

KARL BARTH'S NOTION OF EVIL AS NOTHINGNESS: AN AFRICAN'S DIALOGIC PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

In African spiritual exercises, there is so much talk about the menace of demons or evil spirits. These spirits are conceived of as the antithesis of God or as the spiritual opposition to the benign activities of God. Modern African religion sees them as the causes of sicknesses and any form of catastrophe in the lives of people. The paper takes off from Karl Barth's conception of evil and demons as nothingness and argues that when correctly understood, the so-called evil spirits or demons are the active agents of God in His relationship with humans. Since African cosmology sees the world as a universe of forces held in harmony by God, it seems that the African idea of the deities and spirits as subordinates of God better captures the idea of the evil spirits or demons as nothingness outside the purview of God than the Barthian conception.

Keywords: African Theology, Demon, *Ekwensu*, Evil Spirit, Karl Barth, Nothingness

1. Introduction

Evidently, theologies arise out of the attempt of humans to understand their relationship with their God and other realities around them. And when theologies fail to explain the lived realities or the experiences of a people, such a people tend to abandon the prevailing theologies while attempting a different means of grasping the God-talk. It was the sociologist, Peter Berger (1969: 79), who once warned that "if the Christian explanation of the world no longer holds, then the Christian legitimation of social order cannot be maintained very long either." In other words, if Christian theologies fail to explain peoples' lived experiences, then other explanations that fit these experiences will determine the way this particular people lead their lives.

This article focuses on a possible dialogue between the African idea of the evil spirits or demons as the agents of the Supreme God and Karl Barth's treatment of evil as nothingness in *Church Dogmatics* III/3 ('God and nothingness'). My intention of discussing Karl Barth and bringing him into dialogue with the African notion of demons is mainly because of the direction Barth took in his appreciation of the importance of sin, evil and demons as nothingness. His interpretation of evil as nothingness is very challenging to the mind of a modern-day African. This is because of the widespread reverence or fear of the demons in contemporary African religious thought and consciousness. Many Africans believe so much in the power of the evil spirits or demons that it seems no possible theological endeavor could douse their anxiety concerning the power of evil. In the face of unmitigated belief in the power of evil spirits and demons, how could a typical African make a meaningful grasp of Barth's thesis of evil as nothingness? Hence, an understanding of Barth's thoughts on

nothingness leads to a better appreciation of his thesis of sin and evil as nothingness. This concept will then be compared with the prevailing African idea of the influence of the demonic or evil forces as the major causes of sickness in the African continent.

In other words, the paper attempts to relate Barth's notion of evil as nothingness to a particular trend of African theology that sees the Supreme Being as the source of every other being. This trend contends that the admission of the reality of the Supreme Being is fairly representative of the belief of many African societies. Sandra E. Greene (1966) has termed it the 'devout' explanation of the African God. This view holds that there was the concept of the Supreme Being in African religious consciousness before she made contact with Islam and Christianity. Hence, the other deities or spirits are only the agents of this Supreme Being. This admission has great implications for the notion of the influence of the evil spirits or demons. It argues against the prevalence of the admission that demonic forces are the cause of sicknesses in the lives of people by religious people in Africa. If the evil spirits or demons are mere agents of the Supreme Being, how could they have the power to inflict ills in the lives of people?

