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Shifting Perspectives in African Philosophy of Religion

Ada Agada [iD] and Aribiah D. Attoe

Centre for Leadership Ethics in Africa (CLEA), University of Fort Hare and Department of Philosophy, University of the Witwatersrand, and Conversational Society of Philosophy, Calabar
Email: adaagada@gmail.com

The field of African philosophy of religion, like its parent discipline African philosophy, is making its presence felt globally rather late in the day for reasons familiar to the scholar and student of postcolonial studies. With the West comprehensively dominating knowledge production and dissemination processes, it has positioned, and continues to position, itself as the centre of academic life. Western intellectual dominance has translated plainly into academic hegemony. Western philosophers hardly consider African philosophy a worthy intellectual horizon with which they can engage for the good of global philosophy. The field of African philosophy of religion is hardly referenced in Western scholarship despite Kwasi Wiredu's (2013) loud invitation to Western philosophers of religion to a philosophical dialogue with African philosophers in his chapter 'African Religions', which appeared in Chad Meister and Paul Copan's (2013) edited volume *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Religion.* Low African philosophy of religion research output combined with global neglect to keep the field in the doldrums for decades.

Recently, however, research activities in the field have dramatically increased, thanks in no small measure to the John Templeton Foundation and partner organizations like the Global Philosophy of Religion Project hosted by the University of Birmingham. A series of research grants from the two organizations have enabled a number of African philosophers to organize workshops and publish important articles that convince sceptics that the field of African philosophy of religion has roared back to life and is ready to offer the twenty-first century compelling alternative views of God, the problem of evil, the question of death, the possibility of immortality, and the meaning of life. This current *Religious Studies* special issue, 'Shifting Perspectives in African Philosophy of Religion', continues the trend of the expansion of the horizon of engagement in global (no longer Western) philosophy of religion. The special issue boasts five excellent and potentially field-defining articles by some of the finest African philosophers writing actively today.

In 'Rethinking the Concept Of God and the Problem of Evil from the Perspective of African Thought' Ada Agada sets out to show that a cultural antinomy revolving around the conception of God in African Traditional Religion (ATR) and traditional African thought exists and will have far-reaching implications for the field of African philosophy of religion as the field emerges fully within the broad African philosophy tradition. He identifies the antinomy in two theses: (1) There exists a Supreme Being that is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent. (2) There is no transcendent God but only a limited deity that cannot eliminate evil in the world. Agada argues that both theses are grounded

in African religious and cultural phenomena and cannot, therefore, be reconciled without philosophers falling into the trap of logical inconsistencies like positing God's omnipotence and his limitation simultaneously in respect of his powers. Agada favours the limited God thesis because it promises a more plausible account of why there is a large amount of evil in the world. Drawing from the doctrine of consolationism, his major contribution to African philosophy (see Agada (2022) for a detailed exposition), he rethinks the concept of God and universalizes the African limited God view with the argument from life that purports to establish the rationality of belief in a limited God. Consequently, he argues that a limited God who is not the author of evil but who is sufficiently powerful to create the world is conceivable as working to reduce the amount of evil in the world using the instrument of human moral agency.

In 'Examining the Logical Argument of the Problem of Evil from an African Perspective' the Chimakonams argue from the broad African limited God perspective that conceptualizing the deity as a harmony-God facilitates what they consider a negative resolution of the logical problem of evil. A negative resolution overlooks the necessity of theodicies and proposes that the logical problem of evil may be, in fact, a pseudo-problem. The Chimakonams commence their philosophical intervention with critical comments on the Judaeo-Christian tradition that sustains the problem of evil in Western philosophy of religion. After drawing out the strengths and weaknesses of the solutions proffered by African philosophers (like John Bewaji, Babajide Dasaolu, and Aribiah D. Attoe), the Chimakonams identify the Western bivalent truth-falsity logical valuation tradition inherited from Aristotle as the main culprit in the rigid opposition of truth to falsity and the assignation of absolute good to God while excluding the value of evil from the nature of the deity. Drawing inspiration from the African logical system of *Ezumezu* (see Chimakonam (2019) for details), they substitute Western bivalent logic with a trivalent logic that admits a third value of truth-falsity complementation. This complementary logic enables them to argue for the complementarity of good and evil and for a harmony-God who embodies the perfect balance of good and evil and expresses this balance in the world. They argue that their novel conception of the deity as a harmony-God establishes that evil exists necessarily and complementarily with good, such that its elimination will lead to the elimination of good.

