

The Omnipotence of God in Reformed Theology and its Relevance to Lepcha Tribal Context

In Darjeeling/Kalimpong District and Sikkim (India)

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Sponsored by:

STICHTING AFBOUW KAMPEN

**THEOLOGISCHE UNIVERSITEIT VAN DE NEDERLANDSE
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Introduction

0.1. Need for Research on the Omnipotence of God in Reformed Theology and its Relevance in the Lepcha Tribal Context

The main purpose of this thesis is to find the meaning of the Omnipotence of God in Reformed Theology and its relevance to the Lepcha tribal context in the Darjeeling district, Kalimpong district and Sikkim in India. One of the important challenges the Christian theologians in India are facing today is finding an appropriate nature, content and methodology of doing theology in an Indian context. India, being a home for various diverse cultures, religions, and ethnic groups, demands our attention to bring, into our theologizing, unity within diversity. The emerging issues in our contemporary society today, which we experience daily, are the threatening realities that people are sick, hungry, thirsty, traumatized due to wars and conflicts, some dying young due to addiction and HIV & AIDS. There are upheavals from issues like gender justice, globalization, ethnicity, multi-religiosity, multi-culturalism, cultural erosion, identity crises, insurgency problems, peace issues, etc. For the Christian Reformed Church to deal with all these issues and problems in our region, we need to develop a relevant Christian theology. Hence, our Christian theology, especially ‘Christian Reformed Theology’ in our context, must respond to all these emerging issues accurately and relevantly.

When we look at the development of Indian Christian theology, and especially Indian Christian Tribal theology,¹ we see that in their theologizing, many times the Indian

¹ For the study on Indian Christian Tribal Theology the main focus is on the writings of Tribal contextual theologians such as Wati Longchar, K. Thanzauva and a few others specifically on the concept of God and His Omnipotence from the Indian tribal perspective, H. Vanlalauva’s book *Doctrine of God: John Calvin’s Doctrine of God with Special Reference to the Indian Context*, and Eyingbeni’s book *God of the Tribes: Christian Perspective on the Naga Ancestral Idea of the Supreme Being*, were extensively used.

Christian leaders go overboard rereading and criticizing systematic theology which, to them, was developed by Western theologians in a western context. By doing this, they tend to cross the line of control in their interpretation. Here, we stand in great danger of losing the authenticity and truth of the Biblical message. Therefore, I see that there needs to be a meeting point of eastern and western ways of theological thinking and development. Perhaps, this can be a good way to check each other when things tend to be too rigid and stagnant or too flexible and dynamic.²

When we look at reformed theology, it itself has vast subjects to deal with and to inquire into the possibility of bringing out the relevance of every aspect of the reformed doctrines in the Lepcha Tribal context is more than a lifetime's work. Hence, it is important to keep attainable goals and deal with one aspect of the Reformed Doctrines and focus on deeper research. In Reformed Theology, the doctrine of God is one of the central issues. And one of the main focuses in Reformed doctrine is on the Omnipotence of God.³ A lot of important literature is dedicated to this subject. Therefore, this thesis will only try to discover the relevance of the Reformed concept of the Omnipotence of God in the Lepcha Tribal people's context in the Darjeeling district, Kalimpong district and Sikkim. This

Detailed discussion of developments and insights in the Indian Christian Tribal Theology and the Indian Tribal understanding of the Omnipotence of God will follow in Chapter Three.

² The Synthetic Model explained by Stephen Bevans in his book *Models of Contextual Theology* could be the closest reference. See Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, NY 2007), 88-102.

³ The study of the doctrine of God and His Omnipotence in Christian theology, is a humongous task. What is discovered may be relevant to a particular people and context but not complete. It is like the gigantic Mt. Everest which is standing tall and visible for India and also stands tall and visible for Nepal and Tibet. The same mountain can be described in various shapes from these countries. As all the descriptions are right but not complete, so is the understanding of the doctrine of the Omnipotence of God. A bigger and better understanding is possible, when we bring together all these understandings. Therefore, may this research make a small contribution to the understanding of the concept of the doctrine of God's Omnipotence in Reformed Theology from the Lepcha Tribal Perspective.

context will be further sketched in Chapter Two below. We take the religio-cultural traits and values of the Lepcha Tribal people as one of the tools to help formulate the Reformed concept of an omnipotent God in the Lepcha context. So, the main question of this study is:

What is the Reformed understanding of the omnipotence of God and what is its relevance to the Lepcha Tribal people's context?

This main question is followed by several sub-questions: How is the concept of Omnipotence developed in the Reformed Theological Tradition? What is the concept of the omnipotence of God in the Lepcha Christian Tribal mindset? To what extent can the effects of the Lepcha context and its idea of the omnipotence of God either be restored or obliterated for the relevance of Reformed theology in the Lepcha context? What is the impact of Indian Tribal theology in Darjeeling District, Kalimpong District and Sikkim? How does Tribal theology in India express the concept of the omnipotence of God that could be relevant to the Lepchas? Is there any possibility for a correlation (differences, contradictions and parallels), for divergence or convergence, between Reformed theology and Indian Tribal theology, especially in their understanding of the concept of the omnipotence of God, for finding out the relevant approach in doing theology in the Lepcha Tribal people's context?

0.2. Method of Research

In order to bring the Reformed understanding of God's omnipotence into conversation with the Lepcha Tribal context, this research will integrate various perspectives and approaches. Aspects of the notion of omnipotence will be examined by means of conceptual analysis, following in the footsteps of Gijsbert van den Brink, Herman

Bavinck, Michael Horton, Dolf te Velde and others.⁴ The general context of the Lepcha tribe and its specific patterns of cultural and religious beliefs and practices will be sketched on the basis of cultural anthropological research and religious studies.

In exploring the viability of a Reformed Tribal theology for people in India, theological and practical issues of contextualization will be discussed with the help of western and non-western contributions. A special part of this research is an empirical survey conducted among religious and Christian professional leaders from the Lepcha tribe. Since this is a relatively novel method to be applied in systematic theology, the next sub-section will provide a brief explanation of the type of empirical research employed with regard to the understanding and experience of the omnipotence of God in the Lepcha Tribal people's context. A fuller exposition will be provided in the opening sections of chapter 4.

0.2.1 Empirical Research

The researcher conducted participant observations, interviews and questionnaires with Christian Lepchas of Darjeeling District, Kalimpong District and Sikkim and also Lepchas living in other cities who are basically from these places. The reason for this empirical research is firstly to determine the reception of God's omnipotence by some Lepcha Christian leaders who would be representative of the whole Lepcha tribe. The topic,

⁴ Ref., Gijsbert van den Brink, *Almighty God: A Study of the Doctrine of Divine Omnipotence* (Kampen: Kok Pharos Publishing House, 1993); Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: God and Creation Vol. 1-4*, edited by Bolt, John (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003-2008); Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith, A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publications, 2011), Dolf te Velde, *The Doctrine of God in Reformed Orthodoxy, Karl Barth and the Utrecht School. A Study in Method and Content* (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

“The Omnipotence of God,” is a highly complex one and needed a deeper study in expressing its meaning.

Secondly, there are not enough written documents on the concept of the omnipotence of God in Lepcha literature, therefore, the researcher had to depend upon empirical research for a more current and detailed understanding. The details of the study will be presented in Chapter Four.

The perspective from which the research is done is that of a positive approach to the Lepcha culture and their understanding about the concept of the omnipotence of God in order to find out the relevance of the Reformed concept of the omnipotence of God in Lepcha Tribal people’s context in Darjeeling district, Kalimpong District and Sikkim.

0.2.1.1. Research Objective

The research objective is to discover the idea of the omnipotence of God based on each interviewee’s personal conviction, based on his/her idea of Christianity and based on his/her idea of the Lepcha belief system. A secondary objective is to find out if any change in the understanding of the omnipotence of God has taken place in today’s context. It will also find out whether there is any relationship between the Lepcha Tribal God and the Christian God, according to the interviewees, and whether there are changes needed in order to make the Christian God relevant in the Lepcha Tribal Context.

0.2.1.2. Research Strategy

This is a qualitative survey with interviews of and questionnaires to a selected 25 Lepcha Christians living in Darjeeling District, Kalimpong District and Sikkim and also with some Tribal Christians who are working and living in bigger cities but from these same places. Forty percent of the interviewees are converted Christians from

Bungtheism/Munism and Buddhism. Sixty percent were born into a Christian family. This combinations was mostly random, just to bring in a variety of perspectives. The respondents' ages are divided into two groups: fifty percent of the respondents are people above 45 years of age and fifty percent are below 45 years old. The researcher falls in the middle of the age divisions, and can relate well to both groups.

In order to receive deeper and more concrete answers, the interviews were taken and questionnaires were collected from Lepcha Christians from different walks of life. They are categorized into two sections: a) Pastors (Christian Lepcha pastors/priest and church leaders) and b) Professionals (academicians, politicians, Government servants, students, farmers, etc.).

0.2.1.3. Major Questions

1. How do you look at the Omnipotence of God according to your own Christian religious background? (Include any change of understanding in the contemporary situation.)
2. How do you look at the Omnipotence of God in the Lepcha Tribal Belief system? (Include any change of understanding in the contemporary situation.)
3. Do you see any discontinuity, relative continuity, or absolute continuity between the Lepcha God and the Christian God?
4. What changes must Christianity adopt in order to make the Christian God relevant to the Lepcha Tribal Context?

The empirical study seeks to find out the Christian Lepcha thinking today on the concept of the Omnipotence of God and throw some light on the relation between the original Lepcha tribal belief and Christian faith.

0.3. Outline of the Chapters

First Chapter: Omnipotence of God in Reformed Theology. This chapter deals with the concept of the Omnipotence of God in Reformed Theology. The idea is to arrive at an acceptable definition of Omnipotence in the Reformed tradition, taking into account the issues and challenges faced by the church in developing this concept.

Second Chapter: Omnipotence of God in Lepcha Tribal Context. This chapter is a literature review to establish what type of belief system the Lepchas have practiced over the years and how that has affected their way of thinking and their way of life. The concept of the omnipotence of God in the specific Lepcha tribal context is examined from this background. This chapter is not an attempt to review all the concerned literature on this topic but looks at selected documents which are considered foundational for the present research.

Third Chapter: Omnipotence of God in Christian Tribal Theology in India. This chapter gives some general background for the empirical research described in Chapter Four. The discussion of Tribal beliefs in general here brings the research in the next chapter into the wider context of all Tribals in India. An explanation of the term “Tribal” and a brief description of the Tribals in India exposes the identity and condition of the Tribals in India. The chapter explores the idea of the omnipotence of God from the tribal perspective, keeping in mind the tribal context and culture and their viewpoints in relation to the Christian God. The content and ideas from this chapter may be used by Reformed Theology as a wider contextual background to either acclaim, falsify or balance the tribal understanding of the Omnipotence of God so that it would show the relevancy of the topic for the Lepcha tribal people.

Fourth Chapter: Omnipotence of God in Present Lepcha Tribal Mindset: Empirical Research. This chapter analyzes the details of the empirical research and expresses the 25 key leaders' views on the Omnipotence of God according to their own Christian religious backgrounds.

Fifth Chapter: Formulating a Definition of the Omnipotence of God in the Context of the Lepcha Tribal People. This chapter presents the researcher's concluding remarks based on the materials collected from the research. First, it begins with the idea of general and special revelation in the context of the omnipotence of God, followed by the idea that Jesus Christ is the wish for all religions. These two ideas give a broader framework of understanding to state the relevance of the Omnipotence for the Lepcha tribal people. The important section in this chapter is the new proposed culturally-sensitive definition of the Omnipotence of God.

Sixth Chapter: Omnipotence of God in Reformed Theology and its Relevance to the Lepcha Tribal Context This is the final chapter, and it presents a number of building blocks for how Reformed Theology can be relevant to the Lepcha Tribal Context in India. The first sections discuss some aspects of Reformed Theology and Contextualization and will point to Jesus Christ and Scripture as a Gift to the Lepchas. Jesus Christ is the missing link and His sacrifice expresses God's power and His ultimate purpose for His creation. Scripture is the primary source and a magnifying glass to help the Lepchas see the truth clearly. The next section of this chapter presents a way to receive and understand the concept of omnipotence, as developed within Reformed theology, for the specific Lepcha context. In particular, the concept of Divine omnipotence will be related to human freedom, and to the questions of evil and suffering.

The chapter ends with the recommendation for future research and the final conclusion.

Chapter One

Omnipotence of God in Reformed Theology

1.1. Introduction

Numerous theologians have spent their lives in research, trying to define Reformed Theology and give a structure to it. But can we really describe Reformed Theology in a nutshell? I suppose not! What was started in the 16th century by the reformers was just the beginning of a great movement and not the end. Reformed theology is a theology of discovering, reaffirming and propagating what had begun in Scripture two thousand years ago and more. It is also a theology which corrects what had been lost and misrepresented over the years. Reformed theology is not static, but active and progressive. The Latin phrase, *Semper Reformanda* usually translated as “*always reforming*” is a widely used slogan in the reformed tradition and the churches established in the reformed tradition felt the need to be always reforming.¹ A reformed church must continue to be a reforming church, not a church that is *semper eadem*, always the same, as the Romans once claimed.²

Perhaps, Reformed Theology cannot claim that all theological issues are now settled once and for all. Though God and His truth are pure and eternal, theology is written by human beings and therefore has limitations, and sometimes humans differ in their viewpoints. As stated above, the sixteenth century reformation and the theology that developed was a continuing movement rather than a completed incident. In the 21st century we face difficult issues. How can the challenges of globalization, poverty, cloning, human

¹ A.T.B. McGowan, ed., *Always Reforming: Explorations in Systematic Theology* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 13.

² R.T. Jones, “Reformation Theology” in *The New Dictionary of Theology*. Edited by Sinclair B. Ferguson, David F. Wright and J.I. Packer (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988), 567.

sexuality, HIV/AIDS, ecology, etc., be faced? How can the distinctiveness of salvation in Christ alone be asserted in a world where anything that makes you happy is okay and all religions supposedly lead to God? How can people still stand firm in Christ against a politically and scientifically correct world? It is a huge task for theologians to balance reformed biblical truths on the one hand and cultural relevance on the other hand.

Most world religions are based on the concept of God. The doctrine of God is the most basic element of Christian belief. It also serves as the foundation for the rest of Christian theology. The conclusions reached in the study of the doctrine of God will greatly affect our understanding and practice of the Christian faith. The doctrine of God also forms a theological interface with other fields such as philosophy, anthropology, sociology, etc.³ However, exploring the study of the doctrine of God in theology itself is a huge task. It is like a man standing on the shore of the ocean and trying to measure its size. We cannot indeed fully measure God; He is beyond our comprehension. Therefore, in this chapter I intend to discuss only one attribute, the omnipotence of God in reformed theology. The study of divine omnipotence is especially important because it is so essential to the concept of God. God's divine power must be greater than human power. Only an all-powerful, infinite God can be the true object of worship and trust. Can we really be sure of our salvation if there is something that God cannot overcome?⁴

Therefore, the *omnipotence of God* is referred to in the phrase, "Almighty God" which van den Brink aptly chose as his book's title, and which has functioned for many

³ Millard J. Erickson, *God the Father Almighty: A Contemporary Exploration of the Divine Attributes* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 13-28.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 165-166

centuries as one of the most common forms of addressing God.⁵ In fact, *omnipotence* is one of the most well-known attributes traditionally assigned to God. However, today, with the changing times, events, circumstances, situations, people and their newer growing challenges, etc., the *omnipotence of God* is the most contested of all God's characteristics. In this chapter a deeper study of the omnipotence of God basically in the reformed theological traditions will be presented. The definition of omnipotence and its interpretations; omnipotence in the reformed theological traditions (with special reference to John Calvin, Karl Barth and Herman Bavinck in their studies of this topic); the developing and current problems and challenges with the concept of omnipotence; and finally an analysis, will be covered in this chapter.

1.2. Definition of “Omnipotence”

Theologians and philosophers struggled for centuries formulating the meaning and concept of the omnipotence of God. Some would say omnipotence means “God has power over everything,” and others would interpret it as “God has the ability to do everything.” These two ideas overlap but do not mean the same thing. Therefore, the doctrine of *the omnipotence of God* became a highly debatable topic and some even went as far as finding no *omnipotence* in God, while others would still attribute it to Him, but in a qualified sense. There were a few who kept digging into it trying to find balance and still trying to bring stability to it. Let us first look at the classical biblical interpretation of omnipotence and then the ‘minimizing interpretation’ as Gijsbert van den Brink defines it in *Almighty God: A Study of the Doctrine of Divine Omnipotence*.

⁵ Gijsbert van den Brink, *Almighty God: A Study of the Doctrine of Divine Omnipotence* (Kampen: Kok Pharos Publishing House, 1993), 1.

1.2.1. Classical Biblical Interpretation

Theologians who subscribe to the classical biblical interpretation of omnipotence see God as the source of all power, controlling the events of history, who is unlimited and matchless in His wisdom, presence and power. He is the Maker and Master of all, and all things are subject to His will.⁶ God's omnipotence is revealed in His sovereignty, and Scripture sets no bounds on God's power. Herman Bavinck puts it this way:

Already in the names El, Elohim, El Shaddai, and Adonai the idea of power comes to the fore. He is further called great and terrible (Deut. 7:21ff), whose face no human can see and live (Exod. 33:20), "the mighty one of Israel (Isa.1:24), "the great and mighty God whose name is YHWH of hosts" (Jer. 32:18); he is mighty in Strength (Job 9:4; 36:5), "strong and mighty" (Psalm 24:8), the Lord (Matt.11:25; Rev. 1:8; 22:5), that is, the owner and ruler who possesses authority and "over-lordship," the king who eternally rules over all things (Exod. 15:18; Ps. 29:10, 93, 99; II Kings 19:15; Jer. 10:7, 10, etc.) but especially exercise kingship over Israel, protecting and saving it (Num. 23:21; Deut. 33:5; Judg. 8:23; I Sam. 8:7; Ps.10:16; 24:7; 48:2; 74:12; Isa. 33:22; 41:2; 43; etc.). Similarly, in the New Testament He is called the great king (Matt. 5:35; I Tim.1:17), "the King of kings and Lord of lords (I Tim. 6:15; cf. Rev. 19:16); "the Lord Almighty" (II Cor. 6:18; Rev. 1:8; 4:8; 11:17); "the only Sovereign (I Tim. 6:15), who possesses both the power and the authority to act (Matt. 28:18; Rom. 9:21) and the ability, fitness and power to act (Matt. 6:13; Rom. 1:20).⁷

Van den Brink writes, "God's unparalleled deeds in creation and redemption, the miracles related in the Bible, not least the resurrection of Christ, the way in which He is acclaimed as King of kings and Lord of lords (1 Tim 6:15) – all suggest an unlimited, divine power."⁸ Therefore, this points out that the Bible does teach that God is omnipotent.

⁶ J.I. Packer, *Knowing God* (London: Hodder & Toughton Publishers, 1988), 91-99.

⁷ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: God and Creation Vol. II*, edited by Bolt, John (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 245-246.

⁸ Gijsbert van den Brink, Vincent Brummer and Marcel Sarot (eds), *Understanding the Attributes of God* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1999), 140-141.

Theologians from different walks of life agree that the biblical concept of omnipotence is about God’s actual dominion over humans and the universe and His unrestricted ability to act—in other words, the power with which He accomplishes His will. For L. Berkhof, “Power in God may be called the effective energy of His nature or that perfection of His Being by which He is the absolute and highest causality.”⁹ C.S. Lewis proposes that this power in God has the power to do all, or everything. He writes, “We are told in scripture that ‘with God all things are possible.’ God’s omnipotence means power to do all that is intrinsically possible, not to do the intrinsically impossible. You may attribute miracles to him but not nonsense.”¹⁰ Phrases like “all things are possible for God” appear in virtually all layers of biblical literature (Gen. 18:14; Jer. 32:17; Job 42:2; Matt. 19:26; Mark 14:36; Luke 1:37; Phil.3:21; etc.). When we look at Philippians 3:21, we see, as van den Brink wrote, that, “The capacity for action and the actual rule are together applied to Christ in strong mutual association. God at any rate is capable of doing more things than He in fact does and has done.”¹¹

Herman Bavinck states that God’s omnipotence is clearly seen from His works in the Bible. He writes:

Creation, providence, Israel’s deliverance from Egypt, nature with its laws, the history of Israel with its marvels— all loudly and clearly proclaim the omnipotence of God. Psalmists and prophets alike constantly revisit these mighty acts to humble the proud and to comfort believers. He is “mighty and powerful” (Isa. 40:26), creates heaven and earth (Gen. 1; Isa. 42:5; 44:24; 45:12, 18; 48:13; 51:13; Zech.12:1), maintains their ordinances (Jer. 5:22; 10:10; 14:22; 27:5; 31:35), forms rain and wind, light and darkness, good and evil (Amos 3:6; 4:13; 5:8; Isa. 45:5-7; 54:16). He renders people speechless and enables them to speak, he kills and makes alive, saves and

⁹ L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1946), 79.

¹⁰ C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1962), 28.

¹¹ Gijsbert van den Brink, *Understanding the Attributes of God*, 140.

destroys (Exod. 4:11; 15; Deut. 26:8; 29:2; 32:12; 39; I Sam. 2:6; 14:6; II Kings 5:7; Hos. 13:14; Matt. 10:28; Luke 12:20). He has absolute power over all things so that nothing can resist him (Ps. 8, 18-19, 24, 29, 33, 104, etc.; Job 5:9-27; 9:4ff.; 12:14-21; 34:12-15; 36-37). Nothing is too hard for God; for him all things are possible (Gen. 18:14; Zech. 8:6; Jer. 32:27; Matt. 19:26; Luke 1:37; 18:27). Out of stones he can raise up children to Abraham (Matt. 3:9). He does whatever he pleases (Ps. 115:3; Isa.14:24, 27; 46:10; 55:10-11) and no one can call him to account (Jer. 49:19; 50:44). His power is above all evident in the works of redemption: in the resurrection of Christ (Rom. 1:4; Eph. 1:20), in bringing about and strengthening faith (Rom. 16:25; Eph. 1:18-19), in the dispensing of grace above all we ask or think (Eph. 3:20; II Cor. 9:8; II Pet. 1:3), in the resurrection of the last day (John 5:25ff), and so on. This power of God, finally, is also the source of all power and authority, ability and strength, in creatures. From him derives the dominion of human kind (Gen. 1:26; Ps.8), the authority of governments (Prov. 8:15; Rom.13:1-6), the strength of his people (Deut. 8:17-18; Ps. 68:35; Isa. 40:26ff.), the might of a horse (Job 39:19ff), the mighty voice of thunder (Ps. 29:3; 68:33; etc.) In a word, power belongs to God (Ps. 62:11), and His is the glory and the strength (Ps. 96:7; Rev. 4:11; 5:12; 7:12; 19:1).¹²

The above explanations from the scriptures show the power of God in all things.

God rules over everything and His ability to act has no limits. Van den Brink points out that it is important to lay this foundation, because "...in Greek philosophical tradition omnipotence is not a part of divine perfection. The highest principle in the great Greek system of thought (the idea of the Good in Plato, the Unmoved Mover in Aristotle, the One in Plotinus, etc.) is never portrayed as actively involved in the world; it is not in need of performing actions! The emphasis on the activity, and by extension the omnipotence of God, is, on the other hand, characteristic of the Judeo-Christian tradition."¹³ And van den Brink concludes that the classical interpretation of the biblical texts, that God is all-powerful, is completely accurate.

¹² Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 246-247.

¹³ Gijsbert van den Brink, *Understanding the Attributes of God*, 141.

1.2.2. Minimizing Interpretation

Another interpretation of omnipotence leans towards the conclusion that God is not portrayed as almighty in the Bible at all. Van den Brink labels this interpretation ‘the minimizing interpretation.’ Supporters of this interpretation often point to the biblical stories where God appears to give in to human beings, and even lets them sin without stopping them. And they claim that the life of Jesus shows “that God is not an Imperial Caesar God of knock-down power, but a creative servant God of invincible love.”¹⁴ David E. Jenkins specifically supports this minimizing interpretation. He writes, “... on the whole, they cannot avoid the impression that ... God’s power is in fact limited in various ways. No doubt God has power, perhaps even superior power, but surely He is not omnipotent, i.e., not all-powerful.”¹⁵

J.L. Mackie, who made a significant impact in the philosophy of religion, claimed that traditional arguments for the existence of God have been reasonably criticized by philosophers, and he believes that an honest theologian must admit that no logical proof of God's existence is possible. He declares that critiques can also be made in dealing with the traditional problem of evil. For him, the simultaneous existence of evil and an all-powerful, all-knowing and all-good God is “... positively irrational and also several parts of essential theological doctrines are inconsistent with one another so that the theologians can maintain their positions as a whole only by extreme rejection of reason.”¹⁶

¹⁴ David E. Jenkins, *God, Miracle and the Church of England* (London: SCM Press, 1987), 29. Cited by Gijsbert van den Brink, *Understanding the Attributes of God*, 140.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ J.L. Mackie, “Evil and Omnipotence,” *Mind*, New Series, Vol. 64, No. 254. (April, 1955), 200, <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0026-4423%28195504%292%3A64%3A254%3C200%3AEAO%3E2.0.CO%3B2-2>.

Mackie mentions that many theological thinkers tried to find a resolution to this issue. He writes, "...few have been prepared to deny God's omnipotence, and rather more have been prepared to keep the term 'omnipotence' but severely to restrict its meaning, recording quite a number of things that an omnipotent being cannot do. ... The thinkers who restrict God's power, but keep the term 'omnipotence', may reasonably be suspected of thinking, in other contexts, that his power is really unlimited."¹⁷ Mackie calls this the 'Paradox of Omnipotence.'

One of the major discussions which led Mackie to coin the term 'Paradox of Omnipotence' was the assumption that God has made humans so free that He cannot control their wills. Can an omnipotent being make things which he cannot subsequently control? Or, what is practically equivalent to this, can an omnipotent being make rules which then bind himself? "It is clear that this is a paradox: the questions cannot be answered satisfactorily either in the affirmative or in the negative. If we answer, "Yes," it follows that if God actually makes things which he cannot control, or makes rules which bind himself, he is not omnipotent once he has made them. There are *then* things which he cannot do. But if we answer, "No," we are immediately asserting that there are things which He cannot do, that is to say that he is already *not* omnipotent."¹⁸ However, Mackie proposes that:

The paradox of omnipotence can be solved if we distinguish between first-order omnipotence [omnipotence (1)], that is the unlimited power to act, and second-order omnipotence [omnipotence (2)], that is the unlimited power to determine what powers to act things shall have. Then we could consistently say that God all the time has omnipotence (1), but if so, then no beings at any time have powers to act independently of God. Or we could say that God at one time had omnipotence

¹⁷ Ibid., 201-202.

¹⁸ Ibid., 210.

(2), and used it to assign independent powers to act to certain things, so that God thereafter did not have omnipotence (1). But what the paradox shows is that we cannot consistently ascribe to any continuing being omnipotence in an inclusive sense.¹⁹

In the course of the discussion, three different types of responses to such paradoxes were expressed:

1. “What Mackie’s paradox actually states is simply that if an omnipotent being can make a thing, then by definition it can control it.”²⁰
2. “The task of “making a being which God cannot control” and phrases such as “a stone too heavy for God to lift” are self-contradictory. Thus, the paradox demands the omnipotent God to do what is logically impossible.”²¹
3. “The third group objected to presupposing omnipotence to God in the first place and considered paradox as an elegant demonstration of the fact that it is logically inconsistent to ascribe omnipotence to one and the same subject. They shared Mackie’s conclusion that omnipotence cannot be attributed to God, so that if God exists then God’s power must necessarily be limited in one way or another.”²²

Charles Hartshorne, the biggest proponent of process theology, critiquing along with Mackie, blames the traditional interpretation of omnipotence of God and writes:

All I have said is that omnipotence as usually conceived is a false or indeed absurd ideal, which in truth *limits* God, denies to him any world worth talking about: a world of living, that is to say, significantly decision-making agents. It is the *tradition* which indeed terribly limits divine power, the

¹⁹ Ibid., 212.

²⁰ Gijsbert van den Brink, *Almighty God*, 136.

²¹ Ibid., 137.

²² Ibid., 137.

power to foster creativity even in the least of the creatures. No worse falsehood was ever perpetrated than the traditional concept of omnipotence.²³

Therefore, proposing a solution through process theology, Hartshorne held to the primacy of events over things, and becoming over being. Change rather than consistency is the underlying principle of reality and thus reality is a process of becoming, not a static universe of objects. Then he proposes, “God himself must be in a process and, in some sense, He must be dependent on the free decisions of creatures. God’s nature is endlessly adaptable and changeable, for God is both the originator and a participant in the process of cosmic evolution.”²⁴ For him:

God is independent in His abstract nature but dependent in his concrete nature. God’s perfection should not be seen exclusively in terms of absoluteness, necessity, independence, infinity and immutability wholly in contrast to the relativity, contingency, dependence, finitude and changeability of the creatures. God’s perfection means God is unsurpassable in social relatedness. God is supremely absolute in his abstract nature but supremely relative in his concrete nature. No one can surpass Him in the supremacy of His social relatedness to every creature except Himself. He is the ‘self-surpassing surpasser of all’. God is more than just the world in its totality because He has His own transcendent self-identity, yet God includes the world within Himself by His knowledge and love.²⁵

1.2.3. Qualified Definition of Omnipotence by van den Brink

Van den Brink agrees that there is a certain amount of truth that led to the minimizing interpretation, so it cannot just be thrown out. However, on the contrary, he

²³ Charles Hartshorne, *Omnipotence and other Theological Mistakes* (Albany NY: State University of New York Press, 1984), 17-18. (ebook ISBN13: 9780873957717).

²⁴ M. Williams, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (second edition), edited by Walter A. Elwell (UK: Baker Academic, 2001), 536.

²⁵ D.W. Diehl, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, edited by Walter A. Elwell (UK: Marshall, Morgan & Scott Publications Ltd., 1984), 882-883.

writes, “An engagement with the ‘Biblical ABC’ which is not satisfied with remaining at a superficial level, leads inevitably to some qualifications to the simple ‘God can do everything’ view, with which the classical interpretation is often all too easily equated.”²⁶ Among these qualifications, van den Brink writes that at least the following five qualifications should be included: **Firstly**, God’s omnipotence in the Bible is not only theoretical, but is backed with factual truth and is rooted in the daily activities of life.²⁷ His omnipotence is experienced as an expression of trust based on an interpretation of history as seen with the eyes of faith.²⁸ **Secondly**, the deeds of God throughout history are always done with redemptive purpose, and we experience his omnipotence in both creation and history.²⁹ **Thirdly**, the acts of God’s power do not occur in an unbroken series. His purposes with humanity and the world are realized at intermittent times throughout history, as He increasingly gets more personally involved, and ultimately takes on our very sins on the cross.³⁰ **Fourthly**, If we look at the experience of Christ on the cross, it looks like God’s

²⁶ Gijsbert van den Brink, *Understanding the Attributes of God*, 142.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ “The psalmist expresses the Lord as king (Ps.97:1). The liturgical setting of the omnipotence texts in Revelation tells us that the omnipotent God is not an abstract, lifeless conviction, but an object of faith, hope and worship, grounded in the concrete, wondrous discoveries that were made during the history of salvation. Abraham came to recognize it when Sarah became pregnant, Job when God revealed His power in creation, the disciples when Jesus astonished them by his miracles.” Ibid.

²⁹ “The people of Israel realized that God was the God who liberated them out of Egyptian bondage. But at the same time God is also a judge who can put them into exile for their disobedience. God is not just God of Israel but the creator of heaven and earth whose power is evident in the immensity of nature and its regularities (Job 38-41).” Ibid., 142-143.

³⁰ “Often, God’s people find themselves on the verge of despair when God’s active intervention fails to appear. Sometimes they feel that God is not actively involved in the world. Here the crucifixion, as described in the gospels, is paradigmatic. ‘He saved others; he could not save himself,’ it is shouted at the cross (Matt. 27:42), and apparently this is true. God is engaged in a struggle against the opposing forces of sin and death, and on Calvary it became clear just how real the struggle is. Every form of Docetism, which suggests that God is only partly engaged in this struggle, and is in fact elevated above it in omnipotent serenity, is misplaced here.” Ibid., 143.

weakness. (I Cor. 1:25). However, the cross does not show that God is weak, but shows that God's power in action can be quite opposite from our human understanding and our concept of power. At Calvary, and in so many ways, God shows His power in a counter-intuitive way.³¹ *Fifthly*, God's omnipotence does not imply He is capable of doing everything. There are certain things that God cannot do, because it would be contrary to His Being. He must be true to Himself. His omnipotence is limited and driven by His unique, perfect character.³² By changing the classical definition of omnipotence according to the above qualifications, we acknowledge the elements of truth in the minimizing interpretation, and remain true to the biblical foundation for the doctrine of omnipotence. For van den Brink this classical doctrine is viable because the doctrine of God's omnipotence, or almightiness, "... is not a matter of course but a matter of faith. It belongs to the very core of Christian faith to believe that God, the sole source of all truth, goodness and beauty, is almighty, rather than the forces of falsehood, evil and ugliness."³³ Therefore, we conclude with a definition better suited for understanding the "Omnipotence of God" suggested by van den Brink that takes into account the context of faith in which the concept of omnipotence works:

God is omnipotent because He has the ability to realize all states of affairs that are logically possible for Him to realize, given His perfect being.³⁴

³¹ "God's way here can be seen as a way of weakness and foolishness from human perspectives. Christ's sacrifice on the cross was such an act of weakness. But this weakness turns out to be indicative of the very specific nature of the power of God; it is on the cross, that God realizes His deepest salvific purpose with humanity." Ibid., 143.

³² Ibid., 144.

³³ Gijsbert van den Brink, *Almighty God*, 5.

³⁴ Gijsbert van den Brink, *Understanding the Attributes of God*, 153.

This is the definition we will use in building our argument toward a more culturally-sensitive definition upon conclusion of the research.

1.3. Omnipotence in the Theological Tradition

What does it mean to say that God is omnipotent? Western philosophical theology gives two different reasons for saying God is omnipotent. The differences between the two reasons are responsible for the confusions and doubts regarding the definition of God's omnipotence.³⁵ Therefore, for van den Brink, "the most crucial question concerning omnipotence cannot be settled by means of a context-free analysis of the involved concepts alone, but must also be examined from the religio-theological context."³⁶

The first reason that believers may have for calling God omnipotent is simply that omnipotence is considered to be included in the *concept of God*.³⁷ If God were not omnipotent, He could not be God. This claim van den Brink termed in two different ways; inductively and deductively.

The *inductive way* points to the fact that there is no religion in the world which does not consider power to be the most fundamental property of the divine. Whether animism, polytheism or monotheism, etc., the divine is primarily considered as powerful, although understanding of the nature and operation of its power varies. In monotheism the divine, since it is one, is seen as the unique bearer of *all* the power. The Judeo-Christian tradition also considers power as an essential characteristic of God. That Christianity, to a large

³⁵ Gijsbert van den Brink, *Almighty God*, 160.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 134-135. See also Dolf te Velde, *The Doctrine of God in Reformed Orthodoxy, Karl Barth and the Utrecht School. A Study in Method and Content* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 625.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 160.

extent, adapted the Jewish view of divine power is clear from the Apostles' Creed where omnipotence is the only attribute explicitly ascribed to God the Father. Therefore, inductively from the empirical reality of the phenomenon of religion, people relate divine with "being powerful". But does He "have power over all things?" It is quite debatable.³⁸

The *deductive way* of looking at God as omnipotent is in terms of "perfection." God is the most *perfect being* we can imagine. Now this means, as Anselm of Canterbury observes, that God is "whatever it is better to be than not to be."³⁹ In other words: God has all those properties which it is better to possess than to not possess. Therefore, as the most perfect being, God must be completely powerful, i.e. omnipotent. That is: God is able to bring about all logically possible states of affairs. Van den Brink comes to the conclusion that the deductive way of Anselm leads to a very specific meaning of divine omnipotence. However, it gives rise to the insolvable problems of the Paradox of Omnipotence and further.⁴⁰

Therefore, he turns to the second reason for attributing omnipotence to God: God has *revealed Himself* as omnipotent through covenantal actions. People have experienced God as powerful, indeed an all-powerful agent, in their lives from His words and deeds. It is from such special experiences of God's self-revelation, and from their being shared with others and handed down to later generations, that the tradition's knowledge of God as omnipotent stems.⁴¹ In the Judeo- Christian Tradition, it was first with Abraham that the

³⁸ Ibid., 161-162.

³⁹ Anselm, *Proslogion V* (Charlesworth, St.Anselm's, 120f). cited by Gijsbert van den Brink, *Almighty God*, 164.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 163-165.

⁴¹ Ibid., 165.

chain of transmission of God's revelation started. The Hebrew text of Gen.17:1 reads *El Shaddai* for "God the Almighty" where he identifies Himself when he appears to Abraham.⁴² What that means is not entirely clear but it does not mean, "Being able to bring about all logically possible states of affairs." Van den Brink suggests the only way to establish the meaning of "Almighty" here is to:

...give up the atomistic approach of the term in favor of the contextual approach, taking the context in which it functions. For Abram and Sarai, it was impossible to give birth to a child at an age too high to receive offspring. However, YHWH presented himself as *El Shaddai* to them. God's omnipotence appears from His actions. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Israel and the Christian community have experienced in the course of history that God is able to realize His particular promises, and it is for that reason that they came to call Him omnipotent. In His actions, God shows Himself to possess the capacities to do things He wants to do and His followers are called to put on the attitude of faith.⁴³

Here it seems that the God of the Bible sharply contrasts the God of the philosophers. The two reasons are not just mutually exclusive but also seem to convey two different meanings and concepts of omnipotence. The God of the Bible is the God who reveals Himself to people and requires their unconditional trust. He is the God who acts in history but not in an empirically verifiable way: His acts are unpredictable. At times they are conspicuous by His very absence, suggesting an utterly powerless God. But then again they gloriously attest to God's unambiguous and steadfast love, which we see when Israel was brought out from Egypt "with a mighty hand" (Deut. 26:8) and when Jesus was raised from the Dead. However, on the contrary, the philosophers' God appears to be cold and

⁴² Ibid., 166.

⁴³ Ibid., 166-168.

unaffected, immutable and apathetic, in His necessary being and omnipotence elevated far above the everyday experience of common human life.⁴⁴

In finding no solution to bridge these problems, some philosophers cut the knot here, while others are put into dilemma and claim that the God of the philosophers is not different from the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Van den Brink suggests that this issue can be satisfactorily solved by carefully analyzing where all or some philosophers agree with the biblical tradition and where they disagree with it.⁴⁵ Te Velde observes that, "...van den Brink subscribes that we should distinguish between a philosophical and a properly Christian concept of omnipotence. Whereas the philosophical concept can be understood coherently, a Christian cannot believe in it. What Christians believe in, is God's 'almightiness' as God's ability to do all things which are compatible with his nature."⁴⁶ Let us now look at how the idea of divine omnipotence evolved from the biblical tradition into the creeds and the early church, through the medieval period, then into reformed theology and up to today.

1.4. Omnipotence in the Biblical Tradition

Scripture remains the prime source for Reformed theologians to know about God. They claim that God's self-identification is expressed in the Bible in both the Old and the New Testaments. Michael Horton writes, "Not only are the people of Israel able to infer certain attributes or characteristics of their God from His mighty acts; God Himself interprets these to them. Israel's lexicon of divine attributes does not come in the form of

⁴⁴ Ibid., 168.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 169.

⁴⁶ See Dolf te Velde, *The Doctrine of God in Reformed Orthodoxy*, 627.

systematic theology such as the present volume but in narrative, instruction, liturgy and law. ... The narratives generated doctrine and doctrine gave rise to doxology.”⁴⁷ In this way, we have learned about the omnipotence of God. The Omnipotent God of the Bible is able to accomplish His promises in real, often surprising, redemptive acts in history.

The word Omnipotence in the New Testament is *Pantokrator* in Greek, which is a compound word, formed from two words meaning “all” and “to be powerful,” and meaning basically the same as *El Shaddai* in the Old Testament.⁴⁸ The title is applied to God and seems clearly to mean “all powerful.” This Greek term *Pantokrator* served as the translation of the Hebrew divine name *Sebaoth* and points to the power which God in the Bible is said to have over all things. According to van den Brink, “The Bible ascertains that God is able to do anything; whether that be a miracle in the realm in nature, like the power by means of which He calls Isaac out of the barren womb of Sara, Israel out of its womb Egypt, and His Son Jesus Christ out of the darkness of the tomb,”⁴⁹ or His ability to change the human heart, like, as Erickson says, “...when the disciples expressed wonderment, asking, ‘Who then can be saved?’ Jesus’ reply was, ‘With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible’ (Matt. 19:26) or ‘What is impossible with men is possible with God’ (Luke 18:27). Here the power of God was related not simply to physical natural laws, but to the ability to change a human heart.”⁵⁰ Similarly, as stated by van den Brink, it is “...the power by means of which He conquers in various ways the forces of evil which try

⁴⁷ Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith, A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publications, 2011), 225.

⁴⁸ Millard J. Erickson, *God the Father Almighty*, 169.

⁴⁹ Gijsbert van den Brink, *Almighty God*, 176.

⁵⁰ Millard J. Erickson, *God the Father Almighty*, 170.

to obstruct these salvific actions: the military force of Abimelech (Gen. 20), of Pharaoh at the Red Sea and of Pilate's guards at the tomb."⁵¹ At other times, Bloesch notes that:

God's unbound power can be shown to be none other than the boundlessness of His love. God's power is not unrestricted or arbitrary but is the power of his suffering love. He loves us with an everlasting love (Jer. 31:3) and therefore acts to save us (Ps. 136; Jonah 4:2). God is a destroyer as well as a redeemer, but He destroys in order to redeem. His omnipotence is the sovereign freedom of a God who is both holy and merciful and who acts to vindicate His righteousness as well as to console and to deliver.⁵²

In the Bible, the nature of God's omnipotence can be seen in His actions in varied contexts. At times, it may not be possible to understand the words of the Bible simply based on analysis or the origin of the words themselves. In this case, the meaning of the words can be determined from an examination of their usage in particular contexts. Therefore, the word *El Shaddai* is flexibly referred to as powerful or mighty and not necessarily almighty.⁵³ But in the words of Erickson: To the one who is receiving the power of God, this would not make any difference, it all means the same, the almighty.

One of these usages is in the revelation to Abram in Genesis 17:1–18:15. The Lord comes to Abram and identifies himself as *El Shaddai* (17:1). The promise of a son made to Abram involved his wife, Sarai and this required what must have appeared to them a miracle, for Abram was one hundred years of age and Sarai was ninety. When Sarai heard the news, she also laughed to herself, at the idea that at this stage they would now have this pleasure (18:12). The Lord said to Abram, "Why did Sarai laugh and say, 'Will I really have a child, now that I am old?'" His next words were instructive to Abram: "Is anything

⁵¹ Gijsbert van den Brink, *Almighty God*, 176.

⁵² Donald G. Bloesch, *God the Almighty: Power, Wisdom, Holiness, Love* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 106.

⁵³ Millard J. Erickson, *God the Father Almighty*, 166.

too hard for the LORD? I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarai will have a son” (vv. 13, 14). In this context, the name *El Shaddai* is linked with being able to do anything. Nothing is beyond the reach of God’s power. Note, incidentally, that God was also apparently able to read the hearts of people who did not speak aloud (v. 15).⁵⁴

According to van den Brink, the Bible does not suggest that if God were not omnipotent, He could not be God. He says, “Abraham learns to know God as omnipotent, but he does not come to know Him as essentially omnipotent.”⁵⁵ For example, Erickson describes how, “Isaac pronounces a blessing on Jacob (Gen. 28:1-5) and then God appears to Jacob (Gen. 35), commands him to be fruitful and multiply and promises that a great community of nations will come from him. The same name is the one that Isaac had used of God. Although the context does not require almightiness, it does relate to His being powerful and doing very great things.”⁵⁶

On the contrary, the Bible also presents God’s power being challenged at regular intervals by evil forces which try to foil God’s plans. This does not mean God is not omnipotent. As creator of heaven and earth He surely is. This also does not mean that God’s omnipotence is not absolutely necessary and therefore, omnipotence is not an essential attribute of God. It is possible for God to voluntarily give up His power. He is still all powerful even with such voluntary acquiescence. Such resignations imply that God is really omnipotent, since omnipotence should include the ability to let go and give up (part

⁵⁴ Ibid., 166-167.

⁵⁵ Gijsbert van den Brink, *Almighty God*, 80.

⁵⁶ Millard J. Erickson, *God the Father Almighty*, 167.

of) one's power. As Karl Barth says, to deny God this ability would be to "make Him the prisoner of His own power."⁵⁷

The Bible refrains from assigning required omnipotence to God, to some extent, and qualifies the "omni" in a rather simple way. Especially in the canonical literature in its later sections, a number of things are declared which God cannot do. God cannot swear by someone greater than Himself (Heb. 6:13), cannot lie (Num. 23:19; I Sam. 15:29; Heb. 6:18), cannot deny Himself (II Tim. 2:13), cannot be tempted by evil (James 1:13), etc. Clearly, first this has to do with the idea that this is something which is logically impossible for God to do, since no one greater than God exists. In other cases, this has to do with things which are incompatible with God's character, especially with His moral perfection. Van den Brink suggests that the word "all" in the statement "all things are possible for God" should not be taken to mean literally all possible states of affairs.⁵⁸ For Bavinck, the reason God cannot do the above things is because on one hand His will is identical with his being, and on the other hand many more things are possible than are, or appear, real.⁵⁹

Van den Brink puts it this way:

The Bible not only ascribes power to God, but also weakness. According to Paul the divine weakness is manifested particularly in the cross of Christ (I Cor. 1). The weakness of God here is not quantitatively but qualitatively different from His power, indicating the sort of power which is involved in God's furthering His purposes. God's omnipotence needs not to suggest that God in some way can do things which are logically impossible for Him to do or which are incompatible with His nature.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Karl Barth, "The Doctrine of God," *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. II.i. Edited by G.W. Bromiley & T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T.& T. Clark, 1957), 587.

⁵⁸ Gijsbert van den Brink, *Almighty God*, 181.

⁵⁹ Bolt John (ed.), Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 246-247.

⁶⁰ Gijsbert van den Brink, *Almighty God*, 182.

For example, on the question of evil, Bloesch claims, “He does not cause evil, but He acts in the midst of evil in order to bring good out of evil.”⁶¹ Van den Brink more concretely states that:

God’s omnipotence includes His being able to do evil and it is vital to uphold this, since this ability is constitutive for the moral character of God. But that does not imply that God therefore can do evil. Though it is possible for God to literally do everything, including what is contrary to His nature and perhaps even what seems logically impossible for Him to do, given His perfectly good character He cannot bring Himself to do so.⁶²

1.5. Omnipotence in the Early Church

Concerning the idea of divine power in the early church, Peter Geach claims that there is a significant difference between the biblical concept of ‘almightiness’ and the Greek, philosophical concept of ‘omnipotence.’⁶³ On the basis of the different terms used in Greek (*pantokrator*, *pantodynamos*) and Latin (*omnipotens*, *omnitenens*), van den Brink comes to a better understanding of the characteristics of the Christian concept of divine power: **A-power** = God’s universal dominion over all and everything (as authority); **B-power** = God’s power shown in the creation and preservation of the world (as backup); **C-power** = the capacity to realize all possible states of affairs (as capacity). He states that a gradual shift, first from A- to B-power and later from B- to C-power, took place while keeping all the characteristics of the previous powers. He explains that:

The term *pantokrator* primarily denoted God’s actual reign over the universe, rather than His ability to realize all kinds of states of affairs. *Pantokrator* says something about what God actually does with regard to the world, not about all the things which He might in theory be able to do. The same goes for the Latin term *omnipotens*, which became the standard

⁶¹ Donald G. Bloesch, *God the Almighty*, 106.

⁶² Gijsbert van den Brink, *Almighty God*, 183.

⁶³ P.T. Geach, *Omnipotence, Philosophy*, 43 (1973), 7-20; quoted by van den Brink, *Almighty God*,

rendering of *pantokrator* as soon as Latin took over from Greek as the dominant language. When God was called *omnipotens* it was originally meant to say that He rules over all things. Later a different understanding of the title *omnipotens* also came to the fore, however, namely as an abbreviation of *qui omnia potest*, ‘He who can do everything.’ It was Augustine who consciously stimulated this broadening of meaning. ‘Who else is *omnipotens* than He who can do everything!’ Thus, divine omnipotence became conceived of in the early churches as the possession of unlimited capacities by God, more or less irrespective of the way in which these are exercised in God’s acts of creation and providence.⁶⁴

1.6. Omnipotence in the Apostles’ Creed (First Article)

1.6.1. Origin and Development

A creed is a personal declaration of belief: “I believe in God the Father Almighty... And in Jesus Christ His only Son ...I believe in the Holy Spirit.” The Apostles’ Creed was written to establish the historical basis of Christianity. It documented events which had taken place in the real world. It claimed that these events were fact. Additionally, it was also written to “...rule out particular rationalistic explanations, and to protest against dogmatic denials of certain things which the Christian believed to be fundamental.”⁶⁵

The Apostles’ Creed discussed here is a concise summarization of the Christian gospel and is a valuable tool for describing the Christian Faith.⁶⁶ Benjamin H. Spalink writes, “The true origin of the Apostles’ Creed, according to reliable information given in sacred and ecclesiastical history, is to be found in the great commission which Jesus gave His disciples (Matthew 28:19-20).”⁶⁷ G.K.A. Bell claims that an old legend relates that,

⁶⁴ Gijsbert van den Brink, *Understanding the Attributes of God*, 145.

⁶⁵ G.K.A. Bell, *The Meaning of the Creed; Paper on the Apostles’ Creed* (London:National Mission Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1917), Vii-Viii.

⁶⁶ C.E.B. Cranfield, *The Apostles’ Creed; A Faith to Live By* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1993), 5.

⁶⁷ Benjamin H. Spalink, “Our Faith in the Triune God,” *Sermons on the Apostles’ Creed; Lord’s Day VIII-XXIV Vol. II*, edited by Henry J. Kuiper (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1937), 12.

“After the Ascension of Jesus, on the eve of departing from one another on their several journeys, the Apostles composed the Apostles’ Creed as “standard of their future preaching,” each contributing a single clause; at the end of the fourth century it was commonly believed that this was an accurate account of the origin of the Creed. Truly, though the Apostles may not have composed the creed, it did represent what the Apostles taught.”⁶⁸ For Liuwe H. Westra:

...despite the traditional designation “Apostles’ Creed” or *symbolum apostolorum*, no serious theologian any longer holds that the Creed was composed by the Apostles themselves, which was the current view in the Middle Ages. As a matter of fact, it seems impossible to find a copy of the Apostles’ Creed before the end of the eighth century.⁶⁹

Westra continues:

This does not mean, however, that the Apostles’ Creed did not exist before A.D. 800. In the four or five preceding centuries, there are a good number of texts which are designated *symbolum* or *symbolum apostolorum*. Although none of these is identical to the Apostles’ Creed, they resemble it rather closely. As far as one can tell, they all mention belief in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (in that order), all contain phrases like *deum patrem omnipotentem*, *filium eius unicum*, all dwell on Christ’s Birth, Passion, Resurrection, and so on. In short, all these texts may safely be branded variants of the Apostles’ Creed.⁷⁰

J.N.D. Kelly is of the view that the Apostles’ Creed is an “elaborated variant of the Old Roman Creed, and the primary role of the Apostles’ Creed was to serve as the declaratory creed at baptism.”⁷¹ It seems that the Roman Creed was expanded upon in the area north of the Alps, and then, after Charlemagne died in A.D. 814, this enhanced form

⁶⁸ G.K.A. Bell, *The Meaning of the Creed*, Xi-Xii.

⁶⁹ Liuwe H. Westra, *The Apostles’ Creed: Origin, History and Some Early Commentaries* (Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2002), 22-23.

⁷⁰ Liuwe H. Westra, *The Apostles’ Creed*, 22-23.

⁷¹ J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1950), 369-370.

was received back in Rome as what we now know as the Apostles' Creed.⁷² Liuwe H.

Westra summarizes the development this way:

In the first century, short, purely Christological acclamations and confessions were used in various Christian contexts. By the turn of the century, a slightly longer but still purely Christological confession arose for antidocetist purposes which gave birth to the so-called Christological sequence before 150 A.D. In the meantime, the older private confessions remained in use in the baptismal context. Maybe for anti-gnostic reasons, *regulae fidei*, taking up the older Christological sequence, as well as Trinitarian baptismal formulae, were born. At some point between 150 and 250 A.D. the Christological sequence was fused with just such a Trinitarian baptismal formula in Rome. The Hypothetical Roman Creed which, probably from the third century onwards, spread all over the Latin Church and was expanded in the different ways in different places was the fruit of this process. In the fourth century, synodal and private creeds took over the function of the *regulae fidei*. From this moment on, creeds came to be regarded as inviolable summaries of faith. With such background, the free development of the Apostles' Creed continued for three or four centuries more.⁷³

In summary, the Apostles' Creed, which originated from the apostles themselves, developed throughout the centuries and took its current shape in the 700s A.D. It was used in the early centuries, used in the medieval western churches used by the sixteenth-century Reformers and is used today by both Roman Catholics and Protestants as a statement of their faith in the Triune God.⁷⁴

1.6.2. The Underlying Concept of a Trinitarian God

The doctrine of a Trinitarian God is absolutely central and crucial to the Christian faith, yet the word 'Trinity' is not mentioned in the Apostles' Creed, and neither does the Bible itself mention it by name. Yet, as Marguerite Shuster writes, "...the structure of the

⁷² C.E.B. Cranfield, *The Apostles' Creed: A Faith to Live By*, 5-6.

⁷³ Liuwe H. Westra, *The Apostles' Creed*, 71-72.

⁷⁴ C.E.B. Cranfield, *The Apostles' Creed: A Faith to Live By*, 5-6.

Creed, like the structure of biblical revelation itself, is Trinitarian in form.”⁷⁵ J.N.D. Kelly writes, the Fatherhood of God “was always interpreted as referring to the special relation of the First to the Second Person within the Holy Trinity.”⁷⁶ He further claims that by the time the Apostles’ Creed assumed its final form, “...the interpretation read into the Holy Spirit represented the words as affirming belief in the third Person of the Godhead, coeternal, coequal and consubstantial with the Father and the Son. Thus with the mention of the Holy Spirit the mystery of the Trinity is completed.”⁷⁷

When the Creed speaks of “God the father,” “His only Son,” and “the Holy Spirit,” it is not speaking of three Gods but the one and only true God, who in His eternal being is the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.⁷⁸ The notion of Trinity was exhibited in the Bible and in the entire life of Jesus. An early biblical reference can be found in the commission of Jesus to His disciples cited by Matthew to baptize “in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19). The Apostle Paul used a three-party blessing at the end of one of his letters (II Cor.13:14). But the concept of the Trinity only took solid shape a few centuries later. Then the Creed displays the full idea of this oneness of God, the Trinitarianism of God.⁷⁹ Shuster writes:

Thus while no Christian wishes to be understood as other than monotheistic in his/her faith, there is something at least partially misleading in lumping Christianity together with Judaism and Islam under some such rubric as “the great monotheistic faiths,” without further ado. Indeed, it is precisely what

⁷⁵ Marguerite Shuster, “The Triune God,” *Exploring and Proclaiming the Apostles’ Creed*, edited by Roger E. Van Harn (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), 1.

⁷⁶ J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 372.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 383-384.

⁷⁸ C.E.B. Cranfield, *The Apostles’ Creed: A Faith to Live By*, 12.

⁷⁹ O. Sydney Barr, *From the Apostles’ Faith to the Apostles’ Creed* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 15-16.

makes Christianity Christian – affirmation of the full deity of Jesus Christ and of the Holy Spirit as a distinct member of the Trinity.⁸⁰

The Christian faith is a Trinitarian faith, and the Apostles' Creed confirms it.

1.6.3. The First Article: I Believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth

1.6.3.1. "I Believe"

The term "I believe" plainly expresses a glad commitment that is understood to grow out of serious and risky conviction, and to represent, in principle, a life-changing act which ultimately buys into a covenant with the God to whom the creed makes reference.⁸¹

G.K.A. Bell puts it this way, "Belief/Faith starts with an acknowledgment that I am limited.

The agent wills and acts beyond the limits of his knowledge. In other words, faith implies action beyond the limit of knowledge."⁸² Norris Jr. claims that this sort of believing

however is a complex affair because there is a distinction to be noted between believing

God and believing in God. It is possible to believe that God exists and indeed to believe

what God "says" without believing in God. On the other hand, it is not possible to believe

in God without (a) believing that God exists and (b) believing God.⁸³ Cranfield points out

that Faith is God's free and undeserved gift, humans cannot attain it by good works. Yet

faith is a personal decision on the part of the one who believes. It is a decision that we make

on the basis of that God-given ability to believe. I "believe" in the creed means turning

from other gods and choosing the one and only real God. Faith is obedience and trust in

⁸⁰ Marguerite Shuster, "The Triune God," *Exploring*, 2.

⁸¹ Richard A. Norris Jr., "I Believe in God, the Father Almighty," *Exploring*, 22.

⁸² G.K.A. Bell, *The Meaning of the Creed*, 6.

⁸³ Richard A. Norris Jr., "I Believe in God, the Father Almighty," *Exploring*, 22.

God's faithfulness. But though it is trust, it is no mere leap in the dark, a blind trust that asks no questions. For faith is knowledge and understanding. It is also confession. Faith must become public, and from the beginning the Creed was a confession.⁸⁴

Faith can be compared to the relationship between parents and children. When they are small there is unquestionable faith in the parents, but when the children grow, they start to reason out things and even question the parents. So, faith without reasoning is imperfect. G.K.A. Bell notes that, "Blind and unexplained faith in God which belongs to the early stages of religion can be of no use when life itself has become difficult and complicated. Religion must have a meaning and a power in life; otherwise it becomes a mere superstition."⁸⁵ However, the process of adapting religion to this new and more difficult inclusion of reasoning is not simple. In the first place, a human's knowledge of God is not like a child's knowledge of their parents. Real, honest knowledge of God comes from knowing his love. O. Sydney Barr explains, "The knowledge of God is revealed in the history of Jewish religion and declares His Power, His Holiness and His love."⁸⁶

Secondly, between man and God stand man's sins. Paul says man can only be saved from sin by his faith. What is this faith? Bell says, "It is the saving faith in Christ when man responds to this long revelation of loving care and trust. He trusts no more in his own righteousness and his own effort at reform and he surrenders wholly to the power of God and seeks for no other salvation."⁸⁷ Therefore, faith in God, which is the culmination of our yearning for Him:

⁸⁴ C.E.B. Cranfield, *The Apostles' Creed*, 8-11.

⁸⁵ G.K.A. Bell, *The Meaning of the Creed*, 1-11.

⁸⁶ O. Sydney Barr, *From the Apostles' Faith*, 15.

⁸⁷ G.K.A. Bell, *The Meaning of the Creed*, 11-14

...appears as a true consciousness of sonship, and has, in spite of differences, many points of likeness to the faith of the child in his father. It is the fulfilment of the hope which has been stirred in the mind of man wherever he has felt the presence of God in the world– the hope that he may build a bridge between himself and God, and enter into friendship with Him. That is the central meaning of faith in religious language.⁸⁸

1.6.3.2. “In God, the Father”

Rufinus, the early fourth century historian and theologian, writes, “When ‘God’ is uttered, you are to understand a substance without beginning or end, simple, uncompounded, invisible, incorporeal, ineffable and incomprehensible: a substance in which there is nothing accidental, nothing creaturely. For He who is the originator of all things is Himself without origin.”⁸⁹ O. Sydney Barr claims that the Jewish worshipers addressed God as both “king” and “Father.” He writes:

The ascription of kingship underlined His role as transcendent and omnipotent Creator and Ruler of the entire world. The title Father however expressed quite another aspect of God’s sovereignty. In Hebrew tradition, a king was closely associated with his people, his own welfare intimately connected with theirs. Hence God, in His omnipotence and transcendence, was at the same time thought of as an intensely personal being, knowing and knowable in immediate personal relationship.⁹⁰

It is quite common for us humans to measure our relationship with God according to our human standards. We first consider what our human father was to us, and we conclude what our heavenly Father must be to His children. But actually, as Henry Keegstra explains, it must be the opposite. “Father in the fullest and deepest sense of the

⁸⁸ Ibid., 15.

⁸⁹ Rufinus, *A Commentary on the Apostles’ Creed*, translated by J.N.D. Kelly (London: Longmans, Green and Co, 1955), 33-34.

⁹⁰ O. Sydney Barr, *From the Apostles’ Faith...*, 22.

word, is He who is the origin, the first cause of what exists; through whose activity things are as they are; the fountain from whom all blessings flow.”⁹¹

Richard A. Norris Jr. gives three principal “senses” of “Father” in its theological usage. All of them are symbolic and, according to Norris, first require being untangled from each other and then integrated with each other if the creed’s basic understanding of God is to be understood. He writes:

First, it characterizes God as the ultimate ground of the cosmos, the one “from whom are all things,” the one who generates all things (I Cor.8:6). This sense of the term is already an established common place in the writings of the early philosophers (Philo, Plato, Stoics, etc.). Early Christian writers (Clement, Theophilus of Antioch, Tatian, etc.) too seem often, in the first instance, to explain “Father” in this way; i.e., in the framework of God’s relation to the created order as a whole. In the second usage, “Father” portrays God as the loving Father of believers –as our Father (Matt. 6:9; Gal.1:4; 4:6). St. Paul also regularly used the phrase. “God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” Some early church fathers (Ignatius of Antioch, Cyril, Ambrose, etc.,) too referred to God as the father of believers. On relatively few occasions it is employed in the Old Testament: when the persecuted people of God in Egypt called upon “their merciful God and Father” for help. In Psalm 89:26ff., God is the father of the king and of the people in His covenant with them. God is father of the fatherless (Ps. 68:5), Israel’s Father (Isa 63:16; 64:8; Jer. 3:19-22; Hosea 11:1ff.). The opening of the Lord’s prayer “Our Father in heaven,” and our adoption into sonship through Jesus Christ (Gal. 4:1-7) clearly point us to the idea of God as the Father of believers in the creedal formation. The third connotation of “Father” signifies the “unique Son” who is, as the Creed insists, “Jesus Christ our Lord,” and God is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (Col. 1:3; Rom. 15:6). In the creed, God the Father means the first hypostasis of the Trinity, the begetter of the Word and breather of the Spirit.⁹²

Almost all scholars agree that in the Apostles’ Creed the term “Fatherhood” of God, is in reference to God being the Father of His Son Jesus Christ. Augustine only mentions ‘Father’ with regard to the opening words about Jesus: “We believe also in the Son,”

⁹¹ Henry Keegstra, “God the Father,” *Sermons of the Apostles’ Creed; Lord’s Day VIII-XXIV Vol. II*, Edited by Henry J. Kuiper (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House), 27.

⁹² Richard A. Norris Jr., “I Believe in God, the Father Almighty,” *Exploring*, 24-28.

meaning, the Son of God the Father Almighty, ‘His only Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord.’⁹³ Rufinus claims that “...when ‘Father’ is uttered, you are to understand it means the Father of the Son, the Son being the image of the above mentioned substance. Just as no one is called Master without a servant or a teacher without a pupil, so it is impossible for anyone to be called ‘Father’ unless he has a Son. Thus the very title by which God is called ‘Father’ proves that a Son coexists side by side with the Father.”⁹⁴

Karl Barth reads the Creed in the same way: “God is Father in respect to Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ is His eternal Son.”⁹⁵

Kelly confirms further by writing, “God was regularly understood as connoting the one Godhead, and Father as pointing to the Father of Jesus Christ.”⁹⁶

Van den Brink suggests a different understanding:

The original primary intention of this term *pater* or ‘Father’ was to designate neither the relationship between God and Jesus Christ as his Son, not the relationship between God and the individual believer as one of His adopted children, but the relationship between God and the world as His Creation. It was later in the early fourth century in the light of Arianism and other Christological heresies which entailed some crucial shift in the interpretation of the first article. As a result, the Fatherhood of God became more exclusively related to the generation of the Son rather than to the creation of the world. In accordance with the crystallization of the Trinitarian dogma, the meaning of the title “Father” came to be restricted to God’s intra-Trinitarian relationship with the Son.⁹⁷

⁹³ Augustine, *De symbolo ad catechumenos*, 3. Cited by Richard A. Norris Jr., “I Believe in God, the Father Almighty,” *Exploring*, 28.

⁹⁴ Rufinus, *A Commentary on the Apostles’ Creed*, 34.

⁹⁵ Karl Barth, *The Faith of the Church*, trans. G. Vahanian (New York: Meridian Books, 1960), 45. Cited by Richard A. Norris Jr., “I Believe in God, the Father Almighty,” *Exploring*, 28.

⁹⁶ J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 372.

⁹⁷ Gijsbert van den Brink, *Almighty God*, 56-58.

Once this change in the understanding of the word *pater* had come about, every reference to the divine act of creation had disappeared from the creed. This fact is the most likely explanation for the relatively late addition to the first article of the phrase ‘Creator of Heaven and Earth.’⁹⁸

1.6.3.3. “Almighty”

In the creed, “Almighty” is applied to God regarding His dominion over the universe.⁹⁹ Its purpose is distinct from that of the term “Father.” The word “Almighty” according to Norris, “...accentuates the role of God as the active founder and administrator of all that is – one who actively fulfils the work of creation in exercising providence and in the work of redemption.”¹⁰⁰ C.E.B. Cranfield claims that in describing God the father as “Almighty,” the Creed contrasts His absolute strength and power, with the opposite, which would be having all weakness, both obvious weakness and not-so-obvious weakness. He writes:

Power is indeed so characteristic of God that the word “power” can be used in the New Testament as a way of referring to God (Mark 14:62, where rightly capitalized “power”). God’s power is utterly real, unfailing, and perfect, but it is not absolute or unqualified. It is determined and limited by the character of the One who is almighty. God “cannot deny himself” (II Tim. 2:13). All notions of God’s almightiness as being indeterminate, absolute power, the ability to do just anything, are once and for all excluded. With the word “Almighty” we confess that God the Father is able to accomplish perfectly what he wills, his own righteous and merciful purposes. But He is unable to contradict His own character and so respects both the real measures of freedom that He has given to His human creatures,

⁹⁸ Ibid., 58.

⁹⁹ Rufinus, *A Commentary on the Apostles’ Creed*, 36.

