this study their use of the notion of covenant was inherently un-covenantal. This is precisely why its socially stratified model failed to capture elements without which covenant cannot be fully understood: the dynamics of reasoned discourse, reciprocity, and acceptance of the “other.” Obsessed with expansion viz., the (in)famous southern march, and exerting unitary identity, they failed to negotiate with the masses to secure their will.

Third, it was a widely used system of knowledge, especially in social and political settings, throughout the world both in fruitful and in not so fruitful ways. Suffice it to mention post-Reformation Europe and the recent memory of South Africa. This might appear to be a weaker criterion because its use elsewhere does not mean that it is readily relevant to Ethiopia. The weakness might seem overwhelming, given the fact covenant-thinking has been misused, for example, in apartheid in South Africa. However, there are parallel lessons that can be learnt from the uses and misuses. The cardinal elements for our reconceptualization of covenant however, come from Ethiopia’s indigenous knowledge systems, such as fereha-egizabeher, mechachal, metesaseb, and so on.

These are the indigenous concepts at the heart of everyday Ethiopian social intercourse. Surprisingly, however, politicians have hardly tapped into them, except, for the notion of mechachal, which recently gets into public discussion after a deadly religious clash in the southwestern part of the country. The best way to foster and nurture such concepts would have been a pre-crisis situation. This is because post-crisis discussion of them, though important, will be laden with biased value judgments.

There is every reason to think that Ethiopia, at this epoch of history, is at the crossroads. The former unitary state has seen its demise. Ethnic and religious borderlines are sharpened. The political leaderships have refused, or failed, to give Ethiopians a common narrative. The present picture is that Ethiopia is a nation of nostalgic, confused, and disconcerted citizens. Its political trajectory can lead this nation in any direction. It is always desirable to hope for the better. In the meantime, however, it is advisable to be realistic. One sign of being realistic is preparation—preparation to avoid the worst and continue the promise. There are glimmers of promises, not necessarily in the government policies or in constitutions, which are full of enchanting hope of freedom and self-determination, but in value system of ordinary citizens.

This therefore is high time that Ethiopian scholars and policy makers collect the jigsaw puzzle of cultural values in each ethnic and cultural constituency and put them together to create an Ethiopian narrative. The process of creating this narrative should use no force, or
manipulations. It should open up a forum to each stakeholder to bring its own unique narrative, and create a concert in which all the stakeholders weave their story together in a coherent way, without risking their uniqueness. While conducting reasoned discourse, constructive criticism (*meqeqaqes*), and setting common goal, Ethiopians have their means of adjudication. It should not necessarily be the Rawlsian conversational constraint with no metaphysical anchorage. But Ethiopians have their own form of “universal moral respect” known as *fereha-egziabeher*—an ethical framework rooted in Ethiopian philosophy of life.
NOTES

One  The Hermeneutic of “Wax and Gold”

1. Knowledge system, here, is taken not as a specific skill or technique of getting things done. It is understood as a philosophical and ideological construct that influences ways of understanding.
2. See Budge, *A History of Ethiopia*, pp. 142–51, for more detailed discussion on pre-Christian religious practices in Abyssinia.
3. While claiming a Christian confession, the church is no stranger to diverse practices of purification, healing, magic, and divination.
4. We continue this discussion in the following subsection, under “Society.”
5. Gadels are a part of the noncanonical (hagiographic) books in which the heroic deeds of the church fathers are crafted with the aim of cementing spiritual values on the lives of the readers. As strange, and even bizarre, as its stories at times may sound, they nevertheless are a part of the important books in the EOC tradition in terms of influencing its worldview and philosophy. It has to be noted that Gadel is the name of books (e.g., Gadel of St. Marry, etc.) as well of a genre. When I discuss the genre I use Gedel (or Gedels), while I use Gadels when I refer to individual books.
7. The Amharic world nefs, literally soul, has its etymological roots in nefas, wind. But, while it is often used to refer to soul as opposed to body, it is also used to refer to the whole person. For example, an expression, “I made one soul happy” infers that someone made a person (with no discrimination between soul and body) happy.
8. See *Synaxarium: The Book of the Saints of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church*, translated by Sir. E. A. Wallis Budge (Garland, TX: Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Debre Meheret St. Michael Church).
9. One of the best examples could be Meropius (both merchant and philosopher by profession) motivating his friend Metrodore, who eventually was killed by natives because of the prevalent Greco–Roman tension with Ethiopia.
11. See the works of Edward Ullendorff, especially his *Ethiopia and the Bible* (1968), for a lengthy discussion on the Ethiopian relationship with the Bible and critical treatment on the contexts in which Ethiopia is mentioned in the Bible. (cf. footnote 20)
12. See my discussion on the first part of this chapter.
13. I address the notion of covenant and its relation to Ethiopia in coming chapters, especially the fourth, in detail.
14. See chapter four for more detailed discussion of these ideas.
15. See the discussion above under “Metaphysics” to see how God’s transcendence is used in the wax and gold paradigm to give a way for a dualistic understanding of reality.
16. Although Plato may not have tried to justify his hierarchical understanding of society on hereditary basis, he advocated strict marriage relations among the Guardians and Auxiliaries to raise and educate children so they would fit their future tasks (Republic, Book 5).
17. This literature was written approximately between 200 and 170 BC by an individual who identifies himself as “Jesus the son of Eleazar, son of Sirach of Jerusalem.” It is apparent that Ben Sirach ran a school known as the “House of Instruction.” While the work was originally written in Hebrew, its prologue shows it was translated into Greek by a grandson of the writer.
18. This trend is clearly exhibited in what is generally called “the wisdom poems”: Chapters 1, 2, and 24.
20. It has to be noted here that some scholars, such as W. C. Trenchard, accuse Ben Sira of being too patriarchal and/or too negative towards women. This accusation derives from Ben Sira’s apparent claim that woman—Eve—is the source of sin. Trenchard’s kind of interpretation of the Book of Sirach, besides ignoring its historical context, also seems to fail to note the positive contribution the book makes to neglected members of contemporary society; Ben Sira’s attitude toward women and slaves are outstanding examples. See The Book of Ben Sira in Modern Research edited by Pancratius Peentjes (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1997) for more discussion on this.
21. Please note, this is not to claim that the EOC worldview is the sole reason for Ethiopia’s economic problems. This study accepts that the reason for the economic problems is far more complicated. However there seems good reason to consider the significant contribution of such an attitude in light of the fact that those students are deliberately instructed to beg and experience hardship as a means of escaping “this world.”
22. For more on this see Tesfaye Gebreab’s “Yegazetegnaw Mastawesha” (A Journalist’s Memoir) (Cape Town: Tesfaye Gebreab, 2009).