In 'How African Conceptions of God Bear on Life's Meaning' Thaddeus Metz engages in an intriguing comparative axiological exercise that brings African and Western/Christian conceptions of God into a philosophical conversation. Aware that there is no one universal conception of God in ATR, Metz makes it clear that he is comparing the African vital force conception of God with the Christian Abrahamic conception of God vis-à-vis the question of the axiological value of the scope and content of God's purpose for humans. Metz asks whether our lives would be richer in meaning if the African vitalistic God or the transcendent Abrahamic God existed. Metz's question leads to mixed results. With regard to the scope of the purpose God would assign to human beings, Metz thinks that the African vitalistic conception of God promises more meaning in the life of the human being. On the content of God's purpose, he argues that the Abrahamic conception of God promises more meaning in a life than the African vitalistic conception of God.

In 'African Traditional Religion and Moral Philosophy' Motsamai Molefe and Mutshidzi Maraganedzha raise the question whether an African religious ethics dependent on ATR is possible in view of the fact that ATR lacks a holy book in which the mind and will of God are revealed. Convinced of the possibility of a moral philosophy that draws its principles from the African vitalistic conception of God, the authors set out to construct a philosophical model of an African supernaturalist ethics with its own meta-ethical, normative, and practical assumptions. After demonstrating the possibility of an African ethical system informed by ATR, they promise the philosophical defence of the ambitious ethical

system in a future work. The authors make a bold statement in this article that will reignite debates about the sources of African moral tradition.

Finally, Aribiah David Attoe in his article 'Death and Meaning(lessness): Re-examining the African View' offers us an account of the meaninglessness of life that is based on African conceptions of death and meaning. This ambitious article can be considered the most robust attempt at discussing the question of life's meaninglessness, within the context of African conceptions of death, in African philosophical literature. Attoe greatly extends the initial groundwork that was thinly laid by Kwasi Wiredu (1992) in his book chapter titled 'Death and the Afterlife in African Culture'. In this article, Attoe draws from various clues in the literature on African metaphysics and African philosophy of religion, and argues that life is ultimately meaningless since we die. He does this in two ways. First, he argues that we cannot trust some of the metaphysical assumptions that undergird much of African thought about the nature of the human being, for example, belief in the reality of a spiritual component that animates the body and is responsible for things like consciousness, judgement, memories, thinking, etc. For him, developments in neuroscience seem to point to the physical brain as responsible for all these human capabilities. If true, then death implies an individual's plunge into nothingness since death causes the loss of subjective consciousness. The fact that life empties into nothingness implies meaninglessness. Second, Attoe suggests that even if the first point was implausible, the idea of a 'second death' in African thought (the demise of an ancestor through the loss of the ancestor's memory among the living) reintroduces the finality of death. The assumption that the individual is composed of non-physical components crumbles in the face of the finality of death since a second death (of the ancestor) is possible. This finality of death is what, for Attoe, provides a good reason for one to acknowledge that, from an African perspective, life is ultimately meaningless.

The articles featured in this special issue are critical and constructive to the extent that they advance the cause of system-building in African philosophy while rigorously subjecting their assumptions and theses to robust analytical scrutiny. The focus on system-building is timely in view of the relative absence of constructive thinking in African philosophy. The editors of the current special issue are pleased to introduce the five articles to a global audience and hope that these articles will not only help define the field of African philosophy of religion for many years to come but will also motivate crosscultural engagement on the global stage.

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