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The Politics of Metanoia
Towards a Post-Nationalistic Political Theology in Ethiopia
Introduction

Ethiopia in Academic Discourse

Suppose that one day, after a nuclear war, an intergalactic historian lands on a now dead planet in order to enquire into the cause of the remote little catastrophe which the sensors of this galaxy have recorded. He or she – I refrain from speculating on the problem of extraterrestrial physiological reproduction – consults the terrestrial librarian and archives which have been preserved, because the technology of the mature nuclear weaponry has been designed to destroy people rather than property. Our observant, after source study, will conclude that the last two centuries of human history of planet Earth are incomprehensible without some understanding of the term ‘nation’ and the vocabulary derived from it.¹

Taking a cue from this passage by Eric Hobsbawm, we recognize that this category called the ‘nation’, which remains significant to understand human action and suffering, is not a naturally given or a self-evident reality. Indeed, it is difficult to offer a priori definition of what a nation constitutes. In this regard, the aid of the dictionary is of no avail since the nation is not a semantic phenomenon but rather a modern political concept that is best understood in particular political and social formations. Owing to such a fact, then, the nation (being historically and locally rooted) can only be properly understood a posteriori.² Consequently, any inquiry relating to the nation – such as this one – must draw

² Scholars such as Hobsbawm have well argued that nations, as natural or God-given way of classifying people and determining their destiny, are historical constructs with an element of social engineering and are, of course, ideological processes. Thus, nationalism comes before nations (not vice versa). Following Ernest Gellner, the term ‘nationalism’ can be understood as ‘primarily a principle which holds that the political and national unit should be congruent.’ See Ernest Gellner, Nations and Nationalism: New Perspectives on the Past (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1983), 1. For a different view, however, cf. John Armstrong, Nations before Nationalism (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982).
attention to local, and modern, historical processes and their discourses. This study examines the case of Ethiopia.\(^3\)

Although the name ‘Ethiopia’ evokes several images, Carlo Conti Rossini’s illustrious cliché *è un museo di popoli* (a museum of people) best describes Ethiopia, which is home for diverse people groups, anthropologically.\(^3\) When Conti Rossini coined this aphorism during the early years of the past century, Ethiopia was already a modern empire-state heading towards centralisation. At least two aspects are evident, here: Ethiopia as a bounded territorial state and Ethiopia as a population state composed of diverse groups.

Three historical conjunctures are important to understand the territorial construction of the modern empire-state. First, the centralisation of parcellised sovereignties within the fragmented Christian Abyssinian kingdom located in the central and northern highlands of Ethiopia including parts of present day Eritrea during the 19\(^{th}\) century a period referred to as the *Zamana Masafent* (Era of the Princes) under emperor (*Atse*) Tewodros II; second, the conquests and expansions to the regions south of the Abyssinian kingdom – a process locally understood as *agar maqnat*, which implies cultivation and a Christianising or civilizing mission, under *Atse* Menelik of Shawa (present day central Ethiopia);\(^5\)

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3 Geographically, the country is located in the north-eastern part of Africa commonly known as the Horn of Africa and it borders Djibouti and Somalia in the east, Kenya in the south, Sudan and South Sudan in the west and south-west and Eritrea in the north. Covering an area of 1,112,000 square kilometers (472,000 sq. miles), which is almost the size of France and Spain combined, Ethiopia has varied topography and climate. Demographically, it has the second largest population in Africa: the population projection for 2014 (based on the 2007 census, 73,750,932) is 87,952,991. See Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia Central Statistical Agency, “Population Projection of Ethiopia for All Regions at Wereda Level from 2014-2017,” n.p. Accessed 20 January 2014, http://www.csa.gov.et/


and third, the scrimmage of interests and treaties between European colonisers such as Britain, France and Italy and Ethiopian rulers.

Despite the divergent interpretations given to these historical conjunctures (which we will see later), the historical agency of these conjunctures have led to greater diversity of people groups subjected to a common law within a single polity: Ethiopia. Due to such processes, present day Ethiopia is composed of diverse ethnic, linguistic and religious groups: Oromo, Amhara, Tigre, Sidama, Gurage, Wolaytta, Hadiyya, Afar, Gamo, Gedeo, Somali, and others. Over eighty languages are spoken: Amarigna (Amharic) is the official language; Oromiffa and Tigrigna are official regional languages; and other languages such as Somali, Sidama, Wolaytta, Gurage, Afar, Hadiyya, Gamo, and foreign languages such as English (official) and Arabic are also spoken, taught in schools and serve as working languages. Ethiopia is also home for various religions: Orthodox, Muslim, Protestant, traditional, Catholic, other.

In view of such diversity, how do we understand Conti Rossini’s aphorism – a museum of people – today? Does this imply that Ethiopia contained the diverse groups ‘side by side’ as closed self-contained and self-sufficient groups, or has Ethiopia been a ‘melting pot’ – a sphere of assimilation? This is not only an academic question but one that also has strong practical or political implications. Under successive regimes, the management of the diverse population has taken different routes. The incumbent government (1991-present) claims to have taken a radical leap from the unitary centralist political culture of previous regimes that are considered to have misrecognised this diversity: the modernising autocracy of Haile-Selassie (1916/1930-74) and the military socialist regime (1974-1991).

