

A THEOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE FIRST COMMANDMENT OF THE DECALOGUE (EX. 20:3-6) AND ITS PRACTICAL RELEVANCE IN AFRICAN SOCIETY.

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Preamble

Central to almost every religion is the worship of one Supreme Being and to be loyal to him along with the obligations necessary for a superlative act of worship. However, many religions hold that the worship of the Supreme Being can best be offered through the use of intermediaries, naturally created things or images. On the other hand, some other religions abhor totally any thing that seems to compromise the supreme adoration of the almighty God. This is based on the understanding of the monotheism of the excluded. It is from this background that we have the sacred injunction of the first commandment of the Decalogue which states:

You shall have no other god before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandment (Ex. 20:3-6).

Our concern in this essay is to give an understanding of the first commandment of the Decalogue and then show how relevant it is to our African situation.

The Concept of the Decalogue

The word used for the term *Decalogue* in Hebrew is *Eseret HaDibbrot*, which means "ten words." However, Decalogue as it is used today is the Greek term for the "ten words", the Ten Commandments, a collection of laws which God revealed to the people of Israel through Moses at Mount Sinai. This law is "understood by Judaism and Christianity to be the foundation of all proper moral and religious behaviours. While honouring the Ten Commandments as central to religious life, Judaism views these rules within the context of the longer legal codes in which they appear... Christians, by

contrast who view the law to have been abrogated by Jesus, tend to see in the Ten Commandments a complete statement of God's ethical demands."¹ Catholic tradition teaches that the Ten Commandments in themselves were written by the finger of God Himself while other commandments were written by Moses (cf. C C C 2056). This however marks a point of deference with the Jewish tradition which holds that the whole law was written by God himself.² In the words of Sebastian Kizhakkeyil, "Yahweh proclaimed the Decalogue directly to the people while the other laws and teachings were given through Moses."³ "The ten commandments are categorical and unconditional, that is, they say nothing about the particular circumstances of the action but rather remain deliberately general and axiomatic, and thus make an unqualified claim on the human being... the commandments of the Decalogue warn of deeds that have not yet taken place; they are instructions for life, ethics rather than law."⁴ However, they form the bases for natural moral law.

There are two versions of the Decalogue that are both called the Ethical Decalogue: the first one is that of the Elohist tradition which is found in Exodus 20: 1-17 while the second is that of the Deuteronomistic tradition which is found in Deuteronomy 5: 1-21. In both cases, the Decalogue is divided into two categories. The first category comprising the first three commandments has to do with one's duty to God while the second category, the last seven commandments, deals on man's duty to his neighbour. Thus, Werner Schmidt states: "The Ten Commandments indicate the uniqueness of this God and humanity's relationship to him (connection with history, exclusiveness, lack of images). On the other hand, they also serve to protect the neighbour."⁵ St Thomas Aquinas puts it thus: "The Decalogue directs man to God by way of reverence, fidelity, and service. It regulates man's conduct towards his fellows by requiring special reference for parents, and forbidding evil and harmful deeds (killing, stealing, adultery), words (false witness), and thoughts and desires (covetousness)."⁶

The First Commandment of the Decalogue: An Exegesis

This commandment calls us to the awareness that Yahweh is One, Holy, and Jealous. He is God without equal and has the sole and supreme right to our worship. It portrays "a strong assertion that Yahweh is the only deity in Israel. Since he defeated their former master, he and no other deity is their God... Verses 3-5a forbid images, which in the Ancient Near East were the ordinary means of encounter between god and worshipper."⁷ Verse 3 refers to the statues of deities in the sanctuary; excavations have revealed that

virtually all the shrines of worship in the Ancient Near East region were found with several images of gods in them but none was found among the shrines of the ancient Israel. Verse 5 indicates that Yahweh is a jealous God and is willing to punish those who reject him even to the fourth generation. On the other hand, verse 6 puts Yahweh forward as a God that shows kindness to those who love him. This is the bases for the covenantal love of God to those who worship him. Those who desert him shall be punished.

In essence, "the first commandment forbids the worship of all gods but Yahweh and asserts the basic exclusivity of the Yahweh-Israel bond... This commandment by no means denies the existence of other gods but affirms the exclusive right of Yahweh to the worship of Israel."⁸ This indicates the practical nature of the mosaic monotheism. However, the acknowledgement of the existence of other gods was denied by prophet Isaiah who declared that Yahweh alone is God with no other (cf. Is. 43:10).

