



A theological analysis of the concept of the future's openness in African religious discourse

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Abstract: Ongoing theological discussions persist within evangelical Christian theological circles regarding the question of whether the future is predetermined by God or not. Classical theists assert that God has unequivocally predetermined the future. In this particular arrangement, although the future may be unknown to humans, it already exists and is known by God. According to Classical theists, all moments in time, including the future, exist simultaneously before God. On the other hand, there are Open theists who explicitly reject this deterministic perspective. Open theists believe that the future is yet undetermined and is still in the process of becoming. This article sought to achieve two interconnected theological manoeuvres. Firstly, it aimed to broaden the discussions regarding the nature of the future inside African religious discourse. Secondly, the article aimed to justify the belief that the future is unknown to both God and mankind based on African religious reflection. This task was conducted using analytic theology as a research method. The conclusion drawn is that in African religious thought, the future is perceived as non-existent at present. The article contributes to the field of multicultural theology.

Keywords: African traditional religion, classical theism, omniscience, open future, open theism

Article History: Received: 19-04-2024

Revised: 28-11-2024

Accepted: 04-12-2024

1. Introduction

This article presents the argument in African religious discourse that the future is not predetermined and remains open to both God and Africans. This topic is particularly pertinent to African Christians who are obligated, according to Christian religious doctrine, to contemplate the future, particularly in relation to eschatological concepts of forthcoming events. In addition, it is crucial to highlight that the way Africans live their Christian lives in the present is influenced to a great extent by their concept of the future. Therefore, the notion of the future is a subject that cannot be taken for granted in both Christian and African religious discourses. In order to provide context

for this article, it is necessary to present a summary of the current theological trends about the nature of the future.

Contemporary theological debates categorise the nature of the future into four distinct perspectives. *Classical* theism is the first perspective. *Classical* theism arguably originated from the contributions of mediaeval theistic intellectuals such as Augustine (354-430) and Aquinas (1225-1274), and certain reformers, most notably John Calvin (1509-1564).¹ This perspective is based on two theoretical frameworks: Greek philosophy and the Bible.² The philosophical framework is fundamentally shaped by the influence of the pre-Socratic philosopher Xenophanes who argued that God is characterised by constancy, “*Always he (God) remains in the same state, in no way changing, nor is it fitting for him to go now here now there.*”³ This argument implies that, within *Classical* theism, God cannot exist in created time, where change and succession occur. Informed by this philosophy, Boethius, a seminal figure in *Classical* theism, posits that “*eternity is the simultaneous and complete possession of infinite life.... All that lives under the conditions of time moves through the present from the past to the future; there is nothing set in time which can at one moment grasp the whole space of its lifetime.*”⁴ In Boethius’ configuration God dwells outside the confines of created space-time and experiences His existence in a simultaneous manner. This idea implies that future, present, and past coexist concurrently before God from a timeless perspective. From this standpoint, *Classical* theists contend that since the future is already existent for God, it is predetermined, and God possesses knowledge of it accordingly.

Within the biblical framework, Psalms 139:16 is interpreted by *Classical* theists to mean that God possesses knowledge of all future events, encompassing the destinies of each individual. Psalms 139:16 states: “*Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.*” Steven Roy propounds that the *Classical* interpretation of this text suggests that “*if all the days of David’s life were so formed, planned and ordained that they were written by God in his book, then certainly God knew all of those days.*”⁵ Roy, like other *Classical* theists, asserts that God’s knowledge is comprehensive, encompassing knowledge of future events. In this sense, for *Classical* theism, the future is closed rather than open.

¹ Lari Launonen and Ryan Mullins, “Why Open Theism is Natural and Classical Theism Is Not,” *Religions* 12, no. 11 (2021): 5, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12110956>.

² Edward Feser, “What is Classical Theism,” in *Classical Theism: New Essays on the Metaphysics of God*, Eds. J. Fuqua & R.C. Koons (London: Routledge, 2023), 16.

³ Mann, W.E, “Divine Sovereignty and Aseity,” in *The Oxford handbook of philosophy of religion*, Ed. W.J. Wainwright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 35.

⁴ A.M.S. Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. W.V. Cooper (Ex-Classics project, 2009), 68. Available at: <https://www.exclassics.com/consol/consol.pdf>. (Accessed on 25 November 2024).

⁵ Steven Roy, *How Much does God Foreknow? A Comprehensive Biblical Study* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006), 34.

An advantage of the *Classical* perspective on the future is its portrayal of a God with omniscience, including knowledge of the future. Christians typically possess inherent assurance in a God who possesses foreknowledge of future events. Furthermore, the *Classical* perspective has a lengthy lineage in the history of Christianity, dating back to the Middle Ages. Nevertheless, a limitation of the *Classical* perspective is that since the future is decided by God, it renders the act of prayer, for example, ineffective. This is because if God already knows everything about the future, no amount of prayer will change that.

This article will examine the concept of the future in African traditional religion, primarily in relation to the *Classical* theism. The primary rationale for emphasising the *Classical* perspective is its extensive historical foundation in Christian theological discourse.

Indeed, the *Classical* perspective is not the sole viewpoint in Christian theological discussions. The alternative perspective is *Arminianism*. This view aims to address the conceptual inadequacies connected with *Classical* theism.