**Two The Hermeneutic of Demystification**

1. Literally means “committee”; and the name taken by the Communist regime in Ethiopia.
4. Gudina Tumsa is an exception who briefly showed the promise of the direction in which Ethiopian Protestant churches have grown in terms of addressing social issues using theological concepts.
5. For instance, paying taxes and giving alms to tribal kings, practitioners of witchcraft, and rainmakers on a seasonal and yearly basis is prevalent in, at least, southern Ethiopia. It was customary to come across people who bitterly resented the oppressive aspects of traditional religious ideologies.
6. As noted in chapter one, the term “monism” is not used in contrast to religious cosmology (i.e., Islam, Christianity, and Judaism), as Darwinist tradition puts it. I use the term from a Christian background against the EOC metaphysical conception which tends to picture nature in a dualistic tension between sacred and secular. This notion has already surfaced in...
Zará Yaeqob’s philosophy as “order of creation” and will be further elucidated in following sections on creational order.

7 It is apparent, from the title of his song album, that Dereje was told to remain silent (by someone probably claiming to be neutral or the regime itself). But when his human identity is defined without his object of belief (God), Dereje felt he had to violate the status quo by speaking up or rather singing, about his convictions.


9. See the example of the Maale ethnic group in Donham’s “Revolution and Modernity in Maale: Ethiopia, 1974–1987.”

10. For instance, the only church not closed down by the regime, EECMY embraced members of other denominations in their organization. EECMY also benefited from the spiritual experiences of the Pentecostal churches. As a result, it became customary for a Lutheran church to hold a healing ministry, for instance. By then, many Pentecostal churches were not positive about education—religious or otherwise. However, after a positive interaction with non-Pentecostal churches (EECMY) that did have a favorable attitude to education, few Pentecostal young people were challenged, for instance, to join theological schools.


12. Ibid.

13. Ibid. Luther would not object; his two realms did not mean separation, but distinction: God rules both realms, but with different means and objectives.

14. *Zemecha*, literally meaning campaign, was one of the methods used by the Marxist regime to denounce the old way of thinking and introduce a new philosophy to build a better order based on a new interpretation of reality. Some students seemed really passionate about it, but according to reports, many espoused Marxism before fully understanding what it was about, just as a way of expressing their disenchantment with “stagnant” imperial rule.

15. See Donald Donham’s “Revolution and Modernity in Maale: Ethiopia, 1974–87,” pp. 44–57 for a fascinating study of how student revolutionists changed the course of traditional, religious, and political life in a small southern ethnic group of Maale.

16. Friedrich Engels’s witness is very important not only because he was a part of the movement, but also because he had first-hand knowledge of Marx as a person as well as a thinker.

17. This does not mean that the arrival of Marxism completely eradicated the EOC concept of philosophical anthropology. Still, it provided the political and educated elites with an alternative to understand the human person among other things.

18. See for more detailed discussion on this John W. Hall’s article: “Changing Conceptions of the Modernization of Japan.”

19. Black gives historical precedence to the United Kingdom and France, while the United States and former British Dominions are placed in the second rank. Other European countries belong to the third rank whereas the Latin American countries are put in fourth place, followed by Ethiopia, Russia, and a small group of Middle East and Asian countries (Japan, China, Iran, Turkey, Afghanistan, and Thailand) in fifth rank. Finally, the sixth and seventh ranks are given to the remaining Asian and African countries.


22. The theological viewpoint does not include Marxism, which does not espouse any view of God as an active agent in any sense. The idea pertains only to Protestantism.

