



A comparative study of eschatology in Christianity and African traditional religion



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The concept of eschatology remained a captivating theological subject that theologians dedicated substantial time and resources to comprehend. Contrary to popular belief, some Christians may not prioritise theological discussions about eschatological details. Eschatological discourse – the fate of the universe, including humans and the physical world – may also be prioritised. Death, the second coming of Christ, judgement, rewards, heaven and hell are some of the eschatological themes that fascinate and disturb people because of limited understanding about the afterlife. African traditional religion (ATR) has been criticised for omitting eschatology in its belief system which this study debunks. This study showed that Christianity and ATR have the concept of eschatology and identified the main points of convergence and divergence in their eschatologies to demonstrate that ATR's eschatology is well-established but different from Christianity's. This paper adopts theoretical research, often referred to as conceptual research, since it is aimed at advancing knowledge. Christianity and ATR agree that physical death ends life in the body, and death symbolises the afterlife. Earthlings have limited time to fulfil their duties. Both sides agree that the soul and spirit survive death and resurrection. Christianity and ATR share many beliefs and traditions across sects, ethnicities and regions. These factors influence the eschatology of each tradition. Both faiths agree that present decisions impact fate and eternity. They also agree that God opposes immorality, but the virtuous will inhabit a place of joy. Positive and negative conduct are punished differentially.

Intradisciplinary and/interdisciplinary implications: This work discusses end-of-life issues that strongly relate to systematic theology and African traditional religion, emphasising that while their eschatologies differ, they share a belief in life after death. African traditional religion should not be mocked as a religion without eschatology.

Keywords: Christianity; African traditional religion; eschatology; systematic theology; comparative religion; religious studies.

Introduction

The term 'eschatology' traditionally refers to the scholarly examination of ultimate or final events. Eschatology continues to be a compelling theological concept that theologians devote significant time and effort to understanding. Its significance lies in its potential to profoundly impact our understanding of the future. The issue pertaining to the completion of history, which involves the fulfilment of God's work in the world, has been resolved.

According to Bongmba (2020), it has been contended that certain Christians may not place a high emphasis on participating in theological discussions that pertain to significant elements or aspects, contrary to prevailing assumptions. Instead, they may choose to focus on eschatological discussions, which concern the destiny of the created order, including both humanity and the world. Themes commonly associated with eschatology, such as death, the second coming of Christ, judgement, rewards, heaven and hell, have a profound impact on individuals as they evoke a sense of fascination and discomfort. This is because of our limited understanding and imagination of what the afterlife truly entails (Bongmba 2020).

In recent years, there has been a significant shift in the global landscape of Christianity, with Africa emerging as a prominent player. This shift has led to the development of theological and Christological practices that aim to strengthen the field of theology, Christology and biblical scholarship in Africa. These practices utilise the unique tools and resources available within the African context, resulting in a multitude of implications for the field (Agboada 2023). Amevenku and Boaheng (2021:3) argue that the African belief system on end-time concepts encompasses the sequential stages of birth, the experienced experience of life, death, and subsequent return to the

ancestral realm, thereby initiating a new cycle. The significance of this subject matter has been extensively expounded upon by scholars such as Mbiti, Bolaji, Nyamiti, Olupona, Dickson, Ukpong, Nyang and Mugambi, among others, including Mulago, Bediako, Gutiérrez and Wa Thiong'o.

Today, there is a greater interest on what the future holds for the human race both in a larger context and a cosmic context. Writing on what the future holds for the whole reality, Erickson (2001) is of the view that the rise of the Third World, which may currently face unfavourable conditions but holds great potential for the future, is a noteworthy contributor to the prevalence of eschatological discourse. The rapid dissemination of Christianity in developing nations, particularly in comparison to other regions, has generated heightened enthusiasm and anticipation for future events, resulting in a greater emphasis on eschatology rather than historical inquiry. He further asseverates that the current inquiry into what lies in store for humanity was spurred by the looming threat of extinction that hangs over humanity. The potentiality of a catastrophic nuclear event looms ominously over the entire global community (Erickson 2001:374).

While the impact of the current ecological crises is comparatively less than that of a nuclear war, it poses a significant threat to the future of the human race. The aforementioned circumstances unequivocally demonstrate that we cannot solely exist in the present moment, fixated on current events. It is imperative for individuals to ascertain or predict forthcoming events. The present study aims to investigate the concept of death and eschatology as it pertains to both African traditional religion (ATR) and Christianity to identify their point of convergence and divergence.

Methodology

This paper adopts theoretical research, often referred to as conceptual research. It is a type of study that aims to develop or refine theories, models or frameworks to explain and interpret various phenomena, in this case, death and eschatology. This research approach involves critically analysing existing literature, identifying gaps in current knowledge, and proposing new theoretical constructs or refining existing ones. Theoretical research is vital for advancing understanding and knowledge in academic disciplines, particularly in fields such as social sciences, humanities and natural sciences.

Theoretical study entails a systematic investigation of a set of principles, beliefs and assumptions. The basic aim of this endeavour is to enhance our comprehension of a certain topic such as the one under consideration – death and eschatology. The data obtained from this procedure is not directly employed for any immediate practical purpose, as the primary objective of this form of investigation is to further knowledge.