Arminianism is closely linked to the Dutch theologian, Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609). According to this theology, God possesses an equal level of omniscience as the God in *Classical theism*. However, in *Arminianism*, God has bestowed in humans the capacity for libertarian freewill. Despite the existence of libertarian freewill, God is nonetheless able to occasionally intervene in human affairs. *Arminianism* posits that God possesses knowledge of the future through a concept known as “*simple-foreknowledge*,” as described by Jeff Grupp.⁶ According to Steven Rader, by possessing simple-foreknowledge, God, prior to the act of creation, observed the entirety of future events without actively influencing their occurrence.⁷ Therefore, God possesses knowledge of the future in its concrete form. David Hunt supports this theological approach in contemporary times.⁸ Hunt, like *Classical* theists, refers to Psalms 139:4 to imply that God already knows the future. Hunt concedes that he is uncertain, though, about the manner in which God knows the future: “*But the fact is that I’m not all sure how God knows the future.... What I am committed to defending... is the view that God simply knows the future.*”⁹ Hunt posits that God possesses knowledge by simple foreknowledge rather than through preordination, as is characteristic of classical theism.

⁶ Jeff Grupp, “Why God Did Not Choose All Souls: New Scriptural Evidence,” *Philosophy & Theology* 32, no. 1 & 2 (2020): 95, <https://philpapers.org/archive/GRUWGD-2.pdf>.

⁷ Steven Rader, “The Meaning of Foreknowledge in Romans 8: 29 and Its Ecclesiastical Implications,” (2015): 28, <https://repository.sbts.edu/handle/10392/4965>.

⁸ William Craig and David P. Hunt, “Perils of the Open Road,” *Faith and Philosophy* 30, no. 1 (2013): 49-71, <https://doi.org/10.5840/faithphil20133013>.

⁹ David Hunt, “The Simple-Foreknowledge View,” In *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views*, Eds. J.K. Beilby and P.R. Eddy (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2001), 67, 69.

One theological benefit of *Arminianism* is that it allows for God to have knowledge of the future while still allowing humanity to have free will. This may align with the African religious paradigm wherein Africans perceive themselves as possessing libertarian freewill in their decision-making. Africans typically perceive that many adverse events in their lives stem from their own choices. Consequently, they occasionally honour ancestors to implore God for forgiveness of their transgressions through these intermediaries.¹⁰ A significant obstacle that *Arminianism* encounters, however, is the task of explaining how God might engage in human events without modifying the future outcome that He already possesses knowledge of. In view of the above, Molinists have highlighted theological constraints inherent in *Classical* theism and *Arminianism* and have endeavoured to rectify them.

Molinism, named after the Spanish theologian Luis de Molina, is a theological belief system that asserts God has complete knowledge of all counterfactuals pertaining to the voluntary activities of all possible beings in every imaginable circumstance. 1 Samuel 23:6-14 is a biblical passage often cited to bolster the concept of counterfactuals. In this text, God informs David of a reality regarding a hypothetical situation, specifically that if David were to remain in Keliiah, then king Saul would chase after him. Additionally, God informs David that if king Saul were to chase after him, the people of Keliiah would betray him to Saul.

Consequently, God's knowledge of each individual's future counterfactuals enables Him to precisely orchestrate situations in order to influence people's decision-making within those circumstances.¹¹ Human libertarian freedom is maintained in this respect. *Molinism*, therefore, aims to resolve the conflict between divine foreknowledge and human freedom while acknowledging both aspects. In *Molinism*, in contrast to *Arminianism*, God refrains from intervening in human libertarian freewill. William Craig is a well-known theologian in the present time who supports *Molinism*.¹²

An advantage of Molinism is that it maintains both the sovereignty of God and the existence of human libertarian free will. However, this perspective has a flaw in that it attempts to separate itself from a predeterministic *Classical* theism, yet it still maintains a feeling of determinism by asserting that God's knowledge of future events is based on His pre-determination of the universe we inhabit. These theological paradigms now lead us to the fourth perspective, *Open* theism.

¹⁰ Derrick Mashau and Themba Ngcobo, "Christian Mission in Creative Tension with African Worldview (s): A Post-colonial Engagement Regarding Life After Death and Ancestry," *Missionalia: Southern African Journal of Mission Studies* 44, no. 1 (2016): 41-42, <https://doi.org/10.7832/44-1-89>.

¹¹ Nevin Climenhaga and Daniel Rubio, "Molinism: Explaining our Freedom Away," *Mind* 131, no. 522 (2022): 459-485, <https://doi.org/10.1093/mind/fzab042>.

¹² William Craig, *The Only Wise God: The Compatibility of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom* (West Broadway: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999).

Open theism is a contemporary framework that gained popularity with the publication of the book *The Openness of God* by evangelical theologians Pinnock et al.¹³ The *Open* view is distinctive in its rejection of the concept of a predetermined future by God. According to Janelle Zeeb, the term “open” in *Open* theism implies that the future is unknown rather than predetermined.¹⁴

Similar to *Arminianism* and *Molinism*, *Open* theism posits that God has provided mankind with the capacity for libertarian freedom. *Open* theists say that in order for freedom to be genuine, it must be incompatibilistic. This is likely due to the fact that God lacks the ability to foresee the actions of mankind.¹⁵ Genesis 6:6 is often used by *Open* theists as a key biblical text to justify their position. In this verse, God expresses remorse for having brought human beings into existence. The contention is that if the future was predestined, God would have possessed foreknowledge of the depravity of humanity as described in Genesis 6:6. The fact that God expressed remorse implies that He lacked foreknowledge of future events when He created humanity.

