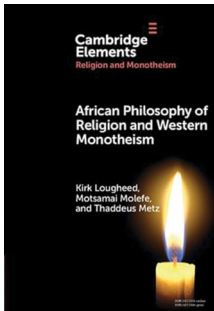




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A critical review of 'African Philosophy of Religion and Western Monotheism'

This small book does its job of spotlighting/providing a critical summary of some ideas in African traditional religion(s) and a comparative analysis of those ideas with ideas from some monotheistic religions that are popular in Europe and America. Following some preliminary clarifications in Section 1, the reader is introduced to various key concepts in ATR in Section 2. These include a description of God as "the most powerful, good, and knowing person" and also as an eternal, distant and imperceptible being that is responsible for creating and sustaining the universe. This view is later contrasted with the limited God view, which rejects the argument that God possesses certain absolute/maximal properties of omni-benevolence, omnipotence, omniscience, etc. There is also the idea of the interconnectedness of things, which the authors cash out in terms of vitality. This idea of vitality flows through to statements about the hierarchy of being, where a thing's place in the world is dependent on the type of vitality that is imbued in it by God. Now, I must remark here that relationality/interconnectedness in African thought is not only cashed out in terms of vitality. For some, like Asouzu¹ and Attoe², relationality is a necessary feature of the world, as existent things are necessarily missing links of a complementary whole. This focus on vitality ought not to be misinterpreted as establishing vitality as the primary conceptual model for understanding relationality in African traditional religion (ATR).

Sections 3 and 4 focus largely on questions about God's existence/non-existence. On the cosmological view, the authors argue that the view is "lost on ATR". This argument is hinged on the rejection of creation *ex nihilo* in favour of creation *ex materia*. However, one wonders whether creation *ex nihilo* is necessary for an account of the cosmological argument to be considered as such. I do not think so. If a crucial aspect of most cosmological arguments is the existence of a necessary being or beings from which contingent beings emanate, then the cosmological view is consistent with most traditional African viewpoints as such a necessary/eternal first cause is thought to exist.^{2,3} Another important point to note is that God's necessity does not imply aseity. While God's necessity comes from the rejection of absolute nothingness in ATR, this rejection is still consistent with the idea that God (a condition that constitutes all regressively eternal entities), in some ATR, is not self-sufficient. The condition of relationality (in *ex materia* arguments), and the presence and sustenance of the universe, as a way of avoiding the unattractive state of *being-alone*, all point to this non-aseity.² In Section 4, the book explores arguments about God's hiddenness (which seems odd for a section focused on arguments about God's non-existence). First explaining God's hiddenness through the framework of J.L. Schellenberg's views (although the African views can be examined on their own merit), the authors conclude that, in some versions of ATR, God is concealed and distant from the human being and that relationships with other mediating agents (such as ancestors) are often sufficient alternative options that are available to the practitioner of ATR. This may be true for some views, but this hiddenness, I must say, does not imply atheism (or the non-existence of God) in the strict sense. Furthermore, a treatment of Okot p'Bitek's views on the non-existence of a Supreme Being in ATR would have been important for this section, rather than arguments about God's hiddenness.⁴ Concerning the best possible world argument – where God is either unfree (if God has no choice than to create the best possible world) or morally surpassable (if God can only create a less-than-perfect world) – the authors conclude that, for ATR, God does create the best possible world, but there is little discussion about whether God can be free in a libertarian sense. This best possible world is, however, not a world bereft of evil, because good cannot exist without evil.

In addressing the problem of evil, the authors discuss the appeal to fate (whether good or bad) as a reflection of a grand plan for one's life as envisioned by God. In this way, the experience of evil is not gratuitous. While one might wonder about the type of God that metes out bad destinies to certain beings, the authors also consider the idea of a limited God that is capable of evil and/or limited in knowledge or power.^{5,6} While the book argues that the problem of evil still applies to the limited God, as suggested by Ada Agada, I dispute this point because a God capable of evil or lacking some powers might fail at preventing gratuitous evil as (1) a morally limited God might showcase evil or (2) a limited God cannot prevent all evil at all times. The insistence that the problem of evil persists for the limited God is, for me, problematic.

The final parts of the book deal with religious ethics and the afterlife in ATR. The book, again, draws on the idea of vitality, monism and holism in African thought. The authors, however, fail to describe the sort of logic that undergirds these viewpoints. To argue against dualism and yet bifurcate reality into the natural and supernatural; and to argue for the interdependence/inter-relationality of all things, which are also opposed to each other, requires a logic that is not strict on contradictions. For the reader to understand the underlying worldview (monism and holism), the reader must also be exposed to the logic that grounds such a view.

In any case, the authors attempt to develop a meta-ethical and normative account of vitality ethics (the latter focusing on accounts of dignity). Meta-ethically speaking, though, one is not quite clear about the actual meta-ethical concerns discussed or resolved. One would expect discussions on how vitality stands as a moral property, and/or how the vitalist account successfully bridges the is/ought gap. Similarly, while the book makes some interesting arguments about how the vitalist view escapes the Euthyphro dilemma, questions remain about how the vital force, in itself, constitutes God's will.

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