

**Engagement with Gabriel Molehe Setiloane's
Motho ke Modimo theological discourse:
key lessons learnt**

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Introduction

Gabriel Molehe Setiloane argues fiercely for the place and function of African theology in mainstream theological discourse. Note that Setiloane had been part of the black *theologisation* process before engaging in serious research and reflection on what he called a distinct feature and character of African theology. In the early 1970s, Setiloane (1971) battled with the definition of black theology as a term:

“... used in reference to the whole area of theological thinking by the Black Man in the world. It is negatively inspired by the fact that in the past, it is felt, theologians have been insensitive to and neglectful of certain experiences of mankind in our life together on this planet.”¹

Setiloane even challenged the notion that the black theological ‘enterprise’ began in the United States of America. In a special article entitled *Black theology: A black theologian from South Africa*, Setiloane explains what this is all about, tracing phases of interpretation and engagement in the USA and citing specifically that:

My own point of view is that black theology, as I have tried to define [it] ... did not begin in the United States. Indeed our American brothers with TV cameras all around, mass media and communication gadgets about, and news-worthiness of their electrically charged situation, have stolen our thunder and helped to make black theology, even as all the causes of the Black Man, famous.²

¹ Informal discussions with GM Setiloane – Kroonstad, Mangaung, 2001 and the *Black Theology: a black theologian from South Africa explains what is* (1971) publication in the *South African Outlook*.

² *Black Theology: a black theologian from South Africa explains what it is* - article in the *South African Outlook* and informal discussions with GM Setiloane – Kroonstad, Mangaung, 2001.

It has always been Setiloane's aim since starting the first Religious Studies Department at the University of Botswana in the late 1960s to develop African religion and culture in terms of the contemporary challenges of his time. From within African religious consciousness, it was Setiloane's ambition to academically develop its spirituality and morality into the public sphere, into governance and into corporate South Africa's systems and institutions. On the one hand, as Setiloane argued, African religion and culture function in these spheres as a *sine qua non* for all Africans. According to him African people bring this spirituality and morality to their workplace every day of their lives. It is present in their activities, their labour, their communication and interaction with their fellow beings – whether kin, customers or strangers. On the other hand, as he strongly argued, this is not recognised or appreciated by those who are not of African descent. This along with some other contradictions – dating from the colonial and apartheid periods – “muddy the waters from the various sides in virtually every encounter we as South Africans engage in virtually on a daily basis, be that in the office, in conferences, across negotiation tables or even in the kitchens and gardens of our country” (Setiloane).³

Setiloane's primary conviction was to develop African sensibility so that it may confront the modern and, today, corporate and global world. He saw that this had to be done so that Africans could engage with and compete within the context of the complexities of this world from within their own religious and cultural assumptions. For Setiloane, no development is possible if this is not done – Africa will then remain alienated from both its religious and cultural roots and from global progress, as this applies technologically and otherwise.

The basis for African divinity

Setiloane argued strongly that “*Modimo ga O itsiwe*”: “God is not known.” He claimed:

My fathers said, when by some great miracle, pestilence or ordeal, he had struck in their midst: *Gaoitsiwe*: and that name was given to a child who was born in conjunction with the incident as a reverberating testimony, and later, when he was called by other boys at play, by his parents, by other men and old men at the *kgotla* where they deliberated on the unfathomability of their God. Even their fathers had found him so: unknowable. “*Ke mokgwa wa gagwe*”, they would reply if you

³ Setiloane (1976), *The image of God among the Sotho-Tswana*.

persuaded them further with questions: “It is His nature” (this unknowability: His attribute).⁴

He also attempted a comparative study with the West African narratives, in particular the Youruba Nigerians. They

struggle still hard with words, and the science and sound of language to show that their *Orise* is the same God that the Egyptians knew as *Osiris*; the Cameroonians claim that their *Lisa* is a permutation of the same; and also their *Bemba* their *Lesá*. But, on the southern tip of Africa, the Zulus speak of us all, to confirm our fathers and mothers, when they say: ‘He is *Uvelingqaki*’: One whose origin, or source, is a puzzle. It is a riddle. We know where our ancestors came from. ‘For so-and-so, married so-and-so, and they begot so-and-so, who, in turn, married ... and so on and so on.’ But He! He (God) is an enigma. No one seems to have begotten him; no one knows where he came from: *Uvelingquaki!* That is why he is even above the ancestors, and they minister to him, bowing their heads, doing obeisance and clapping their hands in peace – greeting him, as our fathers, and the great men, do to their Chief. For *Uvelingqaki* is a great Chief. Hence, the Zulu fathers call him *Unkulunkulu*: He who is great and above all.⁵