¹⁰⁰ Richard A. Norris Jr., “I Believe in God, the Father Almighty,” *Exploring*, 32.

whose voluntary obedience He desires, and also the orderliness and consistency of his universe.¹⁰¹

Some scholars claim that “Almighty” expresses the relationship of God to the universe as One who is in all things and transcends all things. However, this raises the question of the existence of evil and God’s relationship to it. It is clear that many people have problems with this Omnipotent God of the Creed who is all-powerful, and can do anything He wants. First, the words of the creed may cause God to be depicted as a heavenly tyrant, one who by sheer power forces things into His mold. Therefore, they say, If God is like that, then we will reject Him. They find God as an enemy to be opposed.

Colin Gunton explains that God is not tyrannical or causing unnecessary suffering by raising three rational ways in which God’s Almightyness works:

First, God works over a long time, allowing events to take their course. God allows things to take their course, not because He cannot do anything else, but because this is the nature of the created order. They neither become what they are instantly, nor are they healed of their sickness overnight, not at least until God’s time has run its full course. Second, God never allows evil to run out of control. They may indeed be fearful, but in the mercy of God they will be restricted within limits, so that some good will eventually result. Third and most important of all, God reveals His power and His defeat of evil in the cross of Jesus. There we see the power, the wisdom and the mercy of God in action. The basis of believers’ confidence is that God allows matters to take their time, and yet it shows that from within time and space He takes charge of them in an omnipotent way. It is omnipotent because evil has no answer to the One who conquers it by love alone. In that power we can trust.¹⁰²

Van den Brink believes that the meaning of the word *pantokrator*, prior to the Apostles’ Creed, falls in the area of B-power (God’s power shown in creation and protection of the world – backup power). He says, “As a result of certain doctrinal

¹⁰¹ C.E.B. Cranfield, *The Apostles’ Creed*, 15.

¹⁰² Colin Gunton, “The Father Almighty,” *Exploring and Proclaiming the Apostles’ Creed*, edited by Roger E. Van Harn (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 2004), 36.

developments in connection with the Christological controversies, however, it came to be interpreted more and more in terms of A-power (i.e., God’s universal dominion over all and everything – as authority) although testimony of its B-power overtones continued to be extended for a long time.”¹⁰³

1.6.3.4. “Creator of Heaven and Earth”

The Creed definitely links God’s Omnipotence with creation in the statement, “Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.”¹⁰⁴ The words, “heaven” and “earth” are used in different ways in Scripture, but here, together, they mean everything that exists other than God. He is the creator of all reality besides himself. As Cranfield states, “He has not, like a craftsman, fashioned it out of some already existing material, but has created all things out of nothing.”¹⁰⁵ J.N.D. Kelly suggests that the clause “Creator of Heaven and Earth” has made its way into the creed quite naturally. Kelly notes, “In the second century, it will be remembered, the thought of God as the source and origin of the universe was considered to be contained in “Father.” But when that title came to be explained as meaning the Father of Jesus Christ, those whose task it was to expound and comment on the creed may well have become conscious of an awkward gap in its teaching. As the fact that God was creator of all things was an item which lay already to hand in the routine catechetical instruction provided in the church, the insertion of the reference to it was merely a matter of time.”¹⁰⁶ Agreeing with Kelly, van den Brink claims that the clause, “Creator of heaven

¹⁰³ Gijbert van den Brink, *Almighty God*, 60.

¹⁰⁴ Colin Gunton, “The Father Almighty,” *Exploring*, 36-37.

¹⁰⁵ C.E.B. Cranfield, *The Apostles’ Creed*, 16-17.

¹⁰⁶ J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 374.

and earth,” is a somewhat late addition because in the midst of the prevailing Christological debates, it became very important to build the belief with regard to Son as well as the Father as *pantokrator* in this sense of having universal dominion. Thus this clause, “Creator of heaven and earth,” though a later addition, proves to be very helpful to stabilize the theological relevancy against the high Christological debates of the time and the dualistic notion of God.”¹⁰⁷

The exploration of God’s omnipotence in the early church and in the Apostles’ Creed suggests to van den Brink that:

...authentic Christian reflection on the nature of God’s power can never take place in speculative abstraction from the concrete experience of its governing and preserving actuality. However, the different understandings of God’s omnipotence in early Christian theology reflect a deeply rooted interest in the very nature of power. What exactly is power, what sorts of powers might be distinguished, and why is it so important to have power? What does it mean to ascribe all the power there is to one particular being, perhaps God?¹⁰⁸

We will look at some answers to these questions about God’s power in the following sections.

1.7. Omnipotence in Medieval Scholasticism

In Medieval times there was a continuation of the early church’s thoughts on God’s omnipotence. When the meaning of *omnipotens* was proposed by Augustine, the word started to be interpreted as “being able to do all things” (*qui omnia potest*).¹⁰⁹ Once this interpretation is accepted, according to van den Brink, then, “...the famous philosophical puzzles arise which are bound up with the Classical concept of divine omnipotence. Not

¹⁰⁷ Gijsbert van den Brink, *Almighty God*, 58-59.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹⁰⁹ Augustine, *Sermon 213* (PL, 1060f), cited by van den Brink, *Almighty God*, 61.

surprisingly, questions relating God's power to God's will in one way or another set the scene for vehement quarrelling in the Middle Age."¹¹⁰ Augustine did not avoid these questions or reject them as inappropriate. He argued that God is omnipotent in the sense that He is able to perform everything that He wills.¹¹¹ However, as van den Brink states, to tie God to His will seems to restrict Him in a way that prevents His freedom and subtracts from His perfection. This unease with Augustine's interpretation was the main reason for the beginning of the distinction between God's "absolute power" and "ordained power."¹¹²

It was Anselm of Canterbury who pointed out that 'omnipotence,' understood as 'the ability to do all things,' was not necessarily a good thing. If God is omnipotent, God could do things such as tell lies or distort justice. Yet this is clearly inconsistent with the Christian understanding of the nature of God. Therefore, the concept of God's omnipotence must be modified to include the Christian understanding of God's good nature and character.¹¹³ This point is further brought out by Thomas Aquinas, as he discusses the issue of whether God can sin: "It is commonly said that God is almighty. Yet it seems difficult to understand the reason for this, on account of the doubt about what is meant when it said that 'God can do everything.' If it is said that God is omnipotent because he can do everything possible in his power, the understanding of omnipotence is circular, doing nothing more than saying that God is omnipotent because he can do everything that he can do. ... To sin is to fall short of a perfect action; hence to be able to sin is to be able to fall

¹¹⁰ See Gijsbert van den Brink, *Almighty God*, 61-62.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 68.

¹¹³ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, second edition 1997), 258.

short in action, which is repugnant to omnipotence. Therefore, it is that God cannot sin, because of His omnipotence.”¹¹⁴

Aquinas’ discussion makes it clear that further explanation is needed about the idea of divine omnipotence. George I. Mavrodes explains that God does not do everything He is capable of doing. He says, “Since the time of Aquinas most theologians have thought that divine omnipotence is limited at least to the range of things and projects that are logically possible. Things whose description is self-contradictory cannot possibly exist, so even God cannot create them or bring them about.”¹¹⁵

1.7.1. Two Powers of God

Regarding the medieval distinction between the absolute and the ordained power of God, David Steinmetz writes that it is, “... a distinction between what God can do in view of His sheer and unlimited ability to act and what He has chosen to do in the light of His wise and sometimes inscrutable purpose. God cannot, of course, will His own nonexistence or suspend the principle of non-contradiction. But apart from these limitations, the sovereignty of God is absolute. To talk about what is possible for God to do is to talk about the absolute power of God (*potentia absoluta*). To focus on the choices and the decisions that God has made, is making, or will make (the distinction is in the human mind and not in the utterly simple being of God) is to introduce the subject of the

¹¹⁴ Thomas Aquinas, “The Power of God – Whether God is Omnipotent,” *Summa Theologiae*, Part 1, Q. 25, Art. 3. www.summa-theologiae.org/question/02503.htm.

¹¹⁵ George I. Mavrodes, “Omnipotence, Divine,” *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*, edited by Adrian Hastings, Alistair Mason and Hugh Pyper (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 498.

ordained power of God (*potentia ordinata*)”.¹¹⁶ The distinction between *potentia absoluta* and *potentia ordinata* begins to play an important role in the concept of God’s omnipotence from the Middle Ages on. According to Marilyn McCord Adams, “Most medieval Christian theologians ... began to distinguish what God can do with respect to His absolute power (*de potentia absoluta*) from what He can do with respect to His ordered power (*de potentia ordinata*).”¹¹⁷ She goes on to say, “The most pernicious misunderstanding here, was occasioned by the facts that ‘There is a double power in God’ and ‘God can do something with respect to His absolute power that He cannot do with respect to His ordered power.’ Taken literally, these statements imply that there are in God two powers of different extension and suggest that these are really distinct things, or at least metaphysical constituents in the divine essence.”¹¹⁸ Richard A. Muller points out that the distinction between *potentia absoluta* and *potentia ordinata* can be found in Aquinas’¹¹⁹ “...insistence on the freedom of the divine willing from any determination to do the particular things that God does. Considered by itself, divine power is absolute and can do anything that has ‘the nature of being done.’ Considered as ‘it is carried into execution,’ divine power is ordained, namely, ordered by God’s own just willing. Thus Medieval Christian theologians stated ‘that God can do other things by His absolute power than those He has foreknown and

¹¹⁶ David Steinmetz, “Calvin and the Absolute Power of God,” *Calvin in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 40.

¹¹⁷ Marilyn McCord Adams, *William Ockham*, Vol. II (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), 1186.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Part 1, Q. 25, Art. 5.

preordained He would do.”¹²⁰ Hence, the original intention of this distinction can easily be grasped from the way in which Thomas Aquinas uses it.¹²¹ He suggests that, “God does not do everything that He is capable of doing. By *potentia absoluta* he means God's power irrespective and apart ('ab-soluta') from God's will; by *potentia ordinata* he means the power of God as He has decided to realize it in the order willed by Him.”¹²²

This pair of ideas, helped in lifting, for a long time, the dangerous determinism resulting from Greek philosophy. Van den Brink writes:

...after all, God does not necessarily act in accordance with the existing order. He does not coincide with that order, nor is His power exhausted by it. Rather, God also has ‘absolute power,’ apart from and also over the order decreed by Him. On the other hand, the idea that God could in practice use His power completely arbitrarily was effectively countered by the notion of the *potentia ordinata*: in practice God realizes His power, unlimited as it may be, only in accordance with the order willed and decreed by Him. In this, God’s power is not in tension with His faithfulness and righteousness; we cannot therefore expect just anything from God, but we know where we stand with Him. God is certainly almighty, but not on that account ‘capable of anything.’¹²³

Van den Brink continues:

At the end of the 13th century, a significant shift of meaning became visible and grew more and more apparent during the 14th and 15th centuries. Once again, the tendency was to move towards a broadening of the possibilities attributed to God. The idea emerged that God would, in practice, act outside the order decreed by Him from time to time. In such cases, he acts from His *potentia absoluta*, as if His absolute power constituted a separate reservoir of power. When God acts from His *potentia absoluta*, He is really capable of anything. Theologians from nominalist circles translated this idea into concrete examples. Some argued that in His absolute power, God might for

¹²⁰ Richard A. Muller, “Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725,” *The Divine Essence and Attributes, Vol. Three* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academics, 2003), 68.

¹²¹ See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Part 1, Q. 25, Art. 5.

¹²² Gijsbert van den Brink, Vincent Brummer and Marcel Sarot (eds), *Understanding the Attributes of God* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1999), 146.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

example tell a lie, refrain from fulfilling a promise made in Scripture, awaken an attitude of hatred towards Himself in people, destroy someone who loves Himself, and all of that without acting unjustly.¹²⁴

1.7.2. William Ockham's Concept of *Potentia Absoluta* and *Potentia Ordinata*

William Ockham is often identified, according to Richard Muller, as taking the large-scale use of the concepts of *potentia absoluta* and *potentia ordinata* a step further.¹²⁵ For him, the “Absolute power of God” (*potentia absoluta*) refers to the options which exist before God has committed himself to any course of action. The “ordained power of God” (*potentia ordinata*) refers to how things now are, which reflects the order established by God the creator. These do not represent two different options still open to God. They represent two different moments in history.¹²⁶ Ockham invites us to consider two very different circumstances in which we might use the term the “omnipotence of God.” Alister McGrath explains:

The first is this: God is confronted with a whole array of possibilities, such as creating the world, or not creating the world. God can choose to actualize any of these possibilities. This is the absolute power of God. But then God chooses some options, and brings them into being. We are now in the realm of the ordained power of God- a realm in which God's power is restricted, by virtue of God's own decision. Thus by choosing to actualize some options, God has to choose not to actualize others. Once God has chosen to create the world, the option of not creating the world is set to one side.¹²⁷

¹²⁴ Gijssbert van den Brink, *Almighty God*, 83-87.

¹²⁵ Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 69.

¹²⁶ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 259.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 259-260.

This leads to what appears to be a paradox. Precisely because of His divine omnipotence, God is now not able to do everything. By acting with His divine power, God has limited His options. McGrath states that, “For Ockham, God cannot now do everything. God has deliberately limited the possibilities.”¹²⁸ Marilyn McCord Adams says Ockham believes that “God does nothing inordinate – nothing contrary to what He has ordained that He will do or to the ordinances that He has established.”¹²⁹ This looks like a contradiction, but for Ockham, God is really capable of doing anything, yet He is committed to a specific course of action, to the extent of self-limiting Himself to other possible actions.

However, Ockham’s idea of God’s self-limitation may become more and more problematic. Van den Brink concludes, “The critical transcendental concept of *potentia absoluta* is misunderstood as referring to a resource of power which is actualized from time to time in the real world. In the 14th and the 15th centuries speculations on what God actually can do by His absolute power became very popular and before the reformation philosophers and theologians struggled by making extensive applications of the notion of divine absolute power.”¹³⁰ Though in medieval times the concepts of the absolute and ordinate powers of God were discussed extensively, the ideas needed further exploration, and during the Reformation and beyond the ideas took more concrete shape.

1.8. Omnipotence in the Reformation Period and Beyond

In the time of reformation and beyond, Muller claims that the majority of the early reformers show, on the one hand, a tendency “to disdain the formalized structures of

¹²⁸ Ibid., 260.

¹²⁹ Marilyn McCord Adams, *William Ockham*, 1186.

¹³⁰ Gijsbert van den Brink, *Almighty God*, 83-87.

scholastic theology and to declaim against speculative discussion of scholastic distinctions concerning the power of God,” but on the other hand “the Reformers did have quiet recourse to such distinctions and did tend to frame their thought in relation to the terms of the received doctrine.”¹³¹ Bloesch notices that in Reformed Theology the idea of a God of unrestrained power persisted, though various theologians tried to modify this notion. He writes that “for the Older Reformed Theologians, ‘Omnipotence is the omnipotent nature of God Himself and is therefore eternal, bound to no means and infinite, since it is never exhausted in what it produces.’”¹³² Thus, the theologians did agree generally that God is omnipotent and unlimited in His dominion. However, there still lay the questions of the actual extent of divine power over the order of creation established by God and over all possibilities, including those not realized within the order and those at variance with its laws.¹³³

1.8.1. John Calvin on Omnipotence of God

Van den Brink claims that “in Calvin’s theology God’s power wholly coincides with His will, and God’s will in turn coincides with His goodness, wisdom and righteousness. Calvin refused to speak of divine power apart from divine willing.”¹³⁴ Anna Case Winters also argues that “for John Calvin, omnipotence was a central conviction understood to mean the effectual exercise of the divine personal will in accomplishing

¹³¹ Richard A. Muller, “Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725,” *The Divine Essence and Attributes, Vol. Three* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academics, 2003), 68.

¹³² Donald C. Bloesch, *God the Almighty: Power, Wisdom, Holiness, Love*, 104.

¹³³ Gijsbert van den Brink, *Understanding the Attributes of God*, 144-148.

¹³⁴ Gijsbert van den Brink, *Almighty God*, 88-89.

divine purposes. Closer study will reveal that Calvin's conception was complex, nuanced, and formed by diverse influences. He formed his view in conversation with (and over against) other perspectives available on his theological horizon."¹³⁵ Muller too asserts that, "Calvin is more prepared than the other codifiers of his generation to identify the divine will as the 'rule of righteousness' and to argue, with little instrumental nuance, that God is the 'cause' of all things."¹³⁶ Indeed Calvin insisted that God's omnipotence can never be severed from His will; God is omnipotent in the sense that he "can accomplish whatever He wills to do." However, God will not "darken the Sun" or "make the earth into heaven" or indeed, turn "bread...into the body of Jesus Christ"—such acts would "pervert all order" and "rend asunder God's power."¹³⁷ He warned against the fiction of God of "absolute might", a god who is "a law unto himself." The God of the Bible is not lawless but embodies the "law of all laws".¹³⁸ In the interest of affirming the primacy and freedom of the divine will, Case-Winters claims that Calvin refused the limitation in defining omnipotence in terms of what is logically possible. When the standard meaning came to be, "God can do whatever is doable," Calvin countered that it is in the freedom of the divine will to "determine" what is possible. The possibilities that are open to God are not limited by metaphysical necessities. God's personal will is what defines God's power. Therefore, no external metaphysical limitations can be placed upon divine power.¹³⁹

¹³⁵ Anna Case-Winters, "Omnipotence," *The Westminster Handbook to Reformed Theology*, edited by Donald K. McKim (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 157.

¹³⁶ Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 524.

¹³⁷ Calvin, *Sermons on Job*, Sermon 157 (p.738. col.1), cited by Richard Muller, *ibid.*, 523.

¹³⁸ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* III. XXIII.2. Edited by John T. McNeill, Translated (Philadelphia: Westminster Press). See also Donald C. Bloesch, *God the Almighty: Power, Wisdom, Holiness, Love*, 104.

¹³⁹ Anna Case-Winters, "Omnipotence," *The Westminster Handbook to Reformed Theology*, 157.

“The reformers, typically, resisted the urge to speculate on questions like ‘What does it mean that God can do all things?’ after the manner of the late medieval nominalists.”¹⁴⁰ Thus on the text Luke 1:37, “For no word shall be impossible with God,” Calvin first acknowledges the extent of the divine power: If we choose to take ‘word’, in its strict and native sense, the meaning is that God will do what He hath promised, for no hindrance can resist His power. The argument will be, God hath promised, and therefore He will accomplish it; for we ought not to allege any impossibility in opposition to His word.¹⁴¹ Calvin is also quite willing, given the evangelists’ tendency to echo Hebrew idiom in their Greek, to understand “word” as indicating “thing” and to conclude that the text teaches that “nothing is impossible with God.”¹⁴² But then he warns his readers against speculation: “We ought always indeed, to hold it as a maxim, that they wander widely from the truth who, at their pleasure, imagine the power of God to be something beyond his word; for we ought always to contemplate His boundless power, that it may strengthen our hope and confidence. But it is idle, and unprofitable, and even dangerous, to argue what God can do unless we also take into account what he resolves to do.”¹⁴³

The above statements of Calvin indicate something akin to the language of *potentia absoluta*, although without any speculation—altogether with a clear demand that we examine the *potentia ordinata* not in juxtaposition with God’s absolute power, but instead

¹⁴⁰ Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 522.

¹⁴¹ John Calvin, “Luke 1:37,” *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists* Vol. I (Grand Rapids: Wm. B Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1949), 45.

¹⁴² Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 523.

¹⁴³ John Calvin, “Luke 1:37,” *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists* Vol. I. op.cit., 45.

for the sake of a positive identification of the fact and implication of God's boundless power.¹⁴⁴

1.8.2. Absolute Power and Ordained Power in Calvin

Van den Brink is of the view that Calvin mostly rejected the distinction between the absolute and the ordained power of God but kept elements of the concept as his own theology matured. Van den Brink writes, "He certainly assumed that, both in power and in justice, the divine reality far exceeded the limits of the revealed order."¹⁴⁵ Muller claims that, "Calvin's arguments resembled the thinking of Scotus and Ockham who insist on the freedom of God and the radical contingency of the created order."¹⁴⁶ Case-Winter maintains that in Calvin's view:

God's power is not independent of God's moral character; rather it expresses it. This power is not a neutral, blind force of nature; it is the power of a free, personal will. Like the will of any person, God's will has a certain character—namely, the character of goodness that is part of the divine nature. While external, metaphysical limitations are to be refused, internal, moral imitations are to be admitted. God's power may be unlimited, but it is not arbitrary. Thus any abstract definition of omnipotence as "absolute power" is to be rejected. This omnipotent power is displayed in the creation, governance and final disposition of the world. The nature of its operation is a personal and particular care that works universally and continuously.¹⁴⁷

Steinmetz puts forth Calvin's rejection of the distinction between the absolute and ordained power of God in three contexts in his biblical commentaries: miracles, providence and predestination.¹⁴⁸ The *first context* is the question of the adequacy of the power of God

¹⁴⁴ David Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context*, 47-50.

¹⁴⁵ Gijbert van den Brink, *Almighty God*, 88-90.

¹⁴⁶ Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 524.

¹⁴⁷ Anna Case-Winters, "Omnipotence," *The Westminster Handbook to Reformed Theology*, 157.

¹⁴⁸ David Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context*, 45-48.

to perform miracles. Sarah's laughter in Genesis 18 leads Calvin to make two points to his readers: 1) To warn them not to limit the power of God to the limited measure of their own reason. 2) God's power should only be considered in the context of God's Word – what God can do in the framework of his divine will.¹⁴⁹ The *second context* involves the goodness of providence, especially when the wicked seem to prosper. Jeremiah 12 (also ref. Isaiah 23) shows that God's justice may be slow but it is sure to come. His wisdom and judgment are beyond human understanding, and are inseparable from His power.¹⁵⁰ Another problem with the concept of absolute power is the *third context* – the doctrine of predestination. In Genesis 25, Jacob is chosen by God despite appearances that Esau should be His chosen one. For Calvin, election is 'gratuitous', since no one is worthy to be saved.¹⁵¹ Nothing happens outside the will of God. It may seem unfair, but God is just, even though His justice may be hidden from us; and God's will is the highest and most righteous will (Ref. Romans 9). God predestines a plan, and He must abide by that plan. However, when Calvin is asked to name this supreme will of God, he resists calling it God's absolute will. Calvin writes, "We do not advocate the fiction of 'absolute might'; because this is profane. ... We fancy no lawless god who is a law unto himself."¹⁵²

Thus, after establishing the points above, Steinmetz concludes that Calvin is not actually opposed to the points made by Scotus and Ockham about the freedom and transcendence of God. But he finds it impossible to make those points by appealing to the theological distinction between the absolute and the ordained power of God. Absolute

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 45-46.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 46-47.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 47-48.

¹⁵² John Calvin, *Institutes*, III.XXIII.2.

power is, for him, disordered power – omnipotence separated from justice. Steinmetz writes:

The will of God may be hidden and mysterious; it may even contradict human concepts of justice, but it is not disordered. That ordered power is displayed in miracles, providence, and predestination. Indeed, even the impenetrable darkness outside revelation cannot rob the godly of their confidence that the hidden power of God is not the power of an arbitrary tyrant, but the infinite power of a just Father.¹⁵³

1.9. Omnipotence in Reformed Orthodoxy

The omnipotence of God is affirmed by all Reformed Orthodox writers. As te Velde puts it, “It is seen as the executive faculty of God, by which God does whatever God wills.”¹⁵⁴ Muller asserts that, “The Reformed Orthodox view of divine power or omnipotence agrees in substance with the teaching of the Reformers, drawing, as the writers in both eras did, on the exegetical tradition and on the doctrines and distinctions of the patristic and scholastic past. However, they did draw out the scholastic distinctions inherent in the received doctrine at greater length and in greater positive detail than did the Reformers. And this movement toward metaphysical cohesion continued into the High Orthodox era, where the biblical, philosophical, and religious elements of the doctrine remained in a rather delicate balance despite the obvious difficulties brought by an increasing text-critical exegesis and a vast reorientation of philosophy.”¹⁵⁵ A few aspects of the doctrine of omnipotence are subject to discussion in Reformed Orthodoxy. Te Velde summarizes seven important distinctions and discussions on the subject of the omnipotence of God during that period.

¹⁵³ David Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context*, 49-50.

¹⁵⁴ Dolf te Velde, *The Doctrine of God in Reformed Orthodoxy*, 234.

¹⁵⁵ Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 524.

First, a structural point in the Reformed Orthodox doctrine of divine omnipotence is the distinction, advocated by several authors, between the power (*potentia*) and authority (*potestas*) of God. Many emphasized the need of keeping the two together. Heidegger puts it this way, “Power without authority is tyranny; authority without power resembles a king in exile.”¹⁵⁶

Second, there is the question of how far divine omnipotence extends. Three possible answers are given: a) God can do whatever he wills; b) God can do what is logically possible and does not imply a contradiction; c) God can do what is in agreement with God’s nature. Te Velde notes that most theologians choose to combine two or three of these possible answers.¹⁵⁷ Some theologians modified and claimed that God’s omnipotence is bound not to God’s actual will, but to God’s possible will.¹⁵⁸ The object of God’s power is seen as being in agreement with God’s nature and His inability to do impossible or morally abject things is not a sign of weakness, but rather of highest perfection.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁶ J.H. Heidegger, *Corpus Theologiae*, 102. Cited by Dolf te Velde. *The Doctrine of God in Divine Orthodoxy*, 235.

¹⁵⁷ “This demonstrates that the three options are not mutually exclusive, but that they represent different emphases. The statement that God can do whatever God wills reveals a voluntarist outlook (Voluntarists conceive ‘will’ to be the dominant factor in experience or in the world). This allows for two different, in fact contrary, interpretations: first, it can secure the view of omnipotence from extreme speculations by binding it to God’s will as established in the decree; second, it may be meant as emphasizing the sovereign freedom of God as excluding the divine being bound to laws of logic.” Dolf te Velde, *The Doctrine of God in Reformed Orthodoxy*, 236-237.

¹⁵⁸“They also put forth that the object of God’s omnipotence points to God’s truthfulness, for God would be a liar if performing self-contradictory acts that would entail God saying yes and no to one and the same proposition. The contradictory cannot exist, because its components neutralize each other. However, this line of argument runs the risk of subjecting God to the laws of logic, and of establishing a logical possibility independent of God. Therefore, for many, God’s power is the root of possibility and not the other way around.” Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

Third, the distinction between absolute and ordinate power (*potentia absoluta—ordinata*) is discussed. The distinction became famous due to Calvin's rejection in his *Institutes*. It was reevaluated in Reformed doctrine and sometimes used with some qualifications.¹⁶⁰

Fourth, some authors explicitly speak of God as the principle of action in other beings. This is connected to the view that God is the highest being, and is in the highest degree active (*actus purus*). The existence of the world, as a causal system, is dependent on God as its first cause. In his freedom, God personally acts upon his creatures. The world is not susceptible to a blind fate, but is in a relationship with its ultimate cause in whom its relative freedom of action is protected.¹⁶¹

Fifth, it is asked how the term 'potency' can be attributed to God, given the basic definition of God as pure act (*actus purus*), where act is contrary to potency. The Reformed orthodox answer is that *potentia* is ascribed to God not in a passive, but in an active way. The relations, into which God enters, do not affect his own essence and thus cannot account for 'passive potency'.¹⁶²

Sixth, some orthodox theologians explicitly mention the difference between the philosophical idea of omnipotence and the Christian, biblical belief in an almighty God.

¹⁶⁰ "Some theologians (like Andreas Hyperius) emphasized that God's omnipotence should always be taken together with God's wisdom and will so that God's potency can never be called 'absolute' in the most extreme sense. Others pointed to the fact that the absolute and the ordinate power have different objects: the absolute power is concerning all possible things; the ordinate power only concerns the real future things. Still others (like Maresius) make a distinction by stating that 'by God's actual power, God irresistibly does whatever God wills, while by God's absolute power, God can do more than He actually does.'" Ibid., 237-238.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 238-239.

¹⁶² "Even the relations between the Persons of the Trinity are to be understood either as 'active potency' or as merely descriptive relations without a causal-genetic order." Ibid., 239.

Some (Zacharias Ursinus) explicitly connect God’s omnipotence with God’s salvational purpose. Some suggest that the biblical concept of *creatio ex nihilo* should be included in any Christian account of God’s omnipotence.¹⁶³

Seventh, the omnipotence of God has a moral dimension in application to Godself. Scripture repeatedly states that God ‘cannot’ do certain things, such as lying, denying himself, etc. The Reformed orthodox explain that performing such acts is not a perfection, but instead a lack of perfection. Therefore, the absence of the possibility to do so is a sign of God’s abundant perfection, not a restriction of God’s power.¹⁶⁴.

1.10. Herman Bavinck’s Concept of Omnipotence

For Herman Bavinck, God’s sovereignty reveals itself in His omnipotence. God’s omnipotence is reflected in the scriptures and through all His works. He writes, “Creation, providence, Israel’s deliverance from Egypt, nature with its laws, the history of Israel with its marvels— all loudly and clearly proclaim the omnipotence of God.”¹⁶⁵ He strongly draws from the scripture the notion of the omnipotence of God as the almighty, mighty in power, the King of kings, Lord of lords, creator, and sustainer, etc. He further asserts that, “God has absolute power over all things so that nothing can resist Him. Nothing is too hard for God; for Him all things are possible. He does whatever He pleases and no one can call Him to account.”¹⁶⁶

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ “The moral dimension became especially urgent in reaction to Descartes’s theory of the divine deception. Descartes stated that God could deceive us, if so desired; in fact God does not lie, because God does not want to. The theologians argue against this theory because the sheer possibility of a divine lie is excluded by God’s holy nature.” Ibid., 239-240.

¹⁶⁵ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: God and Creation*, Vol. Two, 245-246.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 246.

Driving home the redeeming feature of God's power he writes, "His power is above all evident in the works of redemption: in the resurrection of Christ (Rom.1:4; Eph.1:20), in bringing about and strengthening faith (Rom. 16:25; Eph. 1:18-19), in the dispensing of grace above all we ask or think (Eph. 3:20; II Cor. 9:8; II Pet. 1:3), in the resurrection of the last day (John 5:25ff), and so on."¹⁶⁷ For Bavinck, all power glory and strength belong to God. God's power is the source of all power, authority, ability and strength in creatures. He has the dominion and authority over the whole world and every of His creation.¹⁶⁸

Criticizing the nominalists, Bavinck writes:

Entirely in keeping with their doctrine of the will and freedom of God the nominalists defined the omnipotence of God not only as the power to do whatever he wills, but also as the power to will anything. Differentiating between God's "absolute" and his "ordained" power, they judge that in accordance with the former, God could also sin, err, suffer, die, become a stone or an animal, change bread into the body of Christ, do contradictory things, undo the past, make false what was true and true what was false, and so forth. According to his absolute power, therefore, God is pure Arbitrariness, absolute potency without any content, which is nothing but can become anything. In principle this is the position of all who subscribe to the primacy of the will. On the other side are those who say that God can do only what he wills and nothing that he does not will. The "possible" coincides with the "real." That which does not become real is not possible either. God has fully exhausted his power in the existing world.¹⁶⁹

Bavinck uses Scripture as the criteria to claim against this idea and writes:

Scripture, we believe, condemns the one position as well as the other. On the one hand, it expressly states that there are many things that God cannot do. He cannot lie, he cannot repent, he cannot change, he cannot be tempted (Num. 23:19; I Sam. 15:29; Heb. 6:18; James 1:13, 17), and he cannot deny himself (II Tim. 2:13). For his will is identical with his being, and the theory of absolute power, which separates God's power from his other perfections, is nothing but an empty and impermissible abstraction. On the other hand, scripture states in language that is equally firm that what is possible extends

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 246-247.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 247.

much farther than what is real (Gen. 18:14; Jer. 32:27; Zech. 8:6; Matt. 3:9; 19:26; Luke 1:37; 18:27). And to this scripture position, Christian theology has held firm.¹⁷⁰

Dealing further with the conceptual difficulties of the concept of omnipotence, he mentions Augustine's statement that:

God's will and power are not distinct from his being. With a human it is one thing to be, another to be able. ... With God, however, it is not the case that His substance is one thing so that He is, and His power another so that He is able: He has being (*esse*) and ability (*posse*) because he holds the willing and the doing together.¹⁷¹

However, God cannot will anything and everything. He cannot deny himself, cannot die, He cannot be changed, He cannot be deceived, He cannot be created, He cannot be overcome. In line with Augustine, Bavinck agrees that, "This is not a lack of power but, on the contrary, true, absolute power. If God would err or sin, that would indeed be a sign of powerlessness."¹⁷²

Bavinck further states that the nominalists misused this distinction of God's absolute and ordained power when they argued that God is able to do anything, even if it is against his nature. The Reformed theologians also qualified their acceptance of the distinction between God's "absolute" power and his "ordained" power. Bavinck refers to Calvin and states that he fought back rejecting this "fiction of absolute power" (Calvin *Institutes* III). Bavinck writes:

Calvin did not deny that God can do more than he actually did, but only opposed a concept of 'absolute power' that was not bound to his nature and therefore could do all sorts of contradictory things. Conceived along the

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 246-247.

¹⁷¹ Augustine, "Lectures on the Gospel of John," tract.20, NPNF (1), VII, 131-37; idem, *Confessions*, XI 10; XII, 15. Cited by Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: God and Creation*, Vol. Two, 248.

¹⁷² Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: God and Creation*, Vol. Two, 248.

lines of Augustine and Thomas, this distinction was generally accepted by Reformed Theologians and so understood it is worthy of endorsement.¹⁷³

Bavinck finally concludes that:

It is impossible to give a logical explanation of the existence of the world apart from the will of an omnipotent God. The actual, therefore, does not completely cover the possible. God's existence is not exhausted by the existence of the world; eternity does not fully empty itself in time; infinity is not identical with the sum total of finite beings; omniscience does not coincide with the intellectual content embodied in creatures. So also God's omnipotence infinitely transcends even the boundless power manifested in the world.¹⁷⁴

1.11. Karl Barth's Concept of Omnipotence

Karl Barth correlates the concept of the omnipotence of God with God's 'constancy'. God is constant and God is omnipotent. Constancy signifies the perfect freedom of God to do whatever He wills, and Omnipotence is the perfect love in which He is free to act. Barth writes, "To what extent is this second statement new or necessary alongside the first? Not to the extent that it seeks or is able to say anything different from the other, but to the extent that it does say the same thing differently."¹⁷⁵ He maintains that speaking about God's constancy and omnipotence should be spoken about both clearly and individually. He writes:

We must speak about them expressly. This is demanded by the essence of God, which needs to be seen and understood from the standpoint denoted by the concepts of constancy and omnipotence. We must also speak about them independently. The whole essence of God must be seen and understood from this standpoint too, as if it were the one and only standpoint. For each of God's qualities and perfections declared and knowable in His revelation is at the same time His one, complete essence. This is also true of God's constancy and omnipotence.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 249.

¹⁷⁵ Karl Barth, "The Doctrine of God," *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. II.i, 490.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 490-491.

Barth further claims that:

... all the perfections of God's freedom, His love, and the one whole divine essence, can and must be expressed by recognizing that God is constant. By this perfection of constancy God differentiates Himself from everything that is distinct from Himself. By it He is what He is in Himself, and by it He also qualifies and directs everything distinct from Himself. Because He is constant, and as the One who is constant, He is also omnipotent. And because He is omnipotent, and as the One who is omnipotent, He is also constant.¹⁷⁷

Barth explains that the constancy of God means that the one and omnipresent God remains the same always – always present, always good, always loving. He writes:

In God there is found no “deviation, diminution or addition, nor any degeneration or rejuvenation, any alteration or non-identity or discontinuity. This absence of change is not in conflict with the freedom and the love of God. Neither does it conflict with the life of God and the fact that God is the living One. God is in the fullness of God’s life that differs from everything else and cannot be subjected to change and does not cease to be Himself.¹⁷⁸

Barth insists that in order to know the constant will and being of God we have to look at Jesus Christ. God is immutably the God who became one with His creature in Jesus Christ as the Creator, Reconciler, and Redeemer. God identifies himself with Jesus even in the latter’s Jesus’s sufferings, agonies and death. Hence, incarnation should not be seen as a change in God. The motive for Christ to give up his divinity and become human demonstrates that being God is not God’s only possibility. God can also empty Himself, and unite with modest humanity. He writes:

We read in Phil. 2:5ff that Jesus Christ emptied Himself (ἐαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν), taking the form of a servant, going about in the likeness of man and being found in appearance (ἐν σχήματι) as a man; and that as such He humbled Himself (ἐταπείνωσεν ἑαυτόν), becoming obedient to death, even death on the cross.... This self-emptying and self-humbling have nothing to do with a surrender or loss of His

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 491.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

deity. The only thing involved is the self-offering of God to the being and fate of men, a self-offering in which He makes them so much His own that His deity becomes completely invisible to all other eyes but His own. What distinguishes Him from the creature disappears from everyone's sight but His own with His assumption of the human form of a servant, with its natural end in death, and above all with His death as that of a criminal on the cross.¹⁷⁹

Barth maintains that, “The cross of Golgotha is not the humiliation, but the exaltation of God. It makes clear that God has freely chosen to assume humanity, and that God has bound himself and us to this fact of salvation. It is only through the free choice of grace that the decree of God is necessary and compelling for us.”¹⁸⁰ Te Velde notices that:

...for Barth, the counterpart of God’s constancy is His omnipotence. Through this perfection of His omnipotence, He is able to do what He wills. This perfection is the only property ascribed to God in the oldest creeds. This attribute describes very specifically the positive character of the divine freedom, that which distinguishes it from the freedom that might be ascribed to a being unmoved and immovable in itself.¹⁸¹

Barth affirms that God is all-powerful, over everything that He actually wills or could will. God is able, able to do everything as His possibility is real possibility. As this omnipotent God, He is constant and distinct from the changeable,¹⁸² and He is also distinct from the unchangeable.¹⁸³ ‘God omnipotent’ distinguishes Himself from all these situations as the One, true, living God.¹⁸⁴ Barth claims that God, in His omnipotence, stands

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 516.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 517.

¹⁸¹ Dolf te Velde, *The Doctrine of God*, 388.

¹⁸² “Which means, on the one hand, that which is not capable of everything that it wills, that which cannot do everything that is a real possibility, that which does not have all true possibilities; and on the other hand that which is capable of what it does not will, that which can do what is not really possible, that for which untrue and impossible possibilities are not impossible.” Karl Barth, “The Doctrine of God,” *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. II.i, 522-523.

¹⁸³ “Whose unchangeableness inevitably means utter powerlessness, complete incapacity, a lack of every possibility, and therefore death.” Ibid., 523.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 522-523.

over the reality which He has created as its Lord, and revealing Himself He is exalted in its midst. In His omnipotence, He is the source of all created life and its preservation. It has its life in and by His life.

At the same time, He is in His omnipotence sovereign over death, which has no place in Him and as a negative force can only be under His feet. In His omnipotence, He is from eternity and to eternity the refutation of all real or possible illusions and errors in relation to gods that are not really gods. Even if creatures regard themselves as gods of this kind or think they should acknowledge and worship such gods in consideration of their own non-divine existence.

Since God is omnipotent, He is the one, unique and simple God, and as such omnipresent. This clearly raises His grace and holiness, mercy and righteousness, patience and wisdom above the perfections which, under these or similar names, could be ascribed to the creature or any of its fictitious creations. They [grace and holiness etc.] possess the strength and truth to be perfections of the true God, and each of them individually the true God Himself, because they are all of them omnipotent: omnipotent grace, omnipotent holiness, etc. For they are all in themselves the omnipotence of God.¹⁸⁵

Barth here **first** begins by stating that the ‘power’ discussed here is the real power of God, God’s Omnipotence. Power in itself is not merely neutral. It is evil. It is nothing less than freedom from restraint and suppression; revolt and domination. Therefore, just as with the other attributes, Barth insists on the right order of subject and predicate: ‘*God is almighty,*’ it is not ‘*power is God.*’ The danger of reversing subject and predicate is

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 523.

enormous, particularly in view of the power of God: it would make God a tyrannical demon.¹⁸⁶

Secondly, the power of God should not be understood simply as physical possibility, a *potentia*. It must be understood at the same time as a moral and legal possibility, a *potestas*. Bringing together God's omnipotence to his concrete revelation is enforced by a moral-juridical addition to the power idea. It is legitimate power; it is the power of the holiness, righteousness, wisdom, love and freedom of the divine person. It is the power which is the origin of legality and is always exercised in the fullness of this legality. It is the power which does not lack the dignity of the Godhead, of the Creator, Reconciler and Redeemer. What God is able to do *de facto*, He is also able to do *de jure*. His holiness, righteousness and wisdom are almightiness. God's *potentia* is in all circumstances *potestas*.¹⁸⁷

Thirdly, God's power is not identical to His works and is not exhausted by them. Omnipotence is more than omni-causality. God is almighty within Himself, and from His own being He applies divine power advantageously to us. Te Velde expresses that Barth criticizes Protestant orthodoxy for separating the inward, Trinitarian power of God and the outward power of God's works in his creation. He agrees with the scholastics when they recognise an internal power of God in the generation of the Son and the procession of the Spirit, but he notes that it is dangerous to limit the doctrine of omnipotence to the external power of God.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 524. Also see Dolf te Velde, *The Doctrine of God*, 389.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 526.

¹⁸⁸ Dolf te Velde, *The Doctrine of God*, 389-390.

Barth also mentions Schleiermacher's idea which led to the equation of omnipotence and omni-causality. He explains that for Schleiermacher, "the totality of finite being is the complete and exhaustive presentation of the divine causality. Here God is limited to actual reality, and God's freedom as the Creator over against God's creation is lost. The source of failure is, in Barth's view, the nominalist understanding of the divine attributes: the idea of simplicity leaves no room for a real multiplicity, thus making God the prisoner of God's own attributes. Additionally, God becomes the prisoner of the world when God is seen as merely the infinite qualifier of the finite world."¹⁸⁹

Fourthly, the power of God surpasses God's actual deeds. It is a meticulous and tangible capability by which the triune God can perform by Himself. All God's works directly reflect His being, and the world is the setting and means of God manifesting Himself. It is in God that all true possibilities are actual, and thus God is the principle of possibility. Anything that is impossible for God is truly impossible. It would only lessen the power of God if God could do things that are impossible for God.¹⁹⁰ Barth writes:

It can be said that God can do "everything" only if the "can" is understood to mean that He Himself in His capacity to be Himself is the standard of what is possible, and if the "everything" is understood as the sum of what is possible for Him and therefore genuinely possible, and not simply the sum of what is "possible" in general. God cannot do everything without distinction. He can do only what is possible for Him and therefore genuinely possible. This does not imply any limitation of His omnipotence. Rather, it defines His omnipotence as His and therefore true omnipotence....To possess the power to do everything without distinction would be a limitation, or rather the removal of His power, and not its extension. Possessing that power, He would not be God. He would be continually disturbed and threatened in His genuine possibilities by His own possibility of the impossible. But this means that He would Himself be a creature, a fallen creature. It is against this misunderstanding that we have to safeguard

¹⁸⁹ Karl Barth, "The Doctrine of God," *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. II.i, 526-532.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 390.

the assertion of God's omnipotence by making clear that God's omnipotence consists positively in His power to be Himself and therefore to be true to Himself.¹⁹¹

Te Velde notes that:

Barth's relation to traditional theology is ambivalent at this point. On the one hand, he joins the church fathers and the scholastics in emphasizing that God cannot do things contrary to God's nature. On the other hand, he regrets their entering into discussions about the logical (im)possibilities. In line with Thomas Aquinas and other medieval scholastics, the Protestant orthodox argues that things involving a logical contradiction do not come under God's omnipotence. For instance, God cannot undo what has been done, or make a human out of an animal. Against Thomas Aquinas, Barth joins the Reformed scholastic J.H. Heidegger, who had stated that the power and will of God are the only root and foundation of possibility (*omnis possibilitatis fundamentum et radix*). According to Barth, the logic of possibility, impossibility and necessity is a human, relative system. Logical truth exists merely due to God's creative will, and therefore it is relative, not absolute.¹⁹²

From this, the conclusion can be drawn that only Omnipotent Creator God can be trusted absolutely; the truth of logic can be trusted only relatively. God's actual power sets the limit of the possible, and thus safeguard the steadiness of our world. The limit of the possible is not, therefore, self-contradiction, but contradiction of God.¹⁹³

Fifthly, the power of God is ascertained in relation to both Himself and the world.

Barth writes:

God's power is power over everything. This means the power of all powers, the power in and over them all. It does not mean the sum or the substance of all powers – this is excluded by what we have said already. Created powers, and above all the powers of opposition and therefore of powerlessness, are always distinct from God's power. He permits them to exist as powers apart from and beside His power. He gives them a place, and this applies not only to the powers created through His work but also to the powers of opposition and powerlessness, to the possibility of the

¹⁹¹ Karl Barth, "The Doctrine of God," *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. II.i, 532-533.

¹⁹² See Dolf te Velde, *The Doctrine of God*, 390.

¹⁹³ Karl Barth, "The Doctrine of God," *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. II.i, 537-538.

impossible, of that which has been excluded by His own act. Yet this does not mean that He abandons even part of His lordship over them, that He is even partially powerless over against them, or that they have even partially an independent position and function in relation to Him. On the contrary, it is by His power that He creates or at any rate tolerates other powers. In this His power is always power in and over them, and He is always first and last the only one who is full of power. He is not at any point limited or determined by them, but at every point He limits and determines them.¹⁹⁴

Besides His power, God allows other powers to exist. In this context, Barth discusses the traditional distinction between *potentia absoluta* and *potentia ordinata*. He writes, “We therefore endorse the distinction between *potentia absoluta* and *potentia ordinata* in so far as it reminds us that God's omnipotence is His own power and therefore free power.”¹⁹⁵ But Barth backs off from interpretations of the ordinary versus extraordinary power of God (*potentia ordinaria—extraordinaria*). In this interpretation, the difference assumes a normal, natural course of things to which the extraordinary power of God makes exception by means of miracles. For Barth, this interpretation of the differentiation is dangerous. He asserts the unity of God's power: the ordinary course of events is as much the result of God's miraculous power as are so-called miracles. Looking at it the other way around, the ‘extraordinary’ interventions, in the ‘normal’ course of things, draw attention to the uniqueness of God's world-sustaining power.

For Barth, distinguishing between the ordinary and extraordinary power of God leads to the dangerous distinction between the *deus revelatus* (revealed God) and the *deus absconditus* (hidden God). This distinction is opposed by Barth. He states that we must come to terms with the freedom of God's power, but not with possibilities that are

¹⁹⁴ Karl Barth, “The Doctrine of God,” *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. II.i, 538.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 539.

physically different from what God actually does. He claims that God has finally and authoritatively revealed his *potentia absoluta* as *potentia ordinata* in Jesus Christ.¹⁹⁶ Barth continues his discussion on God's power in terms of God's *knowing* and *willing*.

For Barth:

God is not only the theme but also the subject of knowing and willing. He is, in fact, the knowing and willing itself. The freedom of God consists of his personality and spirituality. He has the real power and this power is *potestas* not merely *potentia*; the power known and willed by Him and itself the power of His knowing and willing. The omnipotence of His knowing and willing is not the power for anything and everything, but His power with a definite direction and content. It is both His power to will and His power not to will. 'Everything' is the object of His omnipotence, but, because His omnipotence is the omnipotence of His knowledge and His will, it is its object in a definite, distinct, concrete way. He is the master of His omnipotence and not its slave. He is the judge of what is wise and foolish, possible and impossible. He is, therefore, always holy and righteous in His actions. Because it is not willed by Him, and only the object of His will and knowledge in this sense, sin is always sin, folly is folly, and the devil the devil, with no prospect even in eternity of ever becoming the object of His omnipotence in any other sense.¹⁹⁷

Barth states that God's knowledge and will shape not only his omnipotence, but even God's other perfections such as unity, simplicity, holiness, grace, etc. God's *knowing* is revealed by God's speaking the truth and our hearing it. God's *scientia* awakens our *conscientia*.¹⁹⁸ God's willing becomes clear from the fact that the *revelation* of God is at once the divine *reconciliation*. God is not a merely passive knower and a passive object of knowledge, but in a free way He acts to establish with the revelation of His knowledge the fellowship between Himself and us."¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 539-542.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 543.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 546.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 547.

Barth makes a series of qualifications on the doctrine of God's knowledge and will: **Firstly**, "God's knowledge and will are identical to God's being and there is unity in divine knowledge and will."²⁰⁰

Secondly, the "...insight that God *is* the single and complete act of God's knowing and willing should not lead to a denial of the concrete multiplicity of God's knowledge and will."²⁰¹ Te Velde notes that this risk occurs if "we think of the divine will as self-grounded and hovering in eternal regularity over all changeable materials and states."²⁰² and if "the concrete biblical witness about the 'stirrings and movements of the divine will' is understood as mere 'anthropomorphism'." Furthermore, "...the identity of knowledge and will with the essence of God implies their mutual identity. In this sense, it is important to see that in God there is no primacy of either God's knowledge or God's will."²⁰³

Thirdly, Divine knowledge and will in common are free and superior to all their objects. For God's knowledge, this is expressed by the term *omniscience*. Barth claims that:

God knows everything; God's knowledge "as omnipotent knowledge," is complete in its range, the one unique and all-embracing knowledge. For Barth this knowledge is not infinite knowledge. It is, of course, infinite in its power. But although the realm of the knowable is infinite for us, for God, who knows everything, it is a finite realm, exhausted and therefore limited by His knowledge. Barth emphasizes that there is no infinite realm of possible or nonexistent things that exceeds the omniscience of God. Even evil, death and hell, though they qualify as *nihil pure negativum*, are known as such by God. Parallel to omniscience, Barth uses the neologism 'omnivolence.' There is no thing or will outside God that conditions or hinders God's will. Here too, Barth refuses to speak of an 'infinite' divine

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 549-550.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 551.

²⁰² Dolf te Velde, *The Doctrine of God*, 393.

²⁰³ Karl Barth, "The Doctrine of God," *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. II.i, 551. Also see Dolf te Velde, *The Doctrine of God*, 393.

will in regard to its objects. For him the realm of objects that can be willed, is determined and limited by God's will.²⁰⁴

Fourthly, Divine knowledge possesses the character of foreknowledge, *praescientia*, in relation to all its objects outside Him. Barth states that:

This concept deepens that of omniscience in so far as it characterizes the divine knowledge explicitly as a knowledge which is superior to all its objects that are distinct from God. This is the meaning of the "fore," the *prae*, which has, therefore, much more than a purely temporal connotation. God's knowledge of all things is what it is in eternal superiority to all things and eternal independence of all things. Thus the "fore" in the divine foreknowledge denotes the absolute priority and superiority of God Himself to every possible existence distinct from His own, His dignity as the Creator of being and as the Lord and master even of non-being. Everything that exists outside Him does so because it exists first and eternally in Him, in His knowledge. It is for this reason that His knowledge is not actually tied to the distinction between past, present and future being. For this reason, too, all things in all ages are foreknown by God from all eternity, or, to put it in temporal terms, always-no less and no differently in their future than in their present and past.²⁰⁵

Along with to the qualification of God's knowledge as foreknowledge is the determination of God's will as free. God is not dependent on, or limited by, anything that is not Himself – on anything outside Himself. He is not subject to any need aside from Himself. On the contrary, everything that exists is dependent on His will. Everything happens in accordance with His will. There is no external law in which one of its objects is a motive for, or a means to, other goals. Nor is there any internal law, because God's will is itself God, and therefore the standard of everything divinely necessary and the essence of everything holy, just and good. Therefore, there can be nothing divine which must first be its motive or norm. There is only one thing which the divine will cannot will,

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 552-558.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 558-559.

and that is the absurd. It cannot decide to quit being the divine will – to cease to be God Himself.²⁰⁶

Barth further writes:

If we ask why creation of each of us or everything has to be as it is, the only answer is that it must be so by God's free will. If we ask further why being is limited by non-being or why creation has to be obstructed and contradicted by sin and death and the devil, again the only answer we can give is that by the same free will of God by which it was created creation has to have this limitation by what is not created, by nonbeing, and even non-being must also have this definite place and therefore its peculiar being. If we ask the further question – why there must be reconciliation, why the decision in which God shows Himself as Lord and Victor in His creation by saying Yes at this place and No at that, here accepting and there rejecting; and if we ask further why for this reconciliation and this decision there has to take place what does take place, why God Himself must become man, Himself enduring this limiting of His creation by sin and death and the devil in all its fearful totality, and in this way conquer– the only answer we can finally give is that this is how God has known it from eternity, and this is also how He has willed it from eternity, in His divine freedom. And if we ask further why we must believe the Word of God spoken in this event, and obey it, again and above all the only answer we can give is that this is God's free will, and therefore His holy and righteous and good will, and as such His omnipotent will.²⁰⁷

For Barth, important systems of thought are refuted: pantheism as well as panentheism, determinism as well as indeterminism and dualism. Barth claims that the limitless and steadfast will of God includes all necessary and free created beings and actions.²⁰⁸ Te Velde remarks:

According to Barth, the illegitimate assumption of independence on behalf of created entities has led to the discussion on middle knowledge (*scientia media*)...the only way to effectively defeat the doctrine of middle knowledge is to confess the utter incomparability of God and creature. When God and humanity are placed in one ontological system, the relation A—B is in principle reversible to B—A: God conditions humans but can in

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 560-561.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 561.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 562-563.

turn be conditioned by humans. The evangelical starting point should not be in some ontology, but in Christology. Here we find the assumption of humanity by God in such a way that reversal of its order is impossible.²⁰⁹

For Barth, seeing that God's omnipotence is both knowing and willing, and is personal, is an essential view for correctly determining the relationship between God the Creator and His creations. When we recognize that God's power, knowledge and will are found in God's revelation and reconciliation, we realize that all God's power is manifested in Jesus Christ. In considering God's omnipotence, we have to start with the particular – Jesus Christ – and then are able to understand the general. Jesus Christ is the power and the wisdom of God, therefore God's power is revealed in Christ and can be understood in the story of His crucifixion.²¹⁰

1.12. Postmodern Reformed Theology

1.12.1. Definition of Postmodern

The term "*postmodern*" is being used by philosophers, sociologists, literary critics, architects, artists and theologians and they use it more and more frequently. Vanhoozer writes, "Postmodern has become a gregarious adjective, and can often be seen in the company of such respectable terms as literature, philosophy, architecture, art, history, science, cinema- and, yes even biblical studies and theology."²¹¹ What does *postmodern* mean and how does it work? A specific definition of *postmodernity* is difficult to pin down

²⁰⁹ Dolf te Velde, *The Doctrine of God*, 396-397.

²¹⁰ Karl Barth, "The Doctrine of God," *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. II.i, 597-607.

²¹¹ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 3.

and there is no real agreement on the meaning of the term. Sometimes the current cultural situation may even be referred to as *postmodern*.

Vanhoozer writes, “Yet in the past twenty years or so *postmodernity* has become a concept that is as indispensable for understanding contemporary Western thought and culture as *modernity* has been for understanding the past three hundred years.”²¹² Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke too express, “...vast array of interpreters has attempted to comprehend and appropriate *postmodern* thought. In the context of this lack of clarity about the *postmodern* phenomenon, the term has come to signify widely divergent hopes and concerns among those who are attempting to address the emerging cultural and intellectual shift implied by the term.”²¹³

Postmodern is primarily a western phenomenon and usually means against or beyond *modernism*. It is western because the *modern* view of the world arose from within western culture. Therefore, *postmodern* is a movement which has arisen in reaction to the *modernism* of the western civilization, and yet it is also part of the broader change going on in the world today. For Steven Connor, *postmodernism* is the end of *modernism*. He writes, “One might almost say that the derivative character of *postmodernism*, the name of which indicates that it comes after something else – *modernism*, *modernity*, or the *modern* – guarantees it an extended tenure that the naming of itself as an *ex nihilo* beginning might not.”²¹⁴

²¹² Ibid., xiii.

²¹³ Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 18-19.

²¹⁴ Steven Connor, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 1.

Vanhoozer writes, “Some see the *post modern* as “*most modern*,” as the imploding of modernity the implicit paradox of *modernity* made explicit. On this view, *postmodernity*, is simply *modernity* in its death-throes.”²¹⁵ But for others, *postmodernism* is the rejection of what is *modern*. Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke claim, “Two aspects of the *postmodern* ethos are especially important for theological method: the fundamental critique and rejection of *modernity*, and the attempt to live and think in a realm of chastened rationality characterized by the demise of *modern* epistemological foundationalism.”²¹⁶ Vanhoozer puts it this way:

To be postmodern is to signal one’s dissatisfaction with at least some aspect of modernity. It is to harbour a revolutionary impulse: the impulse to do things differently. ...Postmodern thinkers have overturned the tables of the knowledge-changers in the university, the temple of modernity, and have driven out the foundationalists. ... Postmodern perhaps is best construed as an “exodus” from the constraints of modernity.²¹⁷

1.12.2. The Postmodern Condition and Theological Reflection

The postmodern condition can best be understood in terms of three major characteristics: 1. *Rejection of Metanarratives*, 2. *Rejection of Foundationalism* and 3. *Process of Deconstruction*.

1.12.2.1. Rejection of Metanarratives

The postmodernist rejects the idea of the metanarrative, which in the past was recognised as definitive. What they consider today is the pluralism of values and value systems, with each one competing against the others. Smith writes, “Postmodernity can be

²¹⁵ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ed., *The Cambridge Companion*, 8.

²¹⁶ Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 19.

²¹⁷ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ed., *The Cambridge Companion*, xiii-xiv.

understood as the erosion of confidence in the rational as sole guarantor and deliverer of truth, coupled with a deep suspicion of science- particularly modern science pretentious claims to an ultimate theory of everything.”²¹⁸ Noting a strict difference between modern knowledge and postmodern thinking Vanhoozer writes:

Modern discourses like science appeal to metanarratives that legitimate it by, for example, telling a story of how Enlightenment thinkers overcome ignorance and superstition thanks to critical methods, or how modern science has resulted in greater health and wealth for humanity.... Postmodernity cuts metanarratives down to size and sees them for what they are: *mere narratives*.... The mark of the postmodern condition of knowledge, then, is a move away from the authority of universal science towards narratives of local knowledge.²¹⁹

Postmodernism has suspicion or disbelief in ‘big stories.’ If that is so, and Christian faith, as informed by Scripture, is such a metanarrative, Metanarrative in French is translated as *grand recit*, meaning ‘big story’, then Christianity stands antithetical to postmodernism. Vanhoozer poses a more direct question to Lyotard²²⁰ by declaring:

Eating from the postmodern tree of knowledge occasions a new ‘fall’ and loss of innocence....How, then are we to make judgements as to true and false, right and wrong?” Lyotard acknowledges that the central issue of postmodernity is the possibility of ethics, that is, right action. Lyotard, for his part, is content to live with ‘little narratives.’ Yet there are many narratives, and this plurality is what makes the postmodern condition one of legitimate crises: whose story, whose interpretation, whose authority, whose criteria counts, and why?²²¹

At this point Smith comes to Lyotard’s rescue and declares:

What is at stake for Lyotard is not the scope of these narratives but the nature of the claims they make.... For Lyotard, metanarratives are a distinctly modern phenomenon: they are stories that not only tell grand

²¹⁸ James K.A. Smith, *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism? Taking Derrida, Lyotard and Foucault to Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 62.

²¹⁹ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ed., *The Cambridge Companion*, 9-10.

²²⁰ Jean- Francois Lyotard claimed that postmodernism is “incredulity towards metanarratives.”

²²¹ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ed., *The Cambridge Companion*, 10.

stories but also claim to be able to legitimate or prove that story's claim by an appeal to universal reason... thus for Lyotard, the purveyor of metanarratives would be not the religious believers or prophets but rather the enlightened man of science.²²²

In other words, science cannot be the ruler who sets the law for what is counted as truth, therefore Smith claims that we need not apologise for faith and we can be unapologetic in our *kerygmatic* declaration of the gospel story. God's main vehicle for revelation is a story unfolded within the Bible. Scripture is still central for the church today, for the stories in it describe our faith. This communicative character of our faith should touch not only our declaration of faith and our witnessing, but also our worship and spiritual growth. The postmodern church must recognise that its main responsibility is to live the story for the world. We do not just tell stories, but we must live them out.²²³

For Michael Horton, the story of the Bible is not a metanarrative but a meganarrative – a big story. He writes:

All of our worldviews are stories. Christianity does not claim to have escaped this fact. The prophets and apostles were fully conscious of the fact that they were interpreting reality within the framework of a particular narrative of creation, fall, redemption and consummation, as told to a particular people (Israel) for the benefit of the world. The biblical faith claims that its story is the one that God is telling, which relates and judges the other stories about God, us and the world. ... The prophets and apostles did not believe that God's mighty acts in history (meganarratives) were dispensable myths that represented universal truths (metanarratives). For them the big story did not point to something else beyond it but was itself the point. ... God's mighty acts in history are not myths that symbolize timeless truths; they create the unfolding plot within which our lives and destinies find the proper coordinates.²²⁴

²²² James K.A. Smith, 64-65.

²²³ James K.A. Smith, 66-79.

²²⁴ Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith, A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publications, 2011), 16-17.

Michael Horton further claims that at the heart of the Christian narratives is the good news of God's saving love and mercy in Jesus Christ. "It is the story that interprets all other stories and the lead character is Lord of Lords."²²⁵ However, he claims that:

Christian stories differ from such metanarratives in origin and in legitimization, having its origin in revelation, and not philosophy. The Christian metanarrative is a true myth which happened in a particular date, in a particular place, followed by definable historical consequences. The prophets, apostles and the evangelists of the Bible claimed that this was God's story and they were eyewitnesses to it and now became the appointed messengers who have received God's own interpretation of those acts.²²⁶

The Christian faith is indeed an unfolding drama. Michael Horton writes:

Christian faith is a counterdrama to all of the meganarratives and metanarratives of this passing age- ancient, medieval, modern and postmodern. It speaks of the triune God who existed eternally before creation and of ourselves as characters in his unfolding plot. Created in God's image yet fallen into sin, we have our identity shaped by the movement of this dramatic story from promise to fulfilment in Jesus Christ. This drama also has its powerful props, such as preaching, baptism and the Supper- the means by which we are no longer spectators but are actually included in the cast.²²⁷

1.12.2.2. Rejection of Foundationalism

In the modern era, the search for knowledge was hugely influenced by the Enlightenment, with foundationalism at its core. Stanley Grenz and John Franke in their book *Beyond Foundationalism* explain that, "The goal of the foundationalist agenda is the discovery of an approach to knowledge that will provide rational human beings with absolute, incontestable certainty regarding the truthfulness of their beliefs. These beliefs or first principles must be universal, objective and discernable to any rational person."²²⁸

²²⁵ Ibid., 18.

²²⁶ Ibid., 18.

²²⁷ Ibid., 19.

²²⁸ Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 23.

According to foundationalism, true knowledge consists of (a) self-evident axioms and (b) conclusions that are logically deduced from these axioms. Post-foundationalism denies that knowledge has this structure, and instead suggest that knowledge is more like a network of beliefs.

Post modernists reject this foundationalism that basically says, “Come let us reason together” (based on our shared experiences and shared logical categories). It is not that the post modernists are against rational thought. In Vanhoozer’s terms, they do not reject “reason” but “Reason”. He writes, “Post modern denies the notion of universal rationality: reason is rather a contextual and relative affair. What counts as rational is relative to the prevailing narrative in a society or institution. ... Reason is always situated within particular narratives, traditions, institutions and practices. This situatedness conditions what people deem rational.”²²⁹

The postmodern theologians believed that theology must take seriously this critique of Enlightenment foundationalism and must formulate an alternative theological methodology. Grenz and John Franke offer a groundbreaking new approach to theology in the postmodern age. They write, “Theology that seeks to take seriously postmodern sensitivities views itself as conversation. This theological construction may be characterised as an ongoing conversation we share as participants in the faith community as to the meaning of the symbols through which we express our understanding of the world we inhabit.”²³⁰ They propose a new methodology that involves the interaction between the

²²⁹ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ed., *The Cambridge Companion*, 10.

²³⁰ Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 24.

Spirit 's voice through the text of the Bible; a traditional interpretation; and theological reflection. They write:

The normative authority for Christian theology, life and practice is the Spirit speaking through scripture. The Bible serves as the norming norm in theology in that it functions as the instrumentality of the Spirit, in that the Spirit appropriates the Biblical text in order to address the Christian community through the ages. This address can take several forms, in keeping with the manifold diversity of writings that constitute the Bible. Like Christians everywhere, we read the Biblical text today conscious that we are part of an ongoing listening community and therefore that we are participants in a hermeneutical trajectory.²³¹

Accentuating the cultural context in their methodology they write, "The ultimate authority in the church is the Spirit speaking through scripture, the Spirit's speaking through the scripture is always a contextual speaking; it always comes to its hearer within a specific historical-cultural context. Thus, the cultural context is crucial to the hermeneutical task."²³² They finally conclude by proposing a theology which is Trinitarian in structure, communitarian in focus, and eschatological in orientation. They write:

A nonfoundationalist theological method leads to the conclusion that ultimately all theology is as the postmodern condition suggests 'local' or 'specific.' It is the conversation of a particular group in a particular moment of their ongoing experience in the world. Despite the specificity of all theology, these various local theologies share in common a 'family resemblance' or a similar pattern, shape, or style that comprises them as authentically Christian theology.²³³

The commonality they mean is that, "A theology that is truly Christian is Trinitarian in structure (or content), communitarian in focus, and eschatological in orientation."²³⁴ Doing theology in a postmodern age, Vanhoozer suggests that Postmodern Theology

²³¹ Ibid., 24.

²³² Ibid., 25.

²³³ Ibid., 25.

²³⁴ Ibid., 25.

should focus on postmodern as the condition of theology. He writes, “The suggestion, therefore, is to situate modernity and postmodernity alike within the story of what relates both what God is doing in the world through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit and what the world is doing in response. Postmodernity here appears as a proper theological condition.”²³⁵

He further writes, “We have learned from the postmoderns that knowledge is not disembodied. On this point, postmodernity and incarnational Christian faith are agreed. What is needed therefore is a translation of the Gospel that goes beyond conveying propositions – a translation that would concretize the gospel in individual and communal shapes and living.”²³⁶

1.12.2.3. Process of Deconstruction

James K.A. Smith (Smith) writes, “If postmodernism has anything close to a brand name, it is deconstruction, and if it has anything like a celebrity face, it is the dark face of a Parisian transplanted from North Africa: the face of Jacques Derrida.”²³⁷

Deconstruction when first introduced was often used simply as a synonym for destruction or criticism. However, Smith defends Derrida by writing, “When Derrida introduced the term in the late 1960s, he did not intend it as a primarily negative notion, even if he did intend it as a kind of criticism. For Derrida language is the necessary filter through which the world comes to us. All of us interpret our world on the basis of language

²³⁵ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ed., *The Cambridge Companion*, 21.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.

