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Biblical Foundations: An African Study

Tite Tienou

INTRODUCTION

The question of the relationship between the Bible and theology is at least as old as the Christian church itself. It has received much attention in our day because we have increasingly been made aware of the fact that there is no such thing as a presuppositionless theology. We have learned to dismiss the claims of those who say that theirs is a pure, unadulterated biblical theology, but have we not fallen into the other extreme where theology is only a matter of opinion (personal or collective)? The finality of theology, its methodology and the use of the Bible are thereby questioned by many. In other words, what do we mean when we say that the Bible is authoritative in our theology? And how do we make that happen?

This raises at once the question of how one approaches the biblical text when attempting to understand and explain it. Some have suggested that presuppositions have little influence on understanding biblical truth. D. D. Rutledge writes:

In itself it matters comparatively little what system of philosophy is employed to explain, illustrate and develop Christian teaching; the choice must always be decided, at least partly, by the racial temperament and tradition of the people addressed (1965:37).

Others have argued that the philosophical and epistemological starting points greatly determine the resultant message perceived from Scripture and ultimately shape doctrine. Writing in a specific Roman Catholic context, L. S. Senghor states:

It is in fact Catholic doctrine, more than its liturgy, which has been marked by the Graeco-Roman seal of *discursive reason*: the *ratio*. Whereas the *Revelation* announced by the Gospel is more existential than rational ... The historical and geographical context of the Bible is that of an *existential* world where *discursive reason* is rooted in *intuitive reason* (1963:291 my own translation, italics in original).

Foregoing comment on the above two quotations for the moment, let us illustrate the problem with two well-known systems of doctrine in Evangelicalism: Calvinism and Dispensationalism. Both claim Scripture as the final authority or norm and yet each one of them is really a different key to Scripture. Calvinism and Dispensationalism reach divergent conclusions about eschatology, for instance, in spite of the fact that they are both in the tradition of rational approaches to Scripture. With this example in mind, one can easily imagine the p. 90 divergent conclusions possible if there are two entirely different presuppositional starting points. In a way, this is what is happening before our own eyes today in the contextualization debate.

We have learned that all systems of thought, theology included, are determined by presuppositions. As D. H. Kelsey puts it, "at the root of a theological position there is an imaginative act in which a theologian tries to catch up in a single metaphorical judgment the full complexity of God's presence" (1975:163). He calls this imaginative act of the theologian a *mode*. He groups theologians in three modes: ideational, concrete actuality and ideal possibility. Theologians of the ideational mode think that God is present in the doctrine asserted by scripture while those of the concrete actuality *mode* consider the presence of God either in an agent rendered present by scripture or through a process of cosmic recreation. For theologians of the ideal possibility mode, God's presence is either

through scriptural statements announcing the possibility of real authentic existence or Jesus Christ making possible the new being (Kelsey 1975:161). Quite apart from scripture, then, one's basic presupposition determines theological content. It is therefore no longer sufficient to claim biblical foundation for this or that theology. One must always go beyond the theologian's claim of faithfulness to Scripture and discover the all-encompassing mode which explains the system proposed. One's hermeneutics always rests on a prior allegiance or world view. In that sense Kelsey's three modes are prior allegiances to which the various theologians commit themselves. They explain the varied viewpoints represented by the different theological schools.

The three modes proposed by Kelsey are helpful for understanding inter-mode theological divergences within one culture or closely related cultures. They are not adequate for the study of intra-mode diversity, particularly when one deals with theologians having different cultural world views prior to their theological allegiance or mode. Take for example the ideational mode. These are its characteristics according to Kelsey:

God's presence is something like understanding the basic truth about oneself and one's world. Or: It is like having personally appropriated a set of concepts with such seriousness that they decisively shape one's emotions, passions, and feelings (1975:161).