The concept of death and eschatology

Inquiries pertaining to eschatology are not exclusive to the Christian faith. According to Okon (2006), any profound contemplation of human existence, whether on an individual or societal level, will culminate in a nuanced comprehension of the universe and its evolutionary progression. Additionally, such reflection will necessitate a thorough exploration of the destiny of individuals following their demise. The topic of eschatology necessitates a differentiation between personal eschatology and cosmic eschatology. The former pertains to future experiences of the individual, while the latter concerns the destiny of the human race and, indeed, the entirety of the universe (Erickson 2001).

In his work titled 'Systematic Theology', Berkhof (1949) has undertaken the task of exploring various puzzling theological questions related to the nature of human existence. For ages, Christian eschatologists have been attracted and confused by these inquiries. Berkhof inquired about matters pertaining to the ultimate destiny or destination and the pursued objective. What is the trajectory of human progress? Does the cessation of human existence occur upon death, or is there a transition into an alternative state of being, which may potentially be marked by either bliss or suffering? Is it feasible for successive human generations to continuously arise and vanish in an uninterrupted sequence? Is the destiny of humanity predetermined towards a divine purpose, or is it only an evident consequence of the natural progression of events within the broader context of Creation, as intended by a higher authority? (Berkhof 1949:661). These puzzling questions are imperative for our understanding of death and eschatology.

The actuality of death

The incontrovertible and indisputable reality regarding the future of each individual is the inevitability of mortality. Humans have a finite amount of time to complete their tasks on Earth. It is expected that each individual assumes responsibility for their destiny and fulfils their purpose of creation within their allotted timeframe. The veracity of the inevitability of human mortality is confirmed in Hebrews 9:27, which unequivocally declares that each individual shall experience death once, followed by divine judgement. Despite the fact that individuals have cognitively acknowledged the existence and inescapability of mortality, there persists a recurrent reluctance to confront its veracity.

Funeral homes utilise a range of euphemisms that are distinguished by their benign or pleasant tone, aiming to divert attention from the acknowledgment of the inevitable truth of physical death. Each individual will inevitably confront the reality and inevitability of mortality. Paul acknowledges the inevitability of death and expresses his opinion that individuals are constantly at risk of dying for the sake of Jesus, in order to demonstrate his life in their mortal bodies (2 Cor 4:11–12). The aforementioned passage

suggests that while mortality is actively present within us, vitality is concurrently present within us.

Speaking about the pain and uncertainty of death, Manning (2019) argues that the concept of the end of life evokes fear because of its inherent novelty, as individuals are confronted with an unfamiliar experience and the uncertainty surrounding the destination of their existence. When an individual is afflicted with an illness, the process of dying may involve the experience of physical pain and impairment. Under optimal conditions, individuals may encounter situations where they are unable to participate in fundamental physical tasks that were previously assumed to be effortless, or confront a decline in cognitive abilities (p. 1).

On the other hand, several secular scholars (Ebersole 2005; Feifel 1959; Kears 1989) have posited that there exists a distinct connection between religion and death. Moreover, these scholars contend that religiosity significantly influences individuals' perspectives and attitudes towards contemplating mortality. They argue that religious institutions are responsible for introducing the concepts of salvation, reincarnation, heaven, hell, as well as symbols such as the cross and ceremonies aimed at addressing the topic of death. Ebersole (2005) posits that prominent anthropologists have contended that the genesis of religious ideas can be attributed to death, suggesting that religion would not have arisen in the absence of mortality. Feifel (1959) posits that conflict theorists, such as Karl Marx, have challenged and sought to eradicate religion because of its perceived function of providing an avenue for individuals to evade the challenges, pains and sufferings of reality. Veenat (2013) on his part argues that religion is just a compensation for these difficulties and constructs a deceptive alternate reality. According to Veenat (2013), the rise of modernity led to the widespread acceptance of the secularisation thesis. This resulted in various institutions, such as the economy, politics and education, becoming autonomous and secular. The process of secularisation also had an impact on the understanding and approach towards death and dying. To some extent, individuals began to approach the phenomenon of death and dying with principles of rationality (p.195).

Death as a natural phenomenon

Several scholars from different fields of study have defined death from their perspective. Tomasini (2017:7–8) argues that 'Biological death can be understood as: a final event, an absolute state (being dead), [and] part of the dying process'. Arnet (1973) sees death as the cessation of biological functions resulting in the permanent cessation of life. Physical death refers to the cessation of life and the separation of the corporeal and spiritual components. This refers to the disintegration of the human biotic community (pp. 221–222). Vine (1948) characterises death as the termination of the biotic entity known as 'man', resulting in the disintegration of its constituent parts. The constituents of human existence can be broadly categorised into three main components: the body, *centrum vitae* and spirit. The body, which is a

composite of hylic units, is dependent on the presence of *centrum vitae* and spirit for its sustenance. In the absence of these vital components, the body undergoes a gradual or rapid breakdown into various hylic units, which subsequently become part of the natural cycle of decay and renewal. The spirit, on the other hand, is afforded the opportunity to gain experience and exercise its volition within this continuum. Upon completion of this stage, the spirit progresses to the next phase of its existence (Vine 1948:335).