In this regard Setiloane warns that one must never

‘point your finger to the sky’, my mother taught me, and so my father was taught by his mother, and his father, before him, by his mother, when he was a child. I wondered why. I did not ask. The way she said it showed that it was a serious matter. Later, she told me: ‘It is the abode of *Modimo*. If you do, you might push your finger into his face.’ For *Modimo* lives *godimo* (above) *legodimong* (in the sky). That is why the Zulu call him *Inkosi Yamazulu*. The King of the skies. His abode is as boundless as he is limitless.⁶

⁴ GM Setiloane, *Introduction to African Theology*, unpublished papers (not dated).

⁵ GM Setiloane, *Introduction to African Theology*, unpublished papers (not dated).

⁶ GM Setiloane, *Introduction to African Theology*, unpublished papers (not dated).

In this regard he tells a story about a MoSotho young man who was not satisfied to sit in confusion about *Modimo*, his ways, his abode, and his being.

He left his mountain-fast home in search of him. Through vale and dale, lion-infested savanna, Fekisi went, to the unknown *Ntsoana - Tsatsi*, the land of the rising sun, where legend says, man was first created by *Modimo* (for he is *Modiri* - Creator, too, this *Modimo*). Through desert and dense rainforest, he travelled, many days, many months, until he reached a shore. He crossed the sea, and came to the land of *Ntsoana - Tsatsi*. But, he never saw *Modimo*, not in his flesh. He had to die first. However, following him, in the pages of the book, across the veil of death, we realise that the *Modimo* who meets Fekisi, the one he had so relentlessly sought, leaving his cattle and beautiful 'heathen' home, is the same one who has come to be known through Christianity and the Bible. It is he who greets Fekisi with: 'You will be with me in my kingdom. You are about to enter the Holy city.'

It is exactly this gliding over so easily from the darkness of 'African heathenism' which Thomas Mofolo does with Fekisi in *Moeti oa Bochabela*, which has brought about a volley of criticism and questions as Africans seek to relate *Modimo* of our fathers to Christianity and it is God.⁷

He challenged two volumes published by WC Willoughby, a scholar of great eminence, who denies that the Supreme

⁷ GM Setiloane, *Introduction to African Theology*, unpublished papers (not dated).

Being of Bantu or any other African experience is the same as the God of Christianity. Yet, he admits that they distinguished between him and *Badimo* (their ancestors) in their rites:

Bakwena experts assured me that none but the Supreme Spirit can send rain; but their prayers for the rain are addressed to the Spirits of the ruling dynasty, who intercede for them at the court of One too great to be approached by mortals ... While John V. Taylor grants our fathers the credit of a *Primal Vision* of God and his ways, he is nevertheless impatient with their sons' inability to show 'wherein they are different'. Why should there be a difference? It is the same God who reveals himself. Surely experience of him in men of various nations should not be different beyond only the accident of their geographical and cultural situations! Truth - and God is ultimate Truth - is variegated; but it is still One.⁸

⁸ GM Setiloane, *Introduction to African Theology*, unpublished papers (not dated).

The following summarises Setiloane's views in this regard:

- (a) Those who interpret this view, the Idowus, Mbitis and Mulagos of Africa, can speak no other than as the Christians they are. It is difficult to the point of impossibility for Fekisi to describe his journey to the "Holy City" in any other language than that of that city. It is the only means of communication at his disposal.
- (b) The concepts and images of the African view are not easy to contain in the dry, analytic "western scientific" modes, for in the primary sense of the terms the Bantu have a science and logic of their own. Our trouble with Bantu mentality is not that it differs innately from our own, but that it often bewilders us with perverse deductions from unuttered assumptions. It is these unspoken postulates that matter most. The structure of a man's thought may be seen in the utterances, but the bedrock of his conclusions, being composed of his assumptions, so self-evident to him that to mention them would be to cast a slur upon his interlocutors' intelligence, is seldom exposed. Men of archaic and modern civilisation alike get into the way of taking for granted whatever is generally regarded as ultimate fact by the community in which they are reared.
- (c) The African world-view, described by Fr Vincent Mulago as *L'union Vitale* (Vital Participation), whose characteristics are a life "as it had been derived and received from a source of 'power' as it turns towards power, is seized by it and seizes it" is not easy to understand for anyone who has not "participated" fully in African life. This is where many a Western scholar has gone wrong. Africa cannot be put into a microscope, studied and be fully understood from an "objective empirical" platform. In fact, no people

really can be. Willoughby himself confesses that after having being put under the tutelage of “wise old men” to learn “the tribal conception of life, law, religion”, and for a quarter century thereafter diligently having studied the life and thought of the tribes between the Vaal and the Zambezi Rivers, and read widely in relevant literature, nevertheless says: “[Yet] the more I read the more ready were my native neighbours to correct my mistakes, and provide what was lacking in my knowledge.” That is Africa: an enigma to Western metaphysics and analysis!

Even so, let us find out if there are elements in African belief that can contribute to understanding by Christianity - some aspects of the faith and experience of my fathers uniquely spotlighted so that even the Christian-bred conscience can behold the footsteps of God, and discern a similarity to the truths that Christian teachings hold dear.

Motho ke Modimo theological discourse

As he (Setiloane) proclaimed, “The faith of my fathers, borne out in the life they lived, declares the universal truth, which is forgotten so often by post-Reformation-Christianity with its emphasis on individual salvation: that man can only realise his manhood in community. In the African experience, every phase of the individual’s activity is controlled by a common sense of obligation to “law and custom”.⁹ Indeed the “individual is regarded by the Bantu as a kind of political zoid, or unit of the tribal organism, whose functions must be subordinate to the normative idea of tribal life, and whose potentiality is fully attained only in the matrix of that life. If we should substitute words like “human” or “of all mankind” in the place of the adjective “tribal” used twice in the above passage, this is basically what good Biblical Christianity should seek to

⁹ Informal discussions with GM Setiloane – Kroonstad, Mangaung, 2001.

make of man in relation to the community, which today is the whole world. Miss Vandervort, sent out to be a missionary among the Azande, learnt this wonderful Christian truth from them, pagan as they were: “even as no man of them lives alone, so they never allow anyone to die alone”.¹⁰

Yet, all this community feeling is tempered with respect for the *ubuntu* of each. It is the “African’s indirect speech” remarks Swaliem Sidhom of the experience of his native Egypt, the Sudan and Kenya.

For Setiloane it is the African way of preserving the next man’s dignity. As a host you never ask a man whether you can do something for him. You are expected to do all you can. This “keeping of the dignity of the other” that Setiloane presents is confirmed by Casalis¹¹, the pioneer French Missionary (circa 1830) who came to know the people of Southern Africa before they came into contact with Western ways:

‘There’, he records, ‘everyone approaches the most powerful chiefs without ceremony’, and ‘the meanest subject has a right of appeal of judgement of the sovereign, even in matters of the smallest importance’. *Motho ga a latlhwe* my fathers used to say, and still do: ‘Man is not throwing away’ or ‘discarding like a useless bone’. He should not be deserted in time of need; be hurt, physically, mentally or spiritually; or have his dignity abrogated with impunity. They also used to say, *Motho ke modimo*. ‘Man is a sacred being, a divine creature.’ Therefore even the killing of him in battle, the destruction of an enemy in self-defence, needed its drastic consequences - the wrath of *Badimo* - to be

¹⁰ GM Setiloane, *Introduction to African Theology*, unpublished papers (not dated).

