

Teaching and Learning Guide for African Philosophy of Religion: Concepts of God, Ancestors, and the Problem of Evil

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1 | AUTHORS' INTRODUCTION

Religion plays a fundamental role in individuals' lives. Religion has semiotic and normative functions (Cordeiro-Rodrigues, 2014; Parekh, 2005). Semiotically, it is the lens from which individuals interpret the world. Normatively, it gives reasons to act and make practical decisions in the world (Festenstein, 2007). Hence, the study of religion is crucial for understanding human reality. Philosophy of religion as a field of philosophical enquiry has made immense contributions to human understanding of religious concepts and phenomena through the critical interrogation of these concepts and phenomena.

Nonetheless, the philosophical study of religion has focused primarily on the Christian religion which is the dominant Western religious tradition. This narrow focus is problematic because it leaves many important concepts and theories from the East and the South unaddressed (Wang & Cordeiro-Rodrigues, 2022). This article helps fill the gap in global philosophy of religion research by focusing on issues, debates, and trends in the underexplored field of African philosophy of religion. In the article "African Philosophy of Religion: Concepts of God, Ancestors, and the Problem of Evil" we exhibit critical views on three topics: (a) conceptions of God in traditional African thought, (b) the place of ancestors in the African universe, and (c) the problem of evil in African philosophy of religion. In respect of (a), we divide the main views on God into the traditional theistic and limited God families or schools of thought. The first school has scholars who conceive God as omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect while scholars of the second school perceive God as good but not morally perfect, powerful but not all-powerful, and wise but not all-knowing. Regarding (b), we explain how ancestors have played a fundamental role in African religions. They are important supernatural entities that continue to influence the worldly affairs of the living from the abode of the living-dead. Finally, concerning (c), we explain how the two schools of thought mentioned above have impacted the trajectory of debates on the problem of evil in African philosophy of religion.

2 | AUTHORS' RECOMMEND

Idowu, E.B. (1962) *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*, London, Longmans.

For one of the earliest African religious studies texts that defend the idea that African Traditional Religion (ATR) is properly monotheistic, see this classic. The work focuses on the Yoruba belief-system but arrives at conclusions that are fairly applicable to the belief-systems of many African ethnic groups.

Cordeiro-Rodrigues, Luis. 2021. "Mutability and Relationality: Towards an African Four-Dimensionalist Pan-Psychism." *Religions* 12 (12): 1094. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12121094>.

This original article addresses the question of the nature of God from an African pan-psychist viewpoint. Although there are other pan-psychist perspectives in African philosophy, this is the only one that relates it to four-dimensionalism and the question of time.

Mbiti, J.S. (1969) *African Religions and Philosophy*, London, Heinemann.

This classic is useful as an introductory text. It covers important themes that contemporary African philosophers of religion are debating. In a highly engaging manner, the book introduces the concepts of God in traditional African thought, the understanding of ancestors as the living-dead, the idea of tribal memory and collective immortality, and the attribution of evil in the world to human wickedness and the activities of malevolent spiritual entities. Additionally, the book shows how African philosophy grows out of African religion and the cultural rootedness of both African religious studies and African philosophy.

p'Bitek, O. (1971) *African Religions in Western Scholarship*, Nairobi, Kenya Literature Bureau.

This concise book presents arguably the earliest sustained argument for the limited God view in African religious studies and African philosophy of religion. It provides a historical and conceptual context to such issues in contemporary African philosophy of religion as the decolonisation of religious categories in usage in African studies, the applicability of the properties of omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence to the African God, and the actual reality of spiritual entities. Crucially, p'Bitek's early classic foreshadowed emerging sceptical, agnostic, and atheistic currents in African philosophy of religion.

Wiredu, K. (1998.) "Toward Decolonizing African Philosophy and Religion," *African Studies Quarterly* 1(4), 17-46. <http://africa.ufl.edu/asq/v1/4/3.pdf>.

One of the most incisive and influential articles that challenge the traditional theistic perspective in African scholarship. This is a work that must be on the reading list of the student of African philosophy of religion.

Oladipo, O. (2004) "Religion in African Culture: Some Conceptual Issues," in Wiredu, K (ed.), *A Companion to African Philosophy*, Oxford, Blackwell, pp. 355-363.

This book chapter further problematises the claim that ATR conceives God in the same way as Christianity. The work falls into the decolonisation school that questions the authenticity of the traditional theistic understanding of God that is attributed to African societies in the works of African defenders of traditional theism.

