Africa and the Problem of Evil

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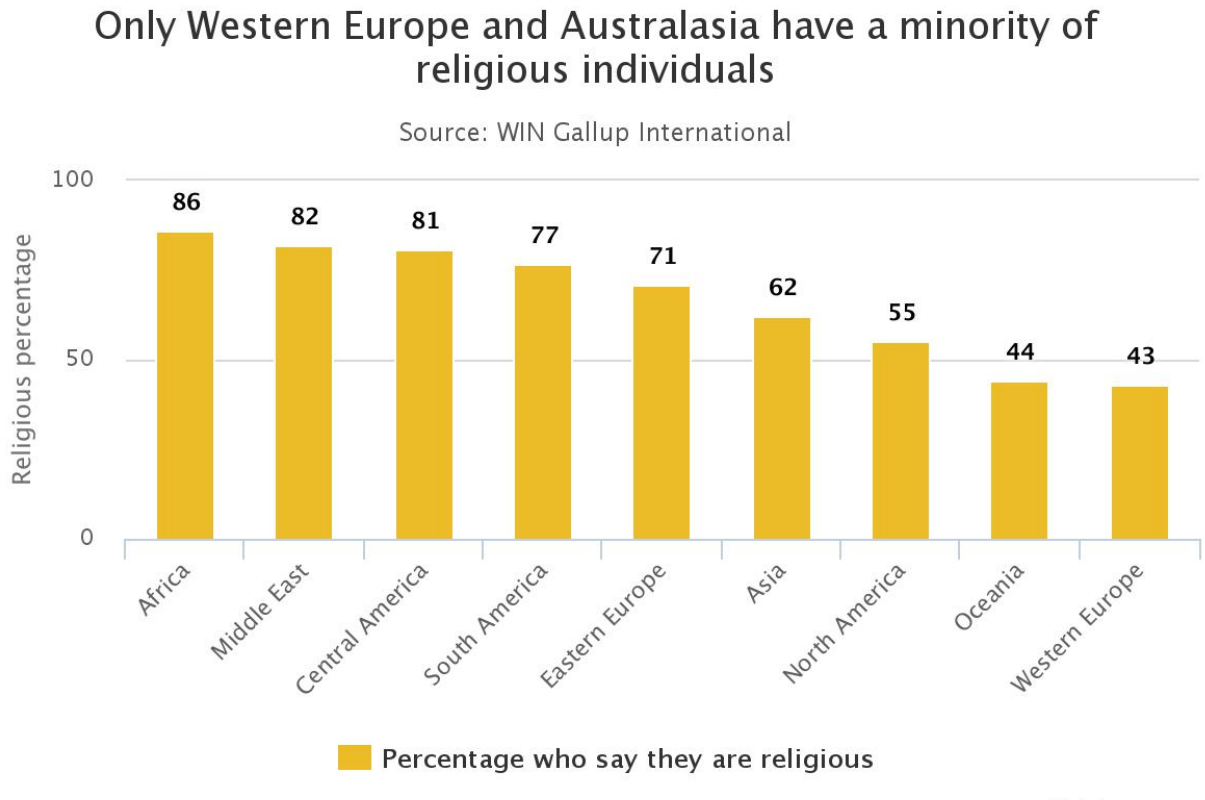
My sister-in-law worked for a year at a Christian orphanage in Kenya. When some of us in the States went to visit her, the orphans greeted us with their rendition of popular Christian praise songs. We later had a feast of thanks that included a goat—one of two times in the year that the children had meat. No part of that animal went to waste. I have an image in my head of a little orphan girl clutching a lollipop in one hand, a roasted goat stomach in the other, and a huge smile in between. In retrospect, her attitude was really amazing. This girl was abandoned by her parents, barefoot in a dirt-floored orphanage, eating meat twice a year, getting sweets only when handed out by well-intentioned Westerners, and yet she sang praise songs to God on a daily basis.

My experience is not unique. Upon visiting Africa, many visitors are struck by how people in absolute penury can at the same time be so happy and so religious. Indeed, Africa is the most religious continent in the world.

