

## COMMENT

## Public health and Christian theism in Africa: An approach to evil and religious belief in the afterlife

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**Abstract**

*Religious beliefs may significantly impact the effectiveness of health policies. In this article, I analyse how Christian theistic beliefs about evil and suffering, in connection with belief in the afterlife, have unreasonable ethical implications in the context of African epistemologies. Further, I contend that such Christian theistic beliefs have a negative impact on health policies, especially during the current pandemic. They prescribe one-size-fits-all approaches, which neglect contextual issues in addressing the pandemic. They also encourage passivity and neglect in the face of suffering. I then offer an alternative inspired by Afro-communitarianism, which I argue is convincing. Given that the theistic view is morally indefensible, I contend that it cannot be a good explanation of the problem of evil.*

**Keywords:** public health; Covid-19; religious beliefs and health; African religions; theism; the problem of evil; belief in the afterlife

**Introduction**

Ideological factors play an important role in determining the implementation of public health policies. For example, communities tending towards libertarian ideological tendencies have been more resistant to public health policies during Covid-19 [1]. This article seeks to explore how some Christian theistic formulations and solutions to the philosophical problem of evil are harmful to the extent that they justify health policies that neglect the socioeconomically disadvantaged groups, especially black people who tend to be more socioeconomically disadvantaged. While there are different kinds of theism (eg, Islamic theism), I only engage with Christian theism in this article. In particular, I will address two Christian theistic arguments: (a) that suffering is an illusion because there is an afterlife that shows that it does not exist; and (b) that the existence of an afterlife makes gross suffering become relative suffering. This is not to say that all

theist philosophers hold such views. For example, Peter van Inwagen clearly states that the former view is mistaken [2]. By “the problem of evil”, I mean the question of why an omnipotent, omniscient and morally perfect God allows evil to occur in the world, when He who has all powers should be able to stop it [2].

I contend that Christian theistic justifications of the existence of evil provide a moral framework that rationalises suffering as morally justifiable. Moreover, Christian theories of the afterlife imply a variety of harmful health policies, as demonstrated below. All this makes the arguments morally indefensible. A theodicy – a theological vindication of the existence of evil – on behalf of a perfect God needs to be morally defensible, or it cannot adequately justify God’s allowing evil in the world. Philosophers who wish to defend such a view need to present good reasons for the occurrence of evil. If the reasons are unconvincing, then their arguments fail. I focus particularly on the implications of theist arguments regarding health inequalities during the Covid-19 pandemic. The theistic view is ideologically problematic because it prescribes passivity in the face of suffering and health injustices. I consider an Afro-communitarian ethical theory to be more convincing, as it is able to explain the problem of evil without the absurd implications of the Christian theistic view. My article addresses the question of evil from an African epistemological view [3]. The little work done on the problem of evil from an African perspective has not yet carried out this inquiry, focusing on the Covid-19 pandemic [4, 5].

I will outline some theistic explanations of the existence of evil, focusing on those justifications that formulate the response in terms of an *afterlife*. I will then provide a critique of these explanations, inspired by Afro-communitarian philosophers such as Metz[6], Gyekye[7], and Menkiti [8]. My third section formulates an Afro-communitarian explanation of why evil exists, and I will show that it does not have negative implications for health policies, with a particular focus on Covid-19. The last section replies to some possible arguments against my view.

**Theism, the explanation of evil, and the afterlife**

Theists tend to believe that God is morally perfect, omnipotent and omniscient. By “morally perfect”, theists mean that God makes no moral mistakes and always acts in the morally right way. “Omnipotence” means God has the power to do anything that it is logically possible to do,

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although He cannot, for example, make square circles because this is not logically possible. "Omniscience" means that God knows everything. Nonetheless, several atheists have challenged the belief of a God with such a set of characteristics on the grounds that evil exists in the world. We are routinely confronted with challenges manifesting evil – murders, invasions – or seen as the fruits of evil – pandemics, natural disasters, and so forth. If God is perfect, omniscient and omnipotent, then how can He allow such evils to occur? The atheist contends that it is not coherent that God has those characteristics and simultaneously allows evil [9,10].