Fayemi, A.K. (2012) "Philosophical Problem of Evil: Response to E.O. Oduwole," *Philosophia: International Journal of Philosophy*, 41(1), 1-15.

For a limited God view perspective on evil and the blameworthiness of God, lesser deities, and human beings, check this article. It argues that as a creator, God is partly responsible for some kinds of evil in the world while as a limited creator-deity it is beyond God's power to eliminate the evil in the world.

Wiredu, K. (2013) "African Religions," in Meister, C. and Copan, P. (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, London, Routledge, pp. 29–38.

See this article for insightful discussions on the status and roles of ancestors in traditional African societies in relation to the question of the source of morality and the nature of God.

Agada, A. (2022a) "Bewaji and Fayemi on God, Omnipotence, and Evil," *Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture, and Religions*, 11(1), 41–56. doi: 10.4314/ft.v11i1.4.

This article provides the most in-depth discussion of the two schools of thought in African philosophy of religion, namely, the traditional theistic school and the limited God school. The article argues that the existence of the two schools means that African philosophers must contend with an antinomy of God's existence that will significantly impact the way they resolve the problem of evil. The article will prove invaluable to students and scholars curious about the future trajectory of the evolving field of African philosophy of religion.

Agada, A. (2022b) "Rethinking the Concept of God and the Problem of Evil from the Perspective of African Thought," *Religious Studies*, 2022, 1–17. Online edition. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412522000294>.

For the latest, and perhaps the most original, discussion of the traditional African theistic and limited God views in relation to the problem of evil, this article offers a wealth of information. The article argues that the rootedness of the two views in traditional African thought means that there is an antinomy of God's existence in African philosophy that African philosophers must navigate to avoid the trap of inconsistent thinking that the antinomy sets before African philosophers. Interestingly, the article supplies the first argumentative defence of the rationality of belief in a limited God who is, yet, not powerless given that this God is powerful enough to create worlds and entities like human beings. For readers familiar with the traditional arguments for God's existence in Western philosophy of religion, the defence of the rationality of belief in God's existence from an African perspective will provide an opportunity for cross-cultural and comparative thinking. A response to this article is soon forthcoming: Cordeiro-Rodrigues. (2023) *Engaging and Developing Ada Agada's Philosophy: Moral Responsibility, Creation, and the Problem of Evil*, *Religious Studies* (forthcoming).

3 | ONLINE MATERIALS

<https://iep.utm.edu/history-of-african-philosophy/>

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/African-religions>

<https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/united-states-and-canada/us-history/african-religions>.

4 | SAMPLE SYLLABUS

Week 1: Introduction: What is African Philosophy?

Reading.

Luis Cordeiro-Rodrigues, 'Integrating African Philosophy into the Western Philosophy C1.

Hallen, B. (2002) *A Short History of African Philosophy*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press.

- Hountondji, P. (1996) *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*, 2nd ed. Evans, H. (tr.), Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Oruka, H.O. (1991) *Sage Philosophy: Indigenous Thinkers and Modern Debate on African Philosophy*, Nairobi, ACTS Press.
- Agada, A. (2022c) *Consolationism and Comparative African Philosophy: Beyond Universalism and Particularism*, New York, Routledge.
- Agada, A. (2013) "Is African Philosophy Progressing?" *Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religions*, 2(1), 239–273.

Week 2: Methodology for Studying African Philosophy.

Reading:

- Chimakonam, J.O. (2019) *Ezumezu: A System of Logic for African Philosophy and Studies*, Cham, Springer. doi: 10.1007/978-3-030-11075-8. Chapters 1 and 2.
- Asouzu, I.I. (2004) *The Method and Principles of Complementary Reflection in and beyond African Philosophy*, Calabar, University of Calabar Press.
- Cordeiro-Rodrigues, L. (2022) Towards a global philosophy of religion: Reply to Schellenberg and Draper. *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 14(3), 263–84. <https://doi.org/10.24204/ejpr.2022.3881>

Week 3: Some African Religious Traditions.

Reading:

- Igboin, B.O. (2014) "Is Olodumare, God in Yoruba Belief, God?" *Kanz Philosophia*, 4(2), 189–208.
- Namukoa, E.W., Verster, P., & Nel P.J. (2000) "Monotheistic Understanding of the Divine in African Religion, Christianity, and Islam," *Acta Theologica*, 20(1), 90–111.
- Aja, E. (1996) "The Supreme God in an African (Igbo) Religious Thought," *Philosophy in the Contemporary World*, 3(4), 1–7.
- Awolalu, J.O. Dopamu, P.A. (1979) *West African Traditional Religion*, Ibadan, Onibonoje Press.
- Idowu E.B. (1962) *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*, London, Longmans.