23. Taken from his sermon. Kedamo Mechato is a well-known Ethiopian evangelist—the first- or second-generation Protestant converts in the southern part of Ethiopia.
Three  The Hermeneutic of Compartmentalization

1. The complex scholarly interaction between Rorty and Derrida seems a good typology of the complexity of postmodernism. These two scholars seem to agree on major aspects of postmodernism. For instance, they both agree that human thoughts are contingent on various situations and therefore there is no neutral vintage point to adjudicate them. This however is far from claiming that Derrida and Rorty, as fellow postmodernists, would agree on everything. The idea of “metaphysics of presence” is one of the fundamental issues that they would spar about clearly. While Rorty utterly rejects any notion of truth and supported antime physical stances, Derrida argues that “Truth is not a value that one can renounce.” The deconstruction of philosophy does not renounce truth—any more, for that matter, than literature does See John Coker’s article, “Derrida,” in Blackwell Guide to Continental Philosophy (London: Blackwell, 2003).


3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.


8. Many might find Asmarom’s characterization of the Judeo-Christian God is inaccurate at best.


10. For example, Fuga—a clan highly skilled in pottery and carpentry—are considered less human, to the extent that they would not be allowed to be a part of any association.

11. I prefer the term “liberationist thinking” over liberation theology/philosophy partially because the generic nature of the term “thinking” allows me to switch to both religious and political senses of liberation as necessary. Another reason why I leaned toward using liberationist thinking is that liberation theology is seldom construed in relation to Ethiopian sociopolitical reality in the same sense as it is done in Africa or Latin America. That does not mean theology did not play role in the Ethiopian resistance of foreign occupation. In what follows, I try to asses if liberationist thinking is helpful or an obstacle for progress in Ethiopia.

12. The scope of this study does not allow discussion of many other examples, including Sidamo and Ogaden.

13. Temple University is known for promoting black liberation ideology. Black scholars known for their research on African studies, include Molifi Asante, a founder of Black Studies in Temple University, and Lewis Gordon, a specialist in Africana thought, race, and racism.

14. Molifi K. Asante is known for advocating theories of Afrocentricity in transracial, intercultural, and international communication. He holds an Afrocentric view and has described Africa and particularly Egypt, which he interprets as the “land of the blacks,” as the birthplace of civilization.
Notes

16. Ibid. p. 29.
18. This study takes the position that there are fundamental differences between African liberation theology and Latin American liberation theology. For instance, the latter utilizes Marxism as a philosophical category that helps to dialectically balance class struggle. While the former might have tried Marxism at the inception, it does not seem to be entertaining Marxism as a relevant philosophical category anymore, probably because the Marxist tendency of aggressive secularization does not sit well with the deep religiosity in Africa. Another concept that has to be made clear at this step is the notion of “progress.” Here “progress” is not used as something neutral, but to convey the idea of opening up the creational potential. See Bob Goudzwaard’s and van der Vennen’s book Hope in Troubled Times (2007) for a good explanation on the hazards of being obsessed with progress.
20. Lemarchand’s claim is as bold as it is intriguing. His argument, “in Africa, as elsewhere, history is fast catching up with historic policies” (p. 1) is persuasive. However, he does not give a specific context or the date of the reported obliteration of monarchy in Africa before the arrival of the European powers. The date he does give (1960–1970) for the “doom” of two African monarchies (Burundi and Libya) hardly fits into his argument that the African monarchy was being obliterated from the map even before the Europeans heard of them. Possibly Lemarchand is alluding to another unspecified date.

Four Toward a New Hermeneutic of Covenant

1. This analysis was taken from Seyla Benhabib’s analysis of a condensed summary of The Theory of Communicative Action.
2. Philosophical justification is an argument for social contract on the basis of philosophical thinking, without necessarily relying on religious and cultural predispositions.
3. Note that “strangers” here are not necessarily refugees or a modern equivalent of asylum seekers. Jewish scholars consider every human society is a “stranger.” Novak argues that originality is a fallacy of “nativists.” For that matter, he argues, even Aboriginal people must have been strangers—they must have come from somewhere else. On the other hand, universally shared sense of estrangement should trigger the creation of a diverse but coherent society.
4. This idea can also be connected with the notion of contextual plurality: people with different cultural background not only tolerate each other (mechachal) but they actually take responsibility for one another (metatsaseb).


Bibliography


Bibliography


Bibliography


Bibliography


Bibliography


Astar, 18
Athanasius the Great, 9, 21
atheism, xix, 68, 80, 88, 168
Athens, 16
See also Greek culture
ATR, See African Traditional Religions
Atsebeha, 20
Augustine of Hippo, 169
Axum, 4–5, 39, 143
ayana (spirit), 98
azmari (local or traditional singer), 43, 144

Bacchus, 17
Baher, 18
Bahru, Zewde, 48, 68, 70–1, 96
Bale-Qene (poet), 2
Baptism, 19, 21, 51
be-chewanet (in a good mannered way), 173
Bediako, Kwame, 111
bela-lebeleha (let’s reason), 158
Ben Sir, 32–5
Ben Sirach, 188n17
Benhabib, Seyla, 153–5, 191n1
Betselota-Michael, 10
Bhaduri, Amit, 69
Bible, xvi, 15, 18, 23, 26, 60, 88, 187n11
Black, Cyril E., 71–2, 189n19
Black Studies, 190n13
Blattner, William, xx
Booyaamanna Hadiyya, 103
boustrophedonic system, 18
Braudel, Ulrich, 103
Brissett, Wilson, 81
Bruce, James, 40–1
Budge, Sir William, 3–5
Bulcha, Mekuria, 116
Burrow, Rufus, 114–15
Burundi, 191n20
Butler, Christopher, 93