The current government ‘has adopted what some might see as a peculiarly anthropological approach to state-building, recalling Conti Rossini’s famous aphorism’ implying a re-imagining of Ethiopia as an ‘assemblage of distinct ethnicities’ – ethnic-federalism. However, how this diversity should be

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6 For population projection at region level, see Central Statistical Agency, “Population Projection of Ethiopia.”
7 Based on Census 2007, Orthodox (43.5%), Muslim (33.9%), Protestant (18.6%), traditional (2.6%), Catholic (0.7%), other (0.7%); cf. Central Statistical Agency, “Population and Housing Census Report-Country – 2007,” p. 109, Accessed 12 January 2012, http://www.csa.gov.et/
understood and recognised is still unclear and an issue of contest in Ethiopia. People groups who once claimed to be Ethiopians are no longer identifying themselves as such, and even people groups who are 'being' or becoming Ethiopian do so in ways different from past times. Indeed, embarking on such a study that relates to the 'nation' places one at the crossroads of various theoretical routes leading to different ways of understanding this abstract entity named 'the modern Janus' by Tom Nairn. No less ambivalent is the subject of 'ethnicity' with a 'chameleon-like capacity', as Katsuyoshi Fukui and John Markakis have rightly described it.

Underlying the political discourse on Ethiopian nationhood are contending intellectual trends. Over the past century, intellectual currents have emerged whose role in shaping the discourse of nationhood in Ethiopia has been significant. In their methodological presuppositions and their disciplinary location, these academic trends are diverse as well as divergent. If I may employ typological categorisation for heuristic purposes, they can be classified into two major trends: the functionalist paradigm or the integration model, and the instrumentalist paradigm or the conflict model. The former paradigm, which is largely informed by structural functionalism and social evolutionary theories,

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10 Here, we can think of events such as the radicalisation of the so-called the Ethiopian Student Movement, the rise of ethno-nationalist resurgent fronts struggling for their respective regions such as Eritrean, Tigrean, Oromo, Somali and Ogaden and the recent independence of Eritrea from Ethiopia and the restructuring of Ethiopia based on ethnic-federal principles and Constitution. See Donald Crummey, “Ethiopian Historiography in the Latter Half of the Twentieth Century: A North American Perspective,” Journal of Ethiopian Studies Xxviii (2001): 7.


13 I developed these typologies based on a familiar sociological distinction of society into 'integration model' and 'conflict model'; Cf. P. Cohen, Modern Social Theory (London, 1968) cited in Anthony D. Smith, Theories of Nationalism (London: Duckworth, 1971), 41. Since the disposition of the former is largely shaped by the functionalist view, I simply designate it as the functionalist paradigm. And because the latter is informed by Marxist conflict theories, I prefer to call it the instrumentalist paradigm. Nevertheless, I am not claiming that there cannot be an element of functionalism in the instrumentalist mode of thought. Nor can I say that the functionalist mode of thought does not include an account of conflict. For other ways of classification; see Merera Gudina, Ethiopia: Competing Ethnic Nationalisms and the Quest for Democracy, 1960-2000 (Maastricht: Shaker Publishing, 2002) and Crummey, “Ethiopian Historiography,” 7-18.
emphasises the survival or persistence of Ethiopia and the integration of its people while the latter, which draws upon Marxist and neo-Marxist theories, centres on conflict and the need for change – i.e., of asserting the right to national self-determination. These are contending ways of understanding Ethiopia – a museum of people.

Such trends have sought to explain the historical conditions under which Ethiopians have developed as a people. However, while the concern of these currents of thought is somehow related to or inseparable from the problematic or philosophy of the human subject, they have not yet given rise to philosophical -theological consideration that takes human action and suffering earnestly. Recently, of course, a philosophical discourse has emerged, which seems to have set a new trend, albeit, arguably, highly coloured by the functionalist mode of thought and liberal political pragmatism.\footnote{Cf. Messay Kebede, \textit{Survival and Modernization: Ethiopia’s Enigmatic Present: A Philosophical Discourse} (Lawrenceville, NJ: The Red Sea Press, 1999).} In reaction to the instrumentalist mode of thought, this philosophical discourse claims to give due attention to the native condition of Ethiopia, which it considers as being marginalised by Eurocentric views adopted to understand, analyse, and redirect Ethiopian socio-political realities. While this mode of thought has its own inadequacies, it strongly asserts the significance of drawing attention to metaphysical and religious dimensions that should not be relegated to a marginal position in understanding the country’s past and present.

This later discourse paves the way for a new possibility of approaching the Ethiopian situation from the theological angle. I will briefly demonstrate how this current of thought relates to my own approach below. And the present study seeks to explore this possibility. It endeavours to offer a theological contribution to the academic discourse of Ethiopia, which to date has been a lacuna. Whilst there is a proliferation of academic works that investigate the political context, few interdisciplinary approaches have attempted to provide a theological outlook. It is precisely the connection between the two discourses – the political and the theological – that I intend to make in this study.