A further analysis of this commandment can be categorized into three components as follows:

- i. Monotheism of the excluded
- ii. Punishment for idolatry
- iii. The worship of images

African Traditional Religion and the First Commandment

African world view has a "unified vision of reality in which there is no room for irreducible dichotomies between matter and spirit, religious tension and daily life, between soul and body."⁹ Ontologically, both the living and the living dead constitute a network of one reality. With regard to religion, "the God of the African is a God of the community or tribe and not a God exclusively addressed to a single person. God does not discriminate between one and the other. His works are for the good of the whole community. If one individual offends the community, he is actually offending God."¹⁰ A community in this sense is a group of people living together with a common language, sharing the same culture, belief and goal. It does not cover the whole of the African continent but individual tribes or ethnic groups. The diversity of the African understanding of the supreme is based on the diversity of ethnic groups and cultures. Thus, the God of the Yorubas is not different from the God of the Ibibios, neither is the God of the hunters different from the God of the farmers. They may have different names and different intermediaries but the end point is the worship of the One Supreme Being. Thus, Nkemnkia states:

*through human-made images or objects, or who may dwell or be somehow present therein. In other words, it is the divine being or spirit who is worshiped, and not the image or object itself. Idolatry in the popular sense is very rarely found.*¹⁴

Espin further agrees with the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* that any endowment of the supreme worship that is meant for God to that which is not God amounts to idolatry. It is on this ground that we can best analyze the two major areas in which Africans perpetrate their idolatrous acts: witchcraft and mammy water worship. Though they are not exhaustively the only ways in which idolatries are being practiced in Africa, they constitute the root to other idolatrous acts.

i Witchcraft

As Hypolite Adigwe puts it, witchcraft is "the ability to inflict harm on the spirit of another living being by means of a remote spiritual mechanism. Witchcraft implies possession of power to do evil which transcends the comprehension of ordinary human beings."¹⁵ These powers are being used for societal havocs and for the infliction of pains on other people. They cause barrenness, sickness, death, and other misfortunes in life on their victims. Witchcraft in the African sense is therefore dreadful, fearful, anti-social and often resentful. Those who fall prey to this or anticipate its attack often look for ways of overcoming it by seeking after other superior powers. In the Christian background, to attack this, people take recourse to 'healing homes' and 'spiritual churches' while some embrace the use of charms and talismans which is in a way the worship of false gods, a transgression of the first commandment of the Decalogue.

ii. Mammy Water Worship

This is one of the most common forms of idolatry in Africa. It is common because many see it as that which has no dichotomy with the African traditional religion itself. It is equally seen as the surest means of power and protection against witchcraft. She is a female deity who is believed to live in waters and is very cruel in evil; this prompts many to worship it while others dread it and seek refuge in other spiritual authorities. "Mammy water has become a household word among healers and exorcists of the new religious movements in Africa. She is also known as mermaid, the Queen of the sea, ... directors of healing centres in Africa claim to be waging war against this

diabolical force which many believe perpetrate evil and untold hardship of its victims. There are many mammy water healing homes established by the African traditional religionists and witch doctors."¹⁶

The Relevance of the First Commandment in African Society:

Oneness of God

In a pluralistic society like Africa with many divinities, the idea of one God, the omnipotent and omniscient is a basic answer to the quest for one true God. God (Yahweh) has no equal in dignity, power and glory. He is the creator of heaven and earth and he alone is worthy of true worship. His sovereignty endures forever for all eternity in every time and place. Thus, the doctrine of monotheism in Africa will create the awareness of the fact that in the midst of the plurality of deities, there is only one true God.

The Supremacy of God

In Africa people believe in several deities, taking part in different aspects of human endeavours; we have in the god of thunder, god of fertility, god (ess) of the seas (mammy water), among others, each struggling for supremacy, therefore enslaving human beings to fear; the idea of the worship of one supreme God is very relevant to give us the idea of a more powerful God to turn to and be freed from fear of other inferior powers.

Relegation of Ancestral Gods and Intermediaries

Central to African traditional religion is the belief that one cannot worship the supreme God directly, except through intermediaries. This could make us ascribe worship meant for the supreme God to the so-called *intermediaries* and to the images created in their likeness. Thus, the idea of one invisible and uncreated God would prompt a sensible African to see the ancestral gods and images as worthless when placed on a par with the creator of the universe.

Improvement of Ethical and Moral Values

The communality of African way of life is not strained, it goes beyond the physical level to the ontological realm, such that it is believed that what affects the part affects the whole; a sin of one person might affect the entire community as they may share in the punishment of that person. Thus, the practice of monotheism as recommended by the first commandment of the Decalogue is no less important to the Africans as it was to the Jews, especially as this would prompt them to trace the common denominator of their moral rules to one Supreme Being. By so doing, ethical and moral values would be highly upheld as that which comes from God.

