

## RETHINKING THE CHRISTIAN CONCEPT OF GOD AND THE EXISTENCE OF EVIL IN THE UNIVERSE

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### **Abstract**

In this article, we argue that the Christian notion that God is morally good and all-loving, and has nothing to do with evil in the universe is of colonial or Western coloration and branding. As it negates and undermines the African theory of duality and Ezumezu ontological stand point, which hold that 'A' and 'B' are not binary or diametrically opposite variables but complimentarily related variables. Drawing from these two African Thought systems, since good and evil are interconnected, and God has been established to be good, God can as well be said to be evil. This is because God is of matter and spirit and good and evil, which are in harmony with one another and cannot be separated. If the creationists (Judeo Christians), who are dualistic and monotheistic, disagree with this then, the staring question is: How is it ever the case that the perfect God, with all kinds of properties and attributes, allowed evil and terroristic activities to be thriving? We set out to address this misattribution and prejudices using Conversationalism, a method of interconnectivity and inclusivity, to argue that good and evil are not two polar values without point of convergence and harmonisation.

**Keywords:** God, Evil, Good, Christian, and Conversationalism

## Introduction

The strong belief among the theists and African scholars in religions that God is infinitely good, omniscient, omnibenevolent and omnipotent; and that evil or suffering has nothing to do with God is of Western coloration and branding. As it denies the complementarity or interconnectivity that exist between and among realities, which God/good and evil are part of; and presented God and evil as separate entities without a meeting point. This mentality is incorrect and colonial in nature. Hence, agreeing with the Abrahamic belief that evil/suffering is not associated with God, in any way, is to simply say that evil and good are binary opposites, which is not true. However, evil is a part of God's own nature (Brightman 1940; Chimakonam and Chimakonam, 2022). On this note, it is difficult if not logically impossible for an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent God to exist (see Machie, 1995). With this, in mind, there is an aspect of evil in God that complements the very good aspect of God.

Furthermore, to understand clearly what evil, in relation to God means, in this paper, it is imperative, at this juncture, to categorically define evil. What then is evil? Evil is seen as a naturalistic or psychopathic spree or anger or hostility exhibited as a sanction to correct anomalies, or a show of displeasure for an unguided action. Based on this definition, since God, in one way or the other, exhibits anger in dealing with critical issues of disobedience and acrimony; it is obvious that there are traits of evil in God. Hence, evil and anger are two things that are pointing at one direction or share a lot in common. Having ascertained this, evil and anger will consequently be used interchangeably in this paper. More so, there have been series of questions as to the attributes of God such as: if God were to be all- powerful, all-knowing, completely good and all-merciful, then, why evil? Put differently, if God had the properties ascribed and attributed to him, and does not cause evil then, who is responsible for the evil occurrences in his pre-deterministic world? Can God be all-powerful and all-merciful and encourage or allow evil from thriving?

To answer the above questions Attoe (2022: 15) opines that “we must imagine God's omnipotence as the capacity and possession of a limited power to create and an unlimited power to uncreate, and nothing more”. For him, therefore, God does not possess most of the properties often attached to Him, considering the deficiencies in the anal of His creation activities. Hick (2007), pondering on the God's omnipotent debate maintains that volumes of afflictions and adversities that exist in the world today speak in variations, and pose a serious threat to God's supposed limitless love. With this, he avers that God has a hand in the existence of evil in the universe. This idea was corroborated and cemented by Hurding (1995:825), who argued that sin and suffering, even though have to do with the conscious activities of humanity; God is undeniably responsible. This is not the case in the thinking of St. Augustine, as he believes that evil is as a result of man's free will. In fact, for him, moral evil is the resultant effect of free will of man, who makes an evil choice (Quoted in Edet, 2005: 136-137). He avers that God has imprinted the moral law on man to serve as fundamental moral principle that directs him/her to do 'good' and avoid 'evil' at all times. God, having given man the opportunity to choose to do 'good' and avoid evil, cannot be blamed or

said to have anything whatsoever to do with evil. In a nutshell, evil, for St. Augustine, came as a result of man's free will and disobedience to the metaphysical being-God (Ogar, 2011: 99). Sponheim (1999), argues in favor of this position when he states, thus, "in possession of freedom comes the possibility of moral evil". St. Augustine and Sponheim's explanations of evil are limited; hence, none could explain in more practical term or took into account natural evils such as volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, tornado, flood, crippling disease, storms, etc., which have nothing to do with man's free will. Be that as it may, both scholars and their approaches to reality are lopsided, as they understood reality in different and bastardised modes and moods. Going by their reflections, two dependence realities, which ought to be seen as polar values that are complementary, will be seen as being diametrically opposed to each other.