Theists have offered several explanations for this, but I am only going to focus on the ones that use the idea of an *afterlife*. Some Christian theist philosophers, such as Alexander Pope, sometimes contend that the existence of the afterlife makes the evil experienced during our lives meaningless in a variety of ways. Pope thinks that just like a symphony may sound ugly if the instruments are played separately, the suffering in one's life appears to be caused by evil if understood in a narrow way, ie, without the idea of an afterlife. However, when one sees life from the perspective of *eternity*, one realises that suffering is part of a harmonious symphony which thus has some justification. Evil is therefore, for Pope, an illusion that results from having a narrow perspective as to what life really is [11].

Unfortunately, this kind of argument is not mere theoretical speculation on how the current Covid-19 pandemic is sometimes understood. Although it may not be immediately obvious how this is linked to Covid-19, note the dynamic of the discourse of those who deny the existence of the virus. Not only is it the case that there are several Covid-19 deniers worldwide, but also that religious discourse has been one of the ways that such denial has spread. Many Christian Churches in Africa and elsewhere have unfortunately engaged in a negationist discourse, which is harmful for their followers. Take for example, some Christian Churches in Cameroon, which have denied the existence of anything like Covid-19, with one of its leaders stating that "We are asking everybody to go on their knees and pray and know that there is nothing as coronavirus." [12]. Likewise, a pastor from a Nigerian Christian Church told his followers "I can tell you as a prophet, there is nothing in it, so anyone that is being deceived as a victim of Covid-19, be free from the fear of it" [13]. This kind of belief is surely fueled by a normative and semiotic approach, which suggests that gross suffering is nothing but an illusion and that instead, one ought to trust that there is a divine plan.

In contrast with the view that evil is illusory, there is another Christian justification for suffering which does not deny the existence of evil. Instead, it understands evil as less significant when one realises that there is a good and eternal afterlife. From the point of view of eternity, the suffering during one's life period is not considered significant, even if life on Earth resembles gross suffering. Put differently, given that individuals have an afterlife that is eternal and good, the

suffering of, say, 80 years is not significant [14].

This view then unfolds several justifications of why God allows evil. The most prominent Christian theistic explanation for the existence of evil is that God may put individuals through difficult situations as a way to make us learn how to be morally good and thus as a way of giving us eternal life. Thus, the adversity of sickness (which is a form of evil) leads individuals to learn about evil and therefore to become better people [15].

The idea that this suffering is not significant is also something that has unfortunately guided the ideas of some Christian Churches worldwide. Looking at the case of Africa, some Christian churches have engaged in the discourse that God or Jesus will save believers, regardless of whether they suffer or not [16]. Furthermore, some of these Churches suggest that God is testing their faith and they should show they believe in Jesus by continuing to come to church and ignoring social distancing measures [12,13,16,17]. The discourse is once more grounded in Christian moral values like the idea that one should put oneself in God's hands and trust that whatever misfortunes happen during one's lifetime are only relative misfortunes because ultimately God will save one.

### Public health and Christian theism: an Afro-communitarian critique

The justifications of the existence of evil impact how people perceive and respond to public health policies. In this section, I do not offer an empirical study of how those beliefs impact public health, but tease out the *ideological implications* that such justifications have for public health. Christian theist arguments and their ideological implications tend to overlook the suffering of individuals from the global South, especially black individuals. Hence, those theistic views on human suffering have morally dubious ideological implications both for public health policies and for personal behaviour.

One example is how such views impact ways to look at lockdowns imposed during the pandemic. Lockdown discourses often ignore social differences. At the beginning of the pandemic, some of the suggested policies for lockdown neglected the fact that for many individuals from the global South, locking down meant not having a daily income. Indeed, without financial support for the poor, in some cases, lockdown involved both impoverishment and death. This neglect represents a viewpoint that considers the experience of privileged individuals (usually white or other middle class) in professions that allow them to work comfortably from home, to be the norm. It prescribes measures that simply ask everyone to stay home without any economic support, neglecting the fact that many black people depend on a daily wage to live and sustain their families [18]. Thus, the online work option is not really an "option" for many individuals, more so in the global South. Hence, lockdown policies that do not look at the specific

circumstances of individuals may cost lives and, in fact, worsen the effects of the pandemic [19]. In fact, as has been shown in the efforts towards eradicating HIV, it is important to look at the context to overcome the disease [20-22].