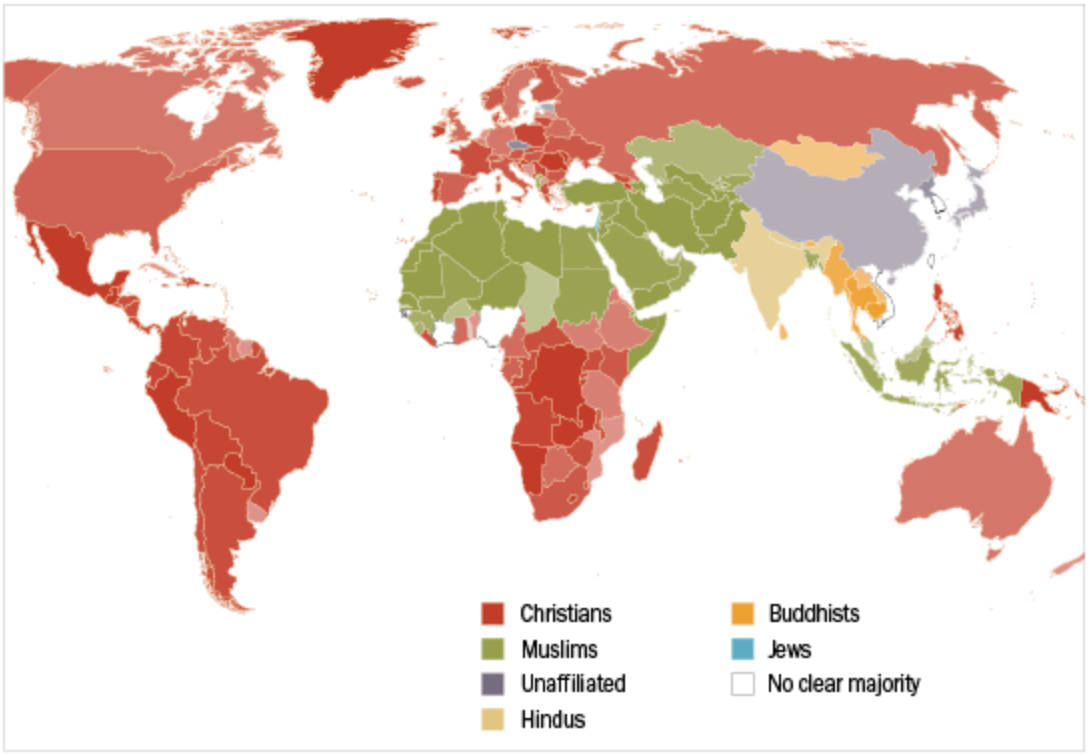


(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/11530382/Mapped-These-are-the-worlds-most-religious-countries.html)

Furthermore, the overwhelming majority of religious people in Africa practice a theistic religion. The Sahara region is dominated by Muslims whereas sub-Saharan Africa is largely composed of Christians.

Majority Religion, by Country

Countries are colored according to the majority religion. Darker shading represents a greater prevalence of the majority religion.



Nine countries have no clear religious majority: Guinea Bissau, Ivory Coast, Macau, Nigeria, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, Togo and Vietnam. There are no countries in which adherents of folk religions make up a clear majority. There are also no countries in which followers of other religions (such as Bahai's, Jains, Sikhs, Shintoists, Taoists, followers of Tenrikyo, Wiccans or Zoroastrians) make up a clear majority.

Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life • Global Religious Landscape, December 2012