In order to elaborate the nature of this theological contribution, I must further expand this introductory outline. The question I want to confront in this introduction – ‘why is a theological turn appropriate and desirable for the Ethiopian case?’ – is what justifies my contribution in this study. Since one way of approaching this question is to demonstrate how the theological figures in the two paradigms, I wish to review briefly these modes of thought below.
The Functionalist Paradigm

The work of Donald Levine, the Chicago sociologist, especially his book *Greater Ethiopia: the Evolution of a Multiethnic Society* best represents and imbues this paradigm.\(^{15}\) Akin and complementary to this current of thought are the ‘western éthiopisant school’ who studied the ‘Christian Orient’ or Semitic Ethiopia.\(^{16}\) Central to this mode of thought is the Durkheimian understanding of integration, or social cohesion. Nationalism or patriotism, according to this paradigm, is considered as one of the stabilising collective ideologies. Drawing upon Talcott Parsons (who synthesises the works of Émile Durkheim and Max Weber), Levine brilliantly combines structural functionalism with social evolutionism in his work.

Of course, Levine is aware of the weaknesses of the social evolutionary theory.\(^{17}\) Despite its weaknesses, Levine deems social evolutionary theory useful to understand or interpret Ethiopia. Levine considers three major concepts of this theory: first, the idea of *emergent novelty* – that is, ‘over time human groups have created social and cultural forms which previously did not exist’; second, *functional specialisation* implying that ‘new forms have been retained because they better satisfied certain needs’; and third, the reality of *social integration* – that is, ‘the new forms have increased the scope of human association, relating larger numbers of persons within societal systems’.\(^{18}\)

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15 As Anthony D. Smith observes, some political scientists have drawn from Durkheim (and also Rousseau), to analyse the political development of the new states of Asia and Africa. This is true of the Chicago School propounded by Edward Shils and Clifford Geertz, for example, who wrote ‘The Political development of the New States’ and ‘The Integrative Revolution’ respectively. Levine also further develops a similar way of thinking. See for example, Edward Shils, *Political Developments in the New States* (Netherlands: Mouton, 1962), 7-9; Clifford Geertz, *Old Societies and New States: The Quest for Modernity in Asia and Africa* (New York: London: Free Press; Collier-Macmillan, 1963), 108-113; Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (London: Hutchinson, 1975), 240-249.

16 Scholars such as Edward Ullendorff, Harold Marcus, Sergew Hable Sellassie, and Tekletsadiq Mekuria, to mention but a few. This school eulogises the Orthodox Christian Abyssinia, and draws upon the works of ‘the Ethiopian highland literati’ (ecclesiastical chroniclers), which, as historical sources are said to be ecclesiastically and politically biased; see Bahru Zewde, *Society, State and History* (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press, 2008), 20.

17 Social evolutionary theory is criticised for its view that social development follows a fixed (irreversible) set of stages and that highly evolved ones are morally superior to less evolved ones.

18 Levine, *Greater Ethiopia*, 165-166. Note here, we see a different appropriation of Durkheimian differentiation. Such an appropriation should not give the impression
Applied to the Ethiopian situation, such concepts construct an understanding of Ethiopia (a) in terms of survival that looks backwards into the past (an historical explanation) and (b) how such mechanism of survival moves forward into the future (a telic explanation). Accordingly, this paradigm emphasises historical continuity and hence, follows a longue durée approach with the idea that Ethiopia extends back to millennia. The interest of this paradigm is not, however, limited to describing the historical events per se but rather seeks to explain this survival sociologically. In consequence, the diverse people of Ethiopia, which are classified as the ‘Ethio-Semitic’, the ‘Cushitic’, the ‘Omatic’ and the ‘East Sudanic’ (or rather Nilo-Saharan), who occupy diverse ecological niches, are said to have undergone processes of social evolution, which culminates in the formation of the modern state of Ethiopia.

What is important to note for our purpose here is not only the undertaking of this paradigm to offer a functional explanation of the ‘nation’ (Ethiopia) in ‘objective’ sociological terms as a whole (vis-à-vis parts and counter-parts), but also its historic determinism. The latter becomes significant and often problematic particularly in its legitimation of nation-building during the 19th century by the dominant ethnie (i.e., the Amhara) and the manner in which all other people groups including the Tigreans and the Oromo had to follow the Amhara. Beside the strength of Amhara socio-cultural system including military prowess accentuated by access to modern weaponry, the revival of the myth embodied in a book called Kebrä Nägäst, ‘Glory of Kings’, which makes Ethiopia’s rulers descendants of successors of Israel and the Jews through a legendary union of King Solomon with the Queen of Sheba, is regarded by this mode of thought as significant in understanding Ethiopia’s modern nation-building. As a ‘national epic’ or ‘societal script’, this ideology of chosenness (covenant) is regarded as fulfilling both legitimising and integrative functions.

The Instrumentalist Paradigm

Drawing upon Marxist and neo-Marxist concepts, socialist movements, particularly the Ethiopian Student Movement, began to shape the discourse on the so-called ‘nationalities question’ in Ethiopia from the late 1960s. The radical writer

that it is because of Levine’s faulty appropriation that functionalism failed. It will not affect my argument as we see in what follows. Durkheim’s differentiation refers to individuals whereas Levine appropriates it to ethnic groups. Each ethnic group develops its own specialisation.

Addis Hiwot, who typifies a profound left critique of Ethiopian society, seems to be the first to establish an academic landmark, as early as 1974, in the deconstruction of the assumptions of the functionalist paradigm. In his analysis, Addis Hiwot deploys the analytical concepts of feudalism, capitalism, and imperialism. This kind of analysis had implications for subsequent works that focused on the idea of class and the question of nationalities.