²³⁷ James K.A. Smith, *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism*, 38.

thus he coins this statement, *'There is nothing outside the text.'*²³⁸ Smith asserts that the statement, *'There is nothing outside the text,'* sounds as if Derrida is claiming that the whole world is a kind of book and nothing else. In other word there are no material things, only ideas in the mind of God. Therefore, many took him as a linguistic idealist and Christians cannot accept such an idea, as Smith puts it, for two reasons: "First, if there is nothing outside the text, then a transcendent Creator who is distinct from any prior to the world could not exist. Second, if there is nothing outside the text, then it would seem that what the Bible (admittedly a text) talks about – what it refers to – is not real reducing Christianity just to a mere fiction."²³⁹ However, Smith defends him and explains:

When Derrida says that we can't get beyond or behind the text to a referent (or signified) that is outside language, he means this in a radical way....he doesn't mean that we can just choose to act as if Mama doesn't exist and play with the text without caring about what it really refers to. That there is nothing outside the text is not a voluntary condition that we can choose to affect. Second, when he claims that there is nothing outside the text, this is simply because we have access to their so-called 'real' existence only in the text and we have neither any means of altering this, nor any right to neglect this limitation.²⁴⁰

Again, if we consider "there is nothing outside the text" means that everything is interpretation, then the gospel would be only interpretation. That means there might be other interpretations too, therefore it cannot be certain that the gospel is true. However, Smith argues that, "if something is a matter of interpretation this does not mean that an interpretation cannot be true or a good interpretation."²⁴¹ In other words, "interpretation makes the truth more clear and it does not dilute the essence of it either. When there is

²³⁸ Ibid., 38.

²³⁹ Ibid., 38.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 38-39

²⁴¹ Ibid., 44.

plurality of interpretations, it helps us to see the same thing from different angles and locations.”²⁴²

Smith further claims that “Derrida also discusses the role of the community in interpretation. Context changes as time and place change, generating different meaning and interpretation. Here many concluded that the text and events can be played with and any meaning can be made as it goes along.”²⁴³ However, Smith argues that “this play of interpretation does not mean that all these interpretations are good or true. Deconstruction does not entail that one can say just anything at all about a text; it is not a celebration of sheer indeterminacy. Here, Derrida emphasises a proposal for a community of enterprise who in agreement make a consensus for the best interpretations of a text, thing or event and therefore the communities fix context, and context determines meaning.”²⁴⁴ Thus, for Smith this role of community is central to the interpretation of scripture. If we are to see the world through the Word, then Smith writes:

If all the world is a text to be interpreted, then for the church the narratives of the Scriptures is what should govern our perception of the world. We should see the world through the Word. In this sense, then Derrida’s claim could be resonant with the Reformers claim of *sola scriptura*, which simply emphasises the priority of God’s special revelation for our understanding of the world and making our way in it. To say ‘there is nothing outside the text’ then, is to emphasise that there is not a single square inch of our experience of the world that should not be governed by the revelation of God in the Scriptures.²⁴⁵

Barend Kamphuis proposes a search for a new hermeneutical interpretation tool for this issue facing the postmodern context and writes, “The contemporary hermeneutics is

²⁴² Ibid., 50.

²⁴³ Ibid., 53

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 53.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 55.

searching for a language that fits the gospel in the present time – language that does justice to the power of Jesus’ word. Hermeneutics is about the question ‘to be or not to be’ for the church in our time. The meaning of theology as a whole is at stake.”²⁴⁶ In line with the proposition of Smith he affirms that the text is central for shaping the interpretation of the world. Interpretation is governed by context and the interpretative community in a specific time and place. Bringing the discussion back to the main points of Christ’s love and scripture as God’s revelation, Kamphuis writes:

For we confess in dogma the doctrine of Holy Scripture. That is the doctrine which is revealed to us. But although it is revealed, this doctrine remains a mystery to us: ‘O the depths of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!’” (Rom. 11:33). We need each other to understand more of it. Only with all the saints do we learn to comprehend the love of Christ in all its dimensions (Eph. 3:18–19). But even then we cannot come further than a stammering, a speaking in fragments and points of view. It is not given to us to have an overview of the whole. And just because of this we have to leave room for each other.²⁴⁷

He further expresses that God’s revelation comes to us in metaphorical language.

He writes:

God accommodates himself to our experience and our understanding by revealing the gospel in images that are borrowed from our reality. That means that everything we know from the gospel has the form of metaphors. In a metaphor a word that belongs to one context is used for another context. God uses words, images, and descriptions from contexts that we know, to reveal to us the unsearchable mystery of the gospel. We from our side cannot do anything else than stick to these metaphors. We may find our comfort in the salvation through the cross of Jesus Christ, we may sing about it, fortunately we may also dogmatize about it, trying to speak and think systematically about it, but we can never escape this metaphorical language. We cannot speak about God’s revelation using a scholarly language in which we have left behind us all figurative language. We always

²⁴⁶ Barend Kamphuis, “The Hermeneutics of Dogma,” *Correctly Handling the Word of Truth*, edited by Mees te Velde and Gerhard H. Visscher (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2014), 63.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 70.

use images from our context to speak about what goes far beyond our experience and understanding.²⁴⁸

Finally, he states that if we are to see the Holy Scripture more clearly, we need to see it through the spectacles of faith. He writes, “The clarity or perspicuity of Holy Scripture is a matter of faith. And faith is being certain of what we do not see (Heb. 11.1)... Many words of the Bible may be dark for us, and however long we study them, they will remain dark. But we believe that the Word of God is “a light shining in the dark place” (2 Peter 1:19; 1 John 1:5)...only by faith can we see the light shining.”²⁴⁹ Further he writes, “The light does not shine only for me, but for everyone who reads the Bible in faith. ...The light of the Word is so powerful that it shines in many dark places. I have learned to be more respectful of other opinions and theologies because I believe that God’s Word is clear.”²⁵⁰ When he wrote *God’s Word is pure but not adequate*, he actually meant that God is always incomprehensible and He is always greater than His revelation. He says, “The Bible is clear precisely in its revelation of the hiddenness of God.”²⁵¹

1.13. Omnipotence of God in Postmodern Reformed Theology

The postmodern reformed theologians use the Latin phrase *Semper Reformanda* to grapple with the questions and issues facing the church today. This Reformed principle suggests that the Reformed theology is always reforming according to the word of God bearing witness to the eternal gospel truth in this changing world of various cultural settings and time. The reforming principle proposes that no perspective, be it that of an individual

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 72.

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 80-81.

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 81.

²⁵¹ Ibid.

or a particular community or a theological tradition, is adequate to do full justice to the truth of God's revelation in Christ.

Dolf te Velde in the conclusion of his book *Paths Beyond Tracing Out* admits that the reality of God always exceeds our concepts and arguments. He writes, "Time and again, we have seen in the analysis of pieces from the doctrine of God that this reality breaks through our given framework of thought and opens new possibilities of thinking."²⁵² Michael Horton affirms that God surpasses us in His existence of knowledge. He writes, "Only God sees reality in independent objectivity. God alone knows things as they really are in themselves...; we know the world only as participants, never a detached observer."²⁵³ Affirming the incomprehensibility of the mystery of God, Barend Kamphuis concluded in "Hermeneutics of Dogma" by writing, "I have to confess that God is always too great for me to understand."²⁵⁴

With this admission, the postmodern reformed theologians moved one step forward to give respect even to other schools of thinking and be mindful of the changing times and the variety of context in doing reformed theology. They acknowledged that the light of the Word of God would also shine in other places. Barend Kamphuis writes, "If you believe in the clarity of Holy Scripture, you always have to listen to other people who listen to the same Word."²⁵⁵

²⁵² Dolf te Velde, *Paths Beyond Tracing Out* (Delft: Eburon, 2010), 653-654.

²⁵³ Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 78.

²⁵⁴ Barend Kamphuis, "The Hermeneutics of Dogma," 81.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 81.

1.13.1. Michael Horton on the Omnipotence of God

When explaining the omnipotence of God, Michael Horton paints every attribute of God as interconnected and complementary, even things that are different. He says if they are separated, they might lose their power. He writes, “God always exercises His power in wisdom, knowledge and truth. In fact, God is not able to exercise His power in a manner that is inconsistent with any of his other attributes.”²⁵⁶ The debate over whether divine freedom or human freedom has more power over the other has been going on for ages.

Michael Horton writes:

The reason that creatures possess any power and freedom at all is that they are created in the image of God, whose sovereignty is qualitatively distinct and unique. Instead of being grateful for this vast creaturely liberty, Satan and human beings since the fall have longed for an independent and autonomous freedom grounded only in themselves. However, this craving to transcend creaturely existence is unreasonable. After all, the earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof (Psalm 24:1). God’s omnipotence is not set over against our freedom but is its necessary precondition. Because God is freedom, such a thing as freedom exists and can be communicated to us in a creaturely mode.²⁵⁷

God’s sovereignty and human responsibility are perfectly consistent. Michael

Horton continues:

Humans do not have less power than God, but all of the power that is essential to their created nature. The ‘freedom pie’ is God’s. He does not surrender pieces but gives us our own pie that is a finite analogy of His own. In Him we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28). As God’s image bearers, we reflect God’s glory, but God does not give His own glory to a creature (Isa. 48:11).²⁵⁸ He further writes, “God is a producer, not a consumer of our creaturely freedom, and his presence fills our creaturely room with the air of liberty. The creaturely freedom has its inexhaustible

²⁵⁶ Michael Horton., *The Christian Faith*, 260.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 261.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

source (in Him) in abundance rather than lack, generosity rather than a rationing or negotiation of wills.”²⁵⁹

Michael Horton is of the view that:

God’s knowledge, wisdom and power are inseparable from His goodness. God’s infinite goodness is the source of all creaturely imitations. Precisely because God does not depend on the world, his goodness is never threatened. God is good toward all He has made, even His enemies (Ps. 145:9, 15-16; Mt. 5:45). He can afford to be because He is God with or without them.²⁶⁰ Horton also states, “God’s goodness is evident in creation and providence but the clearest evidence of the complete consistency between God’s goodness and His sovereignty, justice, wrath, and righteousness is Christ’s cross.”²⁶¹

Michael Horton believes God even has the last word over the evil powers. He

writes:

He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might He increases strength (Isa. 40:22; 23, 29). Evil powers never have the last word, because although God enters into the matrix of creaturely powers, He is never simply one player among others. God remains qualitatively and not just quantitatively distinct from creation – and this is good news for those to whom the future seems destined to be controlled by oppressors.²⁶²

Michael Horton also claims that the world is totally dependent on God for its

existence. He further continues:

This is God’s free decision to become the lead character in His own historical drama with creation. Even in the incarnation, the eternal Son assumed our humanity and not vice versa. If God were not free from creation, we might pray *for* Him, but not pray *to* Him. We would have no confidence that He could overcome evil or rescue us from death. The God of the scriptures is essentially independent yet freely chooses to bring creatures into fellowship and communion with Himself.²⁶³ At the cross, God did not affirm death and suffering, rather, He conquered it. He did not transform evil into good but vanquished evil forever. Precisely because

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 262.

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 265.

²⁶¹ Ibid., 265-266.

²⁶² Ibid., 233.

²⁶³ Ibid., 234-235.

suffering is not immanent to God's being, He can and will fulfil His promise to His suffering people that he 'will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying... (Rev. 21:4). ... God cannot be overwhelmed by suffering and He acts out of omnipotent, omniscient, and all-wise love.²⁶⁴

1.14. Specific Problems with the Omnipotence of God

1.14.1. Logic and the Question of Power

In this section we will look at some specific questions raised by philosophers and theologians when discussing omnipotence. Is God bound by the laws of logic? Do the rules of logic limit what God can do, and if so, is this a genuine limitation of God?

One important question is, "Can God create a stone so large that He cannot lift it? If he cannot, then there is something he cannot do, namely, make such a stone. If He can, there is also something he cannot do, namely, lift such a stone. Either way, there is something God cannot do. Therefore, He is not all-powerful or almighty. Erickson identifies three answers to this question:

First: *The internal contradiction solution.* This approach claims that this is a contradictory idea. Then the question arises, "Is God capable of doing contradictory things, or defying the law of logic?" The answer is, "No." Self-contradictory acts are not a proper object of power. So God is unable to do a self-contradictory act, but the incapability to do this is not a real lack at all.²⁶⁵

Second: *The conditional omnipotence solution.* This approach says that "God can at some point create a stone too large for Himself to lift. He need not actually choose to

²⁶⁴ Ibid., 252.

²⁶⁵ Millard J. Erickson, *God the Father Almighty*, 172.

make such a stone, however. He may simply abstain from such an action. As long as He never exercises this ability, He remains omnipotent.”²⁶⁶

Third: The meaningless description solution. This approach claims that the statement, “x cannot create a stone which x cannot lift” actually means, “If x can create a stone, then x can lift it.”²⁶⁷ Another way of asking the question is, “Can the Omnipotent God contradict Himself or negate Himself or frustrate Himself?” Erickson writes, “That is an interesting but unverifiable sort of statement. Such an action would not seem to be a proper object of power. On either of these approaches the paradox of the stone is actually a pseudo problem.”²⁶⁸

C.S. Lewis confirms that self-contradictory statements are absolutely impossible. He says, “The absolutely impossible may also be called the intrinsically impossible because it carries its impossibility within itself, instead of borrowing from others. Then he goes on to write, “... Omnipotence means power to do the intrinsically possible, not to do the intrinsically impossible. You may attribute miracle to Him, but not nonsense.”²⁶⁹

Another relevant question is, “Can God do that which is logically contradictory, for example, can He in His omnipotent nature be able to construct a square circle?” One can argue that this is not a violation of omnipotence because those aren’t really things; those are just absurd combinations of words. Therefore, lacking the ability to do the self-contradictory is not a threat to omnipotence.

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 172.

²⁶⁷ Ibid., 172.

²⁶⁸ Ibid., 173-174

²⁶⁹ C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 27-28.

However, another question arises here: “Is God bound by Logic?” Here theologians would argue that omnipotence does not mean God can do absolutely anything/everything. There are certainly things in the Bible that God cannot do. For instance, van den Brink mentions that, “He cannot swear by someone higher than Himself (Heb. 6:13); He cannot lie (Heb. 6:18); He cannot deny Himself (II Tim. 2:13); and He cannot be tempted by evil (Jas. 1:13).

In all these cases we are not dealing with acts that are in themselves logically impossible. God cannot perform them because they are contrary to His being and character.”²⁷⁰ Erickson writes:

God’s inability to do the self-contradictory is not an actual instance of weakness, especially if the laws of logic are not thought of as something external to God, to which He must conform, but as part of His very nature. This simply says that God cannot frustrate himself. He is not a God of nonsense. Because He is as He is, believers can confidently place their trust in Him.²⁷¹

Another question regarding God’s omnipotence is, “Can God sin?” God cannot sin because it would be a logical contradiction for a holy Being to do evil. God is the greatest imaginable Being, therefore He is perfect, which includes being morally perfect. Erickson writes:

Sometimes we say something like, ‘He just doesn’t have it in him to do that.’ This however is not a weakness on the part of the person, but a moral strength. So it is with God. He may have all of the abilities, the power, skill, and so on, to do the acts that compromise sin, but doing them is not consistent with the kind of person He is. ... For Him to be God and unable to sin is not a weakness, but strength. Goodness is a positive force; sin is not.²⁷²

²⁷⁰ Gijsbert van den Brink, *Almighty God*, 144.

²⁷¹ Millard J. Erickson, *God the Father Almighty*, 176.

²⁷² *Ibid.*, 178-179.

Our last question here is, “Can God create a being He subsequently cannot control?”

Erickson writes:

Whether an omnipotent being, as omnipotent, can create beings over which He has no subsequent control will depend on the definition of control being used. It would seem that there is no essential compromise of God’s power if he had the power to create or not to create such a being and has the power to rescind that decision, or at least to nullify its effects. This would be a voluntary limitation of His omnipotence, not greatly unlike that involved in the incarnation. But if one holds that God has that power but did not actually use it, in other words, did not make creatures He cannot control, then omnipotence would seem to be in no way compromised.²⁷³

This issue is further discussed below in answering the question of “*Divine Omnipotence and Human Freedom.*”

1.14.2. Divine Omnipotence and Human Freedom

One of the most important features of God as *omnipotent* is God’s universal rule over the world and His sovereign governing of all of history. However, this idea seems to contradict the other Christian belief that human beings are created as persons with a decent amount of freedom and moral responsibility. Is it possible to combine these claims in a rational way? Te Velde believes so. He says, “The radical solution to the dilemma is to interpret God’s almightiness as ‘omni-determination’: solely God’s will and power are responsible for all states of affairs. The only possible understanding of human freedom here is the compatibilist: man voluntarily does what God determines him to do.”²⁷⁴

Van den Brink makes a strong observation on the omni-determinationist view.; He agrees with their idea, but finds it inadequate. He mentions that, “...according to this

²⁷³ Ibid., 180.

²⁷⁴ Dolf te Velde, *Paths Beyond Tracing Out*, 522.

notion, freedom is compatible with determination, because it does not consist in the possibility to act contrary with those determining causes. Acting voluntarily is not only a necessary but a sufficient condition for acting freely. One is not forced to act against his will. Thus, it shows that in a compatibilist view of freedom, human freedom and divine all-determination are compatible.”²⁷⁵

When the determinists try to make the case that God’s all-decisiveness is compatible with the libertarians’ view of freedom,²⁷⁶ van den Brink suggests a “contra-causal” freedom to act otherwise. He writes, “...acting voluntarily is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition of acting freely. ... No matter how many causes are pressing on me to perform a certain action, only if they leave me the choice of not performing it am I sufficiently free with regard to that action.”²⁷⁷

It may not be a contradiction to say God is willing to bring about a certain plan or perhaps not bring about the plan. Either way, it seems that humans can exercise their power to refrain from cooperating. However, van den Brink argues that, “... if God grants humans such freedom with regard to a certain action, He logically cannot at the same time guarantee the outcome.”²⁷⁸ So, van den Brink offers a solution where God has all power, but qualifies this by stating that God self-limits his own use of this power. Van den Brink says, “God can choose either to act through a free human action or to act solely, without interceding human actions.”²⁷⁹

²⁷⁵ Gijbert van den Brink, *Almighty God*, 211.

²⁷⁶ Libertarians believe freedom is essential for moral responsibility. If our choice is determined by anything, it cannot be called a free choice, even pre-determination by God.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 212.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 212.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 224-225.

Another incompatibility of almightiness and freedom arises with the view that human beings must be endowed with freedom of choice; otherwise it would be wrong to hold them morally responsible for their actions. The problem with this view is that first, “it gives credit to human persons rather than to God for salvation.”²⁸⁰ Second, “it makes salvation dependent upon the decisions and steadfastness of sinful, fickle-minded human beings.”²⁸¹ Third, “it conflicts with both the claim of revelation and the experience of many believers that faith is a sheer gift of God, wholly a matter of grace.”²⁸²

However, van den Brink writes, “If we suppose that people only come to faith if God causally brings about their act(s) of faith by overpowering their free choice, the necessary consequence is that if people do not come to faith they are not responsible for this. Since faith can only be God’s doing, they simply cannot help it. And this again runs counter to what Christian theists are committed to hold.”²⁸³ In such a dilemma, van den Brink argues that, sometimes, seeming contradictions can be solved by looking from different perspectives. He explains by an experiment:

If we hold up a finger and a thumb at the same distance from our face, one 10 or 15cm behind the other, we see both in line with each other. But if we close one eye in turn, we see the finger to the left and right side of the thumb respectively (or in reverse). As soon as we open both eyes, however, we see-in depth a single finger, displaced from the thumb in a third dimension. This latter experience integrates at another level the paradoxical experiences of looking at finger and thumb with only one eye, and shows that these are complementary rather than logically contradictory.²⁸⁴

²⁸⁰ Ibid, 226.

²⁸¹ Ibid.

²⁸² Ibid.

²⁸³ Ibid., 226.

²⁸⁴ Ibid., 227.

However, according to te Velde, viewing things from different perspectives requires both mental flexibility, and a person's willingness to change their "perceptual set" and feelings.²⁸⁵ Here, van den Brink makes a comparison with a beggar. He writes:

Imagine a beggar who lives in extremely miserable circumstances, and who is offered a gift by a rich benefactor great enough to make him live without material worries for the rest of his life. Suppose that the beggar hates his poverty, and therefore accepts the gift." Van den Brink explains that since the beggar has accepted the gift, the beggar is definitely involved in the event. His accepting the gift is his own action, not the action of the gift-giver. Even so, it makes perfect sense that the credit for this turn-about goes only to the giver of the gift. It would be ridiculous for the beggar to take credit for himself because just accepting of the gift is in no one's mind his own doing. On the other hand, if he had refused the gift, only he would be responsible for that.²⁸⁶

Commenting on the beggar comparison, te Velde says:

It is understood that God gives us an infinite gift that changes our lives. If we do not accept it, we do not receive it and we ourselves are responsible for missing the gift. If we do accept the gift, God is still fully responsible for the whole event. Van den Brink's beggar perspective does not draw on modern autonomy nor does it give up the essential freedom of man, and it has a rich tradition in Christian history.²⁸⁷

Michael Horton is of the view that created beings have power and freedom because God created them in His own image. The omnipotence of God is a necessary precondition to human freedom. Freedom exists in God and is communicated to us in a creaturely mode. Sovereignty of God and the responsibility of the humans are perfectly consistent. Humans are given all of the power that is essential to their created nature. The ultimate liberty is in the hand of God. He does not surrender his power but gives us our own power that is a

²⁸⁵ Dolf te Velde, *Paths Beyond Tracing Out*, 522.

²⁸⁶ Gijsbert van den Brink, *Almighty God*, 237-238.

²⁸⁷ Dolf te Velde, *Paths Beyond Tracing Out*, 523.

finite analogy of His own. He is the source of that power. The creaturely freedom that humans possess has its infinite source in Him.²⁸⁸

1.14.3. Divine Omnipotence and the Problem of Suffering and Evil

For many people, the presence of evil and suffering in the world poses the biggest problem with belief in a good, omnipotent God. Van den Brink calls it, "... the most incisive and enduring challenge to the Christian doctrine of Divine Omnipotence. Perhaps not just omnipotence but the very existence of God seems to be at stake."²⁸⁹ How do people look at suffering and evil? According to Timothy Keller, "Some find it to be a philosophical problem, calling into question the very existence of God. For others it is an intensely personal issue. They don't care about the abstract question of whether God exists or not – they refuse to trust or believe in any God who allows history and life to proceed as it has."²⁹⁰ Still, the deep question for many is, "How can a good and powerful God allow pointless evil in this world?"

Timothy Keller writes, "Just because you can't see or imagine a good reason why God might allow something to happen doesn't mean there can't be one."²⁹¹ C. S. Lewis raises the question, "If a good God made the world, why has it gone wrong?" His argument was that the universe seems so cruel and unjust that if there were a God, the world should be a better place. However, he later understood that suffering offers a better argument *for* God's existence than one *against* it. He writes:

²⁸⁸ Michael Horton., *The Christian Faith*, 261-262.

²⁸⁹ Gijbert van den Brink, *Almighty God*, 240.

²⁹⁰ Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Scepticism* (New York: Penguin Group, 2008), 22.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 23.

My argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I got this idea of “just” and “unjust”? A man does not call a line crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line. What was I comparing this universe with when I called it unjust? If the whole show was bad and senseless from A to Z, so to speak, why did I, who was supposed to be part of the show, find myself in such violent reaction against it? ... Of course, I could have given up my idea of justice by saying it was nothing but a private idea of my own. But if I did that, then my argument against God collapsed too—for the argument depended on saying that the world was really unjust, not simply that it did not happen to please my private fancies. Thus in the very act of trying to prove that God did not exist – in other words, that the whole of reality was senseless – I found I was forced to assume that one part of reality – namely my idea of justice – was full of sense. Consequently, atheism turns out to be too simple.²⁹²

Timothy Keller further mentions that “The problem of tragedy, suffering and injustice is a problem for everyone. It is at least as big a problem for non-belief in God as for belief. It is therefore a mistake, though an understandable one, to think that if you abandon belief in God it somehow makes the problem of evil easier to handle.”²⁹³ Timothy Keller also claims, “With time and perspective most of us can see good reason for at least some of the tragedy and pain that occurs in life. Why couldn’t it be possible that, from God’s vantage point, there are good reasons for all of them?”²⁹⁴

Van den Brink points out that some evil acts are justified because doing something better seems impossible, or because the evil act keeps something worse from happening. He writes, “Dentists may inflict some pain upon their patients in order to guarantee the greater good of a healthy set of teeth. ... We don’t blame surgeons for the amputation of a child’s leg if this operation was necessary in order to avoid death from cancer....If God has

²⁹² C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Great Britain: Fontana Books, 1955), 41-42.

²⁹³ Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God*, 27.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.

a morally sufficient reason for permitting or bringing about evil and suffering, nothing is wrong....”²⁹⁵

However, not all evils we experience are needed by God to fulfil His purpose. Van den Brink further writes, “Not every suffering in the world serves a greater good. Indeed, it belongs to the very nature of genuine evil that it is not good for anything and therefore should not have happened. ...Although some evils are surely willed by God as the necessary means to achieve some higher goal, it is not the case that all evils can be explained in this way.”²⁹⁶

Does this mean that God has willed sin? Van den Brink answers:

On the one hand, gratuitous evil is against God’s will; He does not want or cause it. ... On the other hand, God does not prevent gratuitous evil, because what He does will is that gratuitous evil is possible; for only in this way can God secure the morally responsible character of creaturely life and action. Clearly, these two kinds of will in God are not contradictory, but perfectly compatible.”²⁹⁷

This answer is helpful in dealing with the problem of moral evil, however we still need to deal with the problem of natural evil. Here, van den Brink diverges from the traditional idea in philosophy of omnipotence and proposes almightiness over omnipotence. He writes:

First, almightiness includes the ability to give up part of one’s power, or rather to refrain from exercising part of one’s power. It is this kind of self-imparted limitation of power which plays a crucial role in the free will defense, for what God does in creating free persons is exactly giving up part of His power in order to make room for their free decisions. Second, we

²⁹⁵ Gijsbert van den Brink, *Almighty God*, 248.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 250.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 253.

have seen that almightiness does not include the ability to bring about literally all logically possible states of affairs.²⁹⁸

He further writes, “In the Bible it is abundantly clear from the way in which God addresses Himself to human beings...that in a sense He has made Himself dependent upon their choices.... God has endowed human beings with freedom and responsibility....”²⁹⁹ By doing this, God did not give up His divine sovereignty. He still could choose not to or perhaps might decide to sometimes overrule the creatures’ freedom.³⁰⁰ Some may think for every story where evil turns out for good there are many more where there is no ‘silver lining’. Or, that even if suffering and evil don’t disprove God, it does not let God off the hook for the world’s evil and suffering. To this, Timothy Keller writes:

Though Christianity does not provide the reason for each experience of pain, it provides deep resources for actually facing suffering with hope and courage rather than bitterness and despair. The Christian God in Jesus Christ came to earth to deliberately put Himself on the hook of human suffering. His suffering and death on the cross is a deep consolation and strength for us to face the brutal realities of life on earth. And we can rest assured that He is with us even in our worst suffering. However, it is not just His suffering and death but His resurrection that gives us hope that our suffering is not in vain. His resurrection assures us that the human’s suffering and death lead them to new life and the injustice received lead to a greater justice.³⁰¹

From the point of view of faith, van den Brink also affirms that God is able to turn evil into good (Gen. 50:20), and to let evil work for good (Rom. 8:28) and the best example is the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He writes:

Here we see how God is able to make good out of the most horrendous evils, how He becomes Himself involved in suffering and evil in order to affect redemption and reconciliation. Here it is the utter weakness of God which

²⁹⁸ Ibid., 255.

²⁹⁹ Ibid., 255-256.

³⁰⁰ Ibid., 258.

³⁰¹ Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God*, 27-29.

is stronger than all human strength. (I Cor. 1:25) ... It is this redemptive, saving agency of God which forms the way in which God justifies Himself for allowing evil. This is not to say that God had to become engaged in overcoming evil in order to justify Himself. Redemption, like creation, is a matter of grace not necessity; in the cross God does not justify Himself, but sinful human beings. ...In this way God shows how His justice, goodness and power go together without the one having priority over the other.³⁰²

Timothy Keller affirms that in the future God will overcome all evil and suffering and will set up a new world where no evil exists. He writes:

The future... is a new heaven and new earth. In Revelation 21, we do not see human beings being taken out of this world into heaven, but rather heaven coming down and cleansing, renewing and perfecting this material world... The Biblical view of things is resurrection – not a future that is just a consolation for the life we never had but a restoration of life you always wanted. This means that every horrible thing that ever happened will not only be undone and repaired but will in some way make the eventual glory and joy even greater. ...This is the ultimate defeat of evil and suffering. It will not only be ended but so radically vanquished that what has happened will only serve to make our future life and joy infinitely greater.³⁰³

Van den Brink suggests taking into account a Trinitarian Christian view of God because it allows us to see that God's power and His love complement each other. He says, "God's power is the power of His love and gives us the most trustworthy ground for belief in the ultimate eschatological overcoming of evil in the kingdom of God."³⁰⁴

1.15. Summary

This chapter extensively dealt with the concept of the omnipotence of God in Reformed theology. Initially, with the help of the classical Biblical interpretation and minimizing interpretation and with some qualification on it, a suitable definition was

³⁰² Gijsbert van den Brink, *Almighty God*, 268.

³⁰³ Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God*, 31-34.

³⁰⁴ Gijsbert van den Brink, *Almighty God*, 271-272.

established by van den Brink that says: *God is omnipotent because He has the ability to realize all states of affairs that are logically possible for Him to realize, given His perfect being.*

In the Biblical tradition, the word omnipotence in the New Testament is *Pantokrator* in Greek, meaning basically the same as *El Shaddai* in the Old Testament, and also served as the translation of the Hebrew divine name *Sebaoth* which points to the power which God in the Bible is said to have over all things. God's omnipotence can be seen in His actions in the Bible in varied contexts. Therefore, the word *El Shaddai* is flexibly used to mean mighty or almighty.

In the Apostle's Creed, "Almighty" is applied to God regarding His dominion over the universe as active founder and administrator of all that is. In Medieval times there was a continuation of the early church's thoughts on God's omnipotence. The distinction between *potentia absoluta* and *potentia ordinata* begins to play an important role in the concept of God's omnipotence from the Middle Ages on. For William Ockham, the "Absolute power of God" (*potentia absoluta*) refers to the options which exist before God has committed himself to any course of action. The "ordained power of God" (*potentia ordinata*) refers to how things now are, which reflects the order established by God the creator. This leads to what appears to be a paradox. Precisely because of His divine omnipotence, God is now not able to do everything. By acting with His divine power, God has limited His options. This paradox was explored further in the Reformation.

During the Reformation period, omnipotence is viewed as the omnipotent nature of God Himself and is therefore eternal, not bound by anything, is infinite, and is never exhausted in what it produces. God is omnipotent and unlimited in His dominion.

Calvin insisted that God's omnipotence can never be separated from His will. God is omnipotent in the sense that he "can accomplish whatever He wills to do." God's will coincides with His goodness, wisdom and righteousness.

Calvin mostly rejected the distinction between the absolute and the ordained power of God. He said that God's power may be unlimited, but it is not random. When God predestines a plan, He abides by it. God's power is not independent of God's moral character; rather it expresses it. His wisdom and judgment are inseparable from His power.

In Reformed Orthodoxy, omnipotence is perceived as the executive faculty of God, by which God does whatever God wills. During this period, a few important distinctions and discussions on the subject of the omnipotence of God were prevalent. One of them was the distinction between the power (*potentia*) and authority (*potestas*) of God. Here they emphasised the need for keeping the two together. Another discussion that was dominant was the ongoing distinction between absolute and ordinate power (*potentia absoluta—ordinata*) of God. They chose sometimes to use it with qualification. They also wrestled with the question, "How can the term 'potency' be attributed to God?" They ascribed *potentia* to God not in a passive, but in an active way. They connected God's omnipotence with God's salvational purpose and that His power has a moral dimension and He cannot do immoral things; yet this is not a lack of power, but perfect power.

In later centuries, Herman Bavinck claimed that God's sovereignty is revealed in His omnipotence and is reflected in the scriptures and through all His works. All power, glory and strength belong to God, and His power is the source of all power, authority, ability and strength in creatures. Bavinck also claimed that it is impossible to give a logical explanation for the existence of the world apart from the will of an omnipotent God. God's

existence is not exhausted by the existence of the world, and His omnipotence infinitely exceeds even the limitless power evident in the world.

Then Barth introduced the idea of constancy in omnipotence. He is constant, and as the One who is constant, He is also omnipotent. Constancy signifies the perfect freedom of God to do whatever He wills, and omnipotence is the perfect love in which He is free to act.

For Barth, God is all-powerful, over everything that He actually wills or could will. God is able to do everything, since His possibility is real possibility. As this omnipotent God, He is constant and is above both the changeable and the unchangeable. God's omnipotence is the real power of God and it should be understood as both a physical possibility, *potentia* and as a moral and legal possibility, *potestas*. God's power surpasses His actual deeds, and He is not exhausted by them. Additionally, God allows other powers to exist.

Barth endorsed the distinction between *potentia absoluta* and *potentia ordinata*, claiming that God's omnipotence is His own power and free power, and has finally, and with authority, revealed his *potentia absoluta* as *potentia ordinata* in Jesus Christ. Barth believed that God's omnipotence is both knowing and willing, and is personal. He recognized that God's power, knowledge and will are all revealed in Jesus Christ and understood in the story of His crucifixion.

The Postmodern theologians like Michael Horton saw every attribute of God as interconnected and complementary, even things that were different. For them, if God's attributes are separated, they might lose their power; that God's sovereignty and human responsibility are perfectly consistent; and that God even has the last word over the evil powers.

The concept of omnipotence raises many questions about God and logic, human freedom, suffering, evil and the goodness of God. In addressing the issue of omnipotence and logic, Reformed theologians believe that God is unable to do acts that are contradictory to His being and character, yet the inability to do this is not a weakness, but a strength, and is not a threat to omnipotence.

In regard to human freedom, many claim that man voluntarily does what God determines him to do. Acting voluntarily is not only a necessary but a sufficient condition for acting freely. Created beings have power and freedom because God created them in His own image. The sovereignty of God and the responsibility of humans are perfectly consistent. Humans are given all of the power that is essential to their created nature. The ultimate liberty is in the hand of God.

With respect to the issue of suffering, evil and the goodness of God, Reformed theology claims that some suffering in the world is caused by evil and we may not understand why God allows it. Some evil acts may be justified because it seems impossible to do something better, or because the evil act keeps something worse from happening. Not all suffering in the world serves a greater good. God is able to turn evil into good (Gen. 50:20), and to let evil work for good (Rom. 8:28) and the best example is the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Though Christianity does not provide the reason for all suffering, it provides deep resources for facing pain with hope and courage rather than bitterness and despair. The Christian God in Jesus Christ came to earth to deliberately put Himself on the hook of human suffering. His suffering and death on the cross is a deep consolation and strength for us to face the brutal realities of life on earth. And we can rest assured that He is with us even in our worst suffering. However, it is not just His suffering and death but His

resurrection that gives us hope that our suffering is not in vain. His resurrection assures us that human suffering and death lead to new life and the injustices received lead to greater justice. In the future God will overcome all evil and suffering and will set up a new world where no evil exists. God's power is the power of His love and gives us the most trustworthy ground for belief in the overcoming of evil in the kingdom of God.

Many of the issues discussed in this chapter, and that are dealt with in the Reformed concept of omnipotence, are posed as questions in the empirical survey in Chapter Four. However, the next chapter will deal with omnipotence in the Lepcha Tribal Context.

Chapter Two Omnipotence of God in Lepcha Tribal Context

2.1. Introduction

In order to understand the omnipotence of God in Lepcha Tribal context, related literature is reviewed and summarized in this chapter. Using Lepcha primary documents, a brief history of the Lepchas, a definition of the terms “Lepcha” and “Omnipotence” for the Lepchas, and the Omnipotence of God in the Lepcha belief system, socio-cultural system, folk tales, folk lore, legends and myths of the Lepchas are discussed. This provides background for the field research with the Lepcha people of Darjeeling District and Sikkim. The literature review supports corresponding research questions which will be discussed in the fourth chapter.

2.2. Brief History of the Lepchas

The Lepchas are one of the tribal peoples of Sikkim and Darjeeling District who actually are aborigines of this place. They call themselves “Rongkup, Rumkup” or in short “Rong,” which means “the sons/children of the snowy peak, or the sons/children of God.”¹ “Sikkim was formerly a fair-sized country, reaching from the Arun river on the West to the Taigon pass on the East, from Tibet on the North to Kissenggunge on the South.”² The Lepchas were originally the only inhabitants of this large tract of mountainous land, but during the last three centuries their land was taken from them by invaders: the Tibetans,

¹ Lyangsong Tamsang Lepcha, *King Gaeboo Achyok Birth Anniversary 2004* (Kalimpong: Indigenous Lepcha Association, 2004), 9.

² J.R. Subba, “Sikkim: History of Annexation,” *Sikkim: Darjeeling Compendium of Documents*, compiled and edited by R. Moktan (Kalimpong: R, Moktan “Sumaralaya”, 2004), 237.

the Nepalese, and finally the English.³ “Patriarch ThekungTek was coaxed into ceremoniously swearing eternal friendship and brotherhood with the Tibetans who were gradually infiltrating Lepcha land. As a result of this pact, the Lepchas agreed to accept Tibetan kings among themselves, and as a tribe have upheld the pact ever since.”⁴

J.R. Subba claims that, “The bulk of the original territory of Sikkim was lost by degrees to the most powerful forces: China in the north, Bhutan in the east, Nepal and East India Company in the west and south. All these powerful forces annexed most of the areas on all four sides, resulting in the present Sikkim, a small country then, and now one of the smallest states of India.”⁵ The present District of Darjeeling was originally part of Sikkim. However, the Kalimpong area of Sikkim was annexed by Bhutan in around 1700 A.D. (later merged into Darjeeling District of British India in 1866⁶) and the Darjeeling area of Sikkim was annexed by British India in 1835.⁷

Lepchas claim to be the autochthones of the Sikkim and District of Darjeeling and Kalimpong. A few scholars suggest migration from Burma⁸ via Assam,⁹ southern Tibet,¹⁰ but all agree that Lepchas were the first inhabitants of Sikkim. The Lepchas claim that if

³ Geoffrey Gorer, *Himalayan Village: an account of the Lepchas of Sikkim* (Varanasi: Pilgrims Publishing, 2005), 35.

⁴ A.R. Foning, *Lepcha, My Vanishing Tribe* (Kalimpong: Chyu-Pandi Farm, 1987), 8.

⁵ J.R. Subba, 237.

⁶ Basant B. Lama, *The Story of Darjeeling* (Kurseong: Nilima Yonzon Lama Publications, 2008), 79.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 145.

⁸ Indira Awasty, *Between Sikkim and Bhutan: The Lepchas and Bhutias of Pedong* (Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation, 1938), 29.

⁹ H.M. Bareh (ed), “Sikkim,” *Encyclopedia of North-East India, Vol. VII* (New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 2001), 25.

¹⁰ C. De Beauvoir Stocks, *Folk-Lore and Customs of the Lap-chas of Sikkim* (New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 2001), 333.

there was any migration it must have been from Sikkim (including the present District of Darjeeling and Kalimpong) to other parts of the world.¹¹ All their myths and legends point only to their experience in Sikkim. They could think of no other land for themselves than Sikkim. They are the children of the soil there. The original Lepcha belief system is called Bungtheism and Munism.¹² But later they picked up either Christianity or Buddhism. Only a few still follow Bungtheism and Munism. “They believe in the existence of a God called Rum, and to him they offer their prayers and thanksgiving... They also believe in the existence of evil spirits who cause illness and misfortune, and to them also they give offerings.”¹³

The Lepchas are also nature lovers and worshippers (in a loose sense). That is why many writers call them animists. Lepchas believe that Mother Nature has given them plenty. They love, respect and worship Mother Nature as represented by mountains, rivers, clouds, water, stones, earth, soil, trees, rain, sun, etc. Mount Kanchanjunga is, for the Lepcha, their guardian deity. They believe that through the medium of Mother Nature, the Lepchas are nearer to their Rum, the Almighty God.¹⁴ “Lepchas do not have a structured house of worship. But they do assemble at certain places, either at home or at an open place under the bright sun, led by their spiritual Bungthing or Mun.”¹⁵ They are the mediators between God and the Lepchas. “From birth to death and until the soul of the dead person

¹¹ K.P. Tamsang, *The Unknown and Untold Reality about the Lepchas* (Kalimpong: Lyangsong Tamsang, 1983), 4.

¹² *Ibid.*, 43.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁴ Lyangsong Tamsang, “Who are the Lepchas?: Beloved Children of Mother Nature and God,” *TeestaRangit, Special Inaugural Issue, Vol. 01. March 2014*, Editors Lyangsong Tamsang and others (Kalimpong: MLDB, 2014), 35.

¹⁵ K.P. Tamsang, *The Unknown and Untold Reality*, 56-57.

is taken to heaven, the Bungthing and the Mun perform all the religious ceremonies and rituals for a Lepcha.”¹⁶

“Lepchas have a distinct language of their own and they believe that it is very ancient and the purest of all languages. It has an organic structure and displays a fine sensitivity for the natural meaning of letters, vowels and roots of words.”¹⁷ “The Lepchas, though a small community in number, have a distinct indigenous culture of their own. The salient features of the Lepcha culture and the Lepcha way of living, customs, and manners are indelibly stamped on the language, arts and architecture of their land (Sikkim and Darjeeling Dist.)”¹⁸ In the course of time, with the influx of different races, the aboriginal Lepchas were overpowered and for a long time faced severe identity crises in their own homeland. Their simplicity, their hospitable nature and their adaptability with other races had a negative impact on their own survival.

Though most Lepchas still possess land, most of their prior landholdings are now owned by others. Land is sacred; land is mother to them. Land is not merely space; it gives identity to the community. Land is life and without it they cannot survive. But they truly became refugees in their own homeland. Today, a strong socio-economic and cultural awakening has come among the Lepchas. They together demanded the creation of a Lepcha Development Board in the State Government in Darjeeling District. The State Government,

¹⁶ Ibid., 43.

¹⁷ Ibid., 11.

¹⁸ Ibid., 67.

under Chief Minister Ms. Mamata Banerjee, saw the genuineness of the need and was keen on forming a separate board for the development of the Lepcha Community.¹⁹

A draft was prepared by the state government and sent to the Home Ministry for approval. The final draft for the formation of the Lepcha Development Council, sent to the Cabinet Council, was passed by the Home Ministry in November 2012. On February 5, 2013, the state cabinet cleared the proposal to set up a Lepcha Development Board under the Backward Classes Welfare Department. The board officially came into existence on February 12, 2013, when a resolution to this effect was passed. On August 1, 2013, the State Government sent a team of senior officials to the Himalayan foothills to set up the Lepcha Development Board. The focus of the Mayel Lyang Lepcha Development Board was the overall socio-economic development of the community.²⁰ Through this board, much development and a strong socio-cultural and religious awakening has occurred and a great revival in the Lepcha tribes is taking place.

2.3. Definition of Terms

2.3.1. “Lepcha”

The derivation of the term ‘Lepcha’ cannot be ascertained. It must, however be remembered that the English spelling of the word is incorrect and out of keeping with the local pronunciation, which is ‘Lap-cha’ or ‘Lap-che,’ the former being the more common and probably the correct one.²¹ The term Lap-cha is of Nepalese origin, and the *Parbatiya*

¹⁹ Patrick Sadamu Lepcha, *A Concise History of Lepcha Language* (Kalimpong: Christina Lepcha, 2017), 100.

²⁰ Lyangsong Tamsang, “Who are the Lepchas?”, 37.

²¹ *The Gazetteer of Sikkim*, with an introduction by H.H. Risley (Delhi: Low Price Publications, 1928), 39.

dialect of the Nepalese consists mainly of pure Sanskrit roots. The word ‘Lap-cha’ may perhaps be derived from ‘Lap,’ speech and ‘cha,’ vile= the vile/unintelligible speakers– a contemptuous term with reference to their non-adoption of the Parbatiya language like the rest of the ‘Nepalese tribes.’²² Gorer points out the term ‘Lap-Cha’ means “nonsense speaker.” He writes that a parallel could be found in the Russian name for Germans– *nemetski*, which means ‘the dumb ones.’²³ Lepchas reject this term “Lap-Cha,” saying it is contemptuous, and most derogatory and unfavorable to the Lepchas because they claim their language to be a most simple and pure one. Not a single abusive, indecent, or obscene, word exists in the language as commonly found in all the other languages of the world.²⁴ They claim that with a language so comprehensive, and with manners, customs, culture, etiquette, and way of life so truly civilized, they are immeasurably superior to others, so as to entitle them to rank high among civilized nations.²⁵

Another authority enquires whether the term “Lepcha” may refer to the Hindi ‘Lap-thi’ – the name of a kind of skate fish, or flat fish – a term which may have been applied by the Nepali Gorkhas to the Lepchas on account of the flatness of their faces. None of these derivations are convincing, but no other explanations are offered by the Lepcha people themselves.²⁶

²² Ibid., 39.

²³ Geoffrey Gorer, *Himalayan Village*, 35.

²⁴ K.P. Tamsang, *The Unknown and Untold Reality*, 2.

²⁵ Ibid., 3.

²⁶ The Gazetteer of Sikkim, 39.

The Lepchas are often referred to as ‘Rong-pa’ or ravine people.²⁷ In Tibetan,²⁸ the term ‘Rong-pa’ is often used to mean “the dwellers in the steep country,” whilst the term ‘Mong-pa’ also is used, which means “the dwellers in the lower country.”²⁹ Lepchas refute the Tibetans, Bhutias and Bhutanese nicknaming them with the terms Rong-pa, Mong-pa and Mery. These words too are very contemptuous, referring to the Lepchas as short-tailed monkeys that dwell in ravines and clefts, metaphorically referring to the Lepchas as a very inferior race. They were very hateful terms used by the various Tibetans, Bhutias and Bhutanese to address their vanquished Lepcha victims.³⁰

Lepchas called themselves ‘Mutanchi-Rong’ which means ‘mother’s beloved children, whose hearts are white as snow and great as the mountain.’³¹ As mentioned earlier, they also call themselves ‘Rongkup Runkup’ or in short ‘Rong’ which means ‘the sons of the snowy peak, the son/children of God.’³² The British created the present name Lepcha to address the Lepcha people by anglicizing the Nepali word ‘Lapchey’ to ‘Lepcha,’ and by this name now the Rong people are renowned all over the world as Lepcha.³³ Since all books dealing with the Lepchas refer to the people as Lepchas, it would seem merely pedantic and confusing to use the term Rong.³⁴ Therefore for the purpose of research, the common identifiable name ‘Lepcha’ will be used for the ‘Rong’ folks.

²⁷ Indira Awasty, *Between Sikkim and Bhutan*, 28.

²⁸ The Gazetteer of Sikkim, 39.

²⁹ C. De Beauvoir Stocks, *Folk-Lore and Customs*, 12.

³⁰ K.P. Tamsang, *The Unknown and Untold Reality*, 2-3.

³¹ Indira Awasty, *Between Sikkim and Bhutan*, 29.

³² K.P. Tamsang, *The Unknown and Untold Reality*, 1.

³³ *Ibid.*, 2.

³⁴ Geoffrey Gorer, *Himalayan Village*, 35.

2.3.2. “Omnipotence” for Lepchas

The closest Lepcha word for ‘omnipotence’ is “daar.” “Daar” refers to God who is the Supreme Being, the creator and ruler of the universe.³⁵ Lepchas believe in the One Supreme God who is the creator and the ruler of the universe. Nirwan Amos claims that there can be *mungpong* (many evil spirits) but not *Rum-song* (many Gods). He further explains that God is known as *Itbu-Debu Rum* or *Itbu-Moo* meaning “God the Creator.” When Lepchas call God, *Itbu-Debu Rum Daar* it means Almighty God the Creator.³⁶

Lepchas also call God “*Rum*,” in short, meaning Almighty God.³⁷ According to Nirwan Amos, the word “Daar” can find its equivalent in the Hebrew word “El- Shaddai.” As the title “Daar” is used for Almighty God, the creator and ruler of the universe, similarly the Hebrew word, “El-Shaddai is so used in the Bible.” Genesis 17:1b refers to God as “El-Shaddai,” the God Almighty. There is no greater power, no greater god beside Him.³⁸ “Daar” also means splendid, bright and a ray of light or radiance.³⁹ “Rum Daar” means Gloria, a word ascribing praise to God like in the English verse, “Glory be to God on high from whom all blessings flow.”⁴⁰

Nirwan Amos draws the parallel from the Bible (Psalm 84:11; Malachi 4:2a) where God is pictured as the Sun and Shield and even in John 8:12 where Jesus claims to be the

³⁵ K.P. Tamsang, “Daar,” *The Lepcha-English Encyclopedic Dictionary*, edited by Lyangsong Tamsang, second edition (Kalimpong: Mayal, Clymit Tamsang, 2009), 420.

³⁶ Nirwan Amos Subba, *Lepcha People and some Related Stories of the Bible* (Kalimpong: Nirwan Amos, 2011), 8-9. This book is written in the Nepali language and has been translated by the researcher into English for research purposes.

³⁷ Lyangsong Tamsang, “Who are the Lepchas?”, 35.

³⁸ Nirwan Amos Subba, *Lepcha People and some Related Stories of the Bible*, 9.

³⁹ K.P. Tamsang, “Daar, The Lepcha-English Encyclopedic Dictionary, 420.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 658.

light of the world. Therefore, the word “Daar” can also refer to God as the light and shield who ought to be glorified and from whom all blessings flow.⁴¹ “Daar” can also mean power and authority in the general sense.

Besides “Rum” the all-mighty and all-powerful creator and sustainer God, Lepchas also venerate guardian deities in the form of natural objects and humans, to whom God Himself/Herself has ordained and conferred with certain power and authority to preside over certain worldly affairs. For example, A.R. Foning expresses why Lepchas revere and venerate Mt. Kanchanjunga. That is because “it was Itbu-moo, the great mother creator herself who created Kongchen (Mt. Kanchanjunga) and other mountains and who accredited them with divinity and ordained Kongchen among others to receive honor of the highest order and degree and to be worshipped by mortals as such.”⁴²

When Lepchas add suffixes to the word “Daar” it can give a new and complementary meaning. For example, “*Daartik*” means a deity, especially a male deity, presiding over some portion of worldly affairs. Similarly, “*Daarmit*” is the female deity having the same functions. Recently, the Lepchas crowned the present Chief Minister of West Bengal, Miss Mamata Banerjee with the title “KingchoomDaarmit” which means, “goddess of destiny, fortune or wealth.”⁴³ Similarly, in Lepcha, “daarchhyen” means planet; the planet Rahu is thought to exert influence on mankind and events. The original Lepcha name for Darjeeling is *daarjyoolyaang*, meaning ‘abode of God.’ *Daarsathaong*

⁴¹ Nirwan Amos Subba, *Lepcha People and some Related Stories of the Bible*, 9-10.

⁴² A.R. Foning, 44.

⁴³ See K.P. Tamsang, “Daar,” *The Lepcha-English Encyclopedic Dictionary*, 186. When we look at Daartik as a male god and Daarmit as a female goddess, then Kingchoomdaartik is the god of destiny, fortune or wealth. Kingsoomdaarmit is the goddess of destiny, fortune or wealth.

refers to the tiger, powerful and devouring, who rules the jungle.⁴⁴ Thus all the above meanings and characteristics express that “Daar” can also be used as a reference for power, authority and might. The word “Daar” is used in a positive sense to refer to God or His guardian deities.

However, there is no reference to this word being used in a negative sense, especially not for the power of evil spirits. The evil spirit or devil is called “mung” in Lepcha.⁴⁵ “Lepchas also believe that a great number of evil spirits, demons and devils live in trees, rocks, mountains, etc.”⁴⁶ To refer to any act of conduct or action by the evil spirit is known as “mung ayok.”⁴⁷ “Mungmaa”⁴⁸ refers to evil spirits who have the power to afflict humans both with bodily disease and with spiritual corruption, but are subordinate to God and live in enmity with God. These evil spirits cause illness and misfortune, and to them also Lepchas offer offerings⁴⁹ to appease them. Nevertheless, it is understood that the word “Daar” is only used for Almighty God and for His guardian deities to whom He has assigned power and authority over certain worldly affairs. See Appendix B: Glossary, for a list of Lepcha terms and their definitions.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 420.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 583.

⁴⁶ Indira Awasty, *Between Sikkim and Bhutan: The Lepchas and Bhutias of Pedong* (Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation, 1938), 31.

⁴⁷ K.P. Tamsang, “Daar,” *The Lepcha-English Encyclopedic Dictionary*, 583.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 584.

⁴⁹ K.P. Tamsang, *The Unknown and Untold Reality*, 43.

2.4. Omnipotence of God Expressed in the Lepcha Belief System

2.4.1. Worship of One Supreme God Almighty: Creator and Sustainer of the Universe

K.P. Tamsang explains that Lepcha religion is simple; “They believe in the existence of a God called Rum, and to Him they offer their prayers and thanksgiving.”⁵⁰ Nirwan Amos points out that the Lepchas are monotheists,⁵¹ who believe in One and not many gods. This God is the Creator of the universe, including humans, especially the Rongfolks.⁵² The Lepcha call themselves ‘*Mu-tanchee-Rongkup*’ meaning ‘mother’s loved ones.’ Mother for them is *Idbu-Debu Rum*, the great Creator and sustainer.⁵³ She can also be referred to as *Idbu-Debu Rum Daar*, the almighty, supreme ruler of the Universe.⁵⁴ Some scholars have termed the Lepcha religion as animism, owing to their close affinity to and reverence of nature.⁵⁵ Animism refers to the worship of nature and natural phenomena, such as rocks, mountains, rivers, streams, thunder and lightning, describing inanimate things as having a soul. Jeffrey Schwerzel argues that the Lepchas, however, do not worship these phenomena; they respect their natural surroundings but do not ascribe souls to them. Rather they think that these places are where spirits live.⁵⁶ Geoffrey Gorer strongly writes:

⁵⁰ Ibid., 43.

⁵¹ Nirwan Amos Subba, *Lepcha People and some Related Stories of the Bible*, 7.

⁵² Nima Taknilmmu, *The Creation of Lepcha People: A Glimpse of the Creation* (Darjeeling: Shyam Publication, 1968), 4.

⁵³ A.R. Foning, 308.

⁵⁴ Nirwan Amos Subba, *Lepcha People and some Related Stories of the Bible*, 8-9.

⁵⁵ See D.C. Roy, *Lepchas Past and Present* (Siliguri: N.L. Publishers, 2012), 128ff.

⁵⁶ Jeffrey Schwerzel, Shanti Tuinstra and Juddha Prasad Vaidya, *The Lepcha of Nepal* (Kathmandu: Udaya Books, 2000), 35.

Writers about Sikkim and Tibet who incidentally mention the Lepchas refer to them with surprising unanimity as ‘animists’; and the references to devils’ habitations in the desiderata for a house-site given above might suggest that such a term was justified. To my mind, however such a conclusion would be completely erroneous, if animism is understood to mean the worship or reverence of natural objects for the forces implicit in them. ... All supernaturals, good and bad, though eternally living outside the world, have innumerable manifestations with which this world is filled. These manifestations, or replicas, of the supernaturals, choose various natural phenomena for semi-permanent habitations: agreeable phenomena – lakes, or fruit-trees or fruitful land – if the supernaturals are generally benevolent; disagreeable places– useless trees, waterfalls, rocks or barren grounds – if the supernaturals are generally malevolent. Each type of supernatural has a preference for a particular kind of habitation; thus all the deut *moong*– fever devils– live in big isolated trees, sadok *moong*– skin disease devils– in outcrops of rock.⁵⁷

K.P. Tamsang states that, “To see Lepcha devotees kneeling before the image of a stone statue or idol, or rock, or giant tree, or mountain, or river, etc., does not mean that they are worshipping a mere idol, or a stone, or a tree, or a mountain, or a river, but in reality, they are fired with genuine devotion and they worship not an idol or a rock, or a tree, or a mountain, but the divinity of which it is symbolic.”⁵⁸ He further claims that “Lepchas advocate the doctrine of one ultimate substance or principle, as mind or soul or something that is neither mind nor matter, but ground of both, the position that reality is one.”⁵⁹ However, many scholars agree that, over time, with the influx and influence of other belief systems, especially Lamaism, the theology of the Lepcha had to adapt and re-adjust to accommodate these changes. Gorer strongly indicates that the Lamaist belief system, though seriously opposite to what Lepchas believed, was still able to make its mark

⁵⁷ Geoffrey Gorer, *Himalayan Village: an account of the Lepchas of Sikkim* (Varanasi: Pilgrims Publishing, 2005), 76-77.

⁵⁸ K.P. Tamsang, *The Unknown and Untold Reality*, 51.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 49-50.

and establish itself. Thus, in many areas Lepchas simultaneously follow both belief systems.⁶⁰

K.P. Tamsang also agrees with the fact that the more mythical philosophy of Lamaism has crept into the belief of the Lepchas. Writing on the idea of Rumlyang (heaven) he writes, “With the advent of Lamaism into Sikkim and the Darjeeling District, they now believe in more mythical worlds besides their own ancestral belief of Rumlyang.”⁶¹ Nirwan Amos states that the worship of nature (which the Lepchas of today loosely accept) was a later development. He writes, “The original belief of the Lepchas had no worship of nature. For example, in the story of LasoMoong Panu, when LasoMoong Panu, the devil, troubled the Lepchas, they prayed directly to *Itbu-Debu Rum*, the God almighty. And God listened to their prayers and delivered them from him.”⁶² He further states that, “When troubles rapidly came unto people in the form of sickness, pain, disease, sorrow, natural calamities, etc., then in order to get redeemed from them, nature worship might have slowly started. In those days there were no pictures and idols, therefore the closest things that they found helpful in nature, they started to worship them.”⁶³

2.4.2. Worship of Mountains as Guardian Deities

Mountains, especially the Himalayas, play an important role in the Lepcha Tribal religion. Mountains are the symbols and manifestations of the ultimate deity. They are the

⁶⁰ See Geoffrey Gorer, *Himalayan Village*, 181ff.

⁶¹ K.P. Tamsang, *The Unknown and Untold Reality*, 54.

⁶² Nirwan Amos Subba, *The Introductory History of Lepcha People* (Kalimpong: Nirwan Amos Subba, 2009), 44.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 44. This book is written in the Nepali language and has been translated by the researcher into English for research purposes.

meeting place of God and humans and the ecosystem and therefore are regarded as holy. K.P. Tamsang writes, “Looking at the splendid beauty of the snowy mountains, one feels that God’s purity and sublimity are fully manifested only high up there amid the eternal snows.”⁶⁴ A.R. Foning is of the view that reverence and worship of natural objects, especially Mt. Kongchen (Mt. Kanchanjunga) is because:

It was Itbu-Moo, the great mother creator herself, creating Kongchen and other mountains, who accredited them with divinity and ordained Kongchen and others to receive the highest honor and to be worshipped by mortals. Kongchen would look after the welfare of the Lepchas and watch over the well-being of their land. Thus, Lepchas consider Kongchen as the guardian deity, and offer it worship and reverence.⁶⁵

K.P. Tamsang explains that, “According to the Lepchas, there are altogether 108 lofty snowy peaks in the Sikkim Himalayas with their own particular Lepcha names with beautiful meanings and authentic legendary background stories to support the authenticity and genuineness.”⁶⁶ He further writes:

As there are 108 peaks in the Sikkim Himalayas, so also there are 108 Lepcha castes or clans in the Lepcha race, each Lepcha caste or clan represents a particular snowy peak and Kanchanjunga, the highest peak, represents the main veritable corner-pillar of the gigantic Himalayan range of Sikkim and of the Lepchas as a whole.⁶⁷

Festivals like ‘Chu Rum Fat’ (worship of mountain gods to provide for adequate snowfall in the winter to the rivers below and also for the protection of the Rong folks) and TendongLho Rum Fat (worship of Mount Tendong because it is believed that after the

⁶⁴ K.P. Tamsang, *The Unknown and Untold Reality*, 60.

⁶⁵ A.R. Foning, 44.

⁶⁶ K.P. Tamsang, *The Unknown and Untold Reality*, 64.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 64-65.

great flood this mountain went up like horns to save the people)⁶⁸ are celebrated grandly. “In the Lepcha language, Choorum means ‘the God of the Himalayas.’”⁶⁹

Pundim is another peak in the Sikkim Himalayas highly revered and worshipped because Lepchas believe that God delivered them from the oppression of the demon king, Laso Moong Pano, when God came down onto the summit of Pundim and created Tamsangthing, “the saviour,”⁷⁰ After a lengthy 12 year battle, the evil oppressor was killed. As such, the Lepchas worship this Pundim peak as their guardian deity and deliverer.⁷¹

K.P. Tamsang clearly points out that the Lepchas believe that there is an everlasting link between the Lepchas and the Sikkim Himalayas. From birth, through marriage and until death, Lepcha life is attached to the Sikkim Himalayas. The Lepchas worship the Kanchanjunga peak in the spirit of true devotion because the cord of birth binds the Lepchas with this holy peak. Their ancient tradition says, “the Lepchas’ first primogenitors, Fodongthing which means ‘most powerful’ and Nazaognyoo which means ‘ever fortunate,’ were created by God from the pure, virgin snows of Kanchanjunga’s pinnacle and then sent down to MayelLyang, that is Sikkim.”⁷²

In a Lepcha marriage ceremony, “the young couple sits on the floor imitating the two mountains KintsoomzaongbooChoo and his wife Chyadaongrazaomoonoo, as they sit opposite each other. This means; just like these two mountains have a long and permanent life, so give this young couple a long, prosperous and happy wedded life. Just

⁶⁸ D.T. Tamlong, *MayelLyang & The Lepchas* (Darjeeling: Mani Printing Press. 2008), 170.

⁶⁹ K.P. Tamsang, *The Unknown and Untold Reality*, 61-62.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*, 60-61.

as the high snowy peaks are calm and tranquil, so may the life of the young couple be equally tranquil and happy. Also in the Lepcha funeral ceremony, the dead body is cremated facing towards Kintsoomzaongboo (Mt. Kanchanjunga).”⁷³

A.R. Foning expresses that the Lepchas believe that their souls all come from somewhere up on Kanchanjunga and when they die, their *Mun* directs the soul back and helps them to reunite with the souls of the ancestors.⁷⁴ He further writes:

All our gods and the divine beings such as the Mayel Moos (Lepchas' mythical ancestors) have their abodes in and around Kongchen-Konghla (Mt. Kanchanjunga), stationed at a place where normally no human being or animal can reach it, placed in a region of pure and immaculate white...from the time we are born until the time we die, and even in the afterlife, it is Kongchen that is required to protect, guide and lead us. In other words, the very fabric of our social, cultural and religious life centers on this wondrous object of nature, the great Kongchen-Konghla.⁷⁵

2.4.3. Worship of Spirits

Lepchas have a strong belief in the existence of spirits – deities (good spirits that are worshipped) and bad spirits. D.C. Roy writes, “In their religious world, spirits are closely connected in almost all types of their day-to-day activities. All happenings, good or bad, are due to the blessings or curses of the concerned spirit.”⁷⁶ Dugey Lepcha points out that there are two types of spirits. “One type is the benevolent spirit which looks after the well-being of an individual, the household, the cattle, the husbandry and crops etc. But the most numerous are of the other type which cause enmity, jealousy, disease, illness,

⁷³ Ibid., 65.

⁷⁴ A.R. Foning, 309.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 55-56.

⁷⁶ D.C. Roy, *Lepchas, Past and Present*, 130.

death, epidemic, loss of property, failure of crops, and other hazards.”⁷⁷ Though Lepchas acknowledge and worship the existence of one Supreme God who is the almighty creator, they also believe in other smaller deities in the form of good spirits, perhaps His guardian deities to whom He has assigned power and authority over certain worldly affairs.

2.4.3.1. Good Spirits (or Lower Deities)

Lepchas believe that these good spirits do not harm them. These spirits are worshipped regularly in routine time and manner and offered thanks for all blessings which make Lepcha life smooth and prosperous. These are the names of some good spirits D.C.

Roy points out:

Li-Rum is a household deity who is responsible to protect the house, property, animal, crop and overall well-being of the Lepchas. *Lyang-Rum* is the God of the land. The Lepchas worship him so that they can get good rain in time for the field. *Muk-Zuk-Rum* is the God of vegetation. The Lepchas, through the bungthing, thank this benevolent spirit for timely supply of all natural gifts like, mist, cloud, sunshine, clear air, water, etc. *Tendong/TungraongLho Rum* is a holy and sacred mountain that saved the Lepchas from drowning during the great flood which occurred in the pre-historic days when Lepchas were the only inhabitants in this region. Lepchas pray and worship this mountain for its blessings with the request that such a deluge should not repeat further in this part of the world. *Chu-Rum* is basically referred to as Mt. Kanchanjunga, the guardian deity of the Lepchas. Lepchas believe that their primogenitors were created by Itbu-moo, the mother creator out of the pure and virgin snow of Mt. Kanchanjunga. Each Moo, Lepcha clan, has its own Chu (peak), Daa (lake) and Lyep (entry point) in the foothills of Mt. Kanchanjunga and their souls finally return to their respective chu to be with their ancestors. Thus, Lepchas worship Kanchanjunga for protecting them from all evils, troubles and misfortunes. *Mut-Rum or Pong Rum* is the name of the jungle spirit and the Lepchas (especially the males) in traditional days worshipped him both before and after hunting. Lepchas thank the jungle god for providing

⁷⁷ Dugey Lepcha, “Lepchas of Himalayas,” *Glimpses of the Eastern Himalayan Culture* (Calcutta: Centre for Communication and Cultural Action, 1999), 17.

fruits and animals. The spirits are also believed to protect and save the cultivable land from rats, insects and animals. **Tung-Baong-Rum** is a female spirit responsible for looking after the newborn babies. After offering to Tung-Baong, the child becomes the member of the Lepcha society. **Sugi-Rum** is connected with faat where ovation and thanksgiving is offered to their respective teachers. All the Bungthings and Muns assemble in one place to offer their respect, admiration and reverence to ThikoongAzaor, the first Bungthing and NyookoongNyoolik, the first Mun and also their respective teachers who taught them the skill of doing the religious activities.⁷⁸

2.4.3.2. Bad Spirits

The Lepchas believe in evil spirits and to them also they offer offerings.⁷⁹ “These malevolent and bad spirits which cause harm to the Lepchas are called mungs. They are responsible for causing enmity, jealousy, diseases, illness, death, epidemics, loss of property, loss of crops, etc. Mungs are to be praised with appropriate offerings to get rid of their sinister eye.”⁸⁰ These are names of some evil spirits D.C.Roy points out:

Laso-Mung for Lepchas is a man-eating monster who used to kill and eat the Lepchas whenever they entered the forest. This evil spirit camouflaged himself in the form of different animals. But this mung was killed and cut into pieces by the Lepchas. **Arot-Mung** is the devil responsible for causing accidents and committing suicide among the Lepchas and if not pleased, the same thing may repeat in the family. **Midyup-Mung** is responsible for cough and cold. **Shor-Mung** is responsible for creating enmity among the Lepchas. He is also responsible for miscarriage. **Sungrong or Sumu-Mung** is a dreadful devil who lives in high altitude. **Apal-Mung** is the devil responsible for frightening the children. **Khung-Mung** is the devil causing unauthorized sexual relations among the Lepcha boys and girls before marriage. **Soomu-Mung** is female spirit very ugly and dirty who harasses the travellers at night by changing the shape.⁸¹

⁷⁸ D.C. Roy, *Lepchas Past and Present*, 131-134.