¹¹ Author of the *Basutos* (1865) and *Etudes de la langue du bechuena* (1843).

removed by ritual cleansing and ceremony. No human being is dispensable.¹²

The divine presence

All these views and attitudes had their source in the fact that, as Setiloane states,

my fathers lived in constant awareness of, or even obsession with, the presence of the divine in their midst. 'The Africans' instinct for God', says Willoughby¹³ 'is the deepest thing in his soul'. Belief in the existence of God is never questioned: His presence is felt to impinge upon the lives of people, and the affairs of the community. He has a sense of mystery, a feeling that he is somehow related to the unseen and dependent upon it. Sometimes he feels that he is in touch with it; then he is conscious of hope and vigour. At other times he feels out of harmony with it, and makes no doubt that the break must be due to himself or the social group of which he is but a fragment; that self-centeredness has caused alienation, and that peace can be found only in the sacrifice of self-will. He cannot resist the feeling that death is not the end of life. In fact, if it came at the right time, he found in it 'ecstatic fulfilment'.¹⁴

In this case human relationships are all seen as within this overwhelming presence which endows some people with power and knowledge almost tangible for its reality; an

¹² GM Setiloane, *Introduction to African Theology*, unpublished papers (not dated).

¹³ Who wrote extensively about the nature worship and taboo among Africans (1932).

¹⁴ Informal discussions with GM Setiloane – Kroonstad, Mangaung, 2001.

experience that leaves no doubt that the human soul can be stimulated by the divine.

Retribution and judgement

All human beings' life, conduct and dealings with others, argues Setiloane are, according to the African view, under judgement. Over the years, Setiloane argues, liberal theology has stripped the Christian god of this role of being the judge of human beings, their affairs and those of their nations. God has thus degenerated into a passive, permissive, loving, grandparent. The God who works on the principle that "the soul that sins shall die" or even that the iniquities of the fathers shall be visited upon their children (whatever way we understand that principle to work) is himself dead in many Christian consciences. For my fathers, through the instrumentality of the ancestors it was different.

*The dead are not dead, they are ever near us,
approving or disapproving of all our actions,
they chide us when we go wrong;
bless us and sustain us for good deeds done,
for kindness shown, and strangers made to feel
at home;
they increase our store, and punish our pride.¹⁵*

Morality was guarded, equity maintained and human depravity curbed. Surely this is the same principle that underlies the observation that "the wages of sin is death" or that "there will be grinding misery for every human being who is an evil-doer ... and for every well-doer there will be glory".

No sacred-secular dichotomy

¹⁵ Poem by GM Setiloane – from unpublished papers, not dated.

For Setiloane “[t]he divinity with which my fathers perceived all things charged made them have no need to differentiate between the sacred and the secular, in deed and object. Not only the ceremonial and ritualistic were the realm of the activity of the divine, and “super-natural”. A person’s every moment, sleeping or walking, was laden with *Badimo* - these emissaries of the Supreme Being. Every meal was communion not only with the living, but with the unseen members of the community as well; every human converse, a conference with the spirits. It is exactly this dabbling with “spirits”,¹⁶ the perceiving of what has been variably called “soul”, “essence” or “power”, behind and in “things” that has sent many scurrying away from what they call “animism”. The Western person, with his or her passion for scientific fact rationally observed, has no capacity for this kind of language descriptive of phenomena. Yet, the same Western person will split the atom and unleash from within it a “force” and a “power” strong enough to make pigmies of a thousand genii.

Setiloane argues:

John V Taylor may be on to something when he suggests that one of the two poles of a genuinely African theology - and therefore a point at which it can make a marked contribution to Christian thinking - is a doctrine of God, the Holy Spirit, freshly formulated. For if we could have a better understanding of how that God, the Holy Spirit, who is the source and the giver of life, power, truth and righteousness in man, who leads us, guides us, confirms in us what is good, judges us and yet forgives our infirmities, consoles us in sorrow, and helps us to pray, ‘pleading for us’, is yet the same Spirit

¹⁶ GM Setiloane, *Introduction to African Theology*, unpublished papers (not dated).

through whom the whole universe came into being, in whom it coheres and is held together, as it waits eagerly for the final revelation of the sons of God, then perhaps we can have a greater appreciation for the experience of the African genius which claims this in every way.¹⁷

Motho in perspective

According to Setiloane, to an outsider the most abrasive and challenging element in African theology is its teaching on the ancestors. In this case no African theology so far glosses lightly over it. They all defend it even to the extent of finding some new names to explain it to foreigners. For example, “The Living Dead” (Mbiti 1970). Actually the concept of ancestors is bound together with the African understanding of *Umntu-Motho*, i.e. its estimate of the human person (man). This understanding is embedded in the view that the human person is incorruptible and persists after corporal death. The belief that the human person shares in divinity is far more pronounced and practically acknowledged in African theology than in Western theology, which seems to be contrasted to shy away from it as reminiscent of *humanism*, a heresy of the last century in the West. Africans declare simply that *Motho ke Modimo* – a human person is something sacred or even divine, i.e. it participates in divinity, without necessarily claiming equality with it.

