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African Traditional Religion and Non-Doxastic Accounts of Faith*

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Abstract

In the recent Anglo-American philosophy of religion, significant attention has been given to the nature of faith. My goal is to show that some of the recent discussion of faith can be fruitfully brought to bear on a problem for a less globally well-known version of monotheism found in African Traditional Religion. I argue that African Traditional Religion could benefit from utilizing non-doxastic accounts of faith. For a significant number of Africans questioning authority or tradition, including the tenets of African Traditional Religion is viewed as harmful to the community and hence beyond the pale. A non-doxastic account of faith would be helpful for adherents of African Traditional Religion who find themselves disbelieving yet wanting to continue in religious practice and maintain communal harmony. This is because a non-doxastic state such as hope is within one's direct control and does not require as much evidential justification as rational belief.

Keyword: African Traditional Religion, Non-doxastic faith, Religious doubt, Anglo-American philosophy of religion, Cross-cultural philosophy

Introduction

Over the last few decades, significant literature has emerged in the Anglo-American philosophy of religion, exploring the nature of propositional faith (see LOUGHEED & HENDRICKS 2021). Much of the discussion has centered on identifying the specific property or properties essential to faith. What does it mean to say that S has propositional faith that P? In attempting to answer this and related questions, there has been debate about whether belief is necessary for propositional faith. Some philosophers conclude that belief is not in fact necessary for faith, appealing to non-doxastic states such as acceptance, hope, or trust to justify this supposition. As is often the case, the target of faith in such discussions is Western monotheism, with the Judeo-Christian tradition taking centerstage. My goal is not to issue a verdict on the nature of faith in this context, but instead to show that some of these ideas can be fruitfully brought to bear on a problem for a less globally well-known version of monotheism found in African Traditional Religion.

In what follows, the first three sections are intended to introduce the reader to essential information about the two topics I'm bringing together. I therefore begin by explaining the basic contours of the debate about the nature of

faith, with special attention to early non-doxastic accounts of faith as hope (Section 2). I then present some of the basic claims of African Traditional Religion (Section 3). I argue that African Traditional Religion is not frequently separated from other areas of life and ways of thinking, such that there is really no distinct concept of ‘religion’ (Section 4). However, if forced to choose, African Traditional Religion fits best with doxasticism about faith (Section 5). This leads to a problem, which is that doxasticism excludes individuals who would be adherents of African Traditional Religion but find themselves with serious doubts or otherwise disbelieving. Though this is also a problem for other monotheistic religions, I argue that it is much more serious in the African tradition since such disbelief is harmful to the community, and the community is the highest (or one of the highest) goods (Section 6). Embracing a non-doxastic account of faith such as hope would allow individuals who disbelieve African Traditional Religion to continue to practice it without damaging their community (Section 7). I conclude with some observations about the future directions and the challenges of cross-cultural philosophy of religion (Section 8).

Anglo-American Accounts of Faith

One of the central debates about faith in the Anglo-American philosophy of religion regards whether belief is necessary for propositional faith. There is now considerable literature on the topic, and as such, I will make no attempt at a complete summary here. Instead, I focus on Louis Pojman’s seminal paper, “Faith Without Belief,” which is an early defense of non-doxasticism and really set the stage for much of the subsequent literature (1986).¹ I focus on Pojman because I believe the motivation for his account is relevant to what I want to propose for African Traditional Religion later. Furthermore, I suspect that some of Pojman’s claims very much remain part of the motivation that continues to undergird non-doxastic accounts of faith in the ongoing literature.

For the sake of simplicity, let us just consider the proposition ‘God exists’ as the relevant propositional object of faith. Pojman argues that *doubt* can sometimes be the cause of anxiety, especially when it is understood as a necessary condition for salvation. Thus, he argues that *hope* is sufficient for faith in the absence of belief (POJMAN 1986, 157). Now, suppose that this doubt is the result of how an individual assesses their evidence for God. Furthermore, suppose they think that a kind of ‘Pascalian-Jamesian’ method of placing themselves in a position to believe is immoral because it goes beyond their evidence, or that it just doesn’t work for their psychological constitution (POJMAN 1986, 158).² If belief is necessary for faith, then such a person is disqualified.

¹ Both Robert Audi (1991) and William Alston (1996) also contribute early pieces and are found in the acknowledgments of Pojman article.

² The Pascalian-Jamesian method referred to here is one where an individual who lacks religious faith places themselves situations and undertakes projects that make it likely they will develop faith (e.g., attending religious services, reading sacred texts, praying, etc.)

The reason belief is important for faith is that it helps relieve that pain associated with doubt and that it is also action-guiding.³ However, regarding the pain that sometimes comes with doubt, Pojman believes “it may be necessary for many religious people to learn to live gracefully with doubt, using it to probe deeper into ultimate questions. The suffering of doubt may be a cross that a disciple must learn to bear” (1986, 160). More importantly, Pojman denies that belief is a necessary condition for action-guidance. He explains that “For many actions belief that the state of affairs in question will occur is not a necessary condition. I may act on the mere possibility of something being the case without actually believing that it will be the case” (POJMAN 1986, 160). In order to act on a proposition, an individual doesn’t need to believe it. They merely need to believe it involves a risk worth taking given their goals. Indeed, it’s even reasonable to sometimes be guided by very weak credences. If I believe there is a bomb in that suitcase, even with a very low credence, I am reasonable to act quickly to leave the room (POJMAN 1986, 160). Pojman’s point is that the proposition which is doubted doesn’t even need to be positively probable in order to act on it; it all depends on the risks associated with the proposition.

These reflections lead Pojman to claim hope is sufficient for faith, since the “perception of its possibility is often sufficient to incite activity” (1986, 161). There are four conditions for the type of hope that he has in mind. First, it “involves belief in the possibility of a state of affairs obtaining” (POJMAN 1986, 161). This means merely believing that the proposition is not impossible. For example, I might hope to win the lottery, even though I believe it’s extremely unlikely I will win (POJMAN 1986, 162).⁴ Second, “hope precludes certainty” (POJMAN 1986, 162). In order for something to be reasonably hoped for, it has to be possible that it may not obtain. Third, “hope entails desire for the state of affairs in question to obtain or the proposition to be true” (POJMAN 1986, 162). In other words, one must have a pro-attitude to the proposition in question. Fourth, “[i]f one hopes for *p*, one will be disposed to do what one can to bring *p* about, if there is anything that one can do to bring it about” (POJMAN 1986, 162).

The upshot of this view is that it is possible to live as if a proposition is true, even if one in fact disbelieves it (POJMAN 1986, 167). To hope that God exists “implies only that one regards such a being as possibly existing and that one is committed to live *as if* such a being does exist. Whether it is rational to commit oneself in this way depends on the outcome of an analysis of comparative values in relationship to probable outcomes. It is the sort of assessment that goes on in any cost-benefit analysis” (POJMAN 1986, 170). Pojman concludes that for at least some people, this sort of hope is sufficient for a deep and meaningful commitment to the religious life (1986, 170-172).

My aim is not to debate the merits of Pojman’s case, though I believe he presents a plausible one, but rather to highlight that the motivation for it is

³ See Peirce 1962.

⁴ For Pojman “What separates hope from belief is that in believing one necessarily believes that the proposition is true (has a subjective probability index of greater than .5, whereas in hoping this is not necessary” (1986, 162)

connected to evidentialism or epistemic justification. Also, notice that related though distinct reason from worries about evidentialism for endorsing non-doxasticism is based on doxastic involuntariness, the view that individuals don't have (direct) control over what they believe. Beliefs are things that are intuitive or felt, and individuals just find themselves with them. If individuals don't control what they believe, perhaps belief is less relevant to faith than many suppose.⁵

As stated, the literature on the nature of faith has grown significantly in the last few decades. Daniel Howard-Snyder has emerged as a leading proponent of non-doxastic faith (e.g., 2016, 2017). A number of different non-doxastic states have been proposed as consistent with propositional faith. For example, along with Pojman others argue that *hope* or something similar to it is sufficient for faith (e.g., AUDI 2019; JACKSON 2019; JEFFREY 2017). Still others claim that *trust* is sufficient for faith (e.g., MCCRAW 2015; PACE and MCKAUGHAN 2022). On the other hand, one of the most influential doxastic accounts of faith can be located in the work of John Bishop. He argues that faith should be thought of as a doxastic venture, where passional factors can take one beyond the evidence (e.g., BISHOP 2002; 2007).⁶

African Traditional Religion

Before explaining the basic components of African Traditional Religion, a few brief methodological comments are in order. Thaddeus Metz, who is well-known for expounding ideas from the African tradition in ways that are palatable to Anglo-American or 'analytic' philosophers writes that:

When writing on Africa, one is expected to try to avoid stereotyping by acknowledging the existence of variety and particularity among its fifty-four countries and its thousands of linguistic and ethnic groups. However, there appears to be enough common ground among sub-Saharan black peoples (or at least their academic exponents) for many African philosophers and social scientists to speak of an overarching belief system routinely called 'African Traditional Religion' in the literature. (Metz 2022b, 1)

In what follows, I describe the main components of African Traditional Religion with special attention given to the idea of life force, while acknowledging that this is hardly to imply there is uniformity of belief across the sub-Sahara.

African Traditional Religion is unambiguously monotheistic, with one supreme God having created the universe from pre-existing material. God has imbued literally everything that exists, including both animate and inanimate objects with an imperceptible energy commonly referred to as vital energy or life force. In other words, God is responsible for giving everything that exists life. There is a large invisible realm that includes numerous spirits, often representative

⁵ At least some evidence that this is motivation can be inferred from the fact that some have directed responded to it as a challenge. See Mourad 2008; Rettler 2018.

⁶ For response see, for example, Buckareff 2005 and Eklund 2014.

of various aspects of nature, the living dead (those who remain part of their community after biological death for four or five generations), ancestors (venerated living dead who remain part of the community for much longer).

Life force is also indicative of what is known as the African ‘hierarchy of being’ or ‘chain of being’. God has placed humans at the center of the visible universe, giving them the most life force of any of the visible beings and therefore more than non-human animals, plants, and minerals. However, humans have less force than the living dead or ancestors, and much less than God who has the most powerful force (and indeed, is responsible for all other life force). Forces impact each other, where stronger forces can diminish or strengthen other forces. The basic element of the universe is force, which is derived by God. Everything in the universe is interconnected in virtue of possessing life force. This interconnectedness is important for understanding the highly communal nature of communitarian ethics.

The Religious/Secular Divide in African Traditional Religion

What is interesting is that in African Traditional Religion, religion is not often understood as a distinct phenomenon that is separate from other areas of life. It permeates all aspects of life and is not typically thought of as something that can be separated into its own unique category. I hypothesize that at least part of what explains this feature of African Traditional Religion is due to the fact that life force permeates *everything*.

Consider that K. Chukwulozie Anyanwu writes, “[t]he Igbo culture does not make a clear-cut distinction between the self and the world, between body and spirit, between the visible and invisible worlds but regard all as a field of aesthetic continuum” (ANYANWU 1984, 89) The ‘aesthetic continuum’ is here best understood as referring to force. Anyanwu also writes that:

To say that the Igbo live religiously does not mean that they spend all their days in prayer or that they do not exercise their power of thought. A person is not religious solely because he worships God, rather he is religious if he commits all the resources of his mind to and completely surrenders himself to the service of a cause in such a way that it controls his modes of thought, activities and behaviour. (ANYANWU 1984, 87)

George Ukagba explains that:

Mbiti in his book *Introduction to African Religion and Philosophy* claimed that Africans eat religiously, dance religiously and does everything religiously. In traditional African societies, there were no atheists. This is because religion, in the indigenous African culture was not an independent institution. Religion in the African sense was practical and all-involving. (UKAGBA 2005, 185)

Peter Kasenene adds that “[a]ccording to African spirituality, there is no dichotomy between the sacred and the profane, the physical and spiritual, the religious and the moral” (KASENENE 1994, 142). Furthermore, “[t]he African

world-view blends the sacred and the mundane. The religious and the moral intermingle with the physical, material, political and social concerns of the people” (KASENENE 1994, 142). Vincent Mulago observes that religion is not usually distinguished from other customs, with it often being mixed together with the social, political, and even the scientific and medical (1991, 127). And finally, C.N. Ubah explains that “Otanchara-Otanzu [of the Igbo] religion consists of a wide range of beliefs and practices relating to invisible forces which are thought to determine the lot of men on earth. Life is held to exist in two planes: the tangible world of the living and the immaterial world of the spirits” (UBAH 1982, 91). I submit that these descriptions are representative such that this is enough to show that at least for many adherents of African Traditional Religion (or more carefully, for its academic exponents), there is little distinction drawn between religion and the rest of one’s life.

African Traditional Religion and Doxastic Faith

I am now able to bring the topics of Traditional African Religion and faith as construed in the Anglo-American Tradition into conversation with one another. In this section, I defend the claim that traditional African religion is best interpreted as endorsing doxasticism about faith. More carefully, I make the modest claim that it is *more* consistent with doxasticism than non-doxasticism, at least as these concepts are understood in the contemporary Anglo-American philosophy of religion. In other words, if forced to choose between doxasticism or non-doxasticism about faith in African Traditional Religion, the answer is clearly doxasticism. I support this claim by examining some instances of how the term ‘belief’ is used in descriptions of Traditional African Religion in order to first establish that ‘propositional belief’ is a relevant concept. I then turn to the rare usages of ‘faith’ in some influential texts on African Traditional Religion.

Here are some examples of how the term ‘belief’ is used in descriptions of African Traditional Religion:

- “African ethics is deeply religious, being influenced by a *belief* in an all-pervading Supreme Being who controls the universe and social relationships through a number of intermediaries” (KASENENE 1994, 140; emphasis mine).
- “Igbo *beliefs* in *Chi/Chukwu* (Great Creator), *Chi* (personal spirit), *Ala* (Earth-goddess), *Ndebunze* (spirits of ancestors), etc. are the ways in which the Igbo people culturally interpret and organise their experience, and create meaning, value and order in their world” (ANYANWU 1984, 86; first emphasis mine).
- “[E]verything you do, including acquisition of knowledge and coming to *beliefs*, serves the purpose of enhancing the vital energy, the procreation of the tribe. Together. What you do if you isolate, individualize yourself is worse than dying: you will never be a root.” (HAMMINGA 2005, 59; emphasis mine).

All of these instances refer to propositional belief. Additionally, in the introduction to Evans-Pritchard's influential anthropological work, [Theories of Primitive Religion] 'belief' is also frequently used to denote propositional belief (1965, 1-19). The same is true of how it appears in Laurenti Magesa's important book, [African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant] (1997). Though it is ultimately an empirical claim that could be subject to more systematic scrutiny than I conduct here, I suggest this is enough to reasonably conclude that *belief* in African Traditional Religion commonly loosely refers to propositional beliefs. Furthermore, if pressed, I suspect that adherents of African Traditional Religion would affirm that they believe various propositions that represent the content of their views.

Supposing I have established that something like propositional belief reasonably exists in African Traditional Religion, there is the further question of whether faith is a distinct concept from it. I now tentatively suggest that in the remarkably few places it appears, 'faith' just is 'belief' for many adherents of African Traditional Religion (or at least for its academic exponents). For much of this tradition, there is no meaningful distinction between faith and belief.

Consider that in John Mbiti's seminal [Introduction to African Religion], the word 'faith' appears only 13 times within the 220 or so pages.⁷ In 5 places the word is used in reference to something like the 'Christian religion' or 'Christianity' (MBITI 1975, 30, 182, 184). In 3 places it is used to refer to the Baha'i religion (MBITI 1975, 188). In another 3 places, it is used to describe the idea that Christians have faith, often located by faith *in* Jesus (MBITI 1975, 182, 185, 190). Not only is this last usage not related to African Traditional Religion nor propositional faith, but such usages are *never* accompanied by an explanation as to what constitutes faith *in* a person. This leaves just two places where faith is used in reference to African Traditional Religion:

- "These public religious places [i.e., places in nature] are the focus of communal faith, values, and sentiments" (MBITI 1975, 146).
- "They [i.e., elders] embody the presence of God among people and the faith or beliefs of the people, as well as their moral values" (MBITI 1975, 150).

The former of these quotes refers to the communal nature of faith as represented in public natural places of worship, while the latter simply equates faith with beliefs. Again, however, notice that Mbiti offers nothing by way of a description of the nature of faith itself. The safest inference here is that for Mbiti, faith just means belief.

In Evans-Pritchard's (1965), [Theories of Primitive Religion], faith appears just six times with it appearing to mean something like 'belief' (e.g., 1965, 45). Similar claims hold for Laurenti Magesa's (1997) [African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life], since it rarely appears there and when it does, it seems to mean either 'religion' or 'belief'.

⁷ See Appendix I for the details of each usage.

Now, some might express scepticism about my use of Mbiti and Evan-Pritchard as sources as they have been accused of making over-generalizations and of doing ethnophilosophy.⁸ But even setting this debate aside and appealing to a more contemporary text that appears after the push to ‘de-colonize’ the African philosophy of religion, one gets the same results, at least with respect to how faith is employed. Consider that in the over 800 pages of Asante and Mazama’s masterful work editing the [Encyclopedia of African Religion] (2009), that ‘faith’ only appears 24 times and it is used in the same ways described above.⁹ It is simply never used to imply a non-doxastic attitude like hope or acceptance.¹⁰

In sum, all of this suggests that a significant number of adherents of African Traditional Religion (or at least their academic exponents) would, upon reflection, endorse doxasticism about faith. Though the term faith is rarely used, when it is, it implies belief. Likewise, belief almost always implies propositional belief though such belief is not considered separate from other areas of life (as per Section 4). If African Traditional Religion was forced to choose its conception of faith within the parameters of the Anglo-American philosophical tradition, it would almost certainly endorse doxasticism. However, this discussion so far is *descriptive*, and so it is an open question whether African Traditional Religion is consistent with non-doxastic accounts of faith too, even if they are not how faith is typically understood in the tradition.

The Problem: African Traditional Religion and Disbelief

In this section, I introduce a problem for African Traditional Religion on the assumption that it endorses doxasticism about faith. The basic problem is that doxasticism is a rather narrow construal of faith, and as such it risks excluding people who might otherwise be adherents. I begin this section by motivating the problem based on reflections about doxastic involuntariness and epistemic justification. I then explain that such exclusion is particularly worrisome for the adherent of African Traditional Religion because it risks creating division within the community. My explanation will include showing the importance of communal harmony within this tradition.

Doxastic Involuntariness

The first way that a problem for doxasticism about faith in Traditional African Religion can be motivated is based on doxastic involuntariness. This is the view

⁸ Ethnophilosophy is the style of philosophy that takes the beliefs and customs of a peoples and attempts to parse them philosophical terms. It has been criticized for needing to rely on generalizations, in addition to lacking argumentative rigour. However, some of countered that all philosophy is necessarily grounded in culture, at least to some degree. For a recent debate on the merits of ethnophilosophy see Imfidon et. al. (2019).

⁹ I am unable to access the recent [Encyclopedia of African Religions and Philosophy] (2021) which is another obvious place to conduct a search of how ‘faith’ is used though I suspect the result would be similar to what I already report in this section.

¹⁰ See Appendix II for the details of each usage.

that a person does not have direct control over what they believe (e.g., ALSTON 1989).¹¹ Suppose that you are offered one million dollars to believe that there is a real live pink elephant in your office. Given that there is no pink elephant in your office, you cannot simply *will* yourself to believe it, even if you are inclined to report that you believe it in order to get the money. The same is true of willing yourself to believe that $2+2=5$ and many other similar cases. Now, the truth of both doxasticism about faith and doxastic involuntariness can combine to form a moral problem if faith is necessary for something like salvation.¹²

Suppose that faith is necessary in order to maintain good relationships with the living dead and departed ancestors (who are ultimately conduits for God), and in order so that one becomes part of the living dead and is not too quickly forgotten by one's community. Though it is doubtful that there is a clear analogue for something like Christian salvation in African Traditional Religion, this is enough to generate a similar moral concern. For example, imagine that someone within such a community where African Traditional Religion is practiced simply finds themselves disbelieving many of the important (implicit) truth claims of African Traditional Religion. If doxastic involuntariness is true, then they don't have (direct) control over this situation. Not only might there be something fundamentally unfair about being morally blameworthy for one's beliefs if in fact they are not under one's (direct) control, *but doxasticism about faith risks excluding people who would otherwise like to remain participants of African Traditional Religion within their community.*

Epistemic Doubt

The second way that doxasticism about faith in Traditional African Religion can be motivated is based on epistemic doubt. Notice that it is precisely this concern that motivates Pojman's defense of non-doxasticism about faith. Suppose an adherent of African Traditional Religion who has been brought up in a community where it is widely practiced begins to doubt some of its implicit truth claims. Imagine that they study philosophy at the University of Rochester and adopt epistemic evidentialism (e.g., FELDMAN and CONEE 1985). Upon finding many of the claims of African Traditional Religion supported by something like oral tradition instead of empirical evidence or philosophical argument, they begin to harbour serious doubts. Suppose they find the evidence for the living-dead, departed ancestors, or other spirits lacking. A consideration of the relevant evidence brings the person to disbelief. Notice that this point is consistent with doxastic involuntariness. Such a person simply finds themselves disbelieving the major tenets of Traditional African Religion, after an examination of the relevant evidence. The disbelieving itself need not be an act of the will. If belief is necessary for faith, then such an individual cannot properly be considered to have

¹¹ Though it might be fair to characterise doxastic involuntariness as the 'standard view', it has not gone unchallenged in the literature. For example, see Ginet 2001 and Weatherston 2008.

¹² Salvation is so obviously the motivating factor in Pojman's account that it appears in the abstract of the article (1986, 157).

the relevant propositional faith regarding African Traditional Religion. This is yet another way that doxasticism about faith could come to exclude someone who otherwise wants to continue to practice African Traditional Religion and remain in harmony with their community.

The Importance of Community

The story of individuals leaving and rejecting their religious communities is a familiar one in the West. Why is this more of a problem for Traditional African Religion, than for say, Christianity? The answer lies in the value that many in the African tradition place on the community. Contemporary African ethics is often characterised as ‘communitarian’ or ‘relational’. Two of the more influential understandings of African communitarianism are located in *personhood* or *harmonious relationships*. The former says that the most important goal of morality is that an individual develop their personhood, which is a normative term denoting something akin to ‘character’. It is typically thought that personhood can only be developed by exercising other-regarding virtues and hence must be formed in the context of community.¹³ The latter says that harmonious relationships are the highest value which ought to be pursued above all else (e.g., PARIS 1995). Consider the well-known quote from Desmond Tutu in which he claims that “Harmony, friendliness, community are great goods. Social harmony is for us the *summum bonum*” (TUTU 1999, 35). A different approach says the highest value is not located in harmonious relationships themselves, but instead in our *capacity* for such relationships as exhibited through identifying with others and exhibiting solidarity with them (METZ 2022a). Finally, the ethical thought explicitly located in religion identifies life force as the most important value. The goal of morality on this view is to preserve and strengthen the life force of oneself, but more importantly the life force of others (e.g., LOUGHEED, Unpublished Manuscript; DZOBO 1992; TEMPELS 1969).¹⁴

Now, remember that whether it is true that community is the highest value is not what’s at stake here. My point is that even if it is not the highest value, it is an extremely important one in the African communitarian tradition. Either all or almost all acts that cause conflict and division within the community ought to be avoided. Thus, part of the problem with doxasticism about faith regarding African Traditional Religion is that it creates division and conflict within the community. If belief is necessary for faith, it seems more likely that individuals will leave their religious communities or at least not be able to practice with their community, than if a less rigid notion of faith was in place. Regardless of why someone disbelieves key tenets of African Traditional Religion, it will cause strife

¹³ Elsewhere I have argued that there are problems with different interpretations of the role that community plays in forming personhood (LOUGHEED 2022)

¹⁴ There is debate about whether one’s own life force should be of moral concern. However, at very least, if a person is focused on increasing the life force of those around them, this should have a positive impact on them (see LOUGHEED Unpublished Manuscript).

within their community if belief is required for participating in the communal way of life. But such conflict is to be avoided above all (or almost all) else.

The idea that epistemic considerations may cause one to disbelieve some of the tenets of African Traditional Religion is particularly telling. In large swaths of the African tradition, it is inappropriate to question authority or tradition, and this seems to include Traditional African Religion, at least in certain places. Indeed, the idea that such beliefs could even be questioned or subject to rational scrutiny will almost certainly be viewed as a kind of neo-colonialism creeping into the adherent's mind. For example, consider that though Mbiti does indeed use the term 'belief' far more frequently than faith, it is *never* done so in the context of denoting a proposition that is questioned or doubted by any members of the community. Instead, it is taken to merely describe various aspects of religious belief, which I submit is often reasonably construed as propositional belief. Epistemic considerations about the rationality of such beliefs are simply never in view.¹⁵

When creating a moral theory that can account for both African and Western moral intuitions, Metz writes that one important African moral intuition is that it is *pro tanto* immoral "to flout long-standing norms central to a people's self-conception, as opposed to partaking in customs" (2022a, 53). Presumably, customs here reasonably include the rituals and practices associated with African Traditional Religion. This principle implies that "[n]ot only must one acknowledge the presence of others in the African tradition, one is also expected to participate with them, in conversation, rituals, and culture more broadly" (METZ 2022a, 58). Though creativity and individuality are not forbidden, it is typically thought that at least some weight must be given to whether one's actions (or inaction) would be disruptive to their community (METZ 2022a, 58-59).

This is part of the reason why epistemic doubts can be seen as harmful to the community, especially where such doubts might lead one to cease participating in the practices surrounding Traditional African Religion. If faith requires belief, and a person lacks the relevant beliefs, it seems unlikely they can meaningfully participate in the relevant faith tradition. Furthermore, it's an open question whether other members of the community would even welcome such participation. The problem is "it has been common amongst African societies for a long while, and more so than amongst at least Western ones, to think that one has some obligation to engage with one's fellows and not to disrupt the community's way of life" (METZ 2022a, 58). Indeed, it is considered wrong to isolate oneself from communal ways of living, where such isolation is not typically viewed with as much suspicion in Western societies (METZ 2022a, 58-59).

Finally, some hold that the only (or most important) relevant object of moral concern is the community. Claude Ake writes that:

¹⁵ I am of course not speaking about contemporary African philosophers of religion who are indeed conducting such inquiries. My point is that the way African Traditional Religion is typically practiced is not one where questions and doubts are particularly welcomed.

[I]n most of Africa . . . people are still locked into natural economies and have a sense of belonging to an organic whole, be it a family, a clan, a lineage or an ethnic group All this means that abstract legal rights attributed to individuals will not make much sense for most of our people Our people still think largely in terms of collective rights and express their commitment to it constantly in their behavior. This disposition underlies the zeal for community development and the enormous sacrifices which poor people readily make for it (AKE 1987: 9 quoted in METZ 2022a, 138).¹⁶

Again, the takeaway here is that failing to participate in a communal way of life, one that may include the practices of Traditional African Religion is *pro tanto* immoral on the African view. The lack of distinction between the religious and non-religious in this tradition only makes this problem even more pressing. For to not participate in the religious aspect of life, would mean to just not participate in *the* life of the community.

Given the importance of community, doxasticism about faith poses a serious challenge for Traditional African Religion. It risks creating division within the community by alienating individuals who could otherwise continue to participate in the relevant ways of life. The problem, however, is that I have argued that doxasticism about faith more accurately reflects Traditional African Religion, if forced to choose between doxasticism and non-doxasticism (Section 5). In sum, doxasticism about faith is divisive and this is particularly problematic in the context of African communitarianism. In the next section, I explore whether there might be ways to appeal to non-doxasticism to develop a more inclusive account of faith that remains broadly consistent with African Traditional Religion.

The Solution: Traditional African Religion and Non-Doxastic Faith

Though I've argued that descriptions of Traditional African Religion are more consistent with doxasticism about faith than with non-doxasticism, I believe that non-doxasticism offers the potential to significantly weaken the problem posed in Section 6. In this section, I first demonstrate how a non-doxastic account of faith might be successfully applied in the case of Traditional African Religion. I then show how it can be leveraged to help assuage the worry about harm to the community.

For ease of discussion, I will only refer to the non-doxastic account of faith as *hope* as explained in Section 2, though what I say is likely to be consistent with many other non-doxastic accounts of faith. Recall that faith as hope says that S has faith that P iff (i) S believes P is not impossible; (ii) P is uncertain for S; (iii) S has a pro-attitude toward P; and (iv) S is disposed to bring about P inasmuch as possible. With respect to African Traditional Religion, an individual who finds themselves disbelieving the central tenets could still continue to hope that they're

¹⁶ Metz notes that similar ideas are echoed elsewhere. See Gbadegesin 1991, 66–7; Kigongo 2002; Nkondo 2007, 90. Metz also points out though some African thinkers even deny the existence of individual human rights, this is difficult to square with their generally widespread belief that all humans enjoy an inherent dignity.

true. Importantly, they could continue to live as if they're true, avoiding the potentially harmful communal fallout from their disbelief. For example, they could continue to leave food and drink out for the living dead, pay respect to departed ancestors, appeal to witch doctors for help, etc., even if they did not have the relevant propositional beliefs about them.

Notice how quickly this solves the problem of those excluded from Traditional African Religion, at least for reasons not having to do with epistemic justification. Perhaps an adherent just finds themselves disbelieving core tenets of African Traditional Religion and isn't sure why. If hope is *voluntary*, then such a person could choose to accept African Traditional Religion even if they don't believe it. This has the potential to avoid creating the division in one's community that is so important to avoid in this communitarian tradition.

The slightly more difficult case is the one where a person finds themselves disbelieving Traditional African Religion because of epistemic considerations. A person needs a certain amount of evidence to rationally believe a proposition. But I submit that the evidential bar for rationality (whatever that may be) is lower for hope than for belief. Not only can this be seen when considering that rational belief is more closely associated with knowledge, but it's apparent when reflecting on the type of cases where Pojman suggests hope can be warranted. If Pojman is correct, it's rational to hope for something even if the odds of it being true are low. The cost-benefit analysis just needs to be such that hoping a highly communal religion such as African Traditional Religion is true is worth the risk of it being wrong. Given how harmful not partaking in the life of the community is in this tradition, it appears reasonable that an individual could hope African Traditional Religion is true even if they assign a relatively low credence to it. What would make it irrational to hope that Traditional African Religion is true is if someone came to hold its core tenets to be impossible (or perhaps the chances of its truth infinitesimally small) or maybe thought its truth would have negative axiological value.

Finally, one potential advantage of this approach is that it may apply more seamlessly to Traditional African Religion than to the Judeo-Christian tradition. This is because as I have already explained (Section 4), Traditional African Religion is not typically viewed as distinct from other areas of life. The practices surrounding it are very much part of the life of the community such that continuing to participate in them despite disbelief could be easier than in certain Western traditions (think of certain Christian denominations where spiritual conversions focused on belief are of central importance). Furthermore, I have stated that it's unclear that Traditional African Religion fits easily with the Anglo-American debate about faith because propositional belief is not often explicitly under consideration. Consider that this might be even *more* reason to embrace a non-doxastic account where the focus is on practice. This discussion is hardly intended to be decisive. Rather it is a first attempt toward making a way forward for a non-doxastic account of faith in Traditional African Religion that helps protect the community.

Future Directions and the Challenges of Cross-Cultural Philosophy of Religion

An incidental feature of this project is that it serves as a kind of case study in cross-cultural philosophy of religion. For example, I'm well aware that the reader familiar with Traditional African Religion may have cringed at times when reading my attempts to map that tradition onto the concepts in Anglo-American philosophy of religion. Concepts such as propositional belief, doxastic faith, and non-doxastic faith do not have obvious analogues in African Traditional Religion. It would be a kind of Western intellectual colonialism to assume that there *ought* to be a place for such concepts. This is part of what can make conducting cross-cultural philosophy of religion so challenging. Yet I submit that the only way (or more modestly that one of the best ways) to discern whether concepts in one tradition have analogues in another, and whether they can be helpful to each other, is to actually do the work of trying to use a concept across traditions. I have done just that here in attempting to see how Anglo-American conceptions of faith could be brought to bear on Traditional African Religion. We don't know what we can learn from such dialogue without conducting it.

Another tension between Traditional African Religion and the Anglo-American philosophy of religion is my appeal to epistemic rationality, epistemic justification, evidentialism, and the like. If these aren't concepts that naturally arise in the context of Traditional African Religion, isn't it again a form of intellectual colonialism to insist on their use? I take it that one answer here is simply that local scholars working on the African continent are indeed conducting philosophy of religion that engages in critical scrutiny of Traditional African Religion (for recent examples, see METZ and MOLEFE 2021; CHIMAKONAM 2022; CORDEIRO-RODRIGUES and AGADA 2022). Whether these scholars are adherents of Traditional African Religion themselves is besides the point. The 'cat is out of the bag' with respect to African philosophy of religion, even if it has been significantly influenced by various forms of colonialism. For better or worse, the world is a global village, and this includes the academy and scholarship.

With respect to specific future directions, consider that I have only made a connection between Pojman's account of hope as faith and African Traditional Religion. However, there are many other accounts of non-doxastic faith that deserve to be examined in the context of Traditional African Religion. Though I claim that most non-doxastic accounts will be able to provide a solution to the problem I pose, it's an open question whether particular accounts can do it better than others. There are also further questions about the role evidence ought to play in faith. Though Pojman's account is clearly motivated by (some version of) evidentialism, Laura Buchak argues that faith could involve terminating the search for new evidence or remaining steadfast in the face of counterevidence (e.g., 2017). This is because it allows an individual to pursue risky long-term projects that would otherwise have to be given up. If this account is promising, it could perhaps serve as a way to show how an individual could continue to believe in the tenets of Traditional African Religion, even in the face of counterevidence. Whether one of these accounts does a superior job of solving the problem I raise in Section 6 is an open question.

Conclusion

Discussions of faith in the Anglo-American philosophy of religion often focus on the question of whether belief is necessary for faith. I argued that though neither are a perfect fit, doxasticism about faith fits better with Traditional African Religion than does non-doxasticism. I explained that one of the problems with doxasticism about faith emerges from reflections of doxastic voluntariness and epistemic doubts. This problem is particularly poignant for African Traditional Religion since disbelief, for whatever reason, is harmful to the community if it means that an individual is barred from participating in the relevant communal ways of life. In much of the African tradition the community is the highest good (or at least one of the highest). So, though it seems to endorse doxasticism about faith, there are potential problems for it that appear more pressing than in some Western traditions. I argued that adherents of African Traditional Religion could benefit from expanding their conception of faith to include non-doxastic accounts such as faith as hope. Though this broadening of faith doesn't allow every disbeliever to have faith, it allows more of them to, and thus limits the damage done to the community by individuals who disbelieve. More work remains to be done in exploring whether specific accounts of non-doxastic faith fit better with Traditional African Religion than others. Though there are difficulties inherent to cross-cultural philosophy of religion, especially since concepts in one tradition will not necessarily have clear analogues in other traditions, the best way to discover whether different traditions can help each other is to continue to conduct the relevant comparative work.

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Appendix I (see also footnote 7)

These are each place that 'faith' is used in Mbiti *Introduction to African Religion* (1975)

"Christianity spread in every direction, so that by now every African people has heard the Christian message, and many millions of Africans have accepted the Christian faith" (Mbiti 1975, 30).

"Often their religious life shows a combination of African Religion and Christianity, but there are some who endeavour hard to forsake everything from African Religion, believing that in doing so they are more faithful to their newly found Christian faith" (Mbiti 1975, 30).

"These public religious places are the focus of communal faith, values, and sentiments" (Mbiti 1975, 146).

"They embody the presence of God among people and the faith or beliefs of the people, as well as their moral values" (Mbiti 1975, 150).

"Christianity, the religion which puts its faith in Jesus Christ, came to Africa shortly after the death and resurrection of Jesus" (Mbiti 1975, 182).

"Thus, by the beginning of the seventh century, probably one-third of Africa followed the Christian faith" (Mbiti 1975, 182).

"Other martyrs have died in Africa and Madagascar for the sake of the Christian faith, some as long ago as the second and third centuries" (Mbiti 1975, 184).

"Many more have suffered and sacrificed themselves or their time and safety for the sake of the Christian faith in Africa" (Mbiti 1975, 184).

"Christianity has made a great impact upon African peoples through its faith, its teachings, its ideals, and the schools and hospitals which have often accompanied the preaching of the Christian Gospel" (Mbiti 1975, 185).

"Baha'ism started in Persia in 1863 when its founder Baha'ullah made a proclamation of the new faith" (Mbiti 1975, 188).

"In 1911 the Baha'i faith was first proclaimed in northern Africa. Later in the second half of the century it began to reach other parts of Africa, and today its headquarters for Africa are in Kampala, Uganda, where there is a large temple built on a hill" (Mbiti 1975, 188).

"A number of Africans have become followers of the Baha'i faith" (Mbiti 1975, 188).

"The Church is the Christian family, in which all are related to one another through faith and baptism in Jesus Christ" (Mbiti 1975, 190).

Appendix II (see also footnote 10)

These are each place that 'faith' is used in Asante and Mazama (eds) *Encyclopedia of African Religion* (2009).

"Because the muzimu are the most important spirits as ancestors, the people they are able to protect and shelter are always those who express faith in them." (Asante 2009, 89)

"In several cultures, circumcision is a rite of entry into the community of faith." (Houessou-Adin 2009, 169)

"Individual choice in kente is thus determined more by the occasion on which it is to be worn than by individual taste. In the case of adinkra cloth, the combination of both colors and symbols imply particular messages related to morality, ethics, sociopolitical status, and faith in the power of Nyame (Creator/Supreme Being)." (Blay 2009, 174)

"A divination oracle reading with cowrie shells is a ritual that worshippers in the faith believe

can move the veils between the spirit and human world to semitransparency and open windows and doors for positive changes." (Changa 2009, 183)

"7. rejection of the opposition between the sacred and the profane, and the opposition between religion and science or between knowledge and faith; and" (Nkulu-N'Sengha 2009, 244)

"They operate alongside African Independent church healers who believe in faith healing." (Shoko 2009, 311)

"It exemplifies the way in which elements of African faith and traditions have persisted in the folk beliefs and customs of African Americans, although the original meaning may have been lost." (Lundy 2009, 317)

"Therefore, one should not be surprised that the average Yoruba even today, of whatever proclaimed faith, will still consult Ifa and honor the family's orisha or guardian deity in times of crisis." (Ogundayo 2009, 332)

"The two armies fought to a draw; however, the French acted in bad faith and arrested Toussaint during a meeting in June 1802, after which Dessalines became the new leader of the Revolution." (Reed 2009, 408)

"They were not rhetorical analysts or theologians, but rather defenders of the true faith of the people in the power of the Supreme God to bring about order and harmony in the midst of chaos." (2009, 422)

"Be it Mount Sinai in the Judeo-Christian faith, Mount Arafat in the Islamic tradition, Mount Fuji within the Shinto system of belief, or Mount Kailas in Hindu and Buddhist teachings, for example, mountains are considered by many around the world to represent the pinnacle of spiritual liberation and elevation." (Asante 2009, 431)

"Unlike the religions of the Anglicans and Roman Catholics in Guyana, Comfa is dynamic and decentralized, and it draws from eclectic African worldview and Guyanese nationalist sources and therefore might be best called a *faith system* instead of a religion." (Giddings 2009, 472)

"Furthermore, it is possible to describe the Zulu religious system as capable of having numerous transformations in a variety of settings, suggesting the force behind African cultural continuity in

the diaspora and therefore the classification of Comfa as an African religious and cultural system. It is this *adaptive vitality* that is responsible for the process of fashioning the distinctly Comfa faith from the more purely African Watermamma religion in Guyana.” (Giddings 2009, 473)

“Traditionally, divination and sacrifice are key pillars in the practice of Ifa, and these remain the bedrock of this faith tradition.” (Karenga 2009, 476)

“In fact, they believe in their own deities and ancestors and have built much of their ethical life around their faith.” (Asante 2009, 521)

“It is said that he was raised in the Muslim faith and had an exceptional command of Arabic.” (Lundy 2009, 690)

“Christophe, for example, showed a great reverence to Roman Catholicism, but rumor suggested that he had greater faith in Vodou and the African gods.” (Lundy, 2009, 691)

“Consequently, even with the rampant proliferation of evangelical churches, Christian denominations, and other sects, including the Islamic faith in the Republic of Benin today, the Vodun religion remains strong and has a bright future still ahead.” (Houessou-Adin 2009, 694)

“One such edict, the *Code Noir* of 1685, made it illegal for the enslaved Africans to practice their religion and, under stiff penalties, ordered all French colonists to have the Africans living on their plantations converted to and baptized in the Catholic faith within 8 days upon their arrival in the colony.” (Desmangles 2009, 696)

“However, in essence, their spiritual passion (long and high-energy church services, call-and response sermons), worship methodology (sweat singing, polyrhythmic hand clapping, and playing of percussion instruments), daily devotion (a serious attempt to live a fundamentally good and righteous life every day), spirit elevation (swept up by the Holy Ghost Spirit, spirit

dancing, speaking in tongues, and faith healing), and wearing white garments during sacred religious events actually mirror similar activities of Black people on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean and various locations in the African diaspora.” (Changa 2009, 716)

“Winti was declared taboo; it was associated with the occult and with the calling of demonic powers. The whole Winti faith was put in the sphere of “black magic” and became symbolic of a lower social status in the country.” (Sobukwe 2009, 718)

“These days, increasing numbers of people are openly professing their religious beliefs and more easily expressing their feelings regarding their faith in Winti.” (Sobukwe 2009, 718)

“With faith in Winti, one can nourish oneself spiritually.” (Sobukwe 2009, 721)

“Snakes are consequently sacred in the Winti faith.” (Sobukwe 2009, 722)