Calvinism, 146, 150–1
Candace, Queen of Ethiopia, 19, 21
Catholicism, xvi, 49, 148, 150
Cerulli, Enrico, 9, 98
Cesaire, Aime, 113
Chabal, Patrick, 118
Chalcedon, Council of, 23
Choudhry, Sujit, 119
“Christian Island,” 106–7
Christianity, xv–xvi, 3, 6, 9–10, 13–24, 30, 40–1, 50–1, 54–62, 73, 93, 98, 103, 106–7, 117, 123–7, 143, 149, 161, 168, 181, 188n6
Christology, 23
The Church of Ethiopia (1970) (Samuel), 6
Clapham, Christopher, 61, 78
coexistence, peaceful, x, 27, 39, 68, 145, 160, 181, 183
Communion, 21, 25–6
Communism, 64, 67, 69, 79
The Communist Manifesto, 64, 77
compartmentalization, 91–118, 131, 167, 175
and the concept of time, 127–9
and Ethiopian statehood, 104–7
and ethnic federalism, 91, 118–21
and ethnicity, 104–7
and identity politics, 91
and liberationist thinking, 108–18, 121–7
See also liberationist thinking
and metaphysics, 95–100
and philosophical anthropology, 100–3
and postmodernism, 92–5, 118–30
social practices of, 130–3
Cone, James, 115
correspondence (Ethiopian), 92, 101–2, 105, 108, 120, 135, 156, 185
Coptic, 13
Corson, David, 111
cosmology, 28–30, 52–3, 62
covenant
“answerability,” See covenant
“answerability” argument for, See covenant argument and centralization, 12–16
hermeneutic of, See covenant, hermeneutic of
and intersubjectivity, 163–7
participatory, 163–7
and political power and material reality, 35–7
and surplus history, 26–8
thinking, and mixed legacies, xvi–xviii
covenant, hermeneutic of, 137–86
and “answerability,” 167–83
argument for, 138–52
See also covenant argument
characterized, 167–71
and covenantalism, xix, 152–67
and metesaseb and mechachal, 176–83
and “order,” 171–4
and public space, 152–67
and sew-le-sew factor, 174–6
and social contract, 159–67
and society, 176–83
covenant “answerability,” 167–83
characterized, 167–71
and metaphysics, 171–4
and philosophical anthropology, 174–6
and society, 176–83
covenant argument, 138–52
and concept, 141–5
and history, 145–52
and memory, 138–41
covenantal centralization, 12–16
covenantalism, xix, 152–67
and public space, 153–9
Crang, Mike, 128
Creation, 6–7, 30, 32–3, 37–8, 53–4, 56–7, 83, 94–6, 98, 100–1, 103, 145–9, 151–2, 171–3, 175–8, 182–3
order of, 94, 100, 145–9, 151–2, 171–2
potential, 177–8, 182–3
self-creation, 94–5, 101, 103
Crucifixion of Christ, 19
Cuba, 48
Cushitic ethnicity, 116
Cyril of Alexandria, 13
dagna (local king, traditional chair, judge), 58, 158
Daloz, Jean-Pascal, 118
Daqqa Estefanos, 149
“dark continent,” 110, 128
Darwin, Charles, 56, 61, 63, 188n6, 199n6
David, King, 25, 35–6
Davis, Fred, 139
Dawit, Emperor, 150
Debra, Samuel, 10
debterras (cantors), 25
Dejene Aredo, 132
Demiurge, 28–30, 146
democracy, 42, 87, 99, 101, 118, 123, 133, 157, 159–63
demystification, 45–89, 91, 95–6, 100, 105, 107, 130
institutional agents of, See the Dergue; Protestantism
and modernization, 69–84
and public space, 84–8
as a “surprise leap,” 46–53
and worldview, 53–69
demystification worldview, 53–69
and Ethiopian Marxism, 61–9
and Ethiopian Protestantism, 53–61
Denzin, Norman K., 95
the Dergue, xv, 27, 45–9, 54, 58, 61–70, 78–81, 84–8, 95, 97, 101, 104, 107, 116, 118, 121, 130–1, 133, 153, 158, 171, 174–5
as Ethiopian Marxism, 61–9
as an “explosive” modernizer, 46–9
Derrida, 93–4, 190n1
Desalegn Rahmato, 68
Descartes, Rene, 93, 145–6
dialogical pluralism, xxi
Diodorus of Sicily, 17
Djan Daraba, See Ethiopian Eunuch
Donham, Donald, 65–8
Dooyeweerd, Herman, 147, 151, 177–80
dualism, 3–9, 11–12, 17, 23, 28–45, 52–3, 55, 69, 75–6, 89, 146–7, 167–8
Greek, 11, 23, 28, 33, 43, 147
and monism, 3–9, 28–39
and mystery, 45
philosophical, 28–31
Platonic, 17, 28–32, 38, 146
and social practices, 39–43
dualism-monism, 3–9, 28–39
Durkheim, Emile, 95
Ecclesiasticus, Book of, See Sirach, Book of
der (intervention in times of crisis), 132, 181–3
EECMY, See Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus
Egypt, 23, 47, 190n14
Eide, Oyvind, 51
The Election of Israel (1995) (Novak), 164
Ellis, Stephen, xi
enat ager (motherland), 58
enda taíamer (place of miracle), 26
Engels, Friedrich, 62–4, 189n16