It may not be immediately clear why this kind of lockdown rationale is implied by the Christian theist view. The key point I wish to make is that at least the theist viewpoints analysed in this article abstract from the real issues of individuals, assuming a privileged position and placing suffering as insignificant or nonexistent. Indeed, it is usually an aspect of a theodicy to use this kind of abstraction. This is because suffering seems evident and undeniable in common sense morality; the only way to deny it or rationalise it is to explore meta-explanations for this. It is therefore this method of denying the suffering, which fuels a neglect of the actual suffering in the world [23]. This abstraction assumes a privileged viewpoint about suffering, which is the viewpoint of the usually white, privileged theist philosopher. Consequently, suffering is relativised, and the theist argument put forward can be seen as a mischaracterisation of the problem. Fundamentally, what the theist argument reveals is a lack of empathy towards the black "other", where the condition of this other is not properly considered. Here, the suffering of those in a more vulnerable socioeconomic situation is overlooked [24]. In short, affirming that evil is nonexistent or insignificant, because the joys of the afterlife compensate for earthly suffering, is especially problematic because it neglects those in the global South who suffer *the most significant* harms, and justifies health policies which exclude them.

The theistic approach mentioned above also has ideological implications for how individuals should behave. One critique that can be advanced by African scholars is that this theology is a motivator in maintaining oppressive racist health practices that unevenly impact the African peoples – such as lockdowns that make some individuals unable to earn their income if they are isolated. That is, to the extent that the suffering is said to be justified by God's purpose, it suggests that there is a moral justification for it and, therefore, individuals ought to accept it. Consequently, it prescribes passivity in the face of racial inequalities in the arena of health. For the idea of a reward of another life ideologically implies inactivity and the acceptance of oppression. Nonetheless, most of these health inequalities are moral evils caused by economic and social differences, as well as systemic racism, which ought to be actively opposed. The reason why black people have suffered more from Covid-19 is due to socioeconomic differences, such as poor housing, and inadequate access to healthcare, clean water and shelter, lack of resources to purchase protective equipment, and so forth [25,26]. Religion routinely exerts a significant impact on individual behaviour, and whatever the theist view prescribes has a significant impact on individuals [27].

In terms of personal behaviour, it is no surprise that some Churches have ignored social distancing, or the use of masks, and have resisted vaccination. To the extent that suffering is

seen to be relative and sometimes necessary for a greater good, the implication is that whatever suffering the virus may cause should not be taken seriously. The theist white philosopher assumes that the amount of suffering is not substantial, which may be so from a privileged socioeconomic position. The rationale is that, because there is an afterlife, the suffering in this life cannot really be considered gross suffering. To offer an analogy, 10 years suffering in a life of 25 years seems to be gross suffering. While, according to this argument, 10 years in a life of, say, 80 years, seems proportionately less. The Christian theist argument rationalises current suffering (which affects racialised groups the most) as morally justifiable. By offering such an explanation for evil, the theist banalises suffering, rendering it justifiable. In the theist argument, it is something to be accepted, rather than being recognised as something to be avoided. This is particularly problematic because the theist argument not only justifies suffering; rather it is blind to it, justifying gross and unequally distributed suffering that burdens black people disproportionately. What this implies in terms of personal behaviour is that there is no reason to take care of oneself or others, as ultimately this suffering is meaningless, as God will save one. Thus, in practice, there is no reason to maintain social distancing and stop going to church because, even if this causes some harm, that harm is insignificant when compared to the union with God. Likewise, wearing masks, getting vaccinated and generally protecting oneself is not only meaningless, but may also may be a way to disturb the relationship with God. This is because if suffering performs an important moral function (it is a gift from God with a good purpose), then individuals ought not to avoid it.