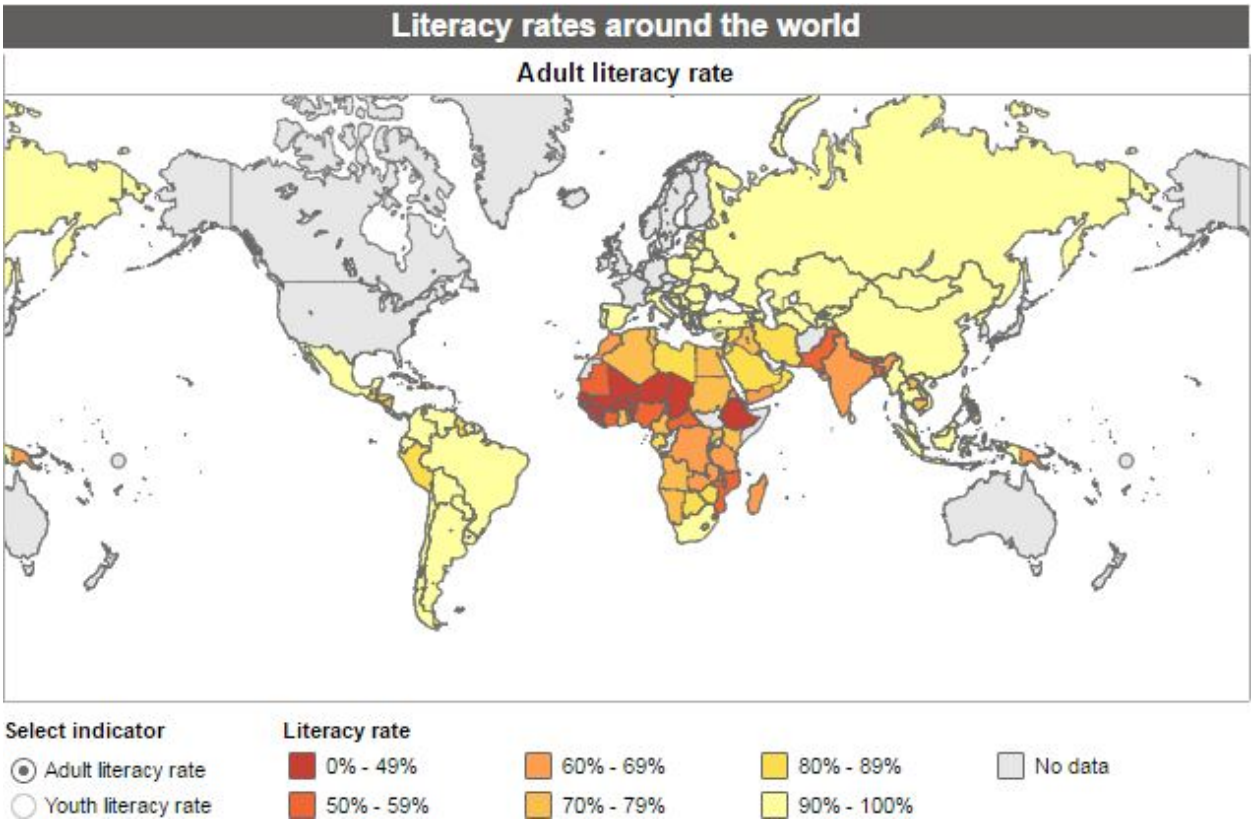
(http://www.pewforum.org/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-exec/)

This dominance of these two religions indicates that most Africans, whether Muslim or Christian, likely believe in God.

The rate of African theism raises two questions: *why* is it so and *should* it be so? The first is descriptive: why is belief in God so widespread despite the poverty, sickness, exploitation, violence, and post-colonial racism that plague the continent? The second is normative: is belief in God reasonable for Africans, especially given what seems like a powerful argument from evil?

First, the descriptive project. Why is it that the most down-trodden people on earth are also the most faithful people on earth? While the full story is surely very complicated, there are at least two points worth noting. Exhibit A: the economic situation in Africa. Religious belief tends to track both poverty and wealth/income inequality, and Africa has plenty of both. It ranks as the poorest populated continent by any number of measures and the second poorest in terms of continent-wide GDP (with only much smaller Oceania behind it). Furthermore, the political situation in much of the continent means that what income is produced rarely helps the common person. That fact has led to Africa being one of the most economically unequal places on Earth as well. In a top-five listing of the most unequal distributions of income, African nations occupy four of the five spots with South Africa topping the chart. Given all of this, it's no surprise that we find wide rates of religious practice.

Exhibit B: the educational situation in Africa. Religious belief also tracks a lack of formal education, and, by virtually any measure, Africa has the most un-educated population on Earth. More school-age children miss out on formal education in Africa than any other continent. And literacy rates alone make Africa stand out on a global map.



(http://www.uis.unesco.org/literacy/Pages/data-release-map-2013.aspx)

Of course, there is no guarantee that properties like poverty and illiteracy correlate with religion, but our best evidence makes widespread African theism exactly what we would expect. It also doesn't tell us the deeper causal story about why the poor and uneducated are more likely to be religious, but more about that below.