Joshua Sijuwade outlines three methods by which *Open* theism posits the future as being open.¹⁶ Firstly, the future is causally open, indicating that there are multiple potential future outcomes for each individual belonging to God. Richard Rice supports this particular perspective of *Open* theism.¹⁷ Secondly, the future is characterised by epistemic openness, indicating that God lacks knowledge of the specific choices that humans will make. Gregory Boyd and John Sanders endorse this perspective.¹⁸ Thirdly, the future is inherently indeterminate, signifying that “*God has not ordained any particular casually possible future to be the actual future for each of his creatures.*”¹⁹ William Hasker is affiliated with this particular variant of *Open* theism.²⁰ In every variation of *Open* theism, however, the future remains unknown. Furthermore, God is not the sole arbiter of the future. Humans, too, possess agency in shaping the outcome of the future. This study reveals that African religious thought exhibits certain theological similarities with *Open* theism.

¹³ Clark Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1994).

¹⁴ Janelle Zeeb, “Open Theism and the Problem of Theodicy,” *Churchman* 130, no. 4 (2016): 302, https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/churchman/130-04_299.pdf.

¹⁵ Launonen and Mullins, “Why Open Theism is Natural,” 9.

¹⁶ Joshua Sijuwade, “Elucidating Open Theism,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* (2023): 1-25, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11153-023-09874-1>.

¹⁷ Richard Rice, *The Future of Open Theism: From Antecedents to Opportunities* (Illinois: Ivp Academic, 2020).

¹⁸ Gregory Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000); John Sanders, *The God who Risks: A Theology of Divine Providence*, 2nd rev. ed. (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2007).

¹⁹ Sijuwade, “Elucidating Open Theism,” n.p.

²⁰ William Hasker, “An Adequate God,” in *God in an Open Universe: Science, Metaphysics, and Open Theism*, Eds. W. Hasker, T. Oord and T. Zimmerman (Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2011), 215-245.

An advantage of *Open* theism is that it establishes a causal relationship between God and humankind. In this configuration, humans possess the ability to exert influence over God, resulting in prayer becoming a purposeful and significant practice for humans. Nevertheless, *Open* theism has its own limitations. An often-cited criticism of the perspective is that if God lacks knowledge of the future, His ability to oversee creation and achieve His intentions is severely hindered.²¹

The predominant four modern perspectives explored above indicate that notions concerning the nature of the future are primarily examined in Western Christian theology. Despite varying interpretations of the matter, it is commonly accepted, especially among *Classical* theists, *Arminians*, and *Molinists*, that the future already exists in the mind of God. I note, though, that literature, both in the West and Africa, often neglects to incorporate reflections on the future that consider the African religious worldview. This is concerning because when Africans embrace Christianity, their entire African worldview, which is rooted in their traditional religion, is not entirely eliminated. They interpret Christian theological themes from the perspective of the African worldview. Consequently, some African Christians find it challenging to comprehend the notion of a predestined future.

Therefore, the primary objective of this article is to broaden the scope of “future” discussions to include African religious discourses. It is anticipated through this article that African perceptions of the future will enhance their spiritual experience inside Christianity, and that Christian theologians will engage in debate with African discourses on this topic. The article advances multicultural theology.

2. Research Methods

This article explores the intersection of *Classical* Christian theology and African traditional religion over the concept of the future. The article effectively employs analytic theology as a research method. The rationale for utilising this approach is explained below.

Religious beliefs and the critical examination of those beliefs coexist in any religious community. Religious views, in essence, are mostly shaped by individuals’ ideas of God and His connection to the world. In this regard, the purpose of theology is to carefully examine religious ideas, thoughts, and values to determine if they can be logically supported and maintained in human life. Accordingly, analytic theology is an appropriate approach to analyse and explore conceptual notions related to the nature of the future.

Analytic theology combines analytic philosophy with theology. This method is currently gaining popularity in Christian theology, with some theologians proposing

²¹ Godfrey Harold, “God’s Omnipotence: A Literary Investigation,” *Pharos Journal of Theology* 103, (2022): 1-10, <http://dx.doi.org/10.46222/pharosjot.1031>.

that it is a subset of theology.²² According to the handmaiden perspective, analytic philosophy functions as a support and collaborator in theological endeavours.²³ Consequently, analytic philosophy applies philosophical tools like style and method to theological discussions.

According to Joshua Farris and James Arcadi, the use of analytic philosophy to discuss theological topics originated from the philosophical side rather than the theological side.²⁴ Notable thinkers who introduced analytic philosophy into theology include Alvin Plantinga, Peter van Inwagen, Brian Leftow, Richard Swinburne, and Eleonore Stump.²⁵ Analytic theology, in this regard, assists the researcher in providing philosophical clarification, justification of religious beliefs, assessment of the coherence or incoherence of theological beliefs, and the application of imagination to a dogmatic theological tradition.²⁶ In the context of this paper's subject, the focus is on attaining clarity and coherence regarding the nature of the future.²⁷

However, it is important to acknowledge that theology has its own distinct methodology. Examples of these include biblical exegesis, general and special revelation, church tradition, and prayer. But, throughout history, theologians have consistently utilised techniques from analytic philosophy to conduct intricate theological inquiries. In light of this, the term "analytic" represents the origin from which theology derives its methods and resources.²⁸

It is crucial to distinguish between theology and analytic philosophy since they can be easily mistaken for one another. Max Baker-Hytch explains that theology and analytic philosophy diverge in their foundations. Theology relies on the Bible and church tradition, while analytic philosophy relies solely on reason.²⁹ Consequently, the objectives of analytic theologians differ from those of analytic philosophers. Farris and Arcadi contend that analytic theologians are primarily concerned with what they refer to as "theoconceptual architecture." What Farris and Arcadi mean is that analytic theologians,

²² Joanna Leidenhag, "Analytic Theology and Science-Engaged Theology," *Religious Studies* 7, no. 1 (2023): 1, <http://dx.doi.org/10.14428/thl.v7i1.77353>.

