

WORKSHOP

ON

God, Problem of Evil and Death in African Religious Philosophy

Hosted by the Centre for Leadership Ethics in Africa

October 14-15, 2021

Zoom link:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/86095456487?pwd=OS96TG84TDFyVS9NaUpxcHU1WjZyUT09>

SPEAKERS:

Dr Ada Agada, Conversational Society of Philosophy, Nigeria.
Prof Thaddeus Metz, University of Pretoria, South Africa.
Dr Christiana Idika, Catholic University of Mainz, Germany.
Dr Enyimba Maduka, University of Calabar, Nigeria.
Dr Aribiah Attoe, University of Witwatersrand, South Africa.
Amara Esther Chimakonam, University of Johannesburg, South Africa.
Dr Jonathan Chimakonam, University of Pretoria, South Africa.
Dr Motsamai Molefe, CLEA, University of Fort Hare, South Africa.
Prof Workineh Kelbessa, Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia
Dr Lerato Mokoena, University of Pretoria, South Africa.
Dr Joyline Gwara, University of Zimbabwe, Zimbabwe.
Dr Lucky Ogbonnaya, University of Pretoria, South Africa.
Dr Pius Mosima, University of Bamenda, Cameroon.
Dr Mohammed Majeed, University of Ghana, Ghana.

Enquiries: Dr Ada Agada (adaagada@gmail.com), Dr Aribiah Attoe (aribiahdavidattoe@gmail.com)

This Workshop was made possible through the support of a grant from John Templeton Fund, awarded via the Global Philosophy of Religion Project (GPR). The opinions expressed in this workshop are those of the speaker(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of John Templeton Fund or the GPR.

PROGRAMME SCHEDULE (All times are SAST/GMT +2)

Day 1

| | | |
|--|--------------------|--|
| Dr Chris Allsobrook | 9.55 – 10.00 | Opening |
| Aribiah Attoe | 10.00 – 10.45 | African Religions and the Question of Life's Meaning |
| Dr Pius Mosima | 10.50 – 11.35 | African approaches to God, death and the problem of evil: some anthropological lessons towards an intercultural philosophy of religion |
| BREAK | 11.35-12.00 | BREAK |
| Dr Christiana Idika/Dr Enyimba Maduka | 12.00-12.45 | ONYENACHI YA! A New Perspective in African Philosophy of Religion. |
| Dr Motsamai Molefe | 12.50-13.35 | African Metaphysics, Religious ethics and Human Dignity |
| Dr Jonathan Chimakonam/Amara Esther Chimakonam | 13.40-14.25 | Examining the Problem of Evil in Light of Ezumezu Logic |

DAY 2

| | | |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------|---|
| Dr Ada Agada | 10.00 – 10.45 | Rethinking the Concept of God and the Problem of Evil from the Perspective of African Thought |
| Dr Lerato Mokoena | 10.50 – 11.35 | Taking my own Conversation Forward; Anthropomorphic Projectionism and its Implications for African Religious Philosophy |
| BREAK | 11.35-12.00 | BREAK |
| Dr Joyline Gwara/Dr Lucky Ogbonnaya | 12.00-12.45 | Rethinking God's Omnibenevolence and Omnipotence in the Light of the COVID-19 Pandemic: An African Perspective |
| Prof Thaddeus Metz | 12.50-13.35 | The Costs and Benefits of the African Conception of God in Respect of Life's Meaning |
| BREAK | 13.35-14.00 | BREAK |
| Prof Workineh Kelbessa | 14.00-14.45 | The Oromo Doctrine of God |
| Dr Mohammed Majeed | 14.50-15.35 | Evil, Death, and Some African Conceptions Of God |
| Dr Ada Agada/Dr Aribiah Attoe | 15.35-15.40 | CLOSING |

WORKSHOP RULES

To ensure a smooth running of the workshop, participants should please take note of the following rules:

- Ensure to mute yourself once you are admitted into the meeting. Background noise and conversations constitute a huge distraction for our speakers and other participants.
- Ensure that your video feed is turned off at all times, except when you are called upon to speak or ask a question. Poor network connections can be a real snag and turning off your video feed would help reduce problems associated with poor network connections.
- Questions and conversations should be respectful and not “confrontational”. We expect lively, but civilised conversations.
- If for some unforeseen reason the meeting ends abruptly (especially if by some stroke of bad luck, poor network kicks out the meeting host and co-hosts), do not panic. Simply wait for two minutes and try to re-enter the meeting.

