THE SOTHO NOTION OF THE SUPREME BEING
AND THE
IMPACT OF THE CHRISTIAN PROCLAMATION ¹)

BY

KLAUS NÜRNBERGER
(Berlin)

The emerging reappraisal of their religious heritage by African Christians shows that we have entered a new phase in the interaction between African traditional religions and the Christian faith. The inevitable uncertainty created by this search for truth seems to call for a careful definition of concepts. The "Supreme Being" is one of the most crucial in this regard. This paper is an attempt to sort things out for the realm of a specific cultural context, viz. that of the Sotho/Tswana cluster which inhabit a large semicircular area stretching from the Northern, Central and Western Transvaal, Botswana, the Northern Cape, the Orange Free State to Lesotho. These peoples are related to each other to such a degree that a certain amount of generalization seems to be justified within the limits of such a paper. We start with a short summary of the religious context in which the concept of the Supreme Being (Modimo) has to be seen. Unfortunately there is no room here for substantiation of the hypotheses put forward. This we limit to the discussion of the Supreme Being itself in the central part. The last section, on the impact of the Christian proclamation on the concept of Modimo, again has had to be very condensed and generalized.

African experience of reality is indivisible. Everything is integrated into a comprehensive whole and as such dependent on everything else. If we are to discover the existential significance of the Supreme Being in the Sotho religion we have to see it in the context of this whole. For the sake of comprehension we will discuss a few of its relevant dimensions.

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The first dimension of the Sotho experience of reality is the field of human relationships as they express themselves within the prescribed bounds of the highly institutionalized social framework of a small-scale society. In such a society the status and the role of every individual is meticulously defined in any given stage of his life. His social position depends on age, sex, marital status and seniority in relation to the patrilineal order. Obviously these social relationships change in subsequent stages of life — both the life of the individual himself and of other individuals, especially close relatives. All these changes are marked by more or less conspicuous rites of passage. In any given stage of his life, however, the individual has to move within the existing structure in such a way that he carefully avoids any disturbance of the balance of power which exists at any given moment according to the requirements of the social order.

The second dimension is the dynamistic conception of reality which we find in more or less the same form in all Bantu peoples of Southern Africa. Reality is experienced in terms of potential or kinetic power. There is an equilibrium of forces at any given moment. But these forces are in constant ebb and flow like the waves of the ocean. Usually the sea is relatively calm. But it can also be tempestuous and destructive turmoil. The community is constantly alert to maintain or restore the calm by relevant rituals. Human relationships are the pivot of man's intercourse with and control over the forces of reality. Illness, barrenness, drought and other adverse "natural" phenomena are all ascribed to troubled human relationships, especially within the family, whether between its living members or between them and the ancestral spirits. Sorcery is nothing but an extreme case in point, to which we will presently return.

Dynamistic power can, however, also be actively employed. This is done by "magic" rites, which are either repetitive and conventional to secure the ongoing processes of life, or extra-ordinary as prescribed by the diviner for special cases. With these rites persons, processes or things are strengthened, which means that they are charged with dynamistic power. This can happen with various aims in view — confirmatory, productive, protective or therapeutic. The latter two bring us to the negative variation of the use of dynamistic power. Dynamistic power as such is ethically and cosmologically neutral. It is neither good nor bad, profitable nor detrimental. Its use or abuse by human beings is decisive. Malevolent use of dynamistic power is boloi