An Investigation into the Timelessness of God Theology, with Special Reference to African Traditional Religion

by

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Declaration

Student Number: 41545400

I, Mogomotsi Jaba, declare that 'An Investigation into the Timelessness of God Theology, with Special Reference to African Traditional Religion' is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

I further declare that I have not previously submitted this work, or part of it, for examination at UNISA for another qualification or at any other higher education institution.

31 March 2021

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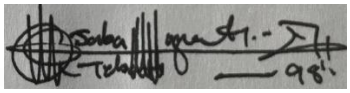

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Keywords

African Traditional Religion
Ancestors
Classical Theism
Divinities
God
Immutability
Omniscience
Time
Timelessness

Acronyms

AIC	African Independent Church
ATR	African Traditional Religion
FEDP	Fathers of the English Dominican Province
NIV	New International Version
QTE	Quasi-Temporal Eternity
STR	Special Theory of Relativity

Abbreviations of Biblical Books

All the references to the Bible refer to the New International Version (NIV).

Book	Abbreviation	Book	Abbreviation
Genesis	Gn	**Nahum**	Nah
Exodus	Ex	**Habakkuk**	Hab
Leviticus	Lev	**Zephaniah**	Zeph
Numbers	Num	**Haggai**	Hag
Deuteronomy	Dt	**Zechariah**	Zech
Joshua	Jos	**Malachi**	Mal
Judges	Jdg	**Matthew**	Mt
Ruth	Ruth	**Mark**	Mk
1 Samuel	1 Sam	**Luke**	Lk
2 Samuel	2 Sam	**John**	Jn
1 Kings	1 Ki	**Acts**	Ac
2 Kings	2 Ki	**Romans**	Rm
1 Chronicles	1 Chr	**1 Corinthians**	1 Cor
2 Chronicles	2 Chr	**2 Corinthians**	2 Cor
Ezra	Ezra	**Galatians**	Gal
Nehemiah	Neh	**Ephesians**	Eph
Esther	Esther	**Philippians**	Php
Job	Job	**Colossians**	Col
Psalm	Ps	**1 Thessalonians**	1 Th
Proverbs	Pr	**2 Thessalonians**	2 Th
Ecclesiastes	Ecc	**1 Timothy**	1 Tim
Song of Songs	SS	**2 Timothy**	2 Tim
Isaiah	Isa	**Titus**	Tit
Jeremiah	Jer	**Philemon**	Phm
Lamentations	Lam	**Hebrews**	Heb
Ezekiel	Ez	**James**	Jas
Daniel	Dn	**1 Peter**	1 Pt
Hosea	Hos	**2 Peter**	2 Pt
Joel	Joel	**1 John**	1 Jn
Amos	Amos	**2 John**	2 Jn
Obadiah	Ob	**3 John**	3 Jn
Jonah	Jonah	**Jude**	Jude
Micah	Micah	**Revelation**	Rev

Abbreviations Used to Refer to Primary Sources

Abbreviation	Full Name of Document	Author
CG	*City of God*	Augustine
Conf	*Confessions*	Augustine
Cons	*Consolation of philosophy*	Boethius
DA	*Dionysius the Areopagite*	Dionysius
DT	*Dogmatic treatises, Against Eunomius*	Gregory of Nyssa
Enn	*Enneads*	Plotinus
Fr	*Fragments*	Xenophanes
Mon	*Mono*	Anselm
Phys	*Physics*	Aristotle
SCG	*Summa contra gentiles*	Aquinas
ST	*Summa theologica*	Aquinas
Tim	*Timaeus*	Plato

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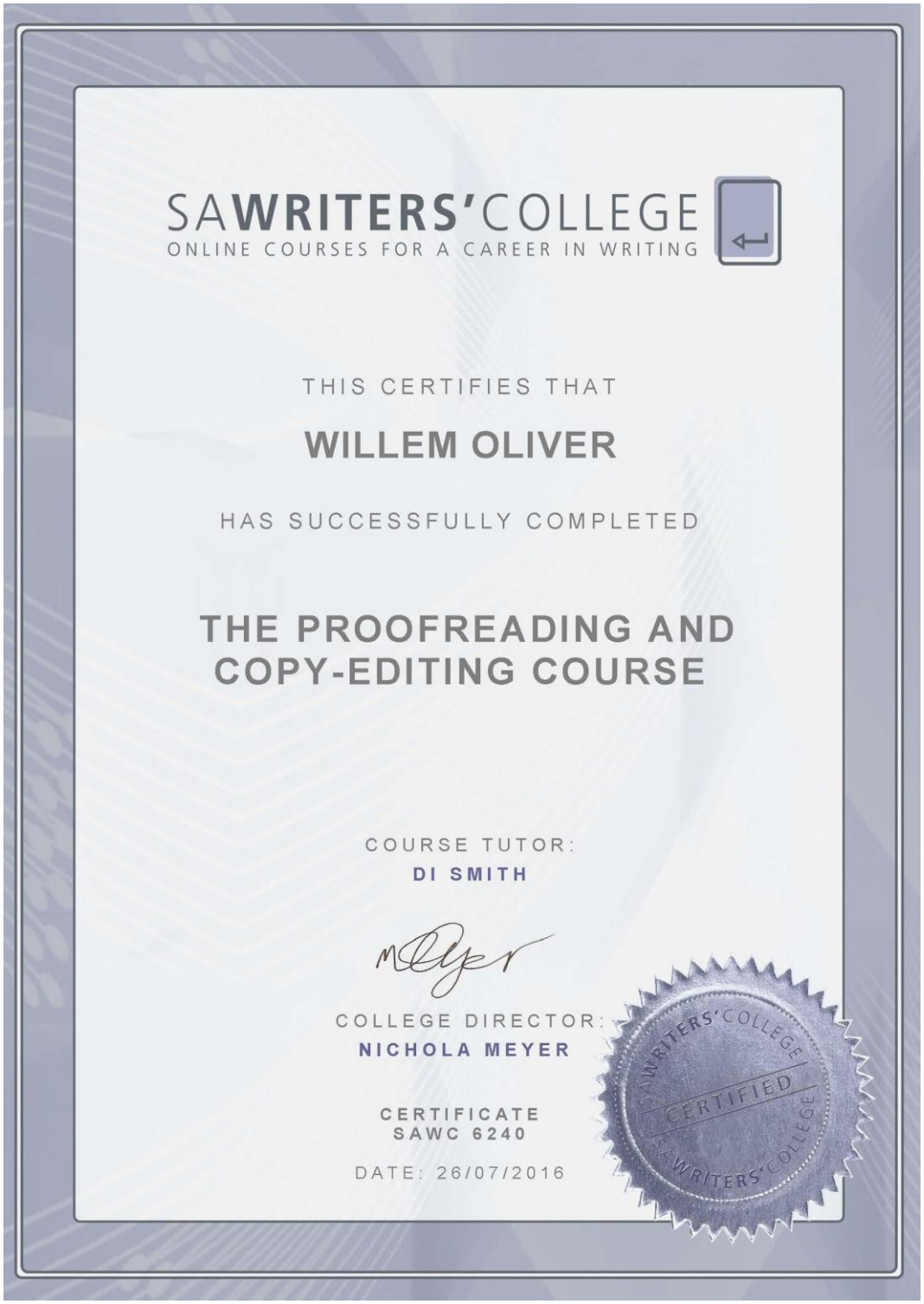

Abstract

The main aim of this thesis was to explore the timelessness of God theology while making special reference to African traditional religion. The 'timelessness of God' is a theological model taught in Western traditional theism. Owing to its development by historical figures like Augustine, Boethius, and Aquinas, this theological model posits that God is absolutely immutable, simple, and omniscient. Developed through the lens of Greek philosophy by the mentioned figures, these divine attributes place God outside of time. To state that God is timeless within this context, implies that he exists, but he exists outside of time. This model continues to dominate theological discourses and, arguably, forms part of the chief theological engine that drives modern Christian theology. This thesis, however, contends that the timelessness of God theology is problematic for African Christians. Mainly, according to African Christianity, this model falls short in meeting Africans' religious and spiritual needs. One such need is God's answer to prayers: A timeless God cannot answer prayers, as this would make him mutable. I argue in this study that African Christians conceive God as coming from a worldview that is entrenched in African traditional religion. According to this worldview, God, *contra* the Western tradition, is in a dynamic give-and-take relationship with human beings. This relationship is made possible because God is viewed by Africans as existing in time.

Chapter 1
Introduction and Orientation

1.1 INTRODUCTION

This thesis investigates the timelessness of God theology, while making special reference to African traditional religion (ATR). The timelessness of God theology is a core tenet of classical theology upon which Christianity rests. In other words, the timelessness of God theology forms one of the pillars that hold Christianity together. As one of the core teachings in Christian theology, it influences how Christians conceive God. Consequently, Christians' outlook on the doctrine of God, in turn, influences how they interpret reality.

First of all, the way in which I entered the ongoing discussions in this field of study will be put on the table. Theological conversations do not take place in a vacuum. It was therefore prudent for me to enquire about the nature and extent to which the debates are being carried out in the literature.

It all started in 2017 when I submitted my Master's degree of theology which was accepted at the South African Theological Seminary. In that study project, I explored the nature of God's foreknowledge and its relation to the doctrine of divine election. There I used the openness of God theology as my theoretical framework (cf. Pinnock 1994; Boyd 2000; Sanders 2007). That study focused on whether the future is an already settled reality in the mind of God and if God knows it as such. I was interested in what the implications would be if this question was answered in the affirmative.

While carrying out the study, I came into contact with debates about God and time. I noticed that the question of God's omniscience, explored in the context of divine election and the nature of the future, compels me to have knowledge of God's relation to time. However, because of the scope of my study at the time, I could not pursue the nature of God's relation to time in detail. I could only gloss over that line of reasoning. I could not help, though, but notice that time plays a pivotal role in Christian doctrine formulation. In my own view, how God relates to time, should be a key theological tenet that should be pursued with care in all religions. This is because, regardless of

the position one takes on the matter, that position will dictate how one interprets the rest of the Christian and religious doctrines. More importantly, it influences how the Christian relates to creation at large. By way of example, if one embraces the classical Christian theology that God exists outside time, they are compelled to accept that God stands in no relation with the created order, or, for that matter, embrace the doctrine of predestination. It is also obvious that the doctrines of creation, preservation, and providence are affected in that regard. It is in this context that I developed my interest in the subject and wanted to find out about other theological implications regarding God's relation to time.

I take the words of Nicholas Wolterstorff (2001:213) seriously when he states that what 'one says about God's relation to time involves a very great deal of the rest of one's theology.' These brief introductory remarks mark my entry point into the subject of this thesis.

1.2 BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

That Christianity has spread all over Africa over the past two millennia, is something that cannot be contested. Whether the missionaries' motives were with a hidden agenda regarding the Africans, they achieved their mandate to have the presence and influence of Christianity spread all over the regions of the African continent. Indeed, Christianity has come to influence the way of African thinking and living. For a very long time, Christianity has had a hold on Africans, a hold that has seen Christian religion taught in schools, while certain government policies and constitutions were built around some Christian precepts. For clarity of thought, when I use the term 'African' in this study, my focus is only on black Africans.

There are a lot of positive things that can be mentioned that Christianity has done for Africans, though. It was a system of religious thought, presented without any problems and limitations to Africans. However, the main problem, as this thesis argues, lies in the Westernised character entailed in Christian theologies, a character that entails tendencies to undermine the African ways of conceiving reality – worse still, a character that seeks to eradicate the African's worldview, being entrenched in ATR (Mabvurira, Muchinako, & Smit 2021:112; Van der Merwe 2016:559).

Colonisation, a task carried out by Western explorers and missionaries on Africans a few centuries ago, exacerbated the situation, creating damage to ATR by pushing it to the periphery. In the meantime, missionaries aimed to replace ATR with a brand of Christianity that operated from a Western theological perspective.

Dirk Van der Merwe (2016:573) correctly argues that in all probability, Western Christianity is not a replica of the primitive biblical tradition. The Christianity that was canvassed to Africans, was clothed in Western regalia – regalia which are even foreign to the biblical world. What I question regarding Christianity, is the superiority complex its adherents have particularly by looking down on other religions. In this way, Christianity has paraded itself as the ultimate goal of correct doctrine, acting as a barometer by which other religions should be judged.

The way in which Christian theologies relate to the theological concepts in other religions is a relevant one. This should be thoroughly explored with respect and carefulness, particularly because Christianity has always regarded itself as superior to other religions. All religions stand on conceptual assumptions about God, and these are just that: Assumptions. Christianity is a religion that, according to some scholars, presumably fell straight from God's throne in heaven to the West on behalf of all religions of the world. However, theologians do not theologise independently of churches. My point is that a religion can never exist if that religion does not adhere to some theological assumptions upon which it is built. The question I have is, who determines which assumptions are a fair reflection of the nature of God, and is one religion's assumptions superior to the rest?

Western Christianity stands on doctrinal propositions. Caleb Oladipo (2010:36) apprehends the essence of this point when he notes: 'The dogmatic language was a direct presentation of the Gospel to the indigenous Africans as the missionaries perceived it, and the method of presentation required a "yes" or "no" response.'

The problem with doctrinal theology for Africans is that it creates some limitations on how they should experience the divine, setting it within a narrow propositional framework. For Africans – a people who are spiritual to the core – religion loses its meaning if it is expressed through a systematic doctrinal proposition. This is because Africans

experience ‘religious practices [as being] more than cultic activities and beyond planned gatherings for worship’ (Oladipo 2010:39). For Africans, religion is a holistic experience that encompasses the entire African cosmology. Caleb Oladipo (2010:39) is poignant when he claims: ‘The Christian life is valued more among Africans than doctrinal certitude, and experiencing God is more important than theological facts.’ Accordingly, the task of African Christian theology should be to serve the African Christian church in the language that the Africans understand (Maluleke 1997:8). This is because there is no indication that Western Christianity is going to do that for Africans any time soon. As African Christianity emanates from the soil of ATR and African cultures, the African church and its theologies ‘must bear an African stamp’ (Maluleke 1997:10).

Studies surrounding ATR was dominated by Western Christianised scholarship (Parrinder 1962; Daneel 1973). While their efforts are welcome, ‘[t]he problem only arises when the representation of ATR begins to show some elements of bias and does not adequately reflect the premise of the religion’ (Mokhoathi 2017b:10). It is lamentable, in this context, that most modern literature by Christian scholars on ATR reflects this attitude. It leaves much to be desired that Christian theologies are used as the barometer upon which ATR is judged. The problem with this conduct, as already indicated, is that it presupposes that Christianity is superior to ATR.

While there are different theological strands regarding the doctrine of God, classical theism is arguably the chief corner stone that holds Western Christianity together. It is this brand of theism that has also been canvassed for Africans. Classical theism, sometimes referred to as traditional theology, is driven by certain theological assumptions. One of these assumptions is that God is timeless. The central notion of this thesis revolves around this theological aspect. However, what does this mean in its basic format?

As the concept suggests, to claim that God is timeless, is to suggest that God exists outside of time. Put differently, the implication is that God has no relation to time in any way or form that humans, for instance, do have. This is what classical theism maintains, and this concept owes its development to medieval theistic scholars (Feser 2023:16; Launonen & Mullins 2021:15). Several biblical texts are used by partisans of

this theology to demonstrate that God exists outside of time. One such text is Isaiah 57:15: 'He [God] who lives forever, whose name is holy.' Another one is Hebrews 1:10-12 which notes that God's years never end, and that he is from everlasting to everlasting. Now, these and other related biblical texts teach that God is everlasting, but for partisans of the timelessness of God theology, these verses imply that God is everlasting because he exists outside time (Miksa 2023:2 of 26; cf. Stump & Kretzmann 1981; Leftow 1991; Rogers 1994; Helm 2010; Blount 2017). For these theologians, God exists in no time captivity, implying that he is timeless. This doctrine is seemingly derived from the Bible. It is important to state it here, as the Bible is the main source of Christian theology.

The timelessness of God theology, according to Paul Helm (2001:28; cf. Wolterstorff 2001:189), has 'an impressive pedigree in the history of Western theism – it is the "mainstream" view represented by Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, Calvin and hosts of others.' Samsa Korpela (2021:56) certifies this thought:

> God's timelessness is closely tied to classical theism. From Antiquity to early modern times, classical theism was the dominant model of describing God's attributes. Lists of God's attributes usually contain the following: omnipotence, necessity, omniscience, perfect goodness, immutability, timelessness, simplicity, and impassibility.

The literature indicates that the timelessness of God theology is used to determine and shape other biblical doctrines (Mullins 2021:148). For example, because God exists outside of time, the timelessness model dictates that the doctrine of divine omniscience implies that God knows all times, including the future. This is because, since God is timeless, he encompasses all temporal reality at once. All times exist simultaneously before him in the eternal now. Such is the influence that the model has over theology. Classical theists maintain that understanding God this way, retains his sovereignty and perfection. The classical theist's God is absolutely in control of everything because nothing takes place outside his control and knowledge.

The description of classical theism by Lari Launonen and Ryan Mullins (2021:5) is worth quoting:

> According to classical theism, God is timeless if, and only if, God necessarily exists without beginning, without end, without succession, and without temporal location. This means that

> God does not do one action and then another action. God does not experience one event and then experience another event. Instead, classical theists say that all of God's acts and experiences occur at a single timeless moment, or the eternal now. This timeless moment does not stand in any kind of temporal relation to the world.

Recently, however, the timelessness model has come under harsh criticism from some Christian theologians (cf. Cordeiro-Rodrigues 2021:3; Blaber 2023:2 of 21). Eisa Mohammdinia and Seyyedi Dibaji (2023:389; cf. Padgett 2011), for example, argue that this model removes God from the world. Not only does it place God outside the world, but it also causes him to be beyond the reach of humans.

The topic of how God relates to time might appear ambiguous on the surface. Yet, the more one digs into the topic, the more one realises the significance it holds for Christian theology. Alan Padgett (2001:92) acknowledges that 'how we understand God's relationship to the world…is a central part of any theistic worldview.' He argues that despite the seeming obscurity of the topic, the subject of God's relation to time 'is an important part of any fully developed theology' (Padgett 2001:92). This is correct, even for Africans whose theistic worldview is shaped by ATR (Mabvurira *et al*. 2021:111; cf. Metz & Molefe 2021). In fact, without conceptions of God in ATR, the religion would not stand.

The central focus of this study, therefore, is to investigate the extent and sense in which God is timeless in Christian theology. This study not only contests the timelessness model that is used by some Christian theologians in the West, but also indicates that this model is foreign to African Christians whose worldview is rooted in ATR. The concern for an African Christian and for me as an aspiring theologian, is that Africans continue to convert to Christianity. Yet, the literature suggests that Christianity is inadequate to address the African religious and spiritual needs. Because Christianity regards itself as superior to the primitive religions of the world, it imposes its theological assumptions on other religions with no regard to context. This poses a challenge for African Christians.

1.3 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

It is worth reiterating that this study project investigates God's relation to time. It does that by way of investigating the timelessness of God theology, underlying classical

theism. Special reference is made to ATR. Of critical concern to me is the escalation in numbers of African Christians. In their Christian walk, Africans find themselves confronted with a myriad of theological views advocated for by Christianity, particularly as they have accepted Christianity, which carries with it a Western stamp of approval.

For classical theists, God exists outside of time. In this frame of reference, God is timeless. Robert Neville (1993:130) elucidates this model when he points out that it owes its origins to Greek thoughts. If God is timeless, according to classical theism, then he does not experience change. According to the classical theists, beings that experience change, exist within time and not outside of time. Neville (1993:130) narrates that the ideas of a God who does not change in any way, can be traced to Plato and Aristotle. Plato, for instance, developed the timelessness thought when he spoke about the 'consequence of the good' in his *Republic* vi:509b (Bloom 1968:189). In this much acclaimed treatise by Plato, eternity is contrasted with time, as eternity is viewed as consisting of no time (Neville 1993:130).

According to classical theism, God resides in eternity. Aristotle, compared to Plato, is associated in the literature with his 'unmoved mover' concept. According to Aristotle's concept found in his *Physics* 8.5 (Aristotle 1999:140), things that are in time can be changed by God, although he cannot be moved by anything (Neville 1993:132). It is imperative to give this information because the

> patristic Christian theologians…used middle Platonic, neo-Platonic, Stoic, Epicurean, Cynical, and Aristotelian concepts to interpret their conceptions of God and to structure their attempts to show how God is related salvifically to history in Jesus, the Spirit, and in the influences of prophecy. Although derivative from the classical speculations of Plato, Aristotle, and the other founders of those schools, the uses to which the 'philosophical' categories were controlled by the semitic drive towards articulating ultimacy (Neville 1993:138).

Early theologians, particularly the medieval theistic ones, were faced with challenges from Greek philosophies related to what constituted perfection and the ultimate being. These Greek philosophies posited that a perfect being needs to exist outside of the realm of temporal things. While being sympathetic about the biblical narratives about God – narratives that presented God as temporal – medieval theologians thought it unsound to speak of a God who was involved with temporal things. If God is the ultimate reality, according to the theistic thinkers, then he needs to exist outside of time.

This point of view became part of the foundation of what is currently known as classical theism in Christian theology. This foundation forms one of Christianity's pillars.

Since the beginning of civilization in the West, the question of the nature of time has attracted the curiosity of scholars of different persuasions (cf. Bäckryd 2023:1; Sherover 2003:3). In recent times, there has been a resurgence within theological discourses regarding time, with particular interest centred on God's relation to time. The theological question whether God exists inside or outside of time, however, remains open in modern literature. If God exists in time, it means that he is temporal. One of the consequences attached to this perspective is that a temporal God is unable to foresee future contingent events. This is because, according to the process of time, the future does not yet exist. On the other hand, to exist timelessly, means that God exists in no time. In this setup, God cannot be located in time. To my mind, this view removes God from the world.

Based on the aforementioned, this thesis recognises gaps in the literature. It also recognises some challenges that come along with this model. First, the discussion on God's relation to time has been largely carried out in the West. As a consequence, the Western context has been used as a conceptual framework in determining the nature of God's relation to time. In turn, this framework has been exported to the rest of the world through Christianity. Africa is no exception to this.

This thesis contends that Christianity and its theologies create conceptual challenges for African Christians (Makhanya 2017:2; Mokhoathi 2017:5). Worse still, is that these theologies are imposed on Africans at the expense of their cultural and religious cosmology. In the past, this attitude by Western Christianity forced some Africans to break away from Christianity and form their own churches. These churches are today known as African independent/indigenous churches (AICs). Mandla Makhanya (2017:1 of 4) attests that while, on the one hand, the AICs made significant efforts to enculturate Christianity into an African way of thinking, it is, unfortunate that Christianity seems to have acted the opposite. Christianity had no room for a contextualisation of doctrine. Even in modern times, Christianity continues to advocate for Western Christian theologies. Indeed, Makhanya (2017:1 of 4) asserts that one of the main reasons why the AICs broke away from the Western brand of Christianity, was to free themselves from

a ‘rigid application of the Christian doctrine and liturgy that sought to destroy the traditional African way of life and worldview.’ Thus, my problem is not with Christianity *per se*, but the brand of Christianity and its underlying theologies that canvass for the attention of African Christians.

Christian theologies still do not make any ideological sense to African Christians. Some Christian theological inadequacies are the reason why some African Christians continue to practise elements of ATR long after their conversion. Umar Danfulani (2012; cf. Mokhoathi 2017a:5 of 14) avers that the return to ATR by African Christians in times of crisis, is indicative of the fact that there is something that Africans miss in Christianity.

Joel Mokhoathi (2017a) agrees that Africans experience inadequacies in the Western Christian theologies. He writes that ‘imported theologies do not sufficiently touch the hearts of African believers because they are couched in a language that is foreign to them’ (Mokhoathi 2017a:2 of 14). While several theologies that fall short of touching the hearts of Africans can be listed, this study is interested in only one of these views, that is the timelessness of God theology.

The statement of the problem which this thesis addresses, therefore, revolves around the nature and the sense in which God is timeless in Christian theology, with special reference to ATR.

1.4 RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

Should a study really concern itself with time, more specifically, how God relates to time? What significance would that have? Most importantly, is there a rationale for embarking on such a project? I think there is, and I hope that this section will demonstrate it.

Time plays a significant role in the lives of people, regardless of its metaphysical nature. Both in the West and in Africa, people talk about time in their day-to-day conversations. Time influences how one views and interprets reality. For example, in Christian theology, there is a sense of eschatological hope, stating that somewhere in the

future all things will end on earth with the second coming of Jesus Christ. Jacob Olupona (2014:8) comments that time is 'embedded in African religious life and practices.' How Africans view time in turn affects their relationship with God.

There are two aspects to time: The extensive and the transitory aspect. The extensive aspect portrays the contention that things stand in temporal relations of 'earlier' or 'later' than, or 'simultaneous with.' According to this perspective, time is composed mainly of relations. On this ground there is no such thing as the becoming of events or events going out of existence. The transitory perspective, on the other hand, regards things that move from being future to being present and to fading away into the past. Based on this perspective, it could be stated that time flows and is dynamic. Events take place one after the other, and events do not stand in a static relation to each other (Oaklander 2014:8). This is basically what the nature of time comes down to and, as will be demonstrated, this way of looking at time brings it to what is known in the philosophy of time literature as the A- and B-theories of time. In the A-theory, time is dynamic and relational, whereas in the B-theory, time is static. This already speaks to the fact that theologians and philosophers of time are divided about the nature of time. This division, in turn, has led to different conceptions of God in the West. This is because, when a question of how God relates to time is asked by theologians, they use either of the two conceptual theories, hence arriving at different conclusions.

Oreste Fiocco (2014) advocates for a third alternative way to the metaphysics of time, claiming that his theory does not abandon the static or dynamic theses of time (Fiocco 2014:88). He calls his theory 'atemporal becoming,' claiming that it accounts for a 'fully satisfactory metaphysics of time, one that honors both transient and permanence and finds for each its proper domain within the world' (Fiocco 2014:88). Basically, what Fiocco does, is to harvest some elements of both theories and fuse them together to produce a third way of understanding time.

However, the past, present, and future are ontologically different. So, treating them – as it is the case in the B-theory – as if they hold an equal ontological status, only creates problems. This is because each time has its own essential and conditional features that makes it different from the others. On this point, Robert Neville (1993:85)

argues that '[w]ithout recognizing the otherness between the temporal modes, it is impossible to accept the passage of time in its own wholeness.' This is one of the problems that this study will highlight. Matters get more complicated when the idea of time is explored in relation to God. This study notes that efforts to study God's relation to time are rife in Western Christian theologies and almost non-existent in African Christian theologies.

