

African Philosophy of Religion: Concepts of God, Ancestors, and the Problem of Evil

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Abstract

There has recently been an increased interest in debates on the nature of God, supernatural entities, and the problem of evil outside the Western tradition and there is a growing realisation that philosophical scholarship should go beyond Western perspectives in order to properly address issues in the philosophy of religion that arise in non-Western cultures. Taking this on board, this article surveys the field of African philosophy of religion and highlights some of the concerns and issues driving debates in the field. In particular, we focus on three important debates. Firstly, we outline the two main schools of thought that divide African philosophers into theistic and non-theistic camps. We label the theistic perspective the 'African theistic view' and the non-theistic perspective the 'limited God view'. Secondly, we explore how commitment to the two views has led to distinct explanations of the problem of evil. Thirdly, we highlight the role of ancestors in African belief-systems and their place in the scheme of things. Adopting the method of philosophical exposition and argument, we show how the two dominant views of God's nature define this emerging field of African philosophy and will determine the future trajectory of the field.

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1 | INTRODUCTION

The field of African Philosophy is becoming increasingly relevant to debates in academia. Although some articles and books in fields such as Ethics and Political Philosophy have now been published in visible international publishing outlets, the same cannot be said of African Philosophy of Religion. The discipline of the Philosophy of Religion is in fact very much centred on the Western and, more specifically, Judeo-Christian tradition. Some scholars have recently made the case for globalising the discipline (Harrison, 2020; Wang & Cordeiro-Rodrigues, 2022). In this article we outline and critically explore the key debates in African Philosophy of Religion on two interrelated topics: (a) concepts of God and supernatural entities and (b) the problem of evil.¹ To facilitate the realisation of the research objective, we have divided the article into three sections. In the first section we describe the two broad conceptions of God in traditional African thought, which we label the 'African theistic view' and the 'limited God view'. The second section focuses on explaining the role of ancestors, a class of entities especially relevant, in the African context, to understanding both the nature of God and the problem of evil. The third section seeks to explain the implications of the previous sections for the problem of evil.

1.1 | African concepts of god

In this section we shall categorise in broad terms the two main schools of thought in African Philosophy of Religion in respect of the nature and qualities of God. Given that Africa is a broad continent with a high level of diversity, some generalisations are necessary. Nonetheless, these generalisations are not intended to essentialise African thought: rather they aid us in finding some common features that facilitate scholarship. Indeed, as Peter J. Paris contends:

Undoubtedly, many will argue that the immense diversity of cultures there prohibits any generalisations whatsoever about Africa. Yet in my judgement respect for the rich diversity of African cultures need not lead to such a conclusion. Rather, as certain generalisations can be made about Americans or Europeans without implying widespread uniformity among them all, similar generalisations can be made about African religions and moral understanding without violating either the integrity or the particularity of tribal groups. (Paris, 1995, 27)

Taking on board the idea that generalisations are, in some cases, necessary for the articulation of a conceptual framework, we wish to outline two broad conceptions of God in African religious thought. These can be classified as the 'African theistic view' and the 'limited God view'. The first, as the name indicates, is similar to the traditional theistic understanding of God that regards the deity as omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent while the second conception regards God as limited in power, knowledge and goodness (see, for example, Agada, 2022a; Igboin, 2014). However, the African theistic view augments the traditional *omni* properties with elements of beliefs taken from African traditional religion (ATR). Proponents of African theism include Placide Tempels (2010), E. Bolaji Idowu (1973), John Mbiti (1975), J. Omosade Awolalu and P.A. Dopamu (1979), Kwame Gyekye (1995), Desmond Tutu (2011), and Thaddeus Metz. Proponents of traditional theism assert that analysis of African religious belief-systems, worship practices, proverbs, songs, and names for God in African languages, clearly reveal that traditional African societies attribute the properties of omnipotence, omniscience, omnibenevolence and omnipresence to God. Gyekye, a prominent defender of traditional theism, categorically asserts that:

Onyame is the Absolute Reality, the origin of all things, the absolute ground, the sole and whole explanation of the universe, the source of all existence...Onyame transcends time and is thus free from the limitation of time, an eternity without beginning, without an end...While containing space, Onyame is not held to be spatial. He is not bound or limited to any particular region of space. He is omnipresent (*enyiasombea*), all-pervading. (1995, 70)