2. Karl Barth and Africa in Intercultural Dialogue?

As Benno van den Toren (2017) has already noted, any comparison between Barth and present-day African theology might appear counterintuitive since "Barth never interacted with African theology beyond the North African Church Fathers." This is not surprising judging that modern-day African theology only began to flourish from the late seventies. Obviously, the context of Barth's theologizing was also different from modern African religious context. His theology was greatly influenced by post-Enlightenment Europe, especially the demythologizing tendencies of that era. He was also schooled in liberal theology. His theology was a reaction for and against such tendencies. In the words of Millard J. Erickson (1984: 187), "Barth was educated in the standard liberalism descending from Albrecht Ritschl and Adolf von Harnack, and was particularly instructed by Wilhelm Herrmann." Barth was also dismayed by the fact that many of the revered theologians of his time had signed the warrant for World War I, leading him to conclude that the flawed political judgement of these theologians was because of their liberal theology (Barth, 1960). It seemed to him that liberal theology had uncritically identified Christianity with nationalism. This led him to re-examine every theological doctrine he had hitherto assimilated (Aye-Addo, 2013). For Barth, it was the nineteenth century divinization of man that led to the cause of nationalism and imperialism that fueled the embers of the war. In response, Barth pursued a theology that was based on the bible and that stressed the absolute otherness, sovereignty and timelessness of God. His intention was, in the words of Thomas F. Torrance, to create a God who "could really be recognized as God in the sheer majesty of his divine nature and in his absolute unique existence and power, while man, disenchanted of his pretended divinity could be free at last to be truly and genuinely human (1970: 121). These few lines seem to suggest that the context of Barth's theologizing is different from present African religious context.

However, it does not mean that Barthian theology is not relatable to theological currents from Africa. In the same way, John Mbiti has pointed out that "Christologies

emerging from Africa need to be assembled and engaged with the Church universal (1986: 15). Of particular importance for the present paper is that several theologians have grappled with the relevance of Barth for African theology. For instance, in 1992, Hosea Dolamo submitted a thesis to the University of South Africa on the relevance of Barth's theology of Church and State for South Africa. The focus of his thesis is the political influence of Karl Barth. In the area of Christology, we hear more African voices in conversation with Barth. In his *The Royal Son: Balancing Barthian and African Christologies*, Zablon B. Mutongu (2009), has made a distinction between what he calls Barth's ontological Christology and African functionality Christology. His distinction seems to be at the heart of decades of scholarship on African religion that concludes that African religion is more interested in the functional dimension of religion than on elaborate abstract theological definitions. The work of Charles S. Aye-Addo (2013) compares the Christologies of two Africans: John Samuel Pobee and Kwame Bediako and their relationship with Barthian Christology. One of the many places where he finds the three theologians as conversation partners is in their bid to apply the biblical faith in doing theology.

Perhaps, the closest of these studies to the present paper is the essay of Benno van den Toren, which is already referenced above. He has compared the *Christus Victor* motif in Karl Barth with the role of Christ as conqueror in recent African Christian Theology. He finds this motif crucial in African Christianity's acceptance of Christ as healer. He agrees with Afua Kuma (1981) that the image of Christ as healer "conveys the supremacy of Christ over every form of evil operating in the universe" (van den Toren, 2017: 183). Van den Toren recognizes that the central event that led Barth to the motif of *Christus Victor* was the spiritual battles in which Johann Christoph Blumhardt was engaged in his pastoral relationship with Gottlieben Dittus, who was thought to be possessed of demons. This battle ended with the desperate cry of the demonic power, which conceded defeat with the acclamation: '*Jesus ist Sieger*' (Jesus is Victor). There are many implications from the '*Christus Victor*' motif. Of particular importance is the fact that although the powers of evil are opposed to the power of God, they do not stand any real chance against the divine power made available to us in the person of Christ. Hence, with respect to the opposition between God and the evil forces, Barth's conclusion is that "Jesus is Victor!" is the first and last and decisive word to be said" (1961: 168).

At the moment of writing this paper, almost every African Christian pastor narrates spiritual encounters that resemble those of Blumhardt. This means that the concerns Barth grappled with in his context are still relevant for African religious discussions. The present article, therefore, is a reaction to the prevalent notion of Africa as a land that swarms with demons. It is an attempt at demythologization of the African world. I will try to show how a blend could be made between the Barthian concept of evil as nothingness and an African idea of God as the supreme source of all things.