In light of these, this thesis recognises at least two major gaps in the discussions about God's relation to time. The first gap is that Christian theological discussions on God and time have been carried out from a Western perspective at the exclusion, in this case, of ATR context, or even e.g., the Asian religion's perspective for that matter. This study project aimed to fill that gap. Questions such as, 'To what extent and in what sense does God relate to time in African religious ontologies?,' 'What are the implications of a Christian timeless theistic theology on African Christians?,' and 'Is the timelessness of God model satisfactory for African Christians?' For example, to a timeless God, all times exist simultaneously before him. However, one of the theological downfalls of this view is that, while God knows all events in one eternal now on the one hand, God cannot know what time it is at that moment, on the other hand. This is basically both externally and internally incoherent. It is because for God to be able to know what time it is currently, he will have to be in time to know that (Mullins 2023:2-3 of 21).

Second, ATR is basically an African worldview. All African theologies owe their theoretical methods to ATR (Mabvurira *et al*. 2021; Agada 2022). It is the live wire of Africans. It influences the way that Africans think, eat, sleep, carry out day-to-day activities, and even the way they conceive God. While a concept of God emerges from ATR and while ontologies on time are present in ATR, one theological issue that has not received attention is how God relates to time in ATR. Africans, like their Western brothers and sisters, do have their own encounters with time. They have their own perceptions about time and, as it is the case in the West, time plays a pivotal role in the African cosmology. The problem that exists is that African Christian theologians and philosophers of time have not really dialogued about the relation that God has to time. Implications of this exploration has the potential to enrich the African concept of God,

particularly as it relates to how it is that God is involved with creation. This thesis intends to address this gap as well. I believe that these two gaps, being stated here, are rationale enough to warrant a study of this thesis' nature.

It must be appreciated, as Dirk Van der Merwe (2016:573) argues, that by all probability, Western Christianity is not the replica of the primitive biblical tradition. This means that Western theologies are not the ultimate truth to matters of theology. Accordingly, the nature of God's relation to time is open for other religions to explore. Van der Merwe notes the attitude of Christianity and its theologies to force its own thought systems on other religions, ignoring those religions' cosmologies. I suggest that curtesy be exercised to let the African Christians contextualise the biblical tradition for themselves – if the Bible is accepted as the only source of theology – according to the thought patterns of African ontologies. Van der Merwe (2016:573) argues that '[t]hroughout the epochs of history the character of Christianity has changed, though not its identity.' In line with this thought, I do not think that Christian theology would suffer a blow if the classical conception of God allows itself to recognise African conceptions of God. I agree with Mandla Makhanya (2017:2 of 4), when he argues that '[c]hurch doctrines and liturgy that seek to obliterate the African way of life and world view without any flexible interpretation of the Bible to accommodate cultural heritage diversity,' should be looked at with suspicion.

While the teaching about God is core in both classical theism and ATR, the timelessness of God appears to have been fashioned after the philosophies of the Greeks, philosophies that disregarded how the biblical writers conceived of God. On the other hand, what scholars of ATR have pointed out, is the similarities that the biblical world has with the African world. This, if anything, invites us to appreciate that God, as he has revealed himself in the Bible, is the same God who reveals himself to Africans. Based on these aforementioned observations, the rationale for investigating the subject matter is merited.

1.5 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

That many Africans have converted to Christianity, is common knowledge. However, inside most African Christians, Christianity and ATR exist side by side. Some African professing Christians turn to ancestors in times of crises and others to ATR healers

and diviners. On the other hand, the same people are professing the Christian doctrine and liturgy. This is the dual life of African Christians (Adamo 2011:1). It means that it cannot be taken for granted that 'Christianity was doubtlessly planted into a deeply spiritually rich African religious soil' (Danfulani 2012:42). From this viewpoint, the tension between Christianity and ATR is easy to point out in the lives of Africans (Onuzulike 2008:165). This tension, according to Uchenna Onuzulike (2008:165), has left most African Christians confused over their identity.

When an African gets converted to Christianity, evidence in the literature suggests that they bring with them elements of ATR. Joel Mokhoathi (2017a:6 of 14) agrees with David Adamo (2011:1) that this is what causes Africans to live dual lives. Indeed, it should be expected that whenever two or three worldviews meet, tension and conflict are bound to take place. Such is the case between Christian theology and ATR. This thesis therefore notes that theologies in conflict are underlying the two religions. These conflicts are diverse and their implications reach far and wide in Africa (Onuzulike 2008:163). These conflicts are of a spiritual, practical, and doctrinal nature.

This thesis is neither interested in merging Christianity with ATR, therefore becoming one movement, nor is this study interested in whether the two religions should be allowed to co-exist, or that the two religions should be separated from each other, just existing on their own, as some African theologians suggest. These possibilities are addressed competently by Joel Mokhoathi (2017a). What is paramount for the development of this study is that elements of ATR continue to be alive in Africans, long after their conversion to Christianity. The argument in this study is that there are many reasons why Africans are leading dual lives – one of those reasons is doctrinal in nature. In this case, the timelessness of God theology serves as a good example.

Joel Mokhoathi (2017a:3 of 14) argues that Christianity should be treated as a 'non-cultural entity.' This could be what God originally intended. However, as Mokhoathi avows, it is only through culture that Christianity can be expressed and lived out. Mokhoathi quotes Jesse Mugambi (2002:517-518) who traces Christianity back to the Judaic culture. According to Mugambi, at first, Christianity formed part of the Jews, but then it became a threat to the Jewish culture and was ultimately rejected by the Jews. Christianity then found its home in the Greek philosophical culture. Mugambi argues

that Christianity then became the religion of choice by the Roman Empire. In this context, Christianity assumed a Greco-Roman Empire culture. Coming closer to our time, Christianity mostly found its expression in the culture of the West. During the imperial and colonial conquests of the West on Africans, Christianity reached Africa while clothed in a Western culture. This means that its theologies were branded with Western ways of expressing ideologies. The Christianity that is therefore driven by Western theologies, is bound to face ideological and religious tensions in African.

To therefore produce a theoretical framework that will guide this thesis, it is imperative to first review some of the theoretical frameworks that have been used before, to address the question of God's relation to time. This will also serve to familiarise the reader with areas of enquiry on God's relation to time, and elaborate on the conceptual framework that will guide this thesis. Studies and theological models are driven by specific theoretical assumptions. An understanding of what has been written and how the topic has been handled in the literature is therefore paramount. An awareness of this, in addition, helps to delimit the study and assists me to address what has not been addressed before. This will be done in this section by means of a literature review.

According to Joel Mokhoathi (2017a:3 of 14), when we speak of African Christianity, we in fact speak of a fusion of ATR and Christianity, which 'is a form of Christianity that draws from both the Christian and African Traditional Religion for some ethico-spiritual principles.' The tension between Christianity and ATR, as Mokhoathi concludes, is that Christianity connects Africans to God, while ATR connects them to their ancestors, or African traditional healers. John Mbiti (1975:13; cf. Mokhoathi 2017a:3 of 14) suggests that one of the reasons for this tension is because Christianity has existed in Africa for a very long time. Its influence on Africans cannot be denied. From this viewpoint, I will outline the conceptual framework for this study.

The focus of this thesis is on God's relation to Christian theology. In this context, special reference is made to ATR. The aim is to investigate the extent and sense in which God relates to time in Christian theology and ascertain the implications that the inves-

tigation has for African Christians. There are, in my opinion, at least five main theoretical frameworks that are used in the literature to address the question of God's relation to time. These frameworks will be discussed below.

The first theoretical framework is developed by the medieval theistic thinkers (cf. Houghton 2022:282; Feser 2023:16). The question of God's relation to time was a standard feature among late-classical and medieval philosophical theistic theologians. Representative of these philosophical theologians is Boethius. His thoughts on the nature of God's relation to time are well articulated in his book *The consolation of philosophy.* Influenced by Aristotelian philosophical ideas (Chadwick 1981:244), Boethius argues in *The consolation of philosophy* 5.6 (Boethius 2009:68) that

> [e]ternity is the simultaneous and complete possession of infinite life. This will appear more clearly if we compare it with temporal things. All that lives under the conditions of time moves through the present from the past to the future; there is nothing set in time which can at one moment grasp the whole space of its lifetime.

This quote has since become a standard definition of the timelessness of God theology in classical theism. The main implication derived from this definition is that God lacks temporal location and extension. He lives his life all at once, not successively as any temporal being that exists in time would. According to this viewpoint, God is changeless (Korpela 2021:56; Rogers 1994:4). Boethius is credited to be the first scholar to refer to the Neoplatonist concept of timelessness in Christian theology (Sorabji 1983:119).

According to John Houghton (2022:282; cf. Sorabji 1983:119), Boethius presents God as existing in eternity, an eternity that has no duration in it. This point is key as it will be demonstrated later in this study that some modern classical theists speak of an eternity that is durational. Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann (1981) are such theists. Richard Sorabji, however, believes that there are specific terms in Boethius' definition that may be accountable for why some scholars believe that Boethius taught a durational eternity – for example, the term 'always' seems to imply duration. According to Richard Sorabji (1983:120), Boethius' definition denies that eternity is spread out – something that would also make eternity durational.

Li Qu (2014:23) believes that Larson's bookcase analogy is justified in explaining Boethius' views on eternity and temporality as follows: 'Perhaps eternity may be likened to a bookcase full of books, all of which are ordered alphabetically, but which are yet equally and simultaneously accessible to an "eternal observer" who stands apart from the books, i.e., transcendent to the books.'

This analogy should be understood in a dualistic way, typical of Greek philosophies. In this analogy the eternal observer is God who transcends everything that is temporal. It is in his transcendence, according to Boethius, that God is timeless. Although being timeless, God is able to observe everything that is taking place in the temporal realm. However, the distinction in the analogy must be understood epistemologically rather than ontologically. What we gain here is that the timelessness of God model protrudes in classical theism from an understanding of what eternity is. In other words, the concept of time cannot take place at the exclusion of the researcher coming to grips with what eternity is.

Medieval thinkers such as Boethius, and also Augustine and Aquinas, held the understanding that time is change. The central thesis to this notion is that where there is a change, there is a time. This way of understanding time significantly influenced how the medieval theologians approached the subject of God and time. Their main concern was that God cannot go through change, as this will subject him to temporalism. In that case, it is no surprise that the theoretical framework that is embraced in classical theology is one that views God as existing outside time (Leftow 1998; 2001; Helm 2010).

Speaking on eternity, Plotinus' *Enneads* III 7.45 (Plotinus 2018:294-295; cf. Chase 2014:76) is worthy of being quoted at this point:

> We know it [eternity] as a Life changelessly motionless and ever holding the Universal content [time, space, and phenomena] in actual presence; not this now and now that other, but always all; not existing now in one mode and now in another, but a consummation without part or interval. All its content is in immediate concentration as at one point; nothing in it ever knows development: all remains identical within itself, knowing nothing of change, for ever in a Now since nothing of it has passed away or will come into being, but what it is now, that it is ever.

The reason for quoting Plotinus is to emphasise the influence that Greek philosophy has placed on the formulation of the timelessness of God model. Boethius' definition implies, at the most basic, that God lives his life all at once. The argument is that while the temporal order experiences phases of time such as moving from future to present and to past, God lives all these times at once. Many classical theologians have since followed in the footsteps of Boethius. According to these theologians, time is a feature of creation and as such, it is finite. God, on the other hand, is infinite and cannot be said to exist in time. Any being that lives in time, suffers from the limitations that time imposes on temporal beings. Thus, according to the classical theists, following after Boethius, God is eternal in the sense that he is timeless. Two of these theologians are Brian Leftow (1991; 2001) and Paul Helm (2010).

Some theologians, however, do not agree with the Boethian definition of eternity. Michael Chase (2014:90), for example, claims that Boethius is dealing with an issue like the one faced by contemporary block-time theorists such as Nathan Oaklander (2014). The issue, according to Chase, is that if eternity is already spread out in such a way that the past, present, and future exist simultaneously, what then becomes of the human free will? If the future already exists, for example, what role, if at all, does our free will play in changing future affairs. For instance, if God knows everything that will happen, how am I able to change that?

Augustine is treading the same theological path as Boethius. According to Augustine in his *Confessions* 11.15 (Augustine 1999:156), God is timeless in the sense that he necessarily exists 1) without beginning, 2) without end, 3) without succession, 4) without temporal location, and 5) without temporal extension (cf. Mullins 2013:161; Qu 2014:2). Paul Helm (2010:39) concurs with Augustine and adds that God 'cannot have a temporal relationship with any of his creation. He is time-less in that He is time-free.'

Modern classical theistic theologians who advocate for a Boethian conception of God's timelessness are e.g., Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann (1981), as well as Brian Leftow (1991). These modern thinkers will be discussed later on in this study. In short, these scholars' ideas of timelessness focus on the Boethian definition. Leftow (in Langdon 2008:16), for instance, narrates the following about Boethius' classical definition:

> Boethius simply took this definition over from pagan Neoplatonist philosophers. He did nothing to integrate it with his Christian theology. It occurs, in fact, only in his Consolation of Philosophy, a work whose Christian ties are so minimal that some have doubted that Boethius wrote it. But there too, there was nothing especially Christian about it. It was simply a bit of useful philosophy.

Brian Leftow's view is interesting. If anything, it challenges the origins of Boethius' definition, but at the same time creates doubt over its theological validity. In their interpretation of Boethius' classical definition of eternity, Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann (1981) suggest that Boethius' eternity is not one that is instantaneously present. It is an eternity that is extended since it has duration. Katherin Rogers (1994:2), however, is not convinced. He relates that there are other Boethian texts that contradict what Stump and Kretzmann claim. For instance, according to Rogers, Boethius states that the knowledge of time that God possesses is 'knowledge of a never-passing instant.' Rogers adds that Boethius, in his *Consolation of philosophy* 5.6 (Boethius 2009:68 of 78) is correct in stating that God views 'all things as though from the highest peak of the world.' God can therefore instantly see the whole temporal time spread out before him. For Rogers, there is no implication in the classical definition that God's eternity is spread-out.

According to Paul Helm (2009:88), though, Boethius' immediate epistemic relation to the temporal creation runs into a theological problem. This problem is that if God sees all events in one immediate now, how does he then know that an event is earlier or later than the other?

Indeed, the Bible speaks of God as being eternal (Isa 40:28; 2 Cor 4:16, 18) and therefore does explicate the nature of God's eternity. However, although the Bible refers to time, it does not concern itself with the ontology and metaphysics of time. In his attempt to answer the question of eternity and time, William Hasker (2009:81) states that 'time is governed by eternity.' Considering this, eternity and time become necessary concepts to be analysed if the nature of God's timelessness is to be established.

This is basically the conceptual framework of the timelessness of God on which the classical theists' model of God's timelessness is built. This model is key to the development of this thesis, which investigates it in order to ascertain its implications for

African Christians. In ATR, the nature of God's eternity is mainly derived from God's praise-names, proverbs, and songs (Agada 2022:2). In light of this, the relation between God and time in ATR is established through an investigation of African imageries, prayers, songs, proverbs, daily speech, religious rituals, myths, and so forth (Islam & Islam 2015:1). Africans do embrace God's transcendence, although, as it will be established, they differ with classical theism. For instance, ATR does not regard God as an abstract philosophical concept. He is with his people in their day-to-day life experiences. His existence in Africa, just like it is in the Old Testament, is taken for granted. Accordingly, one of the goals of this thesis is to explore the African conceptions of God and time and how these concepts affect the lives of Africans.

The question of time is fundamental because without an understanding of the metaphysics and ontology of time, there cannot be an understanding of eternity. This is because eternity and time, as it will become clear, are linked together in literature. Rantoa Letšosa, Fritz De Wet, and Ben De Klerk (2011:1), in addition, have remarked that 'concepts regarding time, and the historical consciousness that flows from it, have a definitive influence on the quality and purpose of human life.' Time in the African ontology is linked to one's relationship with God. According to Danie Van Zyl (2007:143), the African concept of time is similar to that of the Old Testament Hebrews. The implication is that the Western linear concept of time is foreign to both the traditional African context and the Hebraic thought. This difference of understanding between Africa and the West should be taken seriously, since a discussion of God's timelessness depends on a proper understanding of time.

Proponents of the timelessness model claim that it has one main theological advantage compared to other models, as it explains the doctrine of God's transcendence better. As the creator, it is argued, there is a sense in which God absolutely transcends creation (Blount 2017; Miksa 2023:2; Mohammdinia & Dibaji 2023:388). Because God is timeless, he stands in no relation with the temporal world. Paul Helm (2010:39), affirming this model, has in fact noted that God is not able to have temporal relations with any creature of his. The reason is that he is time-less in the sense of being time-free.

The timelessness theoretical model is therefore not without philosophical and theological problems, as it will be indicated in chapter 5 (cf. Korpela 2021:61). Suffice to mention here that one of the problems this model faces, is that it is incoherent. For example, Robert Cook (1987:82) argues that it is incoherent to suggest that a timeless God exists in the eternal now. Boethius' phrase 'eternal now,' rather, suggests temporal location. Cook also takes aim at Boethius' phrase 'possessing unending life existing as a complete whole at once' (Boethius 2009:68). He argues that the phrase 'unending life' means 'infinite duration,' whereas the 'all at once' phrase suggests no duration (Cook 1987:82). For Cook, this is rather a contradiction. The problem with the model for Ryan Mullins (2013:173-174) is that it is impossible for a timeless God to create, and the same timeless God to sustain a temporal world. For Eisa Mohammdinia and Seyyed Dibaji (2023:389), a timeless God cannot have a relation with creation.

Nelson Pike (1970) specifically refers to Plato's philosophical injunction, arguing that it is most likely that in his thinking, Plato believes that perfect things are timeless by nature. However, Pike (1970:189) reminds us about the following: 'Plato was not a Christian – nor can I think of any reason why a Christian should accept Plato's judgement on this matter without careful consideration of how it relates to the broad Christian tradition concerning the nature of God.' Of course, Pike rejects the timelessness model as nothing more than a piece of Greek philosophy which should be rejected. For him, this model must be carefully evaluated against the backdrop of the biblical tradition.

I will argue later on in this study that the timelessness of God model is at odds with the African conceptions of God and the African cosmology at large. Classical Christian theologies assist Christianity to bear witness to the saving presence of God in Christ for Africans. Therefore, Christian theology, if it is to meet the needs of Africans, must present 'a workable knowledge of their [Africans] traditional religion and the worldview and self-understanding fostered by it' (Imasogie 1985:226). Adeleke Adedeji (2012:48-49) is correct when he states that '[t]he most important thing we must remember regarding the African concept of God is that God is close to them [Africans] and they are to Him.'

If dialogue between two religions is anything to go by, as I will propose later on, there can never be doctrinal absolutes (Pobee 2012:6). What I mean is that the classical theists must appreciate the view that the timelessness of God model is an interpretation that is unique to Western cultural academic ideologies. The West must be sympathetic enough to allow African Christian theologians and scholars of ATR to produce an interpretation of God's relation to time – an interpretation that is unique and relevant to African cosmology.

Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann (1981) present a second theoretical framework, addressing the question of God's relation to time. This framework basically builds on the theoretical framework of Boethius. They propose their theory by way of revising Boethius' classical definition. According to them, Boethius' definition makes God appear static and uninvolved in creation. Because of this theological concern, they have revised Boethius' definition to mean that a timeless God can stand in a causal relation with the temporal world. What stands out as key from Stump and Kretzmann is a brand of eternity which, as opposed to Boethius, entails duration. From this standpoint, they argue that God observes temporal events even though he exists outside of time. On this account, God stands in a causal relation to the world. What this model appears to achieve, compared to Boethius' original definition, is that God is involved in creation.

John Feinberg (2001), however, is not convinced by the revision of Boethius' theory by Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann. For Feinberg, their theoretical framework is incoherent. He argues that the only way an eternal being, which in this case is God, could observe a temporal event, would be for the eternal being to become temporal and observe the event temporally (Feinberg 2001:412-413).

Another theologian who has problems with a God being outside time, yet observing events, is Alan Padgett. Padgett (2010:888) observes that the problem with the timelessness of God theologians is about holding firmly to the belief that everything in all times exists in front of God in the eternal now. Often the analogy of an observer on the hilltop, seeing the whole road ahead, is employed to demonstrate the point. The challenge for this analogy is that it is just an abstraction. In reality, although the whole road can be observed, each step of the road exists – even for the observer. Even if

coexistence between eternity and temporality is invoked, Padgett (2010:888) argues, on the temporal time scale, time is not like space. Katherin Rogers (1994:2) also rejects the revision of Boethius' definition by Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann. This revision, though, is key to the timelessness of God debates, as will be discussed later in the study.

A third theoretical framework, created by Brian Leftow (2001:134), agrees with that of Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann (1981). Leftow agrees that eternity entails duration, meaning that God's life is stretched out alongside time. This, for Leftow, makes God aware of what happens in the world. Leftow agrees with Stump and Kretzmann that a timeless God is able to coexist with every temporal moment of time without being affected by the changes that take place among temporal things.

Boethius' definition basically implies that God lives his life all at once. On the other hand, temporal beings experience phases of time by moving from future to present to past. For Boethius, time is a feature of creation and as such it is finite. God, on the other hand, is timeless and cannot be said to exist in time. Thus, whereas for Boethius God cannot be involved with temporality, for Brian Leftow, God's life is stretched out alongside time, and this makes him aware of everything that takes places in the world. Leftow (2014:248) further avers that '[n]one of God's life ever passes away. The events of God's life can have no successors. They just occur – period. Because of this, God is outside the order of time, the order of what passes.' One problem with Leftow's theoretical framework is that the preservation of God's otherness is done at the expense of removing him from creation.

A third theoretical framework, created by William Craig (2001a; 2001b; 2009), argues that God was timeless prior to creation and became temporal when he entered time upon creation. Underlying this framework of Craig (2001b:160), is the idea that time came with creation. Because God stood in no relation to a temporal world prior to creation, he therefore existed in a state of timelessness. However, from creation onward, Craig (2009:155) argues, he went through an extrinsic change. This is the case because at the moment of creation, not only did God create, he also had to provide, sustain, and care for his creation. This phenomenon brought him into a relation with the world. Craig (2009:155) narrates:

> Thus, even if it is not the case that God is temporal prior to his creation of the world, he nonetheless undergoes an extrinsic change at the moment of creation that draws him into time in virtue of his real relation to the world. So even if God is timeless without creation, his free decision to create a temporal world also constitutes a free decision on his part to exist temporally.

According to William Craig (2009:156), 'anything that changes, even extrinsically, must be in time.' in other words, his concept maintains that God is temporally extended and can be located in time. In contrast with the previously discussed theories, Craig's theory places God in time.

The fourth theoretical framework, suggested by Alan Padgett (2001; 2010; 2011), is called 'relative timelessness.' This framework essentially tries to mediate between timelessness and temporality. It maintains that as the creator of time, God must transcend time, but also, at the same time, God must be temporal in some sense, since the biblical world portrays God as interacting with his creation in time. According to Padgett, 'God is relatively timeless, and also contingently without change (but still capable of changing). With creation God becomes omnitemporal, entering into a relative change with us, while still being immutable in those essential properties which set off God as fully divine' (Padgett 2010:890).

Alan Padgett argues that God as the creator of time, had to have a way in which he could be superior to time. He therefore argues that we should

> insist that time in some sense is a created category, which came into existence with the physical universe. Space and time – or we had better say space-time – has a beginning, but God does not. Spacetime time is warped by the presence of matter; but God is not. Thus God must be beyond time as we know it in science, at least in some way (Padgett 2010:887).

Alan Padgett's theory places God in time.

The last theoretical framework, being discussed in this study, is proposed by Nicholas Wolterstorff (2001). He calls his model 'unqualified divine temporality.' The underlying assumption of this theory is that God, as depicted in the Scriptures, has a history of being in a give and take relationship with his creatures (Wolterstorff 2001:188). Therefore, God is temporal. Like in the case of other theories of God's relation to time, Walterstorff's model has been criticised. For instance, Don Lodzinski (1995:187) criticises

the theory by pointing out that if time came into being with creation and God exists in it, it means that God, like created time, is finite.

The purpose of the above brief literature review was to provide context for the conceptual framework that I have adopted for this thesis. As it is evident in the literature review, theologians are divided on the question of God's relation to time. These theologians split into two main groups: Atemporalists and temporalists. Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann (1981), Katherin Rogers (1994), Brian Leftow (1991), and Paul Helm (2010) belong to the group of atemporalists. These theologians take their cue from Boethius who defined eternity as 'the complete possession all at once of illimitable life' by God (quoted above). Although there are some differences of understanding about the nature of God's timelessness among these theologians, they agree that God does not exist in time. It is the conceptual commitments made in the timelessness of God theology that will be the main focus of my investigation.

Those theologians who hold that God is relational, are temporalists. Because God is able to relate with his creation, he therefore exists in time. Leading among these theologians are William Craig (2001b; 2009), Nicholas Wolterstorff (2001), and Alan Padgett (2011). They, too, have a difference of understanding on the nature of God's relation to time, but agree that God is temporal. In temporalism, God exists in time and at every moment of time (Lodzinski 1998:325-326).

This thesis adopts Alan Padgett's theoretical framework with some slight modifications as guide. Padgett calls his model 'relative timelessness.' This framework, I believe, supports the 'landlord of time' theory that I propose in this study. Padgett's theoretical framework, like the theory I propose in this study, essentially tries to mediate between timelessness and temporality. Both Padgett's and I argue that as the creator of time, God must transcend time, but also, at the same time, God must be temporal in some sense, since the biblical world portrays God as interacting with his creation in time. According to Padgett, 'God is relatively timeless, and also contingently without change (but still capable of changing). With creation God becomes omnitemporal, entering into a relative change with us, while still being immutable in those essential properties which set off God as fully divine' (Padgett 2010:890). This point is central to the 'land-

lord of time theory' that I propose and develop in chapter 5. The main reason for adopting Padgett's theoretical framework to guide my thesis is because it takes the Bible as the standard of measure on God's relation to time debates. The framework also resonates with the African ontological worldview.

Whether theologians embrace the Bible as the only source or one of the sources of theology, is a matter that is not debated in this thesis. However, since the Bible is the main tool that has been used to judge ATR and African theologies, it is utilised here as a measuring stick for both ATR and classical theism. Tinyiko Maluleke (1996:11) is correct when he suggests: 'The failure to problematise the relationship between African theologies and the Bible on the one hand, and the relationship between the Bible and African Christianity on the other is a serious shortcoming in many Black and African proposals.'