Literatures, after Addis Hiwot, on Ethiopia, mainly since the 1980s, sought to demystify the myth of Greater Ethiopia. Unlike the functionalist paradigm, this mode of thought emphasises the recent ‘invention’ of Ethiopia – only a hundred years and so – and it also focuses on the domination and exploitation of people groups of Ethiopia. For example, Gebru Tareke’s published thesis de-centers the story of the Ethiopian modernising state through exposing various regional revolts or ‘protests’. In their book *The Invention of Ethiopia*, Bonnie K. Holcomb and Sisai Ibssa employ the concepts of ‘colonialism’ and ‘imperialism’ to explain how modern Ethiopia was invented and how it colonised people groups such as the Oromo. Published in 1993, Asafa Jalata’s *Oromia and Ethiopia* presented Ethiopia, or Abyssinia, and Oromia as though the two were contending nations that co-existing in pre-modern times until Abyssinia gained the favour of European imperialists whose ally and support enabled Abyssinia to colonise Oromia with the ideology or the politics of empire building (1850-1935). Several other works also attempt to expound the relation between the dominant social class and the subordinate groups in light of centre-periphery dialectics.

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The debate on national self-determination, whether among the Ethiopian Student Movement of the 1960s and 70s, or the works mentioned above, from the 1980s and 90s, inappropriately resonate around the question of ‘what is a colony?’ rather than ‘what is a nation?’ Where they ought to have inquired into what constitutes the nation, proponents of this current of thought moved into issues of colonisation because the reality of the nation and the belief that every nation should have its own state were simply taken for granted. Accordingly, this paradigm construes Ethiopia as the ‘prison of nations’ – an expression borrowed from Ernest Gellner – and the political will, which resists the freedom of the ‘nations’ (that is, Greater Ethiopian nationalism), is regarded as ‘great-nation chauvinism’ (echoing Lenin). As a result, this mode of thought elevates the category of the ‘nation’ or the ‘ethnic’, leading to identity politics as ethnic politics.

In a similar manner, the metaphor of prison also applies to religion: the state takes on a new significance in ensuring that religious groups, as interest groups, exercise their freedom and assert their rights. Nonetheless, what reverberates in the literature within this paradigm is the charge that religion (that is, Ethiopia’s Orthodox Christianity), in the past, was in the service of the ruling ideology in order to manipulate the ‘masses’.

**Why A Theological Turn? Why Political Theology?**

Having cursorily reviewed these two paradigms, it is now possible to address the question posed earlier in this introduction concerning the theological turn. To this end, I now want to draw attention to how the theological figures in the two paradigms. And later I also want to add the point that there is already a cultural exigency in Ethiopia that welcomes the theological turn. Although the functionalist mode of thought considers religion as a key aspect of Ethiopian society, religion is narrowly understood in terms of its function as a cohesive force promoting social bond between the whole, the parts and

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26 See Girma Bekele, The In-Between People: A Reading of David Bosch through the Lens of Mission History and Contemporary Challenges in Ethiopia (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2011), 357-367.
counter-parts. Such an understanding of religion in terms of what it does in society – as either legitimising authority (power system), or sacralising consensus (social conventions) – is reductive because it downgrades, if not totally denies, the transcendent dimension of religion or the theological that is often scandalous (i.e., it has a critical capacity). Moreover, it justifies the nationalistic absorption of religion (I will explain this later in Chapters 1 and 4). The functionalist discourse on the differentiation of spheres, as we noted above, leads to the affirmation of secularism. But the story does not end there as this differentiation then leads to the subordination of the theological by the political.

The instrumentalist paradigm charges Christianity and its practices as ideologically distortive. Religion is relegated to the private sphere and the freedom of religion is not as such about its public contribution but its qualification for being treated as one of the interest groups in society. What we observe, here, is the inappropriate positioning of the theological by these secular discourses. And, hence, it is my contention that the repositioning of the theological vis-à-vis these dominant worldviews requires the emergence of a particular Christian theological standpoint.²⁷ Such a theological turn will allow the repositioning of the theological within the Ethiopian society.

These secular sociologies are flawed not only because of the nature of the religious or the theological, but also because of their views on the human subject and especially the nature of collective social existence. Both paradigms affirm ‘original violence’²⁸ as constitutive of the social. Despite its emphasis on integration, the functionalist paradigm embraces the necessity of foundational violence. Even more evidently, the instrumentalist paradigm presupposes imagined ‘ethnic conflict’ underlying social realities because of which society needs a social pact. As I shall argue, these views are not compatible with the views held

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²⁸ This notion implies ‘a reading of the world which assumes the priority of force and tells how this force is best managed and confined by counter-force’; see John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, second edition (Oxford, Blackwell, 2006), 5; See also John Milbank, *The Future of Love: Essays in Political Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2009), 243-244.
by ‘Christian sociology’\textsuperscript{29}. I will make the case that Christianity recognises no ‘original violence’ but rather, in John Milbank’s expression, ‘harmonious peaceful order’\textsuperscript{30} and towards this end, I will outline a political theology (in Part III). Here, my embrace of Milbank is limited to his social ontology in Part IV of \textit{Theology and Social Theory} rather than his critique of secular social theories in the foregoing parts.