enjera (Ethiopian pancake), 2

Enkapsis, 180

EOC, See Ethiopian Orthodox Church

EPRDF, See Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front

EPRP, See Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Party

Equb, 181–3

Erickson, Erick, 106

Eritrea, 20, 116

Estefanos, 149–52, 157

Estephanites, 150–2, 171

Ethiopiawinet (Ethiopian-ness), xvii, 97, 131, 141

Ethiopian constitution, 92, 101–2, 105, 108, 120, 135, 156, 185

Ethiopian diaspora, 117–18

Ethiopian Eunuch, 19, 21

Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY), xiii, 49, 60, 189n10

Ethiopian independence, xvii, 65–6, 69, 72, 76, 102, 142

Ethiopian Marxism, 61–9

See also Dergue

Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC), ix–x, xiii, xviii, 2–8, 22–5, 30–5, 47, 49–55, 60, 62, 69, 74, 77, 107, 144, 147–8, 179, 181, 187n5, 188n21, 189n16

as tevahiido (“made one”), 23

Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), xiii, xv, 27, 91–2, 96–7, 101–2, 105, 107–8, 116, 118–21, 131–4, 144, 153, 158–9, 167

Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Party (EPRP), xiii, 48

Ethiopian Protestantism, 53–61, 82–4

See also Protestantism

Ethiopian statehood, and ethnicity, 13, 104–7, 119, 131, 135

Ethiopiansness (Ethiopiawinet), xvii, 131

ethic federalism, 104–7, 119, 131, 135, 190n10

and Ethiopian statehood, 104–7

and “ethnicism,” 79

and federalism, See ethnic federalism

and “hegemonization” policy, 104

and hierarchy, 85

and marginalized pockets, 91

See also marginalization

and metaphysics, 96

and minorities (anasa), 59, 67, 96, 105, 116–19, 157

and politics and conflict, 16

and statehood, 104–7, 119, 131, 135

“ethnic hegemonization” policy, 104

“ethnicism,” 79

Ethiopia Tekdem (Ethiopia First!), 47, 69, 86

Eurocentrism, 111–12

Eve, 188n20

ex nihilo Creation, 28, 54, 63

Ezana, 20–1

Fanon, Frantz, 110

Fasilades, castles of, 39

fear of God (fereha-egziabeher), x, 96, 145, 167, 173, 180, 185–6

Fekade Azeze, 86–7

Fenton, Steve, 131–2

fereha-egziabeher, See fear of God

Ferenc, Aleksander, 150

Feyissa, Dereje, 120

Fietha Negest, 143

Finke, Roger, 106

Fiteha Negest, 15

Freudian, Sigmund, 139

Freydian, Sigmund, 139

Frumentius, 20–3, 26, 111

Frumentius Lecture (Bediako), 111

Fuga clan, 190n10

Fukuyama, Francis, 101

Gada system, 92, 97–100, 107, 190n7

Gadel (heroism), 9–12, 187n5

“garrison socialism,” 78

Gashaw, Solomon, 105–6, 120

Ge’ez, 9, 18, 23, 149

gebbar (peasants), 15

Gebre–Hana, Aleka, 2

Gebre Heywet Baykedagn, 66, 72, 74–7

Geertsema, H. G., x, 172, 175
Gemechu Megerssa, 116
genealogical method, 94
Gerard, Albert, 3, 4, 130
The German Ideology (Marx), 63
Gerstenschlager, Burke, xi
Getachew Heile, 52
Gordon, Lewis, 190n13
Gordon, Neve, 112
Gospel, 51, 110
Goudzwaard, Bob, 96, 190n6, 191n18
Govert Buijs, x
“Greater Ethiopia,” 104, 134
Greco-Roman culture, 17–18, 187n9
Gregory of Nyssa, 13
Gregson, Ian, 92
Griffioen, Sander, x, 156, 169, 171, 183
Grim, Brain, 106
Habermas, Jürgen, 156–8, 168–70
Haddour, Azzedine, 110
Hadiya, x, 99, 152
Hadiyya clans, 99, 103
Haggai Erlich, 144
Haimanot Abaw (religious fathers), 95
Hamner, Robert D., 112
Harvard University, 98, 113
hebretesebawinet (new politico-philosophical concept), 61, 67–9, 118, 121, 174
Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich, 93, 109–10, 115, 170
Heidegger, Martin, xx
Hercules, 17
hermeneutics of
compartmentalization, 91–135
See also compartmentalization
covenant, 137–86
See also covenant
demystification, 45–89
See also demystification
“wax and gold,” 1–44
See also wax and gold