Based on Tinyiko Maluleke's submission, a call is made to African theologians to establish the relationship that God has with Africans in light of the biblical revelations concerning God. African theologians should therefore work to establish the role that the Bible should play in African religious ontologies.

That the Bible has been well received in Africa, is a point that has become common. Although it is mostly understood in literal tones, the Bible holds a central position in the lives of Africans. This has actually led two African theologians, John Mbiti (1990) and Kwame Bediako (2011), to advocate for its use as the primary source for African theology. Tinyiko Maluleke (1996; 1997), however, is critical of this stance.

Kenneth Ross (1997:97) agrees with African theologians who affirm that '[t]heology is essentially a dialogue between the biblical text and the vernacular world in Africa.' Edward Fashole-Luke (1975:263) avows that it is generally accepted that the Bible is the primary source of African Christian theology, while Caleb Oladipo (2010:52) observes that the 'Bible is not viewed superficially as a material witness among African Christians, but is read devotionally and is taken seriously.' It is in the context of the aforementioned that I uphold the Bible as a rule upon which I will measure both ATR and classical theism.

Richard Gehman (2019:187) makes the following illuminating statement:

> Whenever we evaluate something, we must have a standard of measurement. There must be some criteria by which we critique what we observe. A neutral assessment does not exist. No human being can observe anything apart from his or her own mental grid which is his own worldview. The grid through which a biblical Christian examines and evaluates [God's relation to time] should be the biblical worldview.

1.6 RESEARCH QUESTION, GOAL, AND OBJECTIVES

Classical theists agree that time is associated with change. Where there is a change there is a time. This view of time was the basis upon which medieval theologians judged if an entity was timeless or temporal. Accordingly, these theologians argued that if an entity was timeless, it means that the entity exists timelessly without succession. This is the basic tenet of the classical theists, being affirmed in the Western Christian tradition.

As it was the case with the medieval theistic scholars, modern theologians link the timelessness of God concept to divine immutability. In fact, Paul Helm (2010:73) argues that timelessness entails immutability, and that immutability entails timelessness. Immutability, according to Helm (2010:87), means 'essential total changelessness' on the part of God. Lari Launonen and Ryan Mullins (2021:5) note that '[t]imelessness is systematically connected to divine immutability. As immutable, God cannot undergo any kind of change, be it intrinsic or extrinsic. God cannot change in relationship to other things since that would involve God undergoing succession from one moment to another moment of time.' Kevin Timpe (2007:311) concurs with Helm on the idea of absolute immutability. Helm (2010:94) states that '[o]nly a timeless God can be strongly immutable and omniscient.' Thus, according to him, God's timelessness and immutability link with each other.

In addition, classical theists link God's timelessness to divine omniscience. The classical definition of God's omniscience, as harvested from Boethius, has God knowing all events in all times at once from his eternal standpoint. Aquinas, in his *Summa theologica* 1a. 14.13 and 3 (Aquinas 1947:113) has suggested that '[t]hings [are] reduced to act in time, as known by us successively in time, but by God [are known] in eternity, which is above time.' As such, God is omniscient because he is timeless.

The Study question that this thesis explores, regards the nature and the extent to which God is timeless. The reason for pursuing this question is that the timelessness of God model entails critical theological problems, both externally and eternally. One of these problems, particularly for African Christians, is that the timelessness model removes God from creation. Considering the African cosmology that is pragmatic in nature, a timeless God becomes useless to Africans. This is because in ATR, Africans want a God to whom they can relate, a God who can come to their aid when they need him, a God who can sympathise with their day-to-day challenges, a God who can answer prayers. A timeless God is devoid of these actions (Mann 2005:35). The God of the African people 'is not only living, but a living person. God is not a living being in that he grows, ages, and decays, but living in the mode of the supreme reality of which our own life is an image' (Epsen 2010:423). Accordingly, God is not an abstract philosophical entity to Africans, he is real and experienced in concrete terms.

This thesis, accordingly, explores the nature and extent to which God is timeless in classical theism. Special reference is made to ATR with the intention to argue that the timelessness of God model is not suitable for African Christians whose worldview is shaped by African religious ontologies. Upon conversion, Africans' cosmological way of viewing reality does not easily disappear from the mind. This is one of the mistakes made by the early missionaries: To think that Africans could easily rid themselves of their religious elements. 'For theological consciousness presupposes religious tradition,' writes Kwame Bediako (1994:15), 'and tradition requires memory, and memory is integral to identity: without memory we have no past, and if we have no past, then we lose our identity.' ATR is Africans' identity, as they view reality from this identity perspective. Kevin Timpe (2007:302) correctly appeals to the metaphysics of truth-making on matters like this one, arguing that to understand how a timeless God relates to a temporal event, one needs to have an understanding of the relation between 'the world and truths about the world.' To canvass a timeless God to Africans, therefore, warrants that their cosmology should be taken seriously.

1.6.1 Main Reasearch Question and Sub-Questions

In light of what has been stated above, the main question of this thesis is: *What is the nature of God's relation to time in the timelessness of God theology, with special reference to African traditional religion?* To address this question, the following subsidiary questions are explored:

1) Since the main thrust of this thesis revolves around God's timelessness, the first sub-question this thesis asks, regards the metaphysics of time. Studies on God's relation to time must first consider the nature of time. This is because 'concepts regarding time, and the historical consciousness that flows from it, have a definitive influence' on how one relates to God (Letšosa *et al*. 2011:1). With the term 'metaphysics,' I refer to 'the study of what it means to be at all, of what the characteristics are of anything that is something, is determinate, or has identity' (Neville 1993:67). Metaphysics includes ontology because ontology is 'the study of why there is something rather than nothing, of what it means to be rather than not to be' (Neville 1993:67).
2) The second sub-question is: What is the nature of God's relation to time in ATR? This question needs to be addressed as this thesis makes special reference to ATR. The concept of time is significant, not only in the Western tradition, but also in African cosmologies. According to Caleb Oladipo (2010:60), attempts to understand African cosmologies must take into cognisance how Africans view time.
3) The third sub-question regards the conceptual implications the timelessness of God theology entails for African Christians.

1.6.2 Research Goal

According to Mwalimu Mabvurira *et al*. (2021:113; cf. Ekeke & Ekeopara 2010:209; Ezeugwu & Chinweuba 2018:43), Africans have always had concepts of God, long before the arrival of missionaries. Peter Bolink (1973:19-20) avows:

> There is no more doubt that in all the diverse African traditional religions God has always been there and this belief has seemingly hardly been affected by Western materialistic influences of the past century or more, nor even by the horizontalistic 'Death of God' theology, which so greatly undermined the faith in the Western world.

Africa is currently the most vibrant global centre of Christianity. The continent has a substantial portion of the world's 2.2 billion Africans who have converted to Christianity (Masoga & Nicolaides 2021:18). By accepting Christianity into their lives, Africans are in essence embracing the Christian theology. This is because Christianity is a product of theology, more specifically, of the classical theology of the medieval theists Augustine, Boethius, and Aquinas.

There was no need to school Africans into an awareness of a personal God, as the literature points out: 'Western anthropologists, colonialists, missionaries and explorers easily dismissed Africa's sense of religion and denied Africa's cultural values of morality, awareness of God and capability for philosophical thinking' (Je'adayibe 2012: 78). Put differently, the continent of Africa is not new to theistic theologies. Theistic ideas have been around for some time now. For instance, North Africa has housed some of the best Greek and Latin church fathers to ever grace the Christian theological landscape. Some of these church fathers are Tertullian, Cyprian, Clement, Origen, and Augustine. In fact, according to Dogama Je'adayibe (2012:79), '[e]arly church fathers influenced early Christianity in many ways as its theological minds and writers and helped to shape early Christian theology and canon.'

However, the church fathers did not only set the agenda for Christian theology, they also identified with the critical creeds that systematised theological doctrines. It can therefore be safely stated that Christianity at least goes as far back as the 5th century. In fact, Dogama Je'adayibe (2012:79) suggests that some of the modern Christian theological insights originate from the African church fathers such as Tertullian (155-220 CE), Cyprian (210-258 CE), Clement (150-215 CE), Origen (185-253 CE), and Augustine (354-430 CE). In view of this, it could be stated that what Africa experiences currently – even from the time of the arrival of missionaries – is a second coming of Christianity to Africa (Je'adayibe 2012:80).

With that in mind, it is not surprising that more and more Africans are turning to ATR for their spiritual needs (Adamo 2011:2). Indeed, the Western civilisation had a tremendous impact on the lifestyles of Africans. Africans have embraced and continue to embrace developments initiated by the Western world. A concern that is key to this thesis is that because of their adherence to ATR's ontologies, most Africans lead a

dual life. The one part of their life is that of living the Western way, while the other part is embracing the African way of living (Van der Merwe 2016:571). At the very least, it can be suggested that there is a tension within some African Christians. This tension is caused by a conversion to Christianity and having to live out the Christian life through the lens of ATR.

The main goal of this thesis is to demonstrate that the timelessness of God model, which forms part of the heart of Christian theology, is at odds with African cosmologies. Pioneers in African Christian theology such as John Mbiti and Kwame Bediako, have reflected on the significance that African religious ontologies carry for African Christians. Tinyiko Maluleke (1996:16) argues that African theologians need to 'show more respect for African culture and African traditional religions than to see them merely as preparations of the Christian gospel.' The point is that the nature of God's relation to time in ATR differs with that of classical theism and this needs to be explicated. The 16th-century reformers are well known for having refused to accept without question the doctrines that the Roman Catholic Church was advocating at the time. In like manner, I contend, in the words of Caleb Oladipo (2010:35) that 'blind acceptance of knowledge of God, rather than a meaningful experience of God, presents a severe threat' to the relationship that African Christians have with God. Thus, the timelessness of God model must be submitted to ATR's litmus test to establish if the model works for Africans.

One way of doing research on the timelessness model by African Christian theologians is to contextualise God's relation to time. In this regard, they find credence in seeing the similarities that exist between African cultural religious practices and similar practices found in biblical narratives, particularly the Old Testament narratives. Contextualisation is the effort to relate African theologies that take cognisance of African religious and cultural ontologies (Je'adayibe 2012:81).

African Christianity and African theology, in essence, are interlinked. According to Tinyiko Maluleke (1997:6), 'African theologies exist because of African Christianities, and without African theologies we would not have any sustainable African Christianities.' With this in mind, Maluleke (1997:6) concludes that 'African Christianities are therefore expressions of African theology.'

When Africans convert to Christianity, most of them continue to conceptualise God through the lens of ATR. Therefore, if Christianity wants to thrive in Africa, it should stop ignoring the African worldview through which Africans view and interpret reality (Toren 2001:237-238). In this regard, Justin Ukpong (1983:228) claims that 'when an inadequate Christianity ignores the place of a person's worldview in the understanding of self and perception of spiritual reality, it is unable to speak from the person's perspective.' A worldview can be defined as the 'complex of a people's beliefs and attitudes concerning the origin, nature, and structure of the universe and the interaction of its beings with particular reference to man [sic]' (Imasogie 1985:226). Religion, therefore, is a response-behaviour to these beliefs. In the African thought, this reality is holistic. The African knows no dichotomy between the sacred and the profane, or between the spiritual and the physical. Everything is interconnected and forms one reality.

Based on the aforesaid, the goal of this study is to explore the theological assumptions entailed in the classical timelessness of God theology. Classical theism forms part of the backbone of Western Christianity. This thesis intends to further test this model within the context of ATR for African Christians.

1.6.3 Research Objectives

The objectives of this study are threefold. The first objective assesses the metaphysics of time. This objective lays the groundwork for the subsequent objectives. It recognises that time is central to God and the time debates. If we are to understand the nature of God's relation to time, we should start with a study of time (Craig 2009:164).

The second objective explores the nature of God's relation to time in classical Christian theology and African traditional religion. Although the study engages with modern thoughts on timelessness of God theology, my chief interest, however, is on the timelessness theological brand of the medieval period. This period lasted approximately from the late 5th to the late 15th centuries. Additionally, my interest on ATR is in the brand of ATR before the arrival of the Western missionaries in the 1490s.

The third objective critically examines the timelessness theology. More importantly, this objective discusses how the timelessness of God theology is problematic for African Christians.

1.7 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The problem which this thesis investigates is conceptual in nature. Hence, the methodology, which is adopted, is qualitative. Accordingly, primary and secondary sources were consulted to address the research question. By primary sources I mean sources that are the origin of the information. For example, two of these primary sources that I engage in this study are Augustine's *Confessions* and Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*. By secondary sources I refer to sources that are closely related to primary sources and often interpret them. These materials are available either at the UNISA library or on the internet, in either hard copy or electronic format.

My main reason for adopting the qualitative methodology is that it gives the study context, and it affords me flexibility to ask engaging questions around the subject matter. Of course, one of the downfalls of qualitative methodology is that it can create bias in the selection of scholars I choose to engage. What I mean is that the scholars I choose to engage may all have a certain view of the subject matter as compared to a selection of mixed scholars with mixed views, which is more valuable particularly if they are debating with opposing views.

This thesis rests on at least four key concepts. These concepts are God, time, timelessness, and ATR. It is important to mention these concepts as they may require different methods to be unpacked. The descriptive method, for instance, is suitable for unpacking the concept of God in both classical Christian theology and ATR. This method opens up theological assumptions upon which conceptions of God rest, both in the timelessness theology and ATR. Another method that is used, is the epistemological method, which enabled me to criticise the conceptual and theoretical foundations of God's relation to time, according to classical theology. This method is, for example, applicable when enquiring what Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann (1981) mean when they talk about durational eternity, or on what foundation ATR rests when it claims that God is eternal. To examine the metaphysics and ontology of time, analytical and epistemological methods are utilised. In my view, the field of philosophy

has done more work on the metaphysics of time than theology. The research methodology which I adopted is closely linked with the research design that this thesis follows. This design will be outlined below.

Addressing the research question will require four major steps. First, the study explores the metaphysics and ontology of time. This move lays the groundwork for the investigation of the main research question, which is to find out if the timelessness theological model can satisfy the spiritual and theological needs of African Christians who conceive God through the lens of ATR. This is the focus of chapter 2. The second step focuses on an investigation into the nature of God's relation to time, according to classical theology. Since this thesis critiques the timelessness model, it is only fitting that a description of this model be carried out before the model is criticised. This task will be the focus of chapter 3. The third step takes aim at the nature and essence of ATR. One of the chief interests of this thesis is to ascertain if the timelessness of God theology is suitable for African Christians whose worldview is shaped by ATR. Thus, an exposition of ATR is relevant. This is carried out in chapter 4. The last major step, which is also the crux of this thesis, critically analyses the timelessness of God theology. This is where the timelessness model is subjected to critical examination.

Below is a breakdown of chapters. In this structure, methods that are used in each chapter, are shortly discussed.

- *Introduction*: Chapter 1 introduces the research problem and the plan on how the problem will be addressed. To reach the objectives of this chapter, dialogical, descriptive, comparative, and analytical methods are used. For instance, temporality and atemporality are described and compared in this chapter. Temporality teaches that God is in time, while atemporality, espoused in traditional theology, teaches that God is timeless.
- *The metaphysics of time*: Chapter 2 discusses the nature of time with the intention of laying down some groundwork for the subsequent chapters. Here I relied on the analytical and epistemological methods.
- *The timelessness of God theology*: Chapter 3 explores the divine timelessness concept in traditional theism. Descriptive and analytical methods were used to achieve the chapter's objectives.

- *God and time in African traditional religion*: Chapter 4 explores concepts of God and makes a proposal on how God relates to time in ATR. Descriptive and analytical methods were used in this chapter as well.
- *A critical analysis of the timelessness model*: The purpose of chapter 5 is to critique the timelessness model with the aim to test it against the backdrop of ATR for the sake of the African Christian. To realise the objective of this chapter, analytical and comparative methods were used. In research methods, analytical method is the ability of studying objects, people or actions in detail and intelligent manner in order to reach to conclusions. On the other hand, comparative method is about looking at a subject of study in relation to another. Having examined concepts of God and time in both traditional theology and ATR in the previous chapters, findings were brought together for a comparative analysis. Furthermore, the question of whether the timelessness model would be suitable for traditional African Christians is answered in this chapter. A synthetic method was also used in this chapter to bring the findings of the thesis together.
- *Conclusion*: In chapter 6, a summary of the thesis is given and suggestions for further studies made.

1.8 SUMMARY

The purpose of this chapter was to orientate and introduce the main research question of this thesis. The chapter also stated the theoretical framework and the methodology that will be followed to address the research question. The following chapter looks into the metaphysics and ontology of time with the main aim to lay the basis for the subsequent chapters.

Chapter 2
The Metaphysics of Time

2.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores the metaphysics of time to lay a platform upon which subsequent chapters will rest. The previous chapter problematised the research topic, which is an investigation into the timelessness of God theology. In the context of the research question, special reference is made to ATR, with the purpose to argue that the timelessness model is problematic for African Christians' conceptualisation of God and time.

As already indicated, most literature on ATR is written by non-Africans. One of the consequences that came with this is that the Christianised scholarship on ATR is often biased. It tends to misrepresent and even ignore some of the critical elements of ATR. As has been indicated, most Western Christian theologies are at odds with theologies entailed in ATR. This has led Kenneth Ross (1997:95) to suggest that a radical paradigm shift should be made in order to 'account [for] the differences in doctrine,' which were explored by theologians and scholars of the two religions. It is because of this, that African theologians should labour in doctrinal formulations in order to articulate doctrines that are sympathetic and resonate with the African cosmology.

Concepts of God and time in Africa focus on how people conceive God and religious ontologies in their own languages, experiences, and expectations. This can be detected in African symbols, metaphors, events, and rituals with reference to God (Agada 2022:2). These speak to the immanence and transcendence of God. God is a forever present reality in the lives of Africans, yet at the same time he transcends all reality (Kasambala 2005:316). Time is also a pragmatic reality from which activities and events of the African people often emanate. Hence, concepts of God and ontologies of time arise largely from the lived experiences of Africans in relation to the divine and in the context of cosmic life-force (Kasambala 2005:317). Caleb Oladipo (2010:45) notes that, 'although God is not a noun, God is not impersonal' either.

On the other hand, in the African pre-literary society, life was (and mostly still is) lived holistically. Thus, an academic discussion of time within the African ontology must take this holistic view into consideration. As Rudolph Oosthuizen (1993:197-198) has pointed out, the world for a traditional African 'is a rhythmic whole pulsating with vital spiritual forces. Everything is interconnected so that every activity from birth to death and beyond is interpreted as belonging to a whole – a religious whole.' For that reason, in the African ontology, time is a collection of events (Letšosa *et al*. 2011:2).

In the West, time is relational and temporal – time is basically change. Where there is a change or succession, there is a time. In the Middle Ages, this notion of time determined whether God was inside or outside of time. And, according to traditional theology, if God is outside of time, he is able to observe all parts of time simultaneously (Qu 2014:1).

Currently, Western philosophical reflections on time have given birth to two main definitions of time: The rational-linear and the absolute view of time. According to the rational-linear view, time is the movement from the past to the present and into the infinite future. In its most basic form, time is that which calendars and clocks measure. We could go slightly further and say that time is a composition of all the instants. One of the benefits that emanates from this concept of time is that it assists us to order events sequentially. Time can also be assigned to events.

The second definition of time in the West is the one that is proposed by Aristotle, according to which time is the measurement of movement in the context of before and after. According to this definition, time has a beginning, duration, and end. In the past, periods of days, weeks, months, and years were used to measure time (Bunnag 2017: 179). The Middle Ages have since experienced the invention of clocks and other related mathematical instruments which have since been used in the West to determine time. Basically, as Adrien Langdon (2008:100-101) points out, '[t]ime may be approached as a subjective or a feature of the external world in general, whether defined as the flow of past, present, and future, or as a measured duration.' This way of understanding time in the West plays a major role in the philosophies and theologies about God and time. However, what is time then? The burden of this chapter is to look into the metaphysics of time with the aim to act as basis for the chapters to follow.

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section investigates time from the biblical standpoint. This thesis is a theological discourse. As such, it uses the Bible as a measuring stick. The second section explores time theories in the Western tradition. The last section investigates ATR's ideas of time.

Why must a project of this nature begin with the nature of time rather than with God? Generally, theologians in the West begin discussions on God's relation to time with God rather than with time (Mullins 2013:16). I am of the view, however, that this topic should begin with time. There are three reasons for this preference.

The first reason is both basic and fundamental. It poses a challenge for the researcher to think that they can understand, for instance, that God is timeless, or that God exists in time, while on the other hand, having no idea of what time is. For us to understand God's relationship to X, for example, we must first understand what X is. Suppose we discuss a topic of how God relates to the saved. In this case, then, we must first understand who the saved are and why they are saved or should be saved. This, then, invites us to explore issues pertaining to the doctrine of salvation before we can deal with God's relationship with the saved. In like manner, without an understanding of the nature of time, it is difficult to comprehend how God relates to time. For example, to claim that God is timeless, is to deny him all properties and aspects of time. However, one must know what time is to make such a reflective statement.

My second reason emanates from the observation that some theologians make confusing statements regarding time. For example, it is common to read statements such as 'God will save us from time.' However, a part of time involves having a before and an after. The above statement is therefore confusing because it is untenable that human beings can escape time. In the field of eschatology, the tendency exists to talk about the coming 'end of time.' By way of example, Revelation 10:6 in the King James Bible reads, 'time shall be no more,' while the New King James version reads 'there should be delay no longer.' The New International Version reads 'no more delays.' These conflicting statements are confirming the confusion to which I have already alluded. The confusion here is whether 'the end' refers to time or an era. Ryan Mullins (2013:19) claims: 'The prophetic and apocalyptic authors in scripture are best understood as speaking of God's everlasting kingdom – a kingdom that endures forever and

ever amen – and not making metaphysical assertions to the effect that time itself will end.'

My last reason emanates from contradictions between time concepts among theologians. For example, Bruce Ware (2008) and Kevin Vanhoozer (2010) hold that God is both 'temporal' and 'atemporal' – that is, God is timeless and at the same time exists in time. This statement is incoherent. This is because, to be timeless means to escape all properties of time. To be in time, on the other hand, means to experience properties of time (Helm 2010; Mullins 2013:20; Oaklander 2014). Paul Helm (2010:2) correctly points out that 'no individual can both be in time and outside of time.'

It is therefore appropriate to start the topic of God and time with an understanding of what time is (Fiocco 2014:88). Beyond the reasons given above, in both the Western tradition and ATR, time plays an important role. This makes an exploration of the metaphysics of time relevant. In the next section, I will start to explore the nature of time, starting with the nature of time in the Bible.

2.2 TIME IN THE BIBLE

The subject of time is a contentious one. Generally, it is accepted that time is linked with change. Although there are scant debates over whether time can exist without change, it is generally embraced that change cannot take place where there is no time (Fiocco 2014:89). This, however, only serves as a basic understanding of time from humans' viewpoint. What about time from God's standpoint? Emmanuel Bäckryd (2023:1) answers this question by saying that, '[w]e do not know what time is to God, but it seems that the only reason why we call billions of years a long period is because we use ourselves as measuring rods.' He (Bäckryd 2023:1) then asks: 'What if the time questions we ask in this context say more about our temporal smallness than about reality itself?' These and related questions are key to the understanding of time in the context of this thesis' main question.

However, does the Bible have anything to say regarding the nature of time? This section explores that question.

The notion of time in the Bible is not clear. This could be because subjects that are abstract in nature – such as the subject of time – seem to not have interested biblical writers. The subject of time, in addition, is taken for granted in the Bible. For example, the author of Genesis takes it for granted that time came with the creation of the world. For this to make sense, I will address the topic from both the Old and the New Testament views.

2.2.1 Hebraic Time

The Bible speaks of God as the creator of everything, including time. The very first verse of the Bible, Genesis 1:1, records that, '[i]n the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.' The Hebrew term used in this verse for 'created' is *bara*. Later classical Greek disputes over the word *bara* led to the Latin formulation *creation ex nihilo,* which suggests creation out of nothing. *Bara* is used in the Bible with God as its subject. In Isaiah 44:24, God declares: 'I am the Lord, the maker of all things.' In the New Testament, John 1:3 states: 'Through him all things were made,' and Romans 4:17 records: 'God…who calls things into being, things that were not.' From these few Scriptural inferences, we can reasonably reach two conclusions. The first is that God has preceded his creation. The second is that since the creation of the world, God stood in a causal relationship with the world. In addition, if time formed part of the creation, there should be a sense in which God has related to time in the same way that he related to his entire creation.

The idea that God existed alone prior to creation, moreover, suggests that he has a past. The implication is that, having a past, makes God temporal because he went through change – from him existing alone to existing alongside his created world. God has created and now sustains the world (Col 1:17; He 1:3). The idea is that he has not only created, but is also present to his people in the world (Chavady 2011:117).

The Bible does not clearly state whether time is substantival or relational. 'Substantival' is where time is likened to an empty container in which it can exist on its own without events. This is also known as Isaac Newton's 'objective' time. 'Relational,' on the other hand, means that time is linked with events. In a relational setup, if events and motions are taking place, then time is also taking place. The relational theory of time seems to be supported by the Bible because the Bible is all about events taking

place between God and his creation. Two statements could be made in support of a relational view of time. First, the Hebrew Old Testament idea of time is content-oriented. Time in the Old Testament is linked to events; hence, it is relational in nature. Second, the notion of time as substantival seems foreign to the biblical world. There seems to be no idea in the Bible that time exists independent of events (Jackelen 2000:17; Chavady 2011:118).

Be that as it may, the Bible does not define what time is, but why not? One could argue, on the one hand, that the idea of time may not have been an area of interest to biblical writers, even though the notion of time appears in the Bible, for example, the term *chephets* in Psalm 1:2, which can be translated with 'occasion,' 'period,' or 'season.' However, biblical writers use these words without defining them, and appealing to the etymology of these words, does not yield much for time discussions. Paul Helm (2010:5-6) cautions that it would be a mistake on the part of the researcher to develop a theological concept of time based on etymological studies of the term and related terms. Although it is tempting to appeal to the etymology and the context in which terms related to time appear in the Bible, it still does not make it easy to construct a biblical view on God's relation to time. Perhaps this is where the words of Barr (in Craig 2001b:132) should be embraced: 'If such a thing as a Christian doctrine of time has to be developed, the work of discussing it and developing it must belong not to biblical but to philosophical theology.' Thus, the Bible's silence on the metaphysics of time must be noted within its context.