African theology from African traditional religion, declares Setiloane, views the human being *umuntu-motho* as dynamic. The human is *force vitale* (Tempels 1959); as such it possesses *Seriti-Isithunzi*, a magnetic energy, which makes it a relating entity in “vital participation” (Mulago) with similar entities, which may or may not be human. This human ‘vital force’ *serithi-isithunzi* is derived from the all-pervasive, original, determining Vital Force, Modimo, which is the Source of Being and which accounts for human indestructibility and, therefore, continuation in ‘vital participation’ as ancestors after corporal death. This continued life of the human after death is not for its own sake but for the continued sustenance of the physically living as well as for ethical-moral purposes of ensuring righteous dealing between humans as also between humans and other beings in nature, animate as well as inanimate. Ancestors are “the guardians of the morality” of the group, i.e. community in family or tribe or nation. They carry out this responsibility with excellence and effect because they are Badimo, *Va-dimu*, Wa-zinu (Swahili), literally “the people of Modimo (divinity) and transmitters of Modimo’s essence, energy, Vital Force”.

¹⁷ GM Setiloane, *Introduction to African Theology*, unpublished papers (not dated).

- What about the Incarnation?

Is there a place for Jesus in this scheme of African thinking? To this we would ask: have the other people always found a place for him in their scheme of thinking? For Setiloane it would appear that he has always been the outsider, the unknown, and uncalculated-for factor, thus the symbolic significance of “no place at the inn”. As he argues

he has always been (and shall he always be?) ‘the stone which the builders (of cosmologies and systems of thought) have cast away’. That is why we are all judged when we come face to face with him: this man of Nazareth. Western Christian thinking says nothing of its history and its action! It cannot claim to have done any better understanding of him, over the ages, or even now. No, not while Rudolf Bultmann, John Robinson and Carl MacIntyre still wrangle over who he is, and what his claim on mankind is. Africa, in her lack of sophistication (simple faith?), may be speaking for all:

For ages he alludes us, this Jesus of
Bethlehem, Son of Man ...
He alludes us still ...”¹⁸

For Setiloane, Jesus like his father, he is unknowable!

And yet it is exactly this in the African understanding of *Modimo*, his unknowability and incomprehensibility, in spite of his being *Magnum ad Infinitum*, which makes Jesus, the man of Nazareth, a possible and acceptable phenomenon. This may be the reason why, as he argued, his fathers were so ready to

¹⁸ GM Setiloane, *Introduction to African Theology*, unpublished papers (not dated).

accept Christianity without first finding it necessary to shed their world-view, much to the chagrin of the missionaries. They found in Jesus another confirmation of the unknowability of their *Modimo*. Here, perhaps, lies an answer to John V Taylor's (1958) confusion in Buganda over "while the missionaries emphasised the sinful condition of man, the Atonement and Saviourhood of Christ, the conversion of the individual through conscious repentance and faith, and the offer of sanctification through the Holy Spirit",¹⁹ the Africans did not respond as they wished. What was communicated was primarily news about the "transcendent, personal and righteous God. While we, in Africa, may accept all the complicated talk about the atonement and saviourhood of Christ, yes, and even indulge in it, he stands out, to us, more significantly as the symbol of the Unity of Man. The white man, irreverent, lying, proud and marauding, would not find acceptance into the humanity (manness) which we appropriate to ourselves in our concept of Buntu, with its link with *Badimo* and *Modimo*, if it were not because of this Jesus Christ: The Great Uniter. Therefore rather than all of Western theology, "The veil of the temple was rent in twain", "He has broken the middle wall of partisanship", and "The Prince of Peace" means so much to us. The method Jesus employed to bring about this peace between man and man, and man and *Modimo*, falls straight into the form of ritual we know too well. There is no doubt, therefore, that Africa with wounds still raw and smarting from her history and experience can identify with suffering:

Beaten, tortured, imprisoned, spat upon,
truncheoned,
Denied by his own, and chased like a thief in
the night;

¹⁹ GM Setiloane, *Introduction to African Theology*, unpublished papers (not dated).