Cessation of Tribal Conflicts

Most of the tribal conflicts in Africa exist on the line of demarcation between one tribal god and the other. In Nigeria for instance, an Idoma person might believe in the supremacy of *alekwu* over the *akombu* of the Tivs. This apparent difference in religious beliefs may be the cause of tribal conflicts, as one tribe may want to claim superiority over the other. On the other hand, belief in one God, who is supreme to both *alekwu* and *akombu* would help each tribe to see other tribes as people of common belief and origin.

Denominational Consistency

The trend of multiplicity of deities in Africa has a considerable influence on the way African Christians show fidelity to their denominations. Peculiar to the belief that a particular ancestral god is more powerful than the other, some African Christians move from one denomination to the other in search of where the power of God will be more efficacious. On the other hand, a firm belief in a supreme and all powerful God, who cannot be limited to space and time could help to create a more stable faith in their respective denominations.

Reward and Punishment

Central to the first commandment of the Decalogue is the idea of reward and punishment for our actions that have long term effects on succeeding generations. This idea is also present in African traditional belief in the form of ancestral curses. While in some cases the victims are irredeemable in the African context, like the *osu* caste of the Igbos, God promises forgiveness for anyone who shows repentance and returns to him.

Concluding Remarks

According to Metuh E., in his book on African Religions, some authors have been bewildered by the high concept of God found among African peoples. Their wonder is how *primitive African tribes* could have developed such a high concept of God. Their opinions are summarized by Emile Ludwig, a German biographer, when he said Africans traditionally had a clear concept of God. Many have tried to give explanation to this, but we are particularly stricken by the opinion of J.J Williams who claims that it was due to Jewish influences long before Christian missionary influences. This school of thought strengthen their argument by the claim that this initial influence is juxtaposed with other beliefs, which appear contradictory, such as polytheism, animism, magic, among others.¹⁷ In our opinion, these other elements in African

Traditional Religions do not debunk the evidence of African monotheism; we also have instances of excesses and abuses in other religions. In fact, in most African settings, witchcraft and other black arts are frowned at.

Whatever explanation they give for Africa's initial monotheism, our humble submission is that revelation is part of God's mission to save us all. Therefore, however Africans came to the knowledge of one true and supreme God is inconsequential. We believe God in his own way revealed himself to Africans as part of his scheme to save the whole of humanity. However, we are grateful for the contributions of the scripture to this process of revelation; particularly, the Decalogue that spells out clearly the exclusive uniqueness of one true God, the creator of heaven and earth. It is the same God who in the fullness of time revealed himself more perfectly in Jesus Christ, who in essence is the apogee of all laws.

END NOTES

¹ Alan Avery-Peck: *Decalogue*: in An Introductory Dictionary of Theology and Religious Studies: by Olando Espin (ed): The Columba Press: Dublin: 2007: p. 321.

² Cf. Ibid.

³ Sebastian Kizhakkeyil: The Pentateuch: An Exegetical Commentary: St Pauls: Mumbai: 2009: p. 266.

⁴ Schmidt Werner: Old Testament Introduction: St Pauls: Mumbai: 2002: p.131.

⁵ Ibid. p.132.

⁶ Glenn, Paul: A Tour of the Summa: Tan Books: Illinois: 1978: p.173.

⁷ Clifford, Richard: *Exodus* in The New Jerome Biblical Commentary by Raymond Brown et al (ed): Theological Publications in India: Bangalore: 2005: p. 52.

⁸ Bourke, Myles: *The Book of Exodus: Introduction and Commentary*: The Liturgical Press: Minnesota: 1968: p. 67.

⁹ Nkemnkia, Martin: *African Vitology: A Step Forward in African Thinking*: St Pauls: Nairobi: 1999: p.165.

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 143.

¹¹ Ibid. p. 152.

¹² Cf. Onwubiko, Oliver: African Thought: Religion and Culture: Snaap Press: Enugu: 1996: p. 59.

¹³ Achtemeier, Paul et al (ed.): Harper's Bible Dictionary: TPI: Bangalore: 2005: p. 416/7.

¹⁴ Espin, Orlando: *Idolatry* : cf. Op.Cit. p. 603.

¹⁵ Sackey Bridget: *African Traditional Religion*: in *Evangelizing Mission of the Church in West Africa*: Adigwe Hypolite (ed). AWACC Publication: Lagos: 1993: p. 129.

¹⁶ Ndiokwere, Nathaniel: *The African Church, Today and Tomorrow: Prospects and Challenges*: Effective Key Pubs: Onitsha: 1994: p. 15.

¹⁷ Metuh, E. *African Religions in Western Conceptual Schemes*, Jos: IMICO Press, 1991, p. 37