⁷⁹ K.P. Tamsang, *The Unknown and Untold Reality*, 3.

⁸⁰ D.C. Roy, *Lepchas Past and Present*, 130.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 134-135.

D.T. Tamlong writes, “Pleasing and pampering Mungs or devils was the way of life of the Lepchas. Many people still fear touching sacred and secret things kept in Lepcha homes or treading on the Lepcha ginger field or fruits and vegetable gardens, as sometimes their hands get immobilized due to certain invisible powers which only the Lepcha head of the family can cure.”⁸² Indira Awasty points out that “a great number of evil spirits, demons and devils live in trees, rocks, mountains, etc.”⁸³ To please these mungs, Lepchas offer hen compulsorily along with Chi, fruits rice, fish, egg, etc.⁸⁴

2.4.4. Worship of Sakyo Rum / Mayel Moo (Lepcha Mythical Ancestors)

Lepchas also offer worship to their mythical ancestors, the people of MayelKyong (Mayelvillage). A.R. Foning claims that this village is believed to be situated somewhere at the base of the snow-covered mountains, their deities.⁸⁵ He writes:

In the beginning when the Idbu-Debu Rum, the great creator and sustainer, created everything, she created MayelLyang, the equivalent of the garden of Eden, and this was the place we Rongfolks (Lepchas) were supposed to have been placed. Originally, this country is said to have been fairly big. But now, on account of our human failings, this utopia has been defiled and has shrunk into a limited size, ... only fit for a few souls to live in, only the pure and the unsullied ones find an abode there. ... This village is for us absolutely unapproachable. ... It is said that if we try to go to, or get anywhere near the place, some natural obstacle or barrier, such as heavy rain, a hail storm, sleet or a landslide, will prevent us and drive us away.⁸⁶

These MayelMoo, as Lepchas call them, according to their belief are semi-divine, partly human and partly god, and have access to the domain of the gods; and it is also said

⁸² D.T. Tamlong, *MayelLyang & The Lepchas*, 40.

⁸³ Indira Awasty, 31.

⁸⁴ D.C. Roy, *Lepchas Past and Present*, 134.

⁸⁵ A.R. Foning, 51.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 51-52.

that formerly they also used to meet humans. However, because of the degradation caused by unworthy behavior by the Lepchas, they now shun the Lepchas, and never appear before them, but confine themselves to the sacred place among the gods in the mountains.⁸⁷

Nevertheless, Foning writes:

These god-like people have not forsaken the humans; they still keep in touch with us and still so to say, direct and help us, particularly in the work of growing crops. From time to time they send their messengers, such as Kaku, Chak-dun, Kur-ngok and other birds and insects and grasshoppers of various types. They act as our time-keepers and calendars. We do our sowing, weeding and harvesting by watching their seasonal advent and hearing their singing and chirping.⁸⁸

These benign Mayel people are the ones who, “although indirectly, are also responsible for giving the Lepchas rain. They know that rain and the growing of the crops are complementary. Therefore, being the inhabitants of the valley, situated amidst the abode of gods, they intercede on the Lepchas’ behalf with these gods to bless them with sufficient rain for the fertility of the soil for growing crops, and for helping in the growth of many wild fruits and roots for their consumption.”⁸⁹ Therefore, as a mark of gratitude, the Lepchas like to keep them pleased, and thus, deifying them, they offer worship to these people of MayelKyong. A. R. Foning asserts that the relationship between Lepchas and these Mayel-moos, whom are considered to be their kith and kin and original ancestors, is so close that that they call them endearingly, ‘Zo-Mu-Nyo’, the mother aunties who provide them with food and keep them alive. In a simple way, Lepchas call them ‘Mayel-moo,’ just as they refer to each other as Sadam-moo, Kartok-moo, Sangdyang-moo, the word ‘moo’

⁸⁷ Ibid., 52.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 53.

meaning ‘dwellers of.’ On the other hand, knowing and recognizing them as divine beings, they offer oblations to them and when this is done, they address them as ‘Sakyo Rum,’ the god of food.⁹⁰

2.4.5. Worship of “The Lungzee,” the Benign Supernatural Beings

The Lepchas also believe in certain supernatural beings who are neither mungs (evil spirits), nor come into the ranks of the divinities, such as the mountain gods like Kongchen and other chyu-bees and they are called Lungzee.⁹¹ A. R. Foning writes:

The nearest interpretation or equivalent would be a sort of guardian spirit for a particular object of nature. Normally these objects are such that they catch the eye straightaway, may be a huge tree, a crag, a tarn, a cave, a cluster of trees, or a special hillock, and other such natural objects. They are supposed to have some sort of a limit or boundary around the object in which they have come and taken up abode.⁹²

The Lepchas believe that these supernatural spirits must not be ignored nor the object in which it has taken abode defiled. A.R. Foning puts it this way:

The belief is that if this supernatural spirit is ignored, and the object defiled and polluted by answering calls of nature there, or men and women having sexual connection anywhere in its vicinity, there is the possibility of the whole village suffering, or at least the culprits receiving punishment by a series of diseases, or even death, in the family.⁹³

Thus, the Lepchas are very conscious and have the feeling of awe when they are anywhere near the object occupied by Lungzee. However, these spirits are benign and not

⁹⁰ Ibid., 44-55.

⁹¹ Ibid., 56.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid., 56-57.

harmful if left on their own. Therefore, the Lepchas always adapt as A.R. Foning puts it, a “laissez faire attitude towards them.”⁹⁴ He writes:

If it is a jungle, we would not dare to cut or chop wood from it; if it is a pond or a tarn, we dare not irritate it by throwing stones in it; and if it is a crag, we do not dare to collect honeycombs, hornet grubs, or flowering edible orchids from it. We know that the Lungzee has left the place when we see a big landslide washing away the jungle, or a pond or tarn or a lake drying up for no rhyme or reason.⁹⁵

A. R. Foning claims that “formerly, these objects or spirits, used to be equally worshipped and propitiated; but nowadays no special ritual is performed, except for offering a few leaves plucked on the way for the purpose and uttering some prayers urging them not to get angry for the intrusion and encroachment and seeking their help in the fulfilment of the wish of the passerby.”⁹⁶ “The Bungthings too, while performing the various rites, along with the names of gods and other divine beings, utter the name and address these Lungzees, which is an obligation.”⁹⁷

2.4.6. Bungthing and Mun as Mediators

Like any other religion of the world, Lepchas have religious officials. In the Lepcha belief system, these officials are called *Bungthing* and *Mun*, and the belief system is called Bungthingism and Munism, for them. They are the intermediary between the *Rum* (God) and the humans and even evil spirits.⁹⁸ They lead the people into prayer, salute and bow down to get blessings, power, long life, and protection from diseases, misfortune and

⁹⁴ Ibid., 57.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 57.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Indira Awasty, 31-32.

ultimate death. They invoke God to give them help, guidance and to abide with them, and the entreaty is then followed by offerings of flowers, fish, birds, blood, rice and *chee*.⁹⁹

Tamsang points out the Lepcha folk story which claims that, “when Lord Tamsangthing arrived at Tarkaol Tam-E-Tam from Pundim Cho (Mt. Pandim) to deliver the Lepchas from the clutches of the demon king, Laso Mung Pano, he found them degraded by the harassment of demons, particularly of Laso Mung Panu. So in order to rejuvenate their morale, Lord Tamsangthing gave supernatural powers to a chaste man and chaste woman to bring back the lost moral philosophy of the Lepchas.”¹⁰⁰ Thus the “first consecrated *Bungthing* was Thikoong Azaor Bungthing and the first *Mun* was Nyookoong Nyoolik Mun.”¹⁰¹ “*Bungthing* and *Mun* are shamans, medicine men/women or exorcists.”¹⁰² From birth to death and until the soul of the dead person is taken to heaven, they perform all the religious ceremonies and rituals of the Lepchas. Gorer records that, “throughout life they are necessary for cleansing from supernatural danger, for blessing and solemnizing, and above all for expelling devils.”¹⁰³

Tamsang writes:

Three days after the birth of the child, the *Bungthing* performs *Tungbaong Faat* ceremony, for the purification and the naming of the child. The *Bungthing* offers sacrifices in sickness and also gives herbal medicines. After a husband’s or a wife’s -death, if the widower or the widow wants to remarry, the *Bungthing* performs the *Hitsa* ceremony.¹⁰⁴

⁹⁹ A.R. Foning, 57.

¹⁰⁰ K.P. Tamsang, *The Unknown and Untold Reality*, 44.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² C. De Beauvoir Stocks, 338.

¹⁰³ Geoffrey Gorer, *Himalayan Village*, 230.

¹⁰⁴ K.P. Tamsang, *The Unknown and Untold Reality*, 43.

He further states that in marriage, the *Bungthing* plays the most important part of *Byek-bu*, who arranges the marriage. Here he performs the ceremony of *Moongkoong MunglaFaat* and *NunglyonFaat*, the invocation to God for the longevity, happiness and prosperity of the bride and the groom. In death, the *Bungthing* performs the funeral ceremony, *Chyoakboom*. In the new year harvest, he offers the first fruits to God. That is, from birth to death, without a *Bungthing*, the Lepchas cannot do anything.¹⁰⁵ *Bungthing* is in a position to act as an excellent news agent. In fact, he is a psychiatrist, medicine man, spiritualist, preacher and priest all rolled into one.¹⁰⁶

The first *Mun*, NyoolikMun, possessed supernatural power, knowledge and wisdom. Her name itself meant “who can bring to the outer world even the inner most secrets of the netherworld.” Tamsang brings out seven classes of Mun: AvorMun, PildonMun, AnganMun, TungliMun, MunjunMun, MookMun and Lyang-EetMun. It is said that AvorMun possesses equal supernatural power to the ancient NyoolikMun.¹⁰⁷ PildonMun performs the ordinary ceremonies to deliver up the soul of a dead person to heaven. Her name means, “a Mun that finds out the soul.” She can also call back the spirit of a dead person and speak out in the voice of the dead person and tell the good and bad happenings of the future of the family members and bid goodbye to all, saying not to be grieved.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 43-44.

¹⁰⁶ A.R. Foning, 81.

¹⁰⁷ K.P. Tamsang, *The Unknown and Untold Reality*, 47.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 48.

Therefore, *Mun* is not only a priestess but she is the liberator of the souls of the dead persons to heaven.¹⁰⁹ The rest of the *Muns* performs rituals, ceremonies, forecasts, and make predictions and act as medicine women, but they cannot deliver the souls of the dead persons to heaven.¹¹⁰ Foning observes that, “the *Bungthing* seems like the Christian pastor, Brahmin priest, or Muslim mullah due to the parallel function. But to him the *Mun*’s way of approach and her functioning is completely different. Except while transporting the soul to *Rumlyang*, nothing looks or seems formal.”¹¹¹

He further writes:

The main function of the *Bungthing* is to tackle the *mung* problem, whereas the *Mun* is never called upon to do so. Both the *Mun* and the *Bungthing* equally strive to work for the welfare of humans but their approaches are completely different. While the *Bungthing* sets about sacrificing birds and animals for the appeasement of the *mung*, the *Mun* by dint of her spiritual power, subdues them.¹¹²

The incantations and the invocations of the *Mun* and the *Bungthing* cannot be learnt like chanting the religious texts of the Buddhist religion by the lamas. No-one can aspire to be a *Mun* or a *Bungthing*. The spirit manifests itself. It has been found to possess only those of certain families who have *Mun* and *Bungthing* down the generations.¹¹³ They also have their own grading and standard according to the *mung* received. Some are more enlightened than others.¹¹⁴ *Bungthings* are always male and *Muns* are female, but there are a few *Muns* who are males too. This must be a later development since the *Mun-Bungthing*

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 49.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ A.R. Foning, 63.

¹¹² Ibid., 83.

¹¹³ Ibid., 74.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 83.

institution is getting rarer and the Lepcha culture is now enveloped by diverse cultures. “With the female spirit of the *Mun* taking up a male vehicle and the functions of the *Bungthing* also being taken over by the so-called male *Mun* as found in Dzongu, the overlapping seems to be complete.”¹¹⁵

Bungthing and *Mun* played a vital role in Lepcha religious tradition. In spite of their high status, led a life of humility and rendered their selfless services to the minutest need of both community and individual. Theirs was a consecrated ministry, a ministry serviceable both to God and humankind through whom people were drawn closer to God and holier.

2.4.7. Importance of Prayer

It is the Lepchas’ firm conviction that God could not but listen to their prayers fervently offered by them. They depend entirely on prayers even for their temporal needs.¹¹⁶ In the former times Lepchas prayed directly to Rum their God for help and God came to their rescue. K.P. Tamsang writes:

In the beginning also, when the Lepchas were suffering under the untold oppression of the demons, they prayed to God to have mercy on them and save them from the demons. God heard their prayers and sent down to Sikkim, Lord Tamsangthing, the dearest of His creation, whom He had created from a handful of pure, virgin snows from the top of Mount Pundim and thus subduing the demons, the Lepchas got their freedom.¹¹⁷

Even during the great flood, Lepchas cried out to God and He answered. K.P.

Tamsang writes:

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 83.

¹¹⁶ K.P. Tamsang, *The Unknown and Untold Reality*, 56.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

When the whole of Sikkim and Darjeeling was being drowned by flood, the Lepchas climbed up on the top of Mount Tungraong, now called Tendong and prayed to God to save them from being drowned, and there God appeared in the form of a KohomFo, a partridge bird and sprinkled Chi (liquor) towards heaven and requested God to subside the flood and thus the Lepchas were saved from drowning.¹¹⁸

Today, Lepchas pray to God through their Bungthings and Muns. “For the God-fearing Lepchas, prayers, supplications, and worship through the medium of their Bungthing and Mun are no superstition. For them, prayers need no speech. They have no doubt that prayer is an unfailing means to achieve purity of heart.”¹¹⁹ “They assemble at a certain place, led by their *Bungthing* and *Mun*. There they pray, salute and bow down to get blessings, power, long life, and protection from diseases, misfortune and death. They invoke God to give them help, guidance and to abide with them and the entreaty is followed by the offering of flowers, fish, birds, blood, rice and *chee*.”¹²⁰ The Bungthing and the Mun do not say their prayers and sermons by reading out from any written scriptures or prepared texts as in other religions but “they chant their prayers and sermons orally, which flow out freely from within their heart of hearts.”¹²¹ Bungthing and Mun also “disclose the divine revelation that one can attain any desired objects by the efficacy of prayers, supplications and invocations.”¹²²

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 50.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 57.

¹²¹ Ibid., 49.

¹²² Ibid., 56.

2.5. Attributes and Nature of God Expressed in Lepcha Folklore

The term ‘folklore’ refers to traditional beliefs, customs and stories of a community in the form of myths, legends, folktales, proverbs, songs, rhymes, riddles, etc., passed through the generations orally. It is like a window through which a person can look into the belief, culture, custom, tradition, way of life and civilization of a race. Lyangsong Tamsang writes, “To a Lepcha, folklore is not only a means of entertainment, but it is an education also.”¹²³ He further asserts that, “the Lepcha myths are connected with the origin of the Lepchas and their country, MayelLyang. The Lepcha folk stories deal with everyday life of the Lepchas. The Lepcha moral stories are not only entertaining, they are a guide to a better path and life. They may also deal with situations and problems that may arise in your life. They are told by the elders to their children when the whole family sits together around the hearth for warmth. Thus, the Lepcha traditional folklore, the art of telling stories, is still alive.”¹²⁴ Foning writes, “Many of our so-called superstitions and beliefs stem from mythology, legends and folklore.”¹²⁵ The closest Lepcha expression for folklore is Loongtyen¹²⁶ Sung.¹²⁷ Foning writes:

I now find that these absorbing stories acted as the vehicle and the medium to fashion and shape the very behavior and attitude of our Rong tribal society as a whole. The reason why we behave today as we do is because we are taught this through stories, parables, fables and mythological and legendary tales. These apparently unimportant and childish tales seem to have a deep and lasting effect on us. If we do anything outside what is sanctioned by society, we are at once reminded that we are on the wrong

¹²³ Lyangsong Tamsang (ed.), *Lepcha Folklore and Folk Songs* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2008), IX.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, IX.

¹²⁵ A.R. Foning, *Lepcha, My Vanishing Tribe*, 236.

¹²⁶ See K.P. Tamsang, “Loongtyen”, *The Lepcha-English Encyclopedic Dictionary*, edited by Lyangsong Tamsang, second edition (Kalimpong: Mayal, Clymit Tamsang, 2009), 772.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 877.

path, by being told some relevant stories of days of yore. So apart from storytelling sessions at home, we get these so called reminders, even while moving along the path, while working in the fields or maybe even in the forest while collecting firewood, or going out on a hunt.¹²⁸

However, what is pure Lepcha folklore is a matter of another discussion and research. As Stocks writes:

In this country, not only Tibetan Buddhist ideas are disseminated, but with them probably the motives of Tibetan folklore have also spread. To these must be added the natural borrowings of tales from the peoples of Bhutan and Nepal with whom the Lepchas have now much mixed. Perhaps some of the ideas were imported from India, directly or indirectly, and of late Christian missionaries even can be ranked among the contributors. A clear idea of what can be called the original Lepcha religion will probably be only possible when an exhaustive study of all the tales and customs of the different races inhabiting this corner of the Himalayas is taken including the Rongfolks' immediate neighbors. Until this is done, the only possible way to deal with the Lepcha tales is to treat them as being entirely original— with the exception of those that bear obvious traces of Buddhist or foreign influence.¹²⁹

Lyangsong puts it this way, “There will always be slight variations in retelling the oral stories from person to person but the main theme of stories remains steady and unchangeable.”¹³⁰ In this next sub-section we will use those examples of folklore which express the character and nature of the Omnipotent God.

2.5.1. God the Creator

Lepchas have two names for their creator: Itbu-Debu Rum and Itbu-Moo. Nirwan Amos explains, “Rongkups (Lepchas) call their God Itbu-Debu Rum. Itbu-Debu Rum means “God the creator.” They accept God as their creator. They believe the hills and

¹²⁸ A.R. Foning, *Lepcha, My Vanishing Tribe*, 87-88.

¹²⁹ C. De Beauvoir Stocks., 15.

¹³⁰ Lyangsong Tamsang (ed.), *Lepcha Folklore and Folk Songs*, X.

mountains, rivers and streams, jungles and all the birds and animals, the sky and its components all are created by God the creator. He is the owner of the whole universe and Rongkups are his children. Everything came into existence from and through Itbu-Debu Rum.”¹³¹ He further explains, “Rongkups also call their God Itbu-Moo meaning the Mother Creator. They accept God as their mother. They take God like a mother who is merciful, kind, caring, protecting and raising them up.”¹³²

The creator God is characterized here both in male and female terms, an expression beyond sexuality. The Lepchas have never questioned the pre-existence of the Supreme Being called Rum to whom they offer their prayers and thanksgivings.¹³³ This God is the creator and sustainer of the world and called by the Lepchas as Itbu-Debu Rum¹³⁴ or Itbu-moo.¹³⁵ The creation narrative of the Lepcha, strongly asserts God as the creator and sustainer of the universe who alone has the power and authority to create the world out of His/Her will. Foning writes:

Itbu-moo, the mother creator, creating everything upon earth and in the heavens, set about executing and fulfilling her great plan. She created and shaped Kongchen-Konghlo and other ‘chyu-bee’ or mountains, and called them males. Thus, as complements to those mountains, she created the ‘daa’, the lakes, and called them females. After what she thought was completion of her work, she stopped to reconnoitre her handwork. Then she realized that her achievements were lacking in something essential: and so, to give it a fitting finale, Itbu-moo created the first man, Tukbothing, who later came to be known as Fudongthing. Even after this, she was not quite satisfied, until at last she thought of giving Tukbothing, her pet creation, a companion just like the chyu-bee, to whom she had given the ‘daa’-the lakes, as females. So, it is said that taking out of little bit of ‘nung young’

¹³¹ Nirwan Amos Subba, *The Introductory History of Lepcha People*, 36.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 36.

¹³³ K.P. Tamsang, *The Unknown and Untold Reality*, 43.

¹³⁴ A.R. Foning, *Lepcha, My Vanishing Tribe*, 308.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 88.

or the marrow from Tukbothing's own bones, NazongNyu was created. Nung-young in our oblique language, means wisdom. This was why and how NazongNyu came into being.¹³⁶

Lyangsong expresses that the first male and female were created by God from the pure virgin snow of Mt. Kanchanjunga. He writes, "The Lepchas believe that God created Fudongthing, the first Lepcha male, meaning 'most powerful' in Lepcha, and 'NazongNyu', the first Lepcha female, meaning 'ever fortunate' from the pure and virgin snows of Mt Kanchanjunga's pinnacle."¹³⁷ Yishey Doma more specifically mentions that, "the first man was created by God from the pure virgin snow and the female was made out of his bone marrow."¹³⁸ They were supposed to be like brother and sister and, as such, not marrying each other. "It so happened that these two, the last and the best of Itbu-Moo's creations started living like husband and wife."¹³⁹ Lyangsong writes:

Fudongthing and NuzaongNyu were considered as brother and sister because they were created by God, Itboo-Debu, Himself with his own hands. When they were growing up God commanded and said to them, 'My children, you two are brother and sister, therefore, you two should hold on to the excellence of morals,' and he warned them both of impending disaster, untold misery and misfortune if they crossed the limit. God then sent Fudongthing to live at the top of "TungsengNareng Chu' and NazongNyu was put next to 'Naho-Nathar Da', a lake, at the base of mountain. They were thus separated from each other.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁶ Ibid., 88-89.

¹³⁷ Lyangsong Tamsang (ed.), *Lepcha Folklore and Folk Songs*, 3.

¹³⁸ Yishey Doma, *Legends of the Lepchas: Folk Tales from Sikkim* (Tranquebar: Westland Ltd., 2010), 2.

¹³⁹ A.R. Foning, *Lepcha, My Vanishing Tribe*, 89.

¹⁴⁰ Lyangsong Tamsang (ed.), *Lepcha Folklore and Folk Songs*, 3.

Yishey Doma noted, “Everything was well with their world. As long as Fudongthing and NazongNyu behaved in a manner befitting their celestial lineage, they prospered and never suffered any real grief.”¹⁴¹ And:

...like all humans, they were capable of both good and evil and soon got tired of following the dictates of God the creator. Failing to resist temptation, NazongNyu constructed a golden ladder and climbed up Nareng-Nangsheng Chyu to meet Fudongthing. Fudongthing too did not pay heed to Itbu-Moo’s warning. They began to secretly meet at Tarkol-Partam, a flat piece of meadow land between the mountain and the lake.¹⁴²

Yishay Doma continues, “So absorbed were they in their own company that they forgot Itbu-moo and her divine decree and started living together.”¹⁴³ This was in contravention of Itbu-moo’s building. As a result of this forbidden union, soon a monster child was born of them. Both were afraid that God would come to know about their mischief, so they threw the child away in the forest. Foning writes:

Now NazongNyu started throwing away the children of this forbidden union without suckling. They were the ‘Dom Mung,’ the devil of leprosy, ‘Arot Mung,’ the devil of accidents and misfortune, ‘Ginu Mung,’ the devil of envy and jealousy, and many other devils that trouble us today.”¹⁴⁴

Stocks records, that the dog who kept watch over NazongNyu’s doorway let the secret out to Itbu-Moo, because it had not forgotten Tukbothing’s ill-treatment of it.¹⁴⁵ The two were branded as offenders, and as punishment they were ousted from their divine abodes in the region of the *chyu-bee* and were sent down to earth. Foning claims that, “Itbu-Moo the mother creator, naturally, was a bit hurt and displeased with her favorite creation,

¹⁴¹ Yishey Doma, *Legends of the Lepchas*, 2.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 2-3.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁴⁴ A.R. Foning, *Lepcha, My Vanishing Tribe*, 89.

¹⁴⁵ C. De Beauvoir Stocks, 27.

and although she did not give a harsh punishment besides expulsion, that hurt feeling resulted in suffering for humans.”¹⁴⁶ The creation narrative has many similarities with the Biblical creation narrative. But much before the advancement of Christianity in the region, these stories had been passed down orally from the elders to their next generations. Most likely, the belief in one Supreme Being, the creator of all things, was running in the Lepcha blood and not injected from outside, or perhaps the creation narrative is universal to such an extent that we cannot determine the origin.

2.5.2. The Goodness of the Creator

2.5.2.1. The Goodness of the Creator in Contrast to the Maleficent Spirits

Misfortune was ascribed to the evil spirits and they were appeased by offering sacrifices of domesticated animals, Chi, fruits rice, fish, egg, etc.¹⁴⁷ Stocks, in his book *Folk-Lore and Customs of the Lepchas of Sikkim*, presents an instance where the Bungthings had a covenant with the evil spirits where a condition was agreed upon that the evil spirits would not harm the humans in return for fowls, eggs, pigs or any other animals as an appeasement. He writes:

The Mung (evil spirits) caught hold of Him (Bungthing) saying, “On one condition we will do everything you command, when we worry the human beings with disease and illness, we will go away and leave them in peace if, in return, you will give us something....” To this they all agreed and at PartamSakber the Mung swore that when they worried a human person with illness they would agree to leave the sick person in peace were the Bungthing to attend to the patient, and propitiate them, the Mung by giving an offering of a cow, a pig or several goats.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁶ A.R. Foning, *Lepcha, My Vanishing Tribe*, 89.

¹⁴⁷ See K.P. Tamsang, *The Unknown and Untold Reality*, 43.; D.C. Roy, *Lepchas, Past and Present.*, 130; D.T. Tamlong, *MayelLyang*, 40-44.; Indira Awasty, 31.

¹⁴⁸ C. De Beauvoir Stocks, 30-31.

Even the beneficent spirits expected offerings to be persuaded into doing something favourable. Offering such as flowers, fruits, birds and animals were sacrificed to gain favor from these benevolent spirits.¹⁴⁹ These benevolent spirits are guardian deities appointed by the Supreme Being and have been assigned power and authority over certain worldly affairs. Lepchas believe that these good spirits do not harm them. These spirits are worshipped regularly in the routine time and manner and offered thanks for all blessings which make Lepcha life smooth and prosperous.¹⁵⁰

In contrast to this, the Supreme Being required no sacrifices. The creator was deemed to be naturally good to the creatures. All blessings are attributed to the Supreme Being. Due to his good nature the people were not bothered to appease Him.¹⁵¹ Sadhu Sunder Singh writes:

Once I asked the Lepcha folks in Sikkim, why are you worshipping the evil spirits forgetting the living God? They replied, 'We fear the evil spirits every time because they are likely to harm us. That is why we want to appease them. Why must we appease God or the good spirits who never harm us?'¹⁵²

The creator was uniquely understood more precisely by his ontological goodness and thus the dispensability of sacrifices and offerings for appeasement and favor.

¹⁴⁹ G. Tshering, *The Introduction of Lepcha Tribes* (Darjeeling: Shyam Publication, 1971), 10, (written in Nepali).

¹⁵⁰ See D.C. Roy, 130ff.

¹⁵¹ See Sadhu Sunder Singh, *Search for Truth* (Allahabad: Rev. J.P. J Mandralai, North India Christian Tract and Book Society), 11, (in Hindi language) cited by Nirwan Amos Subba, *Lepcha People and some Related Stories of the Bible*, 22.

¹⁵² Ibid.

2.5.2.2. God's Goodness Expressed in His Provision and Protection

To the Lepchas, God is the source of every good thing. Lepchas turn to him for protection, security, wellbeing and blessings. Nirwan Amos writes, "Rongkups also call the creator "Idbu-Moo" meaning Creator mother. God the creator is like a mother who is merciful, compassionate, caring, providing and protecting."¹⁵³ For Lepchas, God's goodness is expressed in His provision. They can never think of God as capable of doing evil and harming His creation. Rather, they believe that He is there for His people every time they need Him. Therefore, they strongly depend on prayers, even for their temporal needs. Tamsang writes:

They assemble at a certain place, either at home or in the open place under the bright sun, led by their spiritual Bungthing or Mun. Then they pray, salute, and bow down to get blessings, life power, long life and protection from disease, sickness, misfortune and untimely death. They invoke God to give them help, guidance and to abide with them.¹⁵⁴

2.5.3. The Almightyness of the Creator

2.5.3.1. The Earthen Pot Tower

There are numerous stories strongly indicating the almightyness of the Creator. The mythology of the building of the earthen pot tower carries two narratives. The first narrative describes that the tower was built as an observation post to watch out for Laso-Mung Pano, the devil, and probably owing to the fear, terror, danger, fright and horror of this devil, some Lepchas fled south arriving at ToonooTungshi Da, the source of the Romam river and followed its course and finally arrived at Da Roam-dyen and finally built the legendary

¹⁵³ Nirwan Amos Subba, *The Introductory History of Lepcha People*, 36.

¹⁵⁴ See K.P. Tamsang, *The Unknown and Untold Reality*, 57.

Lepcha Earthen Tower to go to heaven. The main intention here was to be near their Itbu-Debu Rum, the Creator.¹⁵⁵

The second narrative tells us that the human beings started developing aspirations of going up to Rumlyang to meet the great Mother Creator; therefore, they decided to construct an earthen pot tower beyond the clouds and through the sky. Foning writes:

Having found a suitable flat place at the heart of their Mayal country (Tal-om Partam in present day South Sikkim), an army of workers got busy on the job. Some started shaping the earthen pots, some collected firewood to burn and harden them, while others started the actual construction work by piling the burned up pots upside down. When the structure had almost reached the ceiling of the firmament, the ones who were on the top, to hook it to the sky-ceiling, shouted down, “*kokveem yang tal*” (pass the hooked stick up). Those below heard, “*Veen chyektel?*” (smash down on the left side?). Both sides repeated the message again and again. At last, frustrated, the top ones shouted down, nodding vigorously, “*Ak, Ak*” (Yes, Yes). Then came the inevitable great crash and fall. Thus ended the foolish aspiration of the Rongfolk in their attempt to meet the Almighty Creator face to face.¹⁵⁶

The story teaches us that the human beings cannot reach God with their own effort. God is almighty and as Foning puts it, “Itbu-Moo is one who is never met materially.”¹⁵⁷ Thus humans are always dependent on the almighty mother creator (Itbu-Debu Rum Daar) and therefore can only approach her through prayer, sacrifices and offerings.¹⁵⁸

2.5.3.2. The Creator’s Gift

Lepchas believe that the power to create, control and designate gifts solely lies with ItbuDebu Rum Daar or Itbu-Moo, the mother creator. Foning noted that it is Her will that

¹⁵⁵ Lyangsong Tamsang (ed.), *Lepcha Folklore and Folk Songs*, 14-15.

¹⁵⁶ A.R. Foning, *Lepcha, My Vanishing Tribe*, 90-91. Also see C. De Beauvoir Stocks, 359-360.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 91.

after the land, sky and the seas were brought into existence along with all their component parts, different creatures were created that would inhabit and enjoy it and make Itbu-Moo's creation a paragon. Among them was a human being. Before they were sent into the world to manage on their own, Itbu-Moo called them near to give them gifts.¹⁵⁹

Further, the creatures formed themselves into groups. The first group, including buffaloes, bulls, cows, deer, stags, asked for a gift with which they could protect themselves from others; they received horns. The next group said that they would appreciate fighting, without which they would get nowhere. Led by the lion, tiger, and leopard, they took away sharp claws and fangs. Next came the party which thought that the earth would be too troublesome to allow them to make a good living. So, they asked for a gift that would free them from the predicament. The vulture, kite, crow and other birds instantly took to their wings and left the place.

Then came the group who said that since the land and the sky were overcrowded, they would be happy to occupy the sea, rivers and oceans. Hence, having received special lungs, fins, tails and some coats of fur, they dived into the water. The human being was the last creature, standing demurely, not demanding anything and looking scared to come in front of the Great Mother. It touched her. She signaled him to come near and asked, "What would you like to have?" There was silence. She asked again. Since the others had taken all the conceivable gifts, he could not think of anything. Realizing this, Itbu-Moo caught hold of him lovingly, acknowledged his patience and understanding, and gave the best of the gifts, *Nung-Young* (intelligence and wisdom), which made him superior to other

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 101.

creatures. By virtue of this gift, humans shall lord it over all the creatures on land, sea and sky.¹⁶⁰

For Foning, the great Itbu-Moo decreed the gift of intelligence and wisdom to human beings unlike the other creatures and as a result the human beings became superior and the lord over other creatures. Thus, the human being, receiving the blessing of this gift, was thankful and grateful to Itbu-Moo.¹⁶¹ The story strongly indicates that the almighty Creator is always the owner and controller of all creation. She called everyone to be responsible stewards and has never transferred Her ownership to the creature. It is also clear that God holds the call to designate what is best for the creature and no one can question that.

2.5.3.3. Almighty God is Superior to Other Gods and Bad Spirits

Lepchas believe that every good thing in this world is a creation of the Almighty God. Therefore, as a grand designer, He has purposefully placed everything in various positions to faithfully serve His purpose. For example, God created Mt. Kanchanjunga to look after the welfare of the Lepchas and keep a watch on the well-being of the country inhabited by them. Thus, Lepchas consider Kanchanjunga as the guardian deity, and as such offer it worship and have reverence for it.¹⁶² Kanchanjunga by itself does not have any power in it but the mother Creator accredited it with divinity.¹⁶³ Even the evil spirits who had their origin from the result of the disobedience of the first man and woman

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 101-103.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 103.

¹⁶² Ibid., 44.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 44.

(Fodongthing and NazongNyu),¹⁶⁴ show their subordination to the almighty “...even though they only bring pain to the Lepchas and never allow them to worship the true God”.¹⁶⁵

The story of Laso Mung Panu clearly indicates that this demon king was mighty and troubled the Lepchas but when they prayed to the Almighty God, ItbuDebu Rum came to their rescue and subdued the demon king. Who is this Laso Mung Pano? Yishey Doma writes:

Fudongthing and NazongNyu’s first seven children who were abandoned and thrown away (because of their forbidden union) had not died. They had grown up to become demons. ...The eldest among them was Laso Mung. He was also referred to as Lasso Mung Pano or the demon king. Angry with his parents for the discrimination, the demon king was desperate to destroy the Lepcha world.¹⁶⁶

The demons had become powerful and there was not a single human who could fight and kill a demon. “Thus, the Lepchas had no alternative but to pray and seek help from Itbu-Moo to save them from the demon king.”¹⁶⁷ God saw their grief and heard their cry and therefore created Tamsangthing from the pure virgin snow and sent him to MayellYang to save the Lepchas and subdue the demon king. Tamsang writes:

When the Lepchas were suffering under the severe oppression of the demon king, Laso Mung Pano, they prayed to God to save them from the demon king. God felt pity on the Lepchas and as such He again came down on the summit of Pandim and created Tamsangthing which means ‘the saviour’ from the pure, virgin snows of Pandim peak and sent him down to MayellYang to kill the demon king and his followers and deliver the Lepchas from their misery. Before sending him down to MayellYang, God said to him, ‘You are my best creation and therefore my most beloved one’ and God bestowed upon him supernatural powers to subdue the demons.

¹⁶⁴ Yishey Doma, 2-3. Also see A.R. Foning, *Lepcha, My Vanishing Tribe*, 89.

¹⁶⁵ Nirwan Amos Subba, *Lepcha People and some Related Stories of the Bible*, 22.

¹⁶⁶ Yishey Doma, 11.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

Thus after coming down to MayelLyang, he assembled the panic-stricken Lepchas at Tarkaol Tam-e-Tam and then fought with the demon king for twelve long years and at last killed him at SukvyerPurtam which means, 'the valley of death'.¹⁶⁸

Tamsang also mentions that, "The Lord Tamsangthing wished to give the supernatural powers to a chaste man and chaste woman and made them to bring back the lost moral philosophy of the Lepchas. Thus, the first consecrated Bungthing was Thikoong Azaor Bungthing and the first consecrated Mun was Nyookoong Nyoolik Mun."¹⁶⁹ According to Yishey Doma's version of this story, after Laso Mung Pano is killed, "in order to get rid of the menace of the demons, the Bungthing summoned all the other demons and evil spirits, who had fled to the depths of the world, for a meeting. In this meeting, the Bungthing agreed to offer animal and bird sacrifices to the demons, who in return promised to leave MayelLyang for the Lepchas and stop bothering them."¹⁷⁰

To this the demons agreed but never could be trusted. However, this episode marks the beginning of appeasing the demons to keep them at bay. Yishey Doma writes:

In those ancient times, the Lepchas of MayelLyang did not know many rites and rituals. They prayed to Itbu-Moo morning and night. Although they knew about evil spirits and demons and were afraid to go anywhere near them, they did not think it necessary to make offerings to appease them. It was the bungthing, a man of great wisdom and understanding of the mysteries of life, who started making sacrifices to the chief of the spirits. And it is from him the Lepchas learnt to propitiate and pay obeisance to more than one supreme creator.¹⁷¹

Nirwan Amos claims that, "The Lepchas slowly tilted from Creator to the creation. Fallen from Itbu-Debu Rum Daar (Almighty God) to Chu (mountain)... In the latter days

¹⁶⁸ K.P. Tamsang, *The Unknown and Untold Reality*, 64.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁷⁰ Yishey Doma, 17.

¹⁷¹ Yishey Doma, 18.

they compromised with the devil too. Slowly, they started to appease these devils and soon they took the place of Itbu-Debu Rum.”¹⁷² This story clearly indicates that God is almighty and more powerful than any other gods and spirits. He is near to listen to the peoples’ cries and will always be there to rescue his people. If there is any distance created or perhaps a compromised solution has taken place, it was not God who did it but the humans; in fact, according to the tradition it was the Bungthing.

2.5.3.4. The Tale of Chyakmong Bird

The idea that Itbu-Debu Rum, the great creator God is superior to other lesser ones is also strongly depicted in the tale of Chyakmong Bird. The mythology says that among all the birds this Chyakmong Fo is undoubtedly the best singer. Foning writes:

Once Itbu-Debu Rum, the Great Creator God on high, called the lesser ones together and asked them if they had been hearing a fervent prayer and supplication to Him in a melodious voice. To this they answered that they too had been hearing and listening to the same at dawn and dusk. The Great Creator then commanded that the creature be brought up from the world of mortals.¹⁷³

Thereupon, the God’s attendants, including fairies and nymphs, got themselves busy combing through the human world, searching for this particular sweet singing devotee. Some of the gods themselves also descended with them. With the help of the gods, the bird was soon spotted, tested and taken up along with them and presented before the Great Creator. The Great One, along with the other gods, was deeply touched by his sincere

¹⁷² Nirwan Amos Subba, *Lepcha People and some Related Stories of the Bible*, 20-21.

¹⁷³ A.R. Foning, *Lepcha, My Vanishing Tribe*, 106.

tuneful supplication and so, being pleased, as a reward the great Creator decreed that the bird should be all gold, shiny and bright.¹⁷⁴

The story further unfolds as the Chyakmong Fo returns to the earth and starts singing all over the place, but this time it was proud of its distinction and achievement. Seeing this, all the other birds felt jealous and later attacked her and pecked all her golden feathers and left her to die. After many hours she gained consciousness but found out that, except for her beak, all her golden colors had turned deep and dark blue on account of the pecking. The tale teaches us that our sincere supplication will surely reach our great Creator. However, the tale also teaches us “not to take pride in one’s own possessions and not to show off as did the Chyakmong bird.”¹⁷⁵ But more than that, we can see a clear distinction between the Almighty Creator and the lesser gods. Itbu-Debu Rum Daar is depicted as superior and holds authority over all the gods and heavenly hosts.

2.5.3.5. Limitedness of the Spirits as Compared to Almighty God

When we look at the layers of functioning of all the gods and spirits, they are limited to a particular place, time, situation and responsibility. They are not prepared beyond that. For example, *Li-Rum* is a household deity who is responsible to protect the house, property, animals, crops and overall well-being of the Lepchas. *Lyang-Rum* is the god of the land. The Lepchas worship him so that they can get good rain in time for the field. *Muk-Zuk-Rum* is the god of vegetation.¹⁷⁶ The Lepchas, through the Bungthing, thank this

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 106-107.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 108.

¹⁷⁶ See D.C. Roy, *Lepchas Past and Present*, 131-132

benevolent spirit for timely supply of all natural gifts, like mist, cloud, sunshine, clear air, water, etc. Even the mountains have their own limitations.

For example, the *Tendong/Tungraong Lho Rum* is a holy and sacred mountain that saved the Lepchas from drowning during the great flood. Lepchas pray and worship this mountain as a request to protect them from such a deluge again. Mt. Kanchanjunga stands tall for the Lepchas to protect them from all evils, troubles and misfortunes. *Mut-Rum* or *Pong Rum* is a jungle spirit and provides the Lepchas with fruits and animals. The spirits are also believed to protect and save the cultivable land from rats, insects and animals. *Tung-Baong Rum* is a female spirit responsible for looking after the newborn babies. After offering to Tung-Baong the child becomes a member of the Lepcha society. *Sugi-Rum* is connected with faat where ovation and thanksgiving are offered to their respective teachers.¹⁷⁷

When we study the evil spirits, even they have their own territories and ways of functioning. Nirwan Amos points out, “Alyu Mung are witches, Sor Mung cause stomach aches, Ginu Mung are spirits of jealousy, Chu Mu Mung are man eaters, Su Mung are the spirits that cause friction and fights, Alu Mung are spirits who live in the high altitudes.”¹⁷⁸

D.C. Roy puts it more descriptively:

Laso-Mung for Lepchas is a man-eating monster who used to kill and eat the Lepchas whenever they entered the forest. This evil spirit camouflaged himself in the form of different animals.... *Arot-Mung* is the devil responsible for causing accidents and committing suicide among the Lepchas. ... *Midyup-Mung* is responsible for coughs and colds. *Shor-Mung* is responsible for creating enmity among the Lepchas. He is also responsible for miscarriage. *Sungrong or Sumu-Mung* is a dreadful devil who lives in high altitude. *Apal-Mung* is the devil responsible for

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 132-134.

¹⁷⁸ Nirwan Amos Subba, *The Introductory History of Lepcha People*, 41-42.

frightening the children. *Khung-Mung* is the devil causing unauthorized sexual relations among the Lepcha boys and girls before marriage. *Soomu-Mung* is a female spirit, very ugly and dirty, who harasses the travellers at night by changing their shape.¹⁷⁹

All the good spirits and the bad spirits, or even those guardian deities, we see are limited to their own territory and function. They don't have the characteristics of the "omni" (omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent) in them. The characteristics of "omni" only lie with Itbu-Debu Rum. Thus, it is evident that Itbu-Debu Rum, the great Creator, is the most powerful and superior and is in control of everything in this world, even the evil spirits.

2.5.4. The Almighty God as Transcendent and Immanent

Nirwan Amos claims that "in the ancient stories of Lepchas God appeared to them three times in the mountain: first to create human beings; second, to save the Lepchas from the flood, and third to deliver them from the demon king Laso Mung Pano."¹⁸⁰ During the time of creation, the folk story indicates that God had a personal relationship with His creation. Itbu-Moo created both the world and the first man from the pure virgin snow of Mt. Kanchanjunga. Later taking out a bit of nungyong (marrow) from the man's bones, Itbu-Moo created the woman.¹⁸¹ God personally met them and gave them instructions. Yishey Doma writes, "Having created the first man and first woman, brother and sister, Itbu-Moo called them and said, 'I have blessed both of you with supernatural powers. Both of you should live separately as true brother and sister. You can never live together.' Both

¹⁷⁹ D.C. Roy, 134-135.

¹⁸⁰ Nirwan Amos Subba, *The Introductory History of Lepcha People*, 44.

¹⁸¹ See. A.R. Foning, *Lepcha, My Vanishing Tribe*, 88. Also see Yishey Doma, 2.

promised they would follow her decree.”¹⁸² However, after the fall, the humans lost their personal touch with God. Nevertheless, that transcendent God continues to be immanent to them actively working in the nature of the universe and being available whenever needed.

During the great flood, when the creatures including the Lepchas desperately prayed to Itbu-Moo, she softened and the flood started abating.¹⁸³ This indicates that the Lepcha perceive God as both ‘beyond’ but not ‘outside’ of them. Mt. Tendong stood as the representative of God for the rescue mission of Her creatures. Though ultimately God abated the flood, Mt. Tendong also had a role to play to sustain the creatures for a little longer until the timely help was sent down from Itbu-Moo.

The transcendent God is also immanent through Bungthing and Mun, through whom supernatural power may be manifested. In the fight against Laso Mung Pano, Lepchas prayed to God and God sent Lord Tamsangthing to save them from the clutches of evil.¹⁸⁴ The transcendent God became immanent through a person to finally kill the demon king. The tradition says the Lord Tamsangthing gave supernatural power to the first Bungthing and first Mun¹⁸⁵ and thereafter the Bungthing and Mun started playing the role of mediator between God and humans and humans and demons.

¹⁸² Yishey Doma, 2.

¹⁸³ See A.R. Foning, *Lepcha, My Vanishing Tribe*, 91-92.

¹⁸⁴ See K.P. Tamsang, *The Unknown and Untold Reality*, 64.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 44.

2.5.5. From Known to Unknown: Almighty God as the Last Resort

God, for Lepchas, maybe symbolically represented through a stone, lake, tree, mountain, or even a particular location. K.P Tamsang writes, “To see Lepcha devotees kneeling before the image of a stone statue or idol, or rock, or giant tree, or mountain, or river, etc., does not mean that they are worshipping a mere idol, or a stone, or a tree, or a mountain, or a river, but in reality, they are fired with genuine devotion and they worship not an idol or a rock, or a tree, or a mountain, but the divinity of which it is symbolic.”¹⁸⁶ Describing the Himalayas as a symbolic representation of God, he further writes, “Looking at these splendid beauties of the snowy mountains, one feels that God’s purity and sublimity are fully manifested only high up there amid the eternal snows.”¹⁸⁷

‘Symbols’ here may mean an indicator or a pointer to the real. Snowy mountains stand as a symbol of purity, strength and protection, so is God for the Lepchas. Thus, when they are worshipping facing towards the snowy mountain, they are actually not worshipping the mountain but the God of that mountain. The mountain is a reminder to them of the holiness, almightiness and protection of Itbu-Debu Rum Daar. However, some Lepchas are also of the view that God has assigned different spirits, mountains, locations, etc., as guardian deities and accredited them with divinity, and thus Lepchas worship them.

A.R. Foning explains that the reverence and worship of natural objects, especially Mt. Kongchen (Mt. Kanchanjunga) is because it was Itbu-Moo, the great mother creator herself, who created Kongchen and other mountains and accredited them with divinity and ordained Kongchen, among others, to receive honor of the highest order and degree and to

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 51.

¹⁸⁷ K.P. Tamsang, *The Unknown and Untold Reality*, 60.

be worshipped by mortals as such. Kanchanjunga would look after the welfare of the Lepchas and keep watch on the well-being of the country inhabited by them. Thus, Lepchas consider Kanchanjunga as their guardian deity.¹⁸⁸

This was possibly a later development because in ancient days Lepchas directly communicated with God.¹⁸⁹ However, this does not mean that they no longer pray to the mother creator. They worship these lesser deities or appease the evil spirits, but if these spirits cannot really answer them, then Itbu-Moo is the last option to go to. The mother creator is the final resort. The idea here is that they think if lesser gods can solve their problems why bother the mother Creator. If what is known cannot solve their problems then they go to the unknown, to the mother Creator.

2.5.6. The Almighty Creator, the Ultimate Judge

God is also the one who sees and knows everything happening on earth; good and evil. God above, looks down from high to simply either reward or punish the creatures. When the first man and woman sinned against the Almighty creator, God punished them and sent them away to live in the foothills of the Himalayas. Lyangsong writes:

In anger, God summoned them both and said, ‘You have committed a sin. I cannot allow you two to live in this sacred mountain any longer. As a punishment, both of you now must live at the foothills of Mt. Kanchanjunga as humans and suffer’. Fudongthing and NazongNyo were sent down to the foothills of Mt. Kanchanjunga as husband and wife. They gave birth to several children and these children, in course of time, spread over the foothills of Mt. Kanchanjunga. Fudongthing and NazongNyo are thus called

¹⁸⁸ A.R. Foning, *Lepcha, My Vanishing Tribe*, 44.

¹⁸⁹ See Nirwan Amos Subba, *The Introductory History of Lepcha People*, 44. See also Yishey Doma, 18.

‘Poomthing,’ meaning the first ancestor of the Lepcha race, by the Lepchas.¹⁹⁰

The reason for the great flood can also be traced back to a disciplinary action from the mother Creator for forgetting Her. Foning writes:

As the Lepchas prospered and multiplied in the fertile MayelLyang, they started forgetting Itbu-Moo, the Mother Creator, and became negligent in offering sacrifices and prayers. The great Mother was hurt. The big black shiny Pamolbu, the very embodiment of evil in a serpent form, went and blocked the flow of the two main rivers, Rongit and Rong-Nyu, flowing through the prosperous Mayel country. The water started rising and at last all the land was submerged under the great flood, destroying everything. Seeing the vast destruction caused by the flood, many realized their mistake and set about appeasing Itbu-Moo’s wrath by offering special sacrifices, burning incense, and prayers, but it was of no avail. Animals, birds and all other earthly creatures also tried to soften Mother’s hurt feelings. At last, Kahomfo, the partridge, reaching the topmost part of the mountain, started offering oblations of *mongchee*, the brewed millet seeds which it had brought in a huge leaf. Facing towards the Kanchanjunga, it started tossing the chee grains upward towards the sky, praying and pleading for mercy on behalf of the creatures of the earth. Itbu-Moo softened and the flood started abating. The few who had followed the partridge also succeeded in reaching the top and were saved.¹⁹¹

The judgment of Almighty God is temporal and not eternal. Lepchas believe that they are the chosen race and God will never send them to eternal damnation because Lepcha ancient belief is that there is only heaven, *Rumlyang*, and nothing else. After the death of a person, his or her soul is taken back to heaven by *Bungthing* and *Mun*. Their idea of heaven is a place above the sky,¹⁹² where the Rum reside. Beneath the earth is said to be water, fire and wind.¹⁹³ “After the advent of Lamaism they now believe in a more mythical world, including *Rumlyang* (heaven), *Nyolyang* (hell), *Numsyim-Nyolyang* (human world),

¹⁹⁰ Lyangsong Tamsang (ed.), *Lepcha Folklore and Folk Songs*, 3-4.

¹⁹¹ A.R. Foning, *Lepcha, My Vanishing Tribe*, 91-92.

¹⁹² The raising of the earthen tower at Tallaom Purtam in Western Sikkim was to reach heaven.

¹⁹³ Indira Awasty, 31.

Munglyang (evil spirit world), *Thamchanglyang* (animal world) and *Muknyamlyang* (spirit world).”¹⁹⁴ There was no concept of hell in ancient Lepcha belief. They did not know the meaning of ‘sin,’ except for the confused knowledge of what was taught to them from Buddhist and Christian doctrines. Foning writes:

The so-called sin that we are supposed to commit we ascribe to the different *mung*, or devils and evil spirits. This, commanded by the great *Itbu-Moo*, the *bungthings* tackle and handle for us. Besides, in our society and community, there is natural disapproval and abhorrence for the commission of deeds which others term “sin”. If the *Sanglyon* ceremony for the dead is not performed, the soul will keep wandering around the places where the person moved when he was alive till eternity.¹⁹⁵

The idea of salvation for Lepchas is to reach heaven, *rumlyang*, and Mun and Bungthing play the mediator role for their journey. The one obstacle is not sin but the *mung* or evil spirits. And this can be handled by appeasing them through ceremonial sacrifices. Thus, it is understood that the almighty God is a judge who judges people not to punish them into eternal damnation but rather to chastise His people so that they can realize their flaws and return back to Him.

2.6. Attributes and Nature of God Expressed in Lepcha Cultural Traits

The Lepcha people asserted their individuality, like other groups, through their culture. Any particular people (nation, tribe, ethnic group) has its own culture, its distinct way of living, eating, playing and worshipping. ‘Culture’ may refer to the musical and visual arts, modern influence on life, an acquired tradition or the regulations that bind the

¹⁹⁴ K.P. Tamsang, *The Unknown and Untold Reality*, 54-55.

¹⁹⁵ A.R. Foning, *Lepcha, My Vanishing Tribe*, 115.

life of a community.¹⁹⁶ E.B. Tylor in his *Primitive Culture* (1871) states that, “Culture... is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.”¹⁹⁷ Clifford Geertz defines culture as “a historically transmitted pattern of meaning embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which humans communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about an attitude towards life.”¹⁹⁸ Thus, culture includes avenues of religion, politics, morality, value system, in fact a total way of life. Accordingly, Lepcha culture is an ordered system of meaning and symbols. The way of life of the Lepchas is reflected by their culture.

K.P Tamsang writes:

The Lepcha (culture) can be said to be the sum total of their religious practices, dogmas, history, language, literature, customs, manners, etiquettes, tradition, songs, dances, music, and the geographical and economic conditions of the country. The Lepcha culture is in fact, the yardstick of the Lepcha civilization. The Lepcha, though a small community in number, are a nation by any definition. ...The salient features of the Lepcha culture and the Lepcha way of living, customs, manners are indelibly stamped on the language, arts and architecture of their country Sikkim and Darjeeling.¹⁹⁹

Foning too asserts:

In the absence of any knowledge of science of any kind, we, by experience, trial and error, have evolved our own method of tackling the various problems touching different aspects of our lives. ...Our culture, tradition, and way of life are really nothing but the sum total of innumerable such beliefs and superstitions, which to an alien have no meaning whatsoever. In

¹⁹⁶ Musimbi R.A. Kanjoro, “Culture,” *Dictionary of Third World Theologies*, edited by Virginia Fabella & R.S. Sugirtharajah (New York: Orbis Books, 2000), 62.

¹⁹⁷ E.B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture Vol. 2* (New York: American English Edition and Publication, 1874), cited by John Bowker (ed.), *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 248.

¹⁹⁸ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture* (London: Fontana Press, 1993), 89.

¹⁹⁹ K.P. Tamsang, *The Unknown and Untold Reality*, 67.

fact, our conception of God and that of afterlife along with the requirements of our mundane lives we find clothed in these so called superstitions and beliefs. For us, each one of these has indeed a real and a purposeful meaning.²⁰⁰

Lepcha culture is directly tied to Bungthing and Munism. After Lord Tamsangthing consecrated the first Bungthing and the first Mun and accredited them with supernatural power,²⁰¹ the Muns and the Bungthings became the most important part of Lepcha life and culture. K.P Tamsang writes, “The Lepcha tradition says that it was Lord Tamsangthing who had first invented the Lepcha scripts, almanac, customary laws, religious acts and regulations, and Lepcha caste systems at Tarkaol Tam-E-Tam and gave them to the Lepchas, and later on, the Lepcha script was expanded, developed and enlarged by Thikoong Mensalong who was a great Lepcha litterateur, a great Lepcha Bungthing, a great Lepcha hunter and a great Lepcha explorer of that period.”²⁰²

2.6.1. Almighty God Involved in Birth, Marriage and Death through Bungthing and Mun

Bungthing and Mun are shamans, medicine men/women or exorcists.²⁰³ They perform all the religious ceremonies and rituals of the Lepchas from their birth to their death.²⁰⁴ Throughout life they are needed for purging from supernatural danger, for blessing and solemnizing, and above all for driving away devils.²⁰⁵ They are present in all

²⁰⁰ A.R. Foning, *Lepcha, My Vanishing Tribe*, 236-237.

²⁰¹ K.P. Tamsang, *The Unknown and Untold Reality*, 44.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 27.

²⁰³ C. De Beauvoir Stocks, 338.

²⁰⁴ K.P. Tamsang, *The Unknown and Untold Reality*, 43.

²⁰⁵ Geoffrey Gorer, *Himalayan Village*, 230.

the cultural festivals and celebrations. They equally strive to work for the welfare of humans.²⁰⁶

2.6.1.1. Birth

Lepchas believe that a child's life starts at the moment of conception. When the two secretions mingle the soul arrives from heaven or the place of gods. At the fifth month when the baby is considered fully formed the expectant parents start observing the numerous prenatal precautions²⁰⁷ which have to be followed if the child is not to be born malformed, or if the mother is not to have a difficult delivery. Miscarrying is caused by a devil *Sor mung* and is a hereditary sex-linked disability, as is difficult delivery. "After the delivery, for the first three days of life, the baby is considered to be still in the womb and all the prenatal precautions have to be observed."²⁰⁸ During those three days the mother must on no account touch the ground; were she to do so the blood clot would not descend. On the third day the baby is officially born and a special birth feast is held for it. The mother is also washed on the third day and dressed in new or clean clothes. The baby is washed in lukewarm water, morning and evening. For the third day feast, the mother sits in a corner of the kitchen with the baby wrapped in a piece of white cloth on her lap. The first person to arrive at the house must be the *Mun*; if a *Mun* has been employed to assist in the delivery

²⁰⁶ A.R. Foning, Lepcha, *My Vanishing Tribe*, 83.

²⁰⁷ There are various practical and superstitious traditional beliefs which the parents follow here. See Geoffrey Gorer, 284, and C. De Beauvoir Stocks, 142.

²⁰⁸ H.M. Bareh (ed), "Sikkim," *Encyclopedia of North-East India, Vol. VII* (New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 2001), 278.

the same one must officiate at the birth feast. Sometimes during the ceremony, the child is given its first name by the officiating *Mun* or by anyone present.²⁰⁹

2.6.1.2. Marriage

Earlier the Lepcha marriage involved seven stages, viz. *Nyom-Vyat*, *Nyom-Khyoum*, *Myok-Punol*, *Asek*, *Tungong*, *Nyom-Rumfatt* and *Nyom-LeemRhon*.²¹⁰ Foning generalizes these into three important stages; *Nyom-Vyat*, *Ashake* and *Bree*. *Nyom-Vyat* means ‘making enquiry about the bride.’²¹¹ *Ashake* is engagement, which is permanent and stable.²¹² *Bree* means wedding. Winter is best for the wedding when the granary is still full and days are dry.²¹³ On the day of the wedding *Bungthing* is the main officiating priest who proceeds with the *Sakyu Rum Fat*(ceremony).²¹⁴ After the invocation and the *Rum Fat* to the gods and the supernatural beings, the officiating priest addresses the bride and the groom jointly with some instructions and exhortations. Then the priest hands over a wooden or bamboo cup which has dabs of butter on the rim, filled with consecrated *chee* from the bowl, and makes both the bride and the groom sip it three times each. This is symbolic of the oath of matrimony. As witnesses, for attestation to the proceedings before the gods, both bride’s and groom’s people are also made to sip three times each from the

²⁰⁹ Geoffrey Gorer, *Himalayan Village*, 283-294.

²¹⁰ H.M. Bareh (ed), 278.

²¹¹ A.R. Foning, *Lepcha, My Vanishing Tribe*, 207-208.

²¹² The groom uses bamboo winnowing fans, or a sheet of cloth to display presents in front of the in-laws.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 217.

²¹⁴ He dedicates the groom’s bull to the gods of marriage. Here various ritualistic invocations are made to the gods. The bull is sacrificed. And after having finished all this ceremony, the *Bungthing* is now ready to consecrate the marriage.

same cup. This signifies the sacramental consecration to the covenant of union between the bride and the groom directly, and between the clans brought together indirectly.²¹⁵

2.6.1.3. Death and Burial

When the dead person is being taken out of the house, the body never passes through any door. Normally one section of the wall is smashed down. It is easy to do this, because in the *Dukaymoo*, or any house, the walls have sectional panels and braided bamboo strips as reinforcement.²¹⁶ Before the body is removed it is made to go around the house three times before being taken to the final resting place.²¹⁷ For burial, a square or a round hole is dug, big enough to permit the corpse to assume a sitting position facing the sacred Kanchanjunga.²¹⁸ In the chanting and invocations of the *Muns*, the 'Apil' (soul) is told of the dangerous rivers it has to cross, the perilous precipices it has to negotiate, and while getting past the village of fearful *mung*, they must remain alert. Then the dead body is lowered into the pit along with grains, *chee*, and various other things.²¹⁹ To this is added a small replica of a ladder and a rope, which are supposed to come into use while the soul is negotiating the imagined obstacles on its onward journey to *Rumlyang* (heaven).²²⁰ The

²¹⁵ Ibid., 221-224.

²¹⁶ Sometimes the dead body is taken out through the roughly-hewn wooden flooring of the house. Another variation was that the outer casing of the banana was made to rest against the framework of the main door, particularly at the sides. Two pieces were placed on either side of the door in such a way that the opening left at the door was very small. When the dead body is taken outside it is brought down with the effort, which is a symbolic expression of the custom of knocking down a part of the house.

²¹⁷ Ibid., 42-43.

²¹⁸ The Lepchas believe that while the *Mun* is performing the *Sanglyon*, the after-death ceremony for the transportation of the soul to *Rumlyang*, the place of the gods to meet with the souls of their ancestors, and when his or her 'Apil' is being instructed, and shown the way, he or she must remain awake and look towards the destination.

²¹⁹ In the case of *Muns* and *Bungthings*, all the paraphernalia of the trade of these divines, such as the sickle of the *Mun*, the medicinal items, divining gadgets, the rosary and other things are all put in.

²²⁰ Ibid., 40.

grave is covered with thorny shrubs to prevent the *Apil* from coming back. It might want a companion until the time the *Mun* undertakes its transportation to the *Rumlyang*.²²¹

2.6.2. Almighty God involved in Lepcha Language, Art and Architecture

The salient features of Lepcha culture and lifestyle are indelibly stamped on their language, arts and architecture. K.P. Tamsang writes, “The Lepcha tradition says that the Lepcha language is the very language of God, because after God had created the Lepchas’ first primogenitors Fudongthing and NazongNyo from the pure, virgin snows of Mount Kanchanjunga’s pinnacle, God had spoken with them in this very Lepcha language, which they in turn later taught this very language to their children and which the present Lepchas are speaking to this day as handed down to them from God and their first primogenitors and ancestors.”²²² Lepcha architecture is strongly dependent on Bamboo, a hollow, woody, tree like plant which plays the most important factor in the construction of Lepcha cane bridges, bamboo rafts and houses, etc. K.P. Tamsang writes, “God had actually created the bamboos along with the Lepchas, for it helps to build houses, rafts, bridges, handicrafts, bows, arrows, spears, fishing rods, traps and contrivances, furniture, utensils, baskets, mats, water jugs, fences, props, ropes, sticks, firewood, flutes, Jew’s harps, poles, stakes and what naught that can be made out of it for the use of mankind.”²²³

Thus, it is understood that the Lepchas cannot think of culture, art and architecture apart from God. God is involved with them in their daily walk of life. For them, belief in

²²¹ Ibid., 41.

²²² K.P. Tamsang, *The Unknown and Untold Reality*, 11.

²²³ Ibid., 67-68.

the sovereignty of God is also expressed in keeping the natural law or customary laws prescribed by the village community and as demanded by the Bungthing and Mun. Doing so was considered equivalent to doing the will of God, or escaping the judgment of the Supreme Being.

2.7. Summary

The focus of the review of literature in this chapter, is on sections which directly relate to the research problem. The Lepcha tribal folks, who call themselves “Rongkup, Runkup” or “Rong,” are the aborigines of Sikkim, Darjeeling and Kalimpong Districts. They are simple, nature-loving people with a distinct language, culture, community and belief system. With the influx of many other people groups and globalization, they are now a minority tribal group and everything authentic about them is either diluted or waning.

The closest Lepcha word for ‘omnipotence’ is “daar.” “Daar” refers to God who is the Supreme Being, the creator and ruler of all, equivalent to the Hebrew word “El-Shaddai.” “Daar” also means splendid, bright and a ray of light or radiance. Daar” can also mean power and authority in the general sense and sometimes is also used by adding a suffix to the word to give a new and complimentary meaning. The word “Daar” is only used in a positive sense to refer to God or His guardian deities and not evil spirits.

The omnipotent God of the Lepcha is the Supreme creator and sustainer of everything in the universe. They also worship mountains as guardian deities, good spirits and supernatural beings, to whom the Almighty God has assigned power and authority over certain worldly affairs. Lepcha believe that mountains are the symbolic representation of the Almighty God.

Bungthing and Mun are the priest and spiritualist who play the mediating role between God and humans. Prayers are offered through them. Lepchas also believe in harmful evil spirits, to whom they also offer sacrifices in order to appease them. To them the Almighty God is a good God, always seeking the welfare of His people. His goodness is expressed in His protection and provision for His people and He is superior to other gods and bad spirits. This God though good, is also the ultimate judge. He watches over the good and evil happening in the world and either rewards or punishes the creatures. Lepchas believe that God's judgement upon them is temporal because they are the chosen race of God. God will never send them to eternal damnation.

Lepcha culture is directly attached to Bungthing and Mun. Both play an important role in Lepcha life and culture. The belief is that the Almighty God is involved through Bungthing and Mun in birth, marriage, death and burial. Lepchas cannot think of culture, art and architecture apart from God. God is involved in every part of their life. They keep the natural law or customary laws prescribed by the village community as an act of worship and belief in the Sovereign God. This obedience is considered equivalent to doing the will of God, or escaping the judgment of the Supreme Being.

This chapter was not an attempt to review all the concerned literature on this related topic, but reviewed selected documents which were considered foundational for the present research. The challenge was to gather sources from a people who were living as a minority among other dominant cultures, hence the need for empirical research as discussed in Chapter Four. The next chapter deals with the omnipotence of God in tribal theology and its relevance to Lepcha tribal context.