In this passage, Gyekye buttresses his view that the Akan people of Africa hold God to be immaterial, eternal, all-powerful, all-knowing and all-good, with reference to the names and titles of God in the Akan language. According to Gyekye (1995, p. 70), the names and titles used to describe God all demonstrate that He possesses characteristics similar to those usually attributed to God by traditional theistic philosophers. The names for God include *Onyankopōn* (the only great being, the supreme being), *Ōbōadeē* (creator), *Ōdomankoma* (the absolute, the eternal), *Brekyirihunuade* (the omniscient), *Enyiasombea* (the omnipotent), *Otumfo* (the all-powerful being), *Atoapem* (the unsurpassable, the ultimate one). Important Akan proverbs like '*Worepe asem aka akyere Onyankopōn a, na woka kyere mframa*' (If you wish to tell God anything tell it to the wind) and '*Onyame na ɔwɔ basini fufuo ma no*' (God pounds *fufu* for the armless one), attest to God's omnipresence and omnibenevolence (Amoh et al., 2019, pp. 14, 16). Just as the wind is present everywhere, so also is God everywhere. Someone without an arm cannot pound *fufu* (food) using a pestle, but God is their strength. Thus God expresses His benevolence by helping the one who is afflicted.

Reviewing widespread belief in God's omnibenevolence across various African cultures, John Mbiti notes:

For example, some of the people of Zaire say, 'Rejoice, God never does wrong to people!' And in Liberia they say, 'God causes rain to pour down on our fields, and the sun to shine. Because we see these things of his, we say that he is good!' In Ghana people look at the works of God and proclaim, 'God is good, because he has never withdrawn from us the good things which he gave us!' (Mbiti, 1975, p. 49).

The Igbo have various names and titles for God that capture His transcendence and omnipotence as the creator and sustainer of the universe. God is Chukwu, the Great Spirit. He is Chineke, the Creator, Osebuluwa, Sustainer of the Universe, Obasi di n'elu, Lord of the Sky, *Eze bi igweogodaya ana-akpun'ala*, The Heavenly King whose robe flows down to the Earth, Ogbara igbo gharii, the Incomprehensible, Ama-ama, Amasi-amasi, the Known, yet Unknown (Njoku, 2002, p. 149).

The Nobel Peace Prize winner Archbishop Desmond Tutu is another thinker who defends the theistic view. Tutu understands God as all-good, a person, the creator, omnipotent and omniscient (Tutu, 1988, 2011; Tutu & Allen, 2011). Tutu is less inspired by African sources and more inclined to endorse an Anglican understanding of God. Yet Tutu's philosophy is still highly influenced by African elements. For example, the greatest good for Tutu is social harmony. Drawing from African ideas, he notes that: 'Harmony, friendliness, community are great goods' (Tutu, 2000, p. 35). Given that for Tutu morality comes from God, in the sense that He is the source and guardian of morality, this characterisation of morality has implications for the nature of God. More precisely, this characterisation of morality entails that his God is a God of social harmony, i.e. a God who understands the world in terms of socially harmonious or socially disharmonious actions and drives the world towards the goal of social harmony.

The proponents of the African theistic view tend to understand themselves as monotheists, despite their belief in ancestors, angels and other supernatural beings (Metz & Molefe, 2021). The rationale for adopting this stance is connected with a prior understanding of what monotheism actually is. In their view, to be monotheistic means to acknowledge *only one* supreme God. Nonetheless, if the criterion for being monotheistic or polytheistic is about the number of divine beings (gods), then their views may, by definition, be polytheistic rather than monotheistic. Thus their self-perception as monotheistic is mostly grounded in a definition of the term (Ho, 2022).

The African theistic view contrasts with the limited view, which is defended by philosophers such as Bewaji (1998), Oladipo (2004), Balogun (2009), p'Bitek (2011) and Kwasi Wiredu (2013). These scholars usually hold the view that the predominant belief in the existence of lesser deities in traditional African societies indicates that there is no one supreme being corresponding to the Christian God, since many gods inhabit the African universe of spiritual entities. Against this view, Idowu (1973) famously invokes what is now known as the "ultimacy" thesis. This thesis submits that while, indeed, there does exist a multiplicity of deities in African belief-systems, these deities were created by God, the supreme being.

