



African Theism and Divine openness: A Theo-religious dialogue on God's relationship with the world

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ABSTRACT

African theism and openness-of-God theology have striking theo-religious similarities, the key one being that both view God as having a give-and-take relationship with humans. This study seeks to engage African theism and openness theology in a meaningful dialogue, with the intention of exploring how this exchange may enhance both African and Christian religious practices. To achieve its main objective, the study utilised an analytical method, focusing on a critical cross-religious comparison of African theism and open theism. The study discovered that the intersection of the two theistic traditions is based on critical theo-religious concepts such as libertarian free will, divine *kenosis*, and the openness of the future. Upon thorough examination, these concepts suggest that God holds human relationships in high regard, to the degree that He has opted to collaborate with humans in forming the future. In such an arrangement, individuals possess the agency to influence the trajectory of future developments. They possess the capacity to influence divine decision-making in significant ways. The study advances the fields of African and Christian studies, especially concerning the nature of God's relationship with the world.

Keywords: African theism, Kenosis, Libertarian Free Will, Open Theism,

INTRODUCTION

This study arises from the inquiry: what characterises the intersection of African theism and openness theology, and how might the dialogue between these two traditions enhance both African and Christian spiritual experiences?

To establish a contextual foundation for this introduction, the researcher begins by examining the classical Christian theological narrative that posits God as timeless.¹ The researcher chooses to begin here because open theism is fundamentally a response to classical theistic theology, which holds that God preordained everything that exists. The relationship between God and people that emerges from classical theology is such that humans do not always have a voice in what and how events occur. They simply follow the script that God has predetermined. This is because, according to classical theism, claiming that God is timeless implies that God does not experience the temporal sequence or succession as temporal beings do.²

¹ Brian Leftow, "Instants, Events, and God," *Debates in the Metaphysics of Time*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 248.

² Richard A Holland, *God, Time, and the Incarnation* (Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2012). 1.

This theological argument postulates that if God exists inside time, He would encounter the same constraints as temporal beings. These restrictions encompass God's incremental growth in knowledge with each passing moment and His anticipation of the future, akin to human cognition.

Philosophers such as Xenophanes have significantly shaped the discourse on timelessness theology, placing considerable emphasis on God's transcendence to suggest that God "remains in the same state, changing not at all."³ Xenophanes' argument culminates in the foundational aspects of the timelessness tradition, highlighting a mode of existence that allows God to surpass the constraints faced by humans bound by the dimensions of space and time. One of the submissions advanced by the tradition of timelessness is that humans cannot comprehend the entirety of reality, including knowledge of future contingents. Conversely, according to classical theism, God surpasses this constraint, as His timeless standpoint grants Him the ability to comprehend the full range of reality, encompassing an awareness of future contingents.

While the tradition of timelessness has a rich historical lineage, featuring prominent thinkers throughout the evolution of ideas, it nonetheless encompasses both internal and external theological and religious implications. For example, a God characterised by timelessness cannot coexist with humanity, as this would necessitate His engagement with change and the progression from one moment to the next, attributes that are fundamentally incompatible with the notion of timelessness.⁴

The preceding foundational observations are articulated to establish African theism, which embodies a distinct conviction in contrast to the tradition of timelessness. In the context of African theism, the existence of God is situated within the dimensions of time and space, rendering God, despite His divine nature, a being that is temporal. In this configuration, temporality does not imply that God came into being or has the capacity to cease to exist. What this connotes is that God engages with the fabric of space-time existence in a manner akin to human experience. This attestation proposes that God may not possess knowledge of future contingents.

Recently, open theism has presented a theoreligious framework that exhibits similarities to African theism. This framework, similar to the African theistic framework, contests the tenets of timelessness theology, postulating that God participates in a reciprocal relationship with humanity. In this arrangement, both God and human actions collaboratively influence the unfolding of the future. One conclusion stressed by open theism is that God is not the sole architect of future events.⁵

This study does not explicitly pursue the timelessness tradition. However, it utilises concepts from the tradition for contextual clarity. The focus of the study is, instead, on the convergence between African theism and the theology of divine openness. The objective of examining this junction is to establish a theologically religious framework pertinent to the spiritual experiences of African Christians.

METHODOLOGY

This study used an analytical research methodology using a desktop research approach to critically examine the literature surrounding African theism and openness theology. Drawing from the findings of the data analysis, the study explored the intersection between African theism and open theism. The inquiry was propelled by the research question: What defines the convergence of African theism and openness theology, and in what ways could the discourse between these two traditions enrich both African and Christian spiritual experiences? The study involved the use of secondary sources, including scholarly books and journal articles. The sources were compiled from various academic platforms, including Google Scholar, ResearchGate, Academia, and the library. The justification for utilising this approach lies in its capacity to enable the researcher to organise existing data systematically and elucidate intricate phenomena at the convergence of African thought and open theism. Therefore, the study design is structured into three main sections, in

³ William E Mann, "Divine Sovereignty and Aseity," in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion*, ed. William Wainwright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 35 2007.