Chapter Three

Omnipotence of God in Christian Tribal Theology in India

3.1. Introduction

Theology is not done in a vacuum; it emerges out of people's historical and spiritual experiences. It is not just grounded in the socio-economic and political realities of the people, but also incorporates the best of people's values, traditions and spirituality. This chapter gives some general background for the empirical research described in chapter four. It can be taken as a preamble to Chapter Four.

Tribals in India have many things in common. They all are counted as minorities, falling into the lowest strata of the society. Except for the few who have risen above, most of them are poor, uneducated and living in oppressed conditions by the so-called higher castes and higher-class people. Lepchas are one of these tribes in India. Besides this, the tribals also have similar cultural patterns, similar belief systems, and similar ways of thinking, and Lepchas are no exception. Therefore, this chapter's discussion of Tribal beliefs in general brings the research in the next chapter into the wider context of the Tribals in India.

Christian Tribal theology is a theology done by the tribals, for the tribals, in India. However, it has its own limitations and weaknesses. This chapter explores the idea of the omnipotence of God in Christian Tribal theology in India. Here, the background is provided, so that it will lead us to comprehend the tribal way of understanding the omnipotent God. Therefore, the chapter starts with the definition of the word "Tribal" and a brief description of the 'tribal people in India' in order to expose the identity and condition of tribal groups in India. The next section discusses the origin and affinity of

tribal theology in India followed by the main characteristics of tribal theology in India. The fifth section will present the idea of the God of the tribes in India. Is the tribal God contra to the Christian God? Or does the tribal God have relative continuity with the Christian God? Or perhaps does the tribal God have absolute continuity with the Christian God? These are the questions we will discuss in this section. The sixth section will deal with the idea of the omnipotence of God as expressed in the tribal worldview and its incorporation into tribal theology in India.

In order to make the omnipotent God relevant to the Lepcha tribes in India, Reformed theology may not want to bypass the understanding and importance of how tribals themselves are doing the interpretation on this topic. The content and ideas from this chapter may be used by Reformed Theology as a wider contextual background to either acclaim, falsify or even balance the tribal understanding of the Omnipotence of God so that it would show the relevancy of the topic for the Lepcha tribal people.

3.2. Definition of the Word “Tribal”

The English word ‘tribe,’ derived from the Latin *tribus*, literally means “to be three.” It was used to identify the three basic divisions of the Roman people– the Tintienses, Ramnenses and Luceres– for the purposes of taxation, military conscription and census taking.¹ Anthropologists use ‘tribe’ or ‘tribal’ to denote “a group of people speaking a common language, observing uniform rules of social organization, and working together for some common purpose such as trade, agriculture, or warfare. Other typical characteristics include a common name, a contiguous territory, a relatively uniform culture

¹ K. Thanzauva, *Theology of Community: Tribal Theology in the Making* (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 2004), 10.

or way of life, and a tradition of common descent.”² In India it may mean primitive people living in the hills and forests, the original but not highly developed inhabitants. Some of the names used for them are Vanjajati (forest caste), Vanvasi (primitive people), Janjati (folk people), Anusuchit Janjati (scheduled tribes), which is a constitutional term, and Adivasi (first settlers).³

Though the original scholarly and official usage of “tribe” did not connote contempt, the way it has come to be used in history has made it highly contested. Some would say that the term ‘tribe’ has accumulated so many pejorative meanings that it cannot be redeemed. They say that it is an imposed term by the Indian government and the term does not elicit pride but connotes backwardness, dependency, passivity, lack of self-esteem and low confidence. Brightstar Jones Syiemlieh writes, “Except for the use of the term in its original context, the term ‘tribe’ in its first reincarnation in modern anthropology, and its second reincarnation in the Indian context, stinks or is a disgrace and shame as the term is too heavily loaded to be fit for use.”⁴

Hence, he concludes that it is not viable for use. However, as Thanzauva suggests, the term ‘Tribal’ is a name that includes all human beings, because at one time all, without exception, were Tribal. Every society has gone through certain stages of evolution, from tribal to modern society. So, the term is a re-affirmation of a glorious history and an affirmation of their history of suffering and alienation and of the way God has liberated

² “Tribes” in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Micropedia, Vol. X, 1979. 115 cited by K. Thanzauva, *Theology of Community*, 10.

³ K. Thanzauva, *Theology of Community*, 11.

⁴ Brightstar Jones Syiemlieh, “The Viability of the Term ‘Tribe’ in the Light of Postmodernity,” *In Search of Identity and Tribal Theology; A Tribute to Dr. Renty Keitzar, Tribal Study Series No. 9*, edited by A. Wati Longchar (Assam: Tribal Study Centre, Eastern Theological College, 2001), 28.

them from the situation. The problem is also not in the term as such, but in the attitude of the dominant groups who have given definitions which are unacceptable. Most importantly, the term 'tribe,' encompasses and embraces all the people belonging to different tribal groups together, in India.⁵

3.2.1. Tribals in India Today

Many of the Tribals (mostly from the plains of the North East and other parts of India), who were once the owners of the land with their own kingdoms, are today reduced to menial status. They have been suffering from alienation of land and culture, from displacement, from illiteracy and from indebtedness. In regard to the nation-state, they are deprived of land and land-based resources, and their livelihood has been ruptured, and their language, religion and culture severely impaired and stigmatized.⁶ Many are labourers, known as Adivasis in the tea gardens (usually found in Assam and West Bengal), who are illiterate and live in a situation of bonded labour.⁷ They are socially oppressed and economically exploited by the non-tribal people. Ponraj writes:

They have been greatly exploited by different people such as the landlords, money lenders, contractors and middlemen. Most of these people are high caste Hindus, Muslim traders, Parse merchants and petty government officials from police and forest departments. The exploitation is related to land exploitation by landlords and mahajans, economic exploitation by landlords, money lenders and merchants, labour exploitation by government or private contractors, health exploitation by government and private medical doctors, wealth (including forest) exploitation by police and forest

⁵ K. Thanzauva, *Theology of Community*, 117-20.

⁶ Jaganath Pathy, "Tribe, Region and Nation in the Context of the Indian State," *Tribal Communities and Social Changes*, edited by Pariyaram M. Chacko (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2005), 42.

⁷ In Assam, these labourers, though originally belonging to either scheduled caste or tribe, are not recognized as such by the Government, hence they are unjustly deprived of the benefits provided by the constitution. K. Thanzauva, *Theology of Community*, 24-25.

officials and middle men, and sex exploitation by landlords, mahajans, middlemen, contractors, merchants, bureaucrats, etc.⁸

Life is hardly worth living where economic injustices, political control and no ability to own land exist. People are forced to work in the scorching sun with no protection from rain, heat or cold. The land and natural resources, which preserved lives for centuries, are now taken away by force in the name of development with no proper options for the people to live on.

As A. Wati Longchar explained it, “Their history is full of defeat, subjugation, exploitation, discrimination, displacement and alienation.”⁹ In some places, for all practical purposes to do with law and civil rights, their existence was ignored by the dominant groups. They have suffered from the hands of Aryan invaders, the Muslim rulers, the British administrators and the privileged people of India today.¹⁰ The tragedy is that even after years of operation of the Indian Constitution, the scheduled castes and tribes remain at the bottom of the Indian social structure. They are culturally estranged, socially denounced, economically put-upon, poor and politically powerless.

3.3. Origin and Affinity of Christian Tribal Theology in India

The development of tribal theology can be traced back to the later part of the 1980s and the early part of the 1990s when tribal theologians such as Renthly Keitzar, Nirmal Minz, and later K. Thanzauva, A. Wati Longchar and others began doing theology from

⁸ S. Devasagayam Ponraj, *Tribal Challenges and the Church's Response* (Chennai: Mission Educational Books, 1996), 16.

⁹ A. Wati Longchar, “Tribal Theology-Issues, Method and Perspective,” *In Search of Identity and Tribal Theology; A Tribute to Dr. Renthly Keitzar, Tribal Study Series No. 9*, edited by A. Wati Longchar, (Assam: Tribal Study Centre, April 2001), 49.

¹⁰ K. Thanzauva, *Theology of Community*, 22-23.

the perspectives of tribal people.¹¹ A. Wati Longchar roughly divides the history of the development of Christian theology among tribal people into three stages: receiving stage, learning stage, and self-theologizing stage.

3.3.1. Receiving Stage (1800-1950s)

During this period, the churches were under Western missionaries. All the decision-making, and material and human resources for mission-work came from and were controlled by them.¹² According to Longchar:

In their effort to contextualize theology, the missionaries pursued the Translation Method of doing theology. Perceiving that Western culture was superior and the only valid expression of Christian faith, they attempted to translate the theological formulations of the mother churches abroad in appropriate native languages by adopting and adapting local terminologies, idioms and categories. It was thought that Christian faith transported from the West is the unchanging truth for all ages and for all contexts, and should be accepted without any question.¹³

Longchar also states, “Therefore, native culture and traditions were never considered valuable resources for doing theology.”¹⁴ He concludes:

There was very little or no awareness of the religio-cultural experience of the people. Theology was alien to the people and outside of the people’s reality. God’s revelation was accepted in a very narrow way, reducing tribal people’s religion and culture as mere *preparatio evangelii*. It was a period

¹¹ Yangkahao Vashum, “Tribal/Indigenous Theology and its Methodology: A Review and Proposal,” *Journal of Tribal Studies*, Vol. XIII, No. 1, Jan-June 2008, edited by Ezamo Murry and others (Assam: Tribal Study Centre, ETC, Jorhat, 2008), 34.

¹² A. Wati Longchar, “An Exploration of Indigenous Theological Framework,” *Contextual Theologies: Method and Perspectives*, compiled by Wati Lonchar (Kolkata: SCEPTRE Sharachi Centre, 2013), 157.

¹³ A. Wati Longchar, “The Challenges of Tribal Theological Methodology for A Common Future,” *Journal of Tribal Studies*, Vol. XIII, No. 1, Jan-June 2008, edited by Ezamo Murry and others (Assam: Tribal Study Centre, ETC, Jorhat, 2008), 23.

¹⁴ A. Wati Longchar, “An Exploration of Indigenous Theological Framework,” 157.

of receiving without any question. Theology was formulated elsewhere, imported from outside and taught by an outsider.¹⁵

3.3.2. Learning Stage (1950s-1980)

During this period, self-identity of the church, unity of the church and mission, and indigenization or enculturation of theology became priorities for the churches. Many of the missionaries during this period left or could not continue their mission work because of political reasons.¹⁶ Though this was a difficult time of transition of leadership, nevertheless it created more space for local people to exercise their rights, responsibilities and leadership in the church. In the wake of nationalism, many Indian theologians became critical of missionary theology. Longchar writes, “They began to freely use the concepts, doctrines and symbols of other religions, especially Hinduism, in doing theology. They tried to work out theological hermeneutics in terms of Hindu/Buddhist philosophical thought patterns and thus, theological language became highly abstract and rational.”¹⁷ Unfortunately, such theological approaches were unrelated to the real-life situation of the people. Indian Christian thinkers supposed that the tribal people’s spirituality was not philosophically deep enough to articulate theology. People studied tribal culture and beliefs simply from the traditional missiological perspective as a dark world to be conquered. Such a one-sided theological paradigm again alienated tribal people from their own religion and culture.¹⁸

¹⁵ A. Wati Longchar, “The Challenges of Tribal Theological Methodology for A Common Future,” 23

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁷ Wati Longchar, “An Exploration of Indigenous Theological Framework,” 158.

¹⁸ A. Wati Longchar, “The Challenges of Tribal Theological Methodology for A Common Future,” 24.

In the 1970s and 1980s the dialogical model for doing theology was introduced. The central theological claim of this model is that for Christian theology to become authentic and liberative it must acknowledge the riches of God's work within the whole of humanity and other segments of God's creation.¹⁹ Longchar comments:

Theology is seen as a product of creative and active engagement in dialogue with people of other living faiths and ideologies. Dialogical theology is to be celebrated for liberating God's revelation from the monopoly of Christians. Although the advocates of the dialogical method were not always sympathetic and sensitive to tribal people's spirituality, culture and religion, the affirmation of God's revelation and lordship over the world, in all cultures and religions, widened the understanding of the mystery of God.²⁰

Longchar further comments, "God works in and through all religions and cultures. This understanding created awareness to appreciate and respect the differences of others and one's own spirituality, religion and cultures."²¹

Initially, liberation theology in Asia was greatly influenced and shaped by the Latin American liberation methodology. Tribal communities, women and other marginalized movements widened the horizon of liberation theology from its Latin American impetus.

²² Longchar writes:

Along with economic and political issues, the cultural and religious dimensions of discrimination are taken seriously in liberation theologies in India. It has influenced people to re-read Scripture from the perspective of the poor and oppressed in their struggle for justice and freedom. Commitment to victims, the oppressed and the struggling poor as the basis and the starting point of theology inspired the alienated tribal people to discover their identity, rights and dignity."²³

¹⁹ Ibid., 24-25.

²⁰ A. Wati Longchar, "An Exploration of Indigenous Theological Framework," 158.

²¹ A. Wati Longchar, "The Challenges of Tribal Theological Methodology for A Common Future," 25.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

Longchar further comments, “It motivated people to engage themselves in new ways of doing theology by relating the Gospel to the socio-politico-cultural realities.”²⁴

3.3.3. Self-Theologizing Stage (1990s Onwards)

After the departure of missionaries, the churches launched the three-self movement: self-governing, self-supporting and self-propagating.²⁵ However, the aspect of self-theologizing was only recently considered important. This period of self-theologizing is now a dominant model of theological undertaking. Many churches in India recognized the importance of self-theologizing to make the church and its mission rooted in the actual life of the people. Hence the Tribals must do their own theology relevant to their context.²⁶ A. Wati Longchar further proposes a people-centered theology – a theology centered on the vision of our Lord Jesus Christ. For him, “the past and present dominant theological discourses have supported imperialism and an anthropocentric orientation of biblical interpretations and therefore legitimized concepts such as master and the ruler and also sanctioned exploitation and manipulation of all segments of God’s creation for extraction of maximum profit.”²⁷ He cited three examples:

i. The Concept of God: Theology is God-talk, a discourse on God. The dominant images of God developed in Christian traditions are images such as Ruler, Lord, Master and Warrior. They are all patriarchal, political and military images. These images have

²⁴ Wati Longchar, “An Exploration of Indigenous Theological Framework,” 159.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ A. Wati Longchar, “The Challenges of Tribal Theological Methodology for A Common Future,” 25-26.

²⁷ A. Wati Longchar, “An Exploration of Indigenous Theological Framework,” *Contextual Theologies* (Kolkata: Sceptre, 2013), 159-160.

made Christianity a religion of, and for, the ruler, the elite and the upper-class. The theological concepts or images of God which we uphold today are in deep crises because they are not capable of liberating the poor and marginalized, like indigenous people, from unjust systems and practices and the unmindful destruction of God's creation. Such a ruler's theology supported colonial governments, war, invasion and unprecedented exploitation of earth's resources. The world is now confronted with the fact that the dominant construct of the concept of God will not be able to liberate the people and nature who are the victims of power.

ii. The Understanding of Missions: The discourse on God as ruler and master has reinforced a success-oriented or triumphalistic mission. Terms like "Mission Crusade," "Mission Campaign," "Home Penetration," "Mass Evangelism," etc., are all military language and concepts. Christians, by and large, engaged in denominational expansion rather than God's mission. Mission is God's mission. God is the owner of the missions, the churches aren't. But Christians have manipulated and acted as if we are the owner of missions.

iii. The Understanding of Creation: The dominant Christian interpretation of creation is anthropocentric – the human being is the reference point of all realities. Nature exists for human. Apart from rational beings, the other segments of God's creation cannot come under the scheme of salvation. There is no sacredness and mystery in nature, but it can be manipulated and controlled for the benefit of human beings. To exploit nature is the divine will. This one-sided theological interpretation again justifies expansion of colonial power and exploitation of nature. The ideology of globalization and expansion of global capital markets are deeply rooted in this interpretation. The unprecedented exploitation of

nature and current ecological crises testify to the failure of this Christian understanding of creation.²⁸

A. Wati Longchar suggests that the discourses on indigenous theology (in our case tribal theology) can make a difference in our times by turning and rerouting the Jesus of Galilee movement. He writes:

In the Jesus movement, we see a decisive reversal from empire and money to people in pain, from ruler to ruled, from oppressor to the oppressed, from individualism to a cosmic vision of life. The Jesus movement was a people-centred and cosmic-centred movement against the power of destruction and death. He stood for a different value system – peace, love, service and liberation of poor were the message of Jesus, but not the power, sword, military nor loyalty to Mammon.²⁹

The approach of self-theologizing presented by Wati Longchar is very informative, but is it the whole reality? Is the presentation of Christianity by the western missionaries all wrong? Wati Longchar's presentation of the Christian God and Christianity can be viewed as too biased and narrow. For example, we cannot deny the strong images of God as a gracious father also proposed by the likes of St. Augustine and John Calvin in their writings, which were also presented by the Christian missionaries.

3.4. Characteristics of Christian Tribal Theology in India

Tribal Theology in India is still in the making. K.P. Aleaz notes that there are basically three approaches to a tribal worldview according to Tribal theologians. He writes:

First is the approach of contextualization and indigenization represented by senior thinkers like Nirmal Minz and the late Renty Keitzar. Here the suggestion given is for adaption of the tribal cultural values. The second approach takes a perspective that the gospel-values are already present in the tribal culture and worldview. For example, Timotheos Hembrom would hold that the Santal creation stories are in line with the Genesis creation

²⁸ Ibid., 160-161.

²⁹ Ibid., 161.

stories. The third approach insists that a tribal Christian theology needs to emerge from a tribal worldview. The space-centred tribal worldview contributes to the very content of tribal theology. The younger creative theologian A. Wati Longchar is a major exponent of the approach.³⁰

How much of tribal culture and values can be adapted and how much of Gospel Truth is already present in tribal worldview; is the question that has to be grappled by the tribal theologians in order to propose a tribal reformed understanding of God's omnipotence. Therefore, with the above tribal worldviews in mind, the study in this section will include the foundational characteristics of Christian tribal theology in India.

3.4.1. A Contextual Theology

Constructing a contextual theology is a theological imperative.³¹ Akheto Sema writes, "Contextual theology must be academically sound, locally applicable, globally challenging and biblically founded. ...let Christ be incarnated into all times, places, cultures, societies, and genders."³² A. Wati Longchar makes a critical remark against the dominant (systematic) theologies and writes that they are considered a science of faith drawn from scripture and tradition. They only represent the context of dominant groups and communities. The language, content and framework of theologizing are drawn from philosophical insights and categories. The notion is that theology must be rational, critical, logical and scientific in form and content. To do so, one needed to fit the received theological concepts into that philosophical system.

³⁰ K.P. Aleaz, "A Tribal Theology from a Tribal World-View," *Towards a Tribal Theology* (Durgapur: Santi Griha Tribal Peace and Reconciliation Centre, 2014), 110.

³¹ K. Thanzauva, *Theology of Community*, 76-77.

³² Akheto Sema, "Contextual Theology in the Changing Context," *Tribal Theology on the Move, Tribal Study Series No.14*, edited by Shimreingan Shimray and Limatula Longkumer (Assam: Tribal/Women Study Centres, ETC, Jorhat, 2006), 115.

In short, theology became merely abstract and intellectual exercises unrelated to the real-life situation of the people.³³ Longchar then contrasts the pros of contextual theologies by writing:

In contextual theologies, the experience, hardship and spirituality of the poor and marginalized people like the indigenous (tribal) people, women, and the poor have become a vital source of doing theology. ... The marginalized and the abandoned people are the locus of the divine. The people are no longer treated as objects but as subjects of history. We can comprehend God by what he has done and is doing for the people in the concrete historical context. The focus on the *ochlos* is the critical principle in contextual theologies. ... Contextual theologies draw more insights from other disciplines such as sociology, psychology, economics and other forms of reflective expression for the analysis and articulation of the experience of people.³⁴

For the tribal theologians, God's contextualizing is "His/Her becoming Jesus—putting on the tribal human form for the sake of Tribal. The new community is what it is because of God. Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen Lord, is the central reality sustaining this new community. This new community's roots and foundation are in God's sacrificial love, embodied in the suffering, crucifixion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This community is in continuity with several other such communities in India and all over the world."³⁵

Tribal Christian theology is a contextual theology in the tribal context. Barnes writes, "Tribal theology is a type of theology that emerges from a reflection on the gospel

³³ A. Wati Longchar, *Contextual Theologies*, 161.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 161-162.

³⁵ Nirmal Minz, *Rise Up, My People, and Claim the Promise: The Gospel Among the Tribes of India* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1997), 111.

from a tribal perspective.”³⁶ For Vashum, “Tribal theology is a critical reflection on the faith experience of the tribal people in the light of their socio-political and economic and religious situation.”³⁷ It is not an introduction of a new theology for the academic discipline’s sake nor bringing out new issues in the world of theology but reflecting theologically on the past and present events and on the interaction of the gospel and tribal culture.³⁸ The Tribals in India are in general politically, socio-culturally, economically and religiously oppressed and down-trodden, hence the Christian tribal theology addresses this context.

3.4.2. A Theology of Inculturation and Inter-culturation

Tribal theologians believe that that there is no authentic theology without culture. The work of God is present in all cultures; therefore, every culture possesses some form of divine manifestation.³⁹ “While the gospel frees people from bondage, it is the culture that sustains and nourishes people’s identity.”⁴⁰ However, cultures also have both liberative and oppressive elements. “The task of theology is to challenge and transform the oppressive elements, recover and affirm, and integrate the life affirming values into our life.”⁴¹ Tribal

³⁶ Barnes L. Mawrie, “Tribal Theology and Local Congregation: A Search for Common and Relevant Ministry,” *Tribal Theology: A Search for Quality Theological Education & Relevant Ministry*, edited by Yangkahao Vashum (Assam: Tribal Study Centre, ETC, Jorhat, 2009), 45.

³⁷ Yangkahao Vashum, “Tribal Theology: A Search for Relevant Theology and Ministry in Tribal Context,” *Tribal Theology: A Search for Quality Theological Education & Relevant Ministry* edited by Yangkahao Vashum (Assam: Tribal Study Centre, ETC, Jorhat, 2009), 18.

³⁸ Bonjera A. Sangma, “Tribal Theology, Theological Educators and Church Leaders: Common Mission and Ministry: Feminist Perspective,” *Tribal Theology: A Search for Quality Theological Education & Relevant Ministry*, edited by Yangkahao Vashum (Assam: Tribal Study Centre, ETC, Jorhat, 2009), 147.

³⁹ Limatula Longkumer, “Sources and Authority of Indigenous Theology: A Naga Perspective,” *Contextual Theologies* compiled by A. Wati Longchar (Kolkata, SCEPTRE, 2013), 191.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

theology, therefore, affirms the good elements of tribal culture. “It seeks to reflect on the faith experiences of the tribal people on the one hand, and it seeks to re-appropriate the liberative and life affirming cultural values for theological reflection on the other hand. Rediscovering of tribal cultural and religious values is therefore a critical function of tribal theology.”⁴²

Inculturation is the living Gospel lived by the Church in a living culture with all the transformations and realities it entails.⁴³ It is an ongoing process that is never finished. This lies both in the nature of the Gospel and of culture. While Christ’s followers seek ever new ways of expressing the gospel, the culture also continues to evolve and adapt itself to changing circumstances. The need for inculturation therefore is universal.⁴⁴

Inculturation is also a dialogical, two-way process in which on the one hand, the Gospel challenges cultures and on the other hand, cultures re-express the Gospel in new forms. It also entails a radical confrontation and contestation of cultural aspects, just as Jesus challenged certain cultural practices of his own people.⁴⁵ Therefore, in this understanding of the relation between culture and religion, between the Gospel and cultures, it is clear that inculturation is inevitable, necessary and fruitful for Christian tribal theology.

⁴² Yangkahao Vashum, *Tribal Theology: A Search for Quality*, 18.

⁴³ D.S. Amalorpavadass, *Gospel and Culture: Evangelization and Inculturation* (Bangalore: NBCLC, 1978), 20.

⁴⁴ Franz Xavier Scheuerer, *Interculturality - A Challenge for the Mission of the Church* (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 2001), 119.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 117-118.

Methodology in its entirety, is an area with which tribal Christian theology has been grappling since its infancy.⁴⁶ However, as theological construction must be guided by certain principles, the choice of a methodological principle is necessary. Thanzauva observes that situations such as identity crises, economic dependency, tribalism, ecological crises and social injustice become the main theological agenda. In response to this complex situation, we are concerned with integrating both social transformation and inculturation of the Christian gospel. Thus, he proposes the combination of Synthetic and Praxis models⁴⁷ in tribal theology, both of which take the culture of the people seriously and at the same time, emphasize social transformation.⁴⁸

Franz Xavier Scheuerer claims that, “Interculturality is the appeal to go beyond frontiers in a never-ending quest to meet those who are ‘outside,’ who are different, and actually share their life with them to the greatest possible extent. Indeed, interculturality is a particular vocation to witness to God’s universal love.”⁴⁹ Sathianathan Clarke too proposes an agenda for intercultural theological methodology in the Asian context. He writes:

Intercultural methodology posits a realm of theological activity that lies between the universal and the local/particular. It is a dialogical space that saves us from the myth that affirms contextual and liberation theology is

⁴⁶ Brightstar Jones Syiemlieh, “The Future of Tribal Christian Theology in North East India: Possible Directions,” *Tribal Theology on the Move, Tribal Study Series No.14.*, edited by Shimreingan Shimray & Limatula Longkumer (Assam: Tribal/Women Study Centres, ETC, Jorhat, 2006), 42.

⁴⁷ The *Synthetic model* is concerned with the development of a new and relevant theology from a synthesis of gospel and culture in a particular context for the purpose of preserving the cultural identity of the people, so that Christ may be confessed in the way they understand him. It also elicits a conversation between theologies from different contexts. The *Praxis model* is concerned with the transformation of society towards the realization of the Kingdom of God, and emphasizes liberation, social justice and wholeness, challenging the structure and system of any society responsible for poverty, discrimination, exploitation and injustice. Ref. Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007).

⁴⁸ K. Thanzauva, *Theology of Community*, 103.

⁴⁹ Franz Xavier Scheuerer, *Interculturality*, op.cit., 236.

only local or national. It asserts that genuine inter-local interaction opens us toward and connects us with the universal. But it also saves us from the dangers of embracing the expanding mechanisms of the agents of the unitary global market, religion, and culture. It asserts that local and national contain elements of the indispensable particular.⁵⁰

In the actual construction of contextual theology, methodological models often overlap one another and no single method is perfectly adequate for the construction of a contextual theology. Perhaps the Tribal Christian theology needs to take into account the theoretical insights of post-modernity, where the watch word is ‘integration of methodologies.’⁵¹

3.4.3. A Theology of Liberation and Transformation

This emerging ‘Tribal theology’ is an alienated people’s theology, born out of the experiences of various forms of injustice and exploitation in the context of their assertion for rights and identity. It is a theology that attempts to express Christianity in the socio-cultural, religious and liturgical thought-patterns of the people. Tribal theology is a liberation theology and resistance theology, aiming to affirm justice, identity, dignity and wholeness of land and all its inhabitants. The experience of oppressions and hardships, and their connectedness to land and environment are vital resources for doing theology. Tribal theology reflects on the issues of the ethnic, cultural and political identities of people.⁵² Yangkahao Vashum writes:

As a liberation theology, it seeks to take seriously the liberative messages which are essential to the Bible for our faith reflection and articulation.

⁵⁰ Sathianathan Clarke, “Exploration of Intercultural Theological Methodologies in Asia: Curing Culture Lethargy and Culling Theological Directionalities,” *Inter-Cultural Asian Theological Methodologies: An Exploration*, edited by Samson Prabhakar (Bangalore: South Asian Theological Research Institute, 2002), 9.

⁵¹ Brightstar Jones Syiemlieh, *Tribal Theology on the Move*, 42.

⁵² A. Wati Longchar, *The Challenges of Tribal Theological*, 26.

God's act of Liberation in the exodus event and throughout the history of Israel, the prophetic messages in the Old Testament and above all, Jesus' own declaration of his ministry as that of bringing good news to the poor, release to the captives, and sight to the blind, demand that if a tribal theology is faithful to the liberative act of God it must be a theology of liberation and healing.⁵³

Yangkahao Vashum further writes:

The Tribals in northeast India have been struggling for liberation in all dimensions of life— politically, socially, economically, religiously and morally. Politically, the existence of a number of so-called insurgent groups who operate in a high state of tension with the pervasive presence of Indian armed forces often leading to violence and bloodshed and human rights abuses mark the extremity of the volatile situation of the region. Factional violence, ethnic clashes and tribal feuds have brought untold suffering into the lives of the people in our region. Another problem is that today more than ever the region is faced with the grim situation of suffering from HIV and AIDS infection. The prevalence of HIV and AIDS in the Northeast region is considered to be one of the highest of any region in India. We need liberation and healing from all structural, corporate, and social sins in addition to our personal sins and aggressions. We need the spirit of reconciliation and peace to prevail among our people. Therefore, indigenous (Christian) theology must be a theology of liberation and healing.⁵⁴

Rosiamliana Tochwawng claims that tribal communities in India have been suffering from colonialism – “both western colonialism and Indian colonialism. Western colonialism suppressed traditional tribal political sovereignty, dehumanized them and uprooted them from their culture. Indian colonialism assimilated many tribes and it further reduced them to the lowest level of the Hindu caste system along with the untouchable class. They are then suffering from triple alienation. Politically subjugated and oppressed, socially stigmatized, and economically exploited, tribal communities are thus defeated

⁵³ Yangkahao Vashum, *Tribal Theology: A Search*, 19.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

communities in India.”⁵⁵ Tribal Christian theology thus aims to liberate them from their inferiority complex, from oppression and discrimination by attempting to rediscover the liberative motifs in their cultures and religion, and by reinterpreting the Bible and Christian traditions from the perspective of the people. Hence the focus and goal of the tribal theology is liberation and transformation.⁵⁶ “Total transformation of the society in the light of the kingdom values must go hand in hand with liberation. In a way liberation and transformation are two sides of the same coin– there can be no critical transformation without liberation and vice versa.”⁵⁷ Longchar here proposes a liberative praxis as the method of doing theology. He writes, “It (praxis-theology) involves rigorous theoretical reflection, but it insists that it should emerge from the practice that is oriented to transformation.”⁵⁸ “In the process of working for their own liberation and transformation, and creative participation in wider society, the tribal people work for liberation of both the oppressors and the oppressed. It is, therefore, a theology that includes liberation of the whole of humanity and of God’s entire creation.”⁵⁹

3.4.4. A Theology of Community

For Tribals, the sense of community prevails over individual identity. “They understand community as an *interdependent communion* of beings where the internal bonds

⁵⁵ Rosiamliana Tochwang, “Tribal Theology: Which Way Forward?”, *Search for a New Society: Tribal Theology for North East India*, edited by Yangkahao Vashum, Peter Haokip and Melvil Pereira (Guwahati: NESRC, 2012), 44.

⁵⁶ A. Wati Longchar, *The Challenges of Tribal Theological...*, 26.

⁵⁷ Yangkahao Vashum, *Tribal Theology: A Search*, 21.

⁵⁸ A. Wati Longchar, “*Contextual Theologies*, 162.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 167.

are seen as organic.”⁶⁰ “God is the originator and foundation of community, but God so loved the world and became one of the members of the community as parents are in a family.”⁶¹ It is very true that the communitarian mode of tribal life makes cooperation rather than competition essential for existence and survival. This comes out clearly in community ownership of land, cooperation in cultivation, and song and dance in the dancing ground.⁶² T. Jomke Angu writes:

Tribal religion is part of their everyday life, not confined to an individual’s faith or creed like that of standardized religions. It has simple, social-ethical codes distilled all through the ages. This sustains the Tribal. The essence of tribal religion is enshrined and intact in themselves with its very outlook itself, that is the rituals in which the whole community participates. In other words, it is community based on unwritten creed. One cannot fully realize its depth and beauty unless he or she is brought up, nurtured in its atmosphere.⁶³

Limatula Longkumer also affirms that the tribal traditional religion was communitarian. She writes:

Ceremonies and festivals and even reconciliation were all community activities. Social disharmony lies in the community rather than individual. The community ethic was a strong and binding factor. The Christian teachings of individual sin and salvation, denominationalism are not akin to an indigenous communitarian value system.⁶⁴

She further writes:

⁶⁰ Francis Gonsalves, “God Is Tribe: Towards Tribal Trinitarian Theology,” *The Quest for Harmony: Christian and Tribal Perspective*, edited by Alphonus D’Souza, Yangkahao Vashum and Lalrindiki Ralte (Guwahati: NESRC, 2013), 164-165.

⁶¹ Lalmuanpui Hmar, “God in the Midst of Tribal People’s Marginalization,” *Towards a Tribal Theology* (Durgapur CNI: Santi Griha, Tribal Peace and Reconciliation Centre, 2014), 97.

⁶² Nirmal Minz, “Missiology for Twenty First Century Tribal India,” *Missiology for The 21st Century, South Asian Perspectives*, edited by Roger E. Hedlund & Paul Joshua Bhakiaraj (Delhi/Chennai: ISPCK/MIIS, 2004), 397.

⁶³ T. Jomke Angu, “Adis’ Belief in Existence of Supreme Being: A Case Study,” *Garnering Tribal Resources for Doing Tribal Christian Theology*, Tribal Studies Series No.16., edited by Razouselie Lasetso (Jorhat: ETC, 2008), 217.

⁶⁴ Limatula Longkumer, *Contextual Theologies*, 192.

We envision the church as a community of faith where everyone is respected, recognised, supported, and that promotes mutual love, unity and fellowship but not a church for power and rigid hierarchy or dividing the community. Building the community should be the priority. The church should be a community encouraging the full participation of all its members and the development of the gifts of each individual and celebrating diversity and difference. We need to promote the vision of a church that is called to carry out the prophetic mission of Jesus, witness to the good news of God's grace and salvation. ... We envision a church as a worshipping community where we come together and express our gratefulness to God as a community by incorporating our indigenous rituals and ceremonies, singing our songs with dances, beating our drums and gongs, playing our music and flutes, telling our stories and sharing our visions as a community of faith.⁶⁵

The Tribals, while talking about the alternatives to capitalism/globalization, do not need to be threatened. They have the best alternative. For example, the present globalization is characterized by individualism which can be easily countered by communitarian concept of the Tribals.⁶⁶ "Communitarianism is one of the transformational patterns which need to be rediscovered from the tribal culture for theologizing. Here the homogeneous people live together sharing their joys and sorrows in mutual love and care. Human beings are social beings and they ought to be in communion with others."⁶⁷ Hence, Christian tribal theology picks up this communitarian aspect of tribal culture and applies it in its theologizing. Liberation and redemption must be for the whole community and not just each individual. God in the exodus event liberated the whole community. He promised the whole community a separate Land. And He promised to be God of the whole community not just an individual.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 192-193.

⁶⁶ Shimreingam Shimray, "Globalization Process and Tribal People," *Journal of Tribal Studies*, Vol. XIII, No.1 Jan-June 2008, edited by Ezamo Murry and Others (Assam: Tribal Study Centre, ETC, Jorhat, 2008), 64.

⁶⁷ K. Thanzauva, *Theology of Community*, 136-137.

3.4.5. A Theology of Identity

Tribal theology also establishes and maintains the tribal Christian identity.

Vanlalchhuanawma identifies five factors for distortion of tribal identity. He writes:

First is *brahamanisation* and *sanskritization* leading to *Hinduization* ultimately. Second factor is *arbitrary demarcation of boundaries* without the rightful consent of the indigenous people resulting in the distorting identity by segregation of homogeneous tribes. The third factor is *westernization*. It is concealed in the enslavement of the indigenous people's psyche, which is reflected in their pride in alien's heritage [rather] than in their own cultural or traditional inheritance. Included in alien's heritage are diverse ecclesiastical traditions. Those traditions being inherited from the West become symbols of division, conflicts and confusion of identity among the indigenous people. The fourth factor is *globalization* that promotes modernization. It consists in the promotion of scientific development and materialism and tends to be very superficial. In its commercial connotation it implies selling out one's own cultural and traditional heritage on one hand and imposition of alien legacy in a given indigenous cultural setting on the other hand. The fifth factor is *linguistic* diversity. Under pressure of the above factors, minor differences in local dialects give grounds for segregation of homogeneous tribes leading to diversities of all kinds.⁶⁸

Yangkahao Vashum writes, "This indigenous Christian identity can emerge only when we are willing to respectfully reclaim our cultures and histories in the light of our faith expression."⁶⁹ "Basic to the Tribal's identity as a people is the affirmation that they are created in the image of God. This affirmation is critical in the context where tribal people's attitudes of themselves are greatly influenced by a long history of colonization and missionization."⁷⁰ "Being created in the image of God means that they all belong to God and they are all children of God. Being created in God's image means, as Tribals, they

⁶⁸ Vanlalchhuanawma, "Keynote Address," *Towards a Tribal Theology* (Durgapur: Santi Griha Tribal Peace and Reconciliation Centre, 2014), 31.

⁶⁹ Yangkahao Vashum, *Tribal Theology: A Search*, 19.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

also share the glory of God's creation."⁷¹ "It is precisely in this sense that they claim tribal theology is an affirmation and celebration of dignity and worth and the beauty of God's creation. It is precisely on this ground that tribals reclaim the cultural past of indigenous peoples rather than condemning them to be evil and devilish."⁷² "Tribal people read the Bible in the context of "an identity crisis"— alienation from their land and culture, exploitation and economic dependency. A tribal Christian is heir to his/her tribal cultural heritage, his/her native soil and his/her adopted home, the Christian Scriptures and traditions and the contemporary world he/she lives in. He/she must find meaning for his/her tribal as well as Christian heritage in the concrete situations of life in this globalized world."⁷³

3.5. Relationship Between Ancestral Tribal God and Christian God

There are three different opinions concerning the relationship between the ancestral tribal God and the Christian God: discontinuity, partial/relative continuity and absolute continuity. Eyingbeni Hümtsoe-Nienu in her book, "*God of the Tribes*," has extensively dealt with these opinions.

3.5.1. Tribal God Contra the Christian God (Discontinuity)

The opinions from this group seem to suggest that Christianity and ancestral faith in God or religiosity are contradictory and therefore are neither to be mixed nor to be

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Alphonsus B. D'Souza, "Tribal Theology in the North East: Some Suggestions from Sociology," *Search for a New Society: Tribal Theology for North East India*, edited by Yangkahao Vashum, Peter Haokip and Melvil Pereira (Guwahati: NESRC, 2012), 36-37.

perceived as reconcilable. The strongest proponent of this view is Veprari Epao.⁷⁴ Veprari Epao has claimed that the religion of the Naga ancestor was that of *animism*, and therefore based on this view, Eyingbeni Hümtsoe noted that Veprari Epao perceived that the Naga Ancestors only had a “vague idea” of the Supreme Being and God’s relationship with humanity. “The reason behind making such an assertion is the belief that in animism ‘people are not much conscious of their faith.’ And this characteristic, or his claim that ‘the faith of animists lacks consciousness,’ ‘led him to conclude, rather hastily, that this is a factor of responsiveness to a new religion,’ i.e. Christianity. He attributes fear of harmful demons as a “dominant feature of animism.” And “the basis of worship,” which in turn “gives the feeling of security,” thus necessitates the popular practice of appeasement.”⁷⁵

This group also claims that in times of adversities and natural calamities they seek the help of a Supreme Being whom they believe is harmless and helpful, and by so doing, they interestingly move away from this near hopeless estimation of ancestral religiosity to a more sympathetic consideration of it. Eyingbeni Hümtsoe argues, “Such lofty trust in the benevolence of the Supreme Being raises the question of whether Naga (or tribal) ancestors really had [only] a ‘vague idea of the Supreme Being,’ as they claim.”⁷⁶

This vague idea, they opine, turned Christianity into a super-hit among the Tribals because the gospel came with a clear and systematic presentation concerning the Supreme Being and His relation to human beings. The foundational conviction of this group is that the distance between the vague idea of the Supreme Being and the fear of harmful demons

⁷⁴ See Veprari Epao, *From Naga Animism to Christianity*, (N.p.:n.p.,n.d), 1ff, cited by Eyingbeni Hümtsoe-Nienu, *God of the Tribes*, 25-43. (The footnote is quoted with its typographical error.)

⁷⁵ Eyingbeni Hümtsoe-Nienu, *God of the Tribes* (Nagaland: Clark Theological College, 2014), 26.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

is increased by animism, and bridged by the clear and systematic doctrine of God in Christianity. Consequently, the “Christian God” surpasses the “ancestral God” and hence requires a “contrasted study.”⁷⁷ This contrasted study will indicate that the Christian God is not a silent one sitting far beyond the blue sky; he is omnipresent, omnipotent and omniscient. He is invisible but made Himself visible to us through his son Jesus Christ, unlike the vague idea of the ancestral God.⁷⁸ Eyingbeni Hümtsoe argues that the disadvantage in this approach is that it prompts an arbitrary dismissal of ancestral faith by simply branding it as “vague”.⁷⁹ Eyingbeni further writes:

The term “animism” does not give an accurate picture of Naga ancestral faith. To view Naga ancestral faith from the angle of animism is to miss the focal point of their faith, which is the belief in the Supreme Being. This belief also formed the basic motivation behind their moral behaviour. An obsession with the domain of the spirits would result in clouding the clear conception of “Ancestral God” according to their own time and situation i.e., before Christianity. That Christianity introduced a more ‘refined’ notion of God, completely unrelated with the “Ancestral God” is at best untenable. The real-ness of the “Ancestral God” is established by the very fact that there is only One God. This leads to the conclusion that there must be continuity between the “Ancestral God” and the “Christian God”.⁸⁰

The tribal theologians from this ‘contra’ group, Eyingbeni Hümtsoe affirms, recognized this fact but they appeared to be more overwhelmed by the insight inherited from western Christianity, feeling that there was little space to utilize the insight that was inherent in their identity as Tribal Christian.⁸¹

⁷⁷ Ibid., 27.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 28.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 42.

⁸¹ Ibid., 43.

3.5.2. Relative Continuity Between the Tribal God and Christian God

The opinion from this group seems to suggest a relative continuity between the Ancestral God and Christian God – the former God as preparatory factor for the later God. “In other words, the belief in the ‘Ancestral God’ is deemed as a *preparatio evangelii* or ‘preparation for the Gospel’/‘Christian God.’”⁸² Theologians like Renty Keitzar and H. Vanlalauva are of this position. Renty Keitzar is the Naga pioneer who emphasized the necessity of contextualization and advocated, in his own words, the Naganization of Christian theology. Naganization of the Christian Gospel and theology means, to him, making the Gospel message and Christian theology relevant to the Naga cultural way of life.⁸³ The Naga understanding of the Christ of faith for Renty Keitzar, is not fully Jesus the man, the Son of God, our Savior and Lord. He is not fully reincarnated as a Naga among Naga. The Word must become flesh among the Nagas and dwell among us; so that we will see His glory, the glory as the only Son from the Father (cf. Jn. 1:14). He also claims that “Naganization is not a mere ‘back to the fount’ recognition of our cultural heritage ... it should be ... theological interpretation of Christian truth in terms of Naga culture and our way of life of yesterday, today and tomorrow.”⁸⁴ With this idea, Keitzar works his way to construct a contextual theology with the Bible as the primary source in the task of Naganization, and according to Eyingbeni Hümtsoe-Nienu therefore, “...focuses on the

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Renty Keitzar, “The Indigenisation of Naga Christian Theology,” *In Search of Praxis Theology for the Nagas* (New Delhi: Regency Publication for Council of Naga Baptist Church, 2003), 51; also cited by Eyingbeni Hümtsoe-Nienu, *God of the Tribes*, 44-45.

⁸⁴ Renty Keitzar, “The Indigenisation of Naga Christian Theology,” *In Search of Praxis*, 36.

kerygmatic pole and thus on articulating the unchanging truths of the Bible in a culturally intelligible manner for a given cultural context.”⁸⁵

As opposed to the idea of animism, this group upheld the tribal faith in a High God and a Supreme Being, who is believed to be the Creator and dispenser of everything. However, they felt the tribal faith was not true religion but something like a *preparatio evangelii*. They concluded that these religions by themselves cannot lead us to salvation because the finality of God’s mighty act of salvation is to be found only in the religion of Jesus Christ that is Christianity.

Barnes L. Mawrie writes, “Among the Khasis there is a type of Christological reflection that speaks of Christ as the “fulfilment” of the religious aspiration of the Khasi people.”⁸⁶ He adds, “In most tribal religions there are present many elements of faith and morals (monotheism, Trinitarian image, Christological concepts, moral norms of love and sacrifice, etc.) which could be considered as *semina evangelii* (seeds of the gospel). This unique phenomenon has led to the belief and conviction among many that these religions are a preparation for the coming of Christianity.”⁸⁷ Referring to the pre-Christian Mizo tribal tradition, Vanlalauva writes:

The Tribals who became known as “irreclaimable savages” were not without knowledge of God. They knew something about God through God’s revelation in nature and through their life’s experience. But, their knowledge of God was imperfect and distorted. Though they knew the goodness of God to some extent, they could not get much benefit from that knowledge of God. God was not only the Creator but also the Supreme Ruler of the whole universe. Though they did not properly know how great

⁸⁵ See Eyingbeni Hümtsoe-Nienu, *God of the Tribes*, 52-53.

⁸⁶ Barnes L. Mawrie, “Tribal Theology and Local Congregation: A Search for Common and Relevant Ministry,” *Tribal Theology: A Search for Quality Theological Education & Relevant Ministry*, edited by Yangkahao Vashum (Assam: Tribal Study Centre, ETC, Jorhat, 2009), 50-51.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 51.

and mighty was God's power, they acknowledged His Lordship by offering Him prayers and sacrifices. The pre-Christian Mizo tradition may be understood as an indication of the fact that God's revelation is available outside Christianity. At the same time, the same tradition may be used to prove that knowledge of God outside the biblical revelation is not sufficient to lead human beings to the true knowledge of God.⁸⁸

Eyingbeni Hümtsoe argues:

There is no doubt about the uniqueness of Jesus Christ for the salvation of humanity but there ought to be a distinctive recognition of difference between the authenticity of general revelation in pre-Christian ancestral context of the Nagas and the finality of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ in Christianity....Without a willing acceptance of the validity of ancestral belief in the Supreme Being in a pre-Christian context, the claim of it as a *preparatio evangelii* itself is nullified.⁸⁹

Keitzar, as Eyingbeni Hümtsoe noted, insisted on the supremacy of the Bible and the revelation therein and therefore suggested the name of God in the Bible as the Ultimate name, clearly undermining the validity of the Naga names of the "Ancestral God." This suggests the idea that a valid experience of God is limited to Hebraic identity.⁹⁰ Eyingbeni Hümtsoe writes:

The universal one-ness of God does not permit dichotomizing the traditional understanding of God and the God of the Bible – with the former serving its significance only in the light of the understanding of God in the latter,.... For Christian theology to be authentic, relevant and meaningful to the Nagas, ancestral faith must serve as an indispensable source. ... Thus, even when the Bible has its very important place in Christian theology, it need not supersede the significance of ancestral faith, an essential frame of reference in reconstructing Christian theology from Naga perspective. Likewise, if the Naga ancestral belief in the High God is to be acknowledged as *preparatio evangelii* then the continuity between the

⁸⁸ H. Vanlalauva, *Doctrine of God: John Calvin's Doctrine of God with Special Reference to the Indian Context* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2006), 72.

⁸⁹ See Eyingbeni Hümtsoe-Nienu, *God of the Tribes*, 53-54.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 58.

“Ancestral God” and the “Christian God” must, of necessity, go beyond naming.⁹¹

3.5.3. Absolute Continuity Between the Tribal God and Christian God

This group vouches for full continuity between the Tribal God and Christian God. They propose to build connectivity between the Tribal God and Christian God on the conception that the experience of God in Christianity is a continuous experience of the One God, and not an interjectory shift from one God (Tribal) to another (Christian). Palatty writes, “To reject everything as superstition will be counterproductive because the people cannot dispel the concept they have of God. But the richness of the Christian God can be gradually integrated into the already rich concept they (Tribals) have of God. The process of interaction can help also to purify their concept of God as it has been traditionally handed down.”⁹²

T. Hembrom firmly bases himself on the idea that the Santals are non-idol-worshipper, monotheist people who believe in one Supreme supernatural being. Therefore, he proposes to find continuity between the Santal tribal God and the Christian God and writes:

The idea that the Santals are Godless people would be an affront to God himself and a rebellion against what Romans 1:19-20 asserts. One should understand that Romans 1:21ff. is not applicable to the Santals, as some of the Christian preachers still do. In our effort to make Santal Christian Theology, let us deal with as St. Paul has said, “whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is lovely, if there is any excellence,

⁹¹ Ibid., 54-57.

⁹² Varghese Palatty, “Concept of God among the Tribes of Northeast India: A Theological Perspective,” *Search for a New Society: Tribal Theology for North East India*, edited by Yangkahao Vashum, Peter Haokip and Melvil Pereira (Guwahati: North Eastern Social Research Centre, 2012), 163.

if there is any worthy of praise,” in the Santal’s religious, cultural, social and economic life, deal with them (Adapted from Phil. 4:8).⁹³

Eyingbeni Hümtsoe also strongly vouches for the continuity of the Naga God and Christian God. First, she builds her thesis by asserting that the tribal ancestral religiosity (Naga ancestral religiosity in her case) is monotheistic and more like the Old Testament monotheism. For her, the One God is the same God who responds, who visits, who judges and, also in Jesus Christ who pardons and transforms persons and societies. She writes:

From the Biblical perspective, it is clear that OT has numerous instances whereby YHWH is regarded not only as the God of the Israelites but of the whole human race. The usage of the term “ELOHIM” to refer to the One God, who is known as YHWH by the Hebrews, gives evidence to this truth. In the NT, Paul comes across as the one who is most passionate to propagate the universality of the knowledge of God and his laws. By employing Adam Christology, he establishes the fact of common descent of the whole of humanity; thereby, opening the way for incorporating non-Israelite perspectives to explain the mysteries of God and God’s desire for humanity.⁹⁴

For Eyingbeni Hümtsoe, “Without the ancestral system of sacrifice, or call it propitiation, and the belief in the visitation of the Supreme Being to the villages, the vicarious and incarnational concepts that are basic to Christianity would have been inexplicable to the Nagas.”⁹⁵ Asserting the continuity between Ancestral God and Christian God, means asserting the continuity between Creation, Redemption and the indwelling

⁹³ T. Hembrom, “Probable Form of Santal Christian Theology: Preliminary Observations,” *Towards A Tribal Theology* (Durgapur: Santi Griha Tribal Peace and Reconciliation Centre, 2014), 108-109.

⁹⁴ See Robert S. Franks, *The Doctrine of the Trinity* (London: Gerald Duckworth and Co. Ltd., 1953), 26-28 cited by Eyingbeni Hümtsoe-Nienu, *God of the Tribes*, 273-274.

⁹⁵ Eyingbeni Hümtsoe-Nienu, *God of the Tribes*, 275.

attributes of the Three Persons, by virtue of the Son and the Spirit having the same essence with the father, the Creator.⁹⁶ Finally, she concludes by writing:

To admit that ancestral religiosity is a *praeparatio evangelii* is to admit that there is absolute ontological continuity between the “Ancestral God” and the “Christian God”. Also in the epistemological level, the experience and knowledge, albeit partial, of the “Ancestral God” can appropriately serve as a bridge towards identifying Christological and pneumatological implications inherent in Naga ancestral religiosity.⁹⁷

She further writes:

There is substantial functional continuity between the “Ancestral God” and Christian God” which is evident in the former’s acts of kindness to the people within their specific contexts of pain, isolation, despair, auspicious rituals, etc. Biblical evidence proves that the “Israelite God” who is understood as the “Christian God” is also the same God of non-Israelites like Melchizedek, Jethro, and Greco-Romans and of other nations like Nineveh. Ancestral practice of offering sacrifices and the belief in the host of the spirits are important sources in allowing Nagas to understand the doctrine of Christ and the Spirit. In this sense, there is modest epistemological continuity between ancestral religiosity and the Christian doctrine of Trinity. Establishing continuity between the ‘Ancestral God” and the “Christian God” can result in the transformation of the morally degraded Naga society, like in the days when upright moral conduct was considered a direct outcome of their faith in the “Ancestral God;” Asserting the claim that Naga ancestral religiosity is monotheistic (not animistic or polytheistic) situates Naga Christians in a position whereby they can actively assert absolute devotion to the One God, the God of their ancestors, who is also the Eternal Father of Jesus Christ.⁹⁸

The above three different opinions concerning the relationship between the ancestral tribal God and the Christian God (discontinuity, partial/relative continuity and absolute continuity) are helpful information for this research. One of the opinions or

⁹⁶ See Vladimir Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God*, edited by John H. Erickson and Thomas E. Nird (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985), 135-36, cited by Eyingbeni Hümtsoe-Nienu, *God of the Tribes*, 275.

⁹⁷ Eyingbeni Hümtsoe-Nienu, *God of the Tribes*, 58.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 278.

perhaps the combination of these points, can be later used and modified in the research conclusion.

3.6. Omnipotence of God Expressed in Tribal Worldview and its Incorporation in Tribal Theology in India

3.6.1. Omnipotent God as One Supreme Being

Tribals in India are known for their belief in one Supreme power over all the universe. Barnes L. Mawrie notes that most of the tribal groups (of India) have a strong tendency to monotheism. Although some of them indicate signs of animism, yet the belief in one all-powerful God is at the base of their religious convictions. He writes, “The Khasis speak of U Blei, the Mizo speak of Pathian, the benevolent God or the Ao Nagas of Lijaba. These are synonyms of the one God almighty.”⁹⁹ T. Hembrom also vouch that the Santal tribes are non-idol-worshipper, monotheistic people who believe in one Supreme supernatural being.¹⁰⁰ The Munda tribe calls their supreme deity *Singbonga*. “Etymologically, *Singi* means sun and *bonga* means spirit: *sun spirit or sun god*. This is not the worship of sun as God but for the Munda the sun was the best symbolic representation of the supreme deity: unique, all-pervading, creator, omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent, preserver and sustainer of the cosmos. Singbonga is the only name by which the Munda address their Supreme God.”¹⁰¹ He is the supreme and unique Spirit above all other spirits, formless God who bears no resemblance to any material object on

⁹⁹ Barnes L. Mawrie, *Tribal Theology: A Search*, 46.

¹⁰⁰ T. Hembrom, *Towards a Tribal Theology*, 101.

¹⁰¹ Aloysius Hemrom, “Singbonga of the Munda: The Concept of God in the Munda Tribe,” *The Quest for Harmony: Christian and Tribal Perspective*, edited by Alphonus D’Souza, Yangkahao Vashum and Lalrindiki Ralte (Guwahati: NESRC, 2013), 229-230.

earth. His name is awesome, for he is seated in the heaven on a golden throne and holds in his hand a golden sceptre. It is a sacred name to be uttered in sacrifice and in sworn imprecations to each other. He is invisible, and only through one's faith can one see Him.¹⁰² Linus Neli writes, "All the Naga tribes define God in functional attributes and that too in different genders. Every expression of the Supreme Being reflects that the Naga God is the God of the Universe who is the author and ruler of heaven and earth."¹⁰³ Varghese Palatty, in his study on the Oraon tribe, writes:

On account of their preoccupation with placating spirits, the Oraons are sometimes considered polytheists. Some outsiders consider these spirits to be some sort of gods. But the Oraon myths are clear in stating, albeit in mythic language, that their God is anterior to all, creator and sustainer of everything, supreme and fully in control of everything. They insist that they know only one God, Dhermes.¹⁰⁴

Eyingbeni Hümtsoe points out that "the tribal ancestral religiosity is monotheistic, but it is monotheism of an exclusive nature. Unlike the unique Trinitarian monotheism of Christianity, it is more like the monotheism of the Old Testament. Monotheism means exclusive worship of and obedience to the one true and Supreme God."¹⁰⁵ The belief in and worship of One Supreme being has been positively picked up by Christian tribal theology to use it as a point of contact with the tribal God and Christian God. Perhaps God can never be called omnipotent or almighty if He is not the only One and Supreme over all. However, is this Supreme God distinct or identical to God of the Bible?

¹⁰² Ibid., 233-234.

¹⁰³ Linus Neli, "The Naga Concept of God: A Communion of Father– Mother– Spirit," *The Quest for Harmony: Christian and Tribal Perspective*, edited by Alphonus D'Souza, Yangkahao Vashum and LalrindikiRalte (Guwahati: NESRC, 2013), 193.

¹⁰⁴ Varghese Palatty, *Search for a New Society*, 147.

¹⁰⁵ Eyingbeni Hümtsoe-Nienu, *God of the Tribes*, 273.

3.6.2. Omnipotence Expressed in His Creatorship

Tribal belief in God the Creator was not injected into their veins by Christianity; it was already present in the pre-Christian time. Eyingbeni Hümtsoe writes, “The Ancestral Nagas [already] believed that there is a pre-existent universal Creator, who is the Supreme Being; the physical world with spiritual significance is a manifestation of the Creator. The existence of God was not a question asked by them, because creation formed a substantial basis for the belief that there was a Creator (Psalms attest to this: ‘The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork’ (Psalm 19:1ff).”¹⁰⁶ Vanlalauva also notes that all the early missionaries, scholars and even contemporary writers claim the existence and manifestation of God the Creator before the advent of Christianity.¹⁰⁷

This God, the Creator, the Nagas accepted as Sustainer of the universe, who is sovereign and almighty, who holds supreme authority over all things— personal, domestic and communal.¹⁰⁸ Mundas also believe that God is the creator, and the one who made everything, both animate and inanimate beings.¹⁰⁹ For Mizos, He is supposed to be the greatest of all the good spirits. It was he who made the world. He lives in the world and takes charge of the sun at night.¹¹⁰ Eyingbeni Hümtsoe claims that their acknowledgement of the Supreme Being as the Creator of the world they inhabited – that all other spirits and supernatural entities were subject to this Supreme Being, and that this Being is the ultimate

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 75.

¹⁰⁷ H. Vanlalauva, *Doctrine of God*, 64.

¹⁰⁸ See Eyingbeni Hümtsoe-Nienu, *God of the Tribes*, 75-77.

¹⁰⁹ Aloysius Hemrom, *The Quest for Harmony*, 235.

¹¹⁰ H. Vanlalauva, *Doctrine of God*, 64.

judge and yet is also the Good righteous God – points to the Absoluteness of the “Ancestral God” who is ontologically none other than the preeminent God the Father in the Christian Godhead.¹¹¹

Myths, rituals and prayers form an important source of information to understand the concept of God. “The Oraon myths are simple, captivating, and full of rich imagery. The most important attribute of Dharmes (Oraon God) is his creative activity. It is God who creates the world, human beings and everything else. He creates the earth, human beings, animals, birds and so on out of pre-existing material. He is the author of life; he puts life (and blood) into the creatures that he shapes.”¹¹² For the Khasi people, God is *U Blei Nongbuh-Nongthaw*. The term *Nongthaw* refers to God as creator. He is the creator and originator of the world. *Nongbuh* refers to God as the one who keeps his creation in proper order. Thus, everything God has created has a proper place and role.¹¹³

Is this One Supreme Creator God known by one name? Or did He manifest himself by different names to different people, in different places and contexts? Vanlalauva claims that it is true to say that God is known not only by one name but by different names in almost all religious traditions. Even the Christian tradition knows God by different names. He adds, “This is also true in the case of the pre-Christian Mizo religious tradition.

It seems, for Mizos, that God has manifested Himself through different names. The prominent ones are *Pathian*, *Khuavang*, *Sankhua*, *Pa vana* and *Vanchungnula*.¹¹⁴ The name *Pathian* is commonly used for the supreme god or good spirit. “In the pre-Christian

¹¹¹ Eyingbeni Hümtsoe-Nienu, *God of the Tribes*, 276.

¹¹² Varghese Palatty, *Search for a New Society*, 146.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 149.

¹¹⁴ H. Vanlalauva, *Doctrine of God*, 65.

Mizo tradition, *Pathian* was the creator of human beings. He was frequently addressed as *Pathiannakkalhpa* which means God who has caused the ribs. This is reminiscent of the creation of Eve in the biblical tradition. *Pathian* was also known as the creator of other living beings.”¹¹⁵ Therefore, the Christian Tribal theological foundation is grounded on recognizing the Creatorship of the Supreme Being.

3.6.3. Omnipotence Expressed in His Sovereignty, Free Will and Control

Tribals also believe that this God, whom they worship, is the Sovereign God. Nothing is greater than Him. He acts in his free will and controls the affairs of this world. Vanlalauva bringing out the majesty and greatness of God in Mizo tradition writes, “There was nothing greater than Pathian. He was most powerful, free, independent and self-sufficient. He was the source of power for all other beings. He had ultimate control over all.”¹¹⁶ He further writes:

In the beginning, the sovereignty of God and the love of God served as key points in the Mizo Christian understanding of God. For them, living in an oppressed situation, God without power and love had no meaning. As their situation demanded, in the early period of Mizo Christianity, the power of God was more central to their thought. But, when their situation improved, the love for God became predominant in Mizo Christian thought.¹¹⁷

Satkhookai Chongloi records that, “the traditional God of the Kuki, *Chungmang Pathen*, or sometimes called *Chung Pathen*, is the source of all beings, creator, omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient, and the highest benevolent God living in heaven. Everything

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 65.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 70.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 125-126.

concerned with prosperity, growth and strength in life is the free gift of God.”¹¹⁸ Varghese Palatty also mentions that, “the Khasi believe that their God ensures that everything on the earth develops in space and time and he safeguards them in their course of existence. He is *U Blei u balahubai*, which refers to the omnipotence of God. God has overall control of the whole creation. Everything develops according to his sacred design.”¹¹⁹ Therefore, no matter what condition the Tribal are in today, their belief in the sovereignty of God leads them to hope that God is their liberator, who is still in control over all creation and in His free will can do anything to bring liberation for the Tribal. Lalmuanpuii Hmar writes, “The Exodus event serves as a model for the liberation of the Tribal from their marginalization, alienation, dispossession and oppression. The God who saw the pain of God’s people in Egypt, suffered with them in their suffering, and revealed Godself in the midst of their oppression is still at work among us.¹²⁰ She further writes, “God may not send a prophet or leader like Moses to liberate the Tribal today, but through Jesus, God has given liberation to all and has taught each individual to be responsible in loving his/her neighbour as him/herself and to spread the values of this kingdom of God here on earth.”¹²¹

¹¹⁸ Satkhokai Chongloi, “The Unseen Christ Among the Kuki People,” *Garnering Tribal Resources for Doing Tribal Christian Theology, Tribal Study Series No. 16*, edited by Razouselie Lasetso (Jorhat: ETC, 2008), 179.

¹¹⁹ Varghese Palatty, *Search for a New Society*, 150.

¹²⁰ Lalmuanpuii Hmar, *Towards a Tribal Theology*, 97-98.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 98.

3.6.4. Omnipotence Expressed in His Providence

In the tribal worldview, the Omnipotent God is their ultimate provider. For Oraon tribes, God is not a God who creates and then forgets his creation; with great care, he provides for them. Varghese Palatty writes:

The creation myths (of Oraon) explain that he provides them with food, going to each one of them personally. Even though all things are created by God and all things are recipients of God's providence, human beings enjoy God's providence in a very special way. It is asserted that human beings are the very purpose of creation. Human beings have a very special place among all God's creatures.¹²²

Palatty continues:

Khasis also call their God *U Blei u Nongri- U Nongda*. This refers to God as the one who looks after and protects. God does not just create and withdraw as some other people conceive of God. He is *U Blei u Nongkhmih-U Nongsumar*. This phrase refers to God as the one who keeps watch over his creation and supplies it with whatever is needed for its sustenance. It also refers to a kind of mother-child relationship that implies feeding and sustaining, as the phrase *Ubabsaubapynbiang* (one who feeds and sustains) also means. He is also *U Blei u Nongsengrynieng Nongsengrta*; that is, he is the one who gives growth and longevity to his creatures.¹²³

Aloysius Hemrom also mentions that for Mundas, God is the provider of all. He writes:

An orthodox Munda will always drop a morsel of food or drink on the floor at meals or celebrations in honour of Singbonga before he starts eating or drinking. In village festivals and celebrations, before tasting the rice-beer, the Munda or the pahan will invite all to pour a drop on the floor, saying: 'To Singbonga and to the ancestors.' After this ceremony, all commence to drink and celebrate.¹²⁴

¹²² Varghese Palatty, *Search for a New Society*, 146.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 149-150.

¹²⁴ Aloysius Hemrom, *The Quest for Harmony*, 235-236.

Vanlalauva also mentions that, in the pre-Christian Mizo tradition; God is the God of providence. He writes:

There are two sayings which are still popular among the Mizos. One is *Chung Pathianin min enreng* which means God who dwells in the heaven or sky is watching over us. The other one is *Pathian a tha* which means God is concerned – is the one who takes care of human beings. He is mindful of them and he is concerned for their well-being.¹²⁵

Linus Neli too writes, “To get into a deeper understanding of the Naga concept of God, it is not sufficient to categorize God as ‘Creator of Heaven and Earth’ (Universe). God is a comprehensive manager of fecundation, generation, multiplication, conservation, protection, orientation, inter-relation, interdependence, unity, integrity, and the ultimate Spirit and principle of all that is visible and invisible.”¹²⁶ Therefore the Christian Tribal Theology maintains the Supreme God of the Bible as the God of providence which also makes it much easier for Tribals to grasp the meaning and essence of the theme: *providence*.

3.6.5. Omnipotence Expressed in His Transcendent and Immanent Nature

There is a school of thought that takes the pre-Christian tribal God as purely transcendent, pictured as distant from earthly life. However, this is not the stand for most tribal theologians. For them, God has been both transcendent and immanent in nature even in the pre-Christian era.¹²⁷ Eyingbeni Hümtsoe writes, “The ‘otherness’ (of God) is coupled with the ‘nearness’ of the Supreme Being as evident in the Ao, as well as other Naga tribes,

¹²⁵ H. Vanlalauva, *Doctrine of God*, 66.

¹²⁶ Linus Neli, *The Quest for Harmony: Christian and Tribal Perspective*, 194.