In spite of the fact that most evangelical theologians could fit in the ideational mode as described by Kelsey, many of them (particularly [p. 91](#) those of the so-called Third World) would feel quite uncomfortable with the rigidity of the system Kelsey attributes to Warfield:

If, for example, a theologian construes the mode of God's presence in the ideational mode, as Warfield does, then he takes the central theological task to be the analysis of doctrines or concepts with an eye to proposing reforms in current forms of church belief and speech. The centre of gravity in the ensuing "theological position" will fall on believing and on what is believed, and traditional theological topics will be treated in the order of their logical dependence. Hence, for instance, the doctrine of revelation, and especially the doctrine of the inspiration of the Bible, will be treated first, to secure the logical ground for what is said on all other topics. Other theological *loci* will be treated in the order in which they may be derived directly from scripture or from scripture and other doctrines together, or solely from other doctrines (1975:161–162, italics in original).

Many Third World theologians would contend that such a conception of the theological task is not only uncultural in its emphasis on logic but that it also fails to interpret the Bible properly and does not bring theology to bear on concrete life situations. The question remains: how faithfully does theology reflect the biblical message for the times and situations it addresses? For if biblical truths are unchanging and unchangeable, the theologian's task is to explain and actualize the Bible's message in such a way that it communicates without being unfaithful. In order to do this, one must rid oneself, as much as possible, of any *pre-understanding* and take Scripture as it is in all its simplicity and complexity.

What, then, is the best method for reaching beyond our preunderstandings in order to grasp the biblical message? Obviously one cannot be so presumptuous as to offer only one method; but a helpful way is to take a major problem of human existence and examine it in biblical perspective, then in a specific cultural milieu and finally seek to correlate the two. This is the approach taken here.

One such major question, both in the Bible and in cultures in general, is: What does it mean to be human in the universe? Or to put it in the Psalmist's language: What is man? ([Ps. 8:4](#)). This all important fundamental question can be studied in the following three

sections: What is person vis-à-vis God? What is person in history? and what is person in the presence of spiritual realities? We limit ourselves here to the first of these questions, namely: What is person vis-à-vis God?

It should be noted that no single method is adequate to guide one's reflection on a question of this magnitude. This is especially so when one attempts to weld together biblical, cultural and theological insights. Consequently, the method employed here is neither primarily [p. 92](#) exegetical, nor systematic nor historical. It incorporates aspects of all three, although there is a slant toward the systematic. This seems to be the best way of bringing biblical revelation to bear on specific cultural ideas.

WHAT IS PERSON BEFORE GOD?

In a way the basic problem in theology is understanding and explaining the fact of being *before* God. The whole of biblical revelation is clearly concerned with this. Genesis places the entire universe before God the creator and shows the implications of this for humanity. It is no accident that the first commandment (both in [Exodus 20:2, 3](#) and for Jesus in [Matthew 22:37, 38](#)) concerns God and the service due to Him by humans. God is the beginning and the end of all theological discourse. K. Bockmühl is right when he says that the task of Christians and theologians today is "to restate and reapply the first commandment" (1982:48). But, in order for this to take place, changes must be made in the way the doctrine of God is taught in churches and theological institutions. In other words, we must dust off our heritage of cultural and philosophical biases in order to let biblical truths shine. Let us illustrate this by the influence of the Pseudo-Denys or Dionysios the Areopagite on the traditional expositions of the doctrine of God.

DENYS THE AREOPAGITE AND THE DOCTRINE OF GOD

Nearly all Christians, regardless of their theological training or the lack of it, can enumerate some of the traditionally defined attributes of God, but few realize the cultural and philosophical weight of concepts such as omnipresence, omnipotence and omniscience. The question of whether these attributes accurately reflect some aspects of biblical revelation is not the point of the present discussion. Our concern here is to establish the specificity of the theological discourse to cultural realities. And the case of the attributes of God reveals such specificity.

No attempt is made here to give a complete historical account of the discussion on the nature of God in the Graeco-Roman tradition of the church. In all probability it started rather early. How else can one explain the opening words of the so-called Apostles' Creed: "I believe in God, the Father *Almighty* ..."? At any rate, early in the discussion (probably beginning in the fifth century), the writings of Dionysios the Areopagite exerted considerable influence on the church's understanding of God. [p. 93](#)

The writings of Dionysios the Areopagite (or Pseudo-Denys) who claimed to be Paul's Athenian convert of [Acts 17](#), have for a long time been granted near apostolic authority. They reached the Western church in the ninth century through Erigena's Latin translation and they influenced the great Thomas Aquinas as well as the mystical theology of the Christian tradition (Rolt 1951:3). He seemed preoccupied with one problem: the knowledge of God and the nature of the Godhead. The doctrine of the super-essential Godhead (ὐπερουάιος θεαρχία) is the pivotal beginning of his thought. God is defined primarily as super-essence or supra-personality because he is infinite (Rolt 1951:4).