To really show that this mentality is polarised and detrimental, this paper demonstrates that both St. Augustine and Sponheim's ideas on the existence of evil are not coherent and encompassing, as they captured only the moral evil, which they could not even explain in a concise manner, and jettisoned or omitted natural evil, which its existence cannot be negotiated. Though, the bone of contention here is not the fact that they could not include or account for the natural evils in their explanations about the nature of God and the emergence of evil, but the fact that they failed to show an understanding that the evil they have being attaching to man's free will, exists as an aspect of God, and brought upon man, as a result of man's inhumanity to humanity and disobedience to several orders of God. This paper sets out to clarify and correct some of these misconceptions, prejudices and presuppositions associated with the Christian concept of God and the existence of evil in the Universe. In the end, it will maintain that the Christian theistic notion of God is rooted or grounded in Aristotle's bifurcated logic, which is against the African duality and Ezumezu pedagogy that believe in the world of opposite and complementary realities.

The paper is divided into three major parts. The first part handles the issue of the traditional African understanding or belief about God and the origin of evil amidst God's infinite goodness. Here, the African conception about the ever-lingering problem of evil will be divulged and critiqued. The second part deals with the issues of Christians' omnipotence, omniscience and omnibenevolence God. These superlatives or hallmarks of God will be renegotiated and revisited, in demonstration and understanding of God's nature and attributes. In view of this, the question, is God all-powerful, all-knowing and all-loving or infinitely good, will be dealt with, to reveal the true properties of God. After this, the third part will delve into the bold claim that evil is an aspect of God's nature. Under this sphere, more will be highlighted or said on the relationship between God and evil. More so, the unanswered question like; is God fully evil or evil in part? Or infinitely good or partly good, will be addressed too.

### **The Traditional African Understanding of God and the Problem of Evil**

The nature of God and problem of evil are two enigmas that have pre-occupied the minds of both traditional African thinkers (TATs) or better put; anonymous traditional African thinkers (ATATs), and African philosophers of religion (APR) for centuries now. In the course of their search or theology, they concluded that God created everything or that everything emanates out of God's will (Spinoza, 2001), but denied the relationship between God and evil. Apart from the question (s) raised by these thinkers and their resolution or theodicy that God is the source or the

‘created-uncreated’, the question about the nature of God is as old as humanity, and has been the concern of almost every human being. Especially, those that are not dogmatic or epistemologically or colonially blind folded. As a matter of fact, there have been questions like; who is God? Where is God? Is God totally spiritual or both spiritual and physical? What is the sex or gender of God? In other words, is God sexless or genderless or She or He? Even though, none of the above questions has been given acceptable answers; a good number of African thinkers believe that God is God, and infinitely good, and any attempt to ask further questions about His spiritual activities or being, jeopardizes or thwarts the hearts or faith of God’s believers. Agada (2022), in line with the above, but with different approach, substituted the categories of omnipotence and omniscience with what he calls “categories of power and glory, to argue that God is not the originator of evil and cannot eliminate the evil in the world through the moral human agency”.

This position is problematic in that it fuels the underlying argument of this paper instead of addressing it. If God did not create evil and cannot avert evil then, what is the determinant of God’s power and glory categories, which Ada subscribes to. Nevertheless, three things can be established following Ada’s position; (1) that God is not more powerful than evil, and therefore cannot be said to have created it (2) that God and evil are two opposing entities without any meeting point (3) that God cannot stop evil because it is as strong as God himself. To agree with Ada’s conception of God is to be monotheistic and reiterate that God and evil are parallel entities that do not complement at all. This idea of God operates under the ambit of dualism of the West instead of African duality, which indicates the existence of physicality in spirituality and spirituality in physicality (Ijiomah, 2014). The argument that a proposition is either true or false is typical mentality of the West that operates on two valued logic, where the third intermediate value is undetermined. In the African thought system, the third value is determined or known (Chimakonam 2019; Ijiomah, 2014, Asouzu, 2004). Moreover, the African strong belief or conception of God was why Mbiti averred that:

All African people believe in God. In fact, their belief about God dominates every other belief they have about other realities. Though, nobody can concisely explain how this belief about God originated. One can only talk about it as an ancient belief in African religious life (1975: 40).