¹²⁷ See Eyingbeni Hümtsoe-Nienu, *God of the Tribes*, 95-104.

folklore that manifests Naga ancestors' belief in both the 'otherness' and the 'nearness' of the Supreme Being."¹²⁸ Varghese Palatty also claims that, "the God for the Oraon tribes is "someone who is always near, someone who is very familiar to them. He is their God. But he is also the Master of all, fully in control of everything, one who is transcendent, one who is 'totally the other.'"¹²⁹ Vanlalauva, on behalf of the Mizo Christian tribe writes:

Mizo Christians affirm that God is related to the world and humankind within the framework of their inherited Calvinistic tradition. God is Creator and Supreme Ruler of the world. He is also the Saviour of individual human beings as well as of the whole world. In their pre-Christian tradition, though God dwelt in the Sky and was far removed, He was known to them as the Creator. His sovereignty over the world was acknowledged. While His transcendental aspect was stressed, His immanence in the world was also recognised. As a spirit, God remained active in the world. In fact, in the pre-Christian Mizo experience, spirits, nature and human beings formed a community. This appears to be quite helpful for the Mizos to affirm the relationship of God to the world.¹³⁰

Varghese Palatty further makes it clear on the Mizos and writes:

As regards to God's involvement with human beings, there is a difference of opinion. Some viewed him as residing in a remote heaven, a *Deus otiosus*, not concerned with the daily life of human beings. Others perceived him to be seeing human difficulties from heaven and willing and capable of endorsing justice. So they were confident of going to him when they were in trouble. Phrases about God in their everyday life show the attributes of the God of the Mizos believe in. When they were frightened they would comfort themselves with the phrase *Patian a awm ang chu* (there is God). When confused they would accept the situation by saying *Pathianthuthu* (God's will be done). When suffering injustice, they say, *Pathian a hriaalawn* (God knows). From these phrases, the belief of the Mizos in the capacity of God to intervene in their lives is quite clear. Moreover, we can say that there seems to be a progressive understanding of God, from a High God, who is remote and not interested in the affairs of men, to a God who is involved in the lives of people and to whom people can make requests.¹³¹

¹²⁸ Ibid., 96.

¹²⁹ Varghese Palatty, *Search for a New Society*, 146.

¹³⁰ H. Vanlalauva, *Doctrine of God*, 125.

¹³¹ Varghese Palatty, *Search for a New Society*, 152.

Thus, for the Tribal, the nearness of God was understood way before Christianity. However, this is not to suggest that the knowledge of Jesus Christ is of no particular significance to Christian Tribals. “Jesus Christ as a ‘personal’ Saviour, more than one who is ‘near,’ is a unique message that Christianity professes.”¹³² Christian Tribal Theology takes into account the transcendental nature and even immanent nature of God in the tribal belief system and then builds strongly on the Christian God in Jesus Christ.

3.6.6. Omnipotence Expressed in His Almightyness

3.6.6.1. Almighty God as Good, Distinct and Superior over all Powers

Tribals believe that every good thing in this world is from God, the Almighty. He is distinct, sovereign, owner and controller of this universe. He has placed everything in its place so beautifully, that each serves its purpose diligently, in this world. Vanlalauva writes, “Prominent to the Mizo religious tradition is the majesty or greatness of God. There was nothing greater than Pathian. He was most powerful, free, independent and self-sufficient. He was the source of power for all other beings. He had ultimate control overall. He was also considered to be distinct from the world.”¹³³

He further writes:

In pre-Christian Mizo thought, God is good. They did not offer as many sacrifices to God as they did to the evil spirits, because He was kind and good in the sense that He did no evil to the human being. He did not harm anybody. God’s goodness was seen in His supplying rain, providing health and fertility to the people. Rich harvests, seasons with sufficient rain and successful hunting were the signs of God’s goodness.¹³⁴

¹³² See Eyingbeni Hümtsoe-Nienu, *God of the Tribes*, 103.

¹³³ H. Vanlalauva, *Doctrine of God*, 70.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

Eyingbeni Hümtsoe notes that for Nagas, this omnipotent and omniscient good God is seen in contrast to the maleficent beings, and is also considered even distinct from other beneficent spirits.¹³⁵ “Offering sacrifices in kind to all classes of spirits – beneficent, maleficent or even ambivalent ones – was a common behaviour for the Nagas. Perhaps this aspect also distinguished the Creator, the Supreme Being, from the rest of the supernatural entities because the ancestral Nagas believed that the Supreme Being required no sacrifice.”¹³⁶ “The creator was deemed to be naturally good to the creatures.... due to His good nature, people were not bothered to appease Him as they were by the harmful spirits.”¹³⁷

God, for them, is in no need of any material offering. He was uniquely understood more precisely by the ontological goodness and, thus the dispensability of sacrifice and offerings for appeasement and favour.¹³⁸ God, for the tribes, is all powerful and has superior power over evil spirits and can control them. The evil spirits on the other hand are inferior to the Supreme Being and have limited power in which they function. Peter Haokip mentions that the Kukis call God *Pathen*, literally Holy Father or *Chung Pathen* meaning God from above. He has the power to subdue the evil influence of the *Thilhas* (the malevolent spirits) and it is to him that the Kukis offer their sacrifices to regain health or escape any adversity. He created the universe and is all powerful.¹³⁹ “The Oraon offer their

¹³⁵ Eyingbeni Hümtsoe-Nienu, *God of the Tribes*, 79.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 79-80.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 80.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.* 81-82.

¹³⁹ Peter Haokip, “God in Kuki Traditions,” *The Quest for Harmony: Christian and Tribal Perspective*, edited by Alphonus D’Souza, Yangkahao Vashum and Lalrindiki Ralte (Guwahati: NESRC, 2013), 143.

prayers to *Dharmes* (Oraon God) who is an omniscient and omnipotent God who is the father and provider of all things. As they greatly fear the spirits, they always ask *Dharmes* to control the spirits who are capricious and full of demands just like human beings.”¹⁴⁰

However, though the Tribals understood God as the all-powerful One, superior to other spirits, they only found His omnipotence in His love in the Christian God in Jesus Christ. Vanlalauva writes:

In the past, the Mizos were haunted by the constant fear of evil and misfortunes. They were physically and spiritually oppressed. They were looking for a power to save them from these oppressive forces. Now, with the coming of the Calvinistic missionaries, the majestic but loving God for whom they had been searching had been found. In their innumerable songs, the joy of having such a powerful, magnificent and loving God is clearly reflected. Thus, for the Mizo Christians, God is primarily the sovereign Lord. He is their Saviour and their Liberator.¹⁴¹

And this is true with all the tribal Christians today.

3.6.6.2. Almighty God as Ultimate Judge

God of the tribes expresses his almightiness in his judgment. They call him the ultimate judge. He is not partial and punishes the evil according to their works. Vanlalauva writes:

Pathian was also a God of justice in the pre-Christian Mizo tradition. There are two common sayings which indicate that God was considered to be a God of justice. One is *Pathianinzah a nagai ang* which means God would be forgiving or merciful, and the other is *pathianin a hair alawn* which means God knows and will judge justly. In their existential situation, they were looking for justice which was expected to come from Pathian.¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ Varghese Palatty, *Search for a New Society*, 147.

¹⁴¹ H. Vanlalauva, *Doctrine of God*, 125.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 66.

God, for Mizos, is the God who was the just and impartial judge. God was also considered to be against all immoral acts, such as stealing, murdering and cursing.¹⁴³ Aloysius Hemrom on the Munda God, writes, “Being the Lord of all, sometimes he punishes the people for the evil they do as a warning so that the one punished may correct himself. Sins and faults not punished by Him in this life, they are punished after death.”¹⁴⁴ Eyingbeni Hümtsoe notes that the Nagas were conscious of the Divine retribution. God to them is the Supreme Judge, who judges everyone according to their deeds. He is also a righteous judge and partiality is against his nature. The idea of divine retribution led them to imply that God is sovereign and human beings are inevitably accountable to God—accountable to keep the natural law or the customary law prescribed by the village community. Doing so was considered equivalent to doing the will of God or escaping the judgment of the Supreme Being.¹⁴⁵

She further claims that although the element of fear of God’s judgment might have evoked a sense of truthfulness in a person, yet the grim fact remains that they became enslaved to the result of their immediate deeds, right or wrong, with no hope of recompense. It seems their God did not know forgiveness, he only knew how to judge right from wrong. Then she writes:

The absence of the knowledge of Jesus Christ, who became the perfect sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins, once and for all, paints a picture of desolation. Even the loftiest idea that the Supreme Being is intrinsically good could not bring them to any point where they could ascertain a forgiveness status. No sacrifice and no other person could act as the bridge between God and sinful humanity, except Jesus Christ. Most Naga writers agree on the point that the act of God’s forgiveness in Jesus Christ is the

¹⁴³ Ibid., 70.

¹⁴⁴ Aloysius Hemrom, *The Quest for Harmony*, 235.

¹⁴⁵ Eyingbeni Hümtsoe-Nienu, *God of the Tribes*, 119-120.

missing element in ancestral religiosity, and holds that it formed the primary reason for the popularity of Christianity among the Nagas.¹⁴⁶

3.7. Summary

This chapter explored the idea of the omnipotence of God in Christian Tribal theology in India. Tribals in India are one of the most backward and most suffering people because of social oppression and economic exploitation from the so-called higher and richer section of the society. Their history is full of defeat, subjugation, exploitation, discrimination, displacement and alienation. Even the government has not done much for them.

Christian Tribal theology in India is a developing theology influenced and shaped by Latin American Liberation theology. When the foreign missionaries left India, the Indian churches had to think of Self-governing, Self-propagating, Self-supporting and also Self-theologizing. In the early stage of Self-theologizing, theological hermeneutics were worked out in terms of Hindu/Buddhist philosophical thought patterns and thus, theological language became highly abstract and rational. Unfortunately, this approach did not appeal much to the tribals. Soon, the theologians emerging from the tribal community started to do theology from their own perspective.

In Tribal theology the economic and political issues, the cultural and religious dimensions of discrimination are taken seriously. Tribals re-read Scripture from the perspective of the poor and oppressed in their struggle for justice and freedom. The starting point of Tribal theology was the commitment to victims, the oppressed and the struggling poor. This inspired the alienated tribal people to discover their identity, rights and dignity.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 127.

Tribal theology in India is a contextual theology, theology of inculturation and interculturalization, theology of liberation and transformation, theology of community and theology of identity.

Next was presented the idea of the God of the tribes in India in relation to the Christian God as: a) contra-Christian God (thus discontinuity between them), or as b) having relative continuity, or c) absolute continuity. It may all depend upon perspectives, as to how we look at the relationship between the two concepts of God. The researcher, in his final conclusion may try to find the most relevant perspective to move forward for this research.

Finally, the idea of the Omnipotence of God expressed in the tribal worldview and its incorporation into Christian Tribal theology in India was dealt with. The findings were that this Omnipotent God is One supreme being, Creator and Sovereign over all. He controls everything in His free will and provides for His people. He is not a God who is only transcendent, and thus far away from people's reach, but is immanent, and one who is near to everyone who needs Him and who in Jesus Christ finds complete fulfilment. His Almightyness is expressed in His goodness, distinctness and superiority over all spirits. He is also the ultimate judge over all.

The next chapter will present the findings of the empirical research on the thoughts of Lepcha Christians toward contemporary Christian ideas on the omnipotence of God. This was intended to give the researcher a richer understanding of their views toward the Omnipotence of God in Reformed Theology.

Chapter Four

Omnipotence of God in the Present Lepcha Tribal Mindset: Empirical Research

4.1. Introduction

The literature review done in Chapter Three sets the problem in a wider context and gives an introduction and general background to the empirical study in this chapter. We shall limit our empirical study to 25 chosen Lepcha Christian leaders of Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Sikkim. Reasonable data on the research topic has been already collected in the literature review in Chapter Two & Three from the scholars who are Lepchas as well as non-Lepchas from different religious background; therefore, only 25 Christian Lepchas were chosen for the empirical research. The selection of 25 Lepchas are done on the basis of their intellectual ability, professional diversity, their experiential variety and their spiritual affinity.

The intention of this study is not to present full-scale empirical research but to find out the impression of the Christian Lepcha thinking today especially on the Omnipotence of God and also to provide some reflections on the relation between the original Lepcha tribal belief and Christian faith. The study serves as a first exploration of the reception of the doctrine of God's omnipotence among members of the Lepcha tribe, which yields some elements that will be taken up in the subsequent argument of the dissertation.

The purpose of the empirical research is to understand the concept of the 'omnipotence' of God by the Lepchas today. It will yield an impression of how traditional Reformed conceptions of God's omnipotence are received within a Lepcha context, which points of contact can be established, and which experiences and questions from Lepcha

people need specific attention and elaboration. What is needed to formulate a theology about God's omnipotence in a Lepcha context? Does the understanding of omnipotence remain the same or has it been changed or developed over time? If changed, what factors are affecting the change? What suggestions arise from these empirical results for a conversation with other (reformed) theologians? These are some of the questions to which we are going to find the answers in this chapter.

How the idea of the Omnipotence of God has been presented to the Lepchas and what has been its effect on their religious and spiritual outlook has remained largely unknown. Four major research questions are answered here in terms of data collected through questionnaires and interviews. This constitutes a focus on the qualitative analysis of the responses. The goal is to determine the reception of God's omnipotence by these Lepcha leaders based on their faith, conviction and tradition. Thorough study of the interviews and questionnaires was done and they were analyzed in terms of the research questions. The four research questions are presented following some general information.¹

4.2. General Respondent Information

In the beginning of the questionnaire, respondents were asked their names and addresses. The database was designed to represent Christian Lepchas from various walks of life including high executives, government servants, doctors, teachers, church leaders, social workers, business people, etc. The researcher selected 25 Lepcha leaders who were

¹ For the work on this chapter the researcher was advised by Dr. Henk Geertsema (Empirical Research advisor) to study research design both conceptual and technical, from the book by Piet Verschuren and Hans Doorewaard, *Designing a Research Project* (The Hague: Eleven International Publishing, 2010). The type of empirical research employed here is qualitative, and combines elements of 'case study' and 'grounded theory' (Verschuren and Doorewaard, *Designing a Research Project*, 178-194).

active members of the church and giving leadership in different fields both within and outside the church. The interviewees were categorized into two sections: Pastors (including couple of Roman Catholic priests) and Professionals which are presented below in Table 1.

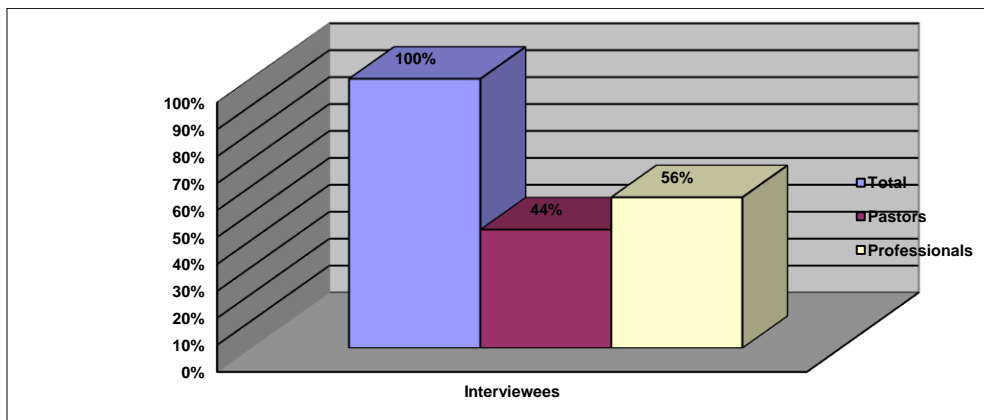


Table 1: Total Number of Interviewees

To try to capture a snapshot of the Lepcha tribe's concept of the complex idea of the Omnipotence of God, a group of 25 highly intellectual Lepchas from different walks of life were selected for participation, of which, some of them are scholars who have themselves done their doctorates. These leaders hold very respectable positions in the Lepcha community and are independent in their thinking and speech. The researcher is known to all of them professionally. All the answers provided by the respondents are their own independent thoughts.

Secondly, there are not enough written documents on the concept of the omnipotence of God in Lepcha literature, therefore, the researcher had to depend upon the empirical research for a more current and detailed understanding. The study was to be completed in a given period of time, therefore, a qualitative study was chosen for the purpose. A quantitative study would not be possible due to the following limitations. There is no proper road to travel to many Lepcha villages and the only means of travel is by foot

which costs lots of time and energy. Taxi service is limited in many remote areas. In some areas the vehicle only goes to the town in the morning and returns in the evening. There is still an acute postal problem in the remote Lepcha villages. Mail hardly reaches the villages. Lack of electricity, internet and telephone in some areas also adds to the communication gap. However, further research on the topic can be done by the next researchers using a quantitative methodology to validate the present findings.

Since the research topic is theological in nature, priests from different denominational backgrounds were selected. The aim was to get a reasonable understanding about the research topic from the priests who are coming from their own church traditions. Not all the priests who responded have a reformed background. Some represent the Presbyterian Free Church which has a Presbyterian form of governance and its theological standing is a combination of reformed and evangelical. The Church of North India has a strong Anglican affinity though their root is still Presbyterian and follows the Episcopalian way of governance. The United Church of North India is a Presbyterian church more conservative reformed in their standing. The Pentecostal churches and other independent churches are more autocratically functioning where pastors have the responsibility to bring the church together. Many have a charismatic flavor. Lastly, the Roman Catholics have a huge number of churches around the hills and they propagate a strongly-contextualized Roman Catholic theology.

The goal here is not to illuminate the perspective of all the represented denominations on the subject of the omnipotence of God, but to reflect the ideas of the selected individuals from the Lepcha tribes on the subject, irrespective of their background. The categories are presented in Table 2.

Pastors/Priest (Denomination)	Total Number
Presbyterian Free Church	2
Church of North India	2
United Church of North India	2
Pentecostal and other Independent Churches	3
Roman Catholic	2
TOTAL	11

Table 2: Pastors/Priests and their Denominations

Most of the respondents were second or third generation Christians or perhaps more than that. This is to make sure that the idea about the concept of the Omnipotence of God has not just been passed down, but also has been processed and by now, has brought strong conviction to the respondents. The researcher also gave special attention to the age group of the interviewees because their outlook and perspective on the subject may vary because of the age factor. Table 3 gives us the age breakdown.

Below Age 45	Above Age 45	Total
11	14	25

Table 3: Age Groups of the Respondents

All the respondents were Lepchas of Sikkim, Darjeeling District and Kalimpong District. Some are currently from other cities, but originally were from these areas. Some of the questionnaires were distributed and received through electronic mail. The selected respondents had a reasonable understanding of the Christian faith and Lepcha tribal traits. The selection was also done from among the literate circle of the community. This implies that the research presented here does not constitute a baseline measurement of how Lepcha people came to an understanding of God's omnipotence at the first instance of their

conversion to the Christian faith, but reflects the actual mixture of Christian convictions and pre-Christian notions of which people are aware.

4.3. Research Questions

The following section presents data gathered from the questionnaires and interviews under headings of the corresponding research questions. The first research question presents the understanding of the Omnipotence of God according to Lepcha Christian religious background. Any change of understanding in the contemporary situation of the Lepchas is also included here. The second question explores the understanding of the Omnipotence of God in the Lepcha Tribal Belief system. Any change of understanding in the contemporary situation is included too. The third looks into if there is any discontinuity, relative continuity, or absolute continuity between the Lepcha God and the Christian God; And the final question asks if there is any change Christianity must adopt in order to make the Christian concept of God's omnipotence relevant to the Lepcha Tribal Context. To answer the research questions, 25 Lepcha people from different walks of life were interviewed and questionnaires were distributed. The questions were divided into sub-questions.

4.3.1. Major Question 1. How do you look at the Omnipotence of God according to your own Christian religious background? (Include any change of understanding in the contemporary situation.)

4.3.1.1. Logic and Divine Omnipotence: Findings

(Q1) Is God omnipotent?

All 25 respondents agreed that God is almighty and omnipotent.

(Q2) Can God exhaust His own power?

The majority of the respondents also agreed that God cannot exhaust His own power. One of the respondents did tick 'YES' but probably he did not understand the question very well. Abrona Lee and Jacob Lepcha were honest in ticking "I don't know." Azuk Tamsangmu is of the view that God does not exhaust His own power, but he voluntarily limits himself giving way to humans to take care of the affairs of the world. Therefore, God is not actively involved in the affairs of the world. Humans have the power to take care of the daily affairs.²

(Q3) Can God make something above His own power? Like creating a stone so large that he cannot lift it?

If he cannot, then there is something he cannot do, namely, make such a stone. If He can, there is also something he cannot do namely, lift such a stone. Either way, there is something God cannot do. Therefore, He is not all-powerful or almighty.

The respondents had a mixed reaction to this question. Paul T. Simick claims that God is a no-nonsense God. He will use His power beneficially for the human beings and His creation. By doing so (creating the stone), what would he prove? There is no question of creating anything bigger than God himself.³ He is infinite.⁴ And He cannot be limited and confined in a room.⁵ "He is above all powers. However, if he so desires, if he wishes, He can."⁶ E.T. Lucksom claims that this is a totally illogical question and power is not

² Interview with Azuk Tamsangmu, Commercial Tax Officer, Govt. of India, Kalimpong, taken on 14th May 2017.

³ Questionnaire to Paul T. Simick, Teacher and Headmaster, Kalimpong, received on 8th May 2017.

⁴ Questionnaire to Eno Chodup Panlook, Pastor UCNI and Business man, received on 9th May 2017.

⁵ Interview with D.T. Tamsang, IAS (Retd) Govt. of India, Kalimpong, taken on 14th May 2017.

⁶ Questionnaire to M.S. Foning, (PhD), Self-employed, Kalimpong, received on 2nd May 2017.

defined in a self-contradictory way.⁷ Lucky Karthak is of the view that, “there is nothing above Him; since he is the Creator, nothing is out of his domain.”⁸ In other words, if God wants to, He can, but chooses not to make such a stone. His ability not to exercise this, makes Him omnipotent. Kenza Foning moves a little beyond the question and claims that “God can make anything beyond his power, whatever He makes, nobody can question Him; possibly he could but it is beyond what we can measure.”⁹ Enos Simick¹⁰ and James Paul Lepcha¹¹ are of the view that God can do anything if He wants. For them if God can create a stone, then God can also lift it. Everything will happen within His creativity and control. For Wangyal Lepcha¹² and Fr. Samuel,¹³ God will never create such stones because it is against His attributes and nature.

(Q4) Do you believe God is powerful enough to do anything? Even something which is logically impossible, e.g. make a square circle, married bachelor, etc.

Most of the respondents are convinced that God is powerful enough to do anything, even something which is logically impossible if it suits His purpose. The biblical examples given were the virgin birth of Jesus and His resurrection, Jesus walking on water which is

⁷ Interview with E. T. Lucksom, Pastor and Moderator of Presbyterian Free Church, Kalimpong, taken on 22nd February 2017.

⁸ Interview with Lucky Karthak, Pastor of Himali Shalom Church, Siliguri, taken on 8th April 2017.

⁹ Interview with Kenza Foning, Business Head of India Labour Net, Kalimpong, taken on 10th May 2017.

¹⁰ Interview with Enos Simick, Pastor of Bethesda Church and Admin. of All Nations Theological Seminary, Siliguri, taken on 8th April 2017.

¹¹ Questionnaire to James Paul Lepcha, Pastor, United Church of North India, Kalimpong, received on 17th April 2017.

¹² Interview with Wangyal Lepcha, Pastor Church of North India, Sikkim, taken on 22nd February 2017.

¹³ Interview with Fr. Samuel Lepcha (PhD), Priest of Roman Catholic Church, Darjeeling, taken on 31st May 2017. Note: there are two respondents whose names are Samuel Lepcha. Therefore, to differentiate between the two, this Samuel Lepcha will carry the title Fr. in front of the name.

against the law of gravity, Sarah giving birth to Isaac in her old age, etc. Lucky Karthak claims that, “God is all powerful; if He wishes He can do anything. Bible also says so. What is impossible for us is possible with God.”¹⁴ J.S. Simick writes, “Our concept of the physical world is limited by our intellectual capacity to understand. Our brain understands things only up to a point. There are things which are beyond our finite brain's concept of physics and the physical world. This is the realm of the omnipotent Creator.”¹⁵ However, illogical things like making a square circle or married bachelor are just absurd combinations of words. Lacking the ability to do self-contradictory things is not a threat to omnipotence. N.T. Tasho writes, “God doesn’t do anything contrary to His Godliness.”¹⁶ Whatever He does, it makes sense.¹⁷ Anything logically impossible is also possible for God if He wishes.¹⁸ But God will not do anything which he cannot do by himself. He will do everything and under His control, if he wants he can undo it also.¹⁹ We cannot comprehend His power with our human brains.²⁰

(Q5) Is there anything the omnipotent God cannot do?

Omnipotence does not require God’s ability to do absolutely anything. There are certain things in the Bible that God cannot do. For instance, He cannot swear by someone

¹⁴ Interview with Lucky Karthak.

¹⁵ Questionnaire to James S. Simick, Medical Doctor (Surgeon), Kolkata, originally from Kalimpong, received on 4th March 2017.

¹⁶ Questionnaire to N.T. Tasho, Additional Magistrate, Govt. of India (Retd.), Kalimpong, received on 24th May 2017.

¹⁷ Questionnaire to Jacob Lepcha, Student, Kalimpong, received on 23rd May 2017.

¹⁸ Interview with Kenza Foning.

¹⁹ Interview with E.T. Lucksom.

²⁰ Questionnaire to Ugen Tshering Lepcha, Pastor of Presbyterian Free Church, Kalimpong, received on 30th May 2017.

higher than Himself (*Heb. 6:13*), He cannot lie (*Heb. 6:18*), He cannot deny Himself (*II Tim. 2:13*) and He cannot be tempted by evil (*James 1:13*). God cannot perform them because He is “antithesis to sin.”²¹ It is against His attributes.²² In all these cases we are not dealing with acts that are in themselves logically impossible. God cannot perform them because they are contrary to His being and character,²³ and it is against his personality.²⁴ It is against the very nature and identity of God.²⁵ “Light does not produce darkness, so is God. He saves.”²⁶

4.3.1.2. Logic and Divine Omnipotence: Analysis (Q1 to Q5)

C.S. Lewis writes, “Omnipotence means power to do the intrinsically possible, not to do the intrinsically impossible. You may attribute miracles to Him, but not nonsense.”²⁷ The respondents (moving beyond the questions), claimed that God is all powerful. He uses His power for the benefit of human beings and His creation. He is unlimited and if he so desires, He can also do things beyond logic. In other words, God can also do things which are intrinsically impossible if it meets His purpose ultimately bringing benefits to human beings and His creation. However, they do also resolve that the omnipotent power must not be defined in a self-contradictory way. For them, His ability not to exercise the self-contradictory things actually makes Him omnipotent. God doesn’t do anything contrary to

²¹ Questionnaire to Aaron Namchu, Businessman, Kalimpong, received on 21st May 2017.

²² Interview with E.T. Lucksom.

²³ Interview with Lucky Karthak.

²⁴ Interview with Kenza Foning.

²⁵ Questionnaire to Eno Chodup Panlook.

²⁶ Interview with Peter Lingdamu, Priest of Roman Catholic Church and Headmaster, Darjeeling, taken on 31st May 2017.

²⁷ C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 27-28.

His Godliness. God cannot perform things which are contrary to His nature, being, character and divine attributes. God is the greatest conceivable being, therefore a perfect being including moral perfection. For Him to be God and unable to sin is not a weakness, but strength.

4.3.1.3. Human Freedom and Divine Omnipotence: Findings

(Q6) When God created human beings, did He create them with power?

Most of the respondents agreed that God created human beings with power. Lucky Karthak feels that because God created humans in His own image and His likeness, He did create human beings with power. Humans are powerful like God, but because of the interference of sin, that power is limited. Today, humans do possess power but how you use it, depends.²⁸ E.T. Lucksom agrees that God gave Adam power and intelligence, so that within the peripheral circle, humans can efficiently manage stewardship. After, the fall, Adam became limited, the curse came in, and there were lots of things Adam could not do. The problem came in between God and men.²⁹ Kenza claims that humans are “potent” but not “omnipotent”.³⁰

(Q7) Has God given human beings the freedom to choose?

Most of the respondents also agreed that the freedom of choice was indeed given to human beings. E.T. Lucksom claims that God never forced man to do anything, but He rather gave humans the right to do anything. He gave the first human absolute freedom, not

²⁸ Interview with Lucky Karthak.

²⁹ Interview with E.T. Lucksom.

³⁰ Interview with Kenza Foning.

limited, but it was misused.³¹ Enos Simick claims that before the fall, yes, full freedom was there with humans; after the fall, conditional freedom appears. It is more God-directed and controlled. Freedom to choose is still there, but they are more under the influence of evil, have taken a wrong turn. This power is not human power alone, but it is either the power of God or human power working on us. Today it is our choice that leads to this either/or situation.³² Kenza Foning points to the foreknowledge of God and tells that God has indeed given humans freedom to choose. However, He also has foreknowledge of which way we will choose.³³ Lucky Karthak looks at it from salvation history and writes, “Before the fall there was no need of a savior, all were people of God so there was no need of the freedom of choice especially for salvific concerns. However, since the fall, all humans are born in sin, so we have the freedom of choice to accept God in our lives or not.”³⁴ D.T. Tamlong claims that God has given us freedom to choose and He will constantly be near us to help and guide us when we pray to Him.³⁵

(Q8) While giving power to human beings, did God limit His power? In other words, is God dependent upon human choices?

Most of the respondents answered “No” to this question, while three of them said God partially limited himself and three more said, “Yes” God fully limited himself in power while giving power to human beings. Enos Simick agrees that God works according to human choices.³⁶ This he said perhaps due to the reason that if everything is controlled

³¹ Interview with E.T. Lucksom.

³² Interview with Enos Simick.

³³ Interview with Kenza Foning.

³⁴ Interview with Lucky Karthak.

³⁵ Interview with D.T. Tamlong.

³⁶ Interview with Enos Simick.

by God, He could also control the choice to choose evil from the beginning itself. E.T. Lucksom claims, “God’s absolute power did not diminish when he gave that power to humans. God is God, he never loses His power. His limitless power continued.³⁷ Lucky Karthak was of the view that in one sense it looks like God has limited Himself, but in reality, He has not. In His omnipotence, God may choose to limit Himself if he wishes so.³⁸

(Q9) Can the power of God subsequently control our freedom?

The respondents were equally divided on this answer. Eleven (11) of them said ‘Yes’, eleven (11) of them said ‘No’ and the rest did not answer this question. Table 4 gives us the data.

Yes, God will Control	No, God will not Control	No Response
11	11	3

Table 4: Can the Power of God subsequently control our freedom?

E.T. Lucksom claims that God’s power will subsequently not control our freedom. He said, “When God gave power to humans, He truly gave. He did not want to demonstrate his power as a magician, but indeed gave absolute power to humans. Only after the sin the limitation came. It was not His intention to create another god, but in order to manage the creation, power was given to humans for a positive purpose.³⁹ Abrona Lee writes, “Freedom is the state opposite of being enslaved by or shackled to someone or something, mostly negative. The person who has a good relationship with God is not enslaved by any negative element. In fact, one is more free to live without fear and chaos when one’s

³⁷ Interview with E.T. Lucksom.

³⁸ Interview with Lucky Karthak.

³⁹ Interview with E.T. Lucksom.

relationship with God is strong.”⁴⁰ Panu Lucksom writes, “God has given us the power of choice, though He could control our freedom, but He never does so forcefully. Our freedom depends on our choice.”⁴¹

Ugen Tshering addressing the sovereignty of God and responsibility of humans writes, “God in His sovereignty gives humans responsibility to fulfil the command.”⁴² Wangyal Lepcha claims, “As long as we are under the grand design of God, freedom within that boundary is possible, therefore our choices lead us to face the consequences, good or bad.”⁴³ Peter Lingdamu takes the middle path and writes, “God can subsequently control but He will not.”⁴⁴ Fr. Samuel divides this answer into two halves and puts it this way, “Looking at it theologically, God will control, but philosophically, God does not control.”⁴⁵ However, there are also other respondents who were convinced that God’s power will subsequently control our freedom. Sharon D. Foning writes, “Humans have been endowed with a “conscience” that I feel is the power of God that subsequently controls our freedom.”⁴⁶ Allen Phipon also claims, “God has the power to control our freedom and at times exercise it in our lives.”⁴⁷ For Eno Chodup Panlook, “Although humans do have the

⁴⁰ Questionnaire to Abrona Lee Pandi, Teacher, Sikkim, received on 16th April 2017.

⁴¹ Questionnaire to Panu Lucksom, Musician and Sound Engineer, Kalimpong, received on 23rd May 2017.

⁴² Interview with Ugen Tshering Lepcha.

⁴³ Interview with Wangyal Lepcha.

⁴⁴ Interview with Peter Lingdamu.

⁴⁵ Interview with Fr. Samuel Lepcha.

⁴⁶ Questionnaire to Sharon D. Foning, Medical Doctor (OBS Gynae), Kalimpong, received on 20th May 2017.

⁴⁷ Questionnaire to Allen Phipon, Pastor, Pedong Christian Church, Pedong, received on 23rd May 2017.

freedom of choice, God's discretionary power can overrule human freedom."⁴⁸ James S. Simick also writes, "Although we have been given the privilege of Choice, God uses, and has used, his supreme power to override our choice (e.g. Moses had to go back to Egypt)."⁴⁹

(Q10) Is there any way God's power and human power complement each other?

Eight of the respondents ticked 'No' to this answer. The reason was that God has the ultimate answer, humans don't. We only get to choose.⁵⁰ They acknowledge the sovereignty of God and claim that God's ways and thinking are not human ways and thinking, *Isaiah 55:8-9*.⁵¹ God is the source and originator of power; He cannot be dependent on human power.⁵² However, the rest of the respondents were positive about the complementarian aspects of God's power and human power. Samuel Lepcha cites an example of the reciprocal love between God and humans which is complementarian.⁵³ Kenza Foning says, "Just by praying, I cannot pass my exams, I have to study."⁵⁴ He means to say that God has His role to play and humans also have their role to play. Abrona Lee acknowledges that in reality all power flows from God and human power is miniscule in comparison to God's power. However, certain human acts, like prayer, exercising one's faith, giving, sharing, ministering to others' needs, counseling, and so on can complement God's power in so far as the extension of His kingdom is concerned.⁵⁵ Eno Chodup Panlook

⁴⁸ Questionnaire to Eno Chodup Panlook.

⁴⁹ Questionnaire to James S. Simick.

⁵⁰ Questionnaire to Panu Lucksom.

⁵¹ Questionnaire to Paul T. Simick.

⁵² Questionnaire to Allen Phipon.

⁵³ Questionnaire to Samuel Lepcha, Pastor of Church of North India, Kalimpong, received on 27th April 2017.

⁵⁴ Interview with Kenza Foning.

⁵⁵ Questionnaire to Abrona Lee Pandi.

writes, “As God created humans in His own image, God does respect human opinions.”⁵⁶ Wangyal Lepcha is of the view that “God’s power complements men’s power, not the opposite. God can do anything; even create things out of nothing.”⁵⁷

For E.T. Lucksom, in the original plan of God, He would be the owner and humans the manager and with this good coordination, the power of God and humans would complement each other. Even today, as the knowledge grew, though the God given power is still there in humans, unfortunately humans are misusing the power. Humans have discovered new things through His power, but they are not using this to bring God’s glory, but self glorification only.”⁵⁸ N.T. Tasho feels ultimately God’s power will prevail over human power.⁵⁹ And for Ugen Tshering, “God does not depend on anything outside of Himself. Sometimes He uses human abilities to fulfil His purposes.”⁶⁰

4.3.1.4. Human Freedom and Divine Omnipotence: Analysis (Q6 to Q10)

Does God have universal domain over the world? Not everyone thinks so. There are many who believe human beings are created as persons with a relevant degree of creaturely freedom and moral responsibility. Some respondents above agreed on the notion that solely God’s will and power are responsible for all states of affairs: humans voluntarily do what God determines them to do. Humans acting voluntarily are a condition for acting freely. They are at least not forced to act against their will. However, Van den Brink maintains that acting voluntarily is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition of acting

⁵⁶ Questionnaire to Eno Chodup Panlook.

⁵⁷ Interview with Wangyal Lepcha.

⁵⁸ Interview with E.T. Lucksom.

⁵⁹ Questionnaire to N.T. Tasho.

⁶⁰ Questionnaire to Ugen Tshering Lepcha.

freely. He writes, “No matter how many causes are pressing on me to perform a certain action, only if they leave me the choice of not performing it am I sufficiently free with regard to that action.”⁶¹ Some of the respondents also clearly acknowledged that God has all power, but He self limited himself in the exercise of this power. After all, God in his omnipotence can choose either to act through a free human action or to act solely, without interceding in human actions.

To the notion of whether God’s power and human power are complementary, the respondents had mixed answers, but they lean toward the free-will perspective of human freedom. Here, it could help Lepchas to understand God’s role in our lives by referring back to Van den Brink’s example of a beggar receiving a gift, discussed in section 1.14.2. His accepting the gift is his own act, not the act of his benefactor. Nevertheless, only the benefactor is credited for this event. On the other hand, if he had refused the gift, he and only he would be responsible for that.⁶² It is understood that God gives us an infinite gift that changes our lives. If we do not accept it, we do not receive it and we ourselves are responsible for missing the gift. If we do not accept the gift, God is still fully responsible for the whole event. Van den Brink’s beggar perspective does not ignore God’s role, nor does it ignore the creaturely freedom of man.⁶³

Some respondents also maintain that human beings possess power and freedom because they are created in the image of God, whose sovereignty is qualitatively distinct and unique. Michael Horton claims that God’s omnipotence is a necessary precondition to

⁶¹ Gijsbert van den Brink, *Almighty God*, 212.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 237-238.

⁶³ See Dolf te Velde, *Paths Beyond Tracing Out*, 523.

human freedom. God's sovereignty and human responsibility are perfectly consistent with each other. Humans have as much power as they need as created beings. The 'freedom pie' is God's. He does not give away pieces of His pie, but gives us our own pie that is a limited copy of His own. Horton says, "The creaturely freedom has its inexhaustible source (in Him) in abundance rather than lack, generosity rather than a rationing or negotiation of wills."⁶⁴

4.3.1.5. Evil, Suffering and Divine Omnipotence: Findings

(Q11) How can a good and powerful God allow pointless evil and suffering in this world?

The presence of evil and suffering is the incisive and continuous challenge to the Christian doctrine of Divine Omnipotence. If God is Omnipotent, why do evil and suffering still exist? Perhaps why are good people suffering in the hands of the evil? These are some of the burning questions asked throughout the centuries. All the respondents answered this question in their own way. Some were common and others were different. The most common answer was that the evil and suffering is because of the fallen nature of human beings. E.T. Lucksom writes, "Suffering is because of man. Originally it was never God's plan, it was brought by human themselves. Therefore, mankind must go through this."⁶⁵ Ugen Tshering also claims that "Evil and suffering is because of the fallen conditions of human beings. i.e., sin."⁶⁶ Peter Lingdamu points out that evil and suffering is the result of the misuse of freedom by the humans.⁶⁷ Panu Lucksom adds to it and says the presence of

⁶⁴ Michael Horton, 261-262.

⁶⁵ Interview with E.T. Lucksom.

⁶⁶ Questionnaire to Ugen Tshering Lepcha.

⁶⁷ Interview with Peter Lingdamu.

evil and suffering is due to the choices we make, or our predecessors made long ago (curse/blessings follow).⁶⁸ However, some would also think that suffering can help turn humans to God and change from the fallen nature.⁶⁹ The period of suffering helps us to focus back to our creator and repent. Therefore, suffering is also a graceful period for us to repent and come back to God, e.g. Prodigal Son.⁷⁰

James S Simick claims that suffering could be to meet God's higher purpose. He refers to Isaiah 55:9 which talks about God's ways and thoughts which are higher than human ways and thoughts."⁷¹ Allen Phipon admits that at times God allows evil and suffering for reasons we will never be able to understand while we are here on earth.⁷² Lucky Karthak claims that sometimes God allows evil and suffering to purify us and make us more mature. He cited I Corinthians 5:1-5 to say that "physically we may not be able to control evil and suffering, but spiritually it is always in the hand of God." He stated, "If I see Judas in heaven I will not be surprised."⁷³

Wangyal Lepcha claims that evil and suffering is to test our faith. He writes, "When the Holocaust happened, many asked where is God? But the question should be where is humanity? God has given us law and right things, but in spite of this if we do evil than it is not God's doing."⁷⁴ Abrona Lee points out that sometimes evil and suffering are given so that we would be a witness and motivation for those passing through the same phase as we

⁶⁸ Questionnaire to Panu Lucksom.

⁶⁹ Interview with E.T. Lucksom.

⁷⁰ Interview with D.T. Tamlong.

⁷¹ Questionnaire to James S. Simick.

⁷² Questionnaire to Allen Phipon.

⁷³ Interview with Lucky Karthak.

⁷⁴ Interview with Wangyal Lepcha.

already did. She writes, “Maybe evil is not “pointless” if one comes to think of it. Sometimes people suffer so they can feel others’ suffering with sincere intensity and compassion and help them withstand those sufferings by sharing their own experiences or by simply being available for them in any way possible.”⁷⁵ Kenza Foning points out that in our weakness and suffering we may find ourselves closer to God.⁷⁶ Enos Simick claims no matter what, God is still in control, He is almighty.⁷⁷

(Q12) Has God willed sin?

All the respondents agreed that God did not or cannot will sin. Sin for many is the consequences of human choices. However, many agreed that God allowed sin to meet his higher goals. For D.T. Tamlong, “God allows sin to bring glory to Him.”⁷⁸ Kenza Foning refers to the history of the Jews and says, “Jews were 40 years in the wilderness, but they went to the same old life (idolatry). However, if Jews had not crucified Jesus we would not get chance for salvation. So, for every sin to happen God has a larger plan.”⁷⁹ For Lucky Karthak, “God hates sin but loves sinners.”⁸⁰

(Q13) Does an omnipotent God suffer in the hands of evil? e.g. Jesus?

Many respondents said “No,” God cannot suffer in the hands of the evil because He is omnipotent. The suffering of Jesus was possible because He incarnated himself as a human being.⁸¹ God had to come to this world because of humans’ sin and redemption.

⁷⁵ Questionnaire to Abrona Lee Pandi.

⁷⁶ Interview with Kenza Foning.

⁷⁷ Interview with Enos Simick.

⁷⁸ Interview with D.T. Tamlong.

⁷⁹ Interview with Kenza Foning.

⁸⁰ Interview with Lucky Karthak.

⁸¹ Interview with Peter Lingdamu.

Enos Simick writes, “God cannot sin, but because of humans’ sin so he bore the sin in Him, to redeem us. He does not bring sin but allows sin, so that human can understand without Jesus there is no salvation.”⁸² D.T. Tamlong also writes, “God had to be human to demonstrate his love and friendship with humans, and in their suffering. So that when we repent the reconciliation can be done.”⁸³ For Paul T. Simick and Wangyal Lepcha this redemptive work of God in Jesus Christ is under the providence and plan of God.⁸⁴ Aaron Namchu points out that God in Jesus Christ suffered by choice.⁸⁵

This suffering of Jesus does not make Him less Omnipotent.⁸⁶ Kenza Foning writes, “Greatest fear of man is Death, Highest honor is sacrifice. So, when Jesus was crucified it was for a reason. Before He destroyed sin with water and other wraths, this time with love and sacrifice. Omnipotent is beyond the power game. A person who gets beaten but still smiles, is stronger than the hitter.”⁸⁷

(Q14) Will God be able to eradicate all evil?

Most of the respondents answered “Yes” to this question because they believe that there will be a judgment for good and evil at the end and God will sit at His throne and separate Sheep and the Goats (Matthew 25:31-46) and finally eradicate evil. Abrona Lee writes, “Perhaps on the Judgment Day, God will separate the sheep from the goats and eradicate all evil. Since God’s ways and thoughts are higher than our own, it may be very

⁸² Interview with Enos Simick.

⁸³ Interview with D.T. Tamlong.

⁸⁴ Questionnaire to Paul T. Simick and Interview with Wangyal Lepcha.

⁸⁵ Questionnaire to Aaron Namchu.

⁸⁶ Questionnaire to Allen Phipon.

⁸⁷ Interview with Kenza Foning.

different from what we have envisioned. It is difficult to describe the exact *modus operandi*, at least for me.”⁸⁸ Sharon D. Foning writes, “The Bible promises that this earth and all evil will be destroyed and His everlasting kingdom will be established. How? I don’t know. But yes all evil will be eradicated.”⁸⁹

However in the present, Eno Chodup Panlook writes, “The devil has not exhausted his time, and God will eradicate all evil in His time.”⁹⁰ James S. Simick dreams of an establishment of a new Jerusalem and when that happens, God’s ultimate victory will be established.⁹¹ Kenza Foning puts it this way, “The world is like a factory with raw material, in heaven it is all fine and no evil.”⁹² Similarly, for Allen Phipon, “in the new heaven there is no evil.”⁹³ Lucky Karthak thinking more existentially believes as long as people commit sin, God can do nothing. He writes, Since God cannot change his word “the wages of sin is death” so he cannot eradicate sin, as long as people commit sin he cannot do anything.”⁹⁴ D.T. Tamlong believes that “God will not eradicate evil but will punish all evil. However, this period is the period of grace and a moment to change.”⁹⁵

4.3.1.6. Evil, Suffering and Divine Omnipotence: Analysis (Q11 to Q14)

If the good God made the world, why has it gone wrong? Most of the respondents blamed the humans for entry of sin and suffering and not God. However today, if God is

⁸⁸ Questionnaire to Abrona Lee Pandi.

⁸⁹ Questionnaire to Sharon D. Foning.

⁹⁰ Questionnaire to Eno Chodup Panlook.

⁹¹ Questionnaire to James S. Simick.

⁹² Interview with Kenza Foning.

⁹³ Questionnaire to Allen Phipon.

⁹⁴ Interview with Lucky Karthak.

⁹⁵ Interview with D.T. Tamlong.

at work in redeeming the world, why is it taking so long? The respondents believed strongly on the eschatological aspects of the kingdom of God where in the future in God's own time, He will sit on His throne and judge the world. For them the kingdom of God has already been started in Christ and it will be fully realized in the future when Christ will come again to take home His loved ones and finalize the judgments. However evil and suffering come into our lives for different reasons.

Firstly, the suffering may be the result of our own action. Eating junk food, addicted to drugs and alcohol, giving way to immoral lifestyle, all may ultimately lead to suffering physically and spiritually.

Secondly, suffering can also be the work of the devil. Job is a good example in the Bible (Job 1:6-12; 2:1-6). In I Peter 5:8-9 the followers of Jesus Christ are called to be alert because the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Because of this evil force, many believers around the world are undergoing the same kind of suffering. However, God will not allow us to be tempted beyond what we are able (1 Cor. 10:13). And He will provide a way of escape, enabling us to bear the trial (1 Cor. 10:13).

Thirdly, suffering also may be the chastisement of God. God chastises to correct us (Heb. 12:9), so that we may be partakers of His holiness (Heb. 12:10); and we may yield the peaceable fruit of righteousness (Heb. 12:11).

Fourthly, the respondents also answered that suffering may have something to do with meeting the higher purpose of God. Romans 8:28 declares, "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to His purpose." God is able to use suffering to make us better! Van den Brink writes, "Dentists may inflict some pain upon their patients in order to guarantee the greater good of a healthy set of teeth.... We don't blame surgeons for the amputation of a child's leg if this operation was

necessary in order to avoid death from cancer... if God has a morally sufficient reason for permitting or bringing about evil and suffering, nothing is wrong..."⁹⁶ Paul struggled with a thorn in his flesh and he prayed three times for God to remove it. But the Lord answered him by saying, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (II Corinthians 12:7-10). From that day onwards, Paul realized that the grace of God is more strengthening for him than removal of the thorn from his flesh. James too shares (James 1:2-4) that the trying of our faith can produce good results.

Finally, God suffers with us in our suffering. The Christian God in Jesus Christ came to earth to deliberately put Himself on the hook of human failures and suffering. His suffering and death on the cross are a deep consolation and strength for us to face the brutal realities of life on earth. And we can rest assured that He is with us even in our worst suffering. However, it is not just His suffering and death, but His resurrection that gives us hope that our suffering is not in vain. His resurrection assures us that human suffering and death lead to new life and that injustices received lead to a greater justice. God is able to turn failure into blessing (Gen.50:20) and to let evil work for good (Rom.8:28). And, the most paradigmatic example is the cross and resurrection of Christ. Timothy Keller affirms the eschatological aspects of the working of God where in the future He is surely going to subdue all the evil and suffering and establish a new heaven and earth.⁹⁷ God's power is the power of His love and gives us the most trustworthy grounds for belief in the ultimate eschatological overcoming of evil in the kingdom of God.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Gijsbert van den Brink, *Almighty God*, 248.

⁹⁷ Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God*, 31-34.

⁹⁸ Gijsbert van den Brink, *Almighty God*, 271-272.

4.3.1.7. Personal Experience and God's Omnipotence: Findings

(Q15) Are there any changes of understanding in your Christian religious journey on the idea of the omnipotence of God in the contemporary situation?

Many of the respondents answered this question from the perspective of divine causality and not human causality. Looking at the Omnipotence of God from the divine causality, Samuel Lepcha⁹⁹ and Ugen Tshering¹⁰⁰ firmly claimed that there is no change in understanding because God cannot be changed. He is unchangeable in any situation. James S. Simick writes, “The omnipotence of God does not change with time and season, nor does it in the contemporary or otherwise situation.”¹⁰¹ M.S. Foning also writes, “The omnipotence of God was there in the beginning and will be there till eternity no matter what the situation.”¹⁰² Kenza Foning agrees with the un-changeability of God but writes, “I still hold on to the basic journey of life; we change ideas but certain things don't change. Filtering and polishing have taken place.”¹⁰³

The other respondents, answering from the perspective of human causality, find there has been change in the idea of the Omnipotence of God in the changing time and situation. Lucky Karthak recalls that in childhood he understood God as a strict father, but as he grew up he experienced the love and grace of God. He tells, “The fear for God I have today, is not because God is a tyrant and a punishing God, but I fear Him out of love, reverence and worship. He is a powerful God for my Good.”¹⁰⁴ Paul T. Simick claims that

⁹⁹ Questionnaire to Samuel Lepcha.

¹⁰⁰ Questionnaire to Ugen Tshering Lepcha.

¹⁰¹ Questionnaire to James S. Simick.

¹⁰² Questionnaire to M.S. Foning.

¹⁰³ Interview with Kenza Foning.

¹⁰⁴ Interview with Lucky Karthak.

the Lepchas worshipped God in a distorted form similar to Old Testament times, different than Christian worship. For him, the New Testament gives a newer and holistic perspective about the Almighty God.¹⁰⁵ N.T. Tasho admits that, “There are certain things in the Bible which don’t sustain the test of reasoning and cast doubt on the omnipotence of God.¹⁰⁶ Allen Phipon further writes, “We cannot fully understand the omnipotence of God, but as we live our lives, face situations, we understand more and a little more about His omnipotence.”¹⁰⁷ Fr. Samuel feels, “God seems to depend a lot on the cooperation and exercise of human freedom. Misuse of human freedom appears to control God’s omnipotence.”¹⁰⁸

Abrona Lee describes her journey of faith beautifully this way:

When younger, we were given to believe that our God is a powerful God who will rout all evil and triumph over sin and evil with a great flourish. During our Sunday School Days, we thought that God would not tolerate wrongdoing and hurl his divine wrath at all miscreants and we would be around to witness the show of power and glory. However, growing older has given me an opportunity to realise God does not believe in the kind of showmanship and exhibitionism I had attributed to Him. God works in simple and complex ways, in open and mysterious ways, in a short time or over long years. One cannot really have a set of rules or rigid expectations for the ways in which God will express His omnipotence.¹⁰⁹

Wangyal Lepcha claims that as theological research grows and expands, ideas about the Omnipotence of God may also change. Today people are also doing contextual theologies and looking at this subject from their own context.¹¹⁰ He anticipates a positive

¹⁰⁵ Questionnaire to Paul T. Simick.

¹⁰⁶ Questionnaire to N.T. Tasho.

¹⁰⁷ Questionnaire to Allen Phipon.

¹⁰⁸ Questionnaire to Fr. Samuel Lepcha.

¹⁰⁹ Questionnaire to Abrona Lee Pandi.

¹¹⁰ Interview with Wangyal Lepcha.

change and richness in the understanding of the Omnipotence of God. Enos Simick, admits that the traditional idea about “God can do everything” was strongly valid. But today people are arguing to prove not everything is possible from God. Before people accepted the idea blindly in face value but today there are lots of reasoning, questions about God’s power and His existence. Then he suggests, “Faith should play an important role. Word of God and biblical history must also hold on to our journey.”¹¹¹

(Q16) How do you describe the Omnipotence or Almightyness of God in your own words?

All the respondents answered this question in various ways. Mostly, they would explain the Omnipotence of God from His characteristics. Most of them described that an omnipotent God is a Creator of all things. Wangyal Lepcha states, “God is omnipotent because He is the creator and source of everything. He has power to create everything.”¹¹² Samuel Lepcha adds, “Omnipotent God can create, correct, change, build through his word.”¹¹³ James P. Lepcha also writes, “He is the creator of all the universe and human beings. Nothing exists without His power. There is no comparison to His greatness.”¹¹⁴ Paul T. Simick writes, “I can see His omnipotence in the creation: human beings, all living creatures, nature, land, sea and vegetation in them. God has made all things for His glory and for His sake.”¹¹⁵ James S Simick writes, “I am made for God, not He for me. This explains his Almightyness.”¹¹⁶ Sharon D. Foning poetically explains, “Unseen, unheard,

¹¹¹ Interview with Enos Simick.

¹¹² Interview with Wangyal Lepcha.

¹¹³ Questionnaire to Samuel Lepcha.

¹¹⁴ Questionnaire to James P. Lepcha.

¹¹⁵ Questionnaire to Paul T. Simick.

¹¹⁶ Questionnaire to James S. Simick.

yet deeply felt. The very breath that I take, which keeps me alive, is a gift of the almightiness of God, a reminder of His omnipotence.”¹¹⁷ The Omnipotent God is the creator, therefore He is above all creation and His will prevails, as He so desires.¹¹⁸

God is not just the creator, but he is also the controller and sustainer of everything.¹¹⁹ Abron Lee writes, “Omnipotence is that attribute which makes God who He is. God’s omnipotence controls the cosmos, His omnipotence keeps the planets in their orbits, His omnipotence keeps each one of us on track. His omnipotence creates and controls space and time. His omnipotence orders the multiverse. His omnipotence orders every life force within the multiverse. His omnipotence brings order out of chaos, it brings peace out of suffering, it brings life out of death.”¹²⁰ Peter Lingdamu moves a step further and describes the omnipotence of God as Creator, liberator, forgiver and loving.¹²¹ Ugen Tshering claims, “There is none like Him who is all powerful.”¹²² The idea of Omnipotent being as eternal is also strongly expressed by Eno Chodup Panlook and Lucky Karthak. Eno Panlook writes, “God is in charge of my life. He was, He is and He is to come.”¹²³ Lucky Karthak adds, “God is eternal, I am a stranger in the journey, I cannot experience the wholeness of God and one day it will also come to a stop when I die. But in the spiritual realm, I continue. The power of God continues for eternity.”¹²⁴

¹¹⁷ Questionnaire to Sharon D. Foning.

¹¹⁸ Questionnaire to M.S. Foning.

¹¹⁹ Interview with Dawa Lepcha.

¹²⁰ Questionnaire to Abrona Lee Pandi.

¹²¹ Questionnaire to Peter Lingdamu.

¹²² Questionnaire to Ugen Tshering Lepcha.

¹²³ Questionnaire to Eno Chodup Panlook.

¹²⁴ Interview with Lucky Karthak.

For many, the omnipotent God expresses himself in the day-to-day life of His people. His protection, care, concern, etc. People experience God's omnipotent power manifested in their lives in small and big ways. They face challenges of different kinds, and they simply pray and rely upon this Omnipotent God. And He appears to them. E.T. Lucksom writes, "Personally, I never doubt God's power, I have confidence in God, all this year God is with me, protecting me, leading and guiding me, even in small circumstances God's loving care is always with me. When I pray, God gives me success in all my work, that is our confidence in God. We see God's power operating in our lives."¹²⁵

For the omnipotent God, everything is possible which is good and logical. Enos Simick claims, "The Omnipotent God is sovereign, creator and sustainer and savior. Everything is possible in Him which is good and logical."¹²⁶ Fr. Samuel also adds, "The Omnipotent God must be able to do things which are logically possible."¹²⁷ However, Allen Phipon admits that God must not be bound in logic in the human sense. He writes, "Omnipotence of God is His ability to do things in His way. His timing for His purpose which may or may not seem good or logical to us. His character that we can experience, and learn more and more."¹²⁸ Panu Lucksom writes "This omnipotent God is the end of all authorities, He is absolute, the end of all logic."¹²⁹ When Panu Lucksom refers to the Omnipotent God as the 'end of all logic,' he probably means that the Omnipotence of God is expressed beyond human logic. What would be the logic of God? Indeed all human logic

¹²⁵ Interview with E.T. Lucksom.

¹²⁶ Interview with Enos Simick.

¹²⁷ Questionnaire to Fr. Samuel Lepcha.

¹²⁸ Questionnaire to Allen Phipon.

¹²⁹ Questionnaire to Panu Lucksom.

added together cannot match the logic of God. Therefore, Kenza Foning writes, “I never question Him, the alpha and the omega. He is beyond what I can and what I cannot describe.”¹³⁰

4.3.1.8. Personal Experience and God’s Omnipotence: Analysis (Q15 to Q16)

For the respondents, the Omnipotent God is One supreme being, Creator and Sovereign over all. He controls everything in His free will and provides for His people. He is not that God who is transcendent far away from people’s reach but also immanent, who is near to everyone who needs Him. His Almightyness is expressed in His goodness, distinctness and superiority over all spirits. He is indeed all powerful. This power of God is the highest power surpassing human logic.

It is true that not every decision can be made using pure logic. We also use our instinct, emotions, preference; subjective reasoning because we are not purely logical creatures and that is what God has made us. The term “beyond logic”, is the acknowledgment of the fact that God sometimes does things that we cannot understand from our human perspective. God sometimes does things that don't make any sense to us. He is beyond logic to us and also our instinct, emotions and preferences. In other words, God transcends our human logical reasoning and understanding. The Omnipotent God must be able to embrace and handle all kinds of logic and also things beyond logic.

Therefore, the collective definition of the respondents may go like this:

God is Omnipotent because He, in His infinite and perfect being, can do anything that is logical and beyond logic possible which is in harmony to his will and nature.

¹³⁰ Interview with Kenza Foning.

4.3.2. Major Question 2. How do you look at the Omnipotence of God in the Lepcha tribal belief system? (Include any change of understanding in the contemporary situation.)

4.3.2.1. Major Question 2: Findings

(Q17) Do you think that the Lepcha God is almighty / omnipotent?

The respondents were almost equally divided in this answer. Eleven of the respondents answered yes to affirm that the God of the Lepchas is omnipotent, while thirteen did not feel so and one respondent did not know the answer. Table 5 will give the statistics.

Q17	Yes	No	I Don't Know	Total
Respondents	11	13	1	25

Table 5: Is the God of the Lepchas Omnipotent?

(Q18) What reasons can you give to prove that the God of the Lepchas is God omnipotent?

All the respondents who affirmed that the God of the Lepchas is omnipotent claimed that both Christianity and Lepcha tribal belief are monotheist. Though the monotheism of Christianity is a Trinitarian monotheism, the tribal Lepcha belief is closer to the Old Testament concept of God. They claim that the name of the Lepcha God, “Itbu-Debu Rum” speaks for itself. Enos Simick claims that, “The name *Itbu-Debu Rum* itself means creator and sustainer who is almighty.”¹³¹ Fr. Samuel also affirms that “the Lepcha credit the whole creation to *Itbu-Debu Rum* (creator and destroyer).”¹³² Paul T. Simick

¹³¹ Interview with Enos Simick.

¹³² Questionnaire to Fr. Samuel Lepcha.

adds ‘Dar’ and calls the Lepcha God *Itbu-Debu Rum Dar*. Dar in Lepcha may mean mighty or almighty. He writes, “Lepchas called their Almighty “*Itbu-Debu Rum Dar*” meaning eternal and Almighty.”¹³³

For Wangyal Lepcha, God is not just the creator but source of everything.¹³⁴ M.S. Foning writes, “During our ancestors’ days, their belief was expressed in their own context; their ways of life during their period. For them that was the belief. Today, we as Christians we have our belief.”¹³⁵ He is affirming that there was a time when the God of the Bible had not been introduced to the Lepchas, the Lepcha ancestors believed in this omnipotent God from their own perception. Azuk Tamsang claims that the God of the Lepchas has the same concept as the Old Testament in the Bible.¹³⁶ Sharon D. Foning further writes that this “Almighty God of the Lepchas is none other than Jesus our Lord and Saviour.”¹³⁷

Lucky Karthak acknowledges that the idea of creator God was strongly there, but Lepchas limited themselves to nature. Therefore, the concept of God is limited. However, they were in search of the true God. And when they found one, much related to their own belief system, it was easier for Lepchas to believe in the God of Christianity.¹³⁸ Panu Lucksom writes, “worshipping nature in itself is an act of submission that God is everywhere.”¹³⁹

¹³³ Questionnaire to Paul T. Simick.

¹³⁴ Interview with Wangyal Lepcha.

¹³⁵ Questionnaire to M.S. Foning.

¹³⁶ Interview with Azuk Tamsang.

¹³⁷ Questionnaire to Sharon D. Foning.

¹³⁸ Interview with Lucky Karthak.

¹³⁹ Questionnaire to Panu Lucksom.

(Q19) What reasons can you give to prove that the God of the Lepchas is “NOT” omnipotent?

Many of the respondents who vouch to think the Lepcha God is not omnipotent would point to the notion that Lepcha people are more of nature worshippers. Kenza Foning maintains, “Lepcha never had God, they are nature worshippers. They were focused more on creation than the creator.”¹⁴⁰ James S. Simick also points out that Lepcha worships the spirits of their ancestors and nature. He writes, “In a primitive setting they searched and found solace in such faith and trust. There is no Lepcha God as such, like Baal or Diana or Milcom or Dagon. So there is no question of omnipotence”¹⁴¹ E.T. Lucksom also claims that Lepchas are basically nature worshippers. For him:

Their belief system is different than Christianity. Though they believe that there is God, on the omnipotence of God there is a difference. Actually, they don't have a formal theology, not yet organized, true concept of God is not clear. They are still in the transitional phase from Oral tradition to written form. Their belief is still handed down orally, so they have no such research done. If we ask the concept of omnipotence to 10 people, we will surely get 10 different answers. Many is just inference, not own conviction but I will say I have heard our forefathers say. They believe without having a clear concept. The concept of the almightiness of God is there, but not in the sense of merciful God, but retributive God, punishing God. We cannot do this because God will punish us.¹⁴²

The respondents also point out that the Lepchas were more focused on appeasing the evil spirits than the almighty God. Allen Phipon writes, “Lepchas believe in the existence and appeasing of the mung (bad spirit) for their good, more than pleasing the Rum (God, good Spirit).”¹⁴³ D.T. Tamlong also affirms this and claims, “They worship the

¹⁴⁰ Interview with Kenza Foning.

¹⁴¹ Questionnaire to James S. Simick.

¹⁴² Interview with E.T. Lucksom.

¹⁴³ Questionnaire to Allen Phipon.

evil spirit, and appease them. Idea of creator is there, but they deal with the mung (evil spirit) world. They focused on the appeasement of the devil. Only the idea was there of an omnipotent God, but they spent all the time appeasing the devils.”¹⁴⁴

Some of the respondents also point out that the concept of the Omnipotent God in Jesus Christ and his redemptive plan is not there in the Lepcha belief system. James P. Lepcha writes, “Salvation is incomplete without Jesus, and Jesus is not there in the Lepcha belief system.”¹⁴⁵ N.T. Tasho also affirms that the “Lepcha God does not have any provision for the salvation of human kind from sin.”¹⁴⁶ Finally, some would also point out that the Lepcha concept of omnipotent God is not well defined. Eno Chodup Panlook writes, “Lepchas do not have a clear and definite concept of God.”¹⁴⁷ Aaron Namchu also affirms that, “The Lepcha concept of the omnipotence of God is not well defined. The Lepcha Rum is a distant being not like the Christian God. He is the creator and benefactor and the role is quite limited.”¹⁴⁸ Samuel Lepcha also confirms that the concept of God in the Lepchas is a developing concept.¹⁴⁹

4.3.2.2. Major Question 2: Analysis – Lepcha View of the Omnipotence of God (Q17 to Q19)

The respondents who did not agree that the God of the Lepchas is an omnipotent God based their opinion on the view that Lepchas are animist. They believed that

¹⁴⁴ Interview with D.T. Tamlong.

¹⁴⁵ Questionnaire to James P. Lepcha.

¹⁴⁶ Questionnaire to N.T. Tasho.

¹⁴⁷ Questionnaire to Eno Chodup Panlook.

¹⁴⁸ Questionnaire to Aaron Namchu.

¹⁴⁹ Questionnaire to Samuel Lepcha.

Christianity and Lepcha belief are contradictory to each other. To them, the traditional Lepchas only have a vague idea about God. Therefore, this vagueness has been nicely bridged by the clear idea about the doctrine of God in Christianity. Consequently, the Christian God surpasses the Lepcha God. The Christian God is not a silent one sitting far beyond the blue sky. He is invisible but made Himself visible to us through his Son Jesus Christ, unlike the vague idea of the Lepcha God.

Even so, does the term ‘animist’ give an accurate picture of the belief of the Lepchas? By doing so, will miss the focal point of their faith in *IdbuDebu Rum Dar*, the one and only creator, controller, sustainer, destroyer almighty God? Is it not also possible that most of the respondents being born and brought up in a Christian environment (conditioned by Christianity in the western garb) are so overwhelmed by the insight inherited from Christianity that there was almost no space to utilize the insight that was inherent in their identity as Lepcha Christian?

However, there were also those who saw a relative similarity between Lepcha God and Christian God. They agreed that there cannot be many creators. Therefore, God who has created this universe is One Supreme Being. As against the idea of animism, this group upheld the Lepcha faith in a High God and a Supreme Being, who is believed to be the Creator and dispenser of everything. However, these are not true religion but are something like a *preparatio evangelii*. These religions by themselves cannot lead us to salvation because the finality of God’s mighty act of salvation is to be found only in the religion of Jesus Christ that is Christianity. However, without a willing acceptance of the Lepcha belief in the Supreme Being in a pre-Christian context, will the claim of it as a *preparatio evangelii* be validated?

4.3.3. Major Question 3. Do you see any discontinuity, relative continuity, or absolute continuity between the Lepcha God and the Christian God?