The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy
(Tsenay), 116
Heyling, Peter, 49
hibretesebawinet (“equality of man”), 131
hierarchy, 29–31, 34–5, 39, 44–6, 48, 53, 57–8, 67–8, 80, 85, 146–8, 150, 171–3, 188n16
Hintersteiner, Norbert, 113
Hogan, Patrick, 112
Hogue, Lawrence, 112
Holy Mysteries, 26
The Home We Build Together (2007) (Sacks), 164
Homer, 17
homo economicus, 103
homo ethnicus, 100–3, 134, 175
homo respondens, 175
Horn of Africa, 47
Hoxha, Enver, 101
as battleground, 9–12
and Platonic dualism, 29
Hume, Nathan, 119
Hutcheon, Linda, 92
Hutchinson, Fred, 94–5
“I-ness,” 160–3
ICG, See International Crisis Group
Iliad, 17
Imago Dei, 56–7, 103, 175
imperialism, 9–10, 16, 38, 47–8, 60–1, 66–7, 89, 96–7, 104, 115–17, 150, 189n14
India, 20
Institute of Reformational Theological Training, xi
integrality, philosophy of, 32–5
International Crisis Group (ICG), xiii, 120
intersubjectivity, 145, 152, 156, 163–7, 169, 174
“intimacy,” and praising, xviii–xix
iqub (financial prudence), 132
Irele, Abiola, 113
Index

214

Irenaeus of Lyons, 19
Isaiah, 36
Islam, 19, 50, 107, 123, 171, 181, 188n6
Ismagilova, Roza, 104, 121
Israel, 5, 12, 14, 19, 24–6, 32, 35–6, 143, 163–4
Italy, 51, 72–4, 76, 104, 125–6
Jagtspeolfonds, x
Jalata, Asafa, 117
James H. Cone and Black Liberation Theology (1994) (Burrow), 114
Japan, 71, 74–6
Jeremiah, 36
Jerusalem, 19, 25
See also Hebraic tradition
Jesus Christ, 19–21, 23, 26, 35, 51, 53, 56, 59, 61
Jewish culture, 4, 11, 12, 19, 23–8, 32–3, 35, 38–9, 43, 160–5, 168, 170, 191n3
and covenant, 26–8
and diaspora, 161
and Hebraic monism, 11, 12, 28, 38–9, 43
and Hebraic tradition, 23–8
and mysticism, 170
and Old Testament, 24–6
and scholars, 191n3
Jewish Diaspora, 161
Jeyifo, Biodun, 173
Jones, Branwen G., 109–10
Judaism, xvi, 4–6, 19, 22, 32–5, 53, 73, 160–4, 168, 170
Kamenju, Grant, 112
Kampen Theological University, xi
Kant, Immanuel, 93, 155
Kaplan, Steven, 106
Kaylan Connally, xi
Kebede, Dereje, 56–7, 189n7
Kebre Negest (Glory of Kings) (KN), xiii, 12–13, 16, 24, 26–7, 67, 73, 143
Kedamo Mechato, 89
Kedash (clergy), 15
Kee, Alistair, 124
Kenya, 116, 122, 143
Kikamba culture, 128
Kikuyu culture, 128
Kine Mahlet, 25
Kinfe, Abraham, 118
Kissi, Edward, 69
KN, See Kebre Negest
Korten, David, 173
Korten, Frances, 173
Kremlin, 46, 48
La’akuto Le’ab, 12
Lalibela, 12, 39
Laremont, Ricardo, 111
Latin American liberation theology, 124, 191n18
Le Dueur, James D., 112
Lechte, John, 96
Legesse, Asmarom, 98, 190n7,8
Lemarchand, René, 123, 191n20
Leninism, 47–8, 62
Levine, Donald, xii, 2, 7, 13, 17, 40–2, 51, 66, 85, 87, 126, 130
Levites, 21, 36
Lévy-Bruhl, Lucien, 109
liberationist thinking, 91, 108–18, 121–7, 190n11
as cotextualized, 108–18
and social change, 121–7
Libya, 191n20
Lichtenstein, Aharon, 163–4
London School of Economics, 114
Ludolphus, Job, 19
Lytard, Jean-Francois, 93
Maale, 189n9,15
Mahrem, 18
Makeda, See Queen of Sheba
Makumba, Maurice M., 109
Manna, 103
“manifest history,” xvi
Marcus, Harold G., 48
marginalization, 59, 83, 91, 100, 126, 134, 143, 158, 166
and “marginalized people groups,” 91
Marian, Mesfin Wolde, 104
Markakis, John, xv, 78
Martin Heidegger, xx
Marx, Karl, 62–4, 93, 95, 189n16
Marxism, xv, 45–70, 77–81, 83–4, 86, 88–9, 93, 95–7, 100–1, 103, 105, 107, 118, 130, 134, 170, 189n14,17,22, 191n18
Ethiopian, 45, 61–9, 83
See also the Dergue
Novak, David, 160–4, 168, 184, 191n3
Novak, Michael, 184
Nuer, 120
Nyerere, Julius, 68, 114, 122

*odaa* (sycamore), 99
Oduyoye, Mercy, 173
Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), xiii, 120
Old Testament (OT), xiii, 6, 13, 23–6, 35, 122, 127
and covenant, 24–6
Onomatologica Medica, 139
“ontological approach,” xix–xx
Origen, 13, 21
Oromiya, 107
Oromo, 92, 97–100, 107, 116, 121, 158, 190n7
Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), xiii, 99–100, 107, 116, 120
Orthodox Christianity, xvi
“other,” 117, 121–2

