

PROCESS THEISM AND DIVINE OMNIPOTENCE

I.J.EKPO

Introduction

In *Process and Reality*¹, Alfred North Whitehead conceives God as representing the principle of 'concretion'. By 'concretion', Whitehead means that God is the genus of all creative activity and that this generic character has the being of God as well as the lowliest actual occasion.² According to him, God does not create actual entities but provides them with initial impulse of self creation. Thus Whitehead sees God as the ground of all creativity while the world is the instrument of actualities. That is to say God has the primordial as well as the consequent natures. As primordial nature, God is the genus of all creation, and as the consequent nature, God is the realization of the actual world. Accordingly, the consequent nature acquires integration with the primordial nature and the primordial nature acquires integration with the consequent nature and becomes determined, incomplete and fully actual.³ This means that God offers new potentialities to the world and the world offers New actualities to God in this manner, God and the world move conversely to each other in respect of process. What is implicit in Whitehead's process theory is the view that God and the world are co-creators since each outcome of creativity is merely a phase of God and has the reality of being a partial description of God. In this way, Whitehead's process theory portrays God as a real companion of realities in the process of creativity.

This symbol of God is evident in Taoism where the divine being (Tao) is portrayed to be all-pervading reality which diffuses itself in all things and therefore the ground or underlying principle of all realities.⁴ In Taoism, Tao is believed to be the power that works slowly but finally, the most effective agency in reality. This implies the divine providential activity as the instrument or the underlying principle in the evolution of the world. This view is in harmony with most religious philosophies, according to which the deity is the ground of the established order. But traditional theism, for one reason or another, has made us to believe in divine immutability and omnipotence.⁵ These attributes suggest that God must infact determine every detail of the world. This portrait of God seems to be metaphisically incoherent when considered in relation to human freedom. Yet traditional theism upholds the freedom of rational crea-

tures and at the same time upholds the doctrine of divine omnipotence. The purpose of this paper is to:

- (i) Show how some of these divine attributes like immutability and omnipotence crept into the present traditional theism and
- (ii) argue that process theism can offer us a more viable vision of the Christian Deity.

The fundamental notion of Process Theism

Process theism operates on the one hand from the perspective of Christian faith and on the other hand on the metaphysical context provided by the process philosophy and its doctrine on God. It is opposed to much that has been meant by God in traditional theology and popular metaphysics. It is opposed to:

- (i) God as Cosmic Moralist; that is the image of God as a divine law-giver and judge who proclaims arbitrary set of moral rules and keeps records of offences and punishes the offenders. In a more relaxed or civilized form, it is the view that God's most fundamental concern is the development of moral attitude in man. This means that God is not concerned with enjoyment of rational creatures but that the main purpose in creation is to impose his law on man.
- (ii) God as the Absolute Immutable Being; the idea of absolute and immutable deity stresses that God is completely unaffected by any reality and lacks all passions and emotional response to creaturely adverse conditions. This implies that God is really unrelated to the world. That is to say, God's influence upon the world is in no way conditioned by divine responsiveness to our plight.
- (iii) God as controlling power; this is the belief that God determines every detail of event in the world. This belief can be illustrated by the fact that it is sometimes observed that when a loved one dies prematurely, the question that often arises is why should God allow this to happen or why should God choose to take this life? Also when destructive natural event such as hurricane, earthquake, flood or the like occur, events often spoken of as the act of God. This implies that God is the sole causal agent in the world and is unaffected by the suffering of his creatures.

The traditional doctrine on God as Omnipotent Deity follows logically from the concept of God as cosmic moralist, absolutely immutable and

infinitely powerful being. This doctrine suggest that God must infact determine every detail of events in the world and that nothing happens without his knowledge. This implies the idea of divine simplicity which involved the assertion that all the divine attributes are identical and hence god's knowledge is identical with his causing it. Process doctrine rejects this notion of a deity and maintains that the world as we experience it is a place of process, of change, of becoming, of growth and decay. Process theism therefore upholds the view that an absolute and passionless deity leads to devaluation of life in the world.

The Development of Divine Omnipotence in Christian Thought

The divine reality has never been a subject of controversy in any religious thought (except perhaps in Buddhism where adherents simply believe in a system of contemplation of the 'Unknown Reality') since the deity is the object of devotion. But various religions have different conceptions of the divine being. Generally, the 'God' of religions is anthropomorphic.⁶ That is to say, the 'God' of any religion is usually conceived in human form and is believed to share some of the attribute of man. Granted this assumption, how did the concept of divine omnipotence creep into the Christian conception of God. Let us begin our discussion with the Jewish concept of God.