Proponents of the limited God view argue that African religious, linguistic and cultural phenomena supply evidence supporting the understanding of God as limited in power, knowledge and goodness. The limited God view denies God's moral perfection since God does both good and evil (see, for example, Bewaji, 1998). These philosophers suggest that proponents of traditional theism imported Christian conceptual schemes into ATR in a misguided attempt to prove to the West that Africans hold indigenous conceptions of a perfect and unlimited God. Routinely the

limited God view understands the theistic view as a colonial imposition that misrepresents the authentic African view (see, for example, Kato, 1975; Bewaji, 1998; Wiredu, 1998; p'Bitek, 2011). This accusation, notwithstanding, some of the theistic philosophers are genuinely influenced by African cultural phenomena and attribute to God such typically African properties as vitalism/life force and remoteness from everyday human concerns (see Idowu, 1973; Metz & Molefe, 2021). 'Authentic' usually means a form of pre-colonial epistemic structure which has not been influenced by colonialism (Chimakonam, 2019). Making a case for the conception of God as a limited being, Oladipo (2004, p. 360) notes the following in direct reference to the Yoruba belief-system:

If omnipotence implies 'infinite powers,' then to say that Olódùmarè is omnipotent is to say that He is almighty in the sense that He is not subject to any constraints in the exercise of his powers. However, it is doubtful that Olódùmarè can be said to be all-powerful in this sense. A crucial consideration in this regard is the acknowledgment, by the people, of other powers and principalities—divinities, spirits, magic, witchcraft and so on. Some of these powers and forces are treated as ends in themselves.

After analysing the traditional Akan religious phenomena relied upon by Gyekye to reach his transcendental view of God, Wiredu goes further and adopts a position opposite to the stance of Gyekye. Wiredu asserts that:

God is the creator of the world, but he is not apart from the universe: He together with the world constitutes the spatio-temporal "totality" of existence. The notion of creation out of nothing does not even make sense in the Akan language. In the most usual sense creation presupposes raw materials. A carpenter creates a chair out of wood and a novelist creates fiction out of words and ideas. If God is conceived as a kind of cosmic architect who fashions a world order out of indeterminate raw material, the idea of absolute nothingness would seem to be avoidable. (1998, 29–30)

For Wiredu, God does not transcend time. Unlike Gyekye and proponents of traditional theism, Wiredu asserts that the Akan God and, by extension, the African God, is quasi-material and limited by the universe of which God is a part. Similarly, Cordeiro-Rodrigues upholds that God is a conscious force present in every material part of the world (Cordeiro-Rodrigues, 2021).² While proponents of the limitation view, for example, Wiredu, Oladipo and Cordeiro-Rodrigues, concede that Africans traditionally conceive God as a powerful and knowledgeable being, they deny that the African God can be equated with the Hellenic Christian God and imbued with the superlative qualities of omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence and omni-benevolence.

In the Yoruba religious text, the Ifa Corpus, God is sometimes depicted as seeking knowledge from lesser deities and even from human beings (see Bewaji, 1998, p. 7), a clear indication that God is not omniscient. An Akan myth presents God as having lived among human beings in the distant past but relocated to heaven because of a woman who "kept pelting him with the butt of the pestle with which she pounded plantain to prepare a favorite Akan dish. In disgust God moved himself inaccessibly high in the sky and has remained there ever since" (Wiredu, 2013, p. 34). This myth depicts a limited God.

The two views significantly disagree on the nature of God. Nonetheless the two opposing perspectives on God in African religious thought hold that God is a real being. In the traditional African context, the existence of God tends to be assumed (Mbiti, 1990). As earlier suggested, the African theistic conception of God is qualified with African concepts; but this African conception of God is not significantly different from how God is understood in Western theistic circles. Nonetheless, there is a key difference in the style of argumentation. In Western philosophy arguments about the nature of God are often based on analysis of language in the sense that one tries to refine concepts and understand what they imply (Davies, 2011; Kenny, 1979; Plantinga, 1974; Swinburne, 1998; Van Inwagen, 2008). But this is not always the case; for example the argument that God is the first cause does not necessarily rely on a linguistic dispute (Aquinas, 1981).