4.3.3.1. Major Question 3: Findings

(Q20) Are there any similarities in the God of the Lepchas and the God of the Christians?

The respondents were very keen to answer this question because they indeed saw many things similar to worship of God in the Bible and their own traditional worship to Rum (Lepcha God). E.T. Lucksom writes, “God is a Spirit, and we ought to worship Him in spirit and truth. They also say God is a spirit; we cannot see God He is powerful.”¹⁵⁰ Sharon D. Foning claims, “The Lepcha worshipped the same Almighty God, but they have been misunderstood by the missionaries to be nature worshippers because they also honour Mt. Kanchanjunga.¹⁵¹ For Azuk Tamsang bowing down to Mt. Kanchanjunga is not a problem. He writes, “We don’t worship Mt. Kanchanjunga, we only give it highest respect. As we also bow down to our parents with highest honour and respect for being our protector and guardian, so do we bow down to Mt. Kanchanjunga.”¹⁵² Lucky Karthak claims, “Yes, in the concept of God there is continuity. When Buddhism and Hinduism came in, it distorted the concept. However, they also started to worship nature. Because of this inner thirst, Lepchas are receptive to the gospel. Christianity was giving continuity to what they believed. Christianity was the answer and fulfilment to their search. Buddhism came with

¹⁵⁰ Interview with E.T. Lucksom, op.cit.

¹⁵¹ Questionnaire to Sharon D. Foning.

¹⁵² Interview with Azuk Tamsang.

atheistic idea and Hinduism came with more pantheistic idea. Christianity came with monotheistic idea.”¹⁵³

There are many stories in the Lepcha historical tradition similar to the Bible. Paul T. Simick writes, “the creation of humankind and their fall from grace is explained in Lepcha perspective.”¹⁵⁴ Eno Chodup Panlook also points out to the story of Babel which is similar to Lepcha traditional story, where the humans were trying to reach God.¹⁵⁵ The respondents strongly points out that both reflect a God who is the creator of this world,¹⁵⁶ who is all powerful,¹⁵⁷ both reflect similar power and character,¹⁵⁸ Abrona Lee writes, “IdbuDebu Rum is also seen as a compassionate God who cared for her creation. There are Mungs or demons who create trouble just like Lucifer did for God.”¹⁵⁹ Panu Lucksom puts it this way, “Both believe in one absolute God (monotheism) – the one who creates and gives humans the will to choose.”¹⁶⁰

The respondents also reflected on the similarity of the moral character of God and human responsibility. E.T. Lucksom writes, “Christian concept of God and tribal concept of God are closer, e.g. we should not sin, steal, lie; we need to have an upright living; if we do so it will be a blessing of God on us, but if we don’t do so, then we will be subject to

¹⁵³ Interview with Lucky Karthak.

¹⁵⁴ Questionnaire to Paul T. Simick.

¹⁵⁵ Questionnaire to Eno Chodup Panlook.

¹⁵⁶ Interview with Fr. Samuel Lepcha.

¹⁵⁷ Interview with Peter Lingdamu.

¹⁵⁸ Questionnaire to Aaron Namchu.

¹⁵⁹ Questionnaire to Abrona Lee.

¹⁶⁰ Questionnaire to Panu Lucksom.

His judgement.”¹⁶¹ M.S. Foning adds, “Both teach us to honor nature and fellow human beings, that there is no big or small, but all equal. This is why we see many Lepchas also becoming pastors, priests, nuns. This melds with our way of life.”¹⁶²

The respondents also wrote that though many things are similar, but many things are incomplete in the Lepcha belief system too. Enos Simick claims “The idea of creator God, savior, etc., is there, but Lepcha God is difficult to reach; they try to reach that God through different means – through Muns and Bungthings, nature, etc. The Christian God is a person and can be reached easily. Christian understanding of God is more personal and Lepcha understanding is impersonal.”¹⁶³ N.T. Tasho also writes, “The idea of creation, of human beings and destruction of evil power, looks similar, but in the case of salvation of people from sin, Lepcha God is not specialized.”¹⁶⁴

(Q21) Are there any differences in the God of the Lepchas and the God of the Christians?

Many of the respondents agreed that there is a sense of vagueness in the concept of God in the Lepcha which has been cleared up by Christianity. D.T. Tamlong claims that the Lepcha idea of Almighty God was too shallow and neglected. The idea was shallowly developed. Whereas, Jesus as almighty is there in the beginning and the end in the Bible. He was the father as well as the son and he is there in eternity.¹⁶⁵ Fr. Samuel also agrees that there is a severe conceptual difference between the two.¹⁶⁶ Aaron Namchu writes, “The

¹⁶¹ Interview with E.T. Lucksom.

¹⁶² Questionnaire to M.S. Foning.

¹⁶³ Interview with Enos Simick.

¹⁶⁴ Questionnaire to N.T. Tasho.

¹⁶⁵ Interview with D.T. Tamlong.

¹⁶⁶ Interview with Fr. Samuel Lepcha.

God of the Christians is an altogether different being than the Lepcha God. The former is well defined and much better understood; the Lepcha God is still remotely understood.”¹⁶⁷ Eno Chodup Panlook also affirms, “Lepcha God is vague, he is often identified with nature God and the awesome powers of nature.”¹⁶⁸ Panu Lucksom writes, “Lepchas being predominantly hunters and gatherers they see the omnipotence of God in their perspective (perhaps nature played an important role in their survival).”¹⁶⁹ However, to some, this vagueness would be cleared or fulfilled by Christianity. Wangyal Lepcha claims, “Lepcha misses Jesus and Holy Spirit, so that could be the connecting point.”¹⁷⁰ Abrona Lee also claims that there is “No account of Lepcha God sending a son to die for the sins of the world.”¹⁷¹ N.T. Tasho also affirms, “God of salvation and His self-sacrifice for it is special in Christianity.”¹⁷²

Some respondents are more critical and found major differences in the God of the Lepchas and God of Christianity. James S. Simick writes:

The Christian's faith and trust are on Jesus, and His sacrifice on the cross. The Christian believes in eternal life in Heaven after death. Lepchas believe in the spirits of their ancestors and the mountains of their family to deliver them from evil and bless them. (Each Lepcha clan has a guardian mountain; e.g. the Foning clan has the Pandim mountain). They believe that after death their spirits will reside in the family mountain and lake along with their ancestors (Achulay). The priestly medium is filled up by the Bungthing and Mun. I do not see any continuity. (The Tower of Babel in the Bible and the pile of stones at Daramdin in Sikkim do not have historical connection.) Mediums like the witch of Endor and the Lepcha Mun/Bungthing, dealing with spirits, are expressly forbidden in the Bible. The Christian is also

¹⁶⁷ Questionnaire to Aaron Namchu.

¹⁶⁸ Questionnaire to Eno Chodup Panlook.

¹⁶⁹ Questionnaire to Panu Lucksom.

¹⁷⁰ Interview with Wangyal Lepcha.

¹⁷¹ Questionnaire to Abrona Lee Pandi.

¹⁷² Questionnaire to N.T. Tasho.

forbidden to bow down before other gods and mountains. Strong alcoholic drink (like the Lepcha chi) is used in worship by the Lepchas. This is not encouraged in the Bible.¹⁷³

Paul T. Simick claims that the Lepchas are also monotheist but Christian monotheism is a Trinitarian Monotheism. The concept may match with the Old Testament God of the Bible but not as a whole.¹⁷⁴ Peter Lingdamu finds the expression of faith is different in both.¹⁷⁵ Probably the Lepchas focus more on good works and sacrifices and Christianity focuses on God's sacrifice in Jesus Christ and His grace for salvation. D.T. Tamlong also criticizes Lepchas for too much focusing on appeasing the evil spirits.¹⁷⁶ Samuel Lepcha also critiques Lepchas for creating semi-gods, which are contrary to Christianity.¹⁷⁷ Wangyal Lepcha writes:

There are major differences in the perception; Christian God is a male God; Lepcha God is a female. Lepcha has a limited sense of sin and salvation that finally depend upon a good moral life. Christians understand moral life is secondary, grace of God and justification through faith are primary. They worship the creator but very close to nature pointing towards pantheism. For Christianity nature is a handiwork of God.¹⁷⁸

Allen Phipon claims, "The God of the Bible is a personal God, the Lepcha God is more of a concept and force. The fighter Tamsangthing who killed evil is a created being unlike Jesus who is the creator himself."¹⁷⁹ E.T. Lucksom claims that the Lepcha

¹⁷³ Questionnaire to James S. Simick.

¹⁷⁴ Questionnaire to Paul T. Simick.

¹⁷⁵ Interview with Peter Lingdamu.

¹⁷⁶ Interview with D.T. Tamlong.

¹⁷⁷ Questionnaire to Samuel Lepcha.

¹⁷⁸ Interview with Wangyal Lepcha.

¹⁷⁹ Questionnaire to Allen Phipon.

mythological stories are devoid of truth, it is fabricated.¹⁸⁰ Ugen Tshering too doubts if the Lepcha beliefs and stories are real. He affirms it is simply mythical.¹⁸¹

(Q22) Would you suggest any meeting point (convergence) between the God of the Lepchas and the God of the Christians?

Respondents who were looking at the Lepcha belief system from the animistic perspective did not see any meeting point between it and the Christian God. Eno Chodup Panlook writes, “They are entirely two different entities.”¹⁸² N.T. Tasho feels that “There is a vast difference in the cardinal faith system.”¹⁸³ Dawa Lepcha further claims “Lepcha never worshipped God, but nature and GebuAchuk (Legendary chieftain/king).¹⁸⁴ E.T. Lucksom firmly declares:

Possibly, some OT events are cited by the Lepcha belief system. Some say we are closer to Christian, we need not be Christians. For me I don’t see any parallel, no truth. Lepchas have no scriptures as such. In our gospel presentation we need to be straight, we cannot compare Scripture with the culture, ours is unique. To share about Christ, this story should be told in a very candid way, plain, openly and honestly and frankly. When we shared the gospel, we did not use any device but shared openly what the Bible said. In Lepcha context also we must be able to share the gospel directly.¹⁸⁵

Lucky Karthak writes, “Jesus is the meeting point, and who ever knows Jesus knows the father (John 14:7).”¹⁸⁶ James S. Simick also writes,

If at all there is a meeting point, it is at the human heart where faith resides. Faith in Jesus and the implications of the cross and Jesus as a personal Saviour. My suggestion is that it should be stressed that faith in Jesus does

¹⁸⁰ Interview with E.T. Lucksom.

¹⁸¹ Questionnaire to Ugen Tshering Lepcha.

¹⁸² Questionnaire to Eno Chodup Panlook.

¹⁸³ Questionnaire to N.T. Tasho.

¹⁸⁴ Interview with Dawa Lepcha.

¹⁸⁵ Interview with E.T. Lucksom.

¹⁸⁶ Interview with Lucky Karthak.

not mean an end to Lepcha ethnicity. Dress, language, food, social norms would be the same even in a heart which is ruled by Jesus.¹⁸⁷

M.S. Foning also claims that Lepcha-ness and Christian faith must complement because they have their own distinctiveness to life.¹⁸⁸

To many, God for both, is the God of creation. He controls and sustains the world. And he is eternal without beginning or end.¹⁸⁹ Abrona Lee also claims that “Both the Gods, love their creation, both believe in rewarding goodness.”¹⁹⁰ Azuk Tamsang claims that the God that Lepchas believe and Christian believe are the same. He writes, “I have not seen Jesus Christ in my life. Hence, IdbuDebu Rum and Jesus would be possibly the same. If I believe in Christian Trinity, then Jesus is possibly the same God who was in the beginning and will be in the end too. Therefore, we can also look at IdbuDebu Rum as Jesus also.”¹⁹¹ Paul T. Simick also writes, “Sometimes Lepchas think Christian God is an import from the west. Therefore, the recognition of God almighty as IdbuDebu, could possibly work well with them.”¹⁹²

Some of the respondents also point to the general revelation of God to the Lepcha people which can be the meeting point for both. Ugen Tshering claims that all of nature and created things of the world point to the creator. This too indicates God’s omnipotence.”¹⁹³ James P. Lepcha refers to the parallel stories between the Lepcha

¹⁸⁷ Questionnaire to James S. Simick.

¹⁸⁸ Questionnaire to M.S. Foning.

¹⁸⁹ Interview with Peter Lingdamu.

¹⁹⁰ Questionnaire to Abrona Lee Pandi.

¹⁹¹ Interview with Azuk Tamsang.

¹⁹² Questionnaire to Paul T. Simick.

¹⁹³ Questionnaire to Ugen Tshering Lepcha.

tradition and the Bible like, creation, fall, flood, tower of Babel, etc., which could be a meeting point of both.¹⁹⁴ Wangyal Lepcha comments, “Some of the Lepcha myth is very close to the Bible, reinterpret it from the Lepcha Christian perspective.”¹⁹⁵ Samuel Lepcha claims that God is God of the creation therefore, He also answers to the prayer of the Lepchas. He writes, “Lepcha people also believe that God created human beings. Many times, God heard the prayer of Lepcha people in their needs.”¹⁹⁶

(Q23) Do you notice any major divergence between the God of the Lepchas and the God of the Christians?

Lucky Karthak points out that the influence of other religions led the Lepchas to worship idolatrous things and Christianity cannot approve of it.¹⁹⁷ But Fr. Samuel also shares a similar influence of Greek philosophy on the understanding of the Christian God. He writes, “Christian concept of God is very much developed on the philosophical understanding of God of the Greeks.”¹⁹⁸

Nevertheless, whatever the influence, it did help the concept of the omnipotence of God in Christianity to take a concrete shape. Paul T Simick further comments that there is a strong divergence in their worship because Lepchas definitely have an animistic flavor in their worship.¹⁹⁹ Lucky Karthak further claims that for Lepchas God is more of power and force than the person.²⁰⁰ Panu Lucksom also writes, “Lepchas are more focused on the

¹⁹⁴ Questionnaire to James P. Lepcha.

¹⁹⁵ Interview with Wangyal Lepcha.

¹⁹⁶ Questionnaire to Samuel Lepcha.

¹⁹⁷ Interview with Lucky Karthak.

¹⁹⁸ Interview with Fr. Samuel Lepcha.

¹⁹⁹ Questionnaire to Paul T. Simick.

²⁰⁰ Interview with Lucky Karthak.

rituals of appeasing.”²⁰¹ Adding to that, Ugen Tshering writes, “Lepchas worship visible things and Christians worship in Spirit and Truth.”²⁰²

Lepchas definitely do not have a written scripture since their traditional belief has been passed down orally and perhaps was tainted when it was transmitted, and perhaps tainted with the influence of other dominant religions. Aaron Namchu writes, “There is almost no scripture available that can be called inspired on the Lepcha God. So the Lepcha concept is not evolved and so comparison can only be limited.”²⁰³ Peter Lingdamu claims that if we take God as God of the cosmos we can easily relate to each other, however if we have to describe God as God of love and God of eternal life then the divergence may take place.²⁰⁴ God sending His Son to die for our sin and redemption is not there in the Lepcha belief system.²⁰⁵ Wangyal Lepcha writes, “Lepcha God is very passive but Christian God is Emmanuel (God with us). This Omnipotent God of Christianity can also be human in order to reconcile us back to Himself. Lepchas missed this.”²⁰⁶ Enos Simick writes, “With Jesus, a clear and strong understanding of the concept of salvation is brought in.”²⁰⁷

James S. Simick further points to the divergence of religious practices which further separates the two. He puts it this way:

The points of divergence, which a practicing Christian cannot accept, are:

1. Role of Mun/Bungthing in invoking the spirits of the dead.
2. Role of strong drink (chi) during worship

²⁰¹ Questionnaire to Panu Lucksom.

²⁰² Questionnaire to Ugen Tshering Lepcha.

²⁰³ Questionnaire to Aaron Namchu.

²⁰⁴ Interview with Peter Lingdamu.

²⁰⁵ Questionnaire to Abrona Lee Pandi.

²⁰⁶ Interview with Wangyal Lepcha.

²⁰⁷ Interview with Enos Simick.

3. Obeisance, or bowing down to Kanchenjunga and Tista-Ranjit, and to the souls of the dead ancestors.
4. Role of Mun/Bungthing as healer of physical diseases.
5. Role of Mun/Bungthing in blessing newborn, marriage, funeral.²⁰⁸

Kenza Foning too affirms that, “Until foreign bodies came, Lepchas were nature worshippers and hunters. Absolute discontinuity and Christianity has changed everything about me.”²⁰⁹ The respondents also expressed that the Lepcha belief system is more Anthropocentric compared to Christianity, which is Theo-centric. N.T. Tasho writes, “Lepcha God left the humans to do things on their own.”²¹⁰ Azuk Tamsang also shares the same view, however in a positive sense. M S. Foning vouches for contextualization and suggests keeping the culture and beliefs separate, but in harmony. He writes, “Both are ways of life, contextually as a tribesman and as a Christian.”²¹¹

4.3.3.2. Major Question 3: Analysis – Continuity versus Discontinuity (Q20 to Q23)

The respondents pointed out that there are some major similarities between the God of the Lepchas and the God of Christianity; both believe in One Supreme being who is the creator, sustainer and dispenser of all. There are also many similarities in the mythical histories, way of worship, customs and culture. However, they were also aware that the Lepcha belief system is not true religion but is something like a *preparatio evangelii*. These religions by themselves cannot lead us to salvation because the finality of God’s mighty act of salvation is to be found only in the religion of Jesus Christ that is Christianity. The unchanging truth of the Bible must be presented in a culturally intelligible manner for a

²⁰⁸ Questionnaire to James S. Simick.

²⁰⁹ Interview with Kenza Foning.

²¹⁰ Questionnaire to N.T. Tasho.

²¹¹ Questionnaire to M.S. Foning.

given cultural context. We must also be aware of the risk of syncretism in the name of contextualization where the essence of the truth of the Bible might be diluted and compromised in the process of contextualization.

Table 6 gives us an idea about the differences between Lepcha God and Christian God as indicated by the interviewees. There are several corrections needed in some, and to others there is room for complements and adjustments. In both cases, it is possible for Christianity to bridge that gap.

Sl No.	Lepcha God	Christian God
1.	The idea of God is vague	The idea of God is clear
2.	God is near, but passive	God is near and actively working
3.	God is impersonal	God is personal
4.	The mediators between God and humans are Shamans	The mediator between God and humans is Jesus Christ
5.	Concept of God as savior is missing	God in Jesus Christ is the savior
6.	Sacrifice animals, and things for atonement	God in Jesus Christ is sacrificed as the lamb of God once and for all
7.	Sacrifice animals and things also to appease the evil spirits	Evil spirits are hated as the enemies and are denied to have ultimate existence and power
8.	Distorted forms of the stories of the creation, fall, flood, Babel, etc.	Clear story presented in the Bible
9.	Venerate nature (highest respect) as guardian deity	Nature is treated as the handiwork of God
10.	Monotheism like the Old Testament	Trinitarian Monotheism
11.	Focus on works and good moral life (anthropocentric)	Focus on grace and faith in action (theocentric)
12.	There are also semi-God concepts	No semi-Gods

Table 6: The difference between Lepcha God and Christian God

Owing also to the similarities we had in Q19, we cannot deny the fact of the general revelation of God in the scriptures. We know through general revelation to all people, God reveals His existence, His power, and His glory. And we can know God by His creation, preservation and governance of the universe, which lead us to *see clearly the invisible things of God, even His everlasting power and divinity*. All are sufficient to convince human beings and leave them without excuse (Romans 1:20).

If we agree that God cannot err in His work of revealing Himself, then we can understand that God's revelation in creation is equally as infallible as His revelation in Scripture because in both cases, it is God who is doing the revealing, and God is *always* infallible. However, because of the fallen state of human beings today, we perceive God through a sinful mind and therefore we have a distorted perception of God. Perception of God through general revelation is distorted. Lepchas today may have many things in common but many things are distorted about the perception of God.

There are many good things in the Lepcha belief system, even their perception about God, and it can be counted as general revelation of God in a distorted form. But what they need is the special revelation and its redemptive work of God in Jesus Christ. Therefore, our attitude and approach towards the Lepcha belief system must be inclusive even though we remain exclusive in our own faith and belief. Acts. 17:22ff is one of the best examples in the scriptures where Paul, when addressing the Athenians, was very inclusive in his approach though he perhaps was exclusive in his own belief. Paul is aware here of the general revelation of God and the essence of divinity in all human beings. Because of the general revelation of God, a seed of religion is planted in all human beings and a consciousness to discern good and evil is engraved in them. However, the

respondents are right that it is only through the special revelation in Jesus Christ through Scripture, that absolute truth is attained.

Some of the respondents saw a point of contact between the God of the Lepchas and God of the Christians when they related the similarities in the stories of the Lepchas and the stories in the Bible. For them this would be the general revelation of God to the Lepcha tribal folks. However, how they perceive this general revelation of God is a matter of research. Can we be inclusive to the Lepchas because they too carry similar stories like the Bible? Perhaps who knows, the essence of the story remains the same, but the presentation may have been diluted, when passed down orally. But still, can we take their stories as authentic and truthful? This is the question we will try to find out in our final chapter.

The redemptive plan of God is not possible without Jesus Christ in history. The respondents were truthful when they said, “Jesus is the meeting point between God and the Lepchas, between their belief and Christianity, between their God and Christian God. “Jesus Christ as a ‘personal’ Saviour, more than one who is ‘near’ is a unique message that Christianity professes.”²¹² God in Jesus Christ is a relational God who loves us, cares for us and even died for us on the cross to redeem us from our struggles. Jesus Christ is not just a concept, but God who became a human being and came in this world to redeem the fallen world and proclaim the kingdom of God. He is truly the fulfilment of the incomplete spiritual quest of the Lepchas.

²¹² See Eyingbeni Hümtsoe-Nienu, *God of the Tribes*. 103 (see footnote 122).

The respondents were categorized into two groups: *Discontinuity and Relative Continuity* between Lepcha God and Christian God in responding to this vital question (Q23). Those who vouched for discontinuity of the Lepcha God and Christian God, based their argument from the perspective that Lepchas are animists. Animists and the Monotheist will never go together. Everything is contradictory between the two belief systems. However, are the Lepchas really animists? If, 'Yes' then is there a point of convergence between the two systems? The respondents coming from this perspective would think that the only bridge between the two systems is the clear systematic doctrine of God in Christianity. Consequently, the "Christian God" surpasses the "ancestral God" and hence requires a contrasted study. However, will the methodology work? Perhaps, it is doubtful at this point to give an authentic 'Yes.'

On the other hand, those who vouched for relative continuity, they came with the perspective that Lepchas are monotheists. For them the Lepcha belief in their ancestral God is deemed as a *preparatio evangelii* or 'preparation for the Gospel' of 'Christian God.' As against the idea of animism, this group upheld the tribal faith in a High God and a Supreme Being, who is believed to be the Creator and dispenser of everything. God has revealed Himself through His general revelation and He reveals Himself in His special revelation through Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the fulfilment of the religious aspiration of the Lepcha people.

However, to see relative continuity, one must only take things which are complementary to both belief systems without also dealing with things that are different. This may lead to severe syncretism. Therefore, things which show discontinuity need to be corrected and things which show continuity must be complemented. In the process of

correcting and complementing, Christian Theology can also learn from Lepcha belief and culture.

No respondents vouched for the third category that is *Absolute Continuity*; probably because all the respondents were Christians and they would like to answer the questionnaires keeping the Christian superiority alive. Since this kind of research is in its early stages, they may have tried to avoid controversial statements realizing the Christian faith prevailing in the area. In other words, they tried to restrict themselves from thinking liberally. Probably, many were not prepared for such theological questions. Perhaps they were aware that the researcher is a pastor in the region; therefore, they wanted to answer the questions in a way that would give a good spiritual impression to the researcher.

Whatever the reason may be, by not vouching for Absolute Continuity, it can be agreed that the Christianity spread in that region is quite a conservative and evangelical one. The reason may be that when Christianity was first imported to this region, it came with high exclusivity and in western garb. Only recently are the people realizing that not everything about their beliefs and culture was evil. The good news is that the present generation is now more exposed to the global context and their approach to life has widened and hence, there was variation in the respondents' answers. Will the reformed theology be relevant to the Lepcha tribal context if the same process is repeated?

4.3.4. Major Question 4. What changes must Christianity adopt in order to make the Christian God relevant to the Lepcha Tribal Context?

4.3.4.1. Major Question 4: Findings

(Q24) Is the idea of omnipotence different in Lepcha and Christian understanding from your own conviction?

The researcher regrets to have framed this question a bit trickily. The intention was to see each respondent's personal conviction compared to both the Lepcha and Christian understanding of omnipotence. However, it confused the respondents and they all tended to give their answers in terms of the differences between Christianity and the Lepcha belief system like in answers to Q21 & Q23. It was a total repeat of the answers given by the respondents in the previous questions, therefore, the researcher has bypassed recording the answers to this question and is moving onto the next.

(Q25) Is the Lepcha God more powerful than the Christian God? OR Is the Christian God more powerful than the Lepcha God?

Table 7 gives us clear statistics of the respondents' answers.

Lepcha God Superior	Christian God Superior	Both Gods are Equal	TOTAL
0	17	8	25

Table 7: Is the Lepcha God Superior, Inferior or Equal?

From Table 7 above we learn that no respondents vouched for the superiority of the Lepcha God over the Christian God. Probably because all of them are Christians and do not want to compromise their beliefs. Perhaps, had a respondent been a non-Christian Lepcha who believed in his traditional God, he would have answered affirmatively. Fr. Samuel writes, "For a Lepcha, his God will appear the best. No one actually likes to compare. But as a Christian, I see Christian God appears to be powerful, expressive and real."²¹³

²¹³ Interview with Fr. Samuel Lepcha.

The respondents who vouched for the Christian God as superior either saw Lepchas as animists or found something lacking in their belief system. Eno Chodup Panlook writes, “Lepchas were basically animists and their understanding of god was limited. On the contrary, the triune God is infinite.”²¹⁴ James S. Simick claims that it is not logical to grade these two factors. However, he too thinks that “the Lepchas found solace and strength in calling upon the spirits of their ancestors and the faraway mountains. This was an effort to reach out to a superior being, and nothing more. The Christian God as revealed through Jesus is the answer to this.”²¹⁵ Paul T. Simick affirms that the “Salvation concept is not developed in Lepcha belief. God’s involvement is not so strong.”²¹⁶

Many others vouch for a similar fault and incompleteness about the God of the Lepchas and their belief system and suggest its fulfilment in Christianity. However, there is also a group of respondents who vouch for the equality of the God of the Lepchas and the God of the Christians. Sharon D. Foning writes, “There is only one God the Almighty. Before the advent of Buddhism, the Lepchas used to believe in that God. My assumption is that they were not very apt at explaining that to other people.”²¹⁷ Enos Simick claims that both the Gods are equal and Jesus Christ is the exception.²¹⁸ Wangyal Lepcha writes that both the Gods are the same, the problem is not with God but the problem is with the understanding and interpretation by humans about that God.²¹⁹ M. S. Foning goes back to

²¹⁴ Questionnaire to Eno Chodup Panlook.

²¹⁵ Questionnaire to James S. Simick.

²¹⁶ Questionnaire to Paul T. Simick.

²¹⁷ Questionnaire to Sharon D. Foning.

²¹⁸ Interview with Enos Simick.

²¹⁹ Interview with Wangyal Lepcha.

history and claims that both are the same and equal. He affirms that a few hundred years ago, what Lepchas worshipped was the same God that Christians worshipped before and today. The Christian Almighty God and the Lepcha Almighty God are the same and equal. Both have their own places, in history.²²⁰

(Q26) What suggestion do you want to give in order to make the Christian God relevant to the Lepcha Tribal Context?

Some of the respondents giving the prime place to the scriptures suggested that the Christian God must be made relevant exactly the way the Bible suggests. James S. Simick writes, “The Christian God should be made relevant to the Lepcha Tribal in exactly the same way as it is in the Bible. There should be no apologies and compromises for what is written in the Bible.” He points to some illicit practices²²¹ of the Lepcha belief system which is against Christianity and suggests it to be encountered head on. He further writes, “These aspects should be encountered head -on, keeping in mind that the battle to be conquered is the Lepcha mind. We should also remember that the realm to be conquered is in the spiritual high places, and that lasting victory will only be possible if God is with us in our efforts.”²²² He further adds, “As said before, in efforts to bring the Lepcha tribal to the Christian fold, stress should also be on language and dress and Lepcha ethnic Christian music.”²²³

²²⁰ Questionnaire to M.S Foning.

²²¹ E.g. Role of Mun/Bungthing in invoking the spirits of the dead, Role of strong drink (chi) during worship. Obeisance, or bowing down to Mt. Kanchenjunga and Tista- Ranjit, and to the souls of the dead ancestors. Role of Mun/Bungthing as healer of physical diseases. Role of Mun/Bungthing in blessing newborns, marriage, funeral.

²²² Questionnaire to James S. Simick.

²²³ Ibid.

Paul T. Simick makes a suggestion on the hermeneutical principle for making the Christian God relevant to Lepchas. He writes, “Relevant theological interpretation is a must for Lepchas. Use of Lepcha language, proper cultural socio understanding of Lepcha tribes, its religious practices, faith and customs that can make more relevant to Lepcha tribal context.”²²⁴ Kenza Foning focuses on the missional approach and makes suggestions on the communication skills. He writes, “Missionaries did not convert people in one day. They focused on health care, education and later church. Today you have to touch these points, with effective communication and not forgetting the spiritual agent. Vision and mission impact.”²²⁵

Some respondents point to the movement from general revelation to the special revelation, from a Theo-centric approach to a Christo-centric approach in bringing up the relevance of the Christian God to the Lepchas. E.T. Lucksom claims:

The evidence of nature and the creation indicates they are the handiwork of God. This tells us that there is a creator; we need to worship him. Omnipotence must be approached from the theo-centric way, not a racial God but God of the whole creation. But the drawback is that the world has not known the true God, and we now have a task to share it with them. First Thessalonians 1:8-9 tells us how the witness of the Thessalonians made God known to others as the true and living God.²²⁶

Allen Phipon suggests a Christological approach and writes, “Use similarities between Lepcha belief and Christian belief and present Christ.”²²⁷ Wangyal Lepcha also affirms this and claims:

Both believe in the same God, but they have limited resources to understand God. They only use one tool, that is nature, to understand that God, but

²²⁴ Questionnaire to Paul T. Simick.

²²⁵ Interview with Kenza Foning.

²²⁶ Interview with E.T. Lucksom.

²²⁷ Questionnaire to Allen Phipon.

Christianity uses nature and Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is one big factor for Christianity to understand God. What Lepchas are missing is Jesus Christ. Their understanding is not wrong, but incomplete. Omnipotence can do anything, in Christ. He can also seem to look powerless to express His Omnipotence. The idea of omnipotence is not just ‘win by force or strength’, but bring everything under his control, if it also means ‘losing to win’, e.g. the Cross.²²⁸

Sharon D. Foning also claims, “I basically feel that our forefathers were right in believing in the ‘One Higher Power.’ Now the Lepchas have to be convinced that this one higher power is none other than the Lord Almighty.”²²⁹

Some respondents also suggested taking contextualization seriously in order to make the Christian God relevant to the Lepcha people. Enos Simick comments, “Contextualization is important, holding to the language and communication through story-telling will be effective (Biblical Stories).”²³⁰ Dawa Lepcha cautiously suggests, “Go through the culture, dress, language; be like them but not compromising your faith. Be a witness, being among them.”²³¹ Samuel Lepcha also suggests that, “We need to consider that Christ is in the culture, Christ is of the culture and Christ is above the culture.”²³² Abrona Lee writes, “Be sensitive towards indigenous beliefs and practices. The message of the Christian God should be put forward without denigrating the Lepcha God. As Lepcha Christians, we were told that the ways of our ancestors were “old” and backward. These binaries of old/traditional versus modern/forward-looking must be avoided. The gospel

²²⁸ Interview with Wangyal Lepcha.

²²⁹ Questionnaire to Sharon D. Foning.

²³⁰ Interview with Enos Simick.

²³¹ Interview with Dawa Lepcha.

²³² Questionnaire to Samuel Lepcha.

must be taken with love, sensitivity and patience without attaching any ideas of cultural or other forms of superiority with the Christian God.”²³³

Lucky Karthak also states, “We have forsaken some of the good culture and language. Distinctions about acceptable and not acceptable should be there; we cannot get rid of the whole thing about Lepchas. Lepchas remain Lepchas.”²³⁴ Paul T. Simick radically states that, “God the Almighty must be depicted in Lepcha perspective and not be depicted as western God or foreign God.”²³⁵ Fr. Samuel also adds to this and writes, “The concept of God has to be encapsulated in the tribal cultural garb.”²³⁶ Azuk Lepcha also strongly suggests, “Make Jesus Christ the Christ of the Lepcha, not a blue eyed blond hair. I want Jesus who does not take my identity away but becomes relevant in my own cultural context.”²³⁷

Finally, some suggested relating the moral lifestyle of the Lepchas as a necessary condition for the gospel. Eno Chodup Panlook writes, “Despite the difference, Lepchas are generally generous, peace loving, God fearing. Christian doctrine of love and peace, and God’s sacrificial love is appealing to them.”²³⁸ Peter Lingdamu also suggests to “Know one another as creations of God; no separation; treat as equal, all the faithful.”²³⁹

²³³ Questionnaire to Abrona Lee Pandi.

²³⁴ Interview with Lucky Karthak.

²³⁵ Questionnaire to Paul T. Simick.

²³⁶ Interview with Fr. Samuel Lepcha.

²³⁷ Interview with Azuk Tamsang.

²³⁸ Questionnaire to Eno Chodup Panlook.

²³⁹ Interview with Peter Lingdamu.

4.3.4.2. Major Question 4: Analysis – Changes Needed for Relevancy to Lepcha (Q24 to Q26)

All the respondents agreed that Jesus Christ must be the central focus of Christianity to present as a gift to the Lepcha people. All agreed that Jesus is the answer and fulfilment of their quest and incompleteness. However, is Jesus the real answer and fulfilment to peoples' quest? Perhaps, looking at the redemptive history of the Bible, Jesus surely is the fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecies. But can He be the fulfilment for other religions also? Can Pantheism go well with monotheism or to say, can animism go well with monotheism? Even amongst the monotheistic religions there is serious dichotomy.

There may be many things similar in religions, but one religion cannot fulfil everything about the other. Therefore, to say Jesus Christ is the fulfilment of Lepcha religion can be again too pluralistic. Hence, we must acknowledge the fact that there are many things common among the two religions and many things severely different. This can be the step forward to uphold and correct the other in order to formulate a relevant theology in the context according to Scripture. God, in Jesus Christ, became a human being to receive and redeem all humans of different race, color, gender, region, etc.

The respondents also proposed contextualization in doing theology with the Lepcha folks. Indeed, upholding the good things about the culture, community, language, customs, dresses, etc. is important. And not just loving your culture alone but also respecting other cultures too. However, correcting the evil practices and helping them in the process of transformation is also an important practice of theology. After all, Jesus our Master, was also born into a culture and He loved His culture. Having loved His culture, he also loved others outside His culture. And finally, he acted against the ill practices of His own culture and led people into a process of transformation, by getting involved in it Himself.

Therefore, to be relevant in a different context, Reformed Theology must move forward from trying to bring uniformity, to promoting unity in diversity in contextualizing.

The respondents also suggested finding a proper hermeneutical tool for doing theology in the Lepcha Tribal Context. Perhaps, Reformed Tribal Theology can be done looking at our reality in the light of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ in the scriptures.

4.4. Summary

This chapter explained the respondents' views on the Omnipotence of God according to their own Christian religious background. The respondents claimed that God is all powerful and who is able to do things beyond logic, but not if it is self-contradictory. The Omnipotent God must be able to embrace and handle all kinds of logic and also things beyond logic. Concerning God and Freedom, the respondents believed in three categories 1) God created them with a relative amount of freedom and responsibility; 2) Humans are acting voluntarily and are not forced to do the will of God, but have a choice; and 3) In the exercise of His power, God has self-limited Himself and therefore He chooses to exercise His power through free humans' actions. Regarding evil and suffering, the respondents' most common answer was that evil and suffering are caused by the fallen nature of human beings and the choices that they make. Others believe suffering is used to meet God's higher purpose to bring humans back to God, to test our faith, and for us to stand as witnesses to God's love. God's suffering, death and resurrection make Him the God who suffers with humans and His creation and works to restore them.

The respondents also shared their outlook on the Lepcha Tribal belief system. They felt there is the possibility of continuity and relative continuity between the two religions. The respondents who did not agree that the God of the Lepchas is an omnipotent God based

their opinion on the view that Lepchas are animist. They believed that Christianity and Lepcha beliefs are contradictory to each other, and the Christian God surpasses the Lepcha God and the only bridge between the two systems is the clear, systematic doctrine of God in Christianity.

Some respondents saw relative similarity and continuity between the Lepcha God and the Christian God, agreeing that there cannot be many creators, but ‘One.’ Many similarities were also noticed in both the religious practices and beliefs. However, they were also aware that the Lepcha belief system is not true religion but is something like a *preparatio evangelii*. For them, God has revealed Himself through His general revelation and He reveals Himself in His special revelation through Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the fulfilment of the religious aspiration of the Lepcha people.

In the concept of God’s omnipotence in the Lepchas, there are several corrections needed in some, and to others, there is room for complements and adjustments. In both cases, the respondents suggested that Christianity must bridge that gap. Good things in the Lepcha belief system and in their perception about God can be counted as general revelation of God in a distorted form. But what they need is the special revelation and its redemptive work of God in Jesus Christ.

The respondents finally suggested that for Reformed Theology to be relevant in the Lepcha context, it must move forward from trying to bring uniformity, to promoting unity in diversity in contextualizing. They also suggested the need for a proper hermeneutical tool for doing theology in the Lepcha Tribal Context.

Based on the materials collected from all the research, the chapter to follow proposes a new definition of the omnipotence of God that is sensitive to Lepcha Tribal theology and Reformed theology.

Chapter Five

Formulating a Definition of the Omnipotence of God in the Context of the Lepcha Tribal People

5.1. Introduction

The first chapter dealt extensively with the concept of the omnipotence of God in Reformed Theology. With the help of the classical Biblical interpretation and minimizing interpretation, and with some qualifications on it, a suitable working definition of omnipotence was established. Then, the concept of omnipotence along with its issues in the theological traditions were discussed. The second chapter dealt with the idea of the omnipotence of God in the Lepcha Tribal Context followed by the third chapter which was on the idea of the omnipotence of God from the perspective of Christian tribal theology. The fourth chapter was an empirical study on 25 key Lepcha leaders. There, the respondents' contemporary version of the omnipotence of God, their outlook on the tribal belief system, etc., were viewed.

Here in this chapter, based on all the materials collected from the research, the researcher will slowly close in on his conclusion. The chapter begins with the idea of general and special revelation in the context of the omnipotence of God, followed by the thought that Jesus Christ is the fulfilment of all religions. This gives a broader framework of understanding from which to state the relevance of Omnipotence for the Lepcha Tribal people. It concludes with a suggestion for a new definition of the omnipotence of God that is sensitive to Lepcha Tribal theology and Reformed theology.

5.2. General and Special Revelation in the Context of the Omnipotence of God

The tribal people in India including the Lepchas, believe in one supreme power over all the universe. Their belief in Almighty God the Creator was not injected into their

veins by Christianity; it was already present in pre-Christian times. “Their ancestral religion is monotheistic, but it is monotheism of an exclusive nature. Unlike the unique Trinitarian monotheism of Christianity, it is more like the monotheism of the Old Testament. Monotheism means exclusive worship of and obedience to the one true and Supreme God.”¹

They also believe that this Almighty God, whom they worship, is the Sovereign God. Nothing is greater than Him. He acts in his free will and controls the affairs of this world and he provides for His people. Living in an oppressed situation, God without power and love had no meaning.² Their belief in the sovereignty of God led them to hope that God is their liberator, who is still in control over all creation and in His free will can do anything to bring liberation for the Tribals.

The Exodus event in the Bible serves as a model for liberation to the tribal theologians. The God who saw the pain of His people in Egypt, suffered with them in their suffering, and revealed Himself in the midst of their oppression is still at work among us.³ The belief and worship of One Supreme Almighty Being has been positively picked up by Christian theology to use as a point of contact between the tribal God and Christian God. However, is this One Supreme Creator God, who is all powerful, known by one name? Or did He manifest himself by different names to different people, in different places and

¹ Eyingbeni Hümtsoe-Nienu, *God of the Tribes* (Mokokchung: Clark Theological College, 2014), 273.

² H. Vanlalauva, *John Calvin’s Doctrine of God with Special Reference to the Indian Context*, (Delhi: ISPCK, 2006), 125-126.

³ Lalmuanpuii Hmar, “God in the Midst of Tribal People’s Marginalization,” *Towards a Tribal Theology* (Durgapur CNI: Santi Griha, Tribal Peace and Reconciliation Centre, 2014), 97-98.

contexts? In other words, *is the revelation of God in the tribes the same as the revelation of God in the Bible?*

Both the God of the Tribals and the God of the Bible have similar features and characteristics. Both are an omnipotent God who is the Supreme Being and the Creator of the world. Do we find any continuity or discontinuity between the God of the Tribes and the God of the Bible? For this question, a better understanding of the idea of General Revelation and Special Revelation of God would help us find an answer.

5.2.1. General Revelation

The Omnipotent God reveals Himself through general revelation to all human beings. And we can know God by His creation of the universe, which leads us to see the invisible characteristics of God, such as his power and divinity. All these things are enough to convince humans of God's existence and leave them without excuse (Romans 1:20). John Calvin is of the view that, "There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity [*divinitatis sensum*]. This we take to be beyond controversy. To prevent anyone from taking refuge in the pretense of ignorance, God himself has implanted in all humans a certain understanding of his divine majesty."⁴ Calvin goes on to say that no one would be excluded from access to happiness, God not only placed in human minds the awareness of his majesty, but revealed himself also in the magnificence of the universe that He created. Humans only need to open their eyes to see God.⁵ Psalm 19:1-2 says, "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above

⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, edited by John Baillie, John T. McNeill and Henry P. Van Dusen (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1967), I.5.1.

⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes*, I.5.1.

proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge.” Herman Bavinck in his *Reformed Dogmatics* accepts the fact that the concept of revelation is not just central to Christianity and happens in Scripture, but is necessary to all religions. In other words, no religion is without revelation⁶ because “religion consistently implies a relation to God and this deity must exist to the minds of the believer, must reveal himself and hence to some extent be knowable. Religion is either an illusion or it must be based on belief in the existence, revelation and knowability of God.”⁷

Thus, he describes general revelation as, “that conscious and free act of God by which, by means of nature and history (in the broadest sense, hence, including one’s own personal life experience), he makes himself known – specifically in his attributes of omnipotence and wisdom, wrath and goodness – to fallen human beings in order that they should turn to him and keep his law or, in the absence of such repentance, be inexcusable.”⁸

Now, we must ask ourselves, “*Do we believe God’s revelation in nature as infallible and supernatural?*” It is possible to agree that God’s general revelation is, by itself, limited in scope and purpose. But if we acknowledge that God cannot make mistakes in revealing Himself, then we may also need to accept that God’s revelation in creation is as infallible as His revelation in Scripture; in both cases, God is doing the revealing, and God is *always* infallible.

⁶ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Volumes 1*, edited by John Bolt (Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, 2003-2008), 284.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 285.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 350.

Not distinguishing between natural and supernatural, Bavinck puts it this way, “Actually, according to Scripture, all revelation, also that in nature, is supernatural.”⁹ He claims, “In origin all revelation is supernatural. God is always working (John 5:17). The work of God outwardly began with the creation and creation is the first revelation of God, the beginning and foundation of all subsequent revelation.”¹⁰

Bavinck further writes:

God first appeared outwardly before his creatures in the creation and revealed Himself to them. In creating the world by His word and making it come alive by His Spirit, God already delineated the basic contours of all subsequent revelation. But immediately linking up with the event of creation is the action of providence. This too, is an omnipotent and everywhere-present power and act of God. All that is and happens is, in real sense, a work of God and to the devout a revelation of his attributes and perfection. This is how scripture looks at nature and history. Creating, sustaining and governing together from one single mighty ongoing revelation of God.¹¹

Then, *can human beings know God by general revelation?* Perhaps it was possible that human beings before their fall into sin would have known God through general revelation alone. But since human beings all sin, without special revelation and the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, they would only experience fear of judgment, due to their sin and God’s perfection. The problem here is not with the revelation of God, but the distorted perception by fallen human beings of that perfect and divine revelation of God. Today, humans in their fallen condition perceive God through general revelation and have arrived at their own different destinations. In the words of Herman Bavinck, they created

⁹ Ibid., 307.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

idols as gods for themselves. Therefore, general revelation has become insufficient. Bavinck notes that general revelation is insufficient in three important respects.

First, though general revelation provides us with a reasonable idea about the existence of God and His characteristics of goodness and righteousness, it leaves us "absolutely unfamiliar with the person of Christ, who alone is the way to the Father."¹² Special revelation is needed to address the fallen human beings in their need as sinners for the forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with God in Jesus Christ.

Second, the knowledge supplied through general revelation is "meager and inadequate," and also "uncertain, mingled with error, and for far and away the majority of people, unattainable."¹³

And *third*, the inadequacy of general revelation is demonstrated by the fact that no group of people has ever been satisfied with so-called natural religion.¹⁴ This universal desire for a more specific revelation of God proves the limitations of general revelation for a complete understanding of God's character.

Bavinck declares, "History teaches us that not a single religion can survive on general revelation alone." The Christian religion too bases itself on a special revelation, and Scripture is the book of special revelation.¹⁵ This special revelation, as defined by Herman Bavinck, "is that conscious and free act of God by which he, in the way of a historical complex of special means (theophany, prophecy and miracle) that are concentrated in the person of Christ, makes himself known – specifically in the attributes

¹² Ibid., 313.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 314.

¹⁵ Ibid., 324.

of justice and grace, in the proclamation of law and gospel – to those human beings who live in the light of this special revelation in order that they may accept the grace of God by faith in Christ or, in case of impenitence, receive a more severe judgment.”¹⁶

5.2.2. Special Revelation

The special revelation, according to Calvin, is ‘Scripture.’ Special revelation is the revealing of salvation through Jesus Christ written about in Scripture. Hebrews 1:1-2 reads, “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.” Special revelation is meant to serve as “spiritual spectacles” for “spiritual sight” to see God in creation. Special revelation does not transcend general revelation; it reveals it (God as Creator) and reveals the way of renewing our relationship to it once we had fallen (Christ as redeemer). Calvin says, “For as persons who are old, or whose eyes have somehow become dim, if you show them the most beautiful book, though they perceive that something is written there, can scarcely read two words together, yet by the aid of spectacles will begin to read distinctly – so the Scripture...,” etc.¹⁷ “Scripture not only reveals the God of nature more brightly to the sin-darkened eye; it reveals also the God of Grace in Jesus Christ, who may not be found in nature.”¹⁸

Special revelation does not do away with general revelation, it brings general revelation back to its proper place. Herman Bavinck writes:

¹⁶ Ibid., 350.

¹⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes*, I.vi.1.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Reformed Theology does not restrict the special revelation to the person of Christ as it is delineated in certain sections of Scripture, say, in the Synoptic Gospels or only in the Sermon on the Mount. The whole of revelation, summed up in Scripture, is a special revelation that comes to us in Christ. Christ is the center and content of that whole special revelation, which starts in Paradise and is completed in the Apocalypse. Now special revelation has recognized and valued general revelation, has even taken it over.¹⁹

Therefore, for Bavinck:

General revelation precedes special revelation and stands as the foundation on which special revelation builds itself. Without general revelation, special revelation loses its connection with all of life and creation. The same God who, through general revelation, reveals himself to anyone who cares to look, also in special revelation makes himself the God of Grace. Hence, general and special revelation interact with each other.²⁰

Coming back to our earlier question, “*Is the revelation of God in the tribes the same as the revelation of God in the Bible?*” Owing to the above argument, we may say, “Yes!” However, because of the fallen state of human beings today, we perceive God through a sinful mind and therefore we have a distorted perception of God. It is only through the spectacles of the scriptures that we can get a clear picture of the revelation of God and his redemptive plan through Jesus Christ. Herman Bavinck saw general revelation as the common ground between Christians and non-Christians, and perhaps as a point of contact with all humans. General revelation can unite all people despite their religious differences.²¹

There are many good things in the tribal belief system, even their perception about God, and it can be counted as general revelation of God in a distorted form. But what they need today is the special revelation and its redemptive work of God in Jesus Christ.

¹⁹ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Volumes 1*, 321.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 322.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 321.

Does God reveal himself only through Scripture? What happens to people who have never heard of Jesus? There is no doubt that the Bible is very exclusive about Jesus Christ as the only name in and through whom all can be saved. Peter declares in Acts 4:12, “And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” John records (John 14:6; 10:7, 9) the declaration of Jesus Himself, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” Paul is convinced when he writes in Philippians 2:9-11, “Therefore God also highly exalted him (Jesus Christ) and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” However, one can question, ‘*How could a good and loving God condemn to hell someone who’s never heard of him?*’ Herman Bavinck suggests that we resist answering this from a human perspective and look for God’s judgment and mercy to decide on this.²² Let us go through Romans 1:18-20 to find our answers.

5.2.3. Romans 1:18-20 – General Revelation can Bring People to God

When we look at these verses (Romans 1:18-20), we can look at it in two ways. The first way would be to look at these verses as grounds for Paul to argue that God’s revelation in nature is sufficient only to condemn, not to save. The people know God (vs. 21) but have suppressed the truth (verse 18) and are therefore, without ‘excuse’ (vs.20).²³

²² Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Volume 4*, 708-714.

²³ John A. Witmer, “Romans,” *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures [New Testament Edition]*, edited by John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Secunderabad: Authentic Books, 2010), 442.

They are guilty not because they have not heard the gospel but have not honoured their Creator. The second way to look at these verses is in terms of our 'response.' God revealed Himself in his created order and in the conscience of people's hearts so that they will not go astray, rather be saved and reconciled to Him. Yes, God has given human beings enough ground in his general revelation, from his created order (Romans 1:19-20) and from his moral law within (Romans 2:14-15) to respond to Him.²⁴

How we respond to Him, determines His judgment. The response can be positive or negative; can be ignorance and arrogance to Him or humility and reverence to Him. God in his omnipotence had a way to bring people into His fold even before Christ, and today He makes that way clear to come to Him, in and through Jesus Christ. Salvation before Christ in the Old Testament was based on God's method of providing for our sinfulness – through the sacrifices they practiced in those days. Their faith was in God. The sacrifice of the blood of the animals atoned for, or took care of, their sin. This was the foreshadowing of the sacrifice of Christ. When he came and sacrificed Himself on the cross as the Lamb of God (John 1:29), that was the ultimate satisfaction, completion and reality of what God had been promising all those years. God in the Bible says those who seriously seek Him from the heart will find Him (Jeremiah 29:13). Cornelius the centurion (Acts 10),²⁵ and the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-40) are some examples in the Bible of people who seriously searched for God from their hearts and He found them. God in His omnipotence is a just God. He judges people in the light of the truth they receive and the opportunity He gives.

²⁴ F.F. Bruce, "Romans," *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, general editor R.V.G. Tasker, (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1963), 84.

²⁵ Ajith Fernando, *The Christian's Attitude Toward World Religions* (Bombay: Gospel Literature Service, 1988), 133-134.

How we respond to that truth and opportunity matters: ignore or pursue. The Omnipotent God in his judgments does the right thing. He is the God of love, righteousness and mercy. When people reject him for whatever reason, they pay the consequences. But when people seek him, he will reveal himself to them. Abraham lived in a culture totally different from what he, in faith, anticipated in the future.²⁶ The Bible says (Hebrews 11:10), “For he (Abraham) looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.” Where did this desire originate? The judge of all the earth will do everything right (Genesis 18:25). And He continues to speak to us within our own conscience, in the privacy of our own life, in creation, and ultimately through His word and the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

God will also never violate our wills. This sacred gift of freedom has been given to us by God Himself. Therefore, the choice we make for eternity is made by the submission of our wills to our heavenly father. God does not want us to lose our salvation; it is we who make that choice. And the good choice we make is also the gift of God. We cannot make ourselves believers. The Almighty God ordains the good choices for us, and we are responsible to receive them.

5.2.4. Acts 17:22-34 – Reaching Common Ground with Non-Christians

What should be our approach to people of other faiths? Acts 17:22-34 gives us a vivid picture of the proper Christian attitude towards other people. We see in verse 22, Paul started with an acknowledgment that the men of Athens are very religious. He made a close observation of their object of worship. It is important that before we tell something about

²⁶ Donald A. Hagner, “Hebrews,” *New International Biblical Commentary* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc, 1983), 189-190.

others' belief system, we need to do a careful study of it. In fact, Paul later even refers to their poets. This shows that he did detailed homework before standing amongst them. Ajith Fernando writes, "The sense of the supernatural provided Paul with a stepping-stone from which he could move into an exposition of the truth about Jehovah God. Paul had found a "point of contact" with the Athenians. They were in agreement with Paul about the reality of the supernatural world."²⁷

Then Paul noticed an altar with an inscription, '*To an unknown god.*' He then tells them, "What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you." He addresses them here as if he found a key to unlock the name and essence of that unknown God. This unknown God he relates with the almighty and sovereign creator.²⁸ Paul went beyond finding a point of contact with the Athenians (verse 23). He saw in this the evidence of a deep, unsatisfied yearning in the Athenians. Fernando notices that "This altar was an admission by the Athenians that their knowledge of the supernatural was incomplete. Paul used this admission as a launching pad for this description of Jehovah God, who did complete everything."²⁹

We can also be reminded here, that the idea of the essence of divinity is in all human beings who in fact also carry the flavour of that Absolute truth of God in them, though distorted. In verses 24 and 25, Paul builds on the difference of this Almighty God with man-made idols. The Athenians were religious people. The form this religiousness took

²⁷ Ajith Fernando, *The Christian's Attitude Toward World Religions* (Bombay: Gospel Literature Service, 1988), 40.

²⁸ I. Howard Marshall, "Acts," *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, general editor R.V.G. Tasker (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1980), 286.

²⁹ Ajith Fernando, *The Christian's Attitude Toward World Religions* (Bombay: Gospel Literature Service, 1988), 41.

was idolatry which provoked Paul to anger (Acts 17:16).³⁰ Like in Romans 1, the Athenians suppressed the truth. However, the Almighty is the creator and also the giver of everything. In verse 26, Paul mentions the creation account and theo-centric sovereignty of Godhood for all nations. He writes, *“From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live.”*

In verse 27, Paul tries to tell them that since we have the image of the creator, our souls search for Him and some would also find Him. Paul is telling them that this sovereign God is near to Athenians in the form of the unknown God and “if you really seek him you will find him.” He went on to refer to some of their poets (verse 28) who also wrote, “For we are also his offspring.” He went on (verse 29), “Therefore since we are God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals.”

In verse 30, Paul tells them that up until now they were ignorant about it and God has overlooked it. Then he asserts the core of his message “Repent”. Now God commands all people to repent. The gear has now been shifted from a theo-centric approach to a Christo-centric approach. God in Jesus waiting to be revealed, is now revealed to everyone. And He will judge the world. Evidence to all was the raising of Jesus from the dead. When they heard of the resurrection of the dead (verses 32-34), some were put off and scoffed, some wanted to hear more later and some joined to become believers.

³⁰ Ibid., 40.

Acts. 17:22ff is one of the best examples in the scriptures where Paul, when addressing the Athenians, was very inclusive in his approach, though he perhaps was exclusive to his own belief. Paul is aware here of the general revelation of God and the essence of divinity in all human beings. God's general revelation is His active presence with all people. It is not just 'God being there and waiting,' but He is seeking and drawing people to be near to Him. Because of the general revelation of God, a seed of religion is planted in all human beings and a consciousness to discern good and evil is engraved in them. However, it is only through the special revelation that absolute truth is attained.³¹ Therefore, our attitude and approach towards other faiths must be inclusive, even though we remain exclusive in our own faith and belief.

5.3. Jesus Christ—the Wish for all Religions and the Fulfilment of the Old Testament

For the people in India, especially the Tribals, God has been both transcendent (superior) and immanent (near) in nature, even in the pre-Christian era. The superiority of God is offset by the nearness of the Supreme Being.³² God is “someone who is always near, someone who is very familiar to them. He is their God. But he is also the Master of all, fully in control of everything, one who is transcendent, one who is ‘totally other.’”³³ However, “Jesus Christ as a ‘personal’ Saviour, more than one who is ‘near’ is a unique

³¹ Stanley D. Toussaint, “Acts,” *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures [New Testament Edition]*, edited by John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Secunderabad: Authentic Books, 2010), 404.

³² Eyingbeni Hümtsoe-Nienu, *God of the Tribes*, 96.

³³ Varghese Palatty, “Concept of God among the Tribes of Northeast India: A Theological Perspective,” *Search for A New Society: Tribal Theology for North East India*, edited by Yangkahao Vashum, Peter Haokip and Melvil Pereira (Guwahati: North Eastern Social Research Centre, 2012), 146.

message that Christianity professes.”³⁴ God in Jesus Christ is a relational God who loves us, cares for us and even died for us on the cross to redeem us from our struggles. Jesus Christ is not just a concept, but God who became a human being and came into this world to redeem the fallen world and proclaim the kingdom of God.

5.3.1. Is Jesus Christ the Fulfilment of all Religions?

The distinction between continuity, discontinuity, and relative continuity was employed before when discussing the relation between the tribal God and the Christian God in section 3.5. It was also included in Major Question 3 of the empirical research (see section 4.3.3.). Now we will apply it to the question: Is Jesus Christ the fulfilment of all religions?

5.3.1.1. Complete Discontinuity between Christianity and other Faiths

Theologians in India have different answers to this question. People who vouch for complete discontinuity between Christianity and other faiths would argue that the foundational points of both are contradictory and therefore not to be mixed nor to be reconciled. Obviously, pantheism or animism cannot go well with monotheism. The notion is that the ‘Christian God’ surpasses the ‘ancestral God,’ hence requires a ‘contrasted study’.³⁵ The Christian God to them is not a silent one sitting far beyond the blue sky; he is omnipresent, omnipotent and omniscient. He is invisible but made Himself visible to us through his son Jesus Christ, unlike the vague idea of the other gods. However, is it justifiable to brand other people’s gods as vague? Are we reading them correctly?

³⁴ See Eyingbeni Hümtsoe-Nienu, *God of the Tribes*, 103.

³⁵ Eyingbeni Hümtsoe-Nienu, *God of the Tribes*, 27.

5.3.1.2. Complete Continuity between Christianity and other Faiths

The other group who vouches for complete continuity between Christianity and other faiths would propose to build connectivity between Christianity and other faiths on the idea that the experience of God in Christianity is a continuous experience of the One Supreme God, and not a shift from one God to another. Based on Acts 14:16-17 and Acts 17:23, Raimundo Panikkar claims that the hidden presence of Christ is there in Hinduism but it is in Christianity that Christ is fully revealed and as such it is the responsibility of the Christians to reveal the hidden Christ in Hinduism.

To Panikkar, God is at work in all religions. “Like Paul who speaks about the unknown God of the Greeks, one can also speak about the hidden Christ of Hinduism – hidden and unknown, yet present and at work because he is not far from any one of us. Recognizing the presence of God in other religions is equivalent to proclaiming the presence of Christ in them, for in him all things subsist (Col 1:17).”³⁶ Panikkar envisioned the Hindu-Christian encounter at an ontological and existential level. Varghese Palatty writes, “To reject everything as superstition will be counterproductive because the people cannot dispel the concept they have of God. But the richness of the Christian God can be gradually integrated into the already rich concept they have of God. The process of interaction can help also to purify their concept of God as it has been traditionally handed down.”³⁷

T. Hembrom firmly bases himself on the idea that the Santals are a non-idol-worshipping, monotheist people who believe in one Supreme supernatural being.

³⁶ Raimundo Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism: Towards an Ecumenical Christophany* (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 1982), 17.

³⁷ Varghese Palatty, *Search for A New Society*, 163.

Therefore, he proposes to find continuity between the Santal tribal God and the Christian God and writes:

The idea that the Santals (one of the tribal people in India) are Godless people would be an affront to God himself and a rebellion against what Romans 1:19-20 asserts. One should understand that Roman 1:21ff. is not applicable to the Santals, as some of the Christian preachers still do. In our effort to make Santal Christian Theology, let us deal with as St. Paul has said, “whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is lovely, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise,” in the Santals religious, cultural, social and economic life, deal with them (adapted from Phil.4:8).³⁸

Eyingbeni Hümtsoe explains that to accept the ancestral religions as preparing the way for the gospel is saying that there is continuity with the Christian God. Also, the experience and knowledge of the “Ancestral God” can be a bridge towards identifying the implication of Christ and His Spirit in Naga ancestral religiosity.³⁹ Further, she also mentions that, “There is substantial functional continuity between the “Ancestral God” and Christian God” which is evident in the former’s acts of kindness to the people within their specific contexts of pain, isolation, despair, auspicious rituals, etc.”⁴⁰ However, trying to find absolute continuity between the Christian God and other gods, through the Christ of faith, while forfeiting the historical Jesus, is a matter of great concern.

5.3.1.3. Relative Continuity between Christianity and Other Faiths

There is now the third group who suggests a relative continuity between other gods and the Christian God. The former gods serve as preparatory factors for the latter God. This group says that the others believed in a High God and a Supreme Being, who is believed

³⁸ T. Hembrom, “Probable Form of Santal Christian Theology: Preliminary Observations,” *Towards A Tribal Theology* (Durgapur: Santi Griha Tribal Peace and Reconciliation Centre, 2014), 108-109.

³⁹ Eyingbeni Hümtsoe-Nienu, *God of the Tribes*, 58.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 278.

to be the Creator and dispenser of everything. However, these are not true religions but are something like a *preparatio evangelii*. These religions by themselves cannot lead us to salvation because the finality of God's mighty act of salvation is to be found only in the religion of Jesus Christ, that is Christianity. Christianity is not the fulfilment of all religions but the fulfilment of the human heart. Renty Keitzar, as Eyingbeni Hiimtsoe noted, insisted on the supremacy of the Bible and its revelation of Christ and therefore suggested the name of God in the Bible as the Ultimate name, clearly undermining the validity of the Naga names of the "Ancestral God" and suggests that a valid experience of God is limited to the God of the Hebrews.⁴¹

Ajith Fernando records:

Dr. E. Stanley Jones often gave evangelistic lectures to Hindu audiences in India, having *Hindus* as chairmen of the meetings. One such chairman, who was chief minister of a state, during his opening introduction said, 'I shall reserve my remarks for the close of the address, for no matter what the speaker says, I will find parallel things in our own sacred books.' At the close of the meeting, he was at a loss of words. Dr. Jones had not presented 'things'; he had presented a person, Jesus Christ; and that person was not found in their sacred books.⁴²

Referring to the pre-Christian Mizo tribal tradition, Vanlalauva writes:

The Tribals who became known as "irreclaimable savages" were not without knowledge of God. They knew something about God through God's revelation in nature and through their life's experience. But, their knowledge of God was imperfect and distorted. Though they knew the goodness of God to some extent, they could not get much benefit from that knowledge of God. God was not only the Creator but also the Supreme Ruler of the whole universe. Though they did not properly know how great and mighty was God's power, they acknowledged His Lordship by offering Him prayers and sacrifices. The pre-Christian Mizo tradition may be understood as an indication of the fact that God's revelation is available outside Christianity. At the same time, the same tradition may be used to

⁴¹ See Eyingbeni Hiimtsoe-Nienu, *God of the Tribes*, 58.

⁴² Ajith Fernando, *The Christian's Attitude Toward World Religions*, 69.

prove that knowledge of God outside the biblical revelation is not sufficient to lead human beings to the true knowledge of God.⁴³

The Bible is the special revelation of God who clearly reveals Himself in Jesus Christ. The people of the world long for atonement and grace. All religions long for a mediator and this wish is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. He indeed is the Messiah and Christ, anticipated by the Jews in the Old Testament.

5.3.2. The Name of God (Yahweh) as “I AM” is Revealed in Jesus Christ

If Jesus is to be the fulfilment of the Old Testament, then he needs to be the personification of the God of the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, God revealed Himself to His people as the great “I AM.” In Exodus 3, God called Moses out of the burning bush and gave him an assignment to go to Egypt and free his people. God promised to be with him, However, Moses was reluctant and tells God (Ex. 3:13-14), “If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” He said further, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” Who is this “I AM?”

In the New Testament, John reveals in his gospel that this great “I AM” is none other than Jesus Christ Himself.⁴⁴ In John 8:58 Jesus declares, “Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am.” “I am is a title of Deity (cf. Ex.3:14; Isa.41:4; 43:11-13; John 8:28); the Jews response (John 8:29) showed they understood it that way. Jesus because of His

⁴³ H. Vanlalauva, *Doctrine of God*, John Calvin’s Doctrine of God, 72.

⁴⁴ PHEME PERKINS, “The Gospel According to John,” *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, edited by Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 2015), 967.

equality with God (John 5:18; 20:28; Phil. 2:6; Col. 2:9), existed from all eternity (John 1:1).⁴⁵ This “I AM,” has always fulfilled His promises. He is not a far away and static God, but He is near. He communicates and relates to His people personally, in and through Jesus Christ. When John refers to the seven “I am” statements of Jesus, all of them were a reference to this great I AM: a) I am the Bread of Life. He who comes to me will never hunger (John 6:35); b) I am the light of the world (John 8:12); c) I am the door (John 10:9); d) I am the good Shepherd. The good shepherd gives his life for the sheep (John 10:11); e) I am the resurrection and the life (John 11:25); f) I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the father except through me (John 14:6); and g) I am the true vine (John 15:1); all express that Jesus is the embodiment of that great I AM.⁴⁶

5.3.3. Jesus, the Personification of the Almighty God of the Old Testament

We find in the gospel of John that Thomas (one of the disciples of Jesus), who is known to be doubting all the time, is now convinced and declares Jesus as his Lord and his God (John 20:28). Isaiah foretold in his prophesy, the child to be born for us will have all the authority rest upon His shoulders and He will be known as the Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father and Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6). Now in Matthew 20:18-20, Jesus declared in His great commission, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that

⁴⁵ Edwin A. Blum, “John,” *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures [New Testament Edition]*, by Dallas Seminary Faculty, edited by John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Secunderabad: Authentic Books, 2010), 306-307.

⁴⁶ Paul Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Secunderabad: G.S. Books, 1989), 202.

I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:18-20).