3. The Origin and Meaning of Evil in Karl Barth's Theology

It has to be stated that Karl Barth's theology is unrepentantly Christocentric (von Balthasar, 1992: 30). And it would appear, as I will shortly elucidate, that his

Christocentric theology led him to a near neglect of the importance of the phenomenon of evil in his writings. This is important in order to understanding his approach to evil. In the first place, Barth makes a categorical distinction between nothingness (*das Nichtige*) and nothing (*das Nichts*). He makes the bold statement that “nothingness is not nothing” (Barth, 1960, 349). If *das Nichts* is that “which does not exist”, it is different from *das Nichtige* defined as “that which is not.” This is so because God is concerned by nothingness. And since God is concerned by it, it cannot be nothing or non-existent. In his bid to understand reality from a Christocentric point of view, Barth (1960: 305) explains that “nothingness” is that “reality” that made God to become incarnate in the world. It is the reality that “opposes and resists God, which is itself subjected to and overcome by His opposition and resistance... The true nothingness is that which brought Jesus Christ to the cross, and that which He defeated there.”

Further, Barth argues that nothingness is *privatio*: “This negation of [God’s] grace is chaos, the world which He did not choose or will, which He could not and did not create, but which, as He created the actual world, He passed over and set aside, marking and excluding it as the eternal past, what is alien and adverse to grace, and therefore without it. In this sense nothingness is really privation” (1960: 353). Not only does Barth contend that nothingness is privation he also holds on to the view that “the Creator has effected [the] negation [of nothingness] once and for all” (1960: 356). The ultimate negation of nothingness started with the incarnation when God exposed Himself to the attack and injury of nothingness. However, God’s exposure of Himself to nothingness in the incarnation and his defeat of nothingness achieve their completion through the death of Jesus. In his words, Christ defeated nothingness “by suffering death..., the death of condemnation... for the forgiveness of the sins of many... in order to take away the power of death” (Barth, 1960: 312). Hence, nothingness has been defeated through the Christ-event.

4. The Demons as Nothingness

Barth contends that it is under the realm of nothingness that the demons are to be located for “they themselves are always nothingness” (1960: 525). He rejects the description of the devil or demons as fallen angels. For him, demons are not to be considered similar to angels in both origin and nature (1960: 520f). While angels are creatures of God, the same cannot be said of the demons. This is because “God has not created them, and therefore they are not creaturely. They are only as God affirms Himself and the creature and thus pronounces a necessary No. They exist in virtue of the fact that His turning to involves a turning from, His election a rejection, His grace a judgment” (1960: 523). Even though this does not explain the origin of the demons, one could conclude that in the thoughts of Barth, the demons are only a rejection of God. In the same way, God’s relationship with them is that of rejection and judgement. It seems that Barth feels that the paralleling of the demons with the fallen angels gives the demons an exalted position they do not deserve. It also presupposes that the demons were good at the beginning. In comparing angels and demons, Barth says, “angels and demons are related as creation and chaos, as the free grace of God and nothingness, as good and evil, as life and death... as kerygma and myth. Perhaps

the last analysis is best adapted to bring out the matter most sharply” (1960: 520). The last analysis he refers to here is the one that sees the reality of angels as kerygma but refers to demons as myth. In fact, the demons are nothing but a negation of the angels. They are not creatures of God and have no subsistence of their own.

There is no doubt that Barth’s rejection of the created nature of the demons and his repudiation of the angelic fall is problematic from many fronts. At least, he seems not to be “obeying scripture as the criterion of dogmatic purity and truth” (Bromiley, 1979: 155). This assessment is especially important since Barth wants to be judged by his “fidelity to the Bible” (Ford, 1979: 199). Again, the origin of the demons has not been explained. Apart from God, there is no reality without an origin. Hence the demons must also have an origin. For Barth, the only possible answer to the origin of the demons is that:

... their origin and nature lie in nothingness... In biblical terms we can also describe it as chaos, or darkness, or evil... As we cannot deny the peculiar existence of nothingness, we cannot deny their existence. They are null and void but they are not nothing... They are only as God affirms himself and the creature and thus pronounces a necessary No... This is all to be said of demons as of nothingness... They themselves are always nothingness (1960: 523).

What I can say about this is that Barth thinks that the demons derive from the absence of the divine. Just like evil and sin, the demons are to be considered a privation. That means wherever the divine is present, the devil or the demonic cannot exist. The devil or the demon exists as privation of the divine.