Despised and rejected like a dog that has fleas

...

These, states Setiloane,²⁰ “we see and understand in the life, and the death on the cross of Jesus, the re-performance, indeed magnified ten thousand times, of that ritual ... in order to bring about reconciliation and through this communion, to rebuild community”. Thus Thomas Mofolo, one of the first indigenous Christian writers from Lesotho, finds the crown and end of Fekisi’s search for *Modimo* in the hazy mists and imagery of the Epistle to the Hebrews: *He entered once and for all into the Holy Place, taking not the blood of goats and calves but his own blood ...* (Heb 9:12). Exactly what it means I do not think Mofolo himself knew. Nor do I! But there is a mesmeric mystic attraction about it. It raises echoes of truths, acquired not by learning nor by intellect, but by something in the blood and bones; truths hidden far away in the depths of African genesis! Does Western Christian thought really know what this description, and others, of Christ’s work and achievements means? I am persuaded that we are all groping. However for us in Africa, it would appear we still have something to hitch to this Christ, some experience still hungrily agape for the tenor of his life and suffering and death ... if only we would connect them. For:

As in that sheep or goat we offer in sacrifice,
Quiet and uncomplaining,
Its blood falling to the ground to cleanse it and
us;
And making peace between us and our fathers
long passed away.
He is that LAMB!

²⁰ See Setiloane published article: *Confessing Christ today*, in *Journal of Theology in Southern Africa*. Vol. 12, September 1975: 29-38. Also “*Christus heute bekennen: aus der Afrikanische Sicht von Mensch und Gemeindegemeinschaft*” in *Zeitschrift für Mission*, vol 2, No. 1, 1976.

**His blood cleanses, not only us,
Not only the clan,
Not only the tribe,
But all, All MANKIND:
Black and White, Brown and Red,
All Mankind!²¹**

- The African traditional views, with emphasis on “wholeness”

This is what Setiloane had to say about this:

I have already professed the positive reactions aroused in our African make-up by terms such as “integrity of Creation”. They ring a bell because as Western observers and interlocutors with the African view have discovered, they are mostly typified by their emphasis on the ‘wholeness of all being’. It is firstly and only when the WCC goes to meet Africans and engages in serious dialogue with them on their own ground that the expression ‘wholeness of human life’ comes into use in ecumenical documents. Please overlook its preoccupation with ‘human life’. This is the anthropocentrism we have been fighting against, which of course is an illness of Western Christian origin. In fact the African view, which is popularly and derogatively referred to as *animism* is a far wider and totally inclusive concept.²²

Western Christians attempt to understand and use it as follows:

The term “wholeness” is primarily intended to express the desire to include the primal inheritance and our contemporaries who are its most explicit representatives in the current Christian invitation to engage in dialogue with people of living tradition. This section of our fellow human beings and the contribution the primal tradition and cultures have made to the rest of humankind have too often been ignored and regarded as worthy of serious attention only as possible objects for conversion. Christians have seldom turned to listen to them, and, if

²¹ Extract from the Setiloane paper with the title: *Confessing Christ today: Man and Community* (not dated).

²² Informal discussions with GM Setiloane – Kroonstad, Mangaung, 2001.

possible, to learn from them, much less to acknowledge the existence of primal forces within themselves (Taylor 1976:1).