⁴ Eisa Mohammadinia and Seyyed Dibaji, "Critical Consideration on God's Essence and His Features in Open Theism," *Journal of Philosophical Investigations* 16, no. 41 (2022): 386–98.

⁵ Ferdinand Nwaigbo, *Faith in an Age of Reason and Science* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2003); Mohammadinia and Dibaji, "Critical Consideration on God's Essence and His Features in Open Theism," 388.

addition to the introduction and conclusion. The first two sections offer an in-depth examination of African theism and openness theology, respectively. The objective of these sections is to establish a foundational framework for the third section, which serves as the central focus of this study. The third section, which serves as the core of this study, examines the convergence of African Theism and Open Theism. The section seeks to address the question of what characterises the intersection of African theism and openness theology, and how the interaction between these two traditions could enrich both African and Christian spiritual experiences.

God in Traditional African Religion

This section explores African traditional religion, from which the concept of African theism originated. It is essential to commence this study here, as a comprehensive understanding of the intersection between African theism and open theism requires an examination of the contexts in which these traditions are situated.

Initial assertions by Western academics positing that Africans lack a religious framework have recently faced scrutiny and opposition in contemporary scholarly discourse. Current literature overwhelmingly indicates that African traditional religion is not only as ancient as the continent itself but also predates the arrival of Christian missionaries and Western scholarship in Africa.⁶ This is an important point to highlight because Africans' conception of God originated within the context of African traditional religion.

Similar to other prominent world religions, African traditional religion is fundamentally cultural, with the essence of culture embodying the religious identity of Africans. When considering the cultural dimension of any given religion, Paul Gifford points out that God continuously reveals Himself in the Bible through the cultural circumstances of the individuals involved. For example, the Lord's supper (Mat 26:26-28) was conducted within the framework of Jewish culture to ensure that its significance resonated with the Jewish people in their own context. In a way, the biblical verses themselves are a manifestation of diverse cultural influences. Culture, moreover, encompasses essential components including language, values, customs, and traditions. Gifford underscores, therefore, that any attempt to undermine the cultural expressions of Africans simultaneously undermines the manner in which God manifests Himself to them.⁷

Gifford's assertion holds considerable weight, especially considering that the arrival of missionaries to Africa was met with challenges originating from unfamiliar religious and cultural expressions of the African populace, which contrasted sharply with Western norms. Missionaries, accordingly, embarked on a campaign to deconstruct the cultural identity of the African populace with the intention of instilling their own Western interpretation of divinity among Africans. Missionaries believed that Africans needed to be saved from what they considered to be a barbaric and demonic culture.

The African traditional religious world can be classified into two critical paradigms. The first paradigm includes five major beliefs held by Africans. These beliefs are centred on God, divinities, spirits, ancestors, and magical elements. These beliefs are unique to Africans and set the African religion apart from other world religions such as Christianity and Islam. The second paradigm includes two secondary but critical beliefs that are basically derived from the previous beliefs. These beliefs include the idea of life after death and the veneration of ancestors.⁸ The role of ancestors in African traditional religion is of paramount importance; their absence would lead to the disintegration of the religion itself. Ancestors offer guidance and safeguard their descendants. They function as intermediaries between God and humanity.

From the above paradigms, the African religion divides into two realms: the spiritual and physical realms. Spirit beings such as God, divinities, and ancestor spirits live in the spirit realm. The physical realm encompasses material entities such as humans and animals. The two realms are inextricably linked, as if they

⁶ Philip La G. Du Toit, "Rethinking Identity Theory in Light of the In-Christ Identity in the African Context," *HTS Theologies Studies / Theological Studies* 80, no. 1 (February 16, 2024): 1–9, <https://doi.org/10.4102/HTS.v80i1.8914>.

⁷ Paul Gifford, "Africa's Inculturation Theology: Observations of an Outsider," *Hekima Review* 38 (2008): 18–34.

⁸ Ibigbolade S Aderibigbe, "Origin, Nature, and Structure of Beliefs System," in *The Palgrave Handbook of African Traditional Religion* (Springer, 2022), 32.

form a single reality.⁹ Given that all aspects of reality are interwoven in African traditional religion, it serves as the foundational framework upon which the African worldview is constructed.

Taking into account the African religious landscape, African theism emerges from a rich tapestry of proverbs, naming traditions, lived experiences, divine utterances, mythology, and folklore, among various other influences. For example, the Yorùbá refer to God as *Olódùmarè*, a designation that ascribes creatorship to God.¹⁰ From this perspective, it can be inferred that Africans view God as the creator of the universe. The Kono community in Sierra Leone designates God with the term *Meketa*, which conveys the meaning of “the Everlasting One.” Mike Ushe avows that these traditional names embody the deep connection that Africans have nurtured with God over countless generations.¹¹ Moreover, the Ashanti proverb, “No one shows a child the Supreme Being,” suggests that Africans have an inherent understanding of the existence of God, “almost by intuition.”¹² All these declarations suggest that the African conception of God is rooted in Africans’ personal interactions with God.