Since the demons are a privation, Barth thinks that the best approach to them is that of negation. Hence, he criticizes Luther whom he describes as one who looks “too frequently or lengthily or seriously or systematically at demons” (1960: 519). For him, an overt concentration on demons has a negative influence on Christians. In his words:

The doctrine of the devil and demons became an integral part of the Christian message, and in many cases the part which Christian preachers and theologians believed they should display their zeal and realism. The result was that all Christianity, even when there were no witch-hunts and the like, acquired a more or less pervasive odour of demonism, becoming something which from this dark chamber seemed to spread abroad, and did actually spread abroad, menace, anxiety, melancholy, oppression, or tragic excitement. And this had the consequence that in the light of witch-hunts a protest was made against this chamber (1960: 522).

Barth’s conviction that the Christian should not fear the devil and the demonic is because of the victory Jesus has gained for us by destroying the demon and establishing the kingdom of God. He says, “it is Jesus Christ, God in his person, who as the Lord and Victor, overthrows nothingness and its lying powers” (1960: 530).

From this connection, one could infer that Barth refers to the devil as nothingness because of his conviction that the devil and every demonic agent are already defeated.

But with the evidence of recurrent theme of the demonic in the New Testament, it seems that Barth, a Reformer, has neglected a sizable chunk of New Testament evidence. Barth merely brushed aside passages such as Revelation 12:7, Matthew 25:41 and the exorcism passages of the New Testament in order to drag his reader to the conclusion of his thesis. But as would be expected, Barth, who believes in the inspired nature of the Scriptures, does not deny the manifest presence of the demons in the Christian Scriptures. His explanation to this presence is that,

What might be called biblical demonology is in fact only a negative reflection of biblical Christology and soteriology. What is revealed is the kingdom of Satan and his angels and this is already assaulted and mortally threatened, and indeed radically destroyed. [what the bible presents to us is] not a world bewitched but exorcised; not a community and Christendom believing in demons but opposing to them in faith ... in short, the triumph of truth over falsehood (1960: 529f).

The conclusion, then, is that the ministry of Jesus has dealt a final defeat to the kingdom of Satan to the extent that the Christian should not be worried about demonic elements anymore (Onyenali, 2019: 365).

Although Barth discussed an exorcism of demons by Johann Blumhardt, which he recorded as a case of “the presence of the opposing world” (1961: 371), Barth thinks that what Blumhardt did was to negate Satan by the application of the name of Jesus. It is Barth’s strong belief that in Jesus’ name, “not just a psychic but a historical and even cosmic decision is made” (1961: 371). This shows Barth’s acceptance of the reality of exorcism. He also considers a necessary connection between “sin and sickness and repentance and healing” (1961: 371) and Jesus’ name is the answer in putting the sickness caused by sin under control. This idea that sickness is caused by sin will have a tremendous resonance as we treat the African idea of the demonic powers.

5. An African Response to Barth’s Notion of Evil as Nothingness

Since the African worldview is not monolithic, there could be myriads of African responses to Barth’s notion of evil as nothingness. However, I present a fairly representative view of what I have already referred to as a ‘Devout’ conception of African worldview. It is a perspective that conceives of reality as made up of different categories of beings, with the Supreme Being (God) at the apex, while the spirits serve as intermediaries between God and humans. It might be important to note that of all the early books on African religion, there was none that paid attention to a systematic and logical argument concerning the origin of the demons or evil spirits. This is probably because their existence was not questioned. Many of the books consulted (Parrinder, 1962; Idowu, 1973; Udoye, 2011) took for granted the reality of evil spirits and their ability to cause ills of various shades. There are also many monographs and articles that explain the phenomenon of witchcraft and sorcery as some of the avenues of the operation of the demonic forces. Even though most of these scholars accept the

African belief in the Supreme Being as the source of every spiritual power and occurrence, they fail to see the logical implication of such an acceptance. If there is a Supreme Being to whom every other spiritual being pays allegiance, how does one explain the presence of evil or demonic forces as entities outside of the control of the Supreme Being? Hence, this section argues that what many Africans have come to see as evil spirits or demons may be nothing but agents of punishment from the Supreme Being. These same agents can also be used for blessing to humans. Relating this to Barthian categories, one could say that the African “evil spirits” are nothingness outside the command of the Supreme Being.