With regard to the cultural exigency in Ethiopia, I wish to turn to Messay Kebede’s work. His philosophical work, as I mentioned above, give attention to metaphysical and religious notions whose significance he recognises brilliantly. In this regard, we share similar concerns. However, in his attempt to accentuate the Ethiopian native condition – vis-à-vis Eurocentric worldviews that he supposes to have eroded Ethiopian values – and to establish Ethiopian autochthony, he does two things: first, he attempts to whitewash the past and associates religion, and myth, only with consensus. Second, he argues that since the spheres of the religious and the political should be differentiated, the interplay between the Church and the political must be understood at and restricted to the national level. He strongly suggests that the Orthodox Church should be the custodian of Ethiopian nationalism.\textsuperscript{31} I disagree with this affirmation of nationalist ideology and the nationalistic absorption of Christianity.

Nonetheless, what I am suggesting is not separating the theological from the political but rather the subordination of one by the other. To be sure, there is no impassable gulf between the two discourses and here, the distinction between the two discourses – the political and the theological – is simply heuristic. The political theology, which I will develop, will blur the boundaries between these two discourses – both of which are imaginative practices.

\section*{A Hermeneutical Approach}

In this study, I will adopt a hermeneutical approach, a cultural hermeneutics.\textsuperscript{32} Epistemologically, this approach differs from the previous paradigms

\begin{itemize}
\item[29] This is Sergie Bulgakov’s term to express a theological standpoint; see Rowan Williams, \textit{Sergii Bulgakov: Towards a Russian Political Theology} (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999), 275.
\item[30] Milbank, \textit{Theology and Social Theory}, 5-6.
\item[32] My approach (i.e., hermeneutical) stands to evoke an association with Paul Ricoeur’s philosophy of imagination; see Introductory Lecture to \textit{Lectures on Ideology and Utopia} (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986); and Graham Ward’s ‘cultural
which manifest ‘objectifying’ tendencies. Of course, I am not claiming that this hermeneutics is completely original since a few others – to some extent – have employed this approach to study the Ethiopian case. However, the degree of interdisciplinary sophistication, which will be evident in this study are lacking in those other works.

The benefits of a cultural hermeneutic approach for my study are two-fold. First, there is a method-content symbiosis: an appropriateness of the methodological tools for addressing the content of the research case. The content is constituted by key terms such as myth, ideology, historical narratives, and identity and of course, these are complex terms/concepts that need to be defined well (in Part I) before they are employed. Second, it allows me to work with a constructive logic of inquiry that draws together differing disciplines such as critical theory and theology – the latter without losing its disciplinary identity. Allow me, here, to briefly explain the nature of this interdisciplinary approach.

**Theology and Social Theories**

Theology and social theories are not necessarily at odds. For any academic inquiry that aims at a meaningful engagement between theology and the contemporary cultures that contextualise theology, theological discernment and theological critique or construction are two important aspects that require sufficient attention. Without proper discernment, theology can simply accommodate cultural productions without a critical contribution. Since the theological task of discernment precedes the theological task of construction, a theologian who seeks a hermeneutical engagement, must start by posing the question: ‘what is the time?’ or where are we culturally? Theology’s own resources – sacred or classic texts, sacraments, liturgies, doctrinal formulations – cannot serve as analytical tools; although these can facilitate, to some extent, ‘theology’s own self-reflection’, they ‘are not fashioned for theology’s engagement with its contextualising cultures’. This implies that theology has to borrow analytical tools developed in the social and human sciences for its understanding of the contextualisation of cultures. Thus, there can be a constructive relation between theology and social theories.

With such a remark, we can move to determining the analytical tools appropriate for this inquiry. As we have already seen in the two paradigms, which

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hermeneutics’, or Christian Kulturkritik (Christian apologetics); cf. Cultural Transformation and Religious Practice, 62-72, 94.

33 For example, Sorenson, Imagining Ethiopia, 38-76.

34 Ward, Cultural Transformations and Religious Practice, 2.
we cursorily reviewed, the category of the nation is central. Nevertheless, the 'nation' has under-determined meaning in the Ethiopian context as we shall see in Part II. The reason such a category, the 'nation', has become important in Ethiopia has its own intellectual and political history. Applying certain theories of nationhood, the mode of thought I designated as the ‘Instrumentalist Paradigm’ ultimately constructed an image of Ethiopia as the ‘prison of nations’. Such construction has not been without its political repercussions. It eventually led to a social engineering, which involved the reconstitution of Ethiopian as an assemblage of beher, behereseboch, hezboch (nations, nationalities and peoples); however, the meanings of these terms are not yet clear (more of this in Part II). Obviously, the use of such terms exhibit divergence from the use of the term ‘nation’ in Europe and North America. What must be highlighted about such developments in Ethiopia with regard to nationhood is intellectual and social reification. A brief discussion on the relation of theories of nationhood to intellectual and social reification can clarify my point, here.

Usually, theories of nationhood are discussions about nations. And, as Rogers Brubaker remarks, nations have been understood ‘as real entities, as communities, as substantial, enduring collectivities. *That* they exist is taken for granted, although *how* they exist – and how they *came* to exist – is much disputed’. Even though such a ‘realist ontology of nations’ has been problematized by the emergence of ‘constructivist’ theories that conceive ‘groupness as constructed, contingent, and fluctuating’ lately, the substantial view of nations still lingers. For example, the usual questions that preoccupy the studies are ‘what is the nation?’ and ‘when is the nation?’ and such questions simply presuppose the existence of nations.