Pankhurst, Richard, 13, 17–18
participatory covenant, 163–7
paternalism, 110–11
patriarchy, 5, 188n20
Paulos Milkias, 104–5
Peentjes, Pancratius, 188n20
Pentecostal churches, 189n10
Persia, 20
Persian Gulf, 47
phenomenology, xx, 161
Phillips, James A., 47
philosophical anthropology, 1, 9–12, 29, 32, 53, 55, 57, 61, 65, 92, 100–3, 167–8, 174–6
and covenant “answerability,” 174–6
and homo-ethnicus, 100–3
and human person as battleground, 9–12
and *sew-le-sew* factor, 167, 174–6
philosophical dualism, 28–31
Pierce, C.S., 169
Plato, 11, 17, 21, 28–32, 37–9, 41, 146–7, 188n16
Platonic dualism, 17, 28–32, 37–9, 41, 146
and cosmology, 28–9
and social practices, 130–3

and the human person, 29
and society, 29–30
and wax and gold paradigm, 30–1
pluralism, xxi, 7, 58, 60, 102, 108, 112, 119, 155, 161, 166–7, 175, 181, 183, 191n4
poetry, See *qene*
Political Theory of Liberation Theology (1989)
(Pottenger), 124
Poluha, Eva, 129
Popper, Karl, 30
The Postmodern Condition (1979) (Lyotard), 93
postmodernism, 91–5, 97, 100–1, 103, 108, 118, 121–3, 130, 134, 169, 190n1
Pottenger, John R., 124
Praeg, Bertus, 133
Prokopczyk, Czeslaw, 110
Protestantism, xvi, 49–61, 82–4, 88, 103, 170
Ethiopian, 53–61, 82–4
and modernization, 82–4
as reluctant modernizer, xvi, 45, 49–53
public space, 39–43, 62, 84–8, 130–3, 152–67, 171, 173, 184
and ambiguity, 39–43
conceptualizing, 153–9
controlled, 84–8
and covenantalism, 152–67
divided, 130–3
negotiating, 152–67
and social contract, 84–8
and social practices, 130–3
Puritanism, 150
Qale Heywet, 49
Qedesta Qedussan (Holy of Holies), 25
*Qene* (poetic tradition), 2, 39–40, 42–3
*Qine Mahlet*, 26
Queen of Sheba, xx
Qur’an, 13

race, 110–13, 190n13
radicalism, xix, 57, 67, 79–80, 127, 140
Radicalism and Social Dislocation in Ethiopia (2008) (Messay), 140
Rahman, Muhammad, 69
Raulfs, John, 155–6, 159, 186
reconciliation, x, 107, 120, 133, 145, 169
Red Terror, 47, 158
Republic (Plato), 29
Ricoeur, Paul, 138–9
INDEX

Ritivoi, Andreea, 139–40, 153
Rorty, Richard, 93–5, 190n1
Roth, Michael, 140
Russia, See Soviet Union

Sabbath, 6
Sacks, Jonathan, 160, 164–7
sacrifice, 15, 17, 68, 73, 100, 128–9
Saiazana, 20–1
St. John’s College, 52
St. Mark, 13
St. Paul Theological College, 39
St. Philip, 21
St. Stephen’s church, 39
Samuel, V.C., 6
scientific materialism, 62, 68, 96
Second Temple Period, 32
secularism, 8, 16, 25, 27, 33, 46, 49, 57–8, 60, 67–8, 70–1, 76, 80, 96, 101, 107, 116, 142, 161, 168–9, 188n6, 191n18
See also demystification
sega (flesh), 11
Selassie, Aba Gebre, 39
Selassie, Brahana, 3–5, 21
Selassie, Haile, 14, 46–7, 50, 67, 72, 78–80, 104
self-governance, 119–21
sem-ena-werq, See wax and gold
semayawi zeginet (heavenly citizenship), 58–60, 83
Semitic, 6, 18, 116, 126
Serving In Missions (SIM), xiii, 49
dev-sew factor (interdependence), 167, 174–6
dev sew-yaderegew sera new (production defines humankind), 100–1
Sheba, Queen of, xx, 4, 5, 8, 13–14, 26, 73
Shenk, Calvin, 21–6
shimagilewos (traditional elders), 133
shimagilewoch (traditional elders), 58
Shoa Oromo, 98
sick society, 78–9
SIM, See Serving In Missions
Slite, 107
Simeon, Bereket, 43, 144
Sinaxarium, 9
Sirach, Book of, 32–4, 188n20
Sisai Ibssa, 99
slavery, 30, 34, 51, 54, 148
social contract, and covenant, 155, 159–67 and “I-ness,” 160–3
social mobility, lack of, 45
social practices, and public space, 84–8, 130–3
social sickness, See sick society
socialism, 47–8, 61, 67–9, 78, 118, 160, 162
society and covenantal centralization, 12–16 and mechachal and meteseb factor, 176–84 and Plato, 29–30
“sick,” 78–9 and “surplus meaning,” 27
Sofya, Queen, 20
Solomon, King, 4, 5, 14–16, 26, 35, 73
Solomonic dynasty, ix, xvi–xviii, 31, 35, 38, 67, 80
Somali, 107, 121, 158
South Africa, xvii, 116, 126, 133, 185 and apartheid, xvii, 116, 185
Southern Ethiopia, 54, 102, 120, 129, 188n5
Soviet Union, 46–8, 133
sphere sovereignty, 150–1, 179–80
Stanley, Henry Morton, 110
“strangers,” 191n3
Structural Transformation of Public Sphere (1989) (Habermas), 156
Sudan, 47
Sudan Interior Mission, See Serving In Missions
Sumner, Claude, 145–6, 189n6
Surma, 102–3
surplus history, 24, 26–8, 35, 43, 135, 137–8, 141, 144–5, 166
Suseneyos, King, 49, 148
Swedish Evangelical Missions, 49
Tabot, See Ark of the Covenant
Tabot tekele (planted a Tabot), 25
Taylor, Charles, 80
togadlo (battle), 10
tekiash (soldier), 15
Temple University, 117, 190n13
Teodros Kiros, 146, 148–9
ter Haar, Gerrie, 123
Tewodros, 16, 78
tezeta, See nostalgia
Theory of Justice (1971) (Rawls), 155
“Third World,” 70, 113
Index