6. Understanding the African Worldview

The African worldview accepts the presence of physical and spiritual beings that inhabit the physical and spiritual worlds respectively. These two worlds overlap to the extent that the spiritual world influences the physical world. There is also a sort of hierarchy in the spiritual world. While God (the Supreme Being) is at the apex of the pyramid, the deities, spirits and ancestors occupy the intermediary positions between God and humans. Through these intermediaries, contact is made between humans and God. A graphic presentation of the above thought appears thus:



Figure 1: A Model of the African Worldview

The pyramid implies that any interaction between God and humans has to pass through the realm of the deities, spirits or ancestors. It is through the intermediary of the deities that God sends blessings or punishments to humans. In the real sense, the deities or spirits derive their power from God and are nothing without him. They are employed by God to serve his purpose. In the words of Idowu (1973: 139), “taking Africa as a whole, there are in reality five component elements that go into the making of African traditional religion. These are belief in God, belief in the divinities, belief in spirits, belief in ancestors, and the practice of magic and medicine, each with its

own consequent, attendant cult.” The practice of magic and medicine belongs to the realm of humans. It is through these arts that humans approach God through the intermediary spirits or divinities. Following from this, “the African conceives of reality in terms of a universe of forces that are linked together, and that are in constant interplay with one another” (Onyeocha, 2007: 99). This reality includes the visible and invisible elements. This interplay means that “nothing moves in the universe of forces without influencing others by its movement. The world of forces is held like spider’s web which no single thread can be caused to vibrate without shaking the whole” (Tempels, 1969: 60). The link between the forces of nature in African cosmology is so strong that “a pernicious influence from one being weakens other beings and threatens the harmony and integration of the whole” (Nwagbala, 2002: 314). This harmony is held together by God.

7. The Role of the Supreme Being in African Worldview

Having stated the importance of understanding the interactions between the spiritual world and the physical world, it is equally important to understand the interactions among the beings that constitute the spiritual world. Perhaps, the most important of these considerations is the role of the Supreme God. Pope Paul VI (1967) had the following to say concerning the position of God in African culture:

A very important and common factor of this sense of spiritual realities is the notion of God as the first and ultimate cause of things. Such a notion is more experienced than described, more realized in life than apprehended by thought. It is expressed in many different ways according to the variety of cultural forms. In reality, a living sense of God as the supreme, personal and mystical Being pervades the whole of African culture.

E. G. Parrinder (1962), traces the African belief in the Supreme Being and in the deities or spirits to many notable African tribes. His study shows that Africans do not see the spirits as competing with the Supreme Being. It is his view that Africans worship the Supreme Being under various names while at the same time offering sacrifices to the spirits as avenues to reach the Supreme Being. Since the Ancestors are the closest of the spiritual beings to humans among most African tribes, Parrinder (1962: 57) comes to the conclusion that many African societies worship the ancestors since they believe that their fortunes are greatly influenced by the ancestors. As many other scholars after him would agree, the spirits stand as mediators between the Supreme Being and humans in the hierarchy of beings. The works of J. Mbiti (1969) and Ikenga-Metuh (1987) are typical instances of this agreement.

Sandra E. Greene has written on *Mawu*, the female deity identified as the Supreme God among the *Ewe* and *Fon* speaking peoples of Ghana, Togo and Benin. In her study (1996: 125), she acknowledged “the importance of studying the notion of a Supreme Being as an integral and important aspect of African traditional religious thought.” Nonetheless, she sees the conceptualization of the Supreme God in these cultures as influenced by historical circumstances, including economic and political considerations. In her words, “one cannot isolate the study of religious thought and

practice from the political, economic and social conditions in which the believers in a Supreme Being operated” (1996: 130). This is a fact that is true of almost all the religions of the world.