The African perspective on death posits that it represents the separation of the soul from the physical body. Abbah (2010) asserts that among Africans, there exists a belief that the soul and body are inseparable while the body is still alive. According to him, the occurrence of separation is exclusively posthumous. The deduction made here is that apart from the corporeal aspect of an individual, the loss of a vital faculty or endowment required for sustenance results in the complete loss of the individual as a composite of both material and immaterial components, which cannot be restored to their original state. Cyprian (2012) argues that African traditional religious belief holds the perspective that the origin and ultimate fate of human beings are interconnected. According to Cyprian (2012:24), the commencement represents a derivative of antecedent being, while the termination denotes the inception of a distinct domain of existence. The process of growth and development within ATR is perceived as an ongoing manifestation of life, which is rooted in African eschatology. This indicates that ATR incorporates the belief that human existence persists beyond physical death as one of its fundamental principles. An examination of the African religious belief system shows mortality does not signify the cessation of existence nor does it terminate the human experience.

Within the context of Christianity, numerous scriptural passages address the concept of physical death, which refers to the termination of life in the physical body. In Matthew 10:28, Jesus distinguishes between the death of the physical body and the death that involves both the body and the soul. Specifically, he advises his followers not to fear those who are capable of killing the body but lack the power to harm the soul. Instead, he urges them to fear God, who possesses the ability to destroy both the body and the soul in hell. The Christian perspective regards death as the separation of the body and soul, as stated in Ecclesiastes 12:7. This passage elucidates that the human body will ultimately return to the earth's dust, while the breath of life will revert to its divine source.

The apostle James espouses a view of death as the division of the body and spirit, stating that 'For just as the (human) body without the spirit is dead...' (Ja 2:26). This passage focusses on the phenomenon of mortality, which is commonly observed or encountered in physical manifestation. The notion that life and death are distinct states of existence is a prevalent concept in scriptural teachings. It is important to note that the cessation of life does not signify the end of existence. According to Erickson (2001:376), death is a mere

transition to an alternative mode of existence, and should not be misconstrued as a state of extinction, as is sometimes believed.

The scriptural text also references the concept of spiritual and eternal death as a corollary to the cessation of physical life. The term 'spiritual death' refers to the state of being disconnected from God, while 'eternal death' signifies a permanent state of separation from God, wherein an individual remains in a state of sinfulness for all eternity. The scriptural perspective regards spiritual deadness as a state characterised by an inability to respond or engage with matters of a spiritual nature, or a total and complete insensitivity to such stimuli (Berkhof 1949:739). Carr (2023) explains that the Apostle Paul's intention in Ephesians 2:1–2 is to show that the individuals who are lost possess a state of existence within this world. Such individuals inhabit, traverse, experience affection within, express amusement within, and pursue gratification inside this environment; nonetheless, they remain devoid of vitality despite their existence. Such individuals, Carr (2023) argues, are not perceived as being disconnected from society, but rather, they are perceived as being disconnected from a divine entity – the Almighty God. These individuals are unable to visually and physically perceive, comprehend, intuit or independently access the presence of the Almighty God. They lack any form of spiritual vitality. Similarly, Myers (2023) argues that Apostle John's emphasis on the second death in Revelation 21:8 pertained to the concept of eternal death. From his viewpoint, the individuals in question will be consigned to the lake that is characterised by combustion and sulfuric emissions commonly referred to as the second death. Myers (2023) argues further that in Revelation 20:6, the Apostle John asserts that individuals who participate in the first resurrection are deemed blessed and holy. This is in contrast to the second death, which entails eternal separation from God. It is noteworthy that the lake of fire holds no power or authority over those who partake in the first resurrection. Additionally, such individuals are designated as priests of God and of Christ, and are expected to reign with him for a period of one thousand years (p. 3).

Iloimo (2021) opines that in the last judgement, it is anticipated that the individual presiding on the judgement seat will be the one who was crucified for the sake of reconciling the world, and no alternative judge will be present. This implies that the eschatological final judgement does not serve as a precedent for the judicial systems of kingdoms or empires (p. 12). Moltmann (1996:250–251) places significant emphasis on the notion that this judgement pertains to God and his inherent sense of creating justice, thus distinguishing it from various manifestations of justice observed in earthly contexts. The term 'last judgement' refers to the universal manifestation of Jesus Christ and the culmination of his redemptive efforts. The conclusion reached at the end of a matter should not be seen as the final outcome, but rather as the initial stage. The objective of this endeavour is the reinstatement of all elements, with the purpose of fortifying the everlasting dominion of God.

The implications drawn from Revelation 20:6 suggest that the second death, commonly referred to as the eternal death, is distinguished by an interminable duration of punishment, agony, lamentation and separation from the divine presence. The consummation pertains to the state of the individual who is spiritually deceased during the moment of physical demise and serves as the ultimate affirmation thereof.