For him, therefore, Africans are notoriously religious. Any idea that stops an African from holding on to his/her belief in God is seen as barbaric and blasphemous. In other words, African worldview is primarily religious (Onunwa, 2011: 42). This is a typical case of an African man. An average African man believes so much in God that he would even prefer to listen to the word of God, to listening to any other thing. This is substantiated further following the naming pattern in Africa, particularly, Nigeria. Names such as; Chukwudi (God lives); Chukwuma (God Knows); Chukwuka (God is greater); Chikaodili (it is the duty of God to know what is right or wrong); Chikamso (it is God that I am following); Kamsiyochukwu (the way I asked from God); Chikadibia (God is greater than a native or witch doctor); Tochukwu (praise God), Chimeremeze (God made me king); Munachimso (I am with my God); Ubasinachi (wealth is from God), etc. As a matter of fact, God is everything good and everything good is God.

With this, in mind, evil/suffering in God's pre-deterministic historicity (Aribiah, 2023), is seen as a punishment over wrong deeds or offences committed against humanity, created order or deities. This notion about the nature of God is not completely correct. Hence, calamity can befall one even when no offence is committed. For instance, what offence can we possibly say that a child of one month or two months, who is suffering from an intense paroxysmal involuntary muscular contradiction or convulsion committed? None. For us, the emergence of evil or suffering is not only to punish the offender (s) but to complement the good. It is in line with this that we uphold the idea that evil has something in common with God. To claim that God is not the architect of evil or problem associated with Homo sapiens, is to shy away from the very fact that God is not infinitely good or benevolent as insinuated. This position nullifies the premise that there was an invasion of the earth by Satan after the rebellion of Lucifer in heaven (Isaiah 14:12-14; Ezekiel 28:12-15). It is out of God's anger that human beings are negatively sanctioned. If this is the case then, evil, which is seen as anger, is an aspect of God, planted to curtail man's excesses. To claim that evil or suffering is as a result of man's free will, is to agree with the deists that God created the world and everything in it, but ceases to be in charge or control at some points; which is not true. To affirm that is to say that man determines for himself, chooses to live or die, without God being in control any longer; which is not equally true.

However, our stand is that God exist and He is the creator of everything in the world including evil. But God's application of evil, which is regarded as anger here, was due to man's disobedience to Him. He unleashes his anger to teach us valuable lessons, to humble us and to help us equip, correct and guide others from falling into the same temptation and mistake (Kuwornu-Adjaottor, 116: 2013). By implication, the anger or evil of God is practically for correction and transformation. One gets sanctioned and renewed after derailing from the dictates, and societal norms, through God's anger. On this note, Clark (1961:239-240) was wrong to have defined God as standard of right and good, without any consideration to evil, which is an aspect of God. Clark must have relied so much on the idea that everything God created was very good (Genesis 1:31). If this were to be true then, what brought about the problem of evil/suffering under discussion today? There is a serious contradiction as to the issue of evil or suffering within the African understanding of God and problem of evil on earth. Though, the Traditional African thinkers (TATs) uphold that evil or suffering can be said to be punishment or ripple effect of the offences committed against deities and created order, they refused to accept or see evil in relation to God. This turned out to be their view about reality, forgetting the fact that "good and evil are like pairs of opposites or counterparts. If one exists so does the other. So, if there was no evil, its opposite, moral goodness, would not exist" (Howard-Snyder, 1999). With this, it is crystal clear that God permitted evil, as the only justification for goodness. More clarification on this will be made in the subsequent section.