Arguing from the religion of the Igbo people of South-East Nigeria, Metuh explains that *Chukwu* (God), who is the creator of the whole world, manifests himself through the deities. He comes to the conclusion that apart from the major deities through which God manifests himself, “God created vast numbers of other spiritual beings called *alusi* (spirit forces). These have supernatural powers which can mean good or evil for men, depending on how they are handled. The *alusi* are metaphysical forces in the universe which can be manipulated to bring good fortunes, but if abused, even inadvertently, can spell disaster” (Metuh, 1987: 6). This fact points to the neutrality of this spiritual forces. It is in application that they could be a source of harm or blessing to people. Still writing about the Igbos of South-East Nigeria, Ekwuru writes that man, the gods, spirits, ghosts, magical powers, totems, the land and the features of the landscape, etc. are all “potential fields of the manifestation of the divine” (1999: 73).

In as much as this is a fair reflection of the African worldview, what needs to be emphasized is that all the other deities or spirits are subject to the Supreme Being. It is the belief of many Africans that the Supreme Being (God) manifests his essence in other realities. In the words of Mbiti, (1969: 29) “expressed ontologically, God is the origin and sustenance of all things... He is personally involved in his creation, so that it is not outside of Him or His reach. God is thus simultaneously transcendent and immanent...” In simple terms, the whole of creation could be said to be under God’s supervision.

The major reason why Africans approach God through his intermediaries is because God is seen in the light of a typical African monarch who operates through his subordinates. He gives blessings and unleashes punishment on sinners through the agency of the deities who serve as intermediaries between him and humans. This means that nothing happens outside the influence of God. Therefore, “evil” is only but God’s punishment for sin. Hence, “the idea of a completely innocent man suffering misfortune for no particular reason is foreign to African Traditional thought” (Omeregbe, 1993: 153). This explains why propitiatory sacrifices are offered to God for the remedy of misfortunes in most African traditions. When this is done in time, the condition of the sufferer begins to improve until one is liberated from the evil afflicting one (Omeregbe, 1993: 154). This means that the evil in existence originates as a result of the sins of humans. This is another point of convergence between Barth and the traditional African view of the origin of evil.

8. Nature and Functions of the Spirits in African Religion (ATR)

As already noted, the spirits or deities act as mediators between God and humans. It is through the spirits that sacrifices are offered to God. It is also through the spirits that God makes contact with humans. With reference to the nature and functions of the spirits, Ikenga-Metuh (1987: 161) avers that “though most African societies regard God, deities and ancestors as good and just, these mystical agencies could actually

inflict physical evil as a premonitive, corrective or punitive measure.” The inflicting of physical evil is a way of maintaining the equilibrium which the sins of humans can cause. Some African societies also believe that the ancestors (the living dead), strange spirits and human manipulation of cosmic forces can inflict sickness on people (Doe, 1993: 55). It is this function of inflicting sickness on humans that has made some people to regard some spirits as intrinsically evil, hence the designation ‘evil spirits’.

However, the ontological evil nature of some spirits seems to have developed in the course of time. Ellis and Ter Haar have come to the conclusion that while African Religion previously,

... ascribed to the spiritual powers of the invisible world a morally neutral character, instead of considering them intrinsically good or evil. Rather, the moral nature of spirits traditionally depends on the relationship between human beings and the spirit world with which they interact.... whereas people once considered spirits to be morally neutral forces that could be used for particular purposes ..., many have come to see traditional spirits as being harmful by nature (2004: 56).

The authors did not provide the reason for this transition from a neutral to an evil attribution for the spiritual powers. However, it seems to me that one of the reasons for such a transition is a result of the influence of Christian beliefs among the native Africans since this is the way the Christian religion conceives of the evil spirits or demons as intrinsically evil and opposed to God. This agrees with the findings of Birgit Meyer. In her *Translating the Devil: Religion and Modernity among the Ewe in Ghana* (1999), she notes that the claim of the Christian missionaries that the gods and ghosts served by the Ewe were real agents of the devil in their interpretation of the New Testament helped to diabolize the Ewe religion and create a boundary between it and Christianity.