²³ Abbas Ahsan, "Analytic Theology and its Method," *Philotheos* 20, no. 2 (2020): 178, 188, <https://doi.org/10.5840/philotheos202020213>.

²⁴ Joshua Farris and James Arcadi, "Introduction to the Topical Issue 'Analytic Perspectives on Method and Authority in Theology,'" *Open Theology* 3, no. 1 (2017): 631, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1515/opth-2017-0044>.

²⁵ Max Baker-Hytch, "Analytic Theology and Analytic Philosophy of Religion: What's the Difference?" *Journal of Analytic Theology* 4, no. 1 (2016): 349, <http://dx.doi.org/10.12978/jat.2016-4.120023010007a>.

²⁶ Farris and Arcadi, "Introduction to the Topical Issue," 631.

²⁷ Aku Visala, "What Does Theology Have to do with Evidence? Exploring Analytic Theology and Epistemology," *Journal of Analytic Theology* 4, (2016): 317-331, <https://doi.org/10.12978/jat.2016-4.001020210800a>.

²⁸ Leidenhag, "Analytic Theology and Science-Engaged," 3.

²⁹ Baker-Hytch, "Analytic Theology and Analytic Philosophy," 350-351.

are interested in the macro-connections between doctrinal topics and how it is that these topics are located within a large web of interlocking dogmatic beliefs informed by several inseparable theological sources of authority (e.g., Scripture, creeds, confessions, theologians, substantive and procedural reason, and experience).³⁰

This article will unfold in three main sections, beginning with the establishment of the theological context relevant to the subject matter. The second section will examine various conceptual challenges that *Classical* theism presents for African Christians. The third objective focusses on integrating the study by engaging in a theological dialogue that juxtaposes African traditional religion with *Classical* theism.

3. Results and Discussion

Conceptual Challenges of a Fixed Future for Africans

This section explores the conceptual challenges faced by African Christians about the *Classical* Christian theology of a fixed future. The Bible serves as a foundational reference for *Classical* theists in developing a theology centred on a God who predetermines the future. 1 Samuel 15:29, Numbers 23:19, and Psalms 90:2 serve as significant biblical references that underpin the *Classical* view. William Craig, influenced by *Classical* theism's perfect Being theology, believes that these Bible verses should be understood as strongly as possible.³¹

To understand Craig's recommendation, let us consider Psalms 90:2, which articulates God's existence as "*from everlasting to everlasting*." The interpretation of this text by *Classical* theists is that God, in His perfect Being, transcends the limitations of reality. In this regard, Greek philosopher Plato has shaped the *Classical* perspective by asserting that everlastingness, or eternity, means that God exists outside of time and holds a higher status than created beings. Plato posits that perfect beings reside in a state of eternity, characterised by the absence of change or succession.³² Xenophanes, another Greek philosopher, presents views that align closely with those of Plato. In his work *Xenophanes of Colophon*, he states, "*Always he [God] remains in the same state, changing not at all.*"³³ Augustine highlights that "in the eternal nothing passeth, but the whole is present; whereas no time is all at once present."³⁴ Contemporary *Classical* theists Stump and Kretzmann present arguments that diverge somewhat from those of earlier thinkers. They assert that the eternity

³⁰ Farris and Arcadi, "Introduction to the Topical Issue," 631-632.

³¹ William Craig, "Response to Gregory A. Boyd," In *Divine Providence: Four Views*, Eds. P.K., Helseth, W.L. Craig, R. Highfield, and G.A. Boyd (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 224.

³² Robert Neville, *Eternity and Time's Flow* (New York: State University New York Press, 1993), 130.

³³ William Mann, "Divine Sovereignty and Aseity," In *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion*, Ed. W.J. Wainwright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 35.

³⁴ Augustine. *The confessions of Saint Augustine by St. Augustine*, Trans. E.B. Pusey (Oak Harbour: Logos Research System, 1999), 154.

exists alongside creation, yet not within the same context.³⁵ This synopsis of the *Classical* view effectively articulates the understanding of God as existing beyond the confines of the created space-time reality.

Ludwig Neidhart examines the implications of an eternal God via the lens of *Classical* theism, “the requirement that the life of an eternal entity should be perfect means that its ability to act and to perceive should be perfect, ranging over all entities; this of course has to be attributed to God in virtue of His omnipotence and omniscience.”³⁶ Corroborating Neidhart, Boethius maintains that God knows the future from a timeless perspective since He experiences His life all at once.³⁷ Geisler, House, and Herrera agree, arguing that “God’s timelessness directly correlates with His exhaustive knowledge.”³⁸

William Craig asserts that divine omniscience has been employed in Christian theology to demonstrate God’s timelessness. According to Craig, no temporal being can ascertain future contingent occurrences.³⁹ The argument is that only an atemporal being existing beyond created space-time can possess knowledge of the future. Paul Helm contends that timelessness must not be regarded as a characteristic of God, but rather “as a mode of possessing attributes.”⁴⁰ Helm argues that, for instance, we ought not say that God is both timeless and omniscient. It is more accurate to say that God is timelessly omniscient. This is because for Helm God’s timelessness informs His omniscience.