### **The Christians' Omnipotent, Omniscient and Omnibenevolent God**

The existence of evil in the universe over the millennia is the reason surrounding various questions about the omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolence of God. Questions and variegated views on the above superlative attributes or properties of God, have been asked to really understand more about the nature of God, and the problem of evil, in a world where everything is supposedly

good. Epicurus is one of the several others, who questioned the omnipotence, omniscience and omnibenevolence of God. His argument about the properties of God can be formalised into a syllogism as follows: Premise 1: If God is omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent, then evil does not exist. Premise 2: There is existence of evil in the world. Conclusion: Therefore, an omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent God, does not exist. Quoted in Hospers (1990: 310). Succinctly, the Epicurean paradox reads: “Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is not omnipotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing, then what brought about evil? Is he neither able nor willing? Then, why call him God?” The issues about the problem of evil and the nature or properties of God have kept so many traditional African thinkers and philosophers of religions into thinking and mustering of ideas, as to explain vividly or in a practical term, the nexus between evil and God or deities.

Obviously, it strikes the mind when we uphold that God created everything and all that he created are good without explaining clearly how evil originated. Presumably, what led to Epicurus’ paradox or riddle is the idea that God is all-powerful, all-knowing and all-loving, yet there are a lot of things He cannot stop from happening. Truly, it is unbelievable to say that God is omnipotent and he cannot stop evil on the presupposed good people or creatures that He singlehandedly made. It seems God did not know that man will be a disappointment to Him. Even at that, why is it that He does not want to use his power, as God, to put to an end to it. Again, what stops Him from dealing with the issues of terrorism, kidnapping, child trafficking, corruption, religious skirmishes, homicides and epistemicides in Africa, in particular and the world in general? Is it possible for God to have the creatures at heart or love them and still allow such evils above to be thriving? For Christians, evil emanates as a result of man’s free will and not from God. By this, God should not be blamed for the existence of evil (Nkulu-N’Sengha, 2009: 289), as man has been given the opportunity to do ‘good’ and avoid ‘evil’ or to belong to the city of God or city of devil. For them, evil was as a result of man’s misappropriation of his free will and autonomy.

This version of the reason for the existence of evil is quite different from the point of view of an African thinker. An African thinker believes that evil is orchestrated to punish anyone, who has derailed from the doctrines and dictates of God. This idea is close to our position in this paper, but cannot be said to be the same. As we agree that some evil emerge out of man’s disobedience to God, we negate the notion that something else and not God, is responsible for every punishment attached or dished out for evil committed. As a matter of fact, we strongly believe that it is God not anything else that is responsible for the evil we experience today. This, notwithstanding, evil or anger is used by God to correct some misconceptions about His commandments and divine etiquettes. More so, we equally nullify the idea that evil is as a result of man’s free will. This is because God’s creatures were pre-determined. God might have given man the freedom to explore or choose out of various variant values; no doubt, He did not make man to be in charge of himself. He only gave man the mandate to make use of plants, animals and other biospheres, for his/her daily consumption. Again, if God were to be infinitely good, that is, good to a fault, as claimed, and created everything to be good, and can be said to have pre-determined or pre-destined everything in this cosmos, He would have given man that free will that will definitely make him to choose good instead of evil (Allan, 2015). In contrary, Howard-Snyders (1999), opines that if God

had dictated for man, the free will in question would have been defeated or turned to something else. In other words, God's permission of free will of man was to enable him/her to have that expressive power that will form the basis of his/her choices, to avoid unnecessary chain or being controlled like robot.

The above theodicies cannot hold water considering the pre-deterministic historicity and belief that God created-everything, knows- everything, sees-everything and is in charge-of everything. If we agree with these then, evil (anger) that we battle with today came from God, and not as a result of man's free will, which God to a reasonable extent, controls. Be that as it may, the Christians' notion of God's nature is not flexible, as they maintained that God is completely good as well as all that he created. They believe that God is the Father and the harbinger of all creation, and cannot be surmounted by the pressure of the world, to do or support evil of any kind. For them, therefore, God is absolutely good. Evil or suffering is as a result of man's inability to keep to God's will. This submission, for us, is false, as it has been made obvious for us not to be in the oblivion to argue in that regard. Since evil (anger) is an aspect of God that is used by God to discipline the wrong doers. Further explanation on this will be made in the next subsection.