Tibebe, 50, 60–1, 83, 147
Tibebu, Teshale, 117, 125
Tiglachen (2011) (Mengistu), 85
Tigray ethnic group, 18, 133
Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF), xiii, 132–3
Tigrean, 13, 118, 121
Tigrigna, 18
Timaeus, 29
time, and compartmentalization, 127–9
Tipps, Dean C., 70–1
Tobbya, 73
toleration, x, 27, 39, 167, 169, 176–83
Torah, 20, 32, 35–6, 163
traditional religions, xvi, 6, 50–4, 88, 99–100, 108, 122–4, 171

Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile (1790) (Bruce), 40–1
Trenchard, W. C., 188n20
tribalism, 100, 108, 112, 119, 122–4, 134, 182, 188n5
Tsenay Serequeberhan, 116
tser-Mariam (anti-Mary), 152
Tumsa, Gudina, 51, 60–1, 188n4
Tyronnus, Rufinus, 20

Ullendorff, Edward, 3, 5–6, 13, 24, 187n11
Unna, 123–4
Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 102
universalism, 96, 107–8, 110, 112, 115, 124
University of Edinburgh, 114
University of Pennsylvania, 114
University Student’s Union of Addis Ababa (USUAA), xiii, 48
US Constitution, 102
USUAA, See University Student’s Union of Addis Ababa
utopia, and Ethiopia, 77–82
uuma (the nature), 98

Van der Beken, Christophe, 104–6
Van der Lugt, Ben, xi

Van der Vennen, Mark, 190n6, 191n18
Vestal, Theodore, 101, 118
Victorian explorers, 128

Wagag, 10
Watson, Stephen H., xix
wax and gold (sem-enaweng), xx, 1–44, 77, 82, 84–8, 95–7, 101, 107, 130–1, 137, 143–4, 174, 178, 187n1
and Athens and Jerusalem, 16–28
and covenantal centralization, 12–16
defined, 1–16
as knowledge system, 3, 187n1
as literary system, 1–3
metaphysics of, 3–9
See also wax and gold metaphysics
and paradigm, 1–3
and philosophical anthropology, 9–12
and philosophy and politics, 28–39
See also wax and gold philosophy and politics
and Platonic dualism, 30–1
and purification, 1–3
and social practices, 39–43
and society, 12–16
sources of, 16–28
See also wax and gold sources
worldview, 1–16
wax and gold metaphysics, 3–9
and dualism, but monism, 7–9
and God and the world, 6–7
and monotheism, 3–6
wax and gold philosophy and politics, 28–39
and covenantal monism, 32–7
implications of the combination, 37–9
and philosophical dualism, 28–31
wax and gold sources, 17–28
and Alexandrian tradition, 19–23
and Christianity, 19–23
and the Greeks, 17–23
and Hebraic thinking, 23–8
and Pre-Christian Greek connection, 17–19
Wodak, Ruth, 111
Wolterstorff, Nicholas, xxi
World War II, 93
Index

The Wretched of the Earth (1967) (Fanon), 110–11

Yaqob, Zará, 65, 88, 145–9, 157, 171–2, 188n6

Yahweh, 4–5

Yaibike Igzi, 13

Yale University, x–xi

ye gel adagne (personal savior), 56

Yemharena Kristos, 12

yersen iddel beras mewessen, eske megentel (self-determination up to cessation), 101–2, 105, 107, 118, 120

Yesehaq, Archbishop, 3–5, 13, 16, 19

Yesus Mana (Jesus’ ethnic group), 103

Yinger, John, 106

Yohannes, Okbazghi, 81

Yohannes, Samuel W., 9–12

Young, Crawford, 106

Zagwe Dynasty, 13, 144

Zainaba, 4

Zedingle, 49

Zemecha (“campaign”), 62, 189n14

Zenawi, Meles, 43, 101, 105

Zenebe Feleke, 67

Zimbabwe, 122

Zion/Zionism, 24, 143–4