The *Classical* view presents certain theological advantages, particularly in the explanation of doctrines like prophecy and divine election. For instance, the *Classical* view posits that God’s knowledge of the elected is rooted in His foreknowledge of future events. He prophesied the future based on His prior knowledge of what is to come.

However, the *Classical* Christian tradition presents conceptual problems for African Christians due to its implications for a timeless and immutable God. One of these conceptual problems is that a timeless God must, regrettably, be extricated from reality to preserve His perfection. But, excluding God from reality is inconceivable within the African cosmological perspective. This is because in African traditional religion (ATR), every entity inside reality, including God, is perceived as interrelated,

³⁵ Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, “Eternity,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 78, no. 8 (1981): 429-458, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2026047>.

³⁶ Ludwig Neidhart, “God and Time. A Defense of God’s Timelessness,” in *God, Time, Infinity*, eds. Mirosław Szatkowski (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2018), 4-5, <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/9783110594164-008/html>.

³⁷ A.M.S. Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, 68 (accessed on 25 November 2024)

³⁸ Norman Geisler, Wayne House, and Max Herrera, *The Battle for God: Responding to the Challenge of Neotheism* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2001), 24).

³⁹ William Craig, “Divine Eternity,” In *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology*, Eds. T.P. Flint and M.C. Rea (Oxford University Press, 2009), 148.

⁴⁰ Paul Helm, *Eternal God*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 17.

as posited by Derrick Mashau and Themba Ngcobo.⁴¹ No entity, including God, exists independently of reality. Moreover, for Africans facing numerous existential challenges, including starvation, elevated unemployment rates, and diseases like malaria, a God detached from reality is of no assistance. It is regrettable that certain conventional Christian theological books and certain pastors continue to proclaim a God who is timeless.

Furthermore, the concept of God's omniscience in *Classical* theism is incompatible with the African perspective on the future. Indeed, *Classical* theists associate God's timelessness with divine omniscience. For instance, Aquinas posits that "*things (are) reduced to act in time, as known by us successively in time, but by God (are known) in eternity, which is above time.*"⁴² Consequently for Aquinas, God is omniscient due to his timeless nature. In this framework, as previously mentioned by Boethius, all times coexist simultaneously before God, including the future.

Be that as it may, the challenge for Africans is that the notion of situating God outside of created space-time for Him to possess foreknowledge of the future is an alien concept. Moreover, this view erodes Africans' faith in God's ability to change the future for their good through prayer. For example, if God is aware that an African political leader will incite genocide against certain minority tribes, then even if Africans pray against it, the situation is unlikely to change in the future because the future is already predetermined.

Another conceptual issue with a God whose knowledge includes knowledge of the future is that God appears cruel. Let me explain. *Classical* theist Paul Helm believes that God ordains everything that occurs, including evil acts by humans.⁴³ In other words, for Helm, atrocities such as horrific crimes in South Africa and the 1994 Rwanda genocide, which killed over 800.000 civilians and displaced up to 2.000.000 Rwandans, were acts ordered by God. There is a daily occurrence of children going missing in Africa. Some wealthy individuals wilfully ignore the plight of the poor in their pursuit of personal wealth. According to Helm, God knew about these things and did nothing to stop them. For Africans, this God cannot be described as a loving and caring God.

The other conceptual difficulty with an already settled future for Africans stems from the fact that the future in ATR is viewed as potentially non-existent. From an African perspective, time encompasses past, present, and potential future events. According to John Mbiti, the future does not possess ontological status because it has

⁴¹ Derrick Mashau and Themba Ngcobo, "Christian Mission in Creative Tension with African Worldview(s): A Post-colonial Engagement Regarding Life After Death and Ancestry", 36-37.

⁴² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Benziger Bros edition. Ohio: Sandra K. Perry, 1947), 113.

⁴³ Paul Helm, "The Augustinian-Calvinist View," In *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views*, Eds. G. Boyd, D. Hunt, W. Craig, and P. Helm (Illinois: Downers Grove, 2001), 165.

not yet come into being.⁴⁴ In light of this, the future is regarded as an inevitable or possible period of time. Put simply, time is only there when there are occurrences or happenings. African philosopher Alexis Kagame supports this perspective.⁴⁵ According to Kagame, the future is fundamentally non-existent because there are no predetermined concrete occurrences that are guaranteed to happen.⁴⁶ The perspectives of these African scholars regarding the concept of the future indicate that the notion of a preordained future stands in stark contrast to the way Africans understand the nature of the future.

The final conceptual issue I wish to emphasise pertains to the African perspective on prayer and the notion of libertarian free will. Africa is a continent renowned for its deep spiritual practices and rich traditions of prayer. Africans engage in prayer for various intentions, encompassing requests for rain to ensure bountiful harvests, desires for procreation, aspirations for healing, and hopes for success in their lives. Africans hold the conviction that through prayer, they can influence the trajectory of their lives. However, if the future has been predetermined without their consent, it seems unjust from a divine perspective. The *Classical* perspective, evidently, is at odds with the theological understanding of prayer for Africans.