Certain unique characteristics clearly separate African traditional religion from other prominent world religions such as Christianity and Islam. Two of these characteristics are that other religions are centred around prominent figures such as Jesus Christ in Christianity and Muhammad in Islam, whereas African traditional religion does not follow this pattern. It is possible, however, that the inception of the African traditional religion was marked by its own original founders, whose identities may have faded into obscurity over time. It is equally plausible that, even if the founders were recognised, their importance was undermined by the deep respect that Africans held for the divine presence of God. What persists to this day, however, is that African traditional religion represents the spiritual heritage of the ancestors of Africans.

Secondly, unlike other religions, African religion does not seek to convert individuals to its beliefs. Individuals who follow this religion are typically brought into it from birth. Furthermore, African traditional religion does not centre on a sacred text akin to the Bible in Christianity or the Quran in Islam. This belief system is based on the richness of personal experiences. The essence of its message is encapsulated in oral traditions, including proverbs, idioms, divine nomenclature, and mythological narratives.

Even so, there exist two opposing African schools of thought concerning the concept of God as inferred from His African names and lived experiences. One school posits that African names for God actually denote the God of the Christian religion. This school is known as the “perfect-God school of thought.” God, according to this school, embodies all imaginable omni-attributes. These omni-attributes exhibit the characteristics of the Christian God, including omniscience, omnipresence, immutability, and timelessness. Ada Agada and Bruno Ikuli examine this school of thought but do not clarify whether timelessness qualifies as one of these omni-attributes.¹³ Noteworthy African scholars associated with the perfect-God school include John Mbiti¹⁴ and Bolaji Idowu,¹⁵ whom the Ugandan poet, Okot p’Bitek,¹⁶ criticise for moulding the African conception of God in accordance with Christian frameworks.

The second school, on the other hand, asserts that the African names of God are not related to the Christian God. According to scholars of this school, African names for God exclusively communicate God as understood by traditional Africans. Byang Kato¹⁷ and Tite Tiénou¹⁸ are affiliated with this perspective. The researcher aligns more closely with the second school of thought. The rationale for favouring this school

⁹ Rev. Jacob Mokhutso, “Ancestors Are Demonic - Is It True? Traversing Christian Demonology and African Traditional Religion,” *Pharos Journal of Theology* 103, no. 2 (November 2022), <https://doi.org/10.46222/pharosjot.103.2046>.

¹⁰ A O Banwo, “Contextualizing the Supreme Being in Yoruba and Chinese Cultures,” *LASU Journal of African Studies (OPANBATA), A Publication of African Languages, Literature & Communication Arts*, 10 no. 4 (2022):

¹¹ Mike Ushe, “God, Divinities and Ancestors in African Traditional Religious Thought,” *African Cultural Personalities in a World of Change: Monolithic Cultural Purity and the Emergence of New Values*, 1942. 163.

¹² John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 11th ed. (London: Heinemann, 1985). 29.

¹³ Ada Agada and Bruno Yammelluan Ikuli, “Orthodox Christian Conception of Hell and African Traditional Religion (ATR) Eschatology,” *Religions* 15, no. 11 (November 15, 2024): 1–12, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15111388>.

¹⁴ John S Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* (Waveland Press, 2015).

¹⁵ E Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*, (London: Longmans, 1962).

¹⁶ Okot P’Bitek, *Africa’s Cultural Revolution* (Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau, 1973). 72.

¹⁷ Byang Kato, “Theological Anemia in Africa,” in *Biblical Christianity in Africa* (Achimota: Africa Christian Press, 1985).

¹⁸ Tite Tienou, *The Theological Task of the Church in Africa* (Achimota: Africa Christian Press, 1990).

lies in the understanding that divine revelation, as experienced through the socio-cultural contexts of individuals, will manifest distinctly for Africans compared to Westerners. In view of this, the researcher posits that the God of Christianity is fundamentally the same as the God revered by Africans, albeit understood through distinct cultural lenses within the two religious frameworks.