ABSTRACTS

Title: The Meaning of Life African Traditional Religion

Authors/Speakers: Aribiah David Attoe

Abstract:

In much of the literature regarding African theories of meaning, there are certain clues regarding what constitutes meaningfulness from an African traditional religious perspective. These are theories of meaning *in* life such as the African God’s purpose theory, which locates meaning in the obedience of divine law and/or the pursuit of one’s destiny; the vital force theory, which locates meaning in the continuous augmentation of one’s vital force through worship, rituals and the worship of God; and what I will call the transcendent communal theories, where meaning begins after death, and is located in the positive contributions one makes to his/her society, as an ancestor. I contend that all these theories have one thing in common that unifies them – and that is the legitimization of God’s existence through the continued sustenance of the universe. This, I will show, constitutes the meaning of life from an African traditional religious perspective. To argue for this thesis, I will first tease out the basic tenets of the previously described theories of meaning. I will then analyze the metaphysical underpinning of the African relational ontology and how it reflects on the subject of *being*. Finally, I will end by showing the role of the universe in legitimizing the existence of God as a thing in the world, and how that constitutes the meaning of life.

Title: African approaches to God, death and the problem of evil: some anthropological lessons towards an intercultural philosophy of religion

Author: Pius Mosima, University of Bamenda, Cameroon

Abstract:

In this paper, I make a case for an intercultural philosophy of religion from an African perspective. I focus on the philosophical underpinnings of the various meaningful religious practices and beliefs that give rise to the concepts of God, death and the problem of evil. A philosophical study of African traditional religions, based on anthropological findings across African cultural orientations, gives us a good starting point in understanding African worldviews and religious experiences. It also reveals that the great world religions may all be seen as offering different perspectives on the same reality. Specifically, I argue that traditional African conceptions of God, death and the problem of evil could make significant contributions to global discourses in the philosophy of religion. First, I articulate points of convergence and divergence between African traditional religions with Saint Aquinas’s proofs for God’s existence; Second, I question the phenomenon of death as the gateway to destiny

and as the fulfillment of life's meaning; and third, I approach the problem of evil and attempt an African solution to the Epicurean dilemma.

Title: ONYENACHI YA! A New Perspective in African Philosophy of Religion.

Authors/speakers: Christiana Idika, Frankfurt am Main & Maduka Enyimba, University of Calabar, Nigeria

Abstract:

Onyenachiya, which literally translates to each individual and his or her chi (God or god), interrogates the nature of religious belief in a transcendental being in African philosophy of religion. It argues that should Mbiti's claim that Africans are notoriously religious be right, it would not be because of a belief in a supreme Christian God. Rather, it must be because of the individual's belief in its other-half, since chi in its different nuances refers to an individual's destiny, which is that which makes you who you are. The task has always been how to determine the constituent of this chi. For most African scholars, thinkers or intellectuals in the study of African religions and African Christian theologies, that which makes you, the you, you are, is something other than the you, a being, transcendent or immanent. This essay argues that the phenomenology and psychology of faith in a God or gods illustrates individual-centeredness in religious belief. Onyenachiya demonstrates the dialectics and paradox that pervades existences, struggle for survival against all odds.

Keywords: onyenachiya, transcendent-supreme God, destiny/fate, personal/communal God, Africa, religious philosophy.