Eschatology in African traditional religion

The inquiry regarding the fate of humanity following the current existence is a matter of great pertinence to all religions. Amevenku and Boaheng (2021) argue that African eschatology should consider the existential conditions prevailing in the African continent. They explain that the conceptualisation and foundation of eschatology are situated within the framework of African traditions, culture and cosmological worldviews as observed in traditional religion and theology. Every religious tradition possesses a distinct eschatological perspective. It is a widely held belief that the essence of an individual, commonly referred to as the soul, endures beyond physical death. According to Ndemanu (2018), the interconnection between African religion and culture results in a profound influence of indigenous religious beliefs on the belief systems, worldviews, and cognitive processes of Africans. Masoga and Nicolaidese (2021) add that the concept of eschatology within ATR can be understood as a manifestation of the religious and theological frameworks derived from Africa's indigenous civilisations and spiritual cosmology (Masoga & Nicolaidese 2021). Shorter (2015) asserts that the process of indigenisation has significantly influenced African theology, Christology and biblical theology. This is because the indigenisation policy in Africa promoted cultural integration, contextualisation, social empowerment and the recognition of indigenous knowledge systems within the broader Christian narrative. It led to the development of a vibrant and diverse African Christian theology that continues to evolve and shape contemporary theological discourse in Africa and beyond. Nevertheless, because of the principles of cultural belief emphasising individual accountability for actions, the notion of punishment (judgement) and reward is an intrinsic aspect within traditional African religion. The concept of judgement in ATR is primarily based on the objective of penalising illicit conduct and rewarding socially acceptable behaviour, with the aim of upholding social harmony and averting divine retribution from the deities, who assume the role of guardians and observers of humanity.

According to Chukwuedo (2019), ATRs do not espouse the notion of a future bodily resurrection, which is a key aspect of eschatology from an African perspective. The adherents of this belief system demonstrate their convictions regarding human mortality and associated rituals through their belief in reincarnation and the existence of a 'village of ancestors'. In this village, individuals who have passed away virtuously come together and dwell, cherishing their perpetual existence as both individuals and as a collective entity. According to

African belief, the human soul is considered to be ethereal and has the ability to evade death. As a result, it is difficult to ascertain a conclusive termination period for individuals. Onyewuenyi (1996) supports Iwe's (1979) proposition that the fundamental principle of African religious philosophy is the belief in immortality. Onyewuenyi (1996) contends that the traditional African perspective on death involves not only acknowledging the departure of the soul of the deceased to the spirit realm; but according to Okoro (2010:73), the entirety of man, rather than just a portion or soul, has transitioned to the realm of the spirit, albeit imperceptibly. This notion is supported by the statement made by Onyewuenyi (1996:37). According to Ikenga-Metuh's (1991) perspective, death does not represent the ultimate conclusion of an individual's existence in Igbo ideology. Rather, all individuals continue to exist in some manner or another following their passing. Onyewuenyi (1996:37–38) opines that individuals who have lived a life of high quality and have experienced a peaceful death are believed to transition to the spiritual realm, known as *Alammuo* (spiritual world), where they are able to continue living a life that is comparable to their earthly existence. Additionally, these individuals are believed to have the opportunity to be reincarnated into *uwa*, (world). Conversely, individuals who have lived a life of poor quality and have experienced a death that is considered to be evil are believed to be relegated to an intermediate state known as [*land of spirits and humans*], which exists between the spiritual realm and the realm of the living. The notion of this afterlife location corresponds to the Igbo belief system's conception of the underworld. According to Ikenga-Metuh (1991), the individuals residing within are perceived as agitated and malevolent entities who are unable to find peace.

Opoku (1978) has effectively demonstrated that eschatology in ATR is cyclical. The African perspective on death is that it signifies a transition from the current earthly existence to an afterlife in the realm of spirits. The aforementioned statement posits that in order for an individual to transcend into the afterlife and persist as a forebear, they must undertake a pilgrimage. According to Akan beliefs, the deceased do not remain interred in the earth, but rather transform into spirits and journey to the afterlife realm known as *asamando*.

It can be asserted that within the framework of ATR belief systems, the concept of an afterlife is firmly upheld, thereby signifying that the cessation of human existence is not synonymous with death. One crucial inquiry that necessitates exploration is the manner in which an individual persists beyond death, given the eventual decay and decomposition of the physical body. In response to this query, Penethum (1977) cites Coward's reply, which suggests that there exists a clear and straightforward solution. From Penethum's perspective, there exists an intermediary state between death and resurrection that maintains our identity until the time of resurrection. This intermediary state is commonly referred to as the soul or spirit (p. 45). This implies that the soul persists after death until it undergoes a transformational state at the

culmination. In the ATR, it is widely accepted that individuals transition into a spiritual existence upon death. However, this transformation presents challenges in terms of functioning in a physical state, as the limitations of the spiritual form hinder the individual's ability to operate as the living do. Ugwu (2002) asserts that death serves as a barrier between the realm of human beings and the realm of spirits, as well as between the visible and invisible worlds. This statement highlights the significance of death as a transitional phase that separates the physical and spiritual planes of existence.