Dionysios' definition of God as ὐπερουάιος θεαρχία illustrates well the relationship between the Bible, theology and culture. He must have realized the problem for he

repeatedly affirms that his teaching, and especially the divine names, derive from scripture (Roques 1958:xxv). Roques notes that:

In reality, if most of the attributes explained are biblical, they are also philosophical, and, at any rate, the way they are systematically explained is more philosophical than biblical ... Denys takes his inspiration from the last neo-platonic (philosophers) (1958:xxvi).

Furthermore, even his two methods for knowing God (the *via affirmativa* and the *via negativa*) are processes of the discursive reason of Greek philosophy. He writes:

It is necessary to distinguish this negative method of abstraction from the positive method of affirmation, in which we deal with the Divine Attributes. For with these latter we begin with the universal and primary and pass through the intermediate and secondary to the particular and ultimate attributes; but now we ascend from the particular to the universal conceptions, abstracting all attributes in order that, without veil, we may know that Unknowing, which is enshrouded under all that is known and all that can be known, and that we may begin to contemplate the superessential Darkness which is hidden by all the light that is in existing things (1949:13).

In light of these thoughts, God is ultimately unknowable by persons because they are “superessential Darkness”. Since Dionysios thinks that the person is the world in microcosm (Rutledge 1965:19), and since God is not person ([Hosea 11:9](#)), God’s attributes (taken as they are from human realities) will be derived by a process of either exaggeration (omnipotence) or negation (infinite) of human attributes.

Dionysios’ approach to understanding God’s attributes, which is p. 94 almost purely logical by Greek standards, has had a lasting influence on theology. Much of the related debate on God’s transcendence and his immanence is therefore of a particular cultural and philosophical orientation. Concepts such as God being supra-personal (Dionysios) or wholly other (the early Barth) may be legitimate in the specific culture of their origin. We must still ask: What is the biblical warrant for making them universal categories for the church? With that question in mind, we now turn to the matter of the biblical understanding of God.

PERSON BEFORE GOD IN THE BIBLE

The main thrust of biblical writings is *not* on understanding the *essence* of God or his attributes in a vacuum. This is especially so in the area of defining similarities and differences between God and human beings. Passages such as [Genesis 1:26, 27](#); [Hosea 11:9](#) and [Acts 17:28, 29](#) leave one guessing at their proper interpretation. Theologians have long debated the meaning of the image of God in persons. They will no doubt continue to do so. Paul even adds to our confusion when he quotes Aratus, the Greek poet, with approval: τοῦ γὰρ καὶ γένος ἑσμέν. v. Instead of explaining what “being of the race of God” means, the Apostle stresses what it does not mean: God is not like gold, silver or stone. The point seems to be that whatever God is like, he resembles more a human being than gold, silver or stone. And yet God is not person; he is our maker. Therefore God is in a category quite apart from all other categories of human experience: He is the only one who is Creator of all that exists. This God has chosen to have a deep relationship with a creature of his. He has given this creature (person) a measure of capacity to understand the Creator. The image of God may signify no more than the fact of a human being’s ability to be in communion with God and to represent him in the world.

Whatever else the image of God may mean, the focus of the biblical record is on God’s relationship to humans. From his visits in the garden “in the cool of the day” ([Gn. 3:8](#)) to the first disobedience and to the end of this age and beyond, God is constantly seeking,

even yearning for, a meaningful relationship with people. It is therefore not surprising that, for instance, “the Old Testament possesses no one single definition of God, nor any one formula by which he is to be identified, although probably ‘Yahweh, the God of Israel’ would come closest to this” (Clements 1978:54). If indeed the phrase, “Yahweh, the God of Israel” is taken as an identifying [p. 95](#) formula for God in the Old Testament, it should be noted that the emphasis is on a *personal relationship* of God with people, namely Israel. Biblical writings do not teach us concepts of God; they show us how people encountered God, learned to know him and walked with him. That we today can follow the same process is why these things were written for our instruction.