Week 4: History of African Philosophy of Religion I: Ancient Egypt.

Reading:

- Jacq, Christian. 2006. *The Wisdom of Ptah-Hotep: Spiritual Treasures from the Age of the Pyramids and the Oldest Book in the World*. Annotated edition. London: Carroll & Graf Publishers Inc., chapters 1-3.

Week 5: History of African Philosophy of Religion II: The Kingdom of Kongo.

Reading:

- Thornton, John. 1998. *The Kongolese Saint Anthony: Dona Beatriz Kimpa Vita and the Antonian Movement, 1684–1706*. Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press.

Week 6: History of African Philosophy of Religion III: Zera Yacob.

Reading:

- Kiros, Teodos. 2004. "Zera Yacob and Traditional Ethiopian Philosophy." In *A Companion to African Philosophy*, edited by Kwasi Wiredu, 183–90. Wiley.

Week 7: African Theism.

Reading:

- Metz, T. & Molefe, M. (2021) "Traditional African religion as a Neglected Form of monotheism," *The Monist*, 104, 393–409. doi: 10.1093/monist/onab007.

Gyekye, K. (1995) *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press.

Mbiti, J.S. (1970) *Concepts of God in Africa*, London, SPCK.

Week 8: The Limited God View.

Reading.

Amara Esther Chimakonam, "Why the Problem of Evil Might not be a Problem after all in African Philosophy of Religion"

Chuks, F.M. (2021) "OBU: The Sacred Homestead for Ancestor Veneration in Igbo Traditional Religion," *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science* 5(1), 467–477.

Fayemi, A.K. (2012) "Philosophical Problem of Evil: Response to E.O. Oduwole," *Philosophia: International Journal of Philosophy*, 41(1), 1–15.

Week 9: After-life and Ancestors.

Reading.

Metz, Thaddeus, and Motsamai Molefe. "Traditional African Religion as a Neglected Form of Monotheism"

Majeed, H.M. (2017) *Reincarnation: A Question in the African Philosophy of Mind*, Pretoria, UNISA Press.

Week 10: African Determinism and Views on Destiny.

Reading.

Attoe, A. (2022) *Groundwork for a New Kind of African Metaphysics: The Idea of Predeterministic Historicity*, Cham, Springer. Chapters 1, 3 and 4.

Week 11: African Cosmology and the Problem of Evil.

Reading.

Bewaji, John, "Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief and the Theistic Problem of Evil," *African Studies Quarterly*, 2(1), 1–17.
<http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v2/v2i1a1.pdf>.

Asouzu, I.I. (2004) *The Method and Principles of Complementary Reflection in and Beyond African Philosophy*, Calabar, University of Calabar Press. Chapters 1 and 2.

Week 12: The Concept of the Devil in African Philosophy.

Reading.

Ofuasia, E. (2022) "An Argument for the Non-Existence of the Devil in African Traditional Religions," *Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture, and Religions*, 11(1), 57–76.

Week 13: Exam Week.

5 | FOCUS QUESTIONS

1. Is the philosophy of religion in need of decolonisation?
2. How do we decolonize the philosophy of religion?
3. What are the two prominent schools of thought regarding the conception of God in African philosophy of religion?
4. How does each school of thought respond to the problem of evil?
5. What is the status of ancestors in traditional African religion?

5.1 | Seminar Topic for Postgraduate Students at PhD Level

African philosophers like Kwasi Wiredu, Okot p'Bitek, John A.I. Bewaji, and Olusegun Oladipo have argued from a decolonisation perspective that the categories of omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence are Western categories imported into African religious studies. How true is this claim?

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- Festenstein, M. (2007). *Negotiating Diversity: Culture, Deliberation, Trust* (1st ed.). Polity.
- Parekh, B. (2005). *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory* (2nd ed.). Red Globe Press.
- Wang, J., & Cordeiro-Rodrigues, L. (2022). Pathways Towards a Global Philosophy of Religion: The Problem of Evil from an Intercultural Perspective. *Filosofia Theoretica*, 11(1), 197–206. <https://doi.org/10.4314/ft.v11i1.15>

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