Ugwu and Ugwueye (2004) posit that the soul, which serves as the vital force of an individual, persists beyond the physical death and decomposition of the human body. They contend that both the spirit and the timeless essence of the soul endure beyond the expiration of the physical body, and ultimately revert to their initial state. African eschatological beliefs are predicated on the notion of an infinite universe. Therefore, the cosmology of Africa is characterised by cyclical patterns. The notion that an individual's conduct or ethical inclination during their lifetime has an impact on their spiritual disposition and ultimate abode finds its origins in this concept. Therefore, an individual's moral character plays a crucial role in determining their acceptance or rejection in the veneration of their forefathers in the afterlife or their banishment to a realm of agony. As per Olademo's (2008) assertion, the African perspective on eschatology is characterised by a dual submission, both of which are deemed to be valid. One belief posits that in the eschaton, subsequent to human mortality, the Creator will demand a reckoning of every action undertaken by each person on the planet. According to the other belief (Olademo 2008:48), it is believed that individuals who have performed commendable moral actions during their lifetime will return to the earthly realm from the abode of the ancestor festivals, such as the Egungun in Yoruba culture, upon their demise.

The concept of reincarnation possesses enduring personal and interpersonal implications and has exerted an impact on the community, as Olademo's (2008) suggests. According to Olademo (2008:104), the concept has historically functioned as a mechanism for enforcing social and ethical norms in traditional societies. The fundamental basis of this assertion is that within African societies, there exists a pervasive conviction in the concept of eschatology, which pertains to the afterlife and ultimate judgement. A prevalent notion among Africans is that human beings are composite entities comprising physical and metaphysical components, namely the body, soul and spirit. There exists a belief among certain African communities that upon death, the soul departs from the physical body, which subsequently undergoes decomposition within the earth. The soul is then believed to embark on a journey towards the spiritual realm, inhabited by entities commonly referred to as spirits. The Akan community holds a belief that upon death, the soul departs from the physical body and reunites with the divine entity, whereas the spirit transforms into an ancestor or a ghost and commences its existence in the netherworld (Amponsah

1974). Parrinder (1968) provides evidence for this claim by stating that Africans commonly hold the belief that deceased individuals are immediately transported to an underworld located beneath the earth's surface, resembling the Greek concept of Hades, characterised by darkness and low temperatures. There are individuals who hold the viewpoint that there exists a body of water that must be traversed, akin to the river Styx as depicted. The concept of fear-inducing judgement is undoubtedly articulated by individuals through the Igbo doctrine of reincarnation.

Onunwa (1990) posits that attestations are depicted as stemming from the conviction in reincarnation and the notion that there exists a reckoning shortly after an individual's earthly existence. Onunwa further explains that Africans hold the belief that the dispensation of justice, compensation and punishment occurs within the confines of the present world. This conviction instils in them a resolute faith that malevolent individuals will inevitably face retribution in this realm. However, it is noteworthy that a significant number of indigenous Africans have formulated a distinct and atypical eschatology, which encompasses the concept of ultimate judgement. A customary musical composition originating from Benin, formerly known as Dahomey, concerning divine adjudication portrays the Almighty as the ultimate arbiter, as follows (Uduigwomen 2006):

Life is like a hill Mamu, the creator made it steep and slippery. To right and left deep waters surround it. You cannot turn back once you start to climb. You must climb with a road on your head. A man's arms will not help him, for its trial. The world is a place of trial. At the gates of the land of the dead you will pass before a searching judge. His justice is true and He will examine your feet. He will know how to find every stain, whether visible or hidden under the skin. If you have fallen on the way he will know. If the judge finds no stains on your feet, open your belly to joy, for you have overcome. And your belly is clean. (p. 179)

According to Hawkins (1996), in the LoDagaa of Ghana beliefs, the deceased will be subject to judgement by elder spirits upon arrival in the World of Spirits, with the assessment being based on their conduct during their earthly existence. According to Yoruba tradition, individuals will be held accountable for their actions on earth upon their passing, and will present a record of their stewardship to God while kneeling in heaven (Awolalu & Dopamu 1979:272). According to Fatokun (2005), it is believed that individuals who are deemed righteous will receive a reward in the form of a heavenly abode characterised by refreshing breezes, known as Orun-rere. Conversely, those who are considered wicked will be relegated to a separate heavenly realm, Orun-apid i, which can be likened to a celestial dumpsite (p.136). Fatokun (2005) argues further that the inquiry that necessitates consideration pertains to the means by which the spirits of the deceased are allocated to either of the aforementioned abodes. The majority of Africans who maintain a steadfast adherence to their traditional belief system regarding the existence of positive and negative afterlife realms posit that the deceased gain access to said realms via the adjudication of a Supreme Being. He further explains that it is commonly

acknowledged that following the completion of burial rituals subsequent to an individual's passing, the deceased are believed to appear before the Ultimate Deity to provide an account of their earthly actions. The deity then proceeds to pass judgement accordingly. As per Yoruba traditional belief, the character of an individual is the primary factor that the Supreme Being evaluates, because of divine judgement. According to Awolalu and Dopamu's (1979) perspective, an individual's moral character is directly linked to their afterlife experience. Specifically, those who exhibit virtuous behaviour are believed to be granted access to a positive afterlife, whereas those who exhibit immoral behaviour are believed to be relegated to a negative afterlife. It is widely held by some that individuals who have attained a state of grace experience a life characterised by serenity, tranquilly and contentment. According to popular belief, individuals who reside in a good afterlife are bestowed with an eternal existence of happiness, whereas those who reside in an unfavourable afterlife experience a state of misery or distress. Because of their lack of a permanent residence, individuals may experience a sense of purposelessness and restlessness in their lives.