Basilius Kasera argues, however, that the concept of God is not present within African traditional religion. According to him, the establishment of missionary presence in Africa marked the start of African interaction with the concept of God. Kasera, moreover, describes African divinities as idols, implying that idol worship, not the worship of God, was widespread among Africans before the arrival of missionaries.¹⁹ The assertions put forth by Kasera align closely with those of Agnieszka Podolecka, who avers that the Zulus' understanding of *uNkulunkulu* as God may have been shaped by the influence of missionaries. Podolecka also postulates that prior to the advent of missionaries, *uNkulunkulu* was perceived as an ancestral being.²⁰

The researcher's interpretation of Kasera and Podolecka suggests that, on the one hand, they seem to support the claims of the early missionaries about the absence of a concept of God among Africans. However, their claims fall flat when compared to the evidence presented by Aylward Shorter, who states that the attributes identifying the African God far outnumber those normally stated in traditional Christian theological works.²¹ Shorter's admission implies that Africans had beliefs about God before the missionaries. Kasera, moreover, is mistaken in asserting that Africans engaged in idol worship.²² The notion of idol worship is foreign to the religious framework of Africa. For instance, the Banyarwanda articulate, "*Imana n'Imana yahanze byose*," conveying that "God is God and it is He who has created all things." In consideration of this assertion, Léon Classe cautions, "Do not look for idols in this country as our people are out and out monotheistic and for them 'nothing can be like God,' let alone surpass Him."²³

In summary, African theism is deeply rooted in the foundations of African traditional religion, and these foundations existed before the advent of missionary influence. Indeed, in contemporary African religion, one can observe certain Christian theological influences shaping African understanding of the divine. However, within its traditional context, the religion fundamentally drew upon its own socio-cultural expressions to formulate its conception of God. In light of the established contextual foundation, this study advances to provide a thorough exposition on open theism.

Open Theism

The theological framework of open theism was triggered by Richard Rice, a theologian from the Seventh-day Adventist church, with the publication of his influential work, *God's Foreknowledge & Man's Free Will*, in 1985. In this work, Rice argues that the future is in a state of perpetual evolution, suggesting that the future is not preordained, as classical theism claims. Rice's perspective, for all that, prompted Review & Herald, a publishing house affiliated with the Seventh-day Adventist Church that originally published his book, to cease its publication. The cessation of the book was due to its contradiction with several core theological principles of the Seventh-day Adventist church, particularly the inerrancy of scripture and the doctrine of prophecy.

In the interim, Clark Pinnock regarded Rice's insights as particularly thought-provoking. He extended an invitation to Rice, along with John Sanders, William Hasker, and David Basinger, to participate in a scholarly book: *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (1994). The authors of this book, along with Gregory Boyd,²⁴ who became involved shortly thereafter, are the pioneers of open theism. *The Openness of God* fundamentally develops from Rice's exploration of divine foreknowledge and human autonomy, positing that God interacts with humanity in a way characterised by

¹⁹ Basilius M Kasera, "African Names for God and the Biblical Concept of YAHWEH," *Mission Namibia* 112 (2012): 112–40.114–115.

²⁰ Agnieszka Podolecka, "uNkulunkulu: God, a God or the First Ancestor? The Quest for a Supreme Deity in Zulu Religious Beliefs," *Rocznik Orientalistyczny* 73, no. 1 (2020): 108–18.

²¹ Aylward Shorter, *African Christian Theology* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1975). 56.

²² Kasera, "African Names for God and the Biblical Concept of YAHWEH."114–115.

²³ Léon Classe, "The Supreme Being among the Banyarwanad of Ruanda," *Primitive Man* 2, no. 56 (1929): 56–57.

²⁴ Gregory A Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000).

reciprocal engagement. The book further contends that for this relationship to be genuine, classical ideas, such as God's timelessness, omniscience, and immutability, must either be revised or altogether abandoned.

Advocates of open theism argue that their theological framework is firmly grounded in scripture, engaging with biblical narratives through thoughtful and serious examination. Several biblical passages that are pivotal to the discourse on open theism include Genesis 22:12, Deuteronomy 13:3, and Jeremiah 32:35. For proponents of open theism, these scriptural passages demonstrate that God interacts with humanity in real time, suggesting a collaborative effort between God and humans in determining future events. In Genesis 22:12, for example, a profound test of Abraham's loyalty is presented by God's directive to Abraham to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice. As Abraham embarks on the task assigned to him, God intervenes, declaring that He has now discerned Abraham's unwavering loyalty. Proponents of open theism contend that this narrative exemplifies a genuine relationship between God and Abraham, emphasising the idea that God was genuinely unaware of Abraham's forthcoming actions. This scenario, according to open theists, indicates that God moves with humanity in real time, leaving the future open for both God and mankind.

Pinnock elucidates, "[T]he open view of God proposes to give a more serious reading to biblical metaphors and lift from them a more dynamic and relational model of God."²⁵ Rice concurs with Pinnock, postulating that biblical narratives illustrate a fluid interplay between God and humanity, marked by reciprocal influence, wherein divine actions mould human experience and human actions subsequently impact God.²⁶ One of the theological implications arising from the open theistic perspective is that a reciprocal relationship necessitates that God undergo change, succession, temporality, and motion.²⁷ Change, for example, implies a moment when God is unaware that I would compose and submit this work for publication. Upon writing and submitting, God transitions from a state of ignorance to one of knowledge.

