

**Editorial: African Perspectives on God, the Problem of Evil, and Meaning in Life**

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**The Expanding Frontiers of African Philosophy**

Much has been written in the last two centuries about African religions and religious phenomena from anthropological, sociological, colonial, postcolonial, missiological, and philosophical perspectives. The British explorer and author Richard F. Burton had provocatively asserted in the nineteenth century that: “The Negro is still at the rude dawn of faith-fetishism and he has barely advanced to idolatry...He has never grasped the idea of a personal deity” (cited in NJOKU 2002, 8). By faith-fetishism, Burton is referencing the simplest kind of animism, the attribution of magical qualities to natural objects. He is, of course, dismissing African Traditional Religion (ATR) with a wave of his hand. The inspiration for the sustained early Western dismissal of the African as an inferior *other*, so well analysed by V.-Y.Mudimbe (1988), can be traced, in part, to two of the greatest names in Western philosophy, David Hume and Immanuel Kant. In a testimony to how racial prejudice dishonours even the best brains, Hume insists:

I am apt to suspect the negroes naturally inferior to the whites. There scarcely ever was a civilized nation of that complexion, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufactures amongst them, no arts, no sciences...there are NEGROE slaves dispersed all over EUROPE, of whom none ever discovered any symptoms of ingenuity...In JAMAICA, indeed, they talk of one negroe as a man of parts and learning; but it is likely he is admired for slender accomplishments, like a parrot, who speaks a few words plainly. (1987, 208n)

As if expecting enslaved Africans to do the impossible in a hostile environment where they are not at ease with themselves and ignoring the noted achievement of the African philosopher Anton Wilhelm Amo in Prussia, Kant wrote that:

The Negroes of Africa have by nature no feeling that rises above the ridiculous. Mr Hume challenges anyone to adduce a single example where a Negro has demonstrated talent, and asserts that among the hundreds of thousands of blacks who have been transported elsewhere from their countries, although very many of them have been set free, nevertheless not a single one has ever been found who has accomplished something great in art or science or shown any other praiseworthy quality, while among the whites there are always those who rise up from the lowest rabble and through extraordinary gifts earn respect in the world. (Kant 2011, 58–59; 2:253, Academy Edition page number)

Obviously, a culture of Western derogatory exoticisation of African belief-systems was very well entrenched in Western societies long before African scholars began to investigate African religious phenomena. With the 1944 publication of J.B. Danquah's book [The Akan Doctrine of God], a new phase of the articulation of traditional African belief-systems commenced. This phase was defined by a marked influence of Christianity on the authors who took it upon themselves to debunk the speculative and mostly inaccurate conjectures of European philosophers like Hume and Kant, early European missionaries and anthropologists who regarded African religion as primitive.

While these African authors were keen to promote what they considered to be the authentic views of God in the belief-systems of traditional African societies, they were yet noticeably influenced by the Christian religion, in particular, and went out of their way to find Western categorical equivalences in African belief-systems (see KATO 1975; BEWAJI 1998; WIREDU 1998; ABIMBOLA 2006; P'BITEK 2011; FAYEMI 2012; AGADA 2022). We will call these African apologetic authors the theistic scholars since they hold the views that ATR is basically monotheistic and Africans traditionally believe in an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent God. The theistic scholars include Danquah, John S. Mbiti, E. Bolaji Idowu, J.O. Awolalu, P.A. Dopamu, and Kwame Gyekye. The traditional theistic stance has since been vigorously contested by African researchers that we may label decolonisation scholars (see IGBOIN 2014). As hinted earlier, the decolonisation scholars are sceptical of the correctness of the transcendental conception of God attributed to traditional African societies by the theistic scholars. Decolonisation scholars like Okot p'Bitek, Kwasi Wiredu, Kola Abimbola, Oladele Balogun, and B.H. Kato underline the need for African scholars and philosophers to rethink concepts in usage in African religious studies and discard those found to have been illegitimately imported from Western religious and philosophical studies. The decolonisation scholars broadly assert, contrary to the traditional theistic scholars, that traditional African societies conceive God as limited in power, knowledge, and goodness.