This section aimed to elucidate some of the conceptual challenges that Africans face regarding the *Classical* Christian perspective on the notion of a future that is already known to God. The following section examines the subject matter more thoroughly.

Theological Synthesis on the Openness of the Future

In this section, “*African religious thought*” means the theological and philosophical views of persons of African origin. The fact that Africans were devout even before the advent of Christian missionaries from the West is now well-established. Actually, before the entrance of missionaries, Africans viewed ATR as absolute truth.⁴⁷ For modern-day Africans, ATR is still the lens through which they perceive and make sense of the Christian religion. Even in modern times, many African Christians continue to adhere to certain ATR practices, including going to initiation schools, paying dowries, and seeking advice from traditional healers. In

⁴⁴ John Mbiti, “Eschatology,” in *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs*, Eds. K. Dickson & P. Ellingworth (London: Lutterworth Press, 1969), 84.

⁴⁵ Alexis Kagame, “The Empirical Apperception of Time and the Conception of History in Bantu Thought,” in *African Philosophy: A Classical Approach*, Eds. E. Parker & K Kalumba (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1996), 82-90.

⁴⁶ Kagame, “The Empirical Apperception of Time”, 84.

⁴⁷ Richard Gehman, *African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective* (Chicago: Oasis International, 2019), 4.

reality, "African identity and culture are preserved in African Traditional Religion," according to Jele Manganyi and Johan Buitendag.⁴⁸

God is the major figure that unites ATR, and the religion, itself, has been passed down through centuries. God is characterised by specific attributes in African religious beliefs. Words or phrases that ascribe traits, properties, qualities, or characteristics to the God are what Emeka Ekeke and Chike Ekeopara mean when they speak of divine attributes.⁴⁹ Most African songs, proverbs, folklore, liturgies, and the naming of children have these attributes. It must be highlighted that neither the colonial nor missionary periods are responsible for these attributes. They predated the arrival of missionaries by a considerable amount of time.⁵⁰ Unveiling concepts of an open future may require some of God's attributes in African religious contemplation. One of these attributes has to do with God's transcendence.

The idea that God is greater than anything in creation is shared by both Christian doctrine and ATR.⁵¹ Among other things, the hierarchical structure of ATR serves to affirm God's otherness. If the researcher had to compare this structure to anything, it would be a ladder. The highest level is God, and below that are lesser spirits like divinities and ancestors. According to Ada Agada, divinities and ancestors serve as go-betweens between Africans and God in this hierarchical system.⁵²

The above hierarchy presents God existing alongside other spirit beings in a communal and reciprocal relationship. This ATR world resembles the one depicted in the Old Testament, where God coexists with other created spirit beings, including angels. This aspect warrants emphasis, as both configurations suggest that God, as a relational entity, possesses the capacity to plan, think, create, deliberate, and engage other created beings in His activities. For example, the Bible describes God dispatching angels (Ps 91:11-12), while in ATR, Africans direct their petitions to God via divinities or ancestors.⁵³ However, engaging personally with God requires God to be relational. The *Classical* God is unable to engage in the relational activities referenced for Africans.

⁴⁸ Jele Manganyi and Johan Buitendag, "A Critical Analysis on African Traditional Religion and the Trinity," *HTS: Theological Studies* 69, no. 1 (2013): 1, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v69i1.1934>.

⁴⁹ Emeka Ekeke and Chike Ekeopara, "God, Divinities and Spirits in African Traditional Religious Ontology," *American Journal of Social and Management Sciences* 1, no. 2 (2010): 211, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5251/ajms.2010.1.2.209.218>.

⁵⁰ Evaristus Chukwudi Ezeugwu and Gregory Emeka Chinweuba, "The Supreme Being in Igbo Thought: A Reappraisal," *Philosophia* 21, (2018): 26-47, <https://philosophia-bg.com/archive/philosophia-21-2018/the-supreme-being-in-igbo-thought-a-reappraisal>.

⁵¹ Andreas May, "God in Dialogue with His Creation," *Khazanah Theologia* 5, no. 1 (2023): 23, <https://doi.org/10.15575/kt.v5i1.20197>.

⁵² Ada Agada, "Rethinking the Concept of God and the Problem of Evil from the Perspective of African Thought," *Religious Studies* (2022): 47-48, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0034412522000294>.

⁵³ Sibani Meesua and Iboaya Ofure, "The Supreme Being and Divinities in African Traditional Religion: X-Raying Their Relationship and Conflicts," *South-South Journal of Humanities and International Studies* 3, no. 2 (2020): 523, <https://ssjhis.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/27-The-Supreme-Being-and-Divinities-in-African-Traditional-Religion.pdf>.

In addition to the relational and communal aspect of God mentioned above, the theme of the Trinity allows for an exploration of the communal aspects present in the African religious context. Africans conceptualise God as a singular being. However, other African tribes, such as the Bambara, refer to God as *Bemba*. This name represents God as a union of four beings, each fulfilling distinct roles within the God-African world relationship.⁵⁴ This perspective implies a God who engages and interacts within a community of four, analogous to the concept of the Trinity in Christian theology. For this to be the case, however, God must undergo change and succession, characteristics that render Him temporal instead of atemporal.

