CHAPTER THREE

EPISTEMOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES OF THEOLOGICAL THINKING IN THE ELCB

3.1. Theology as Liberating Wisdom

3.1.1. Interplay of Faith and Understanding

According to Bishop Moenga the task of theology is to guide the Church. Moreover, he regards theology as the central guide for the Church, which otherwise cannot function in the world. Also the identity of the Church according to Moenga is dependent on its theology, which in his discourse refers both to the Church in general and the African and Lutheran church in particular. Since theology is seen to create hope for suffering people and also for the church struggling with economical realities and the challenges caused by the HIV and AIDS, one might say that theology as such has a significant role in the ELCB.

As a concept theology is deeply connected with understanding in the ELCB. According to Moenga understanding in theological discourse means understanding God. Letlhage summarises theology as knowing...
and understanding who God is and what God is able to do. \(^8\) However, ‘knowing and understanding’ in this regard also includes faith, since the object of intellect is God. \(^9\) Understanding God thus remains partial and incomplete, since rationality is not capable of capturing complete knowledge of the Divine One. \(^10\) Robinson emphasises that God is above of everything else, \(^11\) which means that God also remains above human comprehension. Therefore the object of intellect is not determined by human rationality either, but acts always through the Divine will. \(^12\)

This emphasis on rationality seems to originate from indigenous religiosity. According to several scholars African traditional religion is primarily rational in its scope. \(^13\) This argument stands in contradiction with Eurocentric attitudes, which have historically considered African religious traditions to be ‘barbarian’ or ‘savage’, and thus irrational. \(^14\) Both Kwasi Wiredu and Bolaji Idowu, whose thinking was earlier used to characterise African traditional religion, claim that traditional religious thought is basically rational. \(^15\) Wiredu further argues that reason and faith

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\(^8\) Letlhage emphasises the “knowledge about” and “understanding about God, what God can do and who he is” (LET05/2; cf. ROB93, 1; ROBoi/8; SEG05/54). Letlhage also uses the expression “knowing and understanding” in relation to one’s relationship with God (LET05/12). Moenga states also that theology is “about” God’s talk and God’s deeds (MOE05/71). The word ‘understanding’ cannot be replaced by the words ‘believing’ or ‘faith’, because rationality is actually being referred here.

\(^9\) ROB93, 3; also Annala 1993, 12. The idea will be dealt with below.

\(^10\) In this sense Letlhage refers to an increasing human understanding of God even if God remains the “same God” (LET05/2).

\(^11\) ROBoi/7–8.

\(^12\) Also Setiloane 1978, 410. He refers to the death of God embraced by Christianity, which is culturally foreign idea for the Sotho-Tswana, since death as a force is regarded hostile to life and thus to God. The concept of life will be with in chapter 5. Yet Moenga asks, in relation to Christology “who are we to decide, what God should do?” (MOE05/65).

\(^13\) Appiah (1992, 107–136) in his article “Old Gods, New Worlds” deals with the rationality in African religious thought from the traditional versus modern point of view. He argues that traditional religion is based on reasonable beliefs. “Concentrating on the non-cognitive features of traditional religions not only misrepresents them but also leads to an underestimation of the role of reason in the life of traditional cultures” (Appiah 1992, 134). See also Horton 1998; Wiredu 2006a, 318. Regarding the examples of African religious reasoning, see Oruka 1990, 83–157.

\(^14\) Regarding Africanness as non-rational, see Hegel 1956, 91–92. Regarding the European ideas of African barbarism and savagery, see Mudimbe's The Idea of Africa (1994), where the author evaluates European history from the Grego-Roman era in respect to attitudes and images of what is ‘African’. It is notable that Moffat, even though he considers indigenous religious ideas to be nonexistent among Bechuana, holds Batswana to be “acute reasoners,” “which cannot be denied” (Moffat 1842, 236–237).

\(^15\) Wiredu 2006a, 318–319. According to Idowu (1973, 56) e.g. Yoruba theology of the traditional religion bases on rationality.