Antje Jackelen (2000:17) is one scholar who has done much research on the concept of time from the Hebraic standpoint. She suggests that time in the Bible is both circular and linear. Using Genesis 8:21-22 as reference, he appeals to the Yahwist source in which God refers to cyclical time when he speaks of seasons. In the same passage, interestingly, God proceeds to talk about linear time when he enters a covenant with Noah. If then, time is cyclical, it means that it is repetitive in the same way as seasons are, while if time is linear, '[h]istory is going somewhere, rather than constantly repeating itself' (Rice 1985:76).

In a linear setup, time is expected to come to a climax. Danie Van Zyl (2007:143-144) asserts that in the Hebraic thought system, time constitutes events. If there is a passage where time is understood as linear in the Hebraic thought, it is in a narrow sense. Van Zyl also notes the cyclical nature of the Old Testament time, and also that Hebraic cyclical time resembled that of the Canaanites, whose religion revolved around the cycles of nature. Thus, if one accepts the assertions of Antje Jackelen (2000:17), then it can be argued that the Old Testament speaks about two types of time.

However, in view of the aforesaid, when Hebraic time is considered from a theological perspective, linear time, rather than cyclical time, dominates the theological landscape. For instance, Genesis 5 presents a priestly genealogy by using ages to trace the succession of priests. A chronological distance seems to be in the picture in 1 Kings 6:1. In this Scripture, the temple is dated to have been built 480 years later, after the event of the Exodus. The prophets' ministries in the Old Testament are presented according to dates during which their rulers ruled. Daniel 2 and 7 present events taking place in a linear order. Later on, Hebrew festivals came to be associated with key historical events (Van Zyl 2007:148).

The conclusion, therefore, is that time in the Hebraic thought is understood in two ways, namely cyclical and linear. It appears, from the Bible standpoint, that while God's time is understood as being from everlasting to everlasting (Ps 90:2), humans' time is temporal. It is the eternality of God that separates his time from humans' time. If anything, time is a creaction of God.

2.2.2 The New Testament Concept of Time

In the New Testament, Christ is regarded as the apex of the Old Testament history. Galatians 4:4 states that Christ was born in the 'fulness of time.' By the time of the New Testament, the chronological and mathematical reckoning of time had gained popularity (Van Zyl 2007:148).

In the New Testament, salvation is presented as having a past, a continuation in the present, extending into a future consummation. This perspective is based on the Trinitarian theology. According to this theology, history is initiated by God, and in light of

this, he is presented as the creator of the world. In history, Jesus became our redeemer. This history was consummated by the Holy Spirit. Considering this, linear time emerged, and this time was marked by events. To this effect, Rantoa Letšosa *et al*. (2011:4-5) note:

> The New Testament, in contrast with Judaism, holds the view that the mid-point, and 'breakthrough-point,' of history no longer lies in the future but in the past. For Jesus, his coming signifies that the mid-point of the process has already been reached in his lifetime. He explains that the Kingdom of God has already come because he heals the sick, he checks the power of death and forgives sins. On the other hand, he also holds to the future character of this Kingdom.

From this viewpoint, the modern Western biblical scholarship traces the linear concept of time. John Parratt (1977:123) claims that the linear concept of time was embraced by early Christians as a way to reject the Greek cyclical time. Several terminologies are used in the New Testament to designate time. *Kairos,* for instance, is time that designates a definite point or key event in history; *aion* speaks about time as duration; and *chronos* denotes a period/space of time and also denotes sequence or chronology. According to Rantoa Letšosa *et al*. (2011:5), '[t]hese terms serve to characterise that time in which the redemptive history occurs. Jesus, himself, named his passion as his Kairos at the time of the preparation for the Last Supper (Mat 26:18).'

Were New Testament writers aware of or did they borrow the Greek ideas of time? This question is motivated by the fact that some of the terms used for time in the New Testament were the same terms that circulated in Greek literature. Paul Helm (2010:4) postulates that the biblical writers were not influenced by the Greeks. Indeed, advocates of God's timelessness argue that the biblical writers, maybe except for John, did not have metaphysical tools at their disposal to discuss the metaphysics of time (Craig 2001a:16). Alan Padgett (in Craig 2001a:16) has, however, challenged this notion. According to Padgett, it is possible that the biblical writers were aware of Greek discussions on time – discussions that viewed God as timeless. Yet, the biblical writers chose to present God as being in time. William Craig (2001a:16) argues that the above passage 'gives us reason to think that the biblical authors, had they wished, could have formulated a doctrine of divine timelessness.' Therefore the New Testament writers understood time as linear. On a linear scale, humans' time differs with God's time in that humans' has a beginning. God's time, like it is the case in the Old Testament,

is viewed as eternity, an eternity that is from everlasting to everlasting. What this means is that there was neither a time when God did not exist, nor will there be a time when he ceases to exist.

By way of conclusion, the Bible gives the impression that time came with creation. More importantly, time in the Bible is associated with events. It is both cyclical and linear.

2.3 TIME, ACCORDING TO THE WEST

As indicated above, there are two approaches to time in the West: Time is understood as either extensive or as transitory. Extensive time is understood in the context of things standing in temporal relations of 'earlier,' or 'later than,' or 'simultaneous with.' According to this perspective, time is composed mainly of relations. For this view, there is no such thing as the becoming of events or events going out of existence. In the transitory perspective, things move from being future to being present and to fading away into the past. In this way, time flows and is dynamic. Events take place one after the other, and do not stand in a static relation to each other (Oaklander 2014:8). These two views are a point of contention among Western scholars.

Although we live in time and experience time, we seem to be unfamiliar with time. For Jürgen Moltmann (2000:27), time is a mystery. Augustine was aware of the difficulties in trying to define time. In his *Confessions* 11.14 (Augustine 1999:155), he asserts: 'What then is time? If no one asks me, I know: but if I wish to explain it to one who asketh, I know not.' Time, in the most basic sense, can be thought of as a series of durations. In turn, a duration can be thought of as referring to a series of moments. Time, then, is what we use to measure change with. According to thinkers such as Aristotle (384-322 BCE) and Leibniz (1646-1716), where there is a change there is a time. This, however, does not mean that time is identical to change. According to this perspective, time is composed of instants. And this perspective makes time relational.

However, it is still not easy to give a clear definition of time without in the end being circular. For example, we may argue that time is duration, but then again, we could still probe further into trying to understand what a duration is. This leads us to narrate that a duration is an interval of time, or we could argue that time is a feature of the world that helps us to order events using terms like 'earlier than' and 'later.' We could

further analyse these relations in terms of *past*, *present*, and *future*. Still, these are nothing but temporal terms that say something about time (Craig 2001a:13). Because of these complexities surrounding the nature of time, several theories of time in the West have been proposed.

2.3.1 Relational and Absolute Theories of Time

Prior to Isaac Newton in the 17th century, the standard idea regarding time in the West was that time is relational. Because of its relational nature, time could be explained in terms of change or motion. For example, the solar day was thought of as the amount of time it takes for the sun to its zenith. This theory of time is sometimes called 'Reductionism with respect to time' or 'Relationism with respect to time' (Markosian 2016). According to this theory, everyday language that refers to time, eventually comes down to conversations about temporal relations among things or events. This way of understanding time was associated with the Greek philosopher, Aristotle (Qu 2014:36).

In his *Physics* 4.11 (1984:69), Aristotle argues that time cannot exist without change. He adds that if our minds were to be in a state of no change, time would not pass. His argument is that movement and time should be linked. It means that where there is a time there is a movement, and where there is a movement there is a time. Leibniz (in Craig 2001a:66) supports Aristotle's theory, and adds that time came with creation, a view that is currently embraced by theologians such as William Craig (2009), Alan Padgett (2011), and Anawat Bunnag (2017). Hence, before Isaac Newton, it was understood that relations of succession and precedence are necessary for time to exist.

If relational time is embraced, it means that at the creation, God created a temporal metric alongside the laws of nature. These laws made it possible for time to be measured. For example, Plato associated time with regular physical events such as the motion of celestial bodies. These served as instruments which were used to measure time. For example, sunset to sunset constitutes a day. A question arises, though: Does time flow, or do we move through time? The general view in Western cosmology is that time flows. Because time flows, it is believed that we move forward in time. One advantage, if time is understood this way, is that we can order events sequentially. This way of understanding time can, additionally, help us to assign time to events

(Mullins 2013:167; Bunnag 2017:180). Having stated all these facts, how does the relational theory fare in the discussions about God and time?

The relational model does not resolve the issue of whether God is inside or outside of time. This theory faces several problems, two of which will be mentioned below. First, if time was created and flows into the future, as the theory implies, it then means that the future is unknown not only to humans, but also to God. Second, while the theory can describe and measure time, it fails to define what time is (Lodzinski 1995:192).

Sir Isaac Newton (1643-1727), an English mathematician, became aware of the limitations that Aristotle's relational theory faced. He then proposed a new theory which he outlined in his *Philosophiae naturalis principia mathematica* (Newton 1999). No scholarly work of science has received more attention from philosophers than this book. In this book, Newton discusses two kinds of time: Absolute time and relative time. He writes (Newton 1999:408):

> Absolute, true, and mathematical time, in and of itself and of its own nature, without relation to anything external, flows uniformly and by another name is called duration. Relative, apparent, and common time is any sensible and eternal measure…of duration by means of motion; such a measure – for example, an hour, a day, a month, and a year – is commonly used instead of true time.

In view of this, Isaac Newton's absolute time flows constantly and uniformly for everyone regardless of circumstances. Further, absolute time exists independently of events. We recall that in Aristotle's relative theory, time depends on events for existence.

Isaac Newton proceeds to suggest that since absolute time flows independently of events, it therefore regulates relational time. What is implied here is that absolute time is in a sense, superior to relational time. According to Newton, since God has existed, absolute time has too. Newton is careful, though, to point out that absolute time is not an attribute of God, as it flows from God (Markosian 2016). Treading a similar path as Newton, are Samuel Clarke (1675-1729) and JR Lucas (1929-2020). Other thinkers, such as Rene Descartes (1596-1650), John Locke (1632-1704), and David Hume (1711-1776), however, chose to follow Aristotle in maintaining that time is relational rather absolute (Bunnag 2017:180; Mullins 2013:23-24).

In the end, Isaac Newton's absolute time is not without flaws. I will mention three of these flaws here. First, if time can flow without change or events, it means that time does not need creation to exist. Added to that, if creation is finite, as there is Scriptural latitude to support that, time has existed before creation. This, Don Lodzinski (1995:188-189) argues, suggests that time is everlasting in a similar way as God. Second, Newton's time is removed from observable flow and change. This creates a problem because time then becomes useless to this world. Third, in line with the concern of Li Qu (2014:38), absolute time seems like it could exist independently of God. This gives the impression that God has no control over it – an idea that is foreign to the biblical world.

In a nutshell, the relational theory maintains that time is created and depends on events for its existence. On the other hand, absolute time exists independently of events.

2.3.2 Special Theory of Relativity

Although groundbreaking, Isaac Newton's absolute time could not satisfy Albert Einstein (1879-1955). Einstein has entered time discourses through his special theory of relativity (STR). Whereas Newton argues that time is absolute, Einstein (1920:32) suggests that time is relative.

Albert Einstein contends that in an inertial frame where the object moves faster, time slows down. Suppose there were two clocks, one on a jet and one at rest. As Einstein (1920:32) sees it, the clock on the jet would tick differently for a person on the jet as compared to a person at rest. For a person on the jet, the clock ticks slower and for a person at rest it ticks faster. Basically, two people from different inertial frameworks experience time differently, thus, making time relative. Indeed, in our day-to-day life experiences, time seems to pass differently for different people (Qu 2014:39). Consequently, Einstein avers that there is no such thing as one universal time (Korpela 2021:57; Craig 2011:148).

Li Qu (2014:39; cf. Korpela 2021:57) suggests that '[w]hat Einstein did in STR is to force physicists to think no longer of space and time but rather look at a four-dimensional space-time.' William Craig (2001a:168) agrees with Qu (2014:39-40) by quoting Minkowski who says that 'space by itself, and time by itself, are doomed to fade away into mere shadows, and only a kind of union of the two will preserve an independent reality.' It is from this fusion of time and space that modern time philosophers derive a concept where time is understood to be static as opposed to it being dynamic. The achievement associated with STR, therefore, is that it rejects the absoluteness/universalness of time. Since time is relative, there cannot be such a thing as the absolute 'now.' What one person perceives as the 'now' in their inertial frame of reference, may not necessarily be the 'now' for another person in their different inertial frameworks (Qu 2014:40). What do we then make of STR?

If STR is embraced in the God-time debates, it becomes a challenge to confine God to one inertial frame's time. For example, if God were to be confined only to one inertial framework, his knowledge would only be limited to that inertial frame. God would not be aware of what is happening in other inertial frames (Craig 2009:150). Besides, existing in one frame would mean that that frame is privileged, an idea that Albert Einstein (1920:32-33) rejects.

William Craig (2009:150), however, is of the view that STR must be rejected on the ground that it uses the concept of verificationism as its chief driving engine. For Craig (2011:151-152), verificationism falls short of proving that Isaac Newton's concept of absolute time is flawed. The other problem that Craig finds with STR is that it concerns itself with uniform motion at the exclusion of non-uniform motion. Craig avers that an analysis of non-motion things such as acceleration and rotation have since been taken up by the general theory of relativity (GTR). GTR's main concern is cosmic time, aiming to 'restore the classical notions of universal time and absolute simultaneity that STR denied' (Craig 2009:151). Craig (2011:154-155) argues that 'GTR in its cosmological application furnishes us with a cosmic time parameter which may be plausibly interpreted as the appropriate measure of God's time since the moment of creation.' Craig's argument provides the advocate of God's temporality with a reason to assert that God exists in universal time.

In sum, STR posits that time is relative rather than absolute. According to this theory, there is no such thing as universal time. This brings us to the A- and B-theories of time.

2.3.3 The A- and the B-theories of Time

In modern Western philosophical discussions about time, there are two major schools of thought. On the surface, these schools are divided over the nature of the 'present.' The one school posits that the present is the official now. This view concerns itself with that mobile bit of 'reality wedged between the equally "already" and "not yet"' (Olsson 2012:178). This school is referred to as the A-theory school of thought.

The second school (the B-theory school of thought) posits that the present is distinguished from other times not by the official 'now,' but by when events take place. For the proponents of this view, talking about the present is nothing but simply 'picking out events, perceptions, and actions that are future relative to an earlier time and past relative to a later time' (Olson 2012:178). According to this view, '[a]ll times…are officially present' (Olsson 2012:178; cf. Oaklander 2014). The founding father of these theories of time is the English idealist metaphysician, John McTaggart (1866-1925).

As indicated, classical and continental physics discussions revolve around time being either 'absolute' or 'relational.' In analytical philosophy, however, a paradigm shift has taken place through the work of McTaggart. In 1908, McTaggart published a remarkable paper that was to shape and, to a certain extent, dictate how discussions on time are carried out in the West. McTaggart's article is published in the journal *Mind* under the title, *The unreality of time*. This article has become a natural starting point for philosophical discussions on time in the West.

As the title of the paper itself suggests, John McTaggart held that time was not real. He presented his thesis in two parts: The A- and B-theories of time. The A-theory goes by different names such as *process time*, *dynamic time*, and sometimes, the *tensed theory of time*. Underlying this theory is the view that time is dynamic and constantly moving forward (Orilia 2014:53; Tegtmeier 2014:76). In explaining the A-theory, McTaggart (1908:458) refers to 'the series of positions running from the far past through the near past to the present, and then from the present to the near future and

the far future, as the A series.' In the A-series, the spotlight is cast on the present, making it possible for the time distinctions 'past,' 'present,' and 'future.' Building on McTaggart, philosophers of time today speak of A-properties and B-relations when talking about reality. A-properties are things and statements that cause people to refer to reality in terms of pastness, presentness, and futurity. For example, the statement, 'Yesterday I ran into the South African minister of finance' has an A-property. This is because the statement refers to the past.

In the A-series, time is constantly moving forward. Think of this movement as an objective arrow that constantly moves on. The present, in this case, is privileged because it exists now. The past and future are referred to, being relative to the present. John McTaggart, in this argument, discusses time not from an absolute, but a relativistic standpoint. He presupposes that the present is a moving now (cf. Tegtmeier 2014:76).

Regarding the B-series, John McTaggart (1908:458) suggests that 'each position is Earlier than some, and Later than some, of the other positions.' In the B-series, properties 'are permanent,' whereas in the A-series, properties are temporal. Thus, events in the B-series are fixed in an orderly manner, making each event to be either *earlier* or *later than* other events. The B-series events, though, are always in a temporal sequence, as there is no spotlight being temporarily cast over any single event. In this setup, no facts can tell which events are past, present, or future.

The A-theorists, in the strong sense, therefore, hold that an event, taking place in the present, is objectively present. The event does not stand in relation, especially simultaneously, with other events. However, Francesco Orilia (2014:53) argues that an A-theorist may be an eternalist if they hold that an event that fades into the past does not go out of the ontological inventory, only that its status changes from being present to being past. Added to this, when an event appears in the present, it does so, coming from the future. The A-eternalist might even go further to state that the present is privileged in that it is more real, compared to the future and past. In this setup, the A-eternalist could be called a presentist.

In the B-series, an event does neither begin to exist, nor does it go out of existence. For example, the fact that Mr. Nelson Mandela's presidency is earlier than that of Mr.

Thabo Mbeki, is an ever-accurate fact in the B-series. In other words, in the B-series, all times exist simultaneously. Advocates of this theory argue that it is only the human consciousness that can differentiate between now and then. As a result, B-theorists reject the objective distinctions of past, present, and future. Instead, they affirm an equal ontological status for all times (Mozersky 2014:119).

For John McTaggart, though, since the B-series cannot account for change, it needs the A-series to do so. McTaggart (1908:463) makes the point: 'The A and B series are equally essential to time, which must be distinguished as past, present and future, and must likewise be distinguished as earlier and later. But the two series are not equally fundamental. The distinctions of the A series are ultimate.'

For modern B-theorists, however, B-relations are crucial as compared to A-properties. The past, present, and future in the A-series are deemed by B-theorists as nothing but an illusion (Zimmerman 2005:402; Mullins 2013:27). In the end, John McTaggart argues for three things: First, that change is real; second, that change is essential to time; and third, to (paradoxically) deny that change is real. McTaggart (1908:464) affirms:

> I am endeavoring to base the unreality of time, not on the fact that the A series is more fundamental than the B series, but on the fact that it is as essential as the B series – that the distinctions of past, present and future are essential to time, and that, if the distinctions are never true of reality, then no reality is in time.

What John McTaggart means is that the distinctions 'past,' 'present,' and 'future' are just ontological determinations. They are not real. He (McTaggart 1908:464) states that these distinctions cannot be compatible with each other since, as Philip Olsson (2012:191) explains, '[e]very event must be one or the other, but no event can be more than one.' In this case, time distinctions have got nothing to do with human experiences. McTaggart's time conception, however, is not without difficulties, particularly concerning the B-theory.

Foyle Mark (2007:73) criticises John McTaggart by pointing out that the latter's paradox relies on the B-series to warrant time as unreal. On the other hand, William Craig (2001b:144) asserts that the key to understanding McTaggart's work is in assessing

the presuppositions about time, held by McTaggart. McTaggart (1908:460-463) presupposes that past, present, and future events have equal ontological status. The only change that events have, is in terms of the tense they go through, as events are regarded as first future, they then become present, and then past. The event becoming past, however, does not mean that it becomes extinct, and if an event is present, it cannot be past or future at the same time.

The reality that time passes, seems undeniable (Mozersky 2014:119). According to Yuval Dolev (2014:31), the problem with the B-theory is that it clashes 'with the experience, specifically in that it turned tense and passage into illusion.' For Dolev, a theory can be embraced, only if it can account for reality not working against reality.

Considering the apparent challenges faced by John McTaggart's B-theory, an attempt has been made to revise the theory in recent philosophical scholarship. According to the new theory, reality is tenseless. Although tensed facts assist us to make sense of reality, tense exists only in our mind (Orilia 2014:55). It must be remembered that when the A- and B-theories of time were first developed by McTaggart, they were taken to be both equally real, although they expressed the same reality in different ways. It is only in the new B-theory that the A tensed facts are relegated to illusion (Dolev 2014:32).

In my view, there is a sense in which time is transitory and also a sense in which time is permanent, i.e., unchanging. Although transience and permanence seem incompatible, it would be a gross mistake to focus only on one at the expense of the other. The two are essential features of reality.

The conclusion, therefore, is that the A- and B-theories help us to order our temporal language. In an attempt to modify John McTaggart's work, some modern philosophers have appealed to *presentism* and *eternalism*.

2.3.3.1 Presentism and Eternalism

Presentism and *eternalism* concern themselves with what exists and what moments of time exist. Presentism, on the one hand, emphasises that only the 'now' exists, and that temporal becoming is real. Presentists take tense language seriously. For them,

reality is composed of 'objective tense determinations of *being past*, *present*, and *future*' (Balashov & Janssen 2003:328; cf. Mullins 2013:31-33). They are also A-theorists. In presentism, objects in the present possess only properties that they carry now. These objects do not have some of their parts spread out into the past and the future as it is commonly held in eternalism (Sider 2006:75; Mullins 2013:162-163; Bunnag 2017:184). According to eternalism, all moments of time are ontologically on par with each other. According to Samsa Korpela (2021:56), the timelessness of God theologians favour eternalism over presentism.

Theodore Sider, however, rejects presentism on three accounts. First, he maintains that the irreducible tense-operators that presentists rely on, 'are objectionably ungrounded in reality' (Sider 2001:12). The point here is that objects are tenseless by their very nature. So, tense-operators are just one's vantage point from which they view objects. Second, Sider argues that '[p]resentists cannot account for the fundamental "cross-time spatial relations" that ground the structure of space-time, and thus cannot account for spatiotemporal continuity, acceleration, and other states of motion.' Sider's argument makes sense, considering that Sider is committed to four-dimensionalism, a theory in which time is understood as spacelike. Last, and most importantly, to Sider, presentism is not compatible with STR. As elaborated on in the discussions earlier on STR, the present is relative to one inertial framework – but what about eternalism?

Whereas presentists insist that the present is the only moment of time that is ontologically privileged, eternalists argue that all moments of time are equally privileged. Since all moments of time are equally real, events and people contained in these moments are also equally real (Zimmerman 2005:403). Eternalists argue, for example, that the fact that an object is far in terms of distance, does not make it less real compared to the one that is close.

Eternalists, following Albert Einstein, tend to understand time and space not as two separate entities. They fuse the two into one reality, called space-time (Korpela 2021:57). Following this line of thinking, time must be treated in the same way that we treat space. In space, there is no ontological difference between here and there. The things that exist here in Pretoria have the same ontological status as those that exist

in Cape Town. Suppose Pretoria is the present and Cape Town the past, there should be no difference between the past and the present. The past, present, and future cannot be treated differently just because they appear to be distant from each other (Sider 2001:12). In this fashion, Steven Hales and Timothy Johnson (2003:528; cf. Sider 2001:12) regard eternalists as '[t]emporal egalitarians, holding that all times are equally real, with no particular time enjoying ontological privilege.'

According to the eternalists, the only thing that is special about the present, is that 'it is this time, just as what is special about the present place is that it is here. This is one place among many and one time among many' (Hales & Johnson 2003:528; Merricks 2007:120). Giacomo Giannini (2021:2803) puts it this ways: 'There is no unique objectively privileged time or temporally located entity. A description of reality can be current and complete without specifying what time is present' according to the eternalists. Consequently, for the eternalists, as it is the case for B-theorists, time is illusory because there is no real passage of time.

Eternalists liken the existence of an object to be spread out in space. Trenton Merricks (2007:141) writes: 'A spatially extended object typically has numerically distinct parts located at the distinct places it occupies. And so the natural thing for an eternalist to say is that a temporally extended object has numerically distinct parts located at the distinct time it occupies – and thus has temporal parts.'

Here is an example to illustrate the above quote: Suppose the Gautrain spreads out in space from Pretoria to Johannesburg. Suppose that I walk from Pretoria to Johannesburg alongside the stationery Gautrain, I reach different parts of the train at different distinct times. Thus, the Gautrain is one object whose temporal parts are spread out in space-time. The point is that objects are spread out in space-time in such a way that the ones we currently experience happen to be the ones that are here. All objects currently exist, although some are in the past, others in the present, and others in the future.

While presentists and eternalists disagree on the nature of the past and future, they agree on the nature of the present time – that things do really exist in the present

(Merricks 2007:124-125). Without undermining the presuppositions underlying eternalism, presentism, in my view, seems intuitively more believable. There is a sense in which we tend to experience the present as the only real time. We remember the past and we anticipate the future. Moreover, while eternalists assert that space and time should be fused together into one reality, a challenge arises against this idea: Although a person can freely move in any direction in space, it is not necessarily so with time. Time seems to be moving forward and reality seems to be moving forward with it. It is impossible to go back into the past, at least timewise.

In short, presentists maintain that only the 'now' exists, while eternalists claim that all times have equal ontological status. At this point, the question of how objects persist through time, it is necessary to elucidate presentism and eternalism.

2.3.3.1.1 Three- and Four-Dimensionalism

Three-dimensionalism is the conviction that objects possess three spatial dimensions. In this setup, an object exists wholly at one time. This view denies the idea that some parts of an object are still existing in the past, also that some parts of an object lie somewhere in the future. Steven Hales and Timothy Johnson (2003:524), two modern advocates of three-dimensionalism, assert that '[a]n object that is here now is entirely here now, and only here now.' Partisans of this view also subscribe to presentism and the A-theory of time.

Because objects are three-dimensional, three-dimensionalists affirm that objects persist through time by virtue of being wholly present from time to time. As the object persists, it loses some of its properties and gains others. This ontology of persistence is referred to as endurantism (Hales & Johnson 2003:524; Mullins 2013:31-33). Thus, three-dimensionalism concerns itself with things wholly existing from time to time.

Four-dimensionalism, on the other hand, argues for a four-dimensional space-time manifold. This manifold comprises of all events in the past, present, and future, existing simultaneously (Orilia 2014:53). Four-dimensionalism comes in two forms: Eternalism and the growing block theory. Eternalism holds that all moments of time have equal ontological status. No moment of time is privileged, just four-dimensional in the space-time manifold (Korpela 2021:57). Although growing blockers believe that space-

time is four-dimensional, they deny that the future is real. For them, the past and the present are the only times that are real. The future is in a state of becoming. Things do come into existence as time slices get added (Sider 2001:210; Zimmerman 2005:402-403; Balashov 2010; Mullins 2013:31-33).