For the God-world relationship to maintain its significance, God must not have foreknowledge of human decisions before they occur. Should this not hold, it follows that all events are preordained, thereby leaving no room for individuals to assert their autonomy in decision-making. In summary, the defining characteristics of open theism include the notion that God engages in a reciprocal relationship with humanity, one that permits individuals to exercise their libertarian free will, and a dynamic relationship in which both God and humans influence future outcomes.

Open theism has encountered criticism, though. As expected, the majority of its critics are classical theists. This is because open theism is fundamentally a response to the classical theistic view that all events, including future contingents, are predetermined by God. Indeed, classical theist Bruce Ware firmly opposes open theism, contending that its proponents compromise the sovereignty of God by implying that God is unaware of future contingents.²⁸ In accordance with Ware, Dennis Jowers argues that open theists undermine the inerrancy of Scripture and the doctrine of prophecy. Jowers perceives prophecy as a reflection of God's profound grasp of the future, suggesting that the future may be predetermined.²⁹ In their defence, Ware and Jowers reference biblical passages, including Isaiah 46:10, which asserts that God knows the end from the beginning, and Matthew 26:31-35, where Jesus accurately foretells Peter's denial of Him. However, while these and other pertinent biblical passages appear to address the notion of divine foreknowledge, proponents of open theism insist that these texts do not imply that the future is exhaustively known or predetermined by God. The texts, according to open theists, merely underscore God's capacity to actualise the future in accordance with His intentions. In the instance of Peter, open theists argue, Jesus possessed an in-depth understanding of Peter, allowing for the foresight of Peter's eventual denial based on this profound knowledge. Nevertheless, as will be clarified in the following section, advocates of open theism avow that their viewpoint does not undermine these doctrines. They merely propose a different perspective on these doctrines.

²⁵ Clark H Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2019), 24.

²⁶ Richard Rice, "Trinity, Temporality, and Open Theism," *Philosophia* 35, no. 3 (2007): 321–28.

²⁷ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness*, 32.

²⁸ Bruce Ware, *God's Greater Glory: An Exalted God of Scripture and the Christian Faith* (Illinois: Crossway, 2004), 241.

²⁹ Dennis W Jowers, "Open Theism: Its Nature, History, and Limitations," *WRS Journal* 12, no. 1 (2005): 3.

In summary, open theism is a theological framework centred on the interaction between God and the world. For this relationship to be authentic, the future must be contingent rather than preordained. Having established the contextual foundation of both open theism and African theism, the following part will examine the junction of these two traditions.

The Intersection of African Theism and Open Theism

This section delves into the confluence of African theism and open theism. The section seeks not only to highlight the convergences and divergences between the two traditions but also to delve deeper and synthesise insights from both traditions. Crucially, the section illustrates the extent to which the confluence of the two enriches African and Christian religious experiences. Due to limitations in spatial capacity, this section will not discuss all points found at the intersection of open theism and African theism. Therefore, the concepts to be explored include libertarian free will, divine *kenosis*, and the nature of the openness of the future. These selections are made exclusively due to their fundamental significance in both African theism and open theism.

Libertarian Free Will

A fundamental principle that underpins African theism and openness theology is related to the nature of God's relationship with the world. In this configuration, both African theism and open theism may be categorised within the framework of relational theologies due to this particular aspect. Relational theology means that God engages in a mutual relationship with humanity. In such a relationship, God influences humanity, while humanity, in its own capacity, also influences God. This indicates that certain decisions God makes are shaped by human actions. In this arrangement, it is reasonable to assert that both God and humanity engage in the processing of information as it flows in and out. This implies, among other considerations, that both God and humanity anticipate the future similarly. In essence, neither party has knowledge of future contingents until such events actually occur.

Relational theology is founded on the assertion that individuals possess libertarian free will—the ability to make choices independent of divine influence. This implies that God cannot possess foreknowledge of human choices before their actualisation. From this perspective, it can be argued that the future continues to exist as a domain shrouded in uncertainty. Therefore, in its fundamental essence, libertarian free will represents the philosophical conviction that individuals possess the capacity to make choices that are not predetermined by a divine entity.

Lari Launonen and Ryan Mullins present a pertinent argument, stating that libertarian free will is fundamentally incompatible with compatibilism.³⁰ Compatibilism is the religious doctrine asserting that God predetermines individual decisions. According to compatibilism, if I awaken tomorrow and choose an English breakfast instead of an African one, I will merely execute a decision that was predetermined by God.³¹ However, for proponents of open theism, a reality governed exclusively by divine pre-determinism diminishes human beings to mere automatons devoid of agency.³² Additionally, compatibilism raises the question of why people should be held accountable for bad decisions if those decisions were ultimately planned by God. In this context, libertarian free will constitutes a key principle of open theism and plays a crucial role in the relationship between God and humanity.