The emergence of the two camps has ensured that, going forward, the fledgling field of African philosophy of religion will witness some of the most exciting developments and debates in African philosophy. But given that the field is still relatively underexplored, it is not surprising that only a few specialist books dedicated to the philosophical evaluation of God and related questions exist. One such book is Aribiah David Attoe's recently released work titled [Groundwork for a New Kind of African Metaphysics: The Idea of Pre-deterministic Historicity] (2022). While there are quite a handful of journal articles on African religious themes published by trained philosophers, the field of African philosophy of religion remains surprisingly neglected by philosophers. Special journal editions in the field are a rarity. However, with research support from the John Templeton Foundation and the University of Birmingham Global Philosophy of Religion Project, African philosophers are taking a second critical look at the dispute between the theistic and decolonisation camps. A special edition of [Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture, and Religions] supported by the John Templeton Foundation recently brought African and Chinese philosophers together to brainstorm on issues in African philosophy of religion. The current special edition on "African Perspectives on God, the Problem of Evil, and Meaning in Life" further expands the horizon of the field by bringing together African philosophers who review existing literature and advance novel theories and positions on God and the relation of this being with human beings and the world.

Ten articles are featured in this special edition. In "The Human Being, God, and Moral Evil," Ada Agada sets out to answer the question of whether the magnitude of evil in the world may indicate the actuality of a tragic universe and not merely a deterministic universe indifferent to human hopes and fears. According to Agada, a tragic universe would be one with an unachievable purpose. Such a purpose might not have been discovered by the human mind but perfection is presented as a possible candidate. A tragic universe is one without an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent creator, one populated by human beings who are determined by a variety of impulses and causes but are yet morally responsible for their actions. He paints a picture of the human being as a seeker after the fullest state of being that would be defined by the absence of moral evil, drawing insights from Ifeanyi Menkiti's idea of personhood and with recourse to his philosophy of consolationism. On the search for the fullest state of being,

Agada notes that the journey to full personhood is one that the human being cannot bring to a satisfactory conclusion in its lifetime. The human being is thus powerless. On the possible intervention of an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent creator to eliminate moral evil, Agada explores African conceptions of God and demonstrates that if God is limited in power, knowledge, and goodness as many African philosophers today interpret traditional African conceptions of God, then God is neither the author of evil nor able to eliminate evil. Agada advances the doctrine of *mood* and identifies this fundamental principle of the universe as a limiting quality from which neither God nor the human being, nor any other being, can escape. Consequently, moral evil must be

regarded as part of the way the world is structured. That all beings are powerless in the face of the operation of *mood*, even as conditioned beings like humans are responsible for actions that are determined, points to the actuality of a tragic universe, according to Agada.

Joyline Gwara and L. Uchenna Ogbonnaya in “Rethinking God’s Omnibenevolence and Omnipotence in the Light of the COVID-19 Pandemic: An African Perspective” insert the perennial problem of omnipotence and evil into ongoing debates about the devastating Covid-19 pandemic. With millions dead, hundreds of millions infected with the coronavirus, and with billions struggling with the socio-economic disruptions caused directly and indirectly by the pandemic, it is fitting that philosophers of religion should wonder where God, or belief in a good, omnipotent, and omniscient God, fits in the current scheme. Gwara and Ogbonnaya explore the intriguing theme of omnipotence and physical evil from the perspective of African thought and find a solution that leads to the conclusion that the pandemic shows that belief in a powerful and good God remains rational although weakness and badness inhere in the divine power and goodness. To demonstrate this seeming contradiction, they appeal to African duality logic as prominently exemplified by *Ezumezu* logic. This logical framework asserts that in addition to the rigid Aristotelian laws of thought, there are complementary African laws of thought that do not promote the absolute necessity of the law of excluded middle. Consequently, Gwara and Ogbonnaya pitch their tent with the African decolonisation scholars who favour the idea of a limited God but go further to argue that while God is not omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent, he is powerful, knowledgeable, and good. The conclusion that inherent in his power, knowledge, and goodness are weakness, ignorance, and badness will provide food for thought for philosophers and non-philosophers.