One could then boldly say that initially, there were no evil spirits in the African world. It is with the influence of Christianity that some spirits have come to be classified as good and some as bad ontologically. This classification into good and evil spirits falls flat with the acceptance of the African world as an ensemble of forces in complementary relationship. The so-called evil spirits are at the service of God. This was also the way the early Greeks saw the demons. In Homer, the demons “were simply supernatural forces of various kinds that intervened in the course of events for good or ill” (Brodman & Doan, 2016: 59; Ferguson, 1993: 236).

9. Ekwensu: The Archetypal Demon in Igbo Traditional Religion?

The argument that God is the source of every activity in the original idea of African Religion is contested because of the presence of some deities that are considered intrinsically evil. Among the Igbo-speaking peoples of South-Eastern Nigeria, such a concept is typified with the idea of *Ekwensu*. This deity is thought of as the Igbo parallel of the Judeo-Christian devil, God’s *opposer* par excellence. In the thoughts of some expatriate missionaries, *Ekwensu* is the supreme author of evil and an

archenemy of God (Basden, 1966: 36) or the spirit of someone who died poor and without family (Correia, 1922: 365).

However, many Igbo scholars have argued against the identification of *Ekwensu* with the devil of Christian theology. The clarification concerning *Ekwensu* has been given by Metuh (1981: 76) in these words: “a person given to violence is said to be possessed by *Ekwensu*. Since violence can spell disaster for the community. During peace time, the activities of *Ekwensu* herald misfortune, and in this circumstance, he is regarded as an evil spirit. However, at wartime, his activities are propitious and he is invoked as a good spirit. Warriors set up shrines where they make sacrifices to *Ekwensu*.” In another place Metuh notes that “*Ekwensu* is the spirit of violence. It may incite people to murder in peace-time and acts of valour in war-time” (1985: 12). His lines of argument are supported by Arazu (2005) who maintains that *Ekwensu* was one of the deities worshipped in some Igbo societies. For him, this explains why some villages bore the name ‘*Umu Ekwensu*’ (descendants of *Ekwensu*) and celebrated the feast of *Ekwensu* before the advent of Christianity in Igbo land. It was with the Christian incursion into Igbo land that the missionaries translated the Igbo *Ekwensu* to Satan, a translation which is, to say the least, unfortunate. This translational error caused many Igbo families who answered the name *Ekwensu* to change their revered ancestral name because the missionaries labeled such names ‘devilish’. This unfortunate transposition of the Christian idea of the devil into the Igbo thought system has gained ground with the acceptance of Christianity as the main religion of the people. As Udoye (2011: 105) concludes, “today *Ekwensu* ... is a malevolent, dangerous and wicked spirit with his numerous demons that are responsible for all evils, misfortune and wickedness in the new Igbo Christianized world-view.” This is an unfortunate transition the Igbo *Ekwensu* has undergone due to his Christian baptism.

10. Evaluating Barth’s Views and the African Response on Evil

As I have already indicated in this paper, Karl Barth’s approach to evil and the demonic principle is culturally conditioned. The effects of the European Witch-hunts and the two world wars left very dirty marks on the contours of European history that another approach to the demons has to be found. Barth found it in his description of the demonic principle as nothingness. This could be the reason Barth criticized Luther whom he thought looked too frequently or lengthily or seriously or systematically at demons. For Barth, this sort of attention satisfies the desires of the demon who seeks attention. Again, paying much attention to the demons would make us to be somehow demonic. The historical facts against which Barth argues are easy to see. Barth did not argue against the reality of demons. What he argued against was the unmitigated attention given to them. In reference to God, they are nothingness.

However, it is easy to see how Barth fails to accomplish his aim of relegating the demons to nothingness. First and foremost, he makes an indistinct characterisation of nothingness as a reality. Perhaps, one could understand this by positing that, for Barth, nothingness is a reality since it possesses the potentialities to alter other natures and cause them to be annihilated. However, it is nothingness because it lacks finalistic

capacity and inner power to achieve these potentialities because it has been neutralized by God. These positions are not clear in Barth's presentation.