The African communitarian viewpoint (understood as the worldview from Africa that prioritises communal goodness) generally contests such views. Afro-communitarians do not necessarily oppose the idea that suffering is necessary for a higher good, such as moral learning [28]. This kind of idea whereby adversity is a necessary condition for its opposite is, in fact, consistent with some African views of the world [28]. Nonetheless, Africans contest the theist argument on suffering. Some African philosophers observe that since burdens (including health burdens) are unevenly distributed across the world, this justification of suffering as moral learning is mistaken. For instance, Jones argues that God could not have chosen specific ethnicities (like African ethnicities) to suffer more for the purpose of moral learning [24]. Indeed, in terms of health, a significant number of health problems tend to appear in black people due to structural disadvantages (eg, exposure to environmental hazards) [29-32]. But if it is the case that some groups are much more burdened than others, this would imply that God had targeted specific ethnic communities for suffering and was inflicting suffering on an ethnic group for the good of other groups. However, this implication is unreasonable. If one transfers this rationale to a human one, it would be the equivalent of a government sacrificing the welfare and

rights of a minority ethnic group for the good of the rest of society. No one could reasonably accept such a prescription [33]. Thus, the theist justification of evil is unacceptable because of its unreasonable implications.

### **African traditional religions, public health, and the problem of evil**

In this section, I wish to advance the argument that the way Afro-communitarian traditional religions conceive the problem of evil and the afterlife does not go against public health measures and can be helpful in overcoming a pandemic like Covid-19. African traditional religions tend to understand God as the creator, but an imperfect one. God is generally disengaged from the world [34]. God however, is the entity providing the world with a moral code. He is a God of harmony and, as such, harmony is the highest good. Hence, the African worldview tends to the idea that the more one contributes to the good of the community, the better. The morality of an action is evaluated on whether the action promotes harmony/positive communal relationships. Positive communal relationships, in this context, imply a combination of solidarity and identification [7]. In particular, it means promoting relationships of goodwill and understanding others as a continuation of ourselves. This promotion of others' well-being contributes to individual well-being as well because they overlap significantly. Hence, those who actually act in morally bad ways will also suffer from their actions, because being in an antagonistic relationship within a community is bad for oneself [35]. Moreover, the African communitarian perspective tends to be that every action should promote life. The more life is promoted the better, and the actions of individuals ought to be directed towards promoting life [36,37]. In short, one is expected, according to this ethic, to promote the welfare of others and through that, promote one's own welfare. In contrast with the Christian theist view, it does not conceive of suffering as good and does not conceive of the afterlife as a promised land. Instead, people are duty bound to address suffering and if they are passive about this, a negative (bad) afterlife will follow [38].

This ethics is inextricably linked with an African ontology. Traditionally, Africans understand the world as interconnected and interdependent. Entities are not understood in an atomistic way where individuals and things are separate entities; but are seen as being in a continuity with each other. Illustrative of this is the West African art motif of the Siamese Crocodile. This art motif depicts a crocodile with two heads and a shared stomach. When one of the heads eats, it will impact the other head due to the shared stomach. One's actions and one's well-being are thus dependent on others as separation from other existing beings is only an appearance. The reality from an African perspective is that one being is a continuation of the other [39,40].

This view has several advantages over the theist one in terms of health. First, due to the absence of the rhetoric of a promised afterlife, it urges individuals to act for the sake of

their health during their lifetime in the world. Life is to be lived now and therefore actions are to be directed towards the promotion of life. Moreover, life is to be lived in a specific way: it should be to promote the life and wellness of others as well as oneself [37]. Second, the African ontology and understanding of the source of evil can help promote goodness in general. The understanding that one is well only when others are also well is of key importance for the pandemic we have been facing. As has been widely suggested by health experts, the pandemic can only be resolved if everyone takes care of themselves and through that takes care of others [41, 42]. In terms of the current health issues faced during the pandemic, this involves the following policies and individual behaviours:

- It means more equity in the distribution of health resources worldwide. An unequal distribution of vaccines, masks, and medical protective equipment is a violation of the promotion of social harmony.
- It enjoins that certain forms of personal behaviour which put others at risk are morally wrong. These include not getting vaccinated as this can contribute to spreading the virus and creating new variants. It also includes the idea that the refusal to wear masks or not keeping to social distancing when possible are violations of religious ethical prescriptions. Positively, it prescribes taking care of oneself (like exercising, not being unnecessarily exposed) and others (aid those who need it, protect others from exposure) [40, 41].