In African philosophy, both the defenders of the traditional theistic conception of God, as well as the limited conception of God, broadly rely on linguistic, religious and cultural data to justify their stances. More precisely, they often try to look into the pre-colonial period and attempt to understand what the data suggest. One way in which African

philosophers usually do this is by looking at the meaning of words in African languages. Gyekye's argument, for example, is linguistic: it is by looking at what the concepts really mean in African languages that one knows what the African concepts of God are; and what the translation of these concepts suggests is that the African God has the attributes of the theistic God. Likewise, the limited God view defended by Wiredu uses the same strategy as a counter-argument. Thus, Wiredu contends that his own interpretation is more faithful to the meaning conveyed in the Akan language.

The reader may be surprised as to why it is the case that the debate in the African philosophy of religion is so strongly focused on questions of authentic African views. Part of the reason for this state of affairs concerns the fact that African philosophy is a field of inquiry born as a form of contestation against colonial oppression and, therefore, born as a form of postcolonial liberation instrument. As Pedro Tabensky contends:

African philosophy, as the distinctive movement that it is today, is largely a response to the postcolonial condition and, in this regard, it should be thought of as a postcolonial project even if the specific themes dealt with are not always postcolonial. African philosophy is born of pain, humiliation, destitution and destruction not solely of material conditions, but also and primarily of the symbolic order from which the confidence and meaning of Africa originally stemmed. (Tabensky, 2008, 290)

Given this drive, many debates in African philosophy are centred on exploring what Africa was really like before colonial influence (Horsthemke, 2015). This is particularly the case because often many Africans and, in the context of this paper, African philosophers feel that colonisers have misrepresented their views in the attempt to communicate either inferior images of Africans or simply to colonise African minds (Gu, 2022; Hountondji, 1996; Mbembe, 2017). Important recent reference works such as *Encyclopedia of African Religions* (Asante and Mazama, 2009) and *Encyclopedia of African Religions and Philosophy* (Mudimbe and Kavwahirehi, 2021) seek to correct the perceived misrepresentation. Most illustrative of this point is the idea that ethno-philosophy may be a colonial enterprise that misrepresents Africans (Hountondji, 1996). The debate in African Philosophy of Religion is therefore shaped by questions about decolonisation and liberation. These questions are grounded in the project of reconstructing an authentic African identity which can be both autonomous and sophisticated, dispensing with the need for it to be driven by European concepts (Wang & Cordeiro-Rodrigues, 2022). Hence the key question in many African intellectual circles is not so much whether God exists, but which view of God is really representative of what Africans traditionally think.

Nevertheless, there is also an emerging marked emphasis on individual creativity and argumentation rather than cultural data analysis. In very recent full-length books, Ada Agada (2015, 2022b), for example, has argued that, with the untenability of the categories of omnipotence and omniscience, the novel categories of power and glory adequately capture the condition of God in a tragic universe where evil abounds and cannot be eliminated and in which human beings have no certain knowledge about their ultimate purpose. According to Agada, a powerful God and a glorious God will merely be sufficiently effective and knowledgeable to create an imperfect world which the deity struggles to improve. For Agada, the limited God view does not satisfactorily resolve the problem of evil, given that even a limited God is powerful enough to create a world where evil is plentiful and has to be accounted for. The seeming gratuitousness of evil in the world leads Aribiah Attoe (2022) to go beyond Agada's positing of a tragic universe and reject the existence of a conscious God altogether. If Agada is willing to accept that God is a person, Attoe moves further away from traditional African thought and denies that God is a conscious entity. In Attoe's materialist framework, God is merely an unconscious material force with no rational ability to tailor means to ends in a mechanical, rigidly deterministic universe.