Such substantialist illusion characterises not only the so-called primordialists ‘who emphasize the deep roots, ancient origins, and emotive power of national attachments’ but also ‘modernists’ and ‘constructivists’ who understand nations as formed by such forces as ‘industrialization’ (e.g., Ernest Gellner), ‘uneven development’ (e.g., Tom Nairn), and ‘the growth of communication and transportation networks’ (e.g., Benedict Anderson). The substantial view is not confined only to those who treat nations ‘objectively’ in terms of ‘language,
religion, and so forth' but also characterises those who see nations 'subjectively' in terms of 'myth, memories, and self-understanding'. The major problem of this view is that it 'adopts categories of practice as categories of analysis', which contributes to the problem of reification in practice as well as in theory. Theoretically, a better promising way of conceiving nations is to understand them 'not as substantial but as institutionalized form; not as collectivity but as practical category; not as entity but as contingent event'. In light of such a conclusion, we note that the Ethiopian case fails at this point. In this study, I do not prefer to use the 'nation' as a category of analysis lest I contribute to the reification. Rather, I intend to problematise it. However, this does not imply that nations can simply be ignored. The set of analytical tools, which I will deploy, will treat the nation as an institutionalised form – as a social formation or reproduction – intimately linked to the operation of ideology, which constitutes subjects.

Therefore, the question of national-formation cannot be divorced from ideology and subject formation and this is a topic less discussed in the academic discourse of Ethiopia (see what I have said about such lacuna above). Academic trends and political discourses in Ethiopia put remarkable emphasis on the assertion of national and ethno-national identities, but the mechanisms by which such identities are constructed have not been subjected to critical analysis. Since the question of identity or subject formation cannot be exhaustively answered by a single theoretical approach, I wish to generate some conceptual tools, which will offer insights for the task. To this end, I will draw upon three critical thinkers: Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, and Paul Ricoeur. Of course, the choice is eclectic (I will elaborate on this below). Herein, we have to accept the risk of employing theories honed elsewhere (in the West) because local theoretical frameworks are still undeveloped. The cultural hermeneutics, which will be employed here, will also have a three-fold theological task of self-criticism, critique and construction.

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39 Brubaker, “Rethinking Nationhood,” 5.
40 Brubaker, “Rethinking Nationhood,” 5-6.
41 Althusser is a structuralist thinker while Foucault and Ricoeur are post-structuralists. Ideologically, the first two are clearly Marxist and post-Marxist respectively while Ricoeur is a Christian philosopher.
Theoretical Frameworks

Drawing upon the above-named theoreticians whose theories are founded on different, often divergent, philosophical premises can rightly be judged as eclectic in approach. Of course, theoretical eclecticism is not without any precedents in various academic studies. Often times, theoretical eclecticism is a response to a theoretical failure. When a single theoretical paradigm fails to be satisfactorily efficient to analyse a given research case, eclecticism presents itself as an alternative. What justifies the eclecticism of this study is the theoretical problem in Africa in general. This is not to say, however, that eclecticism is the only alternative in such moments of theoretical failure. For example, theoretical synthesis can be another viable alternative. In his essay entitled ‘Toward a Sociology of Africa’, Pierre van der Berghe, for example, proposes that synthesising certain elements of functionalism with Hegelian-Marxist dialectic is important for analysing pluralistic and rapidly changing societies of Africa. Even though Berghe proposes a theoretical synthesis, he does not offer explicit criteria as to which elements to synthesise and thus far, developments in this direction seem to be lacking in Africa.

Recently, Achille Mbembe has lamented on the incommensurability between the theories deployed and the social dynamics analysed in Africa. Mbembe links such theoretical poverty to the lack of openness in the social sciences or the humanities such as philosophical inquiry; the enlightenment legacy of the division of intellectual labour, which is still behind the ‘compartmentalization of knowledge’; and generally, the relative lack of the postmodern ‘crisis of representation’ that has affected various disciplines elsewhere; and critiques the lack of interdisciplinarity in the academia that allows the development of ‘cultural studies,

42 The work of the feminist philosopher Judith Butler can be an example, here; cf. Terrell Carverand and Samuel Chambers, Judith Butler's Precarious Politics: Critical Encounters (London: Routledge, 2008), 1-8. See also Aijaz Ahmad, a post-colonial scholar, who raises the issue of uncontrolled theoretical eclecticism in Edward Said’s image of ‘travelling theory’. Of course, the charge is not against the use of eclecticism as such but its control. Ahmad notes, in the work under critique, ‘poststructuralist denunciations of Marxism [...] delivered in the name of Gramsci, using the terminology drawn from Althusser, and listing the names of communist poets like Aimé Césaire, Pablo Neruda and Mahmoud Darwish’; see Aijaz Ahmad, “Orientalism and After,” in Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory: A Reader, eds. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 169.

postcolonial, or postmodern criticism’. Cognizant of such theoretical crisis and because local theoretical frameworks are still undeveloped, I prefer to follow an eclectic approach. However, the theoretical eclecticism, here, is not simply arbitrary but a thematically controlled one: it is narrowly focused on gathering theoretical responses to the fundamental question of subject formation. As we shall see in Part I, there is no singular approach that can adequately address this question: how do we become subjects?

