CHAPTER FOUR

GOD AS AN ABSOLUTE SUBJECT

INTRODUCTION

This chapter deals with the ‘God as an absolute subject’ paradigm of formulating the doctrine of the Trinity. The key theologians associated with the position of God as an absolute subject are Barth and Rahner. Although both Barth and Rahner1 are not widely used within African theological circles, their notion of God as an absolute subject could be very significant to the traditional Africa that already understands God as a being that is both ‘Supreme’ and ‘Personal.’

THE BEGINNINGS OF ‘SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS’

The context of God as an absolute subject reinterpretation of the doctrine of the Trinity was during the rise of the eighteenth century Enlightenment as a cultural period in Western society. It includes the general coldness to Plato and Aristotle that provided the impetus for an alternative model of constructing reality.3 The medieval cosmology was patterned as below:4

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1 Within the African Christian situation, Barth is known as a neo-Orthodox theologian, and he is, therefore, not read either by the African liberals or the evangelicals, who together form the largest share of African Protestantism involved in formal theology. Rahner is still regarded as a prodigal son within Catholicism and little is known about him within African protestant circles.
2 See Part 3 of this research, particularly the contributions of J.S. Mbiti, B. Idowu, and G.M. Setiloane.
3 Note that the ‘coldness to Plato and Aristotle’ referred to here does not mean that Platonism died in the West prior to the rise of Idealism. Platonism has never died in the West because if it did we would not have discussed the ‘God as Essence’ in this work. In fact, other branches of philosophy believe “… that modern philosophy has done little else than write footnotes to the Greek” (H. Berkhof, Introduction to the Study of Dogmatics, 58). What happened with the rise of Philosophical Idealism was the arrival of an alternative, or a rival pattern, of constructing reality hitherto unknown to the Western mind.
Gradually, but without any conscious awareness of what was unfolding, some sections of Western society moved away from this cosmology. They went through a paradigmatic change so that, by the time of Bacon and Descartes, radical anthropocentrism was deeply entrenched and philosophy in these sections no longer addressed substance, essence, or form as the basis of existence or ‘first cause without being caused.’ Instead it addressed ‘ideas’ and the connection between the reality of the ideas and the subject, ‘I,’ who holds the ideas.

This was a complete paradigmatic change: a movement away from the method which philosophy had hitherto employed to an entirely new way of constructing reality. This new way of looking at reality became known as Idealism. Idealism concerned itself primarily with ideas and in a derivative sense with what it considered ideal. In this context, idea meant “… any and every object of which any human mind is at any time aware.”5 This change of ideas not only meant change to focus on the “… ‘copies’ in the mind of objects outside,”6 but it also meant positing a theory of knowledge in which the subject is sure of the existence of the self, the “I”; the object of consciousness (the ‘idea’); and consciousness7 itself. This phenomenon is what Idealist philosophy calls ‘self-consciousness.’

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6 Hoernle, *Idealism as a Philosophical Doctrine*, 34.
7 The German technical term for consciousness is *Bewustsein*. *Bewustsein* indicates consciousness of an object or just intentional consciousness. The addition of the pronoun *selbst* (self) gives *selbstbewust*, which refers to consciousness, knowledge, or awareness of oneself. The emphasis here is not necessarily on the I (who is conscious as contrasted to the external world of objects); rather, it is on seeing the external world of objects as the product, the possession, or the mirror image of the I (see M. Inwood, “Hegel” in *The Blackwell Companion to Philosophy*. Bunnin and Tsui-James, eds. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 61–63).