(i) The influence of the Old Testament

In the Ancient Near East, *El* was the generic term for the deity. *El* was believed to be a member of the supreme Deity of the Pantheon of Ugarit. The term *El* designated power and power was made the basic component in the conception of the divine being. Among the Jews, the term *Shaddai* was used. *Shaddai* designated the one on the mountain.⁷ The cosmic mountain, in Semitic thought, was the home of the deities. *El Shaddai* came to mean 'the God on the Mountain', that is the one who is on the height, the one who is above all, the Almighty or simply the all-powerful. The encounter of the Jews with their God was always on the 'height' - the mountains. Moses and Elijah, for instance, encountered God on Mount Horeb.⁸

Yahweh is another term used by the Jews to designate their deity. When Moses encountered God on Mount Horeb, God revealed Himself to Moses as Yahweh - 'I AM WHO I AM' — the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The term Yahweh formed the basic conception of the nature

and character of Supreme Deity among the Jews. The term was given a causative interpretation. Thus Yahweh brings into being whatever comes into being. That is to say Yahweh is the creator. Thus the Jews came to believe that Yahweh is a personal being who has revealed Himself as the God of His people in the Exodus and Covenant event. Thus it is Yahweh alone who creates, who reveals Himself and imposes His will on the people. It is He alone who saves and judges and to Him alone belongs the kingdom which is as wide as creation.

The notion of 'kingdom' here implies that Yahweh is king. In the Ancient Near East, the function of a king was two fold: war and law. As king, Yahweh fought for the Isrealites and delivered them from bondage in Egypt, assisted them *en route* the promised land and won the land for them. As Lord, Yahweh imposed His will and law on the Israelites. The law was necessary to maintain harmony and justice within the Isrealite community. Thus Yahweh imposes His will on the Israelites and in turn promised to be their God; to deliver, protect and assist them. The Isrealites accepted the obligation to worship Yahweh alone and to maintain the standard of cult and conduct of life Yahweh established. The portrait of the God of Israel here is that of a disciplinarian who imposed His will on the Israelites and promised to protect them if his orders were obeyed and to punish them if they deviated from His stipulations. This is made clear in the Deuteronomic principle and vividly illustrated in the narrative in the Book of Judges - where loyalty to divine law is rewarded with divine protection against the enemies while infidelity is punished by allowing the Israelites to be enslaved. The portrait of Yahweh here is completely ambivalent. The Israelites experienced Yahweh as the one who delivered them from bondage in Egypt. He had compassion on them and gave them the Promised Land to possess. But when the Israelites deviated from Yahweh's stipulations, God punished them.

There is much in what is said above which shows that Yahweh is not all-determining. Though He imposes His will on the Israelites, the people were free to obey and gain rewards or to disobey and be punished. The God of Israelite is not immutable or a passionless deity. He is mutable and is affected or influenced by the moral behaviour of the Israelites. But the interpretation of the Old Testament God in terms of valuations above divine absolute perfection and immutability derived from Greek metaphysics rules out this symbol of God thereby making divine omnipotence to be at logger-heads with human freedom.

(ii) *The influence of Greek Philosophers in shaping Christian Theism*

According to Omoregbe, the Christian concept of God was influenced by the metaphysics of the ancient Greek philosophers.⁹ The early Greek philosophers, like Heraclitus, held that everything was in constant flux while Parmenides maintained that change was an illusion and that reality was in fact unchanging. Subsequent philosophers - Plato and Aristotle - tried to resolve these conflicting views of Heraclitus and Parmenides. Plato, for instance postulated two worlds: the transcendental and unchanging world and the mundane and changing world of senses. For Plato, the former is the real world and this can be perceived by reason alone, but the latter, that is, the sensible world is imperfect and is a reflection of the perfect ideal world. Accordingly, Plato maintained that the unchanging world of ideas is superior to the changing world of senses. Thus immutable things which exist in the ideal world are superior to the changing things which exist in the world of changes, for change connotes inferiority while immutability connotes superiority.¹⁰

Just like for Plato, Aristotle held that change was a mark of imperfection. According to him, change is subject to two principles: potency and act. Potency is the innate capacity to change which all finite beings have while act is; a stage that is arrived at when change has taken place. Because imperfection implies change, and absolutely perfect being cannot be subjected to change. Aristotle further remarked that God is not composed of act and potency like imperfect beings but God is by nature pure act without potency. Consequently, God is absolutely perfect, eternal, immutable, self-subsistent and self-sufficient.¹¹ In order to protect God's perfection, Aristotle further said that God cannot have any relation with the imperfect world because such a relation could mar the absolute perfection of God. As a self-subsistent and self-sufficient being nothing external to Him can affect or influence Him.