While drawing upon these thinkers, I do not presume that they have compatible philosophical foundations. The intention, here, is not to furnish a synthesised theoretical framework out of the structuralism of Althusser and the post-structuralism of Foucault and Ricoeur, but to elaborate an eclectic set of analytical tools to analyse the Ethiopian case. Such an eclectic set of analytical tools, which will help us address the question of subject formation, is related to (a) the concept of ideology including key conceptual terms such as ‘interpellation’, ‘apparatuses’, ‘mastery’, ‘dispositif’, and ‘nation-form’; (b) ‘technologies of the self’ including terms such as ‘subjectivity’, ‘self-writing’, ‘practices of freedom’ and ‘subjectivization’; and (c) human agency including terms such as ‘action’, ‘narratives’ and ‘utopian imagination’. In what follows, I shall briefly discuss how such diverse conceptual tools are interwoven together in a generative way.

Outline of the Argument

In what follows, I shall outline the summary of the argument. Underlying contemporary socio-political practices, or political anthropologies, in Ethiopia are contending secular modes of thought. Such modes of thought, and the political practices they endanger, put considerable emphasis on the enactment of identity – national or ethnic – leading to an equivocal situation wherein the ethos that binds people together has been greatly eroded. Such secular modes of thought are flawed not only on the notion of the human subject but also inappropriately position the religious or the theological. However, a theological turn, as this study argues, will generate theological resources for a social horizon of hope – for the apotheosis of the bond of togetherness – which risks thinking politics in an altogether different way beyond the ethno-national logic. This, as I shall argue, paves the way for the possibility of a new political subject, and the reinvention of politics.

44 See Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall, “Writing the World from an African Metropolis,” Public Culture 16, 3 (2004): 350. Of course the studies Mbembe mentions here are studies that do not define themselves in disciplinary terms and are actually eclectic in their approach drawing concepts across a varied range of disciplines.
The outline of the argument will proceed in three stages. Since the problem of national or social formation is generally associated with social imagination, we need to frame the Ethiopian case with concepts related to ideology and ideology critique. To this end, the first Part, Imaginative Practices, will clarify key conceptual issues pertaining to the role of imagination in politics.45 ‘Social imagination’, according to Ricoeur, ‘is constitutive of social reality’.46 Any bifurcation between imagination and reality, interpretation and practice is defied in such understanding. Social imagination is intimately interlinked with the notion of the human subject – human action or agency.47 Thus, the basic philosophical question that brings together these diverse voices mentioned above (Althusser, Foucault and Ricoeur) is ‘how do we become subjects?’

In Chapter 1, I will start with Althusser’s theory of ideology. Here, the works of other thinkers such as those of Judith Butler and Étienne Balibar will also figure insofar as they support the analysis by Althusser. The concept of ideology will be employed in connection to national formation. This will provide a considerable light for understanding practices that shape or construct identities, whether national or ethno-national, which are now contestable issues in Ethiopia. However, even though Althusser offers an account of how the subject is formed as an outcome or construct of ideological conditioning, he fails to offer an adequate account of how individuals or subjects participate in their own ideological formation.

Foucault’s ‘technologies of the self’ complements and develops Althusser’s concept of ‘ideological state apparatuses’ in Chapter 2. Foucault’s work helps to understand the construction of subjectivity – how the subject is actively constituted by her own actions. This notion of subjectivity has great relevance for understanding the Ethiopian situation in which individuals are encouraged to reflect upon and assert their ethnic identity or belongingness. Foucault’s work in the social construction of subjectivity helps to understand the intersection, and offers a theoretical bridge, between coercive ideology, as conceived by Althusser, and moral agency, as conceived by Ricoeur. Here, the work of Jacques Rancière will also figure insofar as he supports Foucault’s analysis particularly with respect to ‘subjectivization’.

45 Tentatively, I employ the term ideology as an imagination that helps to preserve a social order and utopia as an imagination that helps us to rethink an alternative society (another order).
46 Ricoeur, preface to Ideology and Utopia, xxxv.
47 Ricoeur, preface to Ideology and Utopia, xxiii.
I shall begin the third chapter by discussing Ricoeur’s account of the narrative self because it further deepens Foucault’s conception of the self or agency. Since this account of the self has a critical capacity, it will prepare the ground for the understanding that subjects are not simply conditioned by ideology and its practices but also that they can distance themselves to make a critique of ideology.\(^4^8\) The conceptual discussion will be concluded with the discussion of ideology critique: the necessity of utopia as a social horizon of hope to formulate a critique of ideology. The principal relevance of the conceptualization in this chapter for the Ethiopian case is to highlight the fact that subjects are not only formed in and through ideological institutions and their practices, but also they can act to change and reproduce these institutions.