The biblical record also shows that God reveals himself and his characteristics primarily through encounters with people. Virtually all we know about God in the Bible is by this process of self-revelation. For instance, Abram came to know God as the Almighty (El Shaddai, [Gn. 17:1](#)) in a specific set of circumstances. God had already promised to be a shield for him and to give him a great reward ([Gn. 15:1](#)). Upon Abram’s anxiety of dying without an offspring who could be his heir, God makes the incredible promise to him: “This man (Eliezer of Damascus) will not be your heir; but one who shall come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir” ([Gn. 15:4](#)). And God takes him outside to teach him about the great numbers of his descendants; Abram believes God. But with the passing of time, doubt sets in and Abram and Sarai “help” God fulfill his promise through an appropriate cultural means ([Gn. 16](#)): Ishmael is born.

Following this episode of Abram’s life, God comes to him at age 99. He tells Abram two things: I will establish my covenant with you and you will be “the father of a multitude of nations” ([Gn. 17:2](#), 5). All this is prefaced with the declaration: I am God Almighty. Now God knows that Abram already has a son in his household; so what is the point of saying to him twice: “You shall be the father of a multitude of nations” ([Gn. 17:4](#), 5) and of changing his name to Abraham? It appears to be none other than the fact that God accomplishes his purposes sovereignly, unaided by uncalled-for human initiative: He is almighty! So, a little later, God completes the promise with these startling words: “As for Sarai, your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. And I will bless her, and indeed I will give you a son by her. Then I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of peoples shall come from her” ([Gn. 17:15](#), 16). Abraham’s reaction is rather normal: he does not believe!

God follows the conversation with Abraham by a demonstration of his power. He sends three men to visit Abraham and tell him: “I will surely return to you at this time next year; and behold, Sarah your wife shall have a son” ([Gn. 18:10](#)). At Sarah’s unbelieving laughter, the Lord answers: “Is anything too difficult for the Lord? At the appointed time I will return to you, at this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son” ([Gn. 18:14](#)). And “so Sarah conceived and bore a [p. 96](#) son to Abraham in his old age, at the appointed time of which God had spoken to him” ([Gn. 21:2](#)). God has shown himself, through these unusual circumstances, to be the Almighty. Abraham did not discover God’s omnipotence through a process of logical deduction, this is comparatively easy. God taught him his power through specific events. This is the mystery of divine revelation.

Let us take another example in the life of Abraham: in [Genesis 22](#) Abraham comes to know God as one who provides. Again this came through the dramatic circumstances of God asking Abraham to sacrifice his only son, Isaac. Having obeyed God and trusted him to the point of telling his inquiring son: “God will provide for Himself the lamb for the sacrifice, my son” ([Gn. 22:8](#)), Abraham discovers that God literally does ([Gn. 22:13](#), 14). And this provides the occasion for God to renew his promise to Abraham ([Gn. 22:16–18](#)).

Even the revelation of God to Moses found in [Exodus 3:14](#), the closest formulation we have of God’s being, was given in a specific context. When God appears to Moses in the

burning bush and calls him to go to the Israelites and to the Pharaoh, Moses asks for an identifying name of the God who sent him. God replies: "Tell Israel I am has sent me to you. I am who I am" ([Ex. 3:14](#)). The phrase "I am who I am" does not only "signify that God is a category of being that cannot be defined by reference to any other category" (Clements 1978:63); it is also a reference to God as a living and dependable God. This appears to be the significance of the addition of verse [15](#): "Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel: 'The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.' " The implication is that as God has been with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, so he will be with Moses and Israel. Furthermore, the reference to these three patriarchs (here and elsewhere) underscores the personal nature of God.

