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 system 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...