Comparably, for Africans who regard morality with great regard, the notion of libertarian free will serves as the foundation for their conviction in moral accountability for their actions.³³ This unfolds with remarkable eloquence in the context of African animal sacrificial practices. For example, many Africans tend to perceive that some of the challenges they face stem from their own decisions. An individual may experience the deep anguish of losing a child or face the challenges of a mysterious illness, leading them to

³⁰ Lari Launonen and R. T. Mullins, "Why Open Theism Is Natural and Classical Theism Is Not," *Religions* 12, no. 11 (November 2, 2021): 1–16, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12110956>.

³¹ Jowers, "Open Theism," 2.

³² Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 2.

³³ Aderibigbe, "Origin, Nature, and Structure of Beliefs System," 38.

conclude that these adversities are the result of wrong decisions made consciously. The practice of animal sacrifices to appease God reflects an acknowledgement of individual agency, affirming the notion that Africans possess a belief in libertarian free will.

One argument against libertarian free will, though, is that it may compel God to make decisions based on human actions. Indeed, both African and open theists support this idea. If divine decisions are contingent upon human choices, however, Damiano Migliorini avers that this presents a considerable risk for God.³⁴ This means, for example, that divine providence and governance have inherent risks, as God cannot predict human choices in specific circumstances. Pinnock agrees, affirming that there are no guarantees that humans will make appropriate decisions.³⁵ I will revisit this aspect shortly, particularly in clarifying the views of open theists on this problem. At this point, it is sufficient to assert that open theists and Africans believe that God “retains the power and moral prerogative to inhibit occasionally our ability to make voluntary choices to keep things on track.”³⁶ This suggests that God might intervene to avert detrimental human choices that jeopardise the overarching divine intentions.

Paul Helseth, however, contests the idea that God intermittently intervenes in the autonomy of human choice. He asks: Does the intervention of God in human autonomy not represent a breach of libertarian freedom from the outset?³⁷ Helseth’s point, from the point of view of the researcher, is compelling. However, there is a lack of consensus among open theists regarding the extent to which God can intervene in the exercise of human free will. In Sanders’ view, God possesses the ability to supersede libertarian free will, but the underlying reasoning for God’s selective intervention in certain situations, while remaining uninvolved in others, may elude our full comprehension.³⁸ In contrast to Sanders, Boyd thinks that God does not infringe upon human free will. According to Boyd, however, God exerts every effort to guide individuals towards choices that can circumvent evil.³⁹ In other words, God influences the individual through persuasion rather than directly overriding their exercise of free will.

Certain classical theists, on the other hand, dismiss the notion of free will entirely. John Frame, for instance, contends that the concept of free will is merely a philosophical construct imposed on biblical narratives by open theists,⁴⁰ a critique echoed by Paul Helm.⁴¹ While Frame does not specify the exact scripture, he argues that “Scripture denies that we have the independence demanded by libertarian theory.”⁴² Helseth grants Frame a degree of latitude by referencing Colossians 1:17 and Acts 17:28. Helseth argues that, according to these scriptures, the existence of all things within God precludes the possibility of libertarian freedom.⁴³ For Helseth, God orchestrates all aspects of existence, encompassing even the decisions we make.

In the researcher’s view, although the aforementioned critiques are appreciated, Genesis 1 seems to endorse the concept of libertarian free will. For instance, in Genesis 1:26, it is stated, “Let us make man in our own image.” To some degree, being fashioned in the likeness of God suggests that humans possess a capacity for decision-making akin to that of God in the act of bringing humans into existence. Furthermore, Genesis 3 appears to imply that Adam and Eve possessed the capacity for free will. They had the option to eat the fruit of the forbidden tree or to abstain from it.

³⁴ Damiano Migliorini, “Providence and Mystery: From Open Theism to New Approaches,” *Segni e Comprensione* 103 (2022): 134–58. 136.

³⁵ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 3.

³⁶ David Basinger, “Practical Implications,” in *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*, ed. Clark Pinnock (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994).159.

³⁷ Paul Kjos Helseth, “God Causes All Things,” in *Divine Providence: Four Views*, ed. Paul Helseth et al. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 25–52.

³⁸ John Sanders, “Divine Providence and the Openness of God,” in *Perspectives on the Doctrine of God*, ed. Bruce Ware, vol. 4 (Tennessee, 2008), 196–240.

³⁹ Gregory A Boyd, “God Limits His Control,” in *Four Views on Divine Providence*, ed. Paul Helseth et al. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Grand Rapids, 2011), 183–208.

⁴⁰ John M Frame, “No Other God: A Response to Open Theism” (New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2001).127.

⁴¹ Paul Helm, “Classical Calvinist Doctrine of God,” in *Perspectives on the Doctrine of God: Four Views*, ed. Bruce Ware (B&H Academic, 2008), 5–52.

⁴² Frame, *No Other God*, 127.

⁴³ Helseth, “God Causes all Things,” 41.