Objects in four-dimensionalism consist of temporal parts that are spread over space. Each part exists temporally at a given moment, but not at another moment (Mozersky 2014:121). Thus, unlike three-dimensionalism, where objects *endure* through time, in four-dimensionalism, objects *perdure* through space-time. This notion of persistence is called perdurantism (Hales & Johnson 2003:524; Mullins 2013:33-34).

To what use are three- and four-dimensionalism to this study? In my view, three-dimensionalism, advocated by presentists, is intuitively believable. It rests well within the linear concept of a time framework. Our language, in addition, tends to favour three-dimensionalism because we naturally speak of things existing in the present and other things fading away into the past. We are also anticipating the future. The one challenge faced by three-dimensionalism, however, is that it is not compatible with STR, as STR rests in four-dimensionalism.

In summary, this section has combed through some key theories of time, as discussed in Western cosmologies. The section first gave an overview of how time was understood in the Bible. It was demonstrated that time in the Bible is both cyclical and linear. Time in the Bible is understood more in terms of what it signifies than what it is metaphysically.

This section proceeded to discuss theories as they emerged from the Western world. It demonstrated that theories of time began with the Greek philosopher, Aristotle who argues that time is relational and linked to events. Isaac Newton, on the other hand, argues that time is objective and exists independently of events. Albert Einstein, however, challenges Newton's theory of time by advocating for STR. The main thesis of STR is that time is relative rather than objective, meaning that time depends on one's inertial framework. Einstein argues that there is no such thing as the absolute 'now.'

Modern philosophical discussions on the unreality of time time started with John McTaggart. Although he has concluded that time is unreal, he has left a legacy in which time is currently understood as either dynamic or static. He calls this the A- and B-theories of time. In the end, it emerges that the Western world is not united on one understanding of time. It is safer to conclude, therefore, that in the West, time is understood in two ways, either as dynamic/linear or as static. In the following section, I will focus on a discussion of the African ontologies of time.

2.4 TIME IN AFRICAN ONTOLOGY

This section explores African ontologies of time. As it was the case in the previous sections, the purpose of this section is to serve as a basis for the chapters that follow. To achieve the aim of this section, I will first explore the African concept of time as entailed in the *Sasa* and *Zamani* times. Second, I will look into how time is reckoned in the African tradition. How Africans reckon time, reveals how they relate to or view time. Lastly, I will explore the nature of the future because in traditional Africa the future is viewed as potential time.

One of the commitments made by this thesis is to establish the nature of God's relation to time in ATR. The aim is to show how it fares in relation to the classical theistic notion of timelessness as well as the biblical revelation on the question. I will demonstrate this by using African idioms, metaphors, proverbs, statements, and language used by Africans.

Often when Africans get converted to Christianity, it is taken for granted that the process of conversion marks a rebirth of the African. It is therefore believed that the African is born again in the sense that the old way of viewing reality is replaced by a new way. However, this simplistic approach to conversion ignores certain intrinsic and even extrinsic technicalities that are entailed in the African's cosmological composition. To be specific, Africans go through conversions, while their DNA is still encoded with some elements of ATR. Some of these elements entailed in the African Christian's religious beliefs stand in tension and even contradict some of the Christian theological ideologies (Mokhoathi 2020:1). For example, tension usually arises between the African's way of understanding time over against the Western way of conceiving time. At the baseline of Christianity, time is linear, whereas Africans view time as concrete.

Caleb Oladipo (2010:60) claims, 'When Africans reckon time, they do so for a concrete and specific purpose. They mark time in connection with events and not with digital clocks.'

Tension exists among scholars as to whether Christianity and ATR should be fused into one entity or belief system. Some scholars are contemplating if it is possible for Western Christian theologies to be embraced by Africans, exercised through African cultural prisms. My argument is that if Christian theologies are to be canvassed for Africans, there must be ways through which this could be done. This is because, as Joel Mokhoathi (2017a:1 of 14) argues, fusing the two religions, overlooks 'the essence of both religions, as the elements of one religion are expressed through the other.' The same could be stated about the time conceptions in both worlds. If ontologies of time are understood differently in the two cosmologies, this could signal some tension about how God should be perceived. This is because both God and time are entities that cannot be understood separately from each other. This brings us to the question of time in ATR.

As is the case in the Western tradition, time plays an important role in the African cosmologies. Time influences the beliefs and attitudes of the African people (Kalumba 2005:16). Many religious concepts and practices of Africans can be linked to their concept of time. Despite these sentiments though, John Mbiti (1990:159) claims that 'in traditional thought, Africans are not concerned with academic questions of Time.' This could be because Africans, like biblical writers, take the existence of time for granted. Africans believe that time exists, but are not necessarily concerned with time's metaphysical status. Bearing this notion in mind, comparative studies on concepts of time between Africa and the West should be sympathetic to this fact.

Several factors could be given to answer the question why Africans do not concern themselves with the metaphysical nature of time. One of them is that in Africa, a pre-literary society life is lived holistically. Time, therefore, is considered to be a part of the whole. Rudolph Oosthuizen (1993:197-198) is apt on this thought when he writes that, for an African, life

> is much more than the sum of the parts of the visible world he [sic.] sees around him [sic.]. His [sic.] world is a rhythmic whole pulsating with vital spiritual forces. Everything is interconnected so that every activity from birth to death and beyond is interpreted as belonging to a whole – a religious whole.

Because the African thought system regards life as holistic, time and events are interconnected. Time for Africans, therefore, is a collection of events and experiences. In Africa, time does not exist independently of events. This idea contrasts with Isaac Newton's absolute time to which we referred earlier.

Rantoa Letšosa *et al*. (2011:1) correctly maintain that '[c]oncepts regarding time, and the historical consciousness that flows from it, have a definitive influence on the quality and purpose of human life.' Lenard Nyirongo (1997:89) lays his weight behind this notion: 'How we interpret time, history and man's calling on earth can reveal a great deal of whether or not we have a right relationship with our creator. These are closely linked with God's dealings with us and our response to Him.'

Jacob Olupona (2014:8) certifies this point: 'Both notions of time and ritual cycles are embedded in African religious life and practices.' Appropriately, time is one of the things in life that separate people, cultures, and religion (Booth 1975:81). In the literature on Africans' ontologies of time, time is actual – but what is actual time?

2.4.1 Actual Time: *Sasa* and *Zamani*

John Mbiti's (1990) account of time reaches far and wide in the literature. He will be remembered for having laid the basis for discussions on the nature of African time. To my knowledge, there is no African scholar who has produced a sustained analysis of the African concept of time, like Mbiti. This section, therefore, draws insights from his works.

Although John McTaggart denies the reality of time, for John Mbiti and other African proponents, time is real. From the outset, Mbiti (1990:27) acknowledges that '[t]he traditional concept of time is intimately bound up with the entire life of the people.' Hence, 'our understanding of it may help to pave the way for understanding the thinking, attitude and actions of the people' (Mbiti 1990:27). Mbiti (1990:27) regards 'the

African concept of time as the key to understanding the basic religious and philosophical concepts of the African ontology' (cf. Letšosa *et al*. 2011:2).

John Mbiti's discussion of time focuses on what he calls 'the ontological thesis' (Mbiti 1969:159). According to this premise, time is a composition of events and experiences lived by the Africans. Mbiti then elaborates on these remarks by comparing the African and the Western understanding of time. He does not hesitate to reject the Western view of time according to which time is linear, and argues that '[t]he linear concept of Time, with a Past, Present and Future, stretching from infinity to infinity, is foreign to African thinking, in which the dominant factor is a virtually absent Future' (Mbiti 1969:159). I will discuss this notion of the absent future a little later. For now, I am interested in the broad outlines of Mbiti's account of time.

John Mbiti, however, makes a mistake in thinking that time is understood only as linear in the West. While on the surface, his thinking may have some truth, upon closer inspection, the literature suggests otherwise. Time is understood in different ways in the West. Modern Western philosophical and theological traditions, for example, do not agree that time is linear. For some scholars, time is static – lacking the three dimensions of linear time as mentioned by Mbiti (Hales & Johnson 2003:528; Zimmerman 2005:402-403; Merricks 2007:120; Helm 2010:39). For others, time is dynamic (Lodzinski 1995:192; Bunnag 2017:183). The least that can be stated, is that the three-dimensional linear time, critiqued by Mbiti, belongs to the Western dynamic concept of time, also known as the A-theory of time. Perhaps that is what Mbiti has in mind when he speaks of a linear concept of time.

In any event, John Mbiti's key contribution is in having pointed out the difference between the Western's three-dimensional approach to time and the African one. According to him, time in the African tradition is two-dimensional (Mbiti 1990:21). To develop this point, he appeals to two Swahili terms for time: *Sasa* and *Zamani*. These terms form what Mbiti calls 'actual time.' We will now discuss these two terms.

Sasa is time that comprises the recent past, present, and immediate future. *Sasa* time revolves around the 'now-period.' John Mbiti (1990:21) elaborates:

> Sasa has the sense of immediacy, nearness, and 'now-ness;' and is the period of immediate concern for the people, since that is 'where' or 'when' they exist. What would be 'future' is extremely brief. This has to be so because any meaningful event in the future must be so immediate and certain that people have almost experienced it.

Consequently, *Sasa* time is made up of a dynamic present, an experienced past, and a limited future. Mbiti (1990:22) calls *Sasa* the micro-time, or little time. This is because, as he points out, '[t]he Micro-Time is meaningful to the individual or the community only through their participating in it or experiencing it' (Mbiti 1990:22). Hence, *Sasa* is not just concerned about the 'now,' but it recognises the past as well as the limited future. According to Mbiti (1969:160), *Sasa* time 'is not mathematically constant. Different people have different quantities and qualities of *Sasa*. Individual *Sasa* is constantly changing but never ending.' In short, *Sasa* time is composed of the present, past, and a limited future.

On the other hand, *Zamani* is macro-time or big time. *Zamani* is past time, but different from the English past because it has its own past, present, and future. When *Sasa* overlaps *Zamani*, it gets swallowed up by *Zamani*. The implication is that after events have been experienced in the *Sasa,* they then move backwards into the *Zamani* period. John Mbiti (1969:22) contends: 'Zamani is the graveyard of time, the period of termination, the dimension in which everything finds its halting point. It is the final storehouse for all phenomena and events, the ocean of time in which everything becomes absorbed into a reality that is neither after nor before.'

Although *Zamani* largely concerns itself with the past, it is not an extinct period. In the traditional African context, it is believed that activities take place in the *Zamani* period. John Mbiti (1969:23) calls this period the 'golden age.' He argues that '[t]he "golden age" lies in the Zamani, and not in the otherwise very short or non-existent future.' *Zamani*, therefore, is not just an infinite past, it is a past that is filled with activities. Ancestors reside in this golden age, as they are ruling the living from this golden age (Gillies 1980:26).

Additionally, in John Mbiti's account of African time, and certainly for Africans in general, the past and future are neither abstract concepts, nor are they extensions of present events (Mbiti 1969:16-17). In the Western linear time, on the other hand, events

neither extend into the past, nor into the future. The past is long gone. It cannot be retrieved. The future is in a state of becoming. As time is, according to the Christian tradition, linear, it is expected that it will find its pinnacle in paradise. On the contrary, Lenard Nyirongo (1997:91) argues that '[t]he African does not look forward to a kind of utopia or paradise or the end of time in the future. For him [sic.] his [sic.] paradise is the Zamani period; the ways of the ancestors are the best ways.'

Based on John Mbiti's assertions, it can be concluded that time in Africa is not objective (Parratt 1977:117). It is relational in the sense that it must be experienced for it to be real (Kalumba 2005:16). Some traditional African ethnic groups, such as the Nuer, Logbara of the North-Western Uganda, and North-Eastern Zaire, support this account. For these ethnic groups, as Newell Booth (1975:83-84) points out, 'time is composed of events, not anything that happens in them.' Francis Gillies (1980:26) is on par with Mbiti: 'Time, therefore, does seem to be an ontological reality, the objective possibility for the event-time structure, in traditional Bantu time-consciousness, and to the fact that it is an ontological reality does not contradict the fact that it is experienced only along with events.'

John Mbiti's actual time moves backwards (Mbiti 1969), although, in African ontologies, the 'present' is privileged. This is because the present is viewed in Africa as a decisive point of location (Oosthuizen 1993:198). Danie Van Zyl (2007:148) corroborates this idea: 'In Africa, and in other communities with a traditional concept of time, the present, today, this very day, is the decisive point of orientation.' This, however, does not mean that Africans are presentists, as there is no indication in ATR to suggest that.

Actual time, for Africans, cannot be separated from that of the dead (Kaunda 2020:86). Africans, as it will be indicated in chapter 4, regard the spirit world of the dead as real. The spirit world is a place where Africans believe they eventually go to after death (Russell 2003:90; Van Zyl 2007:145; Letšosa *et al*. 2011:2). Thus, in the African ontology of time, people move backwards in time – into the past. They eventually become part of the past: '*Actual time* is therefore what is present and what is past. It moves "backward" rather than "forward;" and people set their minds not on future things, but chiefly in what has taken place' (Mbiti 1990:17; original emphasis).

In short, through the lens of John Mbiti, African time is actual. It is a composition of experienced events. Most importantly, time in Africa is understood as moving backwards all the way to the spirit world of the ancestors. Is this also the view in traditional Africa?

2.4.2 Time Reckoning in Traditional Africa

An exploration of time reckoning is key for the reason that time is understood as concrete rather than abstract in Africa. Time is part of Africans' holistic worldview. It affects Africans' day-to-day living.

Numerical calendars were non-existent in traditional Africa. What can be traced, though, is what John Mbiti (1969:162) calls 'phenomenon-calendars.' These calendars reckoned key events in terms of their relation to one another and only when these events were taking place. Mbiti (1969:162) maintains that '[o]utside the reckoning of the year African Time concept is silent and indifferent. People expect the years to come and go in an endless rhythm like that of the day and night, and the waxing and waning of the moon.'

Newell Booth (1975:84) agrees with John Mbiti. Across Africa, the position of the sun and activities taking place at given moments during the day, play significant roles. Longer periods are reckoned using cycles of the moon and the sun. Seasons, in most cases, are also used to measure time because seasons are more concrete compared to years.

By way of example, among the Ankole of Uganda, events that affect cattle are used as time references: The Western 06:00 is milking time (*akasheshe*), while 12:00 is the time for cattle and people to rest (*bari omubirago*). These events form a repetitive cycle, making African time cyclical (Kalumba 2005:14). Cyclical time, as Rudolph Oosthuizen (1993:198) asserts, 'represents a repetitive cycle of events related to the environment and to natural seasons' (cf. also Lauer 2013:5). Cyclical time infers that African time has no beginning or end (Letšosa *et al*. 2011:2). It can therefore be argued that the traditional African time is limitless.

Because cyclical time depends on events for its existence, it cannot be separated from place or event. It is connected to experiences lived by the community, and this makes time more humanistic, social, democratic and phenomenological in nature (Letšosa *et al*. 2011:2; Van Zyl 2007:143).

Although the African and Hebraic thoughts correspond concerning the reckoning of time, they differ in the type of events that measure time. In the African ontology, events that are used to measure time are derived from personal, family, and community events, whereas in the Hebraic ontology, events that are used to reckon time, are cultic in nature. Another difference between the two traditions is that in the African ontology, people move into the future, facing the past – meaning that the African looks forward to one day dying and joining a community of ancestors. On the other hand, in the Hebraic thought, there is generally no interest in life beyond death (Van Zyl 2007: 147).

Not only is time reckoned through events and experiences in Africa, but it is also interconnected with space. Life and experiences are lived in space. Although John Mbiti (1969:161) avoids discussing issues pertaining to time and space, he concedes that 'Time and Space are closely connected in African life and thought' (Mbiti 1990:26). He claims that what is important for Africans, 'is what is geographically near, just as *Sasa* embraces the life that people experience. For this reason, Africans are particularly tied to the land, because it is the concrete expression of both their Zamani and their Sasa' (Mbiti 1990:26).

Rudolph Oosthuizen (1993:199) is another advocate of the space-time interconnectedness. As indicated above, the space-time fusion was suggested by Albert Einstein in his STR. In physics, space-time is any mathematical model which fuses the three dimensions of space and the one dimension of time into a single four-dimensional manifold (Hales & Johnson 2003:528; Mullins 2013:32). Although it may not be his intention, Oosthuizen's point edges on the view that there could be a sense in which time is static for Africans. Oosthuizen probably means that events take place in time the same way they do in space, as the idea of a static time is virtually absent in Africa.

African time is therefore reckoned according to events – time is events lived by Africans. The following discussion takes aim at the nature of the future in African thought.

2.4.3 The Nature of the Future in African Thought

Scholars in the field of African time generally agree that Africans lack a sense of the future (Kaunda 2020:87). John Mbiti is, once again, the main advocate of this view. Drawing insights from the Bantu speaking people, he maintains that African languages lack concrete words and expressions to relate ideas of a future that is in the far distance (Mbiti 1990:17). According to Mbiti, in African ontology, the African future extends at most to two years: 'The future is virtually non-existent as *actual* time, apart from the relatively short projection of the present up to two years hence' (Mbiti 1990:21).

John Mbiti contends, in addition, that any event that has not occurred or lacks a chance of taking place, soon is to be regarded as 'no-time.' However, what has potential to take place, 'is in the category of inevitable or *potential time*' (Mbiti 1990:16-17). Consequently, traditional African time 'is a two-dimensional phenomenon, with a long past, a present and virtually *no future*' (Mbiti 1990:17).

John Mbiti (1969:162; cf. 1990:23) suggests that the African history moves from the *Sasa* to the *Zamani* period. In other words, history moves towards the past, not towards the future. This explains why the concept of the end of the world is almost non-existent in Africa. There is no expectation of a future paradise either. Mbiti (1969:162; cf. 1990:16-17) maintains that '[t]he centre of gravity for human [African] thought and activities is the Zamani; rather than the virtually non-existent or myopic future.' The Sonjo people group of Tanzania, however, serve as an exception to the idea that the future is non-existent (Mbiti 1969:163-164). They have a myth according to which the world will come to an end. There is no evidence to suggest that this myth may have been influenced by Christianity. Apart from the Sonjo people, though, Mbiti (1969:23) argues, 'The notion of a messianic hope, or a final destruction of the world, has no place in the traditional concept of history.' So, how does the traditional African see the future, according to Mbiti?

John Mbiti claims that the future is potential time because future events have not yet taken place. Additionally, '[t]he future has no independent existence of its own, since the events that compose Time have not occurred in it, and once they occur it is no longer future but the Present and the Past' (Mbiti 1969:159-160). Rantoa Letšosa *et al*. (2011:2) agree with Mbiti, while John Parratt (1977:119) avers that the idea of a future fits well, only on a linear concept of time – a concept that is foreign to Africa.

John Parratt is sceptical of John Mbiti's view of a non-existent future. He contends that there is a sense in which Africans may understand time as linear (Parratt 1977:122). For instance, Africans are aware of the succession of birth, initiation, marriage, and death. This cannot be comprehended in any other way except chronologically. Parratt argues (1977:122): 'From the standpoint of the individual there must have been some conception of an advance of time. While this may not strictly be linear time, it does involve the idea of development through various set stages which have a temporal reference.'

Francis Gillies (1980:21; cf. Booth 1975:82) agrees with John Parratt when he asserts: 'Certainly, at this level of the meaning of time, the traditional African has an identical concept to Western man. He plans, he plants, he harvests.' From the outset, Gillies sees John Mbiti's work on time as narrow in scope. The problem that Gillies (1980:17) has, is that Mbiti's research only focuses on the Bantu speaking people. Gillies therefore has a point. To use one language as representative of all languages in Africa is not correct. However, to my knowledge, there is no work done on other African languages that has been produced to this end to challenge Mbiti's view. In the absence of this, Mbiti's views on time remain key and a fair representation of the African ontology of time. Thus, at this stage, we cannot counter Mbiti's view, therefore stating that African time is made possible by events.

Nevertheless, Francis Gillies agrees with John Mbiti that the annual cycle is repetitive, but he differs from Mbiti's concept that the African's future only extends to two years. For him, the future is limitless for an African. His argument is that the same annual cycle that Mbiti (1990:23-24) refers to, is indefinite in nature (Gillies 1980:21), and that Africans expect that all seasons and activities are contained in it to go on endlessly. Thus, Gillies detects a similarity between the African and the Western understanding

of the future as limitless. The infinite future of Mbiti (1990:23-24) should therefore be understood in the sense that events are repetitive. On the chronological time scale, however, the future is non-existent – a point Gillies may be missing.

Canaan Banana (1991) is another African scholar that challenges John Mbiti's view of the nature of the future. According to Banana, there exist in Shona and Ndebele people some phrases that suggest an expectation of the future by these people. For example, Banana appeals to the Shona phrase '*Natsa kwawabva kwaunoenda usika*,' which in Ndebele goes '*Unganyelemthonjeni*.' These phrases, according to Banana (1991:25), advice the people that they 'should behave properly because the future is rather unpredictable.' Based on this evidence, Banana (1991:25) states that the 'Shona and the Ndebele people believe in a future time and a future life.' But like with John Mbiti, Banana links the African time to events.

Kibujjo Kalumba (2005) is another African scholar who raises some concerns regarding John Mbiti's view over the nature of the future. He contends that potential time, which Mbiti calls the future, extends into a limitless future (Kalumba 2005:17). This is because, as Kalumba puts it, '[t]he events that constitute potential time – will continue to recur forever. It is the future endlessness of these events that extends potential time infinitely.' Traditional Africans, according to Kalumba, expect key events such as the rain season, planting, and harvesting to go on and on. He argues that '[t]he infinite extension of potential time has the consequence of undermining Mbiti's conceptual thesis…The reason is that, if traditional Africans believe that potential time extends infinitely into the future, then it is contradictory to say that they cannot conceive of a distant future beyond two years from now' (Kalumba 2005:17).

Kibujjo Kalumba's argument accords with Francis Gillies'. To my mind, however, it seems as if these two scholars have misunderstood John Mbiti's argument. When Mbiti contrasts the West with Africa's ontology of the future, it is because Africans have no concept of the future, not that time is definite in the future.

This section aimed at addressing the nature of time in the African worldview. John Mbiti acted as representative of Africans' view of time. The section, appropriately, has established that time in Africa is actual. It is a composition of lived events. This section

established further that time in Africa is reckoned through key events. These events in turn make time cyclical. Regarding the concept of the future which, according to Mbiti, is potential time, the future is almost non-existent for Africans.

2.5 SUMMARY

The purpose of this chapter was to discuss the metaphysics of time with the sole intent to act as basis for the chapters that follow. The chapter explored the nature of time in three areas: The Bible, as well as the Western and African traditions. This chapter showed that although the Bible does not offer a definition of time, it presents time as both linear and cyclical. Time is experienced through events, and in addition, is understood for what it signifies rather than what it is.

Regarding the Western ideas of time, this chapter showed that the West is not united about what time is. While there is a general view that the West regard time as linear, upon closer inspection, this notion is not the only view. It is safer to say, though, that in the West, time is understood in two ways: As dynamic/linear and as static.

In traditional Africa, time is a composition of events lived by the African people. Time is two-dimensional and revolves around the *Sasa* and *Zamani* period. The future is almost non-existent. The following chapter explores the timelessness of God theology.

Chapter 3
The Timelessness of God

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter laid the groundwork for this and the following chapters. It combed through theories of time as espoused in the Bible, the Western, and African cosmologies. It concluded that the West and Africa view time differently. This thesis focuses on God's relation to time, according to Christian theology – more specifically according to the classical theistic tradition. The argument at the heart of this thesis is that the timelessness of God theology has conceptual problems. These problems are both internal and external. Of special interest is that the model is at odds with Africans' conceptions of God and time.

This thesis has determined so far that the timelessness of God model has been a question of interest for both philosophers and theologians in the West. The implications which this theistic model entails, however, remain to be tested in other contexts, such as ATR, to ascertain its applicability for non-Western Christians. The testing of this model for African Christians is significant, especially because more Africans are converting to Christianity.

In light of the above, this chapter investigates the timelessness of God theology as it is taught in the Western classical Christian theology. The research question that drives the thesis and specifically this chapter is: *How can the nature of God's relation to time be described, and to what extent does the timelessness of God theology create problems for African Christians?* To answer this question, my strategy is to first explore the genesis of the timelessness model – I have traced the development of this model back to medieval theologians. Second, I will explore the works of contemporary proponents of this theology. The purpose of doing this is to point out how the timelessness model is being applied in modern Christian theology. The overall aim of this chapter is to present broad outlines of the timelessness theology to prepare the readers for the critical analysis of this model in chapter 5. Thus, before this model is critiqued, its presuppositions must be explored first, and its main thesis must be presented. The

aim of this chapter is to fulfil that. To achieve this, the chapter is divided into two main sections.

The first section focuses on historical thinkers (primary sources) who are responsible for the development of the timelessness model. The three historical figures on whom I will focus, are Augustine, Boethius, and Aquinas. The main reason for focusing only on them is because of issues of time and space. It is indeed not feasible to present a theological treatise of all the medieval theistic thinkers who spoke on God and time. For the purposes of this thesis, therefore, these three medieval theologians' ideas are explored because their views on God's relation to time have come to be the bedrock on which the timelessness of God theology stands.

The second section aims at contemporary defences of the timelessness model. This chapter singles out Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, as well as Brian Leftow as contemporary proponents of the timelessness of God theology. My motivation for focusing only on these three is based on the observation that they defend the model and in turn go further to modify the model.

3.2 THE TIMELESSNESS OF GOD IN THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION

That God is eternal is an idea that is generally embraced by theologians of the Christian tradition. What is contentious, however, is the relation between eternity, time, and creation. This is because while we exist in time and grapple with understanding time, eternity is beyond our grasp (Gilson 1960:193), while God is spoken of as inhabiting eternity. The medieval theologians, however, approach God's relation to time from the perspective of eternity. This means that an understanding of what eternity is, becomes crucial to the God and time debates.