Eschatology in Christianity

Eschatology is the theological term used to refer to the doctrine of the last things. The term in question has its origins in Western culture and was initially employed to denote concepts pertaining to end time events, encompassing beliefs held by adherents of Judaism, Christianity and Islam regarding the culmination of time, the existence beyond death, the final judgement, the era of the Messiah, and the theological predicament of reconciling God's justice (Landes 2023). The field of eschatology pertains to the examination and analysis of the theological concept known as the 'four last things' within Christianity. These four elements, namely the resurrection, judgement, heaven and hell, are believed to hold significant influence over an individual's ultimate destiny at the culmination of time (Landes 2016). Eschatology here is the study of what Christian scripture teaches about the end time. This shows that the teaching of eschatology is the need of the church since it has been the crown and capstone of systematic theology. This is because of the fact that eschatology serves as a reminder for Christians that this earthly realm is not their permanent abode. It enables them to anticipate and gain insight into the current events that pertain to heaven, the eternal dwelling where they will be united with Christ Jesus and fellow believers indefinitely.

It is an idea that has been given approval in Christian eschatology that after death, man's soul and spirit continues in a state of conscious existence between death and resurrection. Britannica (2021) argues that the eschatological anticipation within Christianity pertains not solely to the future of the ecclesiastical community, but also to the future of the individual's faith. The concept encompasses specific notions regarding the persistence of an individual's existence beyond physical death. This is why Christians believe that death does not bring an end to our existence.

Theological discussions on death and eschatology have long captivated the attention of Christian thinkers throughout history. A cursory look at the trends from the early church to the modern times shows the importance of death and eschatology in the discourses of theologians.

St. Augustine of Hippo, an influential figure in early Christian thought, approached the doctrine of death and eschatology from the perspective of original sin and divine grace. Augustine articulated the concept of death as a consequence of humanity's fallen nature, a result of the original sin inherited from Adam (Augustine, *City of God*, 426–427). He underscored the significance of divine grace as the means of salvation, highlighting the role of Christ's redemptive work in overcoming the spiritual death that plagued humanity. Augustine's emphasis on the resurrection of the dead and the final judgement resonated with his belief in the ultimate triumph of God's righteousness and the eternal fulfilment of the redeemed in God's presence (Augustine, *City of God*, 426–427).

On the other hand, Martin Luther, the seminal figure of the Protestant Reformation, approached the doctrine of death and eschatology through the lens of a 'theology of the cross'. For Luther, the experience of suffering and the inevitability of death were inherent to the Christian journey, emphasising the transformative power of faith in God's redemptive plan (Luther 1518). His theological framework accentuates the importance of relying on God's grace amid human weaknesses and vulnerabilities, fostering a deeper trust in the divine providence that overcomes death itself.

Karl Barth, a renowned 20th-century Swiss Reformed theologian, approached eschatology through the lens of Christocentrism. For Barth, the focal point of eschatological hope resided in the resurrection of Christ, signalling the promise of redemption for humanity (Barth 1932). He emphasised the anticipation of the consummation of God's kingdom, where the eschaton represents the fulfilment of God's ultimate purposes. According to him, the Christian's hope is grounded in the assurance of God's redemptive plan and the eventual victory over death (Barth 1932). Barth's theological framework underscores the centrality of Christ's resurrection in shaping Christian eschatological perspectives, pointing to a future reconciliation with God and the triumph over mortality.

In his other book, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of the Word of God, Part 3*, Karl Barth's theological viewpoint about death and eschatology is founded upon his Christocentric framework, which underscores the significance of Jesus Christ in comprehending these notions (Barth 1968). Barth's work emphasises the profound importance of human mortality as a direct result of sin, while also emphasising the inescapable nature of death as an inherent element of human beings (Barth 1968). Nevertheless, Barth (1968) places significant emphasis on the Christian hope that arises from the eschatological assurance of God's redemption and the physical resurrection of deceased individuals. Barth (1968)

advises against inordinate speculative readings and emphasises the significance of permitting the Scriptures to interpret themselves in his critique of specific eschatological perspectives. Moreover, Barth posits that the resurrection of Jesus Christ serves as the fundamental basis for the subsequent resurrection of all believers in Christ, hence playing a pivotal role in forming his comprehension of eschatological doctrine (Barth 1968).

In the modern and contemporary times, the theological landscape has been significantly shaped by the contributions of various modern theologians who have offered compelling insights into the doctrines of eschatology and death. One of such scholars is Jurgen Moltmann, a prominent figure in modern theology, who has presented a unique perspective on eschatology, emphasising the theology of hope as a central theme. Moltmann's theology underlines the significance of eschatological hope as a transformative force that not only offers solace in the face of mortality but also instils a sense of anticipation for the realisation of God's redemptive purposes (Moltmann 1996). He posits that the eschatological hope serves as a source of strength and resilience, enabling individuals to confront the existential challenges of life and death with unwavering faith in the ultimate triumph of God's kingdom (Moltmann 1996).