Note that the differences in prescriptions between the theist and traditional African religions are not simple accidents. They are grounded in the core values of each religious moral foundation: while Christian theist views value libertarian freedom and apathy, African traditional religions value solidarity and vitality.

### **Lack of charity, atheism, and anti-communalism**

Theists may argue that the above interpretation of their philosophy is uncharitable, that it assumes that white people do not suffer, and may deny that their theory suggests passivity in the face of health or other inequities. On the other hand, atheists may feel that the mere fact that religious beliefs – in this case – coincide with public health recommendations in the current pandemic is not sufficient reason to endorse them. Such religious beliefs are false and, as such, tend to be harmful and, overall, it is better to eliminate them completely. More often than not, religious beliefs bring about many forms of harm, especially in relation to the health of individuals [43,44].

Regarding the first objection, my argument does not assume that white individuals do not suffer. The point of the argument is not that there is a suffering group and a non-suffering group. Instead, my argument relies on the idea that black Africans tend to suffer the most inequities and,



therefore, tend to suffer more. Given this social reality, theist arguments which morally justify suffering are actually stating that the much higher degree of suffering among black communities is morally justified, which is an unreasonable position to take. On the second point, there is no doubt that the text of the theist philosophers is not explicit in suggesting that one should be passive about suffering. The same cannot be affirmed about the Bible or the Christian (especially the Catholic) tradition, which routinely suggests turning the other cheek and praises weakness. Theist arguments, however, cannot be read outside the context of Christian literature and, in fact, the Christian philosopher Eleonore Stump explicitly affirms that the explanations can only be understood and conceived as coherent if made within the framework of Christian moral thought [14].

More importantly, my argument is not about what the theist philosophers' texts explicitly state, but what they *likely motivate* in the social realm. An ideology that states that earthly suffering is not significant, that it is morally acceptable and promotes a good afterlife incentivises passivity (or disincentivises action) to the extent that there is no reason why the person ought to try to promote her welfare at this point. This is especially the case because the possible ways of promoting this welfare now may conflict with future welfare. This Christian belief is therefore likely to demotivate attempts at pursuing welfare [45].

The main issue with the atheist argument is that it oversimplifies the complex reality of religion. Religions are not all the same: as systems of belief which are normative, they prescribe different principles to their followers. The argument against religion cannot therefore be made in such a general way. Instead, it needs to look at the specific prescriptions of each religion and evaluate if what the prescriptions imply conflicts with other important values, such as the promotion of health. Further, the atheist would not be able to make a case against African traditional religions. Contrary to general prejudice, these religions have, historically played an important role in preventing the spread of diseases. Traditional African healers, for example, played a fundamental role in teaching their communities how to prevent HIV and Ebola [41, 46]. If the prescriptions are not against any other core value, it is unclear why they ought to be abandoned, especially as cultural and religious association is a key aspect of human well-being.

## Conclusion

To conclude, I contended that Christian theist explanations of the problem of evil tied to beliefs in an afterlife are not only morally unconvincing, but are in fact harmful for health. To the extent that they are morally unconvincing, they cannot be used to adequately explain the problem of evil. Analysing their arguments, it can be concluded that they prescribe passivity and conceptualise black people's excessive burden of suffering as morally justified. I believe an alternative to this theory is that based on Afro-communitarian philosophy. This

theory, which understands the world in a holistic manner, prescribes communal ties as the main ethical value. This approach not only has fewer complicated ethical implications than the theist view, but may also be beneficial in promoting healthcare during this pandemic.

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