In any case, the notion of human autonomy is of significant importance in both African theism and openness theology. In the end, the concept of libertarian free will improves both African spirituality and Christian living by affirming that individuals possess the power to shape their experiences and realities. Prayer, for example, transforms into a significant pursuit, as individuals possess the capacity to influence divine decisions through this practice.

The Openness of the Future

The concept of libertarianism mentioned in the preceding subsection can only be understood when the future is open rather than predetermined. In this subsection, the researcher takes up the topic of the openness of the future and how it links to both African and open theism.

From the perspective of open theism, the inherent openness of the future compels open theists to reevaluate the notion of divine omniscience. It appears, based on the evidence found in the literature, that the term “reevaluation” refers to a reconsideration of the classical conception of omniscience, which posits that God possesses exhaustive knowledge of all aspects of reality, including future events yet to unfold. The researcher, however, examines the open theistic perspective on omniscience as a distinct approach to comprehending this concept, especially as it arises from the biblical narrative.

Indeed, open theists reinterpret divine omniscience to mean that God possesses extensive knowledge exclusively of the present and past, a perspective that aligns with certain aspects of African religious thought. This redefinition diverges from the definition of omniscience in classical theological literature. In light of this, open theist Pinnock explores what he refers to as the *kenosis* of omniscience, a concept that claims that God’s knowledge grows as the future develops.⁴⁴ On the other hand, it is necessary to note that within open theism, certain aspects of the future are indeed known by God. Among these are the anticipated return of Christ, the election of the church, and the ultimate triumph of God over evil.⁴⁵ These elements, at a minimum, exist within the mind of God, and it is in this context that one may assert that God possesses knowledge of certain aspects of the future. It is critical to highlight that these components do not exist in a predetermined manner, but rather as manifestations of what is intended to be realised by divine design in the future. Their manifestation may take various forms in the future, depending on the intricate relationship that exists between God and humanity.

On the other hand, African theism does not encompass the concepts of the second coming of Christ or the election of the church.⁴⁶ This might explain the apparent disinterest among traditional Africans in notions such as the apocalypse and the anticipated arrival of paradise. African theists such as John Mbiti,⁴⁷ Alexis Kagame,⁴⁸ and Kibujjo Kalumba⁴⁹ affirm the nonexistence of future contingents within the framework of African religious thought. For these thinkers, existence is confined to the realms of the past and the present. For example, Mbiti avows that African “time is a two-dimensional phenomenon, with a long *past*, a *present* and virtually *no future*.”⁵⁰ In this conformation, the fabric of reality is woven from historical events and ongoing events. In this sense, God’s knowledge covers all past and present events, while new information enters His consciousness as future events unfold. This is consistent with Pinnock’s concept of the *kenosis* of omniscience.

At this point, the study revisits the earlier assertion that by granting humans libertarian free will, God potentially risks the trajectory of creation towards its ultimate purpose. Although proponents of open theism

⁴⁴ Clark H Pinnock, “Constrained by Love: Divine Self-Restraint According to Open Theism,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 34 (2007): 155.

⁴⁵ Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 145.

⁴⁶ Leonard T Nyirongo, *The Gods of Africa or the God of the Bible? The Snares of African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective* (Potchefstroom: Potchefstroomse Universiteit, 1997). 91.

⁴⁷ John. Mbiti, “Eschatology,” in *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs*, ed. Kwesi Dickson and Paul Ellingworth (London: : Lutterworth Press, , 1969), 159-184.

⁴⁸ Alexis Kagame, “The Empirical Apperception of Time and the Conception of History in Bantu Thought,” *Cultures and Time* (Paris: UNESCO), 1976.

⁴⁹ Kibujjo M Kalumba, “A New Analysis of Mbiti’s The Concept of Time,” *Philosophia Africana* 8, no. 1 (2005): 11–19. 11-19.

⁵⁰ Mbiti, “Eschatology,” 17.

concur that God engages in risk-taking, there remains a notable absence of agreement among them concerning the degree of risk that God assumes. As far as this is concerned, Ryan Mullins and Emanuela Sani categorise open theists into two distinct camps: the limited-risk camp, exemplified by William Hasker, and the high-risk camp, represented by Richard Rice.⁵¹ The high-risk camp argues that due to the limitations of God's omniscience, there exists a potential for God not to fulfil His promises. But, given the boundless capabilities attributed to God, it seems exceedingly unlikely that failure will occur. The limited-risk camp, on the other hand, postulates that divine promises, including the second coming of Christ, the election of the church, and the ending of evil, are unequivocal. God's intervention will ensure the fulfilment of these, irrespective of future outcomes. Thus, it appears that, from both perspectives, despite the inherent risks, God will undoubtedly fulfil His intentions for humanity.