Second, the normative, philosophical project. Regardless of the explanation for why many African people *do* believe in God, should they believe in God? Is this a reasonable thing for them to believe given their experiences? To count as God, the creator must be a morally perfect, loving, and all-powerful being. How could you think the world was created and governed by such a being given the existence of horrors all around you? At the very least, isn't theism less reasonable for an African than for a comfortable Westerner?

On one way of looking at this question, the answer is clearly no. Peter van Inwagen made a similar point in his Gifford Lectures on the problem of evil:

> If a grieving mother whose child has just died of leukemia were to say to me, "How could God do this?" my first inclination would be to answer her by saying, "But you already

> knew that the children of lots of other mothers have died of leukemia. You were willing to say that he [God] must have had some good reason in those cases. Surely you can see that it's just irrational to have a different response when it's your own child that dies of leukemia." (*The Problem of Evil*, Oxford, Clarendon Press: 2006, p. 10)

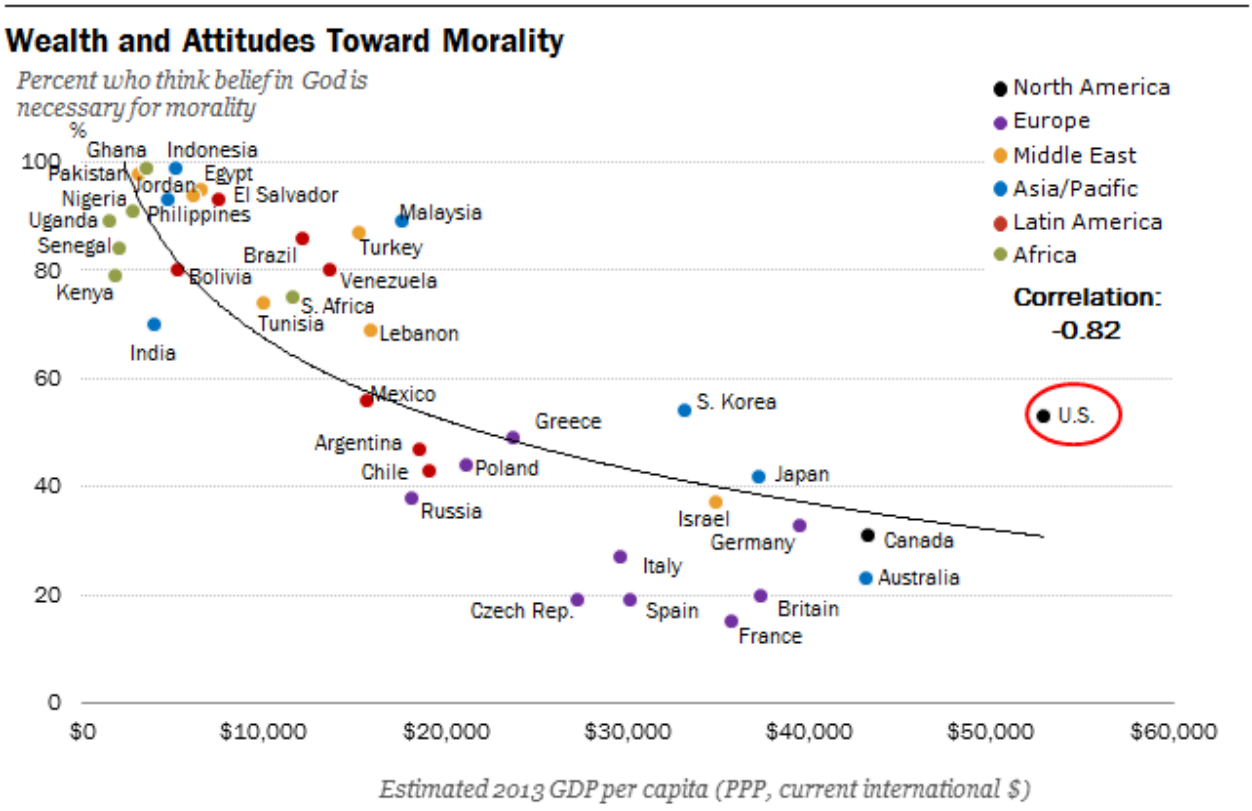
Van Inwagen's point is that if the mother wasn't willing to count the evils suffered by others as evidence against the existence of God, then by parity of reasoning she shouldn't count similar evils suffered by her as evidence against the existence of God.