As previously explored, *Classical* theism fundamentally revolves around the concept of God's absolute transcendence. This view is corroborated by Paul Helm who argues that due to His transcendence, God cannot engage in temporal relations with creation.⁵⁵ Brian Leftow supports the *Classical* perspective, stating, "*As the temporal universe is contingent but God's existence necessary, God is not usually thought to exist essentially in the physical time of the universe.*"⁵⁶ In spite of that, for Africans, this perspective eliminates the presence of God in reality and diminishes His significance to the African context. According to Africans, God is intricately linked to the fabric of reality, reflecting the African perspective.⁵⁷ For Africans who have a concrete understanding of reality, the concept of a God who exists outside of reality is incomprehensible. The argument that for Africans "*atemporalism seems to entail an abstract God who resembles more an idea than a person*" is emphasised by Alin Cucu.⁵⁸

Africans, however, do affirm the transcendence of God. For Africans, however, the concept of God's transcendence positions God as residing in the sky. Many African tribes provide evidence that they consistently link God's dwelling with the sky. The term used by the Nigerian Yoruba for *Olorun* is closely associated with the word for "sky."⁵⁹ The Nupe of North Central Nigeria refer to God as *Soko*, translating to "*the great God in the sky*," while the Nuer people use the term *Kwoth*, meaning "*the spirit who is in the sky*."⁶⁰ The notion of God's transcendence as represented by the sky suggests that for Africans, divine engagement occurs from a sky perspective. This

⁵⁴ Aloysius Lugira, *African Traditional Religion*, 3rd ed. (New York: Ifobase Publishing, 2009), 39.

⁵⁵ Helm, *Eternal God*, 39.

⁵⁶ Brian Leftow, *Time and eternity* (London: Cornell University Press, 1991), 34.

⁵⁷ Mashau and Ngcobo, "Christian Mission," 36-37.

⁵⁸ Alin Cucu, "Debunking the Hellenistic Myth: Why Christians Should Believe That God Is In Time," *Piąte Piętro Bydgoskie Czasopismo Filozoficzne* 2, (2017): 1, <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/186329987.pdf>.

⁵⁹ Tobias Houston, "The Supreme Being in Ciyawo Bible Translation and Managing the Choice of Adequate Terms for God," *Acta Theologica* 42, no. 2 (2022): 213, <https://doi.org/10.18820/23099089/actat.v42i2.14>.

⁶⁰ Mike Ushe, "God, Divinities and Ancestors in African Traditional Religious Thought," *IGWEBUIKE: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities* 3, no. 4 (2017):160, <https://www.igwebuikeresearchinstitute.org/journal/3.4.10.pdf>.

perspective on God's transcendence aligns closely with the interpretations found in the Old Testament. The Old Testament reveals a consistent association between the Hebrews and the concept of God as linked to the heavens. For example, Deuteronomy 26:15 refers to heaven as God's "holy dwelling place." In these configurations, the transcendence of God is not characterised by God residing beyond the sky, with the sky representing the transcendental essence of reality.

The concept of God's transcendence, linked to the sky, implies that Africans perceive God's omniscience in a manner distinct from that of *Classical* theists. According to *Arminianism*, God's knowledge of the future is based on His "*simple foreknowledge*," while *Molinism* attributes it to His "*middle knowledge*." African religious thought, however, predicates that God lacks knowledge of the future, as the future is not yet in existence. This conclusion arises from the African perspective on God's omniscience. Gehman propounds that although certain scholars may dispute the omniscience of the African God, there is a lack of evidence within ATR to support the claim that God is not omniscient.⁶¹ For instance, the Zulu and the Banyarwanda refer to God as "*the Wise One*," while the Baongo express that "*God knows all*."⁶² The Yoruba assert that God possesses complete knowledge, encompassing the innermost thoughts of all individuals, whereas the Barundi describe Him as the "*Watcher of everything*."⁶³

The aforementioned tribal avowals illustrate that the African God possesses complete knowledge, encompassing even those aspects that individuals may remain unaware of. There is no evidence in ATR to suggest that God possesses knowledge of the future, however. This does not represent a limitation of God; rather, it indicates that there is nothing in the future for God to be aware of. Nevertheless, the omniscience ascribed to God in ATR is characterised by the notion that God's knowledge is all-encompassing. In other words, God possesses complete knowledge of all aspects of reality, which positions Him as the most knowledgeable Being in existence. The African puts his trust in God to guide him into the future because of God's better understanding of reality, which is based on this comprehensive knowledge.

Mbiti has proposed that time in the African context flows in a backward manner rather than a forward progression. Mbiti's assertion indicates that Africans engage with life by looking towards the past, specifically the time of the dead or

⁶¹ Richard Gehman, *African Biblical Religion in Biblical Perspective* (Kijabe: Kesho Publications, 1989), 189.

⁶² John Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1970), 3.

⁶³ Shafiul Islam and Md. Didarul Islam, "African Traditional Concept of God: A Critical Analysis," *Green University Review of Social Sciences* 2, no. 1 (2015): 4, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/332554087_AFRICAN_TRADITIONAL_CONCEPT_OF_GOD_A_CRITICAL_ANALYSIS.

ancestors.⁶⁴ For Africans, the past holds greater significance than the future. An African's desire is to transition into the realm of the ancestors upon death. This illustrates the reasons behind the general tendency of Africans to place less emphasis on the future in their daily activities. This could provide additional insight into the absence of a concept of paradise in ATR, contrasting with its presence in Christian theology.