1.2 | Ancestors in African philosophy

Ancestors are another category of entities that play a fundamental role in African cosmology (see Chuks, 2021; Ige, 2006; Mbiti, 1975; Wiredu, 2013). Ancestors are entities that were previously human beings but have died and have moved to a realm where they enjoy powers beyond the scope of naturalistic comprehension of action. For

instance, ancestors are invisible and exercise powers far beyond human capacity. They are believed to reside on the earth, in sacred groves and family homesteads (Chuks, 2021). Nonetheless, not all individuals who have passed away can qualify as ancestors. To qualify for ancestorhood, a human being must have lived to a ripe old age and produced children; they must have died a good death, received honourable burial rites and lived a moral life (Chuks, 2021; Cox, 1995). A good death is one that comes naturally in old age. Violent death through suicide, for instance, would be considered a bad death. Bad deaths are routinely understood to be the result of a bad morality and are, to a certain extent, caused by one's immoral actions which may backfire (Mbiti, 1990). One such bad action may be, for example, disrespecting the ancestors and thereby losing their protection. It is, for instance, not uncommon amongst the Zulu people to believe that not performing some rituals of veneration of ancestors is a form of disrespect which leads to lack of protection from ancestors (Berglund, 1989).

Ancestors in the African context are often understood to be the guardians of morality. Ancestors are morally good entities, but they are limited and thus not morally perfect. While ancestors are regarded as constituting a moral force in the belief-systems of diverse African ethnic groups, they are not the grounds of morality. As Wiredu has insightfully noted, ancestors are bound by the moral code under which they lived on earth (Wiredu, 2013, p. 30). It is not clear whether ancestors are immortal, but in the hierarchy of beings they are below God and the lesser deities, but above human beings.

The key difference between elders and ancestors is precisely that the latter have passed away and have gained some supernatural powers. Ancestors are believed to communicate with the living through dreams and visions and may also reveal themselves through interventions that cause good fortune or misfortune in the material world (Mbiti, 1975, p. 119). Ancestors are spirits since they have moved to the realm of the dead, but they are viewed as part of the material world, and are offered food and drink during prayer sessions invoking their protection and blessings (Chuks, 2021; Ige, 2006). The fact that Africans broadly regard their ancestors as spiritual beings while describing them in material terms leads Wiredu to the conclusion that ancestors are quasi-physical or quasi-material. He notes:

I use the term 'quasi-material' to refer to any being or entity conceived as spatial but lacking some of the properties of material objects. Ancestors, for instance, although they are thought of as occupying space, are believed to be invisible to the naked eye and inaudible to the normal ear, except rarely, when they choose to *manifest* themselves to particular persons for special reasons. (Wiredu, 1996, 53)

Given that ancestors play such an important role in the human world, they do tend to be honoured. In particular, ancestors are honoured because it is believed they serve as intermediaries between God and humans since "they speak both the language of the invisible world and the language of human beings" (Mbiti, 1975, p. 63). It is generally believed that ancestors may communicate directly with their living families through dreams or indirectly through diviners who may interpret a family misfortune as a calamity masterminded by angry ancestors who were starved of veneration by the living (see Chuks, 2021, p. 471). Ancestors are regarded as the custodians of family and communal morality and a force of social stability and harmony. They are powerful enough to intervene in the natural course of things and punish or reward the living as is necessary. According to Cox (1995, 344), no evil force or machination "would ever succeed if at some point the protective power of the ancestors had not been relaxed or if for some reason they had not allowed it."

There is very little debate in African intellectual circles on whether these ancestors, as supernatural entities, exist or not. Although many people in Africa who currently adhere to Christianity and Islam do not believe that their dead relatives continue to influence earthly events after their death, philosophical discussion in African circles does not usually debate the existence of ancestors. Rather, their existence is generally assumed to be true from a cultural perspective. Relationships with ancestors is a common feature of traditional African life, a given for a large number of people (Morgan & Okyere-Manu, 2020; Thurston, 2022). In line with the decolonisation trend in African intellectual circles, what is discussed more often regarding the ancestors is whether the ways in which they are conceptualised are a legacy of colonialism. In the views influenced by theism, ancestors are nearly interchangeable with saints (Mbiti, 1990). The clearest example of this is the influential prophet and thinker Kimpa Vita from the Kingdom of Kongo, who described herself as being possessed by St Anthony in a way similar to that in which Africans sometimes

believe that ancestors interfere in people's lives (Thornton, 1998). However, just as in the case of the debate on concepts of God, the above assumption about ancestors is routinely criticised for being a legacy of colonialism that misrepresents the authentic African view.