The personal nature of God is again emphasized in God's opening statement in [Exodus 20](#): "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" (v.2). Clements has rightly drawn the following three conclusions from this statement: first, God's relationship to Israel is fundamental to knowing and understanding God; secondly, the knowledge of God in the Old Testament is tied to an event of Israel's past and thirdly, God liberates from both political and moral oppression (1978:55, 56). He adds: "Yahweh, the God of Israel, is the God of freedom, the champion of the oppressed, the guardian of the poor and the avenger of those who have been unjustly treated" (Clements 1978:56). This provides us with a link for the New Testament p. 97 understanding of God.

The events which marked the beginning of the New Testament era are strikingly similar, at least in emphasis, to those of Abraham. When the angel appeared to Mary and told her, "Behold, you will conceive in your womb, and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus" ([Lk. 1:31](#)), puzzled, she replied: "How can this be?" ([Lk. 1:34](#)). Then the angel tells her: "Nothing will be impossible with God" (v.37); Mary's reaction is the same as Abraham's: she accepts and believes (v.38).

Following the angel's visit, Mary goes up to see Elizabeth. There she expresses her faith, in the *Magnificat*, in terms which recall [Exodus 20:2](#):

For the Mighty One has done great things for me;
And holy is his name.
And His mercy is upon generation after generation
Toward those who fear Him.
He has done mighty deeds with His arm;
He has scattered those who were proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down rulers from their thrones;
And exalted those who were humble.
He has filled the hungry with good things;
And sent away the rich empty-handed

[\(Lk. 1:49-53\)](#).

Again God is feared, worshipped, loved, and known for what he does in concrete historical events.

The incarnation had no other purpose than to cause people to know God in the actual person of Jesus. For "no one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him" ([Jn. 1:18](#)). Even the disciples had difficulty in understanding and accepting that. This may have been the reason why Jesus' declaration in the Upper Room ([Jn. 14:1-4](#)) prompted two questions. Thomas saying: "We know neither where you are going nor the way" (v.5) and Philip adding: "Show us the father, that is enough for us" (v.8). The emphasis in Jesus' reply to both questions is on the

identity between him and God the Father (vv.6, 7, 8, 10, 11). To know God is to know the Jesus they now see; seeing Jesus is seeing God!

So the biblical record makes plain the fact that God's attributes are not merely intellectual abstractions; they rise out of a specific context, that of faith and obedience. Furthermore they are not ideas reached by societal consensus; they are discovered as God reveals himself to people in history. p. 98

THE DOCTRINE OF GOD AND AFRICAN THEOLOGY: A CASE STUDY

So far we have emphasized the fact that our understanding of the Bible cannot be separated from our prior questions and concerns. Those prior questions, which are largely cultural and philosophical in nature, govern hermeneutics. We have shown what this means for our understanding of the doctrine of God. Now is the time to reflect on the implications for the contextualization of theology, particularly African theology.

THEOLOGY IN THE PRESCRIPTIVE MODE

My understanding of theology is that it is reflection on God's self-disclosure contained in the Scriptures with the purpose of generating the knowledge of God and better obedience. In this perspective, theology is neither a luxury nor only an intellectual endeavour; it is a matter of life and death for Christian communities. I have chosen to call *prescriptive theology* the method used to achieve the above purpose. Our primary concern should not be to study the beliefs and thoughts of particular groups, Christian or otherwise. Rather the question which should constantly be before us is: how will biblical Christianity look when a specific group of people (with their cultural and religious background) reflect on God's word from their context? Prescriptive theology, then, will always have a specific target: a given Christian community in a given cultural milieu. Generalizations, if they are made at all, must come later.

Prescriptive theology is purposeful theology. Its aim is to deepen the hold of scriptural truths on the hearts and minds of people so as to transform them more and more into the likeness of Christ. Such a theology is urgently needed in Africa today and it has a strategic role in reversing what some observers have called the originality of African religions in that they have shown a remarkable ability to transform imported religions (Deschamps 1970:122). Having thus clarified our method, let us now proceed with the case study.

GOD IN BOBO WORLDVIEW

We will focus our attention on the question of God's relationship with human beings as understood by the Bobo of Mali and Upper Volta. The Bobo like many other African peoples, show relatively little concern for God as God. They acknowledge his existence and they fear him. But as Creator and sustainer of the universe, God is now p. 99 absent from the daily life of the people though the Bobo think, he was once as close to them as the sky was to the earth.