In its basic form, the classical view posits that God exists outside of time. God therefore lacks a temporal extension and temporal location. It is in this line of thinking that classical theology speaks of a timeless God. God, from this viewpoint, cannot be located in time (Pasnau 2011:16). This model has an impressive long pedigree in Western classical theology and was advocated for by theological heavyweights such as Augustine, Boethius, Anselm, Aquinas, and even reformers such as Calvin, among

others (Launonen & Mullins 2021:15). Edward Feser (2023:16) informs us that although

> 'classical theism' is not…to be found in any of the works of the ancient and medieval thinkers referred to, it has in recent decades come to be fairly commonly used as a label for the distinctive conception of God and his relationship to the world that those thinkers hold in common, both by defenders of that conception and by its critics.

Edward Feser (2023:16) is upfront in pointing out that Classical theism's 'roots are in scripture and in Greek philosophy, especially the Neo-Platonic and Aristotelian traditions.' Hence, to the question, 'In what sense is God timeless?,' we must look to these medieval thinkers for answers.

On the other hand, if God exists in time, it means that he exists temporally. In this context, God has an experience of the past and the present. He anticipates the future just like all beings that exist in time. This also means that to be timeless is to lack an experience of time. God simply exists in a tenseless state. This suggests that God is either timeless or exists in time, which makes him a temporal being. From a basic point of view, temporality and timelessness are contradictions (Craig 2009:146). According to William Craig (2009:145), the Bible is indeterministic on whether God is timeless or not. Hence Craig suggests that a way to determine the nature of God's relation to time is by appealing to philosophy. Perhaps that is the reason why medieval theistic thinkers expropriated some of the Greek nuances regarding the nature of God and time (Mohammdinia & Dibaji 2023:387; Olabamiji 2023:2; Neville 1993:130).

In Isaiah 57:15, the prophet states that God 'lives forever.' William Craig (2009:145) claims that when the prophet penned these words, he did not have the benefits of metaphysics at his disposal. Hence, the prophet could not expound on the nature of God living forever, or even of God's eternity in relation to time. The medieval theologians arrived at the timelessness theology by studying the nature of God's eternity. For these theologians, the subject of time cannot be grasped properly without a proper understanding of the nature of eternity. Time and eternity, for medieval theologians, are related.

In the academic literature about God, time, and eternity, there are three viewpoints in which the term 'eternal' is understood. The first viewpoint regards eternity as timelessness. In the timeless eternity, there is no change taking place. If God exists in this kind of eternity, it means that he does not change in any way or form. Some of the modern advocates of this view are Brian Leftow (2001) and Paul Helm (2010). The second viewpoint views eternity as an infinitely extended time. Here, eternity embraces a temporal sequence, but without limits of beginning or end. One advocate of this viewpoint is Anthony Kenny (1982). The last viewpoint in which the term 'eternity' is understood, is in the *totum simul* sense. This viewpoint is associated with the medieval thinker, Boethius. More modern proponents who associate with it, are Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann (1981). In this setup, eternity is said to be the all at once possession of illimitable life by God. These viewpoints, as will be discussed in this chapter, find some of their origins in medieval theologians. I will now discuss the timelessness model by focusing on Augustine, Boethius, and Aquinas.

3.2.1 Augustine on Time and Eternity

This section will mainly focus on Augustine's *Confessions*, which is the one treatise of Augustine addressing the question of time in detail. Another reason is that this treatise is his most discussed work on God, eternity, and time (Knuuttila 2001:109). To appreciate Augustine's insights, an understanding of the context in which he wrote, is imperative.

The *Confessions* treatise (Augustine 1999) is Augustine's exploration of himself before God in the form of prayer. The first eight books are autobiographical in scope – revolving around Augustine's infant years, up to his conversion when he was 32 years old. Book 9 narrates about events and experiences that Augustine went through after his conversion. A biography of his mother, Monica, is outlined in book 9 as well. In book 10, he takes aim at the mystery surrounding the human memory, and in book 11 – a book that is topical in scope – Augustine offers an exegesis of Genesis 1 (Augustine 1999:150-152; cf. Griswold 2015:22-23; Ryken 2015:8). Books 12 and 13 expand on the nature of creation. These books are Augustine's mediations on different subjects in the context of the creation account. Since the first nine books are autobiographical in nature, it is curious that Augustine had this sudden turn to explore time in book 11,

also how the last four books fit into the *Confessions* as a whole. That being said, this section focuses on book 11.

In book 11, Augustine discusses the nature of time and how God relates to time. This book can be divided into three sections. The first section revolves around the creation of the world, while the second focuses on time as it relates to the physical motions of bodies. The third section revolves around the reckoning of time. Book 11, as Torrance Kirby (1997:333) points out, tempts one to compare it to Plato's *Timaeus*, or even Aristotle's *Physics*. Plato and Aristotle are two Greek philosophers who discussed the concept of time. It appears, hence, that these Greek ideas influenced Augustine's account of time.

Aristotle, for example, deals with the concept of time in his closing arguments of the fourth book of his *Physics* (Aristotle 1984:78). According to Aristotle, time is divided into future, past, and present, although the past and the future do not exist (cf. *Phys* 4:11; Aristotle 1984:69). The present is like a point that separates the future and the past. However, if time is like a point, does it exist? Aristotle argues that, just like motion is basic to reality, time is equally real, at least to the mind. Not only is time real, but it also has a linear direction, so much so that it is impossible for the past to move into the future (Knuuttila 2001:110-111). As will be discussed below, Augustine's treatment of time treads on this Aristotelian borderline.

Another influence on Augustine's thoughts and point of view, was the works of the philosopher, Plotinus. Richard Sorabji (1983:166) points out that Augustine's famous remark on time found in his *Confessions* 11.14 (Augustine 1999:155), shows a strong resemblance with that of Plotinus' *Enneads* 3.7.1 (Plotinus 2018:295). In fact, according to Sorabji (1983:166; cf. Leftow 1991:73), Augustine has confessed that he found some of his insights from Platonists, although he claims to have made every effort to make sure those Greek insights did not clash with the biblical witness on God and time. Con-sidering these remarks, the Neoplatonist influence on Augustine's account of God's relation to time, must be noted (Langdon 2008:9).

In the modern theological discussions of time, Augustine has become a natural starting point. Commenting on Augustine, Daniel Griswold (2015:22; cf. Rogers 1994:4) states:

‘We find an eloquent and searching inquiry into time which has exercised a profound hold over the thoughts of many subsequent theologians and philosophers.’ Brian Leftow (1991:73) narrates: ‘Augustine’s thinking was the core that determined the broad outlines of all that later medieval philosophical theology made of the concept of God.’ For that matter, modern scholarship on God and time holds correct about Augustine.

The purpose of Augustine’s *Confessions* is to know God. As such, this has led him into the investigation of issues surrounding memory and time. That he was familiar with Greek philosophical works, has already been stated. The way of thinking by the Greek philosopher, Plotinus, for instance, may have had a solid grip on Augustine’s thinking of time and memory. This is visible from how Augustine discusses the concepts of memory and time. ‘Both Plotinus and St. Augustine can be thought of as early introspectionists, because of their interest in the human being’s inner life’ (Manning, Cassel, & Cassel 2013:235). It will be discussed below why Augustine’s account of time appears psychological.

According to Li Qu (2014:16), Augustine gave his account of time at a time when philosophers were attacking the Christian notion of creation and time. Although it seems as if there was a consensus on the idea that creation came into being, it was the idea of time that seems to pose a problem for these thinkers. Concerns raised by philosophers centred on what God was doing before creation and whether there was time before creation. It is from this angle of inquiry that Augustine proceeds with *Confessions* 11.10 (Augustine 1999:153). With this context in mind, we now proceed to explore Augustine’s account of time.

3.2.1.1 Time as a Creature

Augustine discusses time in the context of creation. He writes in response to the Manicheans and Neoplatonists who wanted to know what God was doing before creation (Green 1965:148). From the outset, in his *Confessions* 11.17 (Augustine 1999:157), Augustine acknowledges that there are three times: ‘Who will tell me that there are not three times…past, present, and future?’ Having asked this question, he proceeds to state that time is a creature. This is so, according to Augustine because time was

created by God. Moreover, Augustine, in his *Confessions* 11.13.1 and 11:30 (Augustine 1999:154, 164) asserts that time did not exist prior to creation: 'For whence could innumerable ages pass by, which Thou madest not, Thou the Author and Creator of all ages? Or what times should there be, which were not made by Thee…seeing that Thou art the Creator of all times?'

Augustine drums the same thought in *Confessions* 11.14 (Augustine 1999:155): 'Time itself Thou madest. And no times are co-eternal with Thee.' While Isaac Newton gave the impression that time is co-eternal with God, for Augustine, time is part of creation. This makes time temporal. God, on the other hand, preceded time, hence time could not be co-eternal with God. In his *Confessions* 11:14 (Augustine 1999:155), Augustine avows: 'Thou precedest all things past, by the sublimity of an ever-present eternity; and surpasses all future because they are future.' We establish, therefore, that, according to Augustine, God existed prior to time.

Having acknowledged that time came with creation, Augustine details that time involves change. In his *City of God* 11.6 (Augustine 2016:315), Augustine affirms that '[t]here could have been no time had not some creature been made, by which some motion could give birth to change.' The implication is that before creation, time did not exist, but upon creation it did. From this Augustinian viewpoint, time makes change possible.

In addition, Augustine wants time to be understood in the context of eternity. That is why he observes no intelligence in asking what God was doing before time was created. According to Augustine, God abides in eternity, and, in the context of eternity, time shrinks (Green 1965:149). It was from this difference between time and eternity that the Christian doctrine of the timelessness of God has originated (Hasker 1989:3).

Augustine contends that eternity, compared to time, is 'ever fixed,' as he asks in *Confessions* 11.11 (Augustine 1999:154), 'Who shall hold it, and fix it, that it be settled awhile, and awhile catch the glory of that ever fixed Eternity, and compare it with the times which are never fixed, and see that it cannot be compared?' He adds in *Confessions* 11.11 (Augustine 1999:154) that 'in the Eternal nothing passeth, but the whole

is present; whereas no time is all at once present.' This difference between time and eternity became key for Augustine, so much so that it controlled his view of time.

Augustine, in *Confessions* 11.1 (Augustine 1999:149), then asks a crucial question about how God sees in time. He claims that, although God can see things and activities that are taking place in time, he is not temporally attuned (Griswold 2015:25; Kirby 1997:336). This is because, according to Augustine's *Confessions* 11.11 (Augustine 1999:149), time and eternity are two different entities with eternity being superior to time. Hence, God in eternity views temporal events differently from humans who are in time. While we are aware of the three sections of time, which are past, present, and future, according to Augustine, we are unable to experience all these parts of time simultaneously at once. God, on the other hand, is able to because of his mode of existence which is eternity (Qu 2014:17). In God's eternity, as Augustine in his *Confessions* 11.31 (Augustine 1999:164) observes it, there is neither movement nor duration. Eternity is an ever-present moment that is above time. From an eternity perspective, God observes all times at once. This, put in other words, makes eternity static rather than dynamic.

From Augustine onward, it has become standard in Western Christian theology to talk about the simultaneity of time when discussing God's timelessness. It is not necessarily clear, though, in Augustine's works and Christian theology, how exactly God sees all times at once (Qu 2014:18), except that him being timeless affords him that.

Briefly stated, Augustinian time was created, while God already existed prior to time. As part of creation, time involves change and motion. While humans cannot experience all times simultaneously at once, God can. This is because, from the eternity standpoint, God observes all times.

3.2.1.2 Time as Mind Dependent

I have already noted that Augustine has discussed the notion of memory in his *Confessions.* As such, it does not come as a surprise that when giving an account of time in book 11, Augustine appeals to the notion of memory. Having stated the relation between time and eternity, Augustine goes on to argue for what appears like he has rejected the existence of time.

To appreciate this change of direction, we must recognise Augustine's appeal to the Aristotelian ideas of time in *Physics* 4:11 (Aristotle 1984:70-71) in his *Confessions* 11:23 (Augustine 1999:159). Aristotle teaches that time is linked to the motion of celestial bodies (Aristotle 1984:73). In turn, these celestial bodies were used to measure time (Knuuttila 2001:110-111). Augustine, however, rejects this idea. In his *Confessions* 11:23 (Augustine 1999:159), he argues that time has got nothing to do with bodily motions. In *Confessions* 11.24 (Augustine 1999:160), he argues that time would still pass even if the celestial bodies stopped moving. Up to this point, it seems as if Augustine believes in the existence of time, although he has already refuted the idea that time depends on motion for its existence. However, then he turns the whole idea around and refers to time existing in the mind.

Augustine then maintains that time is the extension of the mind. In *Confessions* 11.26 (Augustine 1999:161), he argues: 'Whence it seemed to me, that time is nothing else than protraction; but of what, I know not; and I marvel, if it be not of the mind itself.' Augustine proceeds to suggest that the mind, instead of motion, measures time. He then substantiates this point in *Confessions* 11.26: 'That I measure time, I know; and yet I measure not time to come, for it is not yet; nor present, because it is not protracted by any space; nor past, because it now is not. What then do I measure? Times passing, not past? for so I said' (Augustine 1999:161).

In *Confessions* 11.27 (Augustine 1999:162), Augustine clarifies the point even more:

> It is in thee, my mind, that I measure time. Interrupt not thyself with the tumults of thy impressions. In thee I measure times; the impression, which things as they pass by cause in thee, remains even when they are gone; this it is which still present, I measure, not the things which pass by to make this impression.

Based on the above quotes, it seems to Augustine that while the mind is conscious of time intervals, which can be said to be either shorter or longer, it is, however, difficult to measure the past and the future. This is because the past is no longer, and the future is not yet. These two parts of time are considered by Augustine as not constituting a state of being. As such they cannot be measured.

Having argued that it is impossible for the past and the future to be measured, since they do not exist, Augustine proceeds to argue that what exists, rather, is the present. However, even for that fact, Augustine maintains in his *Confessions* 11.15 (Augustine 1999:156), that the present does not occupy space – meaning that the present also does not exist. This notion has led him in *Confessions* 11.20 (Augustine 1999:158) to the belief that there are three times:

> What now is clear and plain is, that neither things to come nor past are. Nor is it properly said, 'there be three times, past, present, and to come;' yet perchance it might be properly said, 'there be three times; a present of things past, a present of things present, and a present of things future.' For these three do exist in some sort, in the soul, but otherwise do I not see them; present of things past, meaning; present of things present, sight; present of things future, expectation. If thus we be permitted to speak, I see three times, and I confess there are three.

Augustine's idea of time existing in the soul/mind has come to be known as *distentio animi* (*distension of the mind*). *Distentio animi* was birthed when Augustine was trying to understand the relation between permanence and transition (Knuuttila 2001:112; Gilson 1960:194). On this Augustinian ground, time becomes psychological because all times exist in the mind. As our minds can only possess three times, our minds, are limited. On the other hand, and as Augustine has already argued, God grasps all times in one perfect and eternal present. Robert Neville (1993:128; cf. Gilson 1960:193) comments: 'Because God creates time, according to Augustine, the divine mind is not literally within time nor limited to a finite present. Yet by knowing things that are in time, God encompasses all times into the *totum simul* present of expectation, attention, and memory in which divine eternity consists.'

Augustine's account of time thus holds that time exists nowhere else but in the mind – this despite the fact that Augustine believes that time is a creature that came with creation. Now then, what can be made of Augustine's account of time?

3.2.1.3 Evaluation of Augustine's Account of Time

The significance that Augustine's account of time has, is twofold. First, Augustine moves beyond what his Greek predecessors offered on time. Unlike the Neoplatonic philosophies where God exists outside of time and is removed from the affairs of time, Augustine argues that, although God is outside time, he stands in relation to the past, present, and future. However, he stands in relation to these times all at once. This

means that all times exist simultaneously before God. In that sense, as Adrien Langdon (2008:12) suggests, Augustine has preserved God's providence over his creation.

Second, as it is the case with Neoplatonic philosophies, Augustine embraces a static concept of eternity. In that static sense, there are no activities taking place, neither is there movement or duration taking place. A static conception of time was embraced by most subsequent medieval theologians such as Boethius and Aquinas (Langdon 2008:13). This and the previous point are some of the contributions that Augustine has made to the timelessness model. However, are Augustine's conceptions of time and eternity coherent?

Heron is critical of Augustine's embracing of the static nature of time. He (in Langdon 2008:13) suggests that static theories of time should be rejected in Christian theology. He argues that

> makes it impossible any longer to think of eternity in purely static terms. He who is eternal must be seen as personal. As active, and as capable of entering into time and of taking temporality into himself. Not only the *structure* but also the *movement* of time must have its ground in him, though both movement and structure must certainly be seen in his possession rather than as possessing him (original emphasis).

Three theological problems have been pointed out against Augustine's account of God's relation to time. The first problem regards Augustine's suggestion that the past, present, and future can be infused into one present. What he means is that one can remember past things at present and anticipate future things all at once in the present. All three parts of time can coexist simultaneously at present in one's mind. The challenge with this experience is that it puts humans in the same position as God. Therefore, just like God, humans can perceive all things in time all at once. In this setup, time looks like eternity (Qu 2014:20). Besides, if time is viewed in the way suggested by Augustine, then it becomes nothing but a product of the cognition of events. Time exists in the mind. This contradicts the claim that time is an objective movement (Kirby 1997:344).

The second problem is raised by William Hernandez, who points out that while creating heaven and earth, God has created time before he created humans (Hernandez

2016:38; cf. Padgett 2001:108-109). This perspective, if embraced, makes time objective. It implies that time would still flow, even if there were no human beings. Hence, it becomes odd for Augustine to suggest that time depends on the human mind for its existence.

A third problem regarding the Augustinian account of time is all about the view that there are no time parts in eternity. However, from an eternity standpoint, all times and events are at once present to God. This means that all events are taking place simultaneously before God's eternity, which is God's timeless present (Griswold 2015:34-35). Herman Hausheer (1937:509) adds that by preserving God's timelessness, Augustine upholds the Neoplatonic heritage which placed God outside of time and space. In Neoplatonism, eternity and time were two radically different entities. In time there is change and motion, whereas in eternity there is no change and motion. Thus, the force of the problem against this conception is that if all temporal events are taking place simultaneously before God, he will not know which event is currently happening, since in eternity, time parts do not exist.

For Robert Neville (1993:128), the main problem with Augustine's idea of all times existing simultaneously is that the idea is incompatible with the passage of time where things move from the future into the present and fade away into the past.

By way of summary, this section has explored Augustine's account of God, time, and eternity. This section has established that God is timeless because he exists outside of time. He stands in relation to all times all at once, transcending time, while he does not experience it the same way that humans do. Eternity is perfect stability and God inhabits it as such. Because eternity is timeless, it does not have duration. On the other hand, time is unstable and to a certain extent exists only in the mind.

3.2.2 Boethius on Time

Boethius' influence on the topic under discussion places him on par with Augustine (Griswold 2015:40). According to Paul Helm (2009:77), 'Boethius and Augustine of Hippo are two of the fountainheads from which the long tradition of regarding God's existence as timelessly eternal has flowed.' Boethius, it is claimed, is responsible for transporting the Neoplatonic concept of eternity to the Christian tradition. In turn, he

offers a classical definition of eternity. It is also confirmed that Boethius has taken the ideas of Aristotle and Augustine, developed them, and passed them on to Aquinas. Seamus O'Neill (2014:1) throws his weight behind these claims when he states that Boethius is a 'great synthesizer of Hellenic and Christian thought.' Therefore, like in the case of Augustine, Boethius' account of time owes much of its philosophical tenets to Greek philosophy.

Born somewhere between 475 and 480 CE, Boethius dedicated his life to making it possible for his Latin-speaking community to have unlimited access to Greek philosophical works. He has set out to translate the works of both Aristotle and Plato. While translating these works, he has added his own commentary to these texts. Unfortunately, he was not able to finish this project because of two major reasons. One reason is that while he was translating these works, he had to spare some time to also write on other subjects such as music, theology, geometry, and astronomy. The other reason is that in 524 CE, under the reign of Theodoric, Boethius was accused of treason. He was then sentenced to death (Chase 2014:80; Griswold 2015:41).

Following the philosophical literary tradition known as *Consolatia*, Boethius summoned this genre to help him cope with his circumstances while in prison. Customarily, *Consolatia* was addressed to a friend, acquaintance, or a family member who faced distress and needed comfort. In the case of Boethius, *Consolatia* was addressed to himself. It is a dialogue between him and a female personification of philosophy. This dialogue ensued while he was in prison. The outcome of this dialogue was printed in a book, popularly known as Boethius' *Consolation of philosophy.* This book is written in prose, interspersed with verse. His reflections on God's eternity and time are found in his fifth and final book (Chase 2014:80; Griswold 2015:41).

Although Augustine paved the way for the subsequent theological reflections on the timelessness of God theology, issues surrounding the problem of foreknowledge and free will continued to surface. Boethius therefore picked up where Augustine left, by way of addressing the question of divine omniscience. As William Hasker (1989:6) attests, Boethius' reflections on God's timelessness are framed within God's omniscience and the human free will framework (cf. Langdon 2008:14-15; Helm 2010:xii-xiii).

Boethius picks up a tension between God's foreknowledge and humans' free will. He then tries to resolve this apparent tension from two fronts.

First, he inquires if divine omniscience causes the necessity of events, or if necessity causes the foreknowledge. More specifically, does God's omniscience cancel human free will? Boethius' answer is that 'divine foreknowledge does not change the nature and property of things; it simply sees things present to it exactly as they will happen at some time as future events' (*Cons* 5.3; Boethius 2009:63).

Second, if divine omniscience creates necessity, it leads to a place where humans appear not to be free. Consequently, for Boethius, there is only one way to understand this seemingly problematic matter, and this is by way of understanding how God knows things. Boethius' approach to solving this problem, as will be conversed later, is more epistemic than ontological (Mark 2007:33).

Boethius argues that if God would know ahead what humans are going to do, then humans would not have a free will. According to Boethius, the mistake we often make is that we think that God knows things the same way that humans do (*Cons* 5.3; Boethius 2009:63). He therefore ventures to show the difference between how both God and humans know things (Chadwick 1981:246). In doing this, he employs three Greek philosophical principles to address this matter. These principles are outlined by Michael Chase (2014:92):

- The distinction between absolute and conditional necessity.
- The principle that the nature of knowledge is determined by the nature of the knower, rather than by the nature of the thing known.
- The notion that God experiences all of time as we experience the present, in other words, that God experiences past, present, and future, simultaneously, or that God lives in an eternal present.

This section will specifically focus on the third point.

It is significant that Boethius suggests that God's knowledge 'embraces all the infinite recesses of past, and future and views them in the immediacy of its knowing as though

they are happening in the present' (*Cons* 5.6.1; Boethius 2009:68). He uses this theological thread to account for how God knows things. However, he prefers that God's knowledge should be referred to as 'providence,' as contrasted with prevision – more like a 'looking forth' as opposed to a 'seeing beforehand' (*Cons* 5.6.1; Boethius 2009:70). What Boethius means is that God knowing all things, does not mean that he causes them to happen (Mark 2007:36).

In view of this, Boethius (*Cons* 5.6.1; Boethius 2009:68) proceeds: 'Since then all that is known is apprehended…not according to its nature but according to the nature of the knower, let us examine, so far as we lawfully may, the character of the divine nature, so that we may be able to learn what its knowledge is.'

From this angle, Boethius then offers his famous definition of eternity. Having first acknowledged the eternality of God, Boethius (*Cons* 5.6.3; Boethius 2009:68) then defines eternity:

> Eternity is the simultaneous and complete possession of infinite life [*Aeternitas igitur est interminabilis vitae tota simul et perfecta possession*]. This will appear more clearly if we compare it with temporal things. All that lives under the conditions of time moves through the present from the past to the future; there is nothing set in time which can at one moment grasp the whole space of its lifetime. It cannot yet comprehend to-morrow; yesterday it has already lost.

For Boethius, eternity is therefore timeless. Although we find a similarity between Boethius and Plotinus on this point, Boethius' definition of eternity does not originate from him. In *Enneads* III.7.45 (Chase 2014:75), Plotinus defines eternity as '[t]hat unchanging life, all together at once, already infinite, completely unswerving, standing in and directed toward the One.' This definition affirms at least three main theological ideas: The first idea is that eternity is the total possession of life; the second is that God exists in an eternal present; and the last is that divine eternity is superior to time. Boethius demonstrates the last point by comparing how God and humans experience time. Humans experience time in segments, while God perceives all times at once in his eternal now (Mark 2007:34; Chase 2014:99; Griswold 2015:47).

Another similarity exists, but this time between Boethius and Augustine. Both thinkers affirm that God exists in the eternal now. The two, in addition, develop God's timelessness against the backdrop of creation's temporality. While in the temporal order, time

is divided into past, present, and future. In God's eternity, all times are united in one eternal now (O'Neill 2014:1). The difference between Augustine and Boethius, though, is that while Boethius sticks to his view of the immediate visual perception of the temporal order by God, Augustine seems reluctant on that view. Augustine's view is that humans are not capacitated enough to comprehend how exactly God exists in the eternal now (*Conf* 11.14; Augustine 1999:155; cf. Helm 2009:96).

On the other hand, Boethius' definition of eternity has distanced him from Aristotle and Plato. For instance, while the Aristotelian type of time is infinite (cf. *Phys* 4.10; Aristotle 1984:68), Boethius sees it as limited when compared to eternity. Although Aristotelian time is infinite, it does not possess the entire space of its extent simultaneously 'because both the past and future are out of its reach' (Boethius *Cons* 5.6.3; Boethius 2009:68). Infinity does not compare to eternity.

Regarding Plato, Boethius (*Cons* 5.6.3; Boethius 2009:68) claims that the former is misunderstood by his readers when he avers that the world is eternal. Boethius agrees with Plato that somehow the world and God are co-eternal. He, however, differs from Plato on the following point: 'For to pass through unending life, the attribute which Plato ascribes to the universe is one thing; but it is another thing to grasp simultaneously the whole of unending life in the present; this is plainly a peculiar property of the mind of God' (*Cons* 5.6.3; Boethius 2009:68).

For Boethius, God existed prior to the world. Boethius borrows this view from Augustine. According to these two medieval theologians, the world derived its existence from God: 'As such it [the world] does not automatically share the ability of divine mind, which alone can embrace at once the whole time' (Qu 2014:22; cf. *Cons* 5.6.3; Boethius 2009:68). Foyle Mark (2007:34-35) cautions, though, that

> [s]ince Boethius is concerned primarily with knowledge, he chooses to present this as epistemic priority, portraying God as possessing already in an eternal present that which the world must traverse a temporal interval in order to possess. Boethius concludes that we should distinguish, with Plato, between God as 'eternal' and the world as 'perpetual.'