Significant in the quotation above is how the interlocutor, representing the Christians, has so readily already appropriated the African concept “wholeness” to make it a Christian property into which “the fellow human being of primal traditions and cultures” is, out of charity and magnanimity, included by the Western Christian world. This is worse than anthropocentrism! It is the same arrogance that has taken upon itself the audacity to divide the world into three or even more parts, reserving the first place for itself. Having said that we must also admit that there is something in the primal world-view, African and elsewhere, that lends itself to this kind of treatment. I venture to suggest that its vulnerability lies hidden down in its very view and understanding: its ability to see all as “whole”:

‘To look on nature, not as in an hour
Of thoughtless youth; ...’
But to feel and experience in and through it
‘A presence that disturbs (me) with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfaced,
Whose dwelling is in the light of setting suns
And the round ocean, and the living air,
And the blue sky and in the mind of man.
A notion and spirit that impels
All (thinking) things, all objects of thought,
And rolls through all things’ (Wordsworth: “Tintern Abbey”
{my brackets}).

It is this ability to

‘accommodate’ others and their views of the (African) primal world-view, which has been its Achilles heel. It is good enough to accommodate smaller and weaker interlocutors in dialogue; big, powerful and relentless ones have the tendency to swallow up their accommodating partners in dialogue. A clear example is the way in which Christianity has swallowed up the primal world-view of the ancient Hebrews and made its symbols its own so that these days one becomes a laughing stock who dares to describe Christianity as, in fact, a sect of Judaism. I

believe this is exactly what is happening to the African and other primal worldviews.²³

For example, listen to this confession of a Western Christian who meets it face to face:

We had very impressive experiences while participating in the pattern of worship that were physical as well as intellectual. I also had the disturbing experience of being made aware that certain parts of my development as a human had been stunted or repressed (Taylor 1976).

In other words, this contact had helped Setiloane grow in his understanding as a human being and a Christian. Indeed this is exactly why African and other primal world-views have not hit the spotlight of ecumenical theological discussion and debate. They seep in gently, to be absorbed and utilised toward the total wholeness of human thought in search of Truth. They remind one of vitamins: I suggest that this accounts for why African Christians like myself who rediscover the truth, weight and totality of wisdom and divine revelation in their African traditional primal inheritance do not feel compelled to leave their Christian faith, but rather find themselves fulfilled and brave enough to claim a more vital and vivacious understanding of our common Christian faith, albeit with an embarrassing African flavour. That is what African theology is all about! For, while

[r]eligion and culture are of course closely related to each other they need, however, not be identified. It is therefore possible that religious systems as such may decline, disappear from public view, or even vanish altogether, while much of the religious culture with which they have been associated may continue. In particular many of the beliefs and values, the views about reality, man (sic) and the world, that prevailed in a primal society, may survive the loss of overt religious systems and continue to provide at least part of its terms of reference in a new and more complex situation, indeed even within a new religious faith and practice (Taylor 1976).

²³ Informal discussions with GM Setiloane – Kroonstad, Mangaung, 2001.

Conclusion

I cannot conclude without drawing attention to an inevitable element in the African traditional world-view. The old Greeks called it *Nemesis*; in the Old Testament we have come to call it retribution. The principal here is that inhuman behaviour, i.e. behaviour that is outside the pale of Botho-Ubuntu, is crass, unconsidered, insensitive and destructive of the community life (which, by the way, includes the animals and plants, the earth, mountains and rivers!), never ever escapes the wrath of divinity and its punishment right here on earth. In other words, the forces that govern or regulate our life together in the universe (Creation) are so set that no evil, sin, inhumanity (lack of Botho-Ubuntu) ever escapes unpunished. Looking around the world today one is almost driven to believe that we are already beginning to reap the tragic results of human selfishness that “development”, “progress” or “Western Civilisation” has relentlessly wrought by driving out of existence our neighbours – the animals, for trophies and sadistic sport; disembowelling Mother Earth who gave birth to our ancestors for riches (emeralds, gold and diamonds) – only to gain power with which to oppress and subdue others. In the country of my fathers, South Africa, it is beginning to become clear that the so-called modern scientific methods, which have been brought about by the much-vaunted ‘Western Christian Civilisation’, are beginning to show deleterious results on the soil in the grain-growing areas, bleaching it and robbing it of life-giving nutrients, which artificial fertilisers are failing to replace.