1.3 | African philosophy of religion and the problem(s) of evil

In the Philosophy of Religion there are at least the following important formulations of the problem of evil: the traditional/logical problem of evil and the evidential problem of evil. The traditional or logical problem of evil proposes that it seems logically inconsistent for a morally perfect, omniscient and omnipotent God to allow evil to exist in the world. A God with such properties would never allow evil to occur; nonetheless, atheists argue that evil does exist and that this is sufficient proof that the theistic God does not exist (Mackie, 1955; Sterba, 2019). This view led to a variety of philosophical responses that seek to show that a morally perfect, omniscient and omnipotent God may have good reasons to allow evil in the world (Plantinga, 1974; Stump, 1985; Swinburne, 1998). More recently, some atheist philosophers have advanced further arguments that do not rely on a question of incompatibility of concepts. Some philosophers have contended that it may be the case that there is no incompatibility between the idea of a morally perfect God and the concept of evil. However, they aver that the quantity and gratuitousness of evil in the world is evidence that it is unlikely that a perfect, omniscient and omnipotent God exists. Hence, it is not so much that there is evil, but rather, *how much evil* there is (Tooley, 2019a, 2019b). The clearest illustration of this stance is the problem of animal suffering. Why does God allow animals to suffer, if this does not seem to bring about any greater good? Likewise, even if there are greater goods that can be achieved with evil, it appears unnecessary that so much evil should exist for good to be realised. By way of illustration, there is no need for genocide to be committed for a greater good to occur; it is sufficient that a smaller evil occurs for such good to be realised.

The responses from the two African philosophy schools discussed above are distinct. The African theistic tradition contends that God is not the cause of evil. Defenders of God's omnipotence, omniscience and omnibenevolence have to wrestle with the contradiction of positing an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God who allows evil to exist in the world that He created. Theistic scholars attempt to resolve the contradiction by proposing that the evil in the world is the handiwork of spiritual entities like Obonsam and human beings (see Majeed, 2016).³ Obonsam is a malevolent spiritual entity comparable with the Christian Satan, according to Majeed, and "associated with evil believed to take delight in misleading humans to commit errors" (Majeed, 2016, p. 81). Ekwensu and Esu are considered malevolent deities in Igbo and Yoruba cosmologies respectively and some African scholars have, in fact, compared them with the Christian Satan (see Ofuasia, 2022). Emmanuel Ofuasia asserts that the comparison is one more example of the imposition of Christian ideas on ATR. While arguing for the non-existence of the devil in ATR, he accounts for evil in terms of the free will of humans and other conscious beings. Drawing insights from process thought, Ofuasia offers one of the most sophisticated accounts of the problem when he suggests that God does not act coercively but persuasively (Ofuasia, 2022, p. 70). According to Ofuasia, God acts persuasively since He permits all beings to exercise free will and sustain the harmony of the universe, or imperil it, through their free actions. He contends further that: 'Evil and suffering occur as a result of the failure to meet the right ideals which God presents before all actual beings, humans and non-human, to choose from' (Ofuasia, 2022, p. 70). By tracing the source of some evils to humans and malevolent spiritual entities, Ofuasia offers an account that aims at explaining both natural and moral evil. In both cases, evil is an outcome that results from deviating from God's intentions (Ofuasia, 2021, 2022).

Against the contention that an omnipotent God would not have created the world in a way that makes physical evil possible, the theistic scholar Njoku suggests that God permitted natural evil for reasons beyond human comprehension. With specific reference to Igbo cosmology, he notes:

For the Igbo, to be existent in the way God is, is to be involved practically and realistically: to answer petitions and to say that He [sic] is around whenever, wherever and in whatever circumstances. If *Chukwu* does not answer accordingly, He is queried whether He is asleep. However 'Chukwu', 'Chineke'

is a wonderful God – 'Itununya' – and not fully comprehensible. Humans know God in an...obscure way. (Njoku, 2002, 147)

For Njoku, God's unknowability implies that, logically, the existence of evil may be compatible with a belief in an omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent personal creator of the world. Addressing the problem of moral evil, Gyekye (1995) introduces the element of determinism by noting that in Akan traditional thought God is believed to have given every human being a destiny before birth (cf. Gbadegesin, 1991). Destiny thus becomes an initial condition that determines the future trajectory of a human life. Gyekye's stance is a soft determinism position since he asserts that God only determines the broad outlines of a person's life, not the minute details (1995, 114–116). Gyekye asserts that it is the misuse of free will by human beings that causes moral evil. For him God could have created human beings in such a way that they would always do good but instead He chose to allow them free will that makes them morally responsible for their actions.