We need not dwell any longer on the question of the *Deus absconditus* of African religions. Suffice it to say here that for the Bobo, God cannot be localized or known and no one can entertain direct communication with him. Nevertheless "he is never a stranger, never absent and everything belongs to him" (Sanon 1977:179). While the Bobo view God as all powerful and all knowledgeable, their attention and devotion is given to those intermediaries and mediators sent by God. Reflecting on the Bobo understanding of God, G. Le Moal writes:

The Bobo are inclined to conceptualize the very person of the supreme God ... God, in his essence, is thought unknowable; the nature of his being as well as everything which surrounds him directly are incomprehensible because they are unintelligible in principle. Placed before the problem of the knowledge of God, Bobo theology—reminding us of the position of the ancient Christian schools known as ‘apophatic’—opposes a kind of negative *a priori* (1980:91).

Le Moal does not indicate a particular thinker of the apophatic Christian schools but the unknowability of God in Bobo thought is quite similar to that of Dionysios the Areopagite. In that sense, Bobo worldview and Platonism (and some aspects of Western thought) agree.

But the apophatic method does not represent Dionysios’ entire theological method. We have seen that the two modes (the *via affirmativa* and the *via negativa*) are both part of the discursive reason. The affirmative way (or the cataphatic method) describe the most noble to the least noble of divine attributes; it multiplies words. The negative way (or the apophatic method) takes us from the most humble to the most noble of divine attributes; it leads to silence and awe before God (Roques 1958:xxvi). The difference between the Bobo and the Pseudo-Denys is that the Bobo think that “negative *a priori*” is the only proper way to deal with the question of the knowledge of God.

Nevertheless the similarity between the Dionysian writings and Bobo on such a crucial question as the knowledge of God has far reaching implications for the task of contextualizing theology. It implies, for instance, the impossibility of developing African theology on superficial similarities between African religions and either the Bible or other religions. Mbiti’s *Concepts of God in Africa* is an example of such a comparative methodology. His purpose is to show p. 100 that “African peoples are not religiously illiterate” (Preface, p.xiii). He devotes Part One and Part Two of his book to how Africans describe the nature and the active attributes of God. This is an *exposé* of the attributes of God such as omnipotence, omnipresence, etc., as well as transcendence as found in traditional theological textbooks. African ideas of God may indeed be according to Mbiti’s descriptions and Africans may be as religious as any people of earth; but that does not prove them right in the light of biblical revelation. Mbiti fails here to make a significant contribution to African Christian theology because he remains imprisoned in Western (and African?) theological modes.

An African reading or hearing the Old Testament cannot help but notice similarities between some aspects of the social structures and religious institutions of ancient Israel and those of traditional African societies. If one builds a theology on those (as many have done) one will have missed the point of biblical revelation. For God’s concern is not to teach us about social or religious institutions; rather he calls his people to transcend these and know him as the Lord Almighty. That God Almighty can be known, even though he can never be totally comprehended, is the qualitative difference between biblical faith and all paganisms, ancient or modern!

CONCLUSION

This has been an exercise in how the Bible should be taken to lighten our path in our task of developing theologies in context. It is my conviction that this could be applied to every single area of theology. First, we should deprogramme our hermeneutics so that we don’t only see in the Bible what our hermeneutical key tells us is there. This will help us reduce the effects of our pre-understandings. Secondly, we should read the Bible with the purpose of gaining new understanding. Thirdly, we should see how this affects our total context.

I cannot end this paper without calling attention to the practical implications of what I have learned in the course of this research. First is the necessity for all of us to listen to one another. No one has the infallible method of just letting the Bible speak for itself. Secondly the resources wasted in teaching the traditional attributes of God (say) in African theological institutions could be better utilized in teaching our students to reflect on the Bible. Thirdly, I have anew understood why the Old Testament is the Word of God: it is not because it Contains interesting (and sometimes boring) stories; it is because it teaches me that the supreme heresy is to remove God p.101 from history. This moves me, more than ever before, to communicate as best as I can the historical dimension of faith in Christ!

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Rev. Tite Tienou is Executive Secretary of the Theological Commission of the Association of Evangelicals of Africa and Madagascar. p. 102

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