This point carries over to the Africa issue. You might think that the problem of evil is more poignant for Africans than for Westerners. However, if Westerners know about the daily horrors that occur in Africa, then they have exactly the same evidence of evil as any of the observers on the ground. On this way of looking at it, the evils in Africa either count as evidence against God for everyone or no one—there is no room for evidential relativism. And so the problem of evil is no worse for Africans than it is for any knowledgeable person.

This seems a reasonable conclusion to reach. However, there's a case to be made that the problem of evil really is more pressing for those with first-hand experience of horrors. How could that be? Well, perhaps there is a special sort of knowledge that is provided by real-life experience. Knowing about wine and tasting wine are very different things. Reading about skiing in a book and going skiing are not the same. Having a friend tell you about a toothache and having one yourself will plausibly teach you different things. We might call the knowledge gained first-hand as "knowledge by acquaintance" as opposed to "knowledge by testimony."

If there is something like knowledge by acquaintance, then we should say that people who experience particular evils first-hand know something that the rest of us do not. When her son dies of leukemia, the grieving mother learns what it is like to have a child die. Sure, she knew that children died of leukemia before that point, but that was merely knowledge by testimony. Just as Mary learns what red looks like when she leaves the black and white room, so, too, people who suffer learn what evil is like when they experience it themselves. If this sort of knowledge has epistemic potency, then many people in Africa face a more acute problem of evil than those of us who merely read about horrors from our armchairs. That would explain why so many Jews lost their faith in Nazi death camps.

Of course, even granting this special sort of knowledge of evil, it might not render belief in atheism reasonable. That's because whether it constitutes all-things-considered evidence against the existence of God will depend on one's other philosophical commitments. And in this case there is a pretty clear explanation for why many Africans will fail to see the existence of moral evil decisive evidence against the existence of God. The explanation appeals to the widespread metaethical belief that God and morality are essentially linked. African people tend to think that belief in God is necessary to live a moral life and have values.



U.S., Britain, France, Germany, Spain, and Japan % data from 2011. India % data from Winter 2013.

Source: Spring 2013 Global Attitudes Survey, Q26. Data for GDP per capita (PPP) from IMF World Economic Outlook, October 2013. PPP stands for purchasing power parity, which means that the international dollar has the same purchasing power over GDP as the U.S. dollar has in the United States.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

(http://www.pewglobal.org/2014/03/13/worldwide-many-see-belief-in-god-as-essential-to-morality/)

This particular survey asked about the link between belief in God and living a moral life. Notice on this chart that the green dots representing African nations are clustered in the top, left corner. Africans are more likely than anyone else on Earth to think that God is required for morality.

So suppose you think that morality depends on God. If so, you will find the argument from evil unpersuasive. If morality is dependent upon God, then obviously moral facts about evil won't count as evidence for the non-existence of God. If there were no God there would be no such thing as good and evil in the first place! And so this metaethical commitment linking God and morality will go some distance to explain why so many African people evidently find the problem of evil unpersuasive.

Deep down, however, there is a more fundamental issue. It's an issue of demographics. Here is an example from the empirical realm. Education is positively correlated with an acceptance of the scientific consensus on climate change in most places in the world (the US being a perverse outlier). This correlation creates a demographic problem for climate change skeptics. We typically think that education makes people more reasonable and makes their beliefs more likely to be true. Climate change skeptics need to explain why education did not have this result in this particular case. Perhaps there's a good

explanation for why education has led so many astray on this point, but it's an explanation that the skeptic needs to provide.

For a philosophical example, college education is positively correlated with liberal political views. In the United States, the more college graduates a state has, the more likely it is to be blue. This correlation creates a demographic problem for political conservatives. We typically think that education makes people more reasonable and makes their beliefs more likely to be true. Again, perhaps there's a good explanation for why being educated has led so many astray on political issues, but it's an explanation that conservatives need to provide. For example, they could show that universities are filled with people who have unreasonable, left-wing biases.