What Setiloane found out throughout his research journey is that African Christians in fact Africanise the Christian Western God concept and thus raise it to the level of their concept of Modimo, which is much higher. For instance the story at Lobatse:

So my sweet old lady Methodist Manyano woman informant at Lobatse says: ‘We have learnt nothing new about religion from the missionaries. All they have taught us is *lhabologo*: Western civilization and way of life’. But we are bringing something to Christianity: a view of Divinity much higher, deeper and all pervasive. That is why we quarrel so much with our Christian brothers at ecumenical gatherings. Our expectations of Christianity are different because we come with different presuppositions and different views of the overruling determining divinity, which we all together profess to confess in the Christian fold.²⁴

²⁴ GM Setiloane, unpublished papers.

If so, then Setiloane concludes, “With our higher understanding of Divinity than Western Christian Theology why are we continuing in the Christian fold? I must confess that these days I even find an Ecumenical Bible Study session with my Western Christian Theologian brothers rather irksome and a bore. We need to ask not only why we remain in the Christian fold but as one West African Christian young man asked me in Bezel: ‘Why do we then continue to seek to convert the devotees of ATR?’”²⁵

The question of why we are still in the Christian fold can be answered in different ways. For Setiloane, he felt like someone who has been bewitched and found it difficult to shake off the Christian witchcraft with which he has been bewitched for more than 150 years. As he mentioned:

I cannot say I necessarily like where I am. Secondly, I rationalise my position by taking the view that to be Christian I do not have to endorse every detail of so-called Western Christian Orthodox Historical Theology. Instead it is enough that I confess ‘Jesus as the Christ of God’ i.e. as the most unique unprecedented and so far unrepeated or surpassed human manifestation of Divinity. Note here that I do not say ‘God’ as that might restrict. Is not the most ancient Creed of Christianity before the advent of the second and third dimension simply that ‘Jesus the Christ is the son of God’. It is the theologians of the first five centuries who kept messing it up, the most erroneous ones succeeding because of political reasons.²⁶

As I see it the next task of the African theology is to seriously grapple with the question of Christology – who is Jesus? How does he become the supreme human manifestation of the Divinity? What does Messiahship or Christos become in the African context? Setiloane argued that “[s]ome German theologians were scandalised when I suggested that I would like to look for the Messiah Christos idea in African thinking somewhere in the area of African” *Bongaka*²⁷ and possession of individual persons by Divinity.

As Setiloane argues, this next for African divinity challenges African scholarship undertaken by Africans themselves and should be coupled with serious work into pneumatology. Another area that needs immediate attention especially in Southern Africa is the subtle tension between Black theology versus African theology. One notes that there have been current debates and

²⁵ Informal discussions with GM Setiloane – Kroonstad, Mangaung, 2001.

²⁶ GM Setiloane, unpublished papers.

²⁷ Setiloane defined *ngaka* as an African traditional doctor often derogatively called a “witchdoctor”. For a fuller treatment of this view see his book publication *Image of God among the Sotho-Tswana*, AA Balkema & Son: Rotterdam. 1976:317, Chapters 4 & 5.

discussions but there is an apparent lack of a theological position in this regard.

It is interesting to note and conclude, citing Setiloane's position in this regard,

Of course I believe that Desmond Tutu like most South Africans is confused as to the call he feels in his chest. African Theology or Black Theology. Therefore he lays the charge of being 'brainwashed effectively to think that Western value systems and categories are of universal validity' at the wrong door. For instance I maintain that his call on African Theology to recover its 'prophetic calling' is using a Western Orthodox Christian cliché. Black Theology, he confesses to embrace, has far too easily employed Western Christian norms and understandings like 'prophetic' without examining their presuppositions. When African Theology ventures into this area, and I agree with Desmond Tutu, it is high time we did (the fact that the advent of Idi Amin in Uganda has sent African theologians scattering out of that seat of our thinking is evidence of the urgent need for us to engage in this). It will need to apply its theological divinity but also the implications of *Participation Vitale* in one dynamically related community of beings, human, animal and plant and its theology of Man not only as part of that plethora of beings but as a participant in divinity: as we say in my context the idea that *Motho ke Modimo*: Man is a sacred being. I am sure this, as a starting point of African theology's contribution to the questions of religion and Man in community, should give all of us, especially the black theologians, the leg up which they are so desperately crying for.²⁸

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²⁸ GM Setiloane, *Introduction to African Theology*, unpublished papers (not dated).

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