The early Christian thinkers came under the influence of this Neo-Platonic conception of God. The Old Testament symbol of God as one who has compassion and affection was abandoned in favour of the symbol of God who is immutable and unchanging. For instance, Clement of Alexandria said that God was impassible, without anger and desire. Origen mentioned that the world was created from eternity and not in time because if it was created in time it would imply a change in God.¹² Consequently, God, for the early Christian thinkers was conceived of as the absolutely perfect, eternal and immutable being.

The Scholastics adopted this symbol of God. St. Thomas Aquinas, one

of the greatest Scholastic thinkers, was an Aristotelian. Accordingly, he maintained that change was a mark of imperfection and that since God is absolutely perfect, He cannot be subject to change. Thus God is a necessary being and nothing outside the Being of God can affect or influence Him.

(iii) *Socio-political and outstanding philosophical Influence*

Apart from the influence of the Old Testament, the Ancient Greek philosophers, and the Scholastic thinkers in shaping traditional theism, we must also mention that when the Western world accepted Christianity, the conception of God as a Messiah who shares in the joys and sorrows of man was abandoned or at least de-emphasized. God was now fashioned in the image of the human imperial ruler as one with unlimited power. The Church 'ignorantly' borrowed this symbol and gave unto God the attribute - 'mighty', 'the great' or simply, the 'all-powerful' which belonged exclusively to Caesar, the imperial ruler. From them, the early Christian thinkers innocently thought of God on the analogy of what existed between Caesar and its subjects and linked this false analogy with the Old Testament and neo-Platonic conception of divine omnipotence in history.

Also to be noted about the influence on traditional theism are the two strands of thought that emerged in the epoch of rationalism, which respectively fashioned God in the image of the overlord. The first was Immanuel Kant who personified God as a great moral force and whose will alone must be obeyed. The second was Spinoza who personified God as an ultimate philosophical principle - derived from his idea of substance as:

*... that which is in itself and conceived through itself ... that which a conception can be formed independently of any other conception.*¹³

The history of Christian theism has betrayed these stages of a combination of various strands of thought - God as eminently real, as immutable, as imperial ruler, as a great moral force and as the ultimate philosophical principle. These symbols of God had enduring influence in shaping traditional theism and subsequently gave rise to the notion of omnipotent deity and this has been employed by traditional theisms as the basic attribute of God. But there is another development which does not

portray God as imperial ruler or as a ruthless moralist or simply as immutable omnipotent being. This development portrays God as dwelling in the tender element in the world which slowly but in quietness operates by love. This idea is rooted in the interpretation of the Bible and in contemporary experience that the God of the Christian faith, while remaining God, is intimate to the hopes, anguish, joys and sorrows, and to the victories and defeats of man and can be precisely called "the God who is involved."¹⁴ This development is to be found in process theism.

Process Theism and the Problem of Evil:

Traditional theism tacitly adheres to the doctrines of divine simplicity, omniscience, immutability and omnipotence. These concepts suggest that God must in fact determine every detail of the world. The doctrine on divine simplicity implies that all divine attributes are identical hence God's knowledge of the world is identical with his causing it. This portrait of God gives the impression of a dictator whom we only have to fear and obey because of his controlling power but whom we may not think of as good. But traditional theism admits of divine perfect goodness and the presence of evil. This situation creates problems for the believers, for if God is perfectly good and He is at the same time sole determiner of all events, then He should not allow evil to exist. Yet the response of traditional theism is at best that evil is really, from divine ultimate perspective, a means to greater good. But our experience, especially instances of innocent suffering and the world's injustice in our contemporary culture calls for a more adequate and convincing response. This response is to be found in process thoughts.