Title: African Metaphysics, Religious ethics and Human Dignity

Authors/Speakers: Dr Motsamai Molefe, CLEA, University of Fort Hare

Abstract:

This chapter focuses on the axiological component characteristic of African traditional religion. The literature on religious ethics, in moral philosophy, is dominated by Judeo-Christian interpretations of it. In this chapter, I seek to articulate an alternative and under-explored African religious ethics. Specifically, I will focus on the idea of human dignity. To articulate an African religious theory of human dignity, I will invoke the salient ontological and axiological category of vitality – a divine energy possessed by all existing things - in African philosophy. This chapter aims to achieve three major things. Clarify the metaphysics associated with vitality. Articulate a vitality based view of human dignity. Finally, compare the implications of the vitality-based view of human dignity against *imago dei* in the context of the bioethical questions of abortion and euthanasia. I will conclude by observing that a vitality based view of human dignity is promising and can enrich our moral discourses.

Title: Examining the Problem of Evil in Light of Ezumezu Logic

Authors/Speakers: Jonathan O Chimakonam and Amara Esther Chimakonam

Abstract:

We argue that the problem of evil, logically, stems from the unequal binary that characterises the bivalent structure of western discourses in the philosophy of religion. This structure pits not only God against the devil, but also the value of good against the evil they are believed to represent. The difficulty is that those who subscribe to creationism, for example, hold that God as an omniscient, omnipotent and morally perfect entity created everything. Ironically, this must include evil or the devil himself. If one says He did not create evil, then one is faced with the challenge of explaining how an omniscient, omnipotent, and morally perfect God could continue to allow evil in the world. Our strategy would be to dilute the problem by dismantling logical bivalence. With an appropriate logic background like the African truth-glut three-valued system of Ezumezu as an explanatory mechanism, we will demonstrate that the problem of evil is resolvable, even if negatively, using the principle of value complementarity, which we introduce here to explain that the notions of good and evil are not opposites but complementary. In this way, God, would be construed, especially from

the viewpoint of the African Traditional Religions as 'God of Harmony', powerful but not morally perfect.

Title: Rethinking the Concept of God and the Problem of Evil from the Perspective of African Thought

Authors/Speakers: Ada Agada, Conversational School of Philosophy

Abstract:

The sparse literature on contemporary African philosophy of religion reveals two broad views of God in African Traditional Religion (ATR) and traditional African thought, namely: (1) There exists a Supreme Being that is omnipotent, omniscient and benevolent but not responsible for the evil in the world. (2) There is no transcendent God but only a limited deity that is powerless to stop the evil in the world. The first view follows from the alignment of ATR with traditional monotheism. The second view follows from a later re-evaluation of early ATR scholarship by African philosophers and the conclusion that there is indubitable evidence in ATR and traditional African thought that presents God as a limited deity in a manner that constrains traditional monotheism. In this essay, I show that: (1) There is a transcendence strain in ATR and traditional African thought that agrees perfectly with traditional monotheism and legitimises the question of the relation of God with evil in the world. (2) There is incontrovertible evidence of the conception of God as a limited deity that renders the categories of omnipotence and omniscience inapplicable. (3) It is necessary for African philosophers of religion to acknowledge the logical validity of the two conflicting views in order to avoid formulating inconsistent theories of the relation of God with the world that depict God as both omnipotent and limited in the same respect. (4) Whether one accepts the transcendence view or the limitation framework, it is necessary for African philosophers of religion to show how a transcendent or, conversely, a limited God is related to the evil that exists in the world, since the overwhelming stance of ATR is that God is the creator of the world and wields effective power, whether one accepts that he is omnipotent or limited. (5) The view of God as a limited deity who is yet not powerless, since he is powerful enough to create the world from pre-existing matter, is more plausible than the opposing transcendental view of God. Consequently, I substitute the categories of omnipotence and omniscience with the novel categories of power and glory and argue that while a powerful and glorious God is not the author of evil and cannot eliminate evil in the world, such a God can plausibly work to reduce the amount of evil in the world and give human beings a cause to seek to further reduce evil in the world in the knowledge that a good but limited God is working to perfect the system of nature, however impossible the actual perfection of nature may appear. I assert that substituting the categories of omnipotence and omniscience with the categories of power and glory supplies a more complete metaphysical scheme that describes a universe that admits of God's existence and accounts for evil as simply a necessary part of the furniture of an imperfectly expressed universe. I submit that such a metaphysical scheme fills the knowledge gap created by African philosophers who reject the transcendence view of God and accept the claim that God is a creator-deity but fail to demonstrate the extent of his power.