The conceptual discussion – developed in Part I – provides the hermeneutical tools to analyse the case of Ethiopia in the next stage (Part II). This part, Ethnopolitical Imagination, will focus on the ideological practices of nationalism and ethno-nationalism. Here, I will examine two contending ideologies in two consecutive chapters (Chapter 4 and 5) in light of the conceptual tools elaborated in Part I. The main focus of Chapter 4 will be on how Ethiopians – diverse people as they are – come to imagine themselves as a ‘unified’ people or how they come to represent their unity. Since the history of a nation is always presented to us in the form of a narrative, I will begin the analysis with the so-called narrative of Greater Ethiopia. Then, I will further develop the analysis under the following two thematics: the imaginary singularity of Ethiopians and the nationalistic absorption of religion (Orthodox Christianity). Then, I will conclude the chapter by offering a brief historical context for the rise of ethno-political imagination as an alternative imaginative practice to nationalistic ideology.

The discussion in this chapter sets the stage for the following chapter (Chapter 5), which charts the narratives that contend the narrative of Greater Ethiopia and the contemporary practices that institute ethnic and national identity. Of particular interest, here, are the ‘identity formation mechanisms’\(^4^9\) by which Ethiopians are encouraged to reflect upon their ethnic identity and to express or assert it for political ends and how the management of ethnic difference emerges as an aspect and preoccupation of the government. This chapter will discuss

\(^4^8\) Ricoeur clearly outlines the ethical implications of the ‘narrative self’. For him, narratives are between description and prescription where the ethical aim (the ‘good’) cannot be ignored; cf. Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992).

the pitfalls of this political culture and why a critique of this ideology of ethno-nationalism is needed. Instead of directly proceeding to the final part, however, I shall attend to an emergent perspective: the discourse of nativism. This discourse is a projection based on philosophical reflection on Ethiopia’s native condition. The scope of the discussion will be limited to the reason why this approach appears to be a viable alternative but becomes inadequate for offering a vision of an alternative society. Having examined the historical processes and discourses on ethno-nationalism, the study turns to the theological resources that enable us to engage with the issues precipitated in Part II.

Part III –Theo-political Imagination – is intended to offer a projection of another (alternative) society. It is a post-nationalistic political theology that demonstrates the possibility of a new political subject: a theo-political subject. Here, my use of the term ‘post-nationalistic’ should not be understood in terms of rigid etymology, which may refer to a temporal or chronological concept. Nor do I conceive it as a total rejection of anything ‘national’ or local (for example, in favour of abstract cosmopolitanism). Rather, I intend to define a political theology that engages or contests ethno-national or national discourses, which place considerable emphasis on the assertion of ethnic and national identity, and legitimize particular forms of social order and practices that endanger common life.

Although I will make use of various theologians (only tangentially), I seek to develop my own political theology specifically through the work of the Russian philosophical-theologian, Sergie Bulgakov. Such a choice is not simply arbitrary. Bulgakov’s theological system can address the issues raised by ethno-nationalistic ideology efficiently. His intellectual critique of Marxism and liberalism, the Russian radical intelligentsia, the church’s conservatism are all meaningful aspects of Bulgakov that I consider as important when thinking of his relevance to the Ethiopian case. Here, I have in mind some parallels shared between Ethiopia and Russia. I also have in mind Bulgakov’s ecumenical interest often reflected in his theology. But still a possible objection can be raised concerning the drawing of external sources for the theological construction, especially from those involved in and influenced by the discourse of nativism that gives greater attention to the local construction of knowledge from local sources and I will defend myself from this objection in the Theological Introduction (Chapter 6).

50 A similar objection (as in the case of the critical theorists) could be asked on such choice and I will justify the reasons later (see Theological Introduction).
51 For example, the shifts from monarchic rule to socialism, Orthodox Christianity, the rise of radical intelligentsia, etc. Bahru Zewde, Society, State and History, 433.
In Chapter 7, I shall provide a theological account of Christian agency based on divine-humanity. This will serve as a protocol against Christian tendencies that cannot offer resistance against ideology. Following this chapter, which is more or less a theological self-criticism, I shall proceed to the chapter (Chapter 8) that offers a Christian ontology and ecclesiology as a theological critique against the ontology and anthropology engendered by ethno-national ideology as well as being a resource for the following constructive chapter. In a nutshell, this articulation of ontology aims at a Christian ordering of society: a peaceful harmonious order.

Finally, having articulated both a counter-anthropology and counter-ontology, I shall move on to the more constructive chapter (Chapter 9) that develops the outlook articulated in the previous expository chapters by giving expression to a political perspective consistent with the theology developed in the previous chapters: the Politics of Metanoia.52 Such politics announces a form of Christian humanism that inspires us to risk thinking politics in an altogether different way beyond ethno-national logic. At the centre of this humanism is the possibility for a new culture of the self and the reinvention of politics. This will be a constructive theological contribution that offers an account of an alternative social order and a new way of looking at the interplay between the theological and the political in Ethiopia. Finally, I want to conclude this introduction with the clarification that the book is narrowly focused on the problem of nationalism in Ethiopia and that it excludes any discussion either on the problem of high theory in France or the problem of nationalist theology in Russia. What I said of the eclectic approach in relation to theory also applies here.

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52 Metanoia is a Greek word for conversion or transformation. The translation of this term as ‘repentance’ is an unfortunate one; cf. Treadwell Walden, The Great Meaning of Metánoia: An Undeveloped Chapter in the Life and Teaching of Christ (New York: Thomas Whittaker, 1896), Ch. 2. Here, the politics of metanoia implies recognition of transformative potential of Christianity. It draws subjects to a new comprehension of Christianity and its dogmas insofar as this leads to action that co-ordinates Christianity with contemporary life.