Process theism calls for a freer exploration of the concept of omnipotence. It sees divine creative activity as based upon responsiveness to the world. It conceives God as the realization of the absolute wealth of potentialities. Thus God is portrayed as actual and determinate. By virtue of being determinate, God cannot control the free choices of rational creatures. Hence rational creatures possess a certain degree of autonomy and, therefore, have the ability to resist God's will hence can bring about evil as they in fact have brought it about in the world.¹⁵ Consequently, God only tries to elicit His will through persuasion. That is to say, God's power is persuasive and not coercive as that which could be predicted of a ruthless moralist. Process theologians like John B. Cobb Jr., and Lewis Ford have respectively argued that "... the only power of

any worthwhile result is the power of persuasion",¹⁵ and that "... evil is compatible with unlimited persuasive power".¹⁷

According to these theologians, persuasive power is a more generated mode of power, just the type of power a fully perfect, good deity could be expected to employ especially with reference to the freedom of rational creatures.¹⁸ Persuasive power indicates that divine power is felt always as mercy and never as wrath, as love and never as judgment. Coercive or controlling power tends to betray a symbol of one who is brutal and manipulative and these are repulsive to civilised taste. Divine persuasive power is evident within the context of the workings of our conscience. For our conscience never imposes upon us the decision to make this or that choice but it presents us with alternatives to make our choices. That is to say our conscience often persuades but does not compel us to choose the good in preference to evil.

The process understanding of divine power as persuasive is in harmony with our insight that if we truly love others, we do not seek to control them, impose our will on them nor do we seek to coerce them with promises or threats involving intrinsic rewards or punishments. Instead we try to persuade them to actualise those possibilities which they themselves will find rewarding. We do this by providing them with conditions that would help to open new attractive possibilities. However, this may not rule out controlling power but it means that such control or coercion is exercised as the last resort with the sense of regrets. Jesus' life, message and death which form the climax of God's action in the world which should be seen within the perspective of divine love have been interpreted within the context of divine omnipotence.

Conclusion

From the above, we can say with certainty that the process understanding of divine relation with rational creatures appeals to common sense belief because the freedom of rational creatures is guaranteed the exercise of its inborn endowment. The fact that man is able to make a choice between good and evil explains why there is this or that evil in the world. However, we have to rework the traditional conception of God within the framework of process thought in the light of changed culture which disputes the traditional theistic symbol of God. We have to interpret *creatio ex nihilo*¹⁹ not to refer to the first moment of creation but

to God as the source of everything. This source if not to be understood as a ruthless self-imposed moralist without passion or affection but as loving, merciful and self-limiting in creation. This symbol of God would be more faithful to the dynamic conception of God inherent in the Christian Scriptures because traditional theism has neglected this Scriptural vision of God.

The God of Judeo-Christian Scripture, in process idea, is shown to be profoundly involved in human struggles to the point where God not only affects but is affected by the struggles. For Christ healed the sick, fed the hungry set those in bondage (the demoniac) free and finally died for our transgressions. The God that is Jesus Christ cannot simply be an immutable omnipotent being who is unaffected by our anguish but He is to be seen as a suffering God, for the history of Jesus' death is to be understood as God's action. The crucifixion reveals confrontation with God. The cross shows God as self-identifying, self-differentiating and self-forsaking. Jesus' death is to be understood as the death of God since the suffering of the moment is related to the suffering of God.²⁰

The fact that the traditional conception of God has proved inadequate to contemporary taste does not mean that the Christian faith is wholly displaced. Process theism continues in the effort of clarifying the concept of the object of devotion. It does not produce new argument for the existence of God but continues in the effort to explore and clarify this object of theistic worship. It may be concluded that the major contribution of process theism to the concept of God is its enrichment and clarification of the traditional thought about divine nature. As an adequate and convincing explanation of the nature of God emerges which illuminates human experience and coheres with our understanding of the world, the demand for isolated and abstract ideas - immutability and omnipotence - diminishes. A process vision of God proves more convincing and this can gain more adherents to Christian faith.

Notes and References

1. A.N. Whitehead; *Process and Reality*, corrected edition by D.R. Griffin and Sherburn (New York: Free Press 1978).
2. A.N. Whitehead, *Religion in the Making*, (New York: The world Publishing Company 1960) see pp. 86 - 96.
3. Ibid. p.67
4. *Process and Reality*, op.cit. pp. 349 - 351.