When it comes to the distribution of belief in God, there is a demographic problem for theism. Why is it that the poverty-stricken and the uneducated continue to believe in God in spite of terrible evils? From Hindu outcasts from before the common era to Christian peasants in the Medieval age to antebellum American slaves, there is a long history of the broken and needy being the first to turn to God. How can this distribution of belief and evil make any sense?

Here's one suggestion: perhaps the experience of evil comes in two sorts. Just as it can be a reason and cause for unbelief, so, too, can the experience of evil be a catalyst for religious belief. In a recent book on the problem of evil, philosopher Dan Speak calls this "the two pulls of evil":

> …evil appears to have the power to pull us in two different directions. On the one hand, our confrontations with evil quite naturally provoke our suspicion that a maximally powerful and loving being could not permit it; down this path lies doubt and unbelief. On the other hand, these confrontations with evil can also cause us to see our profound limitations, deep ignorance, and shocking vulnerability. Seeing our own radical contingency provokes a longing to be grounded in a necessity beyond ourselves…down this path lies belief and commitment. (*The Problem of Evil*, Cambridge, Polity Press: 2015, p. 11)

This is all well and good, you might think. But—as any group facing a demographic problem—we are owed an explanation as to *why* evil might sometimes pull us toward the divine. Some philosophers have argued that experiences of evil either provide a kind of special insight into the world or remove a blinder to the world that results from a life of pleasure. Christian scriptures are filled with examples of God revealing himself to the lowly and the suffering instead of the well-positioned and comfortable. This theme finds clear expression in the work of C.S. Lewis when he writes that pain is God's megaphone:

> Pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world. (*The Problem of Pain*, Harper: 1940 p. 91)

The idea is that creature comforts mask a genuine need for God in our lives. Constant pleasure is a constant distraction from what ultimately matters. Orienting human lives towards things of lasting importance requires disruption. And pain is one of the most powerful disruptions you could ask for.

For myself, I find something plausible about this reply. As a father of two sons, I think I would fail them if I arranged things so that they were in states of constant pleasure. Learning to be mature, virtuous people who rightly prioritize things of ultimate significance requires that they endure hardships, struggles

and shortcomings. Perhaps even pain. And if this is right, then it would come as no surprise that people who experience more pain might be attracted to theism and the promises that come with it.

Clarification: the point is NOT that I should make my children suffer the way that so many people in Africa suffer. That's a morally abhorrent thing to suggest. But the point is just that the presence of evil in one's life might serve as a catalyst for religious belief and tip one's life toward theism. As they say, "there are no atheists in foxholes." And if so, then widespread belief in God by contemporary African people might be reasonable.

My conclusion about the problem of evil, then, is a tentative one. Either the first-hand experience of evils is evidence against the existence of God or not. If not, then the widespread theism of African people is not epistemically impugned by the evils they face. If so, then there are two live possibilities to explain pervasive theism in the face of this evidence.

On option one, we grant that evil counts as evidence against the existence of God but insist that this evidenced is counterbalanced by pro-theistic evidence that just happens to be co-extensive with the evils. On this way of understanding the situation, the evils African people face pose serious reason to doubt the existence of God but at the same time these people receive powerful evidence for his existence. On option two, we grant that evil counts as evidence against the existence of God and concede that African religious belief—perhaps like religious belief worldwide—is not a function of evidence.

I want to close on a hopeful note. Religious people and religious organizations have often been on the cutting edge of social and economic progress. Americans are familiar with the work of Quakers in the antebellum abolition movement and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in the civil rights struggle of the 1960's. There are no less inspiring examples in Africa. Church leaders like Desmond Tutu have been pioneers in the contemporary human rights movement. Faith-based organizations play a leading role in HIV/AIDS work, the care of mothers and newborns, and the protection and rearing of orphans.

Of course, it's also true that religion has been used in Africa as a cudgel against the oppressed. For example, some Christian leaders were instrumental in the passing of Uganda's law criminalizing homosexual behavior. Still, given the potential of religious organizations to unite like-minded Africans, we can hope that the deep religiosity of African people can be leveraged to solve the many problems facing the bright continent.