### **Evil/Suffering as an aspect of God's Nature**

To many Christians and traditional African thinkers, the topic under discussion lacks piety or respect for the sacred (God). To further demonstrate that; they asked questions like: How can God in his infinite goodness have something to do with evil or suffering? Is it not a pure contradiction or illogical to attribute or see God, who is all-loving, as the originator of evil or the very one that introduced suffering? What happens to our connection with God if we accept that there is a relationship and interrelationship, dependency and interdependency between God and evil? Conversely, if evil were to be an aspect of God's nature then, God cannot be taken as God any longer, but evil or devil. These and many more are worries or positions of the Christians and traditional African thinkers, in their efforts to prove the worthiness of God/gods. However, it is of great importance to correct these presuppositions. These presuppositions can only be corrected through clarification on what we mean by evil. For us, evil shares a lot in common with anger as we have explained somewhere in this paper. For the fact that both are frivolous and hostile in nature and can hardly be separated, they are seen here as being the same. It is against this backdrop that both are used interchangeably. Moreover, for the fact that there is an element of anger in God, one cannot be stoned or carbonized to say that there is an aspect of evil in God. To agree with this, does not imply that God is evil, but that God contains evil. The Christians and traditional African thinkers may not want to argue in this direction, due to heavy burdens of epistemic injustice and coloniality that have truncated and affected their lenses of viewing reality. They would rather want to continue with their dogmatic, absolutist and superstitious belief that God is omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent, and cannot be said to have contributed to the emergence or have knowledge of evil in the world.

This is what they uphold forgetting that evil in God is to complement the good, which no doubt, exists in Him. After all, everything that exists serves a missing link of reality (Asouzu, 2007, Ijiomah, 2014 and Ozumba, 2010). It is as result of this that we maintain that good and evil are

like *Ejima* (twins) that have different standpoints, but are complementarily related. They can also be referred to as the two sides of a coin.

With this, in mind, no one can emphatically deny the existence of evil in God. To claim that there is no atom of anger in God, is to kick against Psalms (103:8-18) and Nahum (1:3), which says that “the Lord is Kind and Merciful, Slow to Anger and Rich in Compassion”. That God is slow in anger implies that there exists anger in Him, which is delayed in manifestation, as a result of the love and care that God has for us. The very anger that reflected in the Psalms and Nahum above is what we called evil in God. It sounds pejorative, but yet contains some elements of truth. This, perhaps, attests to the fact that “God has an evil streak” (Yardan, 2011). To say that there is no evil in God; is a simple way of trying to play safe in avoidance of blasphemy and heretic negligence of the Supreme Being (God). Be that as it may, it is of great germane to note that the evil aspect of God is noticed or made manifest whenever His subject or creature refuses to abide by His rules and regulations or disobeys Him. So, the anger of God that we are talking about here is quite different from the anger of man, which is unleashed countless times with or without commensurate provocation.

### **Conclusion**

We have presented in this paper, the Christian concept about the nature of God or gods in relation to evil/suffering. We maintained that God and evil are not binary opposites or diametrically opposed to each other. In other words, God and evil are related, in a way. To further strengthen our point, we took a different direction from the extant literature, and notion of the traditional African thinkers and Judeo Christians that God is omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent, and does not know anything about evil. This we did, in a bid to establish a proof that there is a connection between God and evil or human suffering. While we insist on this, we made open, what we mean by evil. For us, therefore, evil is referred to the act of hostility or frivolity. This meaning of evil is taken to be the same thing with what anger depicts. It was on this ground that evil and anger were seen to be the same and used interchangeably in the paper. Though, philosophers of language, linguists and grammarians, may not agree that two words can mean the same; evil and anger are seen as pointing at the same direction or having the same meaning here. So, whether they are construed to be similar or not, they are seen in this paper, as two things that are pointing at the same thing.

On this submission, lies our impetus to say that evil is an aspect of God’s nature. This, notwithstanding, God only unleashes the evil or anger part of Him, when man refuses to obey Him or distort His created order of the universe. Having argued or taken a difference stance, in the issue of evil/suffering and nature of God, we, therefore, create room for objections and criticisms, for further conversations and thought experiments.

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