5. Traditional theism asserts immutability, conscience and omnipotence among other divine attributes. These attributes are so interwoven and interrelated that one implies the other within the context of divine simplicity for God's being is His essence. The discussion in this paper is focused on divine omnipotence because other attributes are dependent on it and can only be understood in relation to it.
6. J.I. Omoregbe, "What is God? A Critical Inquiry", *The Nigerian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 3 Nos. 1 & 2 (1983) p. 17.
7. J.L. McKenzie, S.J. "Aspect of Old Testament Thought", *The Jerusalem Biblical Commentary* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1968) Vol. 2p. 738.
8. See Ex 3:1, 19:20; 24:17-18; 34: 28; Dt. 9:9; 1 Kings 19:5
9. See J.I. Omoregbe, *op. cit.* p. 13
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Benedict de Spinoza, *On Improvement of the Understanding the Ethics and Correspondence* trans by R.H.M. Elwes (New York: Dover Publication Inc. 1955), Pt.1; Def. 3.
14. Anne Carr, "The God Who is Involved". *Theology Today*, Vol. XXXVIII No. 3 (Oct. 1981), pp. 314- 327.
15. This is evident in our experience of our conscience of the divine will is never imposed on us in making good choices.
16. J.B. Cobb, Jr., *God and the World* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press (1969) p. 70; also in J.B. Cobb, Jr., and D.R. Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition*, (USA: Westminster Press, 1976) pp. 52 - 54.
17. Lewis Ford, "Divine Persuasion and the Triumph of Good", *Christian Scholar*, Vol. 50 (1967), p.236.
18. And environment in which God merely persuades (as is evidence in our conscience) and does not coerce is fertile for: the exercise of creaturely freedom. But to talk of freedom within the context of an omnipotent and immutable divine being seems to be a farce.
19. Traditional theism maintains that the universe was created 'out of nothing'. The idea of 'out of nothing' denotes that the universe was created not out of anything. But the account in Gen. 1: 11 informs us that the universe came into being by the word or command from God. The word of God is the operative agent in the history of Isreal from the first act of creative process. However, Genesis 1: 11 does not tell us that God created the world out of nothing but tells us of God as

ordering of chaos into a fixed order or universe. Creation out of nothing did not appear in the Bible until the Greek period when philosophical notion were current. See (2Mc. 7:28); J.L. McKenzie "Aspects of Old Testament Thought", *Op. cit.* p. 744.

20. See Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* trans. by R. A. Wilson and John Bowden (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), p.190.

Rev. Dr. Israel J. Ekpo is the Head of Dept. Christian Religious Studies, Federal College of Education, Oyo, Nigeria.

POSITIVIST PRINCIPLES AND THE PROBLEM OF RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE

J. A. Omolafe

In the early part of this century, it was very common to hear some scholars affirm confidently: "All utterances about the nature of God are nonsensical". Such scholars belong to the group of those who believe that a statement has meaning, if and only if, it is analytic or verifiable. In the thinking of this group, since metaphysical, theological and ethical statements are neither analytic nor, strictly speaking, verifiable, they are meaningless. They provide no knowledge. Neither can they be empirically tested. There are no public and visible evidences to point to in order to establish or refute the claims of such utterances.

In this essay, I will try to re-examine the traditional problem of religious language in the light of the challenge of logical positivism.¹ While it is true that logical positivism is no longer a popular position to maintain², some of its ideas are still to be found, albeit in considerably modified form, in our present day. It is with this in mind that I will address some of the principles and procedures of logical positivism which I believe do contain some fundamental flaws. These flaws weaken considerably the challenge that it poses to the meaningfulness of religious language.

I will try to show, therefore, that contrary to the usual unbridled confidence in scientific language, that the positivist takes to be the norm of language generally, the criteria that govern the use of that language (i.e. the scientific) cannot be justifiably extended to all other forms of language. This is because each language reflects not only the "form of life"³ in which it is in use but also human purpose. Each employs the approach and the logic that is suitable for the purpose which it serves. No language can, in all seriousness, pontificate on the other. The fact is that religious language has significance and meaning in the context in which it is in use, otherwise people would not continue to use it.

Religious Language

Religious language is a form of language that claims to speak about supernatural realities in a manner whose sense or meaning is different from that of ordinary language used in day-to-day human life. In our present, largely secularized, world this form of language has become not