What Boethius means, is that the world, unlike God, cannot embrace its entire extent all at once. This is an attribute only God possesses. Paul Helm (2009:79) writes: 'Boethius holds that even if the world is backwardly everlasting and forwardly everlasting, and so in a sense "eternal," nevertheless the world embraces a temporally successive order, and so exists sempiternally.'

This far we have established that on the Boethian account, God possesses knowledge of all times at once in his eternal now. This is possible because all times are present to God. The immediate perception of all times is made possible because God is timeless. In the end, three significant theological issues should be noted from Boethius. First, Boethius' account of God's timelessness is developed in the context of divine omniscience and human free will. The force of Boethius' argument is in claiming that God knows what humans will do because all times exist simultaneously before God. For Boethius, God perceives things differently from how humans perceive things (Helm 2010:xii-xiii; Griswold 2015:43-44).

Second, God's eternity lacks nothing. The complete possession of life by God includes his intimate knowledge of all life's events at all times. In addition, Boethius' view about eternity is durationless. This means that God cannot be located in time because if he were to be, he would not be in a position to know the future. Boethius, however, holds that even in his timeless state, God has knowledge of the temporal order. However, while events follow one after the other in the temporal order, God does not know them sequentially. All events exist simultaneously before God (Helm 2009:79).

Third, common to Boethius and Augustine is the idea that God observes all reality at once. As Adrien Langdon (2008:16) puts it: 'God is related to each human moment by his complete omniscience.' In this setup, it can be deduced that Boethius' account of God's relation to time has two faces to it. One face is where God exists outside of time. The other is that God is outside of time, yet in some sense related to it. In a timeless sense, 'God's possession of everlasting life is in an instantaneous/simultaneous present, and God's knowledge "transcends all temporal change"' (Mark 2007:37). Yet again, God is related to time in that he is not 'positioned in such a way in order to be abstracted from the universe of human thought and experience but to be "a spectator

from on high of all things," and one who knows all that transpires in the universe in our past, present and future' (Mark 2007:37).

For Boethius, then, God's timelessness affords him the advantage to know everything that happens in the world at once.

3.2.2.1 Evaluation of Boethius

Although Boethius' classical definition became a staple for the medieval theologians and continues to be in Christian theology, it has divided modern Western theologians into two camps (Rogers 1994:1). The divide is about boundless life: Did Boethius mean that eternity has no duration? (Griswold 2015:45).

Adrien Langdon (2008:15) opines that just like Plato, Plotinus, and Augustine, Boethius' concept of eternity is durationless. This view makes eternity static. If eternity is static, it means that there are no activities taking place in it and that there is no movement in it. Brian Leftow (1991), however, rejects the idea of an eternity that is durationless. He argues that, '[t]o say that a life occurs all at once suggests that it is instantlike. Yet that a life is "illimitable" naturally suggests that it endures forever in time' (Leftow 1991: 113). Daniel Griswold (2015:44) supports Leftow when he avers that '[t]he eternity that characterizes the divine life, then, is neither the infinity of temporally successive moments, nor the flash of a durationless instant. It is…a kind of a duration, but a duration that is not really temporal.'

Although Christian theologians like Paul Helm (2010) reject the idea of a durational eternity, others argue that specific terms in Boethius' classical definition of eternity such as 'whole' (*tota*), 'simultaneous' (*simul*), and 'perfect' (*perfecta*) are ruling duration out of eternity (Qu 2014:21). On this ground, Edward Khamara (1974:211) rejects Boethius' account, claiming that by placing God outside of time, Boethius denies God 'a necessary condition of knowledge, so that talk of omniscience with regard to such a being is completely out of place.' These rebuttals will be discussed in chapter 5, when a critical analysis of the timelessness model will be undertaken. The current chapter is only interested in the development and broad outlines entailed in the timelessness of God theology. Having stated that, the focus now turns to Aquinas' account of the timelessness of God theology.

3.2.3 Aquinas on God's Relation to Time

Boethius' definition of eternity forms the bedrock upon which Aquinas (1226-1274) has built his concept of timelessness theology. Aquinas' exposition of the subject is articulated in the first part of his *Summa theologica* (Aquinas 1947:52). His treatment of God's eternity and time follows immediately after his discussion of God's immutability. As such, divine immutability provides the context in which Aquinas rests his discussion of God's eternity. Despite the fact that Aquinas differs significantly from the previously discussed medieval theologians, he also shares a great deal of similarities with them. William Hasker (1989:8) suggests that Aquinas is the one theologian who has made Boethius' concept of eternity popular.

Aquinas' *Summa theologica* was written at a time when scholasticism was at its peak. Foyle Mark (2007:12) adds to this: 'The argument over the eternity of the world was more urgent for Aquinas than for previous theologians on account of the influence of Arabic and Aristotelian ideas on the topic.' In addressing the question of the world's eternity, Aquinas, therefore, offers a detailed exposition of God's eternity.

3.2.3.1 On Eternity

The methodological scheme found in Aquinas' *Summa theologica* 1a.10.3 (Aquinas 1947:53) centres around two divine attributes: Simplicity and immutability. According to Aquinas, God is simple in the sense that he is not composed of bodily parts. From this simplicity viewpoint follows that God is immutable, meaning that he does not experience change or go through change himself. Consequently, if he is simple and immutable, he cannot be temporal. Because he is not temporal, it stands to reason that he exists outside of time since everything that exists in time is temporal (Craig 2009:146-147).

Although developing the timelessness theology from the divine attributes standpoint, Aquinas defends Boethius' definition of eternity in essence. While it can be stated that Boethius' definition of eternity rests on God's simplicity, for Aquinas, eternity stems from God's unchanging nature. As Aquinas has put it in his *Summa theologica* 1a.10.2 (Aquinas 1947:54), '[t]he idea of eternity follows immutability.'

Aquinas develops his concept of eternity by means of a *via negativa*. *Via negativa,* according to Philip Olsson (2012:104; original emphasis), is when '[c]lues about what God is like can only be gleaned by systematically *denying* certain properties and attributes about God.' The *via negativa* literary device is key to understanding Aquinas' account of the timelessness of God theology.

Aquinas creates his account of God's relation to time by first noting objections raised against Boethius' classical definition. He then provides his own rebuttals to those objections. According to Henry Chadwick (1981:195), Aquinas has defended the views of Boethius from attacks coming from other scholars. He does this by outlining the objections which were raised, and then responds to them.

In his *Summa theologica* 1a.10.1 (Aquinas 1947:52), Aquinas begins by zooming in on the objection raised on Boethius' definition of eternity. According to this objection, the term 'illimitable' in Boethius' definition is negative. It belongs 'to what is defective' (Aquinas 1947:52). This term, according to critics of Boethius, should not be used when referring to eternity. It is argued that the term 'illimitable' contradicts the terms referring to 'whole and perfect.'

Another objection raised on Boethius' definition, according to Aquinas, is about the term 'life' (*ST* 1a.10.1; Aquinas 1947:52). It is argued that eternity entails duration. Hence, duration goes hand in hand with the term 'existence,' instead of 'life.' The criticism is that 'life' does not make sense to entail duration, and must be replaced with 'existence.' The term 'existence' entails duration. Aquinas captures the criticism: 'Duration does not imply "possession," but eternity is a kind of duration. Therefore, eternity is not possession' (*ST* 1a.10.1; Aquinas 1947:52).

Regarding the phrase 'whole and perfect,' critics state that the former term implies that eternity has parts because something that is whole has parts. As such, if eternity is understood to be simple in nature, then this term is misleading. As for the term 'perfect,' the argument is that this term is redundant as it represents the same idea when linked to the previous term ('whole'). If eternity were to be understood according to these critics' arguments, it would mean that eternity is not instantaneously whole (*ST*

1a.10.1; Aquinas 1947:52). Basically, this is the first criticism levelled at Boethius' definition as captured by Aquinas himself.

After noting this criticism, Aquinas proceeds by offering a rebuttal to the objection. From the outset, Aquinas offers two important arguments upon which he builds his rebuttals. In the first argument, he claims that 'we attain knowledge of simple things by way of compound things' (*ST* 1a.10.1; Aquinas 1947:53). He then argues that one must 'reach to the knowledge of eternity by means of time.' What he implies, is that one will only be able to understand eternity, if they first understanding time.

Aquinas (*ST* 1a.10.1; Aquinas 1947:53) explains that time is 'nothing but the numbering of movement by "before" and "after".' He then adds: 'For since succession occurs in every movement, and one part comes after another, the fact that we reckon before and after in movement, makes us apprehend time, which is nothing else but the measure of before and after movement.'

For Aquinas, time is therefore change. Time is a movement that involves before and after. Foyle Mark (2007:27) remarks that this results in 'something changeless [that] produces the notion of something timeless: eternity.' From this viewpoint, Aquinas' view on eternity has neither movement nor succession in it. It exists as an instantaneous whole. Daniel Griswold (2015:64) suggests that this epistemological method has at least two theological implications:

> First, since the concept of time arises from awareness of successiveness that is part of change, then the notion of eternity arises from awareness of changelessness; eternity must then lack successiveness. Second, since changeable things begin and end in time, and time measures those things, then an eternal thing, being unchangeable, must lack both a beginning and end.

Accordingly, Aquinas' answer to the critics of Boethius' definition is that '[e]ternity is simultaneously whole,' while on the other hand time is not (*ST* 1a.10.4; Aquinas 1947: 56). For Aquinas, eternity is the measure of being permanent. Time, however, measures movement and change. Thus, a being that is eternal does not go through change, whereas a being that is in time, does. In that sense, a being that is subject to time is 'corruptible, because it is changeable; it is not measured by eternity, but by time' (*ST* 1a.10.4; Aquinas 1947:56).

3.2.3.2 God's Relation to Eternity

After unpacking the concept of eternity by way of addressing Boethius' critics, Aquinas moves on to discuss the question of whether God is eternal. As was the case when discussing eternity, Aquinas first notes objections levelled against Boethius' eternity and then answers those objections.

After criticism on the semantics of Boethius' definition, Aquinas proceeds to highlight Boethius' statement that '[t]he now that flows away makes time, the now that stands still makes eternity' (cf. *ST* 1a.10.2; Aquinas 1947:53). The objection here seems to be that eternity exists because of God. If that was the case, then it would be redundant to suggest that God is eternal. In response, Aquinas narrates that Augustine has maintained that God is the author of eternity. However, this view presents a metaphysical challenge to Aquinas. The challenge is that something that is created, has potentiality. Hence, another criticism states that '[e]ternity is a kind of measure. But to be measured belongs not to God. Therefore, it does not belong to Him to be eternal' (*ST* 1a.10.2; Aquinas 1947:54). The argument here is that if eternity can be measured, it cannot be ascribed to God because God cannot be measured.

Aquinas refers to another criticism: 'In eternity, there is no present, past or future, since it is simultaneously whole…But words denoting present, past and future time are applied to God in Scripture. Therefore God is not eternal' (*ST* 1a.10.2; Aquinas 1947:54). According to this criticism, eternity cannot measure that which does not have a beginning or an end. In his rebuttal, Aquinas appeals to divine immutability. This is because God's eternity emanates from his being unchangeable. For Aquinas, eternity is not a by-product of God (*ST* 1a.10.2; Aquinas 1947:54). God is eternity and eternity is God. If anything, as Aquinas views it, there may be some elements of eternity which God shares with other living creatures such as angels. However, since these beings were created, God remains the only one who possesses eternity.

Aquinas, additionally, grounds the question of whether God is eternal, on God's simplicity. He discusses the doctrine of simplicity in question 3 of the *Summa theologica* (Aquinas 1947:17), claiming that anything that must deal with time comes down to measurement and movement. Foyle Mark's words are apt for what Aquinas has propounded:

> Not only is eternity a denial of temporality, it is also intrinsic to God rather than being a condition of God's existence. Eternity cannot, therefore, be applied to God as a measure without being in some sense erroneous, since it is neither external to God nor strictly a measure of duration (Mark 2007:30).

Regarding temporal expressions that are made towards God in the Bible, Aquinas argues that these expressions must not be understood literally. For him, God encompasses all phases of time from the eternity standpoint. For instance, Aquinas (*ST* 1a.10.2 Aquinas 1947:54) argues, 'Words denoting different times are applied to God, because His eternity includes all times; not as if He Himself were altered through present, past and future.' In his *Summa theologica* 1a.10.3 (Aquinas 1947:55), Aquinas proceeds that '[e]ternity truly and properly so called is in God alone, because eternity follows on immutability.' However, what does Aquinas make of texts such as Exodus 15:18, referring to God who existed before eternity and that he will continue to exist even after eternity. The text seems to suggest that eternity has a beginning and an end, but for Aquinas, this text means that God is eternal prior to sharing his eternity with other created beings (*ST* 1a.10.2; Aquinas 1947:54). He narrates: 'To reign beyond eternity can be taken to mean that if any other thing were conceived to exist for ever, as the movement of the heavens according to some philosophers, then God would still reign beyond, inasmuch as His reign is simultaneously whole' (*ST* 1a.10.2; Aquinas 1947:54).

What needs to be appreciated here, is that Aquinas sidesteps the idea that God shares his eternity with other beings such as angels. Thus, for Aquinas, God has to be ontological prior to these beings so, that, as Foyle Mark (2007:32) correctly points out, 'he [Aquinas] cannot be criticised for making God in any way secondary, or an emanation, but he also needs to maintain that God is eternal in God's self. The notion of God sharing eternity is the method he chooses to resolve this tension.' Additionally, Aquinas notes that the term 'eternity' in Exodus 15:18 is synonymous with 'ages.' This, then, gives the impression that God's eternity encompasses all ages (*ST* 1a.10.2; Aquinas 1947: 54). This notion appears in the accounts of both Augustine and Boethius with reference to God's relation to time. It demonstrates how eternity is superior, yet related to time (Mark 2007:32).

Another crucial point that Aquinas has embarked on, regards the question of whether eternity belongs to God alone. As it has already been implied, Aquinas argues that there are some beings that share eternity with God. Article 3 of *Summa theologica* addresses this question (Aquinas 1947:54). Here Aquinas refers to Augustine who has outlined the question in three ways: First, those who make it to heaven acquire eternity (Dn 12:3); second, those who are condemned to hell are said to be sentenced to an eternal fire (Mt 25:41); third, 'every necessary thing is eternal. But there are many necessary things; as, for instance, all principles of demonstration and all demonstrative propositions' (*ST* 1a.10.3; Aquinas 1947:55). How does Aquinas resolve these apparent theological challenges?

In his *Summa theologica* 1a.10.3 (1947:55), Aquinas claims that '[e]ternity truly and properly so called is in God alone, because eternity follows on immutability; as appears from the first article. But God alone is altogether immutable.' As for saints and angels who share eternity with God, Aquinas argues that they share this only as they contemplate God. Regarding hell, Aquinas argues that it is called eternal only because it is unending. On the issues of necessary things being eternal, Aquinas underscores: 'The true and necessary are eternal, because they are in the eternal mind, which is the divine intellect alone; hence it does not follow that anything besides God is eternal' (*ST* 1a.10.3; Aquinas 1947:55).

Regarding God's omniscience, Aquinas is of the opinion that 'forasmuch as we know future contingent things as such; but [they are certain] to God alone, whose understanding is in eternity above time' (*ST* 1a.14.13 ad3; Aquinas 1947:113). This defends Boethius' classical definition which is that all times exist simultaneously before God. It must be borne in mind that Augustine and Boethius use language that is temporal, even in trying to articulate a timeless God. For instance, Augustine speaks of eternity as 'always present,' while Boethius refer to eternity as 'simultaneous with all times' (Epsen 2010:420).

By way of summary, Aquinas' account of time is basically a defence of Boethius' definition of eternity. According to Aquinas, God is timeless because he is simple and immutable.

3.2.3.3 Evaluation of Aquinas

Aquinas has basically defended Boethius' classical definition of eternity, arguing that God possesses his life all at once. This implies that all times and events exist simultaneously at once before God (Staley 2006:9). In this case, Aquinas, like his predecessors, presents God as timeless.

Aquinas rests his timelessness model on two divine attributes: Simplicity and immutability. However, like his predecessors, he falls in the trap of making God incapable of being involved with creation. William Craig (2009:147) is correct to argue that Aquinas' timeless God does not fit the biblical picture of God who, in the Bible, is pictured as being involved in the affairs of the world in time. In addition, an immutable and simple God is too abstract and impersonal. As Brian Leftow (2001:150-151) avers, this God appears lifeless.

Before leaving this section, a few remarks need to be made regarding the accusation by critics of the timelessness of God theology, stating that the Greek philosophy had a strong grip on the classical conceptions of God and time. One such critic is Nelson Pike (1970). The accusation has been made that medieval theologians gave in to the pressures of Greek philosophy when formulating the doctrine of God's relation to time. This is, however, not necessarily correct. Although there is enough evidence to suggest that, in their doctrinal formulations, medieval theologians were influenced by Greek philosophy, this does not necessarily mean that they accepted everything from the Greek philosophy as gospel truth. Nicholas Wolterstorff (2001:211) points out that medieval theologians recognised the weakness of Greek philosophy and wanted to distance themselves from its weakness. Indeed, and reasonably, while medieval thinkers ascertained the extent to which Greek philosophy influenced their thoughts, their quest appears to have been that of grounding Greek philosophies in Scripture.

Medieval theistic conceptions of God and time have come to be the staple of Christian theology. As theology and Christianity cannot be separated from each other, the implications of the timelessness theology underly the brand of Christianity that is canvassed for Africans. As has already been indicated, Christianity is sold by their doctrines, upon which Africans are requested to accept these doctrines.

That being said, the discussed medieval theologians should be credited for having pioneered a theological model upon which later biblical doctrines came to rest on. The timelessness theology has advocates in modern times. The last part of this chapter looks at three of those advocates – Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, as well as Brian Leftow.

3.3 MODERN DEFENCES OF THE TIMELESSNESS OF GOD THEOLOGY

What stands clear from the medieval theologians, is that God cannot be temporal, as a temporal God is too anthropomorphic and thus appears imperfect. The charge is that a temporal God looks like a human being (Taliaferro 1998:143). As already indicated, the timelessness of God implies that he does not experience duration and has no temporal extension. This means that God cannot be located in time (Pike 1970: 184).

There are theological advantages to the timelessness of God theology. For example, God existing outside time, makes it easy for one to articulate his immutability, simplicity, and aseity. Another advantage that this model entails, is that it fits well with God's creatorship (Everitt 1998:25), in other words, this model preserves the otherness of God.

However, if God is timeless, how then can he act in a world that is in time? This and other related questions have been a point of focus in modern debates on God and time. Modern advocates of the timelessness theology contend that God still exists outside of time, but from this timeless vantage point, God stands in relation with the temporal world. This perspective originated with Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann (1981) with a theory they call the eternal-temporal simultaneity (ET-simultaneity), and also finds its way in the works of Brian Leftow (cf. Leftow 1991). This section explores these scholars' views.

3.3.1 Simultaneity of Events – Stump and Kretzmann

ET-simultaneity is a concept of eternity that is developed by Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann in their landmark paper, *Eternity* (Stump & Kretzmann 1981). The main thesis of this article is that eternity in Boethius' definition is durational (cf. Rogers 1994:1).

The classical definition of Boethius' *Consolation of philosophy* 5.6.3 (Boethius 2009:68) claims: 'Eternity is the simultaneous and complete possession of infinite life [*Aeternitas igitur est interminabilis vitae tota simul et perfecta possession*].' Stump and Kretzmann break this definition up into 'four main ingredients' (Stump & Kretzmann 1981:432). The first ingredient refers to the fact that a being that is eternal has life. The second ingredient focuses on the term 'illimitable.' For Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann (1981:432), 'the natural understanding of such a claim is that the existence in question is infinite duration, unlimited in either "direction."' Although the two theologians concede that Boethius should be understood that illimitable life is instantaneous, they assert that tradition, both before and after Boethius, favours the interpretation that illimitable life entails 'infinite duration.' Stump and Kretzmann (1981:432-433) contend: 'We understand this part of Boethius' definition to mean that the life of eternal entity is characterized by beginningless, endless, infinite duration.' The third ingredient protrudes from the previous one, namely that the life of an eternal entity must have duration. It paves the way for the fourth one, which is '[t]he complete possession all at once.' The implication here, for Stump and Kretzmann, is that a being that has complete possession of its life all at once cannot be temporal. Thus, according to them, the mode of existence for an eternal being is 'characterized not only by duration but also by atemporality' (Stump & Kretzmann 1981:433).

Like Boethius, Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann affirm that eternity is timeless because in eternity there is no 'earlier' or 'later than' relations. There are no activities taking place either. Stump and Kretzmann (1981:434) affirm this:

> Here it should be evident that, although the stipulation that an eternal entity completely possesses its life all at once entails that it is not part of any sequence, it does not rule out the attribution of presentness or simultaneity to the life and relationships of such an entity, nor should it.

Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann further argue: 'Insofar as an entity *is*, or *has* life, completely or otherwise, it is appropriate to say that it has present existence in some sense of the "present"' (Stump & Kretzmann 1981:434; original emphasis). However, this type of 'present,' according to them, cannot be a temporal present since this

'present' is pastless and futureless. They differentiate the two 'presents' in the following way: 'The temporal present is a durationless instant, a present that cannot be extended conceptually without falling apart entirely into past and future intervals. The eternal present, on the other hand, is by definition an infinitely extended, pastless, futureless duration' (Stump & Kretzmann 1981:435).

In view of the aforementioned, simultaneity means 'existence or occurrence at one and the same time' (Stump & Kretzmann 1981:435). According to Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretz-mann, there are two species of simultaneity: Temporal simultaneity (T-simultaneity) and eternal simultaneity (E-simultaneity). T-simultaneity speaks to 'existence or occurrence at one and the same temporal time,' while E-simultaneity speaks to 'existence or occurrence at one and the same eternal present.' What is of chief interest to the two scholars regarding the two species, is the 'simultaneity relationship between two *relata* of which one is eternal and other temporal' (Stump & Kretzmann 1981:436). On this ground, they establish a relation between eternity and temporality. The point here is that 'what is temporal and what is eternal can co-exist on the view that we are adopting and defending, but not within the same mode of existence' (Stump & Kretzmann 1981: 436). Following is a breakdown of the theory of Stump and Kretzmann (1981:439; original emphasis):

(ET) For every x and for every y, x and y are ET-simultaneous if

(1) either x is eternal and y is temporal, or *vice versa*; and

(2) for some observer, *A*, in the unique eternal reference frame, x and y are both present – i.e., either x is eternally present and y is observed as temporally present, or *vice versa*; and

(3) for some observer, *B*, in one of the infinitely any temporal reference frames, x and y are both present – i.e., either x is observed as eternally present and y is temporally present, or *vice versa*.

When ET-simultaneity is applied to the subject of God's relation to time, it claims that God – from his eternity standpoint – co-exists with temporal events at any time that the event is taking place. As Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann (1981:441) put it: 'From a temporal standpoint, the present is ET-simultaneous with the whole infinite

extent of an eternal entity's life. From the standpoint of eternity, every time is present occurrent with the whole of infinite atemporal duration.'

The argument, therefore, is that God, although existing outside of time, co-exists with the temporal. Because eternity is durational, it is spread out infinitely. From this viewpoint, all temporal events exist simultaneously before God, and he stands in relation to these events. By arguing in this fashion, Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann believe that the answer to the question of God's relation to creation is resolved.

3.3.1.1 Evaluation of ET-Simultaneity

Attractive as ET-simultaneity is, the model faces some challenges. For example, if, on the account of Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, a temporal event is simultaneous with God's eternity, it makes sense that every other temporal event must be simultaneous with all other temporal events. For instance, the 2010 soccer world cup final must be simultaneous with the sitting of Mr Ramaphosa as the president of South Africa in 2018, meaning that these two events are taking place at the same time. This, however, is incoherent. John Feinberg (2001:407-408) challenges advocates of the timelessness theology to 'explain how God can be simultaneous with events in time so as to not make them all simultaneous with one another.' He argues that

> [i]f God were to observe a temporal object eternally, that would turn the object into an eternal object. But, then, God would not observe it in time as it is occurring. Moreover, since God already observes the object or event as eternal, he need not raise the temporal event to an eternal one by observing it eternally (Feinberg 2001:412).

In line with John Feinberg (2001:412), Delmas Lewis (1984:75) raises an issue with the third point of ET-simultaneity above. According to Lewis, this point suggests that a being in eternity can be temporally present to a temporal being. This premise does not make sense for him because it suggests that eternity can be observable to a temporal being. As Feinberg (2001:412; original emphasis) notes: 'The two putative facts are incompatible: how can a *temporal* observer *observe* anything without bringing that thing into the temporal series?' He adds that God cannot observe a temporal being without him becoming temporal (Lewis 1984:74-75).

John Feinberg (2001:408) goes on to argue that simultaneity is a transitive relation and in its most basic sense a temporal concept. Accordingly, he argues that 'temporal ideas do not apply to atemporal beings' (Feinberg 2001:74-75). It remains, in that case, for Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann to demonstrate how two entities in two different frames of reference can interact – specifically how God is able to act in a temporal world while he remains outside of time.

The other problem with ET-simultaneity regards the idea of a temporal present and an eternal present. As Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann have already noted, the temporal present is a durationless instant. An instant present, however, cannot 'be extended conceptually without falling apart entirely into past and future intervals' (Feinberg 2001:408). On the other hand, the eternal present is infinitely extended, according to the thesis of Stump and Kretzmann, and has duration. Katherin Rogers counters durational eternity, though. He argues that Boethius did not teach this type of eternity, and appeals to his *Consolation of philosophy* 5:6 (Boethius 2009:68) where he states that God's knowledge of time is a 'knowledge of a never-passing instant' (Rogers 1994:2). For Rogers, this statement does not suggest that God is somehow spread out alongside the world, *contra* Stump and Kretzmann claims.

Katherin Rogers is aware that Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann appeal to thinkers before and after Boethius. These thinkers are, *inter alia*, Parmenides, Plato, Plotinus, Augustine, and Aquinas. According to Stump and Kretzmann (1981:445), they suggest that eternity is durational. Rogers (1994:2), however, argues that none of these thinkers 'clearly expresses the concept of divine timelessness having duration.' He therefore finds it puzzling that Boethius' 'all at once' phrase is taken by Stump and Kretzmann (1981:432) to mean that eternity is 'extended' (Rogers 1994:1).