Key words: God, evil, omnipotence, power, omniscience, glory, African philosophy, *mood*

Title: Taking my own conversation forward: anthropomorphic projectionism and its implications for African Religious philosophy.

Authors/Speakers: Lerato Mokoena, University of Pretoria

Abstract:

In a previously written article titled '*Humans created God in their image? An anthropomorphic projectionism in the Old Testament*' co authored by me and fellow colleague Prof. Ndikhokhele Mtshiselwa, we present an argument for the social roots of Yahweh. Adopting the dominant theories in Guthrie's work of religion as anthropomorphism and Feuerbach's anthropomorphic projectionism

we argue that since human beings do not have cognitive access to a god, *ipso facto* cannot know a god's essence and nature, humans project life-like qualities to transcendental beings. This we argue is the basis of the monotheistic Israelite religion and depiction of Yahweh we have in the Old Testament. Etiological, semiotic and linguistic evidence is further presented to support this view. A view I wish to advance by wanting to employ similar tactics to understand how the idea of religion as anthropomorphism impacts and affects African Traditional Religious philosophies and approaches to God, if it even does at all. This article will attempt to take issues with the following presumptions; is all religion anthropomorphism and how is this idea addressed in African Religious philosophy.

Title: Rethinking God's Omnibenevolence and Omnipotence in the Light of the COVID-19 Pandemic: An African Perspective

Authors/Speakers: Joyline Gwara, University of Zimbabwe & L. Uchenna Ogonnaya, University of Pretoria, South Africa.

Abstract:

The reality of the COVID-19 pandemic questions God's omnibenevolence and omnipotence. Two questions that stare us in the face are: a.) Is God omnibenevolent amid the COVID-19 pandemic? b.) Is God omnipotent amid the COVID-19 pandemic? This paper addresses these questions from the African place using the African theory of duality and its underlying logic, *Ezumezu*. We argue that the reality of the COVID-19 pandemic and its adverse effects (such as sickness, death, hardship, etc.) do not negate God's omnibenevolence and omnipotence. Instead, we assert that God is omnibenevolent and omnipotent despite the evils of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the light of the African theory of duality and *Ezumezu* logic, we contend that the COVID-19 pandemic brings out the argument that inherent in God's omnibenevolence is wickedness and inherent in God's omnipotent is weakness. We shall approach our task by first teasing out God's omnibenevolence and omnipotence from the African place. Secondly, we shall discuss the reality of the COVID-19 pandemic and how it questions the two attributes above. Afterwards, we shall use the African theory of duality and its background logic (*Ezumezu*) to reconceptualize these attributes of God.

Keywords: covid-19, omnibenevolent, omnipotent, duality, *Ezumezu* logic

Title: The Costs and Benefits of the African Conception Of God in Respect of Life's Meaning

Authors/Speakers: Thaddeus Metz, University of Pretoria

Abstract:

I propose to discuss the desirable and undesirable facets of Traditional African Religion's conception of *God* as they concern *meaning in life*. By 'meaning in life', I mean a final good that comes in degrees in the life of an individual and is characterized by features such as what merits pride and admiration, constitutes a good-life story, makes a contribution, and connects with what is greatest. For the sake of depth, I would set aside discussion of Traditional African Religion's conception of the *afterlife* and of Traditional African Religion's bearing on the *meaning of life*, understood as respects in which humanity, not a human person, could be meaningful.