In “Evil, Death, and Some African Conceptions of God” Hasskei M. Majeed engages a number of African philosophers of religion in a conversation on the evilness of death. He argues that the phenomenon of death itself does not belong to the class of things called evil. His reason for making this assertion follows from his view that death itself is a value-neutral phenomenon consisting basically of the cessation of biological existence. For him, factors surrounding death, such as prolonged physical and emotional pain felt by the dying and their relatives, are different from the event of death. According to Majeed, if inherently evil phenomena exist that can be identified as putting the idea of a good God in question, death is not one. In “The Oromo Doctrine of God” Workineh Kelbessa explores traditional Oromo conceptions of God and argues that the deity in Oromo belief-system is a supreme being. *Waaqa* (God) is, however, different from the Christian God to the extent that *Waaqa* is not transcendental (or outside the universe). Kelbessa makes the intriguing assertion that ancestor veneration is a practice unknown to the Oromo. This conclusion is particularly intriguing because ancestor veneration is a widely documented practice in most traditional African societies. African philosophers and researchers in the field of African religious studies will, no doubt, be eager to explore Kelbessa’s conclusion.

Aribiah Attoe, in his paper “Cosmic Purpose: An African Perspective”, pits the idea of God and the African understanding of relationality as prominent determinants for what cosmic purpose from an African perspective would look like. For him, while God subsists as the first cause, the unattractiveness of *being-alone* and the necessity of relationality allows him to think that the existence of the universe/other things in the world is necessitated by the need to legitimise God’s existence. Proof for this lies in the fact that destiny, divine law, and communal practices all seek the type of harmony that sustains the existence of this universe. The need to sustain the universe is anchored on the need to legitimise God’s existence. This, for Attoe, is cosmic purpose.

In “The Concept of God in Igbo Traditional Religious Thought,” Anthony Chimankpam Ojimba and Victor Iwuoha Chidubem defend the controversial assertion that the concept of a Supreme Being is unknown to traditional Igbo religion even as they assert that this religion is properly polytheistic. Their assertion is certain to provoke reactions in some corners of African philosophy of religion. In “Exploring Recent Themes in African Spiritual Philosophy,” Diana-Abasi Ibanga introduces the exotic angle of spiritual philosophy into this special edition and shows how spiritual philosophy has moved away from mysticism and transcendence towards an immanence that implicates psychological attitudes towards the totality of nature – God, humans, animals, vegetable life, and mineral elements.

Lerato Mokoena, on her part, seeks to wrestle with the question of the essence of God and, interestingly, tries to answer those questions by looking at two different perspectives: Gericke’s theological conception and the version of God put forward by Aribiah Attoe (2022). Ultimately, what the article does is find ways in which both the philosophical methods that Attoe uses and the theological modes of enquiry can aid each other in attempts to understand the notion of God, and also highlight the similarities between both views.

Pius Mosima in his article “African Approaches to God, Death, and the Problem of Evil: Some Anthropological Lessons Towards an Intercultural Philosophy of Religion” argues for an intercultural philosophy of religion from an African perspective. For him, understanding the philosophical foundations of certain religious beliefs (God, death, problem of evil, etc.) through an analysis of the various ideas related to these concepts (as found in various African traditions) would help in revealing the underlying premises of the African viewpoints and also allow us have meaningful intercultural conversations with other viewpoints. This is mainly because, for Mosima, much of the discussions in philosophy of religion is, for the most part, about the same kinds of phenomena/problems (for instance, God, death, and the problem of evil). Thus, various traditions are mostly offering different perspectives on the same issues, and should, therefore, be in conversation with each other, with African perspectives also offering significant input.

Finally, Christiana Idika and Enyimba Maduka's article "A New Perspective on Religion in African Philosophy of Religion: *ONYENACHIYA*" seeks to interrogate the notion of religious belief within the African context. Specifically, they seek to show that belief in God in African (Igbo) traditional religion is not necessarily predicated on the idea of a supreme deity in a monotheistic sense. Rather, for them, religious practices are predicated on the belief in personal deities (Chi) that continue to externally influence human behaviours as well as the fate of human beings.

What all these articles have in common is that they extend the frontiers of African philosophy of religion, beyond the usual debates and beyond the usual ways of understanding issues in African philosophy of religion. The novelty inherent in the diverse topics and viewpoints espoused in the articles not only opens up new vistas of thought, but also allows for more questions and conversations to sprout and enrich the field of African philosophy of religion.

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