Again, in a bid to dissuade tracing the origin of evil or nothingness to God as its author, Barth introduced a puzzle where he implicitly accords nothingness an origin independent of God. Also, his biblicism led him to accept the reality of the kingdom of demons in these words,

...it is for the Bible no mere figure of speech or poetic fancy or expression of human concern but the simple truth that nothingness has this dynamic, that it is a kingdom on the march and engaged in invasion and assault... a kingdom which by the very fact that God confronts it is characterized from the very outset as weak and futile... yet a real kingdom, a nexus of form and power and movement and activity, of real menace and danger within its appointed limits. This is how Holy Scripture sees nothingness. And this is how it also sees demons (1960: 524).

Even though Barth fails to explain how nothingness could have a real kingdom that poses a menace and danger, he goes on to argue that "nothingness is falsehood. It exists as such, having a kind of substance and person, vitality and spontaneity, form and power and movement. As such it founds and organizes its kingdom. And demons are its exponents, the powers of falsehood in a thousand different forms" (1960: 527). It is therefore plain that Barth could not escape the trap of ascribing real substance and personhood to a phenomenon he has hitherto designated as nothingness. Mallow (1983: 64) is able to point out that, here, Barth seems to have contradicted himself. This is the weakness of any thesis that tries to remain faithful to the New Testament data while trying to negate the force of the demonic principle. Such a thesis would accept that the exorcism texts of the New Testament (cf. Mk 1:21–28; Mk 5: 1–20; Mk 7:24–30; Mk 9:14–27) depict the demons as real entities opposed to God. This is where the traditional African thought better represents the demons as nothingness than the Barthian presentation. As agents of God, the spirits are nothing without the permission of God in the African worldview.

However, the traditional African concept of the spirits as neutral agents who act at God's behest seems to have been lost. What is now in vogue is the Neo-African conception of the presence of evil spirits or demons as opposition to God. This has far-reaching effects. First, the recognition that evil spirits or demons are responsible for any kind of sicknesses in people means that spiritual remedies are always sought after for the healing of sicknesses. Traditional healing practices are very important among the Africans to the extent that the traditional medicine man is seen as more important than his orthodox counterpart. Sometimes, the traditional African method of healing involves the offering of sacrifices to the gods to take away the scourge of the sickness caused by the evil spirits.

The flip side of this is that instead of concerted efforts towards establishing a real relationship with the Supreme Being, who is the source and author of all things, the

Neo-Africans pay attention to the offering of pseudo-sacrifices or prayers that would assuage the anger of these evil spirits. This does not help genuine relationship with God. Hence, there is the need for an intensive understanding of the African worldview as a hierarchy of beings existing in complementarity. In this complementary relationship, it is God that determines the course of affairs. A harmonious relationship with Him takes care of the craze to assuage the evil spirits.

11. Conclusion

It has to be admitted that what Barth argued against in the 20th century has relevance for the Africans of the 21st century. The level of attention given to the demonic principle or evil spirits in Africa has acquired an alarming level that one could boldly say that the African world swarms with demons who act as God's adversary. The level of intellectual and psychological captivity which this state of affairs engenders has led to the retarding of genuine efforts towards economic and scientific growth. The biggest and most entrapping edifices in many African cities are religious centers dedicated to the casting out and binding of demons. Despite all the efforts made in this regard, it seems that evil continues its giant strides to rule and dominate the lives of most African peoples. Hence, heed should be given to Barth's call not to pay sustained attention to the demons. It was Barth's contention that the concrete form in which nothingness is active is through man's sinful action. This agrees with the African conception of the origin of evil. The current trend whereby African problems are traced to malignant spirits does not solve any of the African problems. If a theological detour is made and the blessings and punishments that people experience are traced to their relationship with God, African theology would once more become relevant to the concrete experiences of the people. Morality would once more occupy a central position in the lives of the people. A realization that the demons or evil spirits only exist as agents to carry out divine injunctions would lead to genuine concerns towards a right relationship with God. A situation where the average Africans feel that they must adopt different antics against the devil or demonic principle so as to remain safe while neglecting the moral principles that lead to a close union with God robs both the traditional African Religion and Christianity in Africa of their God-centered orientation.

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