Such a project would differ from other, more salient ones in the literature, for instance, these: critical discussions of the bearing of *non-religious* interpretations of the African tradition on meaning in life; ethnographic descriptions of African people's religious *beliefs* about life's meaning; and *metaphysical* debates about whether entities posited by Traditional African Religion exist. In contrast to these undertakings, I would engage in an axiological discussion about respects in which the God of Traditional African Religion would be good, or conversely bad, for meaning in life, if that God existed. Specifically, I would often compare the implications of this conception of God with that of the Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

At this point I intend to address four different respects in which God as typically conceived in Traditional African Religion and as distinct from the Abrahamic faiths might make a

difference to life's meaning. First, would our lives be more meaningful or less if God assigned each of them a destiny? The idea that God gives each of us a distinct purpose to fulfil is a common view in the African tradition, but less frequently encountered in the Abrahamic one, where generic purposes such as honouring God and loving one's neighbour are more salient. Would an individualized destiny be preferable for grounding meaningfulness on a person's identity, or would it be undesirable since it would be unduly restrictive of an individual's capacity to obtain meaning in life?

Second, Traditional African Religion usually includes the view that God cannot communicate with us, and that, in order to know God's mind, we must use mediators such as ancestors and diviners. Holy texts and prophets, salient in the Abrahamic faiths, are not salient in Traditional African Religion. Would the African understanding of God's essential inability to make us directly aware of God's intentions, if true, affect life's meaning for better or worse?

Title: The Oromo Doctrine of God

Authors/Speakers: Workineh Kelbessa (PhD), Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia

Abstract:

The Oromo of Ethiopia, the largest ethnic group, have their own indigenous religion known as Waaqeffanna. They believe in one Waaqa guraacha (black God) – the God who created the universe and the various forms of life. Waaqa has multiple attributes. Waaqa is He who is before everything else. Waaqa is Uumaa (a creator of everything in the world). Waaqa is hunda beekaa (omniscient). Waaqni gonkumaa kan hin Duune (God is immortal). Waaqa is hundaa tolaa (omnibenevolent). Waaqa is hunda danda'aa (omnipotent). Nothing is impossible with Waaqa. Waaqa is the source and lover of dhugaa (truth). Waaqa is Qulqulluu (pure). Waaqa is kind. Although the Oromo believe that Waaqa is a Supreme Being which is above everything else, unlike the Christian God, Waaqa cannot be called transcendent. The Oromo people believe that in olden days Waaqa was living on the Earth and only later that Waaqa left the Earth in anger because of personal sin and became invisible. Waaqa is one and at the same time manifests Himself in different ways. Ayyaana (spirit) mediates the relationship between Waaqa and human beings. The general Oromo worldview recognizes the inextricable interconnectedness of humans, animals, plants and the environment. There is a positive relationship between God and the Earth, humans and the natural environment. All creatures are essentially effected and affected by the harmonious relationship between Waaqa and the Earth. Saffuu (an ethical principle) governs the relationship between different entities and humans' use of natural resources. It stresses the need to maintain distance and respect between all things.

Keywords: Ayyaana, Oromo, Saffuu, Waaqa, Waaqeffanna

Title: Evil, Death, and Some African Conceptions of God

Authors/Speakers: Mohammed Majeed, University of Ghana, Legon.

Abstract:

The age-old philosophical problem of evil, established in Western philosophy as resulting from the intellectual irreconcilability of some appellations of God with the presence of evil – indeed, of myriads of evil – in the world, has been debated upon by many African religious scholars; particularly, philosophers. These include John Mbiti, Kwasi Wiredu, Kwame Gyekye, E. B. Idowu and E.O. Oduwole. While the debate has often been about the existence or not of the problem of evil in African theology, not much philosophical discussion has taken place regarding death and its implications for African conception(s) of God. This paper attempts to contribute to the discussion of those implications. It explores the evilness of death, as exemplified in the African notion of "evil death," and argues that the phenomenon of death presents itself in complex but interesting ways that do not philosophically ground its characterization as evil. Therefore, the problem of evil would not arise in African thought on account of the phenomenon of death.

This Workshop was made possible through the support of a grant from John Templeton Fund, awarded via the Global Philosophy of Religion Project (GPR). The opinions expressed in this workshop are those of the speaker(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of John Templeton Fund or the GPR.