Paul Fitzgerald (1985:262-263) is another scholar who finds the durational eternity concept incoherent. He argues that there is no such thing as timeless duration. For him, a duration is a sort of extension being not point-like, while Boethius seemingly had eternity as point-like in mind. Moreover, Fitzgerald states that if eternity is durational, it must have subphases, something that does not make sense if God is timeless.

William Craig locates the problem with ET-simultaneity on the type of 'language' employed by Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann. He asks what Stump and Kretzmann mean when they state that 'x's are observed as eternally present relative to some moment of time' (Craig 2009:157). He then argues that God cannot be ET-simultaneous with a temporal event. If anything, God can be temporally simultaneous with a temporal event. Richard Swinburne (2017) lays his weight behind Craig. He argues that a timeless God cannot be co-current with temporal events, asking, 'How can God be co-current with a temporal event except to mean that God at the time the event is happening is simultaneous with the event?' He then adds, 'How is a timeless God simultaneous with temporal events that are happening at different times on our time scale?' (Swinburne 2017:682). This, according to Swinburne, is logically impossible.

3.3.1.2 ET-Simultaneity Revised

The critique of the ET-simultaneity theory did not go down unnoticed by Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann. In 1992, they wrote a follow-up article titled, *Eternity, awareness, and action* (Stump & Kretzmann 1992). The purpose of that article was to respond to critics and to elucidate their previous thesis. Below is the revised theory of Stump and Kretz-mann (1992:477-478):

(ET) For every x and every y, x and y are ET-simultaneous if and only if

(1) either x is eternal and y is temporal, or *vice versa* (for convenience, let x be eternal and y temporal); and

(2) with respect to some *A* in the unique eternal reference frame, x and y are both present – i.e., (a) x is in the eternal present with respect to *A*, (b) y is in the temporal present, and (c) both x and y are situated with respect to *A* in such a way that *A* can enter into direct and immediate causal relations with each of them and (if capable of awareness) can be directly aware of each of them; and

(3) with respect to some *B* in one of the infinitely many temporal reference frames, x and y are both present – i.e., (a) x is in the eternal present, (b) y is at the same time as *B*, and (c) both x and y are situated with respect to *B* in such a way that *B* can enter into direct immediate causal relations

> with each of them and (if capable of awareness) can be directly aware of each of them.

As can be gathered, Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann believe that the new clauses in the revised version account for the idea that there is now not only an awareness between eternal and temporal series, but now causal relations between eternity and the temporal exist as well (cf. Feinberg 2001:144). Stump and Kretzmann (1992:478) explain:

> An eternal God could have temporal entities as the immediate objects of his awareness, even though he is eternal and they are not. Those clauses also imply that temporal entities and events are metaphysically present to God and not just epistemically present. If being metaphysically present is not entirely captured by these specifications, it is not clear to us what else is necessary.

The key idea in the revised version seems to be the metaphysical presence of temporal things to God. Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann have abandoned the 'observation' language they used previously and instead employ the 'causal relations' language. By doing so, they hope to demonstrate how a timeless God can be active in time. In that case, in the revised setup, 'x and y are ET-simultaneous just in case relative to an observer in the eternal reference frame, x is eternally present and y is temporally present, and the observer can enter into direct causal relationship with both x and y' (Craig 2009:157-158).

The reverse also applies. An observer in the temporal reference frame can enter into a causal relation with both x and y. However, does this revised version of Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann account for God's relation to time any better than the previous one? William Craig does not think so, arguing that this version is 'viciously circular' (Craig 2009:158). What Craig means is that this version implies that God is causally related to temporal events, but does not show how. John Feinberg concurs with Craig, stating that the metaphysical presence of temporal things to God suggests the existence of both of them in the same mode of existence (Feinberg 2001:414). To be in causal relations, there should at least be a causal context, both for God and

temporal events. This, however, does not make sense since a timeless God cannot exist in the same context with a temporal event.

In addition, the revised version of ET-simultaneity makes God and temporal beings epistemically present to one another. This means that each entity can be aware of what is happening in the other's mode of existence. The problem is, however, that being epistemically present to each other's mode of existence, does not necessarily mean that there are causal relations between the two entities. This is because for an eternal and temporal entity to exist, the two must co-exist in the same mode of existence (Feinberg 2001:413). However, as Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann have made it clear, the temporal observer must remain temporal, and the eternal observer remain eternal.

Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann (1992:475) elaborate on to this:

> Imagine two parallel horizontal lines, the upper one representing eternity and the lower, time; and let presentness be represented by light. Then from a temporal viewpoint the temporal present is represented by a dot of light moving steadily along the lower line, which is in this way lighted successively, while the eternal present is represented by the upper line's being entirely lighted at once. So from a temporal viewpoint the temporal present is ET-simultaneous with the infinite present of an eternal being's life. On the other hand, from the viewpoint of a being existing in the persisting eternal present, each temporal instant is ET-simultaneous with the eternal present, but only insofar as that instant is temporally present, so that from the eternal being's point of view the entire time line is lighted at once. From an eternal viewpoint, every present time is present, co-occurrent with the infinite whole of the eternal present.

Brian Leftow (1991:117) summarises this illustration: 'An eternal God is copresent with the whole of time by His life's being stretched out alongside it.' This illustration offers two theological advantages. The first advantage is that since things on the temporal line are perceived in a linear manner, events now exist within their timeframe. They do not have to exist simultaneously with each other as was the case in the previous version of ET-simultaneity. The second advantage is that from his eternal viewpoint, God is aware of all temporal things (Feinberg 2001:410-411). God knows, for instance, that former president Jacob Zuma is still alive. However, since he knows all things all at once, God also knows when the next soccer world cup is going to be.

The two parallel lines analogy with its theological advantages faces difficulties. Katherin Rogers is not convinced by this analogy. For him, eternity has no successive

points, as the analogy suggests. Hence, it becomes absurd to liken eternity to a line. Rogers (1994: 9) argues that '[t]he parallel lines analogy inevitably suggests a God who is "stretched out" some here, some there, some closer, some farther and so is, at least conceptually, divisible, and hence limited and imperfect.'

Paul Helm rejects the parallel lines analogy. For him, eternity is instantaneous rather than extended. Helm (2010:237) is concerned that Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann (1981:432) reject the Boethian textual evidence which points to the direction that eternity is durationless.

In sum, the ET-simultaneity theory upholds Boethius' concept that God exists outside of time. From this vantage point, though, God has a complete awareness of everything that is happening in the world, but these events take place simultaneously all at once. For Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, the Boethian eternity must be understood as durational rather than instantaneously.

3.3.2 Quasi-Temporal Eternity

Compared to Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann (1981; 1992), Brian Leftow (1991) offers a more comprehensive analysis of Boethius' classical definition, although picking up from where Stump and Kretzmann have left. Although he argues, similar to the two theologians, that eternity is extended life, Leftow (1991:120) claims that 'an eternal life contains earlier and later points, but with no succession between them,' and then adds,

> Boethian eternity is like an extension in tenseless time. Perhaps, that is, it involves earlier and later, and yet none of it 'passes away' or is 'yet to come,' as tensed theories say that phases of time do. If this is so, then an eternal being could be one that somehow lives at once…all moments of life whose moments are ordered as earlier and later (Leftow 1991:120).

Brian Leftow calls his theory Quasi-temporal eternity (QTE) (Leftow 1991:120), and elaborates: 'QTE is an extension in tenseless time. Because of this, it may also make eternal life sound more like an extension in space than like a life in time.' He also underscores the following:

> As eternity does not allow change, we can define an eternal reference frame as a frame such that all events that occur within it must occur simultaneously, even if they may occur nonsimultaneously in other reference frames, and a temporal reference frame as one in which events can fail to occur simultaneously. If we do this, again, we define an eternal reference frame in terms that allow that events may occur in eternity which also occur in time (Leftow 1991:239).

Having explained and defended the notion of a durational eternity, Brian Leftow then moves on to explain how a timeless God relates to a temporal world. We must remember that in the ET-simultaneity of Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, there is no frame of reference that is shared by both an eternal and temporal entity. For Leftow (1991:239), such a frame exists. In this setup, temporal events exist in eternity and share causal relations with God. This notion rests on three fundamental points: 1) The distance between God and the temporal world being zero; 2) special things not changing; and 3) temporal things existing in a space-time manifold (cf. Craig 2009:158). In this context, temporal beings exist timelessly in space and there is no distance between God and these temporal beings.

QTE, therefore, is a theory of eternity that posits that God's eternity is extended, although eternity is characterised by earlier and later points. From an eternity vantage point, temporal events take place simultaneously all at once and they are present to God.

3.3.2.1 Evaluation of QTE

Like in the case of ET-simultaneity, the QTE theory has garnered some criticism. Paul Helm (2010), for example, claims that QTE implies that eternity entails some characteristics of duration, and, for Helm, this is odd. He argues that

> either the duration in question has time-like features or it has not. Either we can ask questions such as 'How long?' of this supposed eternal duration, or simultaneity, or we cannot. If we can, we seem to be sliding inexorably back into temporalism. If we cannot, then what is gained by referring to timeless eternity as a timeless duration? (Helm 2010:238).

According to Katherin Rogers (1994:10), if it is accepted that QTE implies that God experiences earlier and later moments both at the same time, then QTE is contradictory. Following Rogers' insight, suppose that a bus departs from Pretoria for Polokwane. The bus leaves Pretoria at exactly 13:00 and arrives in Polokwane at exactly 17:00. On QTE's terms, God experiences both the departure and arrival at the same time, although these events are not taking place at the same time on the timeline scale.

Rogers (1994:10) argues that, '[i]f God thinks *A* earlier than He thinks *B*, then He does not think *A* and *B* at the same time. And *vice versa*. God's life cannot have earlier and later points that nonetheless are lived at once.'

Katherin Rogers (1994:12) maintains that the more Brian Leftow 'says about eternity as duration, the less like duration his eternity becomes.' William Craig (2009:159) also rejects QTE, arguing that even if temporal things were to not change in terms of motion, they do change in terms of properties. For example, a temporal object can change from being one year old into being two years old. This change affects God.

In summary, while in medieval theology, the timelessness of God was developed to address issues of God's relation to time, conclusions reached left God outside of time, away from creation. In this context, God appeared uninvolved in human affairs. In contemporary defences of the model, the focus is cast on trying to bring the timeless God into relations with humans.

3.4 SUMMARY

The main purpose of this chapter was to explore the timelessness of God theology from a Christian perspective. The chapter has established that the development of this model technically started with the medieval theologians. For the purposes of this thesis, the investigative spotlight was cast only on Augustine, Boethius, and Aquinas, and on contemporary defenders of the model. This chapter has found that the timelessness model was developed at a time when the Greek influence made its way into Christianity. The main question that needed attention from the medieval theologians revolved around the question of God's eternity and his relation to time. In addressing these questions, medieval theologians arrived at the conclusion that God exists outside of time. From this angle, all events exist simultaneously all at once before God.

In current debates, concerns centre around the notion if a timeless God can relate to a world that is in time. To this question, defenders of the model claim that God, although timeless, stands in a causal relation with the temporal world because his eternity is extended. This defence comes after the effort to revise Boethius' classical definition, which seems to suggest that eternity is instantaneous. Conclusively, both medieval and contemporary defenders of this theology place God outside of time. This

chapter therefore spelled out what the broad outlines of the timelessness of God theology are. This is key because chapter 5 will critically examine this model to show its inadequacy for traditional African Christians. Chapter 4 is similar to this one in purpose, although it explores the nature of God's relation to time in ATR. Chapter 4, like chapter 3, is key for chapter 5 because chapter 5 examines the timelessness model while making special reference to ATR.

CHAPTER 4
The African Traditional Religion

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter explored the development of the timelessness of God theology. This chapter shifts the focus to ATR. The aim is to establish the nature of God's relation to time in ATR. Richard Gehman (2019:10) is correct when he argues that the 'ATR is not dead; nor is it irrelevant. In order to understand the actions and words of people today, one must understand the traditional religious worldview which provides the assumptions for customary laws.' His comment is noted particularly because he claims that early missionaries did a lot of damage to ATR with the aim to obliterate it. Despite their efforts, ATR continued to thrive to the extent that today it is recognised as a religion alongside other religions such as Islam. Gehman (2019:11) remarks: 'ATR persists and shapes the attitudes and actions of large numbers of people.' As I will indicate below, Africa cannot be without ATR, as it is the heartbeat of Africans.

Fact is that ATR had to face many hostile challenges, particularly from Western missionaries. Despite these challenges, however, there are so many aspects of the religion resembling those of Christian theologies. Mogomme Masoga and Angelo Nicolaides (2021:24) mention a few of them: The concept of a Supreme Being, God, the concept of a spiritual and material world, mediums, prophecies, revelations, and the understanding of dreams. The concept of a Christ who died on the cross as a sacrifice finds resonance in the sacrificial systems of traditional Africans. Richard Gehman (2019:xi) agrees with Masoga and Nicolaides (2021:24), but goes further to point out that most of the elements of ATR, such as the belief in God, intermediaries, spirits, ancestral spirits, and mystical powers, are not unique to ATR. He claims that many people around the world have been practising these elements. According to Gehman, these similarities must be mentioned, so that no impression is created that ATR is unique, or that because of these similarities, Africans are barbaric and untutored.

For some time now, Africans' concept of God has been a point of criticism by Western scholars (Ushe 2017:154). Emeka Ekeke and Chike Ekeopara (2010:209) mention

two mistakes made by these scholars on their criticism of ATR: The first is that Western scholars judge ATR by using Christianity as a theological measuring tool; the second is that they conduct their theological discourses on ATR by utilising as data, the conclusions arrived at by missionaries – conclusions that are biased and limited in scope. Western missionaries were themselves obsessed with their own way of living and experiencing Christianity, which was soaked in the Western culture. At the same time, missionaries were ignorant of African religion and its cultures. Rather than enquiring and consulting about these religious aspects, missionaries tried to destroy the religion and culture of Africans (Mokhoathi 2017a:2 of 14).

The literature is riddled with Christianity using its beliefs and theological views to judge ATR and to even want to convert Africans to Christianity (Mabvurira *et al*. 2021:113; Kollman 2010:6-7). Because of the cosmological problems inherent in Christianity, it continues to be foreign to most Africans (Maluleke 1996:10), and, as I argue in the thesis, it is in tension with Africans' conceptions of God and time.

The so-called AICs (African independent churches, also called African initiated churches or African indigenous churches) have demonstrated their dissatisfaction with Christianity by breaking away from it in the past. There are several reasons that are outlined in the literature that account for these dissatisfactions. The reasons range from Africans wanting a religion that is adequate to address African problems within the African context, to Africans finding it strange that they must be led by the West on religious matters. Of chief interest is the dissatisfaction by Africans about the doctrinal grip that ignored the African worldview (Kollman 2010:7). In this regard, I embrace the following comments by Caleb Oladipo (2010:64), where he states, 'Only God is absolute,' and also that '[n]o theological opinion should be so hallowed that they should lead Christians to close their minds to new sources of theological knowledge.' As long as conceptions of God exist in any religion, that religion, in my view, qualifies as a source of theology. This is because theology is all about God. This thesis recommends that African theologians spell out their own interpretation of God's relation to time, using African religious ideologies as source of theology.

The traditional African religion can assist us with their perception of the majesty of God, their cults, their offerings, and their moral rules, in this justification by God which

depends on human dispositions. On the level of these dispositions, their religious remarks will certainly be useful (Pobee 2012:12).

Having stated this, this chapter aims to set the record straight regarding ATR and Africans' conceptions of God. To achieve its overall purpose, this chapter comprises of two main sections. The first section explores ATR and the elements that make up this religion. The argument of this thesis is that the timelessness of God theology is not compatible with African Christians. This argument cannot unfold properly without a proper understanding of the African worldview which is clothed in ATR. Having explored ATR, the second section attempts to establish God's relation to time in this religion.

4.2 THE AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

Misconceptions, and sometimes sheer intellectual racism regarding Africans and their religion, still abound in the West. One of the misconceptions, for instance, is that Africans worship ancestors, spirits, and divinities. This and other related misconceptions have led some Westerners to the conclusion that ATR is a dead religion. Additionally, Geoffrey Parrinder (1962:32) quotes a 17th-century explorer to South Africa who referred to Africans of this region: 'No one, however thoroughly he has inquired, has ever been able to find among all the Kafirs, or Hottentots, or Beach-rangers any trace of religion, or any show of honour to God.' This remark has been dispelled by the surfacing of a wealth of knowledge that gives credence to the fact that Africans of this region have always had a knowledge of God, a knowledge that can be traced through their ancient traditional belief systems.

Some Western scholars have questioned an African knowledge of God, suggesting that Africans' ability to conceptualise God, is non-existent, while others postulate that Africans are polytheistic and pantheistic. There are also those who claim that the God of Africans is like an absent landlord. Three examples of these Western scholars are Noel Baudin (1845-1887), Diedrich Westermann (1875-1956), and RS Rattray (1881-1938). These scholars' criticisms are addressed by Bolaji Idowu in his book, *African traditional religion* (Idowu 1973). After he has assessed the criticism by these scholars, he rejects their criticism as shallow, ignorant, and riddled with intellectual bias. For instance, Idowu (1973:143) argues that all religions' concept of God is in constant

development – meaning that there is no religion that can claim that its concept of God is clearer and superior to the rest. He argues:

> The only difference between the Western world and Africa is that in one case there is a long tradition of systematic thinking the results of which have been committed to writing, and in the other case a long tradition of systematic thinking which in certain areas remains in the oral tradition of the race and which, in other areas, has unfortunately become confused by historical circumstances (Idowu 1973:144).

The biographer, Emil Ludwig (in Idowu 1962:30) once asked about the Africans: 'How can the untutored African conceive God?' He then asserts: 'Deity is a philosophical concept which savages are incapable of framing.' Ludwig's assertions are appalling and certainly misguided, carrying the implication that for Africans to know God, they must be philosophically trained. Yet, on the contrary, the God of the Africans and of the Bible is portrayed as a dynamic living God who does not require training for him to be experienced. Besides, Ludwig's assertions stand in sharp contrast with the doctrine of revelation which implies that God has revealed himself to all the races and peoples of the earth (Idowu 1962:31).

The above noted biases and misconceptions, nonetheless, have recently been addressed by African scholars, John Mbiti (1969) and Bolaji Idowu (1973). Both Mbiti and Idowu argue that Africans have had the knowledge about God long before the arrival of Western missionaries (Mbiti 1969:6-7; Idowu 1973:147). Emeka Ekeke and Chike Ekeopara (2010:209; cf. Ushe 2017:154) certify the work of Mbiti and Idowu by asserting that their views 'gave Africans and their religion, which was battered and shattered by the missionaries who condemned and denigrated their religion, a new hope and integrity.' In view of this, African scholars and theologians correctly suggest, as Joseph Awolalu (1979:10; cf. Mbiti 1990:15; Knighton 1999:123; Adedeji 2012:45) indicates, that ATR 'cannot easily be studied by non-African. The best interpreter of African Religion is the African with a disciplined mind and the requisite technical tools.' This section will demonstrate, contrary to what Westerners postulate, that ATR is neither a dead religion nor an irrelevant religion for that matter (Gehman 2019:10).

The main purpose of this section is therefore to present an overview of what ATR is all about and why it has received such hostile treatment from the West. The commitment that this thesis makes is to give special reference to ATR. The main purpose of

doing this is to test the Christian theology on God's timelessness' applicability for African Christians. Appropriately, it is only fair that in making this reference, ATR, its nature and character, should be spelled out for the reader. An exposition of ATR will place the thesis in a better position in the next chapter, when a critical examination of God's relation to time will be undertaken.

ATR is composed of several essential elements, which are the life and being of the African (Mabvurira *et al*. 2021:113). However, I will only provide a general survey of those elements that I deem major in ATR. I am aware, though, that generalising African beliefs and practices has its own downfalls. One of those downfalls is that in generalising, I run the risk of losing out on some of the most concrete aspects of ATR. I stand the risk, for example, of misrepresenting some of the major cultural, ritualistic, beliefs and practices of the peoples of the African continent.

But then again, if I choose to focus on the specifics of ATR, there are some risks involved as well. Richard Gehman (2019:x) captures this thought when he narrates that if we 'content ourselves with a specific example of ATR, omitting generalizations, we could become lost in details and loose [sic.] the continent wide perspective.' Nevertheless, many scholars have produced invaluable works in which they focus only on a specific group of the African peoples. These studies receive attention in this chapter. Although this chapter is general in scope, where specifics are needed, that call is made. One advantage that generalisation has, is that it provides a grasp of what the whole continent believes in. Gehman (2019:23) is insightful on which approach is best between being specific and being general, when discussing ATR:

> Either singular or plural is acceptable if one understands the issue. Just as there is not one ethnic group in Africa, but 1,000, so there is not one formulation of religious beliefs and practices, but many. The deeper you go into the study of religious beliefs in ATR, the more conscious you are of diversity.

While there are diversities in the practices and beliefs across Africa, there is a unity in the major elements of ATR. The elements where unity exists, for instance, are their belief in God, the spirit world, and in mystical powers (Adedeji 2012:45; Ndemanu 2018:72; Mabvurira *et al*. 2021:113). Generalisations that proceed in this section are, consequently, representative of what scholars in the field have written about ATR. A

call is therefore made on the reader to take these generalisations for what they are – generalisations. I had to mention that because it will become apparent as I proceed that I will gloss over some key differences surrounding beliefs and practices that the reader is familiar with (Gehman 2019:23).

Yet another fact is that scholars have used different approaches to explore ATR. For example, in his acclaimed book, *West African religions*, Geoffrey Parrinder (1962) builds his approach on only four elements of ATR which are God, divinities, ancestors, and charms. Bolaji Idowu (1973) adopts the same structure as Parrinder, but discusses the subject of divinities and spiritual beings separately. John Mbiti (1969) goes beyond Parrinder's structure and focuses his research on six elements: God, spiritual beings, humankind, human intermediaries, mystical powers, and evil. Most recently, Richard Gehman (2019) referred to three elements of ATR: God, the spirit world, and mystical powers. In the end, what is important for the researcher is to have a grasp of the major elements of ATR (Adamo 2011:3).

Bearing this notion in mind, my focus in this section will only be on two elements of ATR – God and the spirit world. The reason for focusing on these two is twofold. First, God and the spirit world are the heartbeat of ATR. Without these two elements, the religion would not stand. Second, these two elements have material relevance to the purpose of this thesis. For instance, the relationship that Africans have with God and the spirit world affects or is affected by the ontology of time, which is a key component of this thesis.

When it comes to elements that constitute ATR, different African ethnic groups tend to hold some elements of ATR in higher regard than others. The Murle people of Sudan, for example, have a high regard for God and less regard for ancestral veneration. The Zande people of Congo are regarding magic and mystical powers as more important than God. The Yoruba people of Nigeria prefer divinities to God or ancestral veneration. Some Bantu speaking people, like the Akamba people of Kenia, place more significance on ancestral veneration. I highlight these facts because most literature that I will be appealing to on the concept of God, originates in the West African traditional religions where the emphasis is more on divinities and God (Gehman 2019:viiii).

4.2.1 Semantics of ATR

Before the arrival of colonialists and missionaries, Africans, at least those in sub-Saharan Africa, practiced religion (Mabvurira *et al*. 2021:112). Evidence of this, as Aloysius Lugira (2009:123; cf. also Manganyi & Buitendag 2013:1) points out, can be found in ancient African art and paintings, sculptures, buildings, and African folklore. These objects, together with oral traditions, were made specifically to express the religiosity of the natives.

Before the missionaries, ATR was regarded by traditional Africans as absolute truth (Gehman 2019:4). The elders were looked up to for wisdom and guidance, while the living dead and divinities were embraced as looking after the people. Joseph Awolalu (1979:1) therefore states that when we speak of ATR, we are referring to 'the indigenous religious beliefs and practices of the Africans.' He avers that this is the religion that was practised by 'the forebears of the present Africans' (Awolalu 1979:1).

A survey of ATR, nevertheless, cannot be carried out without first looking into the origins of Africa as a continent. Aloysius Lugira (2009:118) is helpful regarding this task, arguing that between 264 and 146 BCE, the peoples of Northern Africa lived under the political influence of Carthage. This group of people were referred to as the 'Afri.' After 146 BCE, when Carthage was defeated by Rome, the term 'Afri' was replaced by 'Africa.' In Latin, 'Africa' is written *terra Africa*, meaning 'the land of the Afri.' Originally, this referred to the part of Africa that was regarded as a Roman province. The rest of the African continent was declared unknown land. This unknown land was referred to in Latin as *terra incognita*. Later, however, *terra incognita* took the meaning, according to Lugira (2009:118), of 'the Dark continent.'

The term 'traditional' in ATR means 'indigenous.' 'Indigenous,' according to Joseph Awolalu (1979:1; cf. Adamo 2011:3), means 'that which is aboriginal or foundational, handed down from generation to generation, upheld and practiced by Africans today.' When religion is referred to in the singular, the interest is usually around the common spirit that binds these religions together.

A consensus has not yet been reached among scholars as to whether traditional religion(s) should be addressed in singular or in plural terms. In the early stages of his

writing, John Mbiti (1990:1-3) argues for ATR to be referred to in plural. His argument is that there are many different religions among different ethnic groups across Africa. The second edition of his book (Mbiti 1990:13), however, changes from addressing ATR in plural to singular. On this notion, Mbiti is joined by Bolaji Idowu (1973). The view to treat ATR as singular is motivated by the observation that there are a lot of similarities in beliefs and practices among traditional Africans. Key among these similarities is the common belief in God. David Adamo (2011:3) quotes Shorter:

> Although they (African religious systems) were separate and self-contained systems, they interact with one another and influenced one another to different degrees. This justifies our using the term African Traditional Religion in the singular to refer to the whole African religions phenomena, even if we are in fact, dealing with multiplicity of theologies.

Conclusively, the plural ATR refers to the different expressions of the religious thought of the African peoples across the continent. Whether singular or plural, underlying the religion is the same foundations, which are God and the spirit world. In fact, it is the common thread of the belief in God that cuts across the African continent that qualifies ATR as a religion (Idowu 1973:104). Bolaji Idowu (1973:103) buttresses this point: 'There is, for example, one name of God which appears in various forms in several places according to the native tongue of each locality.' It is on the basis of the belief in God among Africans that Idowu speaks of the African religion in singular.

According to Adeleke Adedeji (2012:46), the phrase 'African religion' without 'traditional' can be misleading. Adedeji points out that most Africans are traditional people. They attach their