In both African and open theism, the fact that God and humankind have an open future does not undermine the fact that God is all-knowing and all-powerful. These characteristics are sufficient to demonstrate that God is more than capable of carrying out His plans and promises to humanity. One manner in which the concept of limited omniscience enhances African spirituality and Christian living is by suggesting that certain afflictions experienced by humanity may be ascribed to God's lack of foreknowledge regarding these adversities. Indeed, reconciling a God who anticipates malevolence yet remains inactive poses a significant challenge within the framework of classical theology. This God appears harsher than benevolent.

Kenosis

The concept of sacrifice within African theism, alongside the death of Christ in open theism, embodies significant theo-religious aspects pertinent to both African spirituality and the practice of Christian living. The sacrificial death of Christ, as understood by open theists, is rooted in the concept of divine love. This affection is best aptly encapsulated in the concept of divine *kenosis*.

Kenosis (Phil 2:7) connotes the "self-emptying" of divine attributes by Jesus.⁵² For open theists, the concept of "self-emptying" equates to the notion of "self-limiting." Thus, through the process of *kenosis*, God intentionally constrains His attributes to foster a more profound relationship with humanity, engaging with them at a level that enhances their comprehension of His nature. For example, God limits His omniscience by opting not to foresee human actions in advance.

Kenosis converges with a limited-God view found in African theism. This view posits that God is devoid of the omni-attributes characteristic of the God depicted in classical theism. In fact, the idea of God lacking omnipotence serves as an explanation for the absence of creation *ex nihilo* in the African religious world. Agada and Ikuli add that "[God's] limitation in power ultimately extends to his limitation in knowledge and goodness."⁵³ Of course, in African theism, God retains a significant power, although not in the absolute sense of omnipotence. His knowledge is extensive, yet it does not encompass the entirety of knowledge in the classical theological framework.

In African theism, the concept of Christ's sacrifice is notably absent; instead, the focus is primarily on the practice of animal sacrifices.⁵⁴ It is significant to observe that, while Christ offered His blood on the cross to address the issue of sin, analogous instances of bloodshed manifest within African religions to confront the same dilemma. The sacrifice of Christ signifies the forgiveness of sins for Christians. Comparably, Africans make animal sacrifices as a means to placate God and maintain a harmonious relationship with Him. The sacrifices are typically presented to God through ancestral spirits and divinities, who act as

⁵¹ Ryan T Mullins and Emanuela Sani, "Open Theism and Risk Management: A Philosophical and Biological Perspective," *Zygon*® 56, no. 3 (2021): 596–597.

⁵² Vaughn W Baker, *Evangelism and the Openness of God: The Implications of Relational Theism for Evangelism and Mission* (Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2012).112.

⁵³ Agada and Ikuli, "Orthodox Christian," 4.

⁵⁴ David T Adamo, "Christianity and the African Traditional Religion (s): The Postcolonial Round of Engagement," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 32, no. 1 (2011): 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v32i1.285>.

intermediaries between God and the African people. In a comparable manner, Christ is regarded within the framework of open theism as a mediator between humanity and God.

What is essential for African spirituality and Christian living is that, despite the differences between open and African theists regarding the concept of sacrifice, the core significance of the theme remains the same. Sacrifices serve as a means to recognise the proximity and accessibility of God. Sacrifices, moreover, serve to uphold a harmonious reciprocal relationship between the divine and humanity. In the context of African theism, sacrifices are similarly used to influence God's response to prayers.

Kenosis, as a result, allows African and open theists to have a close relationship with God that is founded on the give-and-take principle. The profundity of God's love and the sacrificial act for humanity can be understood through the lens of *kenosis* and the crucifixion of Christ. The act of relinquishing divine attributes is commendable, as it illustrates God's desire to engage with humanity and foster a mutually beneficial relationship.

When all these points of intersection are considered, libertarian free will, the openness of the future, and divine *kenosis*, God emerges as a tangible reality within the experiences of African and open theists. This God dispels the abstract qualities frequently attributed to Him within the framework of classical theism. The intersections outlined reveal a God who engages with human challenges and willingly navigates the complexities of time and space alongside humanity. This implies, among other things, that God bestows upon humanity the autonomy of choice, even in the eventuality that individuals may ultimately reject Him.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the intersection between African theism and open theism through a theo-religious dialogue. The study illuminated at least three significant areas of intersection: libertarian free will, divine *kenosis*, and the openness of the future. The integration of these areas suggests a dynamic relationship between God and humans, wherein both entities play a role in shaping the future. In this relationship, the thoughts and actions of humans impact God, and through the concept of divine *kenosis*, God has permitted Himself to be influenced by human beings. Ultimately, the convergence of African and open theism improves the effectiveness of prayer in the lives of African Christians. As a result, prayer is not only viewed as a practice but also as a means of persuading God to take action on behalf of people. It must be underlined that, in classical theism, prayer is essentially pointless because God has predetermined all that occurs in the world. Furthermore, the convergence of open theism and African theism gives people confidence that God values their contributions to the God-world relationship. Humans do not exist in the relationship as though they were just robots.

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