The idea of divination is another element of African religion that implies that the future is open. In Africa, divination is seen as a gift passed down through generations. Thomas Azongo and Adadow Yidana define divination as "*a set of procedures involving the art of using a ritual or ceremony to acquire information from the spirit world in order to predict the future.*"⁶⁵ With its help, Africans can be better prepared for future changes in their life, increasing their chances of avoiding or influencing those changes.

For example, a diviner may inform an individual about an impending calamity in their life. The African typically enquires of the diviner regarding the necessary actions to prevent the impending calamity. The prevailing perspective among Africans is that, irrespective of predictions regarding the future, there exist rituals that can be performed or prayers that can be directed to God, with the potential to change future outcomes. This bears a resemblance to the narrative of King Hezekiah as presented in 2 Kings 20. The narrative reveals that God, via the prophet Isaiah, informs King Hezekiah of his impending death. In light of the impending calamity that appeared to be predetermined, Hezekiah engaged in earnest prayer, seeking to persuade God to reconsider His decision regarding his death. It is evident that God changed His decision, granting Hezekiah an additional 15 years of life. This narrative, along with the African notion of divination, supports the idea that the future is open rather than predetermined, as suggested in *Classical* theism.

The doctrine of Jesus' incarnation, a fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith, provides insight into the preservation of God's character as a relational being. Jesus is described as having relinquished His divine nature to assume human form. The incarnation of Jesus is sometimes referred to as *kenosis*. The term *kenosis* originates from the Greek text of Philippians 2:7. This concept aligns with the ATR perspective, where God is perceived as able to coexist with humanity while maintaining His distinctness. In this context, Mbiti references the Gikuyu belief that God resides in mountains during His interactions with humanity.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ John Mbiti, "Eschatology," In *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs*, Eds. K. Dickson and P. Ellingworth (London: Lutterworth Press, 1969).

⁶⁵ Thomas Azongo and Adadow Yidana, "Spiritual Diagnostic Laboratory: The Role of Diviners in the Management and Resolution of Life Crises," *American Journal of Sociological Research* 5, no. 1 (2015): 8, <https://10.0.23.35/j.sociology.20150501.02>.

⁶⁶ Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy*, 7.

Nonetheless, Stump and Kretzmann argue that Christ possessed a divine nature inherent to the Godhead, alongside a human nature that was characteristic of humanity. According to these scholars, only the human nature of Christ underwent incarnation.⁶⁷ However, the issue I observe with Stump and Kretzmann's argument is that assuming a human nature implies a temporal existence, which a timeless God, according to the theological principles of *Classical* theism, cannot engage with. Furthermore, the Bible states that Christ ascended to heaven in the flesh and that He will return in the same flesh. This highlights the transient nature of Jesus as the second person within the Trinity.

But the open interpretation of the future is not without critics. Some Christian theologians, for instance, have posited that certain texts in the Bible suggest that God possesses knowledge of the future, implying that the future is present in the mind of God. For example, Mark Pretorius identifies several texts in the Bible, including Matthew 26:31-35.⁶⁸ In Matthew 26:31-35 Jesus foretells Peter's denial of Him. This text serves as evidence that God possesses foreknowledge of the future. Boyd counters, though, and I agree with him, that Jesus merely needed coextensive knowledge about Peter to foretell Peter's denial of Him. According to Boyd, "*we do not need to believe that the future is exhaustively settled in God's mind to make sense of Jesus' prediction of Peter's denial. We need only belief that God possesses a perfect knowledge of the past and present and that he revealed some of it to Jesus.*"⁶⁹

In my opinion, though, the fact that modern artificial intelligences (AIs) can accurately forecast an individual's future actions based on their enormous knowledge of humans is fascinating. Imagine God, who not only created everything but also knows everything there is to know, surpassing even artificial intelligence in this capacity. The point is, if AIs can predict the future with accuracy without knowing what lies beyond, why does God require foreknowledge to do the same? The point is, if God wants to know what the future holds for Peter, all He needs is complete insight into Peter's past and present.

4. Conclusion

This paper concludes that the concept of the future being predetermined is absent in African religious beliefs. This is because Africans adhere to a belief in a causal link with God. Africans and God collaborate to shape an unfolding future that is determined jointly by divine will and human agency. In African religious belief, the fact that God confronts an unknown future is not perceived as a manifestation of weakness on the side of God. Africans firmly trust in the limitless power of God to do

⁶⁷ Stump and Kretzmann, "Eternity," 452.

⁶⁸ Mark Pretorius, "An Epigrammatic analysis on Open Theism and its Impact on Classical Christianity," *HTS: Theological Studies* 69, no. 1 (2013): 5, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v69i1.2041>.

⁶⁹ Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 37.

anything. This infers that if God envisions a specific destiny for Africans, He possesses the ability to accomplish it for them while still considering their contributions.

The prominent theme that runs through the Bible is the divine engagement between God and humanity. This golden ribbon represents the interplay between divine influence on human choices and the impact of human decisions on the divine. The African religious world exhibits striking similarities to the one depicted in the Bible. However, the Classical theistic understanding of God being timeless and absolutely immutable fails to consider the interaction between God and the world. The inquiry into the future's openness or closeness fundamentally revolves around the extent of God's concern for humanity. This study suggests initiating a dialogue between Christian theologians and scholars of African religion to address and reconcile the differing perspectives. This could enhance Christianity by providing a nuanced comprehension of the future, potentially allowing Africans to connect with a Christian God that resonates with their real-life experiences.

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