Defenders of the limited God view contend that not only is the theistic solution to the problem of omnipotence and evil unconvincing but also that the problem does not arise in African Philosophy of Religion. The rationale for this position is that Africans traditionally conceive God as limited in power, knowledge and goodness (see section 1). Hence it is understandable that evil exists in a world created by an imperfect being and that this being even does evil sometimes. Indeed, Bewaji (1998) and Fayemi (2012) assert that God does both good and evil. Nonetheless, these scholars also suggest that evil is a *necessary feature* of the world, and one which God cannot eliminate. This implies that evil is a principle of the universe, i.e. part of the universe's cosmic order, with God, lesser deities, ancestors and human beings constantly struggling to overcome it and make goodness more abundant. Evil and good are not opposite principles, according to this view. Rather, they are complementary phenomena: without the one the other is self-insufficient (Asouzu, 2005). Evil is, therefore, a necessary aspect of reality, necessary for goodness to exist, and part of God's nature. It is part of God's creation and so can never be totally overcome. With regard to ancestors, they are capable of causing harm as they are believed to visit misfortune and suffering on their descendants if the latter fail to venerate them sufficiently, even as ancestors do good by bringing fortune and happiness to descendants who do honour them (see Cox, 1995; Ige, 2006). Nonetheless, it is clear that further research on the limited God view is necessary. Broadly speaking, the evidential aspect of the problem of evil is underexplored in the literature. It is not just the existence of evil that is problematic, but also its quantity and quality (e.g., the question of animal suffering). This topic regarding the question of animal suffering, however, has been recently explored by Cordeiro-Rodrigues, who attempts a solution for it grounded in Afro-communitarianism. (Cordeiro-Rodrigues, 2022a, 2022b). Additionally, if God is imperfect, He also may not be necessary and proponents of the limited God view may need to furnish new arguments for His existence.

2 | CONCLUSION

In this article we provided an overview of debates in African Philosophy of Religion regarding the concepts of God and supernatural entities and the problem of evil. With respect to the concepts of God, we argued that, in broad terms, there are two families of thought in the literature. On the one hand, there is the African theistic view which does not differ significantly from traditional theism. This view particularly understands God as omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent and morally perfect. By contrast, the limited God view regards God as good and better than other beings, but not a morally perfect entity. In addition we outlined the role of ancestors in the African universe. Regarding the problem of evil, the African theistic view is similar to traditional theism as it treats evil as the result of free will with which human beings and spiritual entities are endowed. The limited God view, in contrast, argues that evil is part of the cosmic order. There are indications that as the field expands, philosophical positions will depend less on traditional African thought and more on individual creativity. As the field grows, it is certain that it will contribute to global philosophy of religion and motivate scholars to engage in crosscultural philosophical research.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Although there is a general belief in African thought that the natural and supernatural are not separate, for an easy flow of the text we use the term to refer to beings that are often considered supernatural in Philosophy of Religion, such as God and ancestors.
- 2 This line of thinking seems to endorse panpsychism, the view that consciousness is a fundamental aspect of the world. Indeed, philosophers like Dukor (1990) and Agada (2022b) have argued that the African universe is describable in panpsychist terms.
- 3 This stance seems to introduce a conflict since proponents of the limited God view invoke the existence of lesser deities to undermine traditional theism. While traditional theists see the existence of the lesser deities as posing no challenge to God's omnipotence, the limited God proponents regard this as problematic. One way that the traditional theists can sustain their stance is to claim that God endowed the lesser deities with free will in the same manner that He endowed humans. This conflict is one which African philosophers should be willing to engage in order to find appropriate solutions.

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