Furthermore, Pannenberg (2004), another influential modern theologian, has contributed to the discourse of eschatology by emphasising the concept of a future-oriented faith. Pannenberg's theological framework centres on the idea that the hope for the future resurrection of the dead is intricately linked to the historical reality of Jesus Christ's resurrection, thereby underscoring the significance of the eschaton as the culmination of God's redemptive plan (Pannenberg 2004). His emphasis on the historical credibility of the resurrection not only reaffirms the foundational tenets of Christian faith but also serves to establish a robust theological framework that resonates with the modern sensibilities of believers.

Moreover, Elizabeth A. Johnson has contributed to the conversation on eschatology by emphasising the notion of a cosmic Christ. Johnson's theological reflection expands the traditional understanding of eschatology by highlighting the interconnectedness of all creation in the salvific work of Christ (Johnson 1993). By emphasising the cosmic dimension of Christ's redemptive mission, Johnson offers a compelling vision of eschatological hope that encompasses the entirety of creation, thereby fostering a renewed sense of responsibility towards the preservation and restoration of the natural world.

In summary of Christian eschatology and death, therefore, despite their differing historical contexts, Barth and Augustine share a common theological thread in their emphasis on the pivotal role of Christ's redemptive work in the context of eschatology and death. Both theologians underscore the significance of the resurrection in shaping the Christian understanding of life beyond death. While Barth's Christocentric approach places the resurrection at the heart

of eschatological hope, Augustine's focus on the implications of original sin and divine grace enriches the theological discourse on salvation and the afterlife. Their contributions to the doctrine of eschatology and death continue to influence contemporary theological discussions, offering profound insights into the transformative power of Christ's redemptive work and the hope for eternal life in the presence of God.

While Luther's emphasis on the theology of the cross underscores the transformative potential of suffering and death, Moltmann's theology of hope accentuates the anticipatory joy of redemption and the triumph over mortality within the eschatological framework. Both perspectives offer profound insights into the Christian understanding of death and the ultimate hope for eternal salvation. Their contributions to the doctrine of eschatology and death continue to resonate within contemporary theological discourses, inspiring reflections on the transformative power of faith amid suffering and the anticipatory joy of redemption found in the hope of the resurrection from dead at the coming of Christ.

On the part of the modern and contemporary theologians discussed above, the insights provided by these modern theologians have enriched the theological discourse on eschatology and death by offering diverse perspectives that not only affirm the foundational tenets of Christian faith but also resonate with the contemporary sensibilities of believers, thereby fostering a deeper understanding of the transformative power of eschatological hope in the face of mortality.

One could posit, based on Christian Theology, that death is a mere passage towards an existence in communion with Christ. Paul asserts in his letter to the Philippians that it is preferable to be in the presence of the Lord in the hereafter than in the flesh (Phlp 1:23).

Comparative study of eschatology in Christianity and African traditional religion

In comparing the two religions' eschatology, it is clear that eschatology pertains to the scholarly examination or belief structure concerning the final fate of both humanity and the world. Inquiries pertaining to eschatology concerns, the concept of the afterlife, and the ultimate telos or objective of being. Divergent eschatological convictions are evident among diverse religious systems, such as Christianity and ATR which we have expressed above. The following is a synopsis of eschatology within the aforementioned religious frameworks.

In Christianity, eschatology holds a prominent position, particularly with respect to the teachings of Jesus Christ and the literature of the New Testament. Several fundamental convictions comprise the core of this ideology:

- **Death:** Christianity believes and teaches that death is an appointment everyone has.
- **Second Coming of Christ:** Christians anticipate the return of Jesus Christ to Earth at the end of time. This occurrence is commonly perceived as a precursor to the ultimate reckoning and the inception of an everlasting divine realm.
- **The Christian faith upholds the belief in the resurrection of deceased individuals.** It is widely held that all individuals will experience resurrection and subsequently undergo divine judgement. Those who are deemed righteous will attain eternal life in the presence of God, whereas those who are deemed unrighteous will experience eternal alienation from God.
- **Christianity posits the notion of heaven as a divine abode for God and the sanctified.** Additionally, the religion acknowledges the existence of hell. The state being referred to is one of perpetual bliss and spiritual union with the divine. On the contrary, the concept of hell is commonly perceived as a realm of perpetual retribution and detachment from the divine.
- **The concept of the millennium as described in the Book of Revelation is subject to varying interpretations among different Christian denominations.** The aforementioned perspectives, namely premillennialism, postmillennialism and amillennialism, offer varying viewpoints regarding the reign of Christ on Earth prior to the ultimate judgement.

On the other hand, ATR is a comprehensive term that refers to a wide range of indigenous belief systems that are prevalent throughout the African continent. The eschatological beliefs within ATR exhibit significant variation as a result of the diverse cultural and regional distinctions that exist. Nevertheless, certain recurrent themes and concepts can be discerned:

- **Ancestral veneration is a significant aspect of ATR,** which underscores the importance of ancestral spirits and their function in the afterlife. It is widely held that forebears persist in the metaphysical domain and possess the ability to impact the experiences of their progeny who are still alive. The appropriate reverence of forebears holds significance for the welfare of the society.
- **The notion of a Supreme Being is a fundamental concept within ATR,** as it generally recognises the presence of a High God or Deity. The perception of this divinity differs among diverse African societies; however, the Supreme Being is frequently linked with the genesis of the universe and the paramount origin of potency and supremacy.
- **Afterlife and Spirit Realms:** ATR acknowledges the existence of various spiritual realms beyond the physical world. These realms can include a realm of the ancestors, a realm of spirits, and possibly other realms associated with different deities or natural forces. The concept of afterlife is frequently perceived as a perpetuation of existence, wherein the departed become a part of the domain of forefathers.
- **Rituals and Offerings:** ATR emphasises the importance of rituals, sacrifices and offerings to maintain harmony with the spiritual realm. It is widely held that these rituals and

customs serve to enhance connectivity with forebears and ethereal entities, solicit their counsel and secure their safeguarding and benedictions.