Jesus is the revealed word of God according to John 1:1ff and John 1:14. Jesus Christ is the revelation of God found in the scriptures, who although was equal to God and was God Himself, chose to empty Himself taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness and form. He humbled Himself to be obedient to even die on the cross (Philippians 2:5-8). And the Bible says (Philippians 2:9ff), “Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

5.3.4. Jesus Christ, the Fulfilment of the Old Testament, but not all Religions

The deepest longing of the human heart is fulfilled in Jesus Christ who is clearly and specifically revealed in the Bible. Ajith Fernando, referring to Paul’s attitude towards the people of Athens in Acts 17 comments, “Paul’s handling of the worship of the unknown god tells us something very important about how he regarded other faiths in relation to Christianity. He saw these faiths as the expression of a thirst for God, but he knew that only Christ can satisfy that thirst. So, he approached non-Christians with the belief that they were thirsting for God.”⁴⁷ He goes on to say, “The thirst expresses itself in various forms in different people, though some seem not to be aware that this thirst exists. In Athens it expressed itself in the form of an altar to an unknown god.”⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Ajith Fernando, *The Christian’s Attitude Toward World Religions*, 42.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

Herman Bavinck is convinced that all religions imply a relation to God and therefore must be based on God's revelation and therefore he concludes, "All religion rests on revelation."⁴⁹ He further states that "the idea of redemption in a general sense is characteristic of all religion" and saviours are necessary for salvation. This belief in saviours is also universal and rests only on revelation."⁵⁰

With respect to the doctrine of mediatorship, Bavinck writes, "Holy Scripture does not stand alone but is supported and confirmed on all sides by ideas concerning such a mediatorship in the religions of the people."⁵¹ He writes, "Mediators between humanity and the deity, messengers of God who convey his blessings and revelations to humans and, conversely, lay their prayers and gifts before his throne, occur in all religions."⁵² Even the idea of incarnation and apotheosis occur in almost all religions. The idea that, one day, good will overcome evil also prevails in most religions.⁵³ However, he concludes, "One can with some reason speak of an 'unconscious prophetic tendency' in paganism. In its most beautiful and noble expressions, it points to Christianity. Jesus Christ is not only the Messiah of Israel but also the desire of all nations."⁵⁴ Jesus Christ truly fulfils people's aspirations and thirst. He indeed is the wish for all religions and fulfilment of the Old Testament.

⁴⁹ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Volume 1*, 286.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 287.

⁵¹ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Volume 3*, 238.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 239.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 240.

5.4. Reformed Definitions of the Omnipotence of God

The study of divine omnipotence is very important because it is so crucial to the concept of God. God the divine must surpass human power. More practically, only an all-powerful and infinite one is worthy to be the proper object of worship and trust. Can we really be assured of salvation if there is something that God cannot overcome, whether within or outside us?⁵⁵ Therefore, the *omnipotence of God* or the phrase, “Almighty God” which van den Brink rightly chooses, has functioned for many centuries and still functions as one of the most common forms of addressing God in Christian prayer.⁵⁶

Throughout the centuries theologians and philosophers struggled formulating the meaning and concept of the omnipotence of God. Some would say omnipotence means “God has power over everything,” and others would interpret it as “God has the ability to do everything.” Both have an overlapping idea but do not mean exactly the same thing. Therefore, the doctrine of *the omnipotence of God* became a highly debatable topic and some even went to the extent of finding no *omnipotence* with God, while others would still give it to Him, but in a qualified sense. There are a few who kept digging into it and tried to find balance and are still trying to bring stability to it. Let us look at both the classical Biblical interpretation of omnipotence and the minimizing interpretation, as van den Brink puts it.

⁵⁵ Millard J. Erickson, *God the Father Almighty: A Contemporary Exploration of the Divine Attributes* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 165-166.

⁵⁶ Gijsbert van den Brink, *Almighty God: A Study of the Doctrine of Divine Omnipotence* (Kampen: Kok Pharos Publishing House, 1993), 1.

5.4.1. Classical Biblical Interpretation of Omnipotence

The theologians who look at the classical biblical interpretation of *omnipotence* see God as the source of all power, who controls the events of history, is unlimited and incomparable in His wisdom, presence and power. He is the Maker and Master of all, and all things are subject to His will.⁵⁷ God's sovereignty reveals itself in his omnipotence, and Scripture nowhere sets bounds to God's power.⁵⁸ As van den Brink has said, God's unlimited power is expressed through the resurrection of Christ, and the way He is acclaimed as king of kings and Lord of Lords (1 Tim. 6:15).⁵⁹

The biblical concept of divine omnipotence includes not only God's actual reign over humanity and the universe, but also His unlimited capacity for action. We can equate it with the power in which He executes His will. For L. Berkhof, God's power is the effective energy of His nature or His Being, which is the absolute and greatest power.⁶⁰ C.S. Lewis proposes that this power in God is the power to do all, or everything that is essentially possible.⁶¹

Phrases like "all things are possible for God" appear in virtually all layers of the biblical literature (Gen. 18:14, Jer. 32:17, Job 42:2, Matt. 19:26, Mark 14:36, Luke 1:37, Phil. 3:21, etc.). When we look at Philippians 3:21, we see it means the capacity for action, and the actual rule, are together applied to Christ in their strong mutual association. God at

⁵⁷ J.I. Packer, *Knowing God* (London: Hodder & Toughton Publishers, 1988), 91-99.

⁵⁸ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Volumes 2*, 245-246.

⁵⁹ Gijsbert van den Brink, Vincent Brummer and Marcel Sarot (eds.), *Understanding the Attributes of God* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1999), 140-141.

⁶⁰ L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1946), 79.

⁶¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1962), 28.

any rate is capable of doing more things than He in fact does and has done.⁶² Herman Bavinck points out that God's omnipotence is seen in his works in the Bible such as in Creation, providence, Israel's deliverance from Egypt, nature with its laws, the history of Israel with its marvels.⁶³

As explained above, the Bible clearly indicates that God is all powerful in that He rules over everything and His capacity for action is unlimited. Van den Brink points out that it is important to establish the above fact because in the tradition of Greek philosophers, omnipotence is not a divine quality. He notes that:

The highest principle in the great Greek system of thought (the idea of the Good in Plato, the unmoved Mover in Aristotle, the One in Plotinus, etc.) is never portrayed as actively involved in the world; it is not in need of performing actions! The emphasis on the activity, and by extension the omnipotence of God, is, on the other hand, characteristic of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. And the classical biblical interpretation of the biblical texts that 'God is all-powerful' stands acceptable.⁶⁴

5.4.2. Minimizing Interpretation of Omnipotence

However, there are also other theologians and philosophers who concluded that God is in fact not presented as almighty in the Bible at all (Minimizing Interpretation). In support of their position, they refer to the many biblical narratives in which God seems to give in to human beings, and even lets their sins take their course unhindered. And they insist that the life of Jesus of Nazareth shows 'that God is not an Imperial Caesar God of knock-down power, but a creative servant God of invincible love.'⁶⁵ They suggest that,

⁶² Gijsbert van den Brink, *Understanding the Attributes of God*, 140.

⁶³ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Volumes 2*, 246-247.

⁶⁴ Gijsbert van den Brink, *Understanding the Attributes of God*, 141.

⁶⁵ David Jenkins, *God, Miracle and the Church of England* (London: SCM Press, 1987), 29. Cited by Gijsbert van den Brink, *Understanding the Attributes of God*, 140.

“the power of God is in fact limited in various ways. No doubt, God has power, perhaps even superior power, but surely He is not omnipotent, i.e., not all-powerful.”⁶⁶ One of the major discussions which led J.L. Mackie to frame the word “Paradox of Omnipotence” was the assumption that God has made men so free that He cannot control their wills. Can an omnipotent being make things which he cannot subsequently control? Or, similarly, can an omnipotent being make rules which then bind himself? Therefore, Mackie concluded that omnipotence cannot be attributed to God, so that if God exists, God’s power must necessarily be limited in one way or another.⁶⁷

Charles Hartshorne, the biggest advocate of process theology, agrees with Mackie, and blames the traditional interpretation of Omnipotence of God which limits God and His divine power, which he believes fosters creativity in even the lowest of creatures.⁶⁸ He proposes the importance of events instead of things, of becoming instead of being, and of change instead of consistency as the fundamental principles of reality. Thus, “reality is a process of becoming, not a static universe of objects.” Hence for Hartshorne, God is also in a process of becoming and, in some sense, He must be dependent on the free decisions of creatures. God’s nature is unceasingly adaptable and changeable, for “God is both the originator and a participant in the process of cosmic evolution.”⁶⁹ There is a considerable amount of truth in the minimizing interpretation, therefore it cannot be cast-off for being simply misguided.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Gijsbert van den Brink, *Almighty God*, 136-136.

⁶⁸ Charles Hartshorne, *Omnipotence and other Theological Mistakes* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1984), 17-18. (ebook isbn13: 9780585064079).

⁶⁹ M. Williams, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Second Edition), edited by Walter A. Elwell (UK: Baker Academic, 2001), 536.

5.4.3. Classical Biblical Interpretation with Qualifications

Van den Brink suggests that if some qualifications are made to the Classical Biblical interpretation of omnipotence, which says that, ‘God can do everything’, then we can come to a more acceptable definition.

Van den Brink’s qualifications are: 1) God’s omnipotence in the Bible is both theoretical and factual and is rooted in the activities of everyday life. His omnipotence is experienced as an expression of trust based on an interpretation of history as seen with the eyes of faith; 2) God’s omnipotent actions in creation and history are always performed with redemptive purpose; 3) God’s powerful, purposeful actions are realized at intermittent times throughout history, as He increasingly gets more personally involved, and ultimately takes on our very sins on the cross; 4) God’s power in action can be quite opposite from our human understanding and our concept of power. At Calvary, and in so many ways, God shows His power in a counter-intuitive way; and 5) There are certain things that God cannot do, because it would be contrary to His being. His omnipotence is limited and driven by His unique, perfect character.⁷⁰

By qualifying the classical concept of omnipotence like this, we maintain the elements of truth in the minimizing interpretation, without denying the biblical basis for the doctrine of omnipotence. For van den Brink, this classical doctrine is sustainable because, “the doctrine of God’s omnipotence or almightiness is not a matter of course but a matter of faith. It belongs to the very core of Christian faith to believe that God, the sole

⁷⁰ Gijsbert van den Brink, Vincent Brummer and Marcel Sarot (eds), *Understanding the Attributes of God* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1999), 142-143.

source of all truth, goodness and beauty, is almighty, rather than the forces of falsehood, evil and ugliness.”⁷¹

Therefore, the qualified definition suggested by van den Brink that is most suitable for understanding the “Omnipotence of God” in the Reformed tradition is:

*God is omnipotent because He has the ability to realize all states of affairs that are logically possible for Him to realize, given His perfect being.*⁷²

We need to ask, though, “Would this definition resonate with the Lepcha Tribal Christians in India?”

5.5. Paving the Way for a Reformed Tribal Definition of Omnipotence

5.5.1. Background and Source

Reformed Theology is, in part, based on western philosophical and western cultural backgrounds expressed in theological terms. It is deeply intertwined with Greek philosophy, emphasizing reason, concepts, and ontological interest on intrinsic natures. There was a time that systematic theology was accepted and confessed as the only theology that can be called Christian. It assumed that it had universal significance and was applicable to all. The criticism from the contextual theologies was that this presupposition leads to arrogant and egotistical attitudes, where western theologies have become slayers of local cultures and people’s identities. They felt that it did not appeal to the real-life situation of the people. It did not move in response to suffering and the struggle of people for hope. However, postmodern Reformed theology has shown progressiveness in grappling with the issue of postmodernism today.

⁷¹ Ibid., 145.

⁷² Ibid., 153.

Reformed Theology, with its reforming principle, is dynamic in nature and it maintains the inadequacy of human perspective, be it that of an individual or a particular community or theological tradition to do full justice to the truth of God's revelation in Christ. Dolf te Velde in the conclusion of his book *Paths Beyond Tracing Out* admits that the reality of God always exceeds our concepts and arguments.⁷³ Michael Horton affirms that God transcends us in His existence of knowledge.⁷⁴ Affirming our inability to understand God, Barend Kamphuis concluded, "I have to confess that God is always too great for me to understand."⁷⁵ With this admission, the postmodern reformed theologians moved one step forward in giving respect to other schools of thinking and being mindful of the changing times and variety of contexts in doing reformed theology. They acknowledged that the light of the Word of God would also shine in other places.

Tribal theology on the other hand draws its inspiration from liberation theology. It is a theology originated from tribal context in India and it aims to reconstruct a theology credible to the Christian faith tradition and relevant to the life of the church in its current historical, cultural, social and political circumstances. "It takes the context, conditions and situations of the land, histories and cultures of the people in the society that church exists as resources for theological reflection and faith confession: therewith constructing a theology that is able to shape a Christian identity relevant to its context."⁷⁶ The tribal theology though is very critical; it does acknowledge its affinity, credibility and contribution to the systematic theology. However, their giving prime importance to context

⁷³ Dolf te Velde, *Paths Beyond Tracing Out* (Delft: Eburon, 2010), 653-654.

⁷⁴ Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 78.

⁷⁵ Barend Kamphuis, "The Hermeneutics of Dogma", 81.

⁷⁶ Longchar, *Contextual Theologies*, 2.

and life experience of the people along with scripture and tradition is still debatable in doing theology.

It is true that the Reformed Theology to be relevant to the Lepcha tribal context, must be sensitive to the above concerns. However, unlike the tribal theology of India that brings the three sources: scripture, tradition and context to the same platform is not the idea we can agree on. We ought to put them in their rightful order. And when we do so, the value, need and importance of all three is taken care of. We agree that scripture is the special revelation of God, the divinely inspired written Word of God (2 Timothy 3:16), and we need to obey it. Tradition or confession is a human historical expression of the gospel, a contingent human answer to the eternal word of God. Hence, we must be committed to it. When we are studying Scripture and tradition, we need to also responsibly read them in the context of the current times and interpret them within the tribal context. This will help Reformed theology to be relevant to the Lepcha tribal context.

5.5.2. Theology from Above and Theology from Below

Tribal theology is a “Theology from Below”. “Theology from Below” means exploring our spiritual intuitions and feelings about God, then using those insights to construct a tribal theology. It first of all recognizes human needs. It is also anthropocentric. It tries to make Scripture relevant, and in so doing, they expound Scripture in a way that it appropriately meets those special needs. Inevitably, theologians will be selective in their choice of the Biblical passages and they will focus on passages that they think people in particular contexts and cultures will be able to understand. Will a sinful human be able to reach a holy God this way?

On the other hand, Reformed theology, which is the “Theology from Above,” focuses on God and His purposes, plans and ways of making humanity know his will. It means listening for revelation from God, a voice outside ourselves, telling us things we wouldn’t know otherwise. The Scripture stands as the basis of studying all the activities of God and is the only source of information about him. However, we need to understand that we are not God and God has His own ways of working with this world and we cannot fully discern the mind of God.

Reformed Theology, to be relevant to Lepcha Tribal context, must find a bridge between these two perspectives. The divine causality must find it’s meeting point with the human causality. This is possible, when we look at human reality in the light of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. God revealed himself in flesh and met us in our human condition in order to redeem us from our fallen state. The divine meets the human, paving a path to a new way; perhaps a suitable way forward in doing Reformed Theology in the Lepcha tribal context. This background of both reformed and tribal thinking leads us to look at a definition of omnipotence that takes the Lepcha perspective into consideration.

5.5.3. Christian Tribal Definition of Omnipotence

While traditional Reformed theology articulates the Omnipotence of God in terms of logical conceptuality and accuracy, the Lepchas looks at the omnipotence of God more from the perspective of theological and spiritual relevancy and reliability. To them, God is powerful enough to do anything, even things illogical, to meet his purpose. They accept that God transcends our logical reasoning. However, God can never be illogical to Himself. Everything that he does is logical to Himself. What is logical to God can be beyond the human logical framework.

To the Lepchas, the Omnipotent God is One supreme being, Creator and Sovereign over all. He controls everything in His free will and provides for His people. He is not a God who is transcendent and far away from people's reach but who is immanent, who is near to everyone who needs Him and in Jesus Christ finds the complete fulfilment. His almightiness is expressed in His goodness, distinctness and superiority over all spirits. He is also the ultimate judge over all. And this idea they already conceived from their pre-Christian tribal belief system. But how they interpret this idea of omnipotence of God is in terms of the "all-powerfulness of God." This power of God is the highest power, surpassing human understanding. Therefore, if asked if the omnipotent God can do even incomprehensible things to meet his purpose, they would say, "Yes!" the Omnipotent God should be able to do so.⁷⁷ Then the definition from their understanding would be:

God is omnipotent because He has the ability to realize all states of affairs that are logically and illogically possible for Him to realize, given His perfect being.

Here, we have a definition that makes more sense to the Tribal Christian, but may not be the best bridge to a common understanding of God's omnipotence within the Reformed tradition. Therefore, we must look for a new definition of the Omnipotence of God in Reformed Theology that is relevant to the Lepcha tribal context.

5.6. New, Proposed Definition of Omnipotence

To someone of the Reformed tradition, the term "illogically" above may sound very negative and inappropriate to relate to the perfect nature and being of God. But the Christian Tribal may not mind this. They may not have a logical argument for this, but to

⁷⁷ The majority of the interviewees in my empirical studies gave their idea of the Omnipotence of God as someone who can do the illogical if He wants to. But he will not do it in his perfect nature and being.

them, God is powerful enough to do anything. For them it is the western hegemony that claims what is logical and what is illogical. Sometimes what may be logical in one context would be totally illogical in another context. The Omnipotent God must be able to embrace and handle all kinds of logic. However, we must also acknowledge that God can never be illogical to Himself. Everything that he does is logical to Himself. What is logical to God can be beyond the human logical framework. Ultimately, we must acknowledge that God transcends our logical reasoning. Therefore, in order to begin to make Reformed Theology relevant in the Lepcha tribal context of India I suggest using the words “beyond human logic” rather than the word “illogically” and modify the definition in this way:

God is Omnipotent because He, in His infinite and perfect being, can do anything that is logically, and beyond human logic, possible which is in harmony with his will and nature.

There is of course a difference between ‘logically possible’ and ‘physically possible’. There is no dispute in Reformed theology that God can do things that are from a human point of view ‘physically impossible,’ e.g. the virgin birth of Jesus and his resurrection. There is also no doubting that God is beyond our understanding, e.g. with regard to the concept of the Trinity or the doctrine of the two natures of Jesus Christ. But for the Lepcha we have to go a step further.

We need to put our logic in perspective. We have to express that the limits of our logic are not limits for God. Not every decision can be made using pure logic. We also use our instinct, emotions, preferences; and subjective reasoning because we are not purely logical creatures and that is how God has made us. Logic can give us helpful insights but never the ultimate definition about the Almighty God. Human logic is fallible and limited, bound to human rules that can be changed. They cannot be the same as divine logic. The term “beyond human logic”, is the acknowledgment that God sometimes does things we

cannot understand from the perspective of our human logic. That's why I propose modifying the definition.

Therefore, if the word "illogically" (a negative word) is properly replaced by the term "beyond human logic," then in the new and modified definition of the omnipotence of God, we recognize that the Omnipotent God can do anything that is logical and beyond human logic. This could help the Christian Lepcha Tribals of India come into closer agreement with Reformed theology in regard to the omnipotence of God.

5.7. Summary

This chapter is the final conclusion based on the materials collected from all the research. The study on General and Special Revelation helps us discover that Almighty God's revelation is a reality even if people perceive it differently or don't recognize that it is from God. All religions need a mediator, and General Revelation prepares people for the gospel. Then Special Revelation, which is 'Scripture,' stands as the source and criteria to test the human experience of Almighty God, bringing in the Supremacy of Christ. The next section deals with Jesus Christ as the fulfilment of all the longings of the human heart.

The next part of the chapter attempts to portray the difference of perspective between Reformed Theology and the Lepcha tribal mindset. Reformed theology gives substantial insights on God's Omnipotence and it pays serious attention to questions of logic and consistency. Whereas the Lepchas look at the omnipotence of God from the perspective of how God's actions relate to their lives and how trustworthy He is.

The final section in this chapter is the new, proposed, culturally-sensitive definition of the Omnipotence of God which says: *God is Omnipotent because He, in His infinite and perfect being, can do anything that is logically, and beyond human logic, possible*

which is in harmony with his will and nature. Taking the middle path between the two viewpoints, will help Lepcha Tribals and Reformed theologians to agree that the Omnipotent God can do anything that is logical and beyond human logic which is in harmony with His will and nature. Further similar research may be conducted to help build a bridge to a Lepcha Tribal understanding of other Reformed doctrines.

Chapter Six

Omnipotence of God in Reformed Theology and its Relevance to the Lepcha Tribal Context

6.1. Introduction

Reformed Theology in its dynamic and progressive nature continues to rediscover, reaffirm and propagate what had begun in the Bible. If needed, it also corrects and directs what had been lost and falsified over the years. Theological issues are never settled once and for all, because they are written by human beings and therefore have differentiation and limitations. In the 21st century we face diverse issues and challenges. To uphold and authenticate the uniqueness of the Omnipotent God in Christ is the most challenging factor today. Reformed Theology must be committed to striking a balance between theological consistency on one hand and theological relevancy on the other hand. This section will conclude the presentation of how Reformed Theology can be relevant to the Lepcha Tribal Context in India, focusing on the issue of omnipotence.

6.2. Reformed Theology and Contextualization:

The reforming principle (*Semper Reformanda*) of Reformed Theology signifies its dynamic nature in the changing of time and context. The early reformers lived in sixteenth century Europe and to a large extent were conditioned by their time and context. They read, interpreted and applied the Bible to meet the need of their context and find solutions to the issues facing the church of that time. The 21st century today, is a different time and context. The people and environment are different. The issues and questions the church is facing are different from what the sixteenth century reformers were facing. If the reformers mainly wrote against the papal authority and also against various positions of the radicals in the sixteenth century, the reformed theologian faces the situation of the post-modern

environment in today's 21st century. It is a challenge for Reformed Theology to stay applicable in this changing time and context. What would be the response? The post-modern reformed theologians hold to the idea that the reforming principle maintains that no one human perspective is adequate to do full justice to the truth of God's revelation in Christ. God is incomprehensible and too great for humans to understand. He transcends us in His existence and knowledge and power. He always exceeds our concepts and arguments.

With this admission, they are more mindful of the changing times and the variety of contexts in doing theology. They are adaptive and accommodating and more open to contextualization. This paves a new road for Reformed Theology to penetrate other cultural contexts (in the case of this research, the Lepcha Tribal context). In doing theology, the reformed theologians of today are more respectful also of other schools of thought. They acknowledge that the light of the Word of God would also shine in other places.

Having said that, the transition of Reformed Theology is not towards pluralism but more strongly exclusive in a very inclusive way. This is a middle path as opposed to an exclusivist or pluralist view. The exclusivist view would be too blunt in condemning all the rest of the belief systems as false and evil, whereas the pluralist approach would accept all as ways to Almighty God. Generally, in our approach we must be **inclusive** because we know that the seed of the Word or the rays of light are also present in other religions and therefore they have a degree of truth in them. Personally, we are **exclusive** because we believe that only Christianity contains the ultimate and absolute truth in Jesus Christ. We must respect other belief systems as containing relative truths (perhaps in a distorted form) leading to that Absolute truth in the Bible.

When contextualizing, we should always use the Bible as the main source and standard for making the Christian God relevant to the Lepcha. Biblical truths must be culturally relevant. However, we must also be aware of the risk of syncretism in the name of contextualization where the essence of the truth of the Bible might be diluted and compromised in the process of contextualization. Nevertheless, if we learn how to drive a car well, we will avoid accidents though we still have a risk of it. So is contextualization. In contextualization, upholding the good things about the culture, community, language, customs, dress, etc., is important. And not just loving your culture alone but also respecting other cultures too. However, correcting the evil practices of the culture and helping them in the process of transformation is also an important practice of theology.

After all, Jesus our Master, was also born into a culture and He loved His culture. Having loved His culture, he also loved others outside His culture. And finally, he acted against the ill practices of His own culture and led people into a process of transformation, by getting involved in it Himself. Therefore, to be relevant in a different context, Reformed Theology must move forward from trying to bring uniformity, to promoting unity in diversity in contextualizing.

6.3. Jesus Christ as a Gift to the Lepchas

6.3.1. Jesus Christ, the Missing Link

For the Lepchas, God is the all-powerful, sovereign creator and controller of all. He is someone who is always near, someone who is very familiar to them. However, Jesus Christ as a ‘personal’ Saviour, more than one who is ‘near,’ is a unique gift Christianity presents to them. The deepest longing of the human heart is fulfilled in Jesus Christ who is clearly and specifically revealed in the Bible.

The people of the world long for atonement and grace. All religions long for a mediator and this wish is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. In Acts 17, Paul saw the faith of the Athenians as the expression of a thirst for God, but he knew that only Christ can satisfy that thirst. The thirst expresses itself in various forms in different people; in Athens it expressed itself in the form of an altar to an unknown god. For the Lepchas, the thirst is expressed in the appeasement of God, guardian deities and even evil spirits through sacrifices and offerings.

The Lepcha belief system also rests on revelation through the shamans. The idea of redemption is prevailing and therefore saviours and redeemers are requisites for them. The concept of a mediator between humans and God, the idea of incarnation and apotheosis also occur among them too. The idea that one day, good will overcome evil also prevails among them. However, all the above ultimately point to Christianity. Jesus Christ is not only the Messiah of Israel but also the desire of the Lepchas. Jesus Christ truly fulfils Lepcha aspiration and thirst. He indeed is the Messiah and Christ, anticipated by the Jews in the Old Testament. He indeed is the wish for all religions and fulfilment of the Old Testament.

6.3.2. Power of God Expressed in Christ's Sacrifice

God is almighty to the Lepchas—one who is the Supreme Being, creator and ruler of the universe. God holds all power, authority and might. God in his almightiness has also ordained guardian deities and conferred them with certain power and authority to preside over certain worldly affairs. Lepchas also believe that evil spirits have power to afflict humans both with bodily disease and with spiritual corruption, but are subordinate to God and live in enmity with God. The concept of self-giving and self-sacrificing love of God in

Jesus Christ is a new phenomenon for Lepchas. How can weakness be attributed to God? The journey of the Cross for Christ can be seen as weakness and foolishness in human perspective. But in the Bible, not only power, but also weakness is attributed to God (I Cor. 1:25). The cross indicates that the way in which God realizes His intent can be quite contrary to all our human understanding and power. Christ's sacrifice on the cross was such an act of weakness. But this weakness turns out to be indicative of the very specific nature of the power of God: it is on the cross, that God realizes His deepest salvific purpose with humanity. Here we see God is powerful in such an unexpected and counter-intuitive way. This is the message of Christianity which impacted many of the Lepcha minds and made them turn to Jesus who has become the ultimate sacrifice himself as the lamb of God (John 1:29) once and for all (Hebrew 10:1-18).

6.4. Scripture as a Gift

6.4.1. Scripture as Primary Source

How can humans have a clearer vision of the Omnipotent God? This is through the lenses of sources like Scripture, tradition, context, reason, experience and faith. Tradition or confession is a human historical expression of the gospel, a contingent human answer to the eternal word of God. Tradition needs to be grounded and based on Scripture. We also need to be responsible to the context, because the writing of Scripture and the content, practices, and feel of tradition did not simply fall from the sky. The context is instrumental in giving a necessary condition for Scripture for relevant interpretation. Reason, experience and faith are mediums to assist with a reasonable and logical expression in theological discourse and sometimes beyond logic, providing the valuable conditions for doing theology. Reformed Theology takes Scripture as the primary source and criteria in doing

theology. We agree that Scripture is the divinely-inspired written Word of God (2 Timothy 3:16). The importance and primacy of Scripture is a great gift to the Lepcha tribal context, whose concept of this omnipotent God is vague and sometimes confusing due to the handing down through oral tradition over time. Scripture is the final and special revelation of God to the Lepchas.

6.4.2. Scripture as Spectacles to Help the Lepchas See the Truth Clearly

Lepchas are not without some knowledge of the omnipotent God. Through God's revelation in nature and through their life experiences, they know something about God. But their knowledge of God is imperfect and distorted. They do not properly know how great and mighty God's power is. They just acknowledged His Lordship by offering Him prayers and sacrifices. Through this we can acknowledge that God's revelation is available outside Christianity. But there seems to be no explicit recognition of the Christ event in the Lepcha belief system and because of that there can be no possibility for Lepchas to truly know God. Here, Reformed Theology asserts that the knowledge of God outside the Biblical revelation is not sufficient to lead human beings to the true knowledge of God. The finality of God's revelation is in the Christ event which can only be found in the Bible. The Bible as a special revelation of God is the truth presented to the Lepchas. Reformed Theology presents Scripture as spectacles to help the Lepchas see the truth clearly.

6.5. Concept of Omnipotence for Lepchas

6.5.1. Reformed Contribution to the Lepcha Understanding of God's Omnipotence.

In Lepcha tradition the closest word for 'omnipotence' is "daar." "Daar" refers to the Supreme Being, the creator and ruler of the universe.¹ God is known as *Ithbu-Debu Rum* or *Ithbu-Moo* or in short *Rum*. When Lepchas call God *Ithbu-Debu Rum Daar* it means Almighty God the Creator.² "Daar" can find its equivalent in the Hebrew words *El Shaddai* and *Sebaoth*, and in the Greek word *Pantokrator*. "Daar" for Lepchas can also mean power, authority and might in the general sense. It is always used in a positive sense to refer to God or His guardian deities to whom He has assigned power and authority over certain worldly affairs but not for the power of evil spirits. The title "Daar" is applied to God and seems clearly to mean "all powerful." The meaning of omnipotence however must be determined from its usage in particular contexts. 'Daar' as used by the Lepchas may be similar to the word *El Shaddai*, meaning powerful or mighty, but is used very flexibly to mean 'mighty.' Even when they use 'mighty' only, they really mean 'almighty.' But to the one who is receiving the power of God it would not make any difference, it all means the same, the almighty. Therefore, the term *omnipotent* seems to express similar ideas in both the Lepcha belief system and Christian Scripture. However, this is only true on a superficial level.

Lepchas are shamanistic monotheists which is unlike the Trinitarian monotheism which Reformed Theology advocates. There are no more mediators between God and

¹ K.P. Tamsang, "Daar," *The Lepcha-English Encyclopedic Dictionary*, 420.

² Nirwan Amos Subba, *Lepcha People and some Related Stories*, 8-9.

humans in Christianity. Though God is almighty, Lepchas go to God only as the last resort. First, they want to explore the help of the known (guardian deities, spirits, etc.) through shamans and if nothing works out, then they go to the unknown, i.e., almighty God. Reformed Theology brings to them a more concrete idea of this omnipotent God, who not only reigns over humanity and the universe, but also has unlimited capacity for action. God's omnipotence is evident from His works in the Bible. Therefore, humans can access God and His power anytime without any mediator in-between.

The omnipotent God of the Lepchas seems to create the world in order and remain passive in its affairs. For them too, the power to create, control and designate gifts solely lies with God. He is superior to every god and spirit. As a grand designer, He has intentionally placed everything in various positions to responsibly serve His purpose. One of the great examples is Mt. Kanchanjunga as the guardian deity. The belief is that the assigned guardian deities symbolically represent God and faithfully serve to look after the welfare of the Lepchas and keep watch on the well-being of the country inhabited by them. Reformed Theology on the other hand advocates that the omnipotent God of the Christians is always active and involved in the day-to-day affairs of the world. God's omnipotence is always connected with the deeds that God performs in salvation history which is reflected in Scripture. His omnipotence is a power with 'content' which results in the ability to realize His purposes.

Reformed Theology further gives a more concrete explanation by stating that the power of God is completely determined and filled by His being. God is the most *perfect being* we can conceive of. And because He is perfect, He must be maximally powerful. This power of God wholly coincides with His will, and His will in turn coincides with His goodness, wisdom and righteousness. God is constant therefore free and God is omnipotent

denoting the perfect love in which He is free. The concept of omnipotence is never singled out in Reformed Theology. Every attribute of God is interrelated and complementary to each other. In fact, God is not able to exercise His power in a manner that is inconsistent with any of his other attributes. He is good all the time. His knowledge, wisdom and power are inseparable from His goodness.

6.5.2. The Omnipotent God Beyond Logic

Tribal Contextual Theology in India looks at the omnipotence of God from the perspective of spiritual and practical relevancy and reliability. God is powerful enough to do anything, even things that are illogical, to meet his purpose. But can God be illogical to Himself? Can the Omnipotent God do anything contrary to His Godliness; His nature, being, will, character and divine attributes? Systematic theology, as mentioned before, would look at the Omnipotence of God in terms of logical conceptuality and accuracy. Here too we must acknowledge the fact that the Omnipotent God must transcend our logical reasoning. Decisions cannot be made using only pure logic. We also use our instinct, emotions, preference and subjective reasoning because we are not purely logical creatures and that is how God has made us.

The suitable answer to this logical and illogical debate is presented by the Christian Lepcha respondents in the fourth chapter (see Section 4.3.1. 4, Q4). Choosing the middle path, the term "*beyond human logic*" is used, to address their position. God is all powerful and uses His power for the benefit of human beings and His creation. He is unlimited and if he so desires, He can also do things beyond human logic. In other words, God can also do things which are intrinsically impossible if it meets His purpose and ultimately brings benefits to human beings and His creation. The biblical examples given were the virgin

birth of Jesus and His resurrection, Jesus walking on water, which is against the law of gravity, Sarah giving birth to Isaac in her old age, etc. Therefore, an explanation of the concept of the Omnipotence of God which would fit the Lepcha context would be: *The Omnipotent God can do anything that is logical and beyond human logic which is in harmony with His being, His will, His nature, His divine attributes and His purpose.*

6.6. Divine Omnipotence and Human Freedom in Lepcha Context

Some mythical stories of the Lepchas (see 2.4.3.2. The Creator's Gift) strongly indicate that God gave humans the best gift—that of intelligence and wisdom—which made them superior over all creatures. By virtue of this gift, humans shall lord it over all the creatures on land, sea and sky. The story strongly indicates that the almighty Creator is always the owner and controller of all creation and humans are called to be His responsible stewards. Therefore, Lepchas believe that humans have a relevant degree of creaturely freedom and moral responsibility within the Owner/Steward relationship. God designates humans to manage their daily affairs and if there are things beyond their control, they can also approach the guardian deities and spirits through the shamans. The belief is that the guardian deities and spirits are appointed by God and are conferred with a certain degree of power and authority over worldly affairs. In that case many Lepchas agree that God has all power, but He self-limited himself in the exercise of this power.

Reformed Theology moves beyond this to explain that God's sovereign ownership and humans' stewardship are absolutely complementary. According to Michael Horton, humans have been given, by God, enough power and freedom for them to function. By giving us our freedom, He does not give up His freedom, because He is the Source of all

freedom, and this Source never runs out.³ And unlike the need for mediating powers like in the Lepcha belief system, humans can directly relate to God and receive the power and authority from God in Jesus Christ.

6.7. Omnipotence and Evil and Suffering in Lepcha Context

Lepchas believe in evil spirits and they call them *mung*. The belief is that these spirits cause harm to the Lepchas and are responsible for causing enmity, jealousy, disease, illness, death, epidemic, loss of property, failure of crops and other hazards. Lepchas offer offerings to these evil spirits as appeasement so that these spirits will not cause any harm to them. In such situations it seems the omnipotent God is passive in protecting the Lepchas and leaves them alone to manage the evil spirits by themselves. Reformed Theology on the other hand propagates that the evil spirits are our enemy and must be hated. Our fight is not against flesh and blood but against the principalities and powers of the dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil (Ephesians 6:12). Unlike the Lepcha God, the Omnipotent God of the Christians is actively involved liberating and protecting the people from the clutches of evil spirits. This concept would be a big eye opener to the Lepcha belief system. They are merely managing the evil spirits, but Reformed Theology would help them to get rid of the evil spirits from their lives.

Lepchas believe that suffering is caused by various factors but not God. According to their creation story, humans themselves are to be blamed for the entry of sin and suffering and not God. But they also blame the evil spirits who cause all the suffering in this world. Reformed Theology gives a certain prognosis and treatment for the cause of all

³ Michael Horton, 261-262.

the suffering in this world. The suffering may be the result of our own action. Suffering can also be the work of the devil (Job 1:6-12; 2:1-6; I Peter 5:8-9). However, God will not allow us to be tempted beyond what we are able (1 Cor. 10:13). And He will provide a way of escape, enabling us to bear the trial (1 Cor. 10:13). Suffering also may be the chastisement of God. God chastises to correct us (Heb. 12:9), so that we may be partakers of His holiness (Heb. 12:10); and we may yield the peaceable fruit of righteousness (Heb. 12:11). The Bible also indicates suffering as punishment from God at times (Rev. 8). Suffering may have something to do with meeting the higher purpose of God (Romans 8:28). Finally, God suffers with us in our suffering. The Christian God in Jesus Christ came to earth to deliberately put Himself on the hook of human failures and suffering. His suffering and death on the cross are a deep consolation and strength for us to face the brutal realities of life on earth. And we can rest assured that He is with us even in our worst suffering.

However, it is not just His suffering and death, but His resurrection that gives us hope that our suffering is not in vain. His resurrection proves that human suffering and death lead to new life and that injustices received here and now lead to a greater justice. In the future, God will do away with all evil and suffering and set up a new heaven and earth.⁴ God's power is ultimately His love. God's love is the most trustworthy reason to believe in the overcoming of evil in the kingdom of God.⁵

⁴ Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God*, 31-34.

⁵ Gijbert van den Brink, *Almighty God*, 271-272.

6.8. Recommendation for Future Research

The study of the omnipotence of God and its relevance to the Lepcha tribal context in this research is a small attempt by the researcher to bring the Lepcha tribal context into the platform of Reformed theology in order to develop a Reformed Tribal Theology in India. However, the dissertation was limited to the exposition of the reformed doctrine of God's Omnipotence and how it could be received among the Christians in the cultural context of the Lepcha tribe. Therefore, the highlight of the study of tribal theology in India was generally made just as an introduction to, and for a wider contextual background for, the research. This itself should raise the interest of the next researchers to do further similar studies on other Reformed topics, such as the authority of Scripture or salvation by grace alone, so that they could add on in building a Reformed Tribal Theology in India.

No theology is done without context. Even the idea of the omnipotence of God has been influenced by the context of where it was developed. Therefore, further research may also be done to explore the idea of contextualization in doing Reformed Theology in the Lepcha tribal context. We also can understand that humans can perceive the Omnipotence of God through the lenses of sources like scripture, tradition, context, reason, experience and faith. Hermeneutical methodology for a Reformed understanding of omnipotence in building a Reformed Tribal Theology in India is another area which could be explored by the next researchers.

The other area that opens a wide scope for research is the section on the Methodology in doing Reformed Tribal Theology in India. Future researchers may think of building a Third way as opposed to theology from above (advocated by Reformed Theology) and theology from below (advocated by the Tribal Theology in India). Other topics on methodological modification can be researched, such as the Inclusively Exclusive

Approach and the Transcendent and Immanent Nature of God in Jesus Christ. Keeping in mind the catholicity of Christianity in India, further researchers may also explore the Dialogical Method in formulating the Reformed Tribal Theology in India. No doubt, there are possible divergences and convergences of Reformed Theology and Christian Tribal Theology in India, however, I propose further research into the idea of finding a meeting point of both the theologies, paving a way for a Reformed Tribal Theology in India. The success may lie in the hands of the next researchers who continue from where this research has left off.

6.9. Final Conclusion

Christian Reformed Theology has made a significant contribution to the people living in the foothills of the Himalayas in India. One of them is the concept of God. The idea about this omnipotent God in Reformed Theology is very clear, unlike the Lepcha tribal idea of God which is vague. The Lepcha God is very impersonal, though near, but very passively involved in the lives of the people. On the other hand, the Christian God of Reformed Theology is a God who is near to people and is actively involved in their day-to-day affairs. God in Jesus Christ is the God who is savior, redeemer, the mediator between God and humans and the only one who sacrificed His life on the cross as the sacrificial lamb for the atonement of peoples' sin. The concept of God as savior and redeemer is missing in the Lepcha belief system. The mediators for them are the shamans (*mun* and *bunghing*). The idea of sacrifice is like in the Old Testament in the Bible. They continue to sacrifice animals and offer material things to appease god and also evil spirits. They focus on works and living a good life, tilting more towards human-centrism. Therefore,

Jesus Christ is the greatest gift of Christianity to the Lepcha Tribal belief. He is the fulfilment of Lepcha tribal aspiration.

Though Lepchas can be seen as monotheist led by shamans like in the monotheism of the Old Testament, they also have a high respect for nature and some also venerate natural objects as guardian deities. They also believe in the concept of semi-gods. This mixed and confused belief system is sometimes miscalculated by many anthropologists as animism. However, when the Trinitarian monotheism was presented by Christianity to them, it was well received by many Lepchas. They started to change their perspective on nature and started to treat it as the handiwork of God. Lepchas passed down their stories orally. Like in the Bible, they too have stories of creation, fall, flood, Babel, etc. However, when passed down orally these stories took a twist and turn, and the originality might have been lost over the years. Therefore, the Bible which is the written Word presents to all the truest form without distortion because it is the written word of God.

God is almighty for the Lepchas, but their explanation is never concrete. Reformed Theology contributes a more concrete explanation of the omnipotence of God to them. Having said that, it is never right for Reformed Theology to stand superior to the Lepcha belief system. But it must admit that learning and discovering are never-ending processes on earth. Reformed Theology may have a more concrete idea, but not yet the complete idea, about the omnipotence of God. When Reformed Theology continues to move beyond its own western contextual situation, there will always be a space to discover and learn from others about this incomprehensible God in a larger, concrete and relevant way. Until then, the journey continues.

Appendix A Questionnaire

Dear Respondent,

As part of my Phd studies in Theological University of Kampen, Netherlands, I am doing research on “*Omnipotence of God in Reformed Theology and its Relevance to Lepcha Tribal Context in Darjeeling District, Kalimpong District and Sikkim.*” There are four major questions that I am mainly dealing with in this study. All the major questions are further sub-divided into sub questions. It will be of great help towards my thesis if you could kindly spare your precious time in filling out the questionnaire. Your answers will be kept confidential if you suggest so.

Thanking You.

Sincerely,
Rev. Mathusela Limboo

Do you want your answers to be confidential?

- Yes
 No
-

QUESTIONNAIRE

Name: _____ **Sex:** _____
Age: _____ **Date:** _____
Place: _____ **Occupation:** _____
Religion: _____ **Church:** _____

Major Question 1.

How do you look at the Omnipotence of God according to your own Christian religious background? (Include any change of understanding in the contemporary situation.)

Logic and Divine Omnipotence

- 1. Do you believe that God is almighty/ omnipotent?**
 - Yes
 - No
 - Don't Know

- 2. Do you think God can exhaust His own power?**
 - Yes
 - No
 - Don't Know

3. Can God make something above His own power? Like create a stone so big that He cannot lift it Himself.

- Yes
 No

Why? _____

4. Do you believe God is powerful enough to do anything? Even something which is logically impossible, e.g. make square circle, married bachelor, etc.

- Yes
 No

Explain? _____

5. Is there anything the omnipotent God cannot do? Like sin, lie, etc.

- Yes
 No

Explain? _____

Human Freedom and Divine Omnipotence

6. When God created human beings, did He create them with power?

- Yes
 No
 No Idea

7. Has God given human beings the freedom to choose?

- Yes
 No
 Partially

8. While giving power to human beings, did God limit His power? In other word, is God dependent upon human choices?

- Yes
 No
 Partially

9. Can the power of God subsequently control our freedom?

- Yes
 No

Why? _____

10. Is there any way God's power and human power complement?

- Yes
 No

Explain? _____

Problem of Evil and Suffering and Divine Omnipotence

11. How can a good and powerful God allow pointless evil and suffering in this world? (Tick if you agree)

- For our better Good
 To meet some higher goals/purpose
 Both of them
 No idea

If there are any reasons more, please mention here: _____

12. Has God willed sin?

- Yes
 No,
 No Idea

13. Does an omnipotent God suffer in the hands of evil? E.g. Jesus?

- Yes
 No

Why? _____

14. Will God be able to eradicate all evil?

- Yes
 No
 Partially

If yes, How? _____

15. Are there any changes of understanding in your Christian religious journey on the idea of the omnipotence of God in the contemporary situation?

- Yes,

Explain: _____

OR

- No,
Explain: _____

16. How do you describe the Omnipotence or Almightyness of God in your own words?

Explain: _____

Major Question 2.

How do you look at the omnipotence of God in the Lepcha Tribal belief system? (Include any change of understanding in the contemporary situation.)

17. Do you think that the Lepcha God is almighty/ omnipotent?

- Yes
 No
 Don't Know

18. What reasons can you give to prove that God of the Lepcha is God omnipotent?

Reasons: _____

OR

19. What reasons can you give to prove that the God of the Lepchas is "NOT" omnipotent?

Reasons: _____

Major Question 3.

Do you see any discontinuity, relative continuity, or absolute continuity between the Lepcha God and Christian God?

20. Are there any similarities in the God of the Lepchas and the God of the Christians?

- Yes
 No

Explain? _____

21. Are there any differences in the God of the Lepchas and the God of the Christians?

- Yes
- No

Explain? _____

22. Would you suggest any meeting point (convergence) between the God of the Lepchas and the God of the Christians?

- Yes
- No

Explain? _____

23. Do you notice any major divergence between the God of the Lepchas and the God of the Christians?

- Yes
- No

Explain: _____

Major Question 4.

What changes must Christianity adopt in order to make the Christian God relevant to the Lepcha Tribal Context?

24. Is the idea of omnipotence different in Lepcha and Christian understanding from your own conviction?

- Yes
- No

What are the differences: _____

25. Is the Lepcha God more powerful than the Christian God?

- Superior
- Inferior
- Equal

Explain: _____

OR

Is the Christian God more powerful than the Lepcha God?

- Superior
- Inferior
- Equal

Explain: _____

26. What suggestions do you want to give in order to make the Christian God relevant to the Lepcha Tribal Context?

Suggestions? _____

THANK YOU

MAY GOD BLESS YOU

Appendix B Glossary of Lepcha Terms

Ashake: Engagement to be married

Bungthing: Priest in Lepcha religion

Bungthism and Munism: Ancient Lepcha religion in which the Bungthing and Mun are the mediators between the Lepcha people and the Creator God.

Chee: Grains

Chyu-bee (also Chu): Mountains

Daa: Lakes

Daarchhyen: Planet – exerts influence on mankind

Daarmit: Female deity

Daarsathaong: Tiger– powerful ruler of the jungle

Daartik: Male deity

Dukaymoo: House

Fudongthing: First male Lepcha

Ithu-Debu Rum Daar (also Ithbu-Debu Rum or Idbu-Debu-Rum): Almighty Creator God

Ithu-Moo (also Ithbu-Moo or Idbu-Moo): Mother Creator

Kingchoom Daarmit (also Kingsoom daarmit): goddess of destiny, fortune or wealth

Kongchen: Mt. Kanchanjunga

Lamaism: Form of Buddhism, where the priests are the Lamas such as the Dalai Lama

Laso Moong Panu (also Laso Mung Pano): The devil or evil one

Lord Tamsangthing: Savior from the evil one

Lungzee: Benign, semi-divine supernatural beings

MayelLyang: Homeland of the Lepchas

Mayel Moo: Lepchas' ancient ancestors

Mongchee: Brewed millet seeds

Mun: Priestess in Lepcha religion

Mung: Evil spirits

Mu-tanchee-Rongkup (also *Mutanchi-Rong*): What the Lepcha people call themselves – means mother's loved ones

Fadongthing: First Male Lepcha

NazongNyo: First Female Lepcha

Nyom-Vyat: Making enquiry about a bride (by the potential groom)

Rong: Short name for Rongkup Rumkup or Mutanchi Rongkup, the Lepcha people

Rongkup Rumkup: The Lepcha people – means the son of the snowy peak, the son/children of God

Rumlyang: Heaven

Rum: God or deity

Sakyu Rum Fat: Marriage ceremony

Sanglyon: Ceremony for the dead

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Interviewees

- Foning, Kenza. Business Head of India Labour Net, Kalimpong, taken on 10th May 2017.
- Karthak, Lucky. Pastor of Himali Shalom Church, Siliguri, taken on 8th April 2017.
- Lepcha, Fr. Samuel (Phd). Priest of Roman Catholic Church, Darjeeling, taken on 31st May 2017.
- Lepcha, Wangyal. Pastor Church of North India, Sikkim, taken on 22nd February 2017.
- Lingdamu, Peter. Priest of Roman Catholic Church and Headmaster, Darjeeling, taken on 31st May 2017.
- Lucksom, E.T. Pastor and Moderator of Presbyterian Free Church, Kalimpong, taken on 22nd February 2017.
- Simick, Enos. Pastor of Bethesda Church and Admin. of All Nations Theological Seminary, Siliguri, taken on 8th April 2017.
- Tamlong, D.T. (IAS. Retd). Govt. of India, Kalimpong, taken on 14th May 2017.
- Tamsang, Azuk. Commercial Tax Officer, Govt. of India, Kalimpong, taken on 14th May 2017.

Questionnaire Respondents (in addition to interviewees above)

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- Foning, Sharon D. Medical Doctor (OBS Gynae), Kalimpong, received on 20th May 2017.
- Kabo, Dublen. Commercial Tax Office, Government of India Retd., Kalimpong, received on 10th July 2017.
- Lepcha, Jacob. Student, Kalimpong, received on 23rd May 2017.
- Lepcha, James Paul. Pastor, United Church of North India, Kalimpong, received on 17th April 2017.
- Lepcha, Samuel. Pastor of Church of North India, Kalimpong, received on 27th April 2017.
- Lucksom, Panu. Musician and Sound Engineer, Kalimpong, received on 23rd May 2017.

Namchu, Aaron. Businessman, Kalimpong, received on 21st May 2017.

Pandi, Abrona Lee. Teacher, Sikkim, received on 16th April 2017.

Panlook, Eno Chodup. Pastor UCNI and Businessman, received on 9th May 2017.

Phipon, Allen. Pastor, Pedong Christian Church, Pedong, received on 23rd May 2017.

Rong, Abinoam Panu. Company Secretary, Public Sector Undertaking, received on 10th July 2017.

Simick, James S. Medical Doctor, Surgeon, Kolkata, originally from Kalimpong, received on 4th March 2017.

Simick, Paul T. Teacher and Headmaster, Kalimpong, received on 8th May 2017.

Tasho, N.T. Additional Magistrate, Govt. of India. Retd., Kalimpong, received on 24th May 2017.

Tshering Lepcha, Ugen. Pastor of Presbyterian Free Church, Kalimpong, received on 30th May 2017.

Samenvatting

1. Inleiding

De studie van de leer van God en zijn almacht in de christelijke theologie is een enorme taak. Wat ontdekt is, is wellicht voldoende met betrekking tot een bepaald volk en een bepaalde context, maar het is niet compleet. Het is als de gigantische Mount Everest die hoog en zichtbaar is voor India en die ook hoog en zichtbaar is voor Nepal en voor Tibet (China). Dezelfde berg kan in verschillende vormen beschreven worden vanuit deze verschillende landen. Zoals alle beschrijvingen juist maar niet volledig zijn, zo is het ook met het begrip van de leer van de Almacht van God. Een concreter begrip is mogelijk als we al deze inzichten samenbrengen. Daarom is het doel van dit onderzoek om een kleine bijdrage te leveren aan het begrip van de leer van Gods Almacht in de gereformeerde theologie vanuit het perspectief van de Lepcha stam. De hoofdvraag van dit onderzoek is dus:

**Wat is de gereformeerde opvatting van de almacht van God en
wat is de relevantie ervan voor de context van de mensen van de Lepcha
stam?**

2. Korte introductie van de Lepcha's

De Lepcha stam noemt zichzelf "Rongkup, Rumkup" of "Rong". Dat betekent: "de zonen/kinderen van de besneeuwde bergtop" of "de zonen/kinderen van God". Het zijn de oorspronkelijke bewoners van de districten Sikkim, Darjeeling en Kalimpong in India. De Lepcha's waren oorspronkelijk de enige bewoners van dit grote stuk bergland in de uitlopers van de Himalaya, maar gedurende de laatste drie eeuwen werd hun land van hen afgenomen door indringers – vanuit Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan en het koloniale India. Met de instroom van deze andere bevolkingsgroepen en de globalisering zijn de Lepcha's nu

een minderheidsstam en is alles wat authentiek aan hen is, verwaterd of aan het verdwijnen.

Hoewel de Lepcha's een kleine gemeenschap vormen, hebben ze een eigen inheemse cultuur en taal. De meest opvallende kenmerken van de cultuur van de Lepcha's en van hun leefwijze, gewoonten en manieren zijn onuitwisbaar gestempeld in de taal, kunst en architectuur van hun land (Sikkim en Darjeeling Dist en Kalimpong District.) Hoewel de meeste Lepcha's nog steeds land bezitten, is het meeste van hun vroegere landbezit nu eigendom van anderen. In de loop van de tijd, met de instroom van andere volken, kwamen de oorspronkelijke Lepcha's in de verdrukking en kregen ze lange tijd te maken met ernstige identiteitscrises in hun eigen thuisland. Hun eenvoud, gastvrije aard en aanpassingsvermogen aan anderen had een negatieve invloed op hun eigen voortbestaan. Tegenwoordig is er echter een sterk sociaaleconomisch en cultureel ontwaken onder de Lepcha's en vindt er een grote opleving van de Lepcha stammen plaats.

Het oorspronkelijke Lepcha geloofssysteem heet bungtheïsme en munisme, maar later hebben de mensen het christendom of boeddhisme overgenomen. Slechts enkelen volgen nog het bungtheïsme en munisme, dat gelooft in het bestaan van een God genaamd Rum. Tot Rum richten ze hun gebeden en dankbetuigingen. Ze geloven ook in het bestaan van kwade geesten die ziekte en ongeluk veroorzaken en ook aan hen brengen ze offers om hen gunstig te stemmen. Hun almachtige God is een goede God, altijd gericht op het welzijn van zijn volk en Hij is superieur aan andere goden en slechte geesten. Deze God, hoewel goed, is ook de uiteindelijke rechter. Hij waakt over het goede en het kwade dat in de wereld gebeurt en beloont of straft de schepselen. Lepcha's

geloven dat Gods oordeel over hen tijdelijk is omdat zij het uitverkoren ras van God zijn. God zal hen nooit naar de eeuwige verdoemenis sturen.

Hoewel Lepcha's sjamanistische monotheïsten zijn, hebben ze ook liefde en respect voor Moeder Natuur, zoals die wordt vertegenwoordigd door bergen, rivieren, wolken, water, stenen, aarde, bodem, bomen, regen, zon, enzovoort. Daarom stellen veel schrijvers hen ten onrechte voor als animisten. Ze vereren bergen ook als beschermgoden, goede geesten en bovennatuurlijke wezens, aan wie de almachtige God macht en autoriteit over bepaalde wereldse zaken heeft toegekend. De berg Kanchanjunga is voor de Lepcha's hun beschermgod. Ze geloven dat de Lepcha's door het medium van Moeder Natuur naderen tot hun Rum, de almachtige God. Lepcha's hebben geen gestructureerd gebedshuis. Maar ze komen wel samen, thuis of op een open plek onder de felle zon, geleid door hun geestelijke leiders Bungthing of Mun.

Bungthing en Mun zijn de priesters en geestelijken die de bemiddelende rol spelen tussen God en mensen. Gebeden worden via hen tot God gericht. De Lepcha cultuur is direct verbonden met Bungthing en Mun. Ze geloven dat de Almachtige God via Bungthing en Mun betrokken is bij geboorte, huwelijk, dood, begrafenis - bij elk onderdeel van hun leven. Ze houden zich aan de natuurwet of de dorpswetten als een daad van aanbidding en geloof in de soevereine God. Deze gehoorzaamheid wordt beschouwd als het doen van de wil van God, of het ontsnappen aan het oordeel van het Opperwezen.

3. Methode van onderzoek

Om de gereformeerde opvatting van Gods almacht in gesprek te brengen met de context van de Lepcha stam, zijn in dit onderzoek verschillende perspectieven en benaderingen geïntegreerd. Aspecten van het begrip almacht zijn onderzocht door middel van conceptuele analyse, in navolging van Gijsbert van den Brink, Herman Bavinck, Michael Horton, Dolf te Velde en anderen. Een overzicht over de literatuur met betrekking tot het onderzoek naar tribale opvattingen over de almacht van God, zowel van Lepcha geleerden als van niet-Lepcha's met verschillende religieuze achtergronden, plaatst het probleem in een bredere context en geeft een inleiding en algemene achtergrond voor het empirisch onderzoek.

Om de levensvatbaarheid van een gereformeerde tribale theologie voor mensen in India te onderzoeken, werd een kwalitatief empirisch onderzoek uitgevoerd onder religieuze en christelijke professionele leiders van de Lepcha stam om de opvatting over en de ervaring van de almacht van God in de context van de Lepcha stam te ontdekken. Het onderzoek bestond uit interviews met en vragenlijsten voor 25 christelijke Lepcha's van, of uit, het Darjeeling-district, het Kalimpong-district en Sikkim, met de bedoeling dat zij representatief zouden zijn voor de christenen in de hele Lepcha stam.

Het empirische onderzoeksdoel is om het idee van de almacht van God te ontdekken op basis van de persoonlijke overtuiging van elke geïnterviewde en hun idee van het christendom en van het Lepcha geloofssysteem. Secundaire doelen zijn om te leren over veranderingen in het begrip van de almacht van God in de hedendaagse context; of er een verband is tussen de God van de Lepcha stam en de christelijke God; en of er veranderingen nodig zijn om de christelijke God relevant te maken in de context van de Lepcha stam.

4. Definities van almacht

4.1. Traditionele gereformeerde definitie

Een groot deel van het niet-empirische onderzoek in deze studie gaat over het concept van de almacht van God in de gereformeerde theologie. Aanvankelijk werd met behulp van de klassieke Bijbelse interpretatie en de minimaliserende interpretatie en met enige nuancering daarop, een passende definitie opgesteld door Van den Brink:

God is almachtig omdat Hij het vermogen heeft om alle standen van zaken te realiseren die logisch gezien voor Hem mogelijk zijn om te realiseren gegeven Zijn volmaakte wezen.

Deze definitie wordt uitgelegd door een overzicht van de gereformeerde literatuur, inclusief alle concepten en Bijbelse tradities van *Pantokrator*, *El Shaddai*, *Sebaoth*, de Apostolische geloofsbelijdenis en het idee van de Almachtige daarin, de opvattingen van Willem van Ockham over *potentia absoluta* en *potentia ordinata*, Calvijns benadrukken dat Gods almacht nooit gescheiden kan worden van Zijn wil, het onderscheid in de Gereformeerde Orthodoxie tussen de macht (*potentia*) en autoriteit (*potestas*) van God en tussen de absolute en geordende macht (*potentia absoluta-ordinata*) van God. Ook verwerkt zijn Herman Bavincks standpunt dat Gods soevereiniteit geopenbaard wordt in Zijn almacht en weerspiegeld wordt in de Schriften en door al Zijn werken, en het idee van Karl Barth over de correlatie tussen Gods constantheid en zijn almacht, Barths overtuiging dat God andere machten toestaat te bestaan en zijn erkenning dat Gods macht, kennis en wil allemaal geopenbaard zijn in Jezus Christus en begrepen worden in het verhaal van Zijn kruisiging.

Ook de ideeën van postmoderne theologen zoals Michael Horton, die alle eigenschappen van God als onderling verbonden en complementair zien, worden onderzocht. Voor hen verliezen Gods eigenschappen hun kracht als ze gescheiden worden; Gods soevereiniteit en menselijke verantwoordelijkheid zijn perfect consistent; en God heeft het laatste woord over kwade machten.

Tot slot worden de vele vragen over God en logica, menselijke vrijheid, lijden, het kwaad en de goedheid van God opgenomen. Hoewel het christendom niet de reden geeft voor elk lijden, biedt het door de dood en verrijzenis van Jezus Christus diepe bronnen om pijn tegemoet te treden met hoop en moed in plaats van met bitterheid en wanhoop.

4.2. Christelijke tribale definitie van almacht

Terwijl de gereformeerde theologie de almacht van God verwoordt in termen van logische conceptualisering en nauwkeurigheid, bekijken de Lepcha's de almacht van God vanuit het perspectief van relevantie en betrouwbaarheid. Voor hen is God machtig genoeg om alles te doen, zelfs onlogische dingen, om zijn doel te bereiken. Zij accepteren dat God ons logisch redeneren overstijgt.

Voor de Lepcha's is de Almachtige God één opperwezen, Schepper en Soeverein over alles. Hij bestuurt alles in zijn vrije wil en zorgt voor Zijn volk. Hij is nabij tot iedereen die Hem nodig heeft en vindt in Jezus Christus de volledige vervulling. Maar hoe zij dit idee van Gods almacht interpreteren is door middel van de "boven alles uitgaande kracht van God". Deze kracht van God gaat het menselijk begrip te boven. Daarom zouden zij, als hen gevraagd wordt of de almachtige God zelfs onbegrijpelijke

dingen kan doen om zijn doel te bereiken, zeggen: "Ja!". De almachtige God zou daartoe in staat moeten zijn. Dan zou de definitie vanuit hun begrip zijn:

God is almachtig omdat Hij het vermogen heeft om alle toestanden te realiseren die logisch en onlogisch voor Hem mogelijk zijn om te realiseren gegeven Zijn volmaakte wezen.

Deze definitie is zinvoller voor de tribale christen, maar misschien niet de beste brug naar een gemeenschappelijk begrip van Gods almacht binnen de gereformeerde traditie. Daarom moeten we op zoek naar een nieuwe definitie van Gods almacht in de gereformeerde theologie die relevant is voor de context van de Lepcha stam.

4.3. Nieuwe definitie van almacht om de kloof te overbruggen

Op basis van het verzamelde materiaal uit heel het onderzoek stelt de onderzoeker een nieuwe definitie voor van de almacht van God die gevoelig is voor zowel de theologie van de Lepcha stam als de gereformeerde theologie. Voor iemand uit de gereformeerde traditie kan de bovenstaande term "onlogisch" erg negatief en ongepast klinken om in verband te brengen met de volmaakte aard en wezen van God. Maar voor de christen uit de stam is God machtig genoeg om alles te doen en claimt alleen de westerse hegemonie wat logisch en wat onlogisch is. Om de gereformeerde theologie relevant te maken in de context van de Lepcha stam, stel ik daarom voor om de woorden "boven de menselijke logica uit" te gebruiken in plaats van het woord "onlogisch" en de definitie op deze manier aan te passen:

God is almachtig omdat Hij, in zijn oneindige en perfecte wezen, alles kan doen wat logisch gezien en wat boven de menselijke logica uit mogelijk is in harmonie is met zijn wil en natuur.

Er is natuurlijk een verschil tussen 'logisch mogelijk' en 'fysiek mogelijk'. In de gereformeerde theologie wordt niet betwist dat God dingen kan doen die vanuit menselijk oogpunt 'fysiek onmogelijk' zijn, bijvoorbeeld de maagdelijke geboorte van Jezus en zijn opstanding. Er bestaat ook geen twijfel over dat God ons begrip te boven gaat, bijvoorbeeld met betrekking tot het concept van de Drie-eenheid of de leer van de twee naturen van Jezus Christus. Maar voor de Lepcha moeten we een stap verder gaan.

Deze definitie drukt uit dat de grenzen van onze logica geen grenzen zijn voor God. Menselijke logica is feilbaar en beperkt. De uitdrukking "boven de menselijke logica uit" is de erkenning dat God soms dingen doet die we niet kunnen begrijpen vanuit het perspectief van onze menselijke logica. Daarom stel ik voor om de definitie aan te passen. Dit zou de christelijke leden van de Lepcha stam in India kunnen helpen om meer in overeenstemming te komen met de gereformeerde theologie met betrekking tot de almacht van God.

5. Conclusie

Gereformeerde theologie heeft een belangrijke bijdrage geleverd aan de mensen die in de uitlopers van de Himalaya in India wonen. Eén daarvan is het concept van God. Het idee over deze almachtige God in de gereformeerde theologie is heel duidelijk, in tegenstelling tot het vage idee over God van de Lepcha stam. De Lepcha God is erg onpersoonlijk en slechts passief betrokken bij het leven van mensen. De christelijke God

van de gereformeerde theologie is dichtbij mensen en is actief betrokken bij hun dagelijkse bezigheden. God in Jezus Christus is redder, verlosser en bemiddelaar tussen God en mensen en de enige die zijn leven opofferde aan het kruis voor de verzoening van de zonde van mensen. Dit concept ontbreekt in het geloofssysteem van de Lepcha. Hun bemiddelaars zijn de sjamanen (Mun en Bungthing). Ze blijven dieren offeren en materiële zaken aanbieden om god en boze geesten gunstig te stemmen. Ze richten zich op daden en een goed leven, en neigen meer naar antropocentrisme.

Daarom is Jezus Christus het grootste geschenk van het christendom aan het tribale Lepcha geloof. God is almachtig voor de Lepcha's, maar hun uitleg daarvan is nooit concreet. De gereformeerde theologie draagt voor hen bij aan een concretere uitleg van de almacht van God. Toch is het nooit goed als de gereformeerde theologie zich superieur opstelt ten opzichte van het Lepcha geloofssysteem. Ze moet toegeven dat leren een nooit eindigend proces op aarde is. De gereformeerde theologie heeft weliswaar een concreter, maar nog niet volledig idee over de almacht van God, maar wanneer de gereformeerde theologie haar eigen westerse context overstijgt, zal er ruimte zijn om van anderen te leren over deze onbegrijpelijke God op een ruimere, concretere en relevantere manier. Tot die tijd gaat de reis door.

Vertaald uit het Engels door dr. B. Kamphuis

Curriculum Vitae

Mathusela Limboo is one of the pastors in the Presbyterian Free Church Council, India and team leader of the Christian ministry “Hariyo Kharka.” (Green Pastures) which helps nurture churches in the Himalayan region to be healthy and growing. He received his Bachelor of Commerce from St. Xavier’s College Kolkata, Bachelor of Divinity from Union Biblical Seminary, Pune and MTh (Theology) from NIIPGTS under the Senate of Serampore. He travels as an itinerant preacher and teacher for different churches and discipleship/leadership schools. He is the head of the MDiv distance learning program of Union Biblical Seminary sub-centre in Kalimpong. He also mentors and teaches at the bachelor’s and master’s level in other theological schools in the region. Writing is his hobby and passion and he has already published three books on discipleship and practical Christianity. He lives in Kalimpong, a beautiful town in the foothills of the great Himalayas, with his wife (Ruzabel) and three kids (Leveihang, Bartheos and Levona).