It is noteworthy that Christianity and ATR are multifaceted religious frameworks that exhibit differences in their beliefs and practises across various denominations, cultural groups and geographical locations. The preceding synopsis offers a comprehensive comprehension of the eschatological viewpoints present in these respective religious systems.

Points of convergence

Both the Christianity and ATR eschatologists agree on physical death, which is cessation of life in our physical body. They all see death as transition to the next world. They also agree that the human being has an abrupt time to finish his or her work on earth. The idea of judgement, as expressed by both religions, has been the crown and capstone of their eschatological teachings. Both have agreed that after death, a person's soul and spirit continue in a state of conscious existence between death and resurrection. The two religions also subscribe to the idea of heaven and hell as well as eternal punishment. Some ATR scholars, such as John S. Mbiti, E. Bolaji Idowu, Jacob K. Olupona and Mercy Amba Oduyoye, have not concerned themselves with the concept of eternal punishment in ATR, which could be a literary gap or outright non-recognition of the idea among Africans. For example, Mbiti emphasises the communal and life-affirming aspects of ATRs, highlighting their focus on maintaining harmonious relationships with the spiritual realm and the community; while Idowu emphasises the ethical and communal dimensions of ATRs, underscoring their emphasis on maintaining balance and social cohesion rather than on eternal punishment. Olupona on his part highlights the dynamic and diverse nature of ATRs, emphasising their emphasis on ancestral reverence, rituals, and maintaining a harmonious relationship with the spiritual world; while Oduyoye advocates for women's rights, and her work often focusses on the empowerment of women within the context of ATRs and highlights the communal and spiritual dimensions of these traditions. These scholars, among others, have shed light on the nuanced and multifaceted nature of ATRs, challenging the portrayal of these religions as emphasising eternal punishment. They have highlighted the communal, ethical and spiritual dimensions of ATRs, focussing their emphasis on maintaining balance, harmony and social cohesion within the community.

However, the authors of this present work do not subscribe to this notion, because eternal consequences of the final judgement also form a part of the Traditional Religion.

Point of divergence

The notion of resurrection is found only in Christianity while in ATR it is not so pronounced. The second coming of Christ is an idea found only in Christianity and not in ATR.

Conclusion

When comparing the eschatology in Christianity and ATR, several distinct differences and similarities emerge:

Ultimate destiny

- Christianity: Christians believe in a final judgement where individuals will be resurrected and face God's judgement. The righteous will enter eternal life in heaven, while the unrighteous will face eternal separation from God in hell.
- ATR: ATR views the afterlife as a continuation of life, where individuals join the realm of the ancestors. The emphasis is on maintaining a harmonious relationship with ancestors and spirits rather than a judgement-based system.

Central figure:

- Christianity: Jesus Christ plays a pivotal role in Christian eschatology. His second coming is anticipated as the event that will inaugurate the final judgement and establish God's eternal kingdom.
- ATR: ATR lacks a central figure in eschatology. The focus is on ancestral spirits, who play a significant role in the afterlife and are venerated for their guidance and protection.

Salvation and redemption

- Christianity: Christians believe in salvation through faith in Jesus Christ and his redemptive work on the cross. Salvation is seen as the means to eternal life and reconciliation with God.
- ATR: ATR's emphasis is on communal well-being and maintaining harmony with the spiritual realm through rituals, offerings and veneration of ancestors. The focus is less on individual salvation and more on community welfare.

Concept of heaven and hell:

- Christianity: Heaven is portrayed as the dwelling place of God and the blessed, where believers experience eternal joy and communion with God. Hell is depicted as a place of eternal punishment and separation from God.
- ATR: ATR does not have a specific concept of heaven or hell. The afterlife is associated with the realm of the ancestors, where deceased individuals continue to exist and influence the lives of their living descendants.

Prophetic tradition

- Christianity: Christianity has a strong prophetic tradition, with biblical prophecies and teachings about the end times. Many Christians look to these prophecies for insight into the signs and events leading to the final judgement.
- ATR: ATR does not have a centralised prophetic tradition. Eschatological beliefs and teachings are often based on oral traditions, cultural practices and the experiences of individual communities.

The above comparisons are comprehensive, and both Christianity and ATR have a wide range of beliefs and customs across sects, ethnicities and regions. These factors may affect each tradition's eschatology. Both religions agree that current choices determine a person's fate and eternal state. Immoral people are exiled from God. Virtuous people will enjoy eternal life in the divine presence. Virtues and vices will be rewarded or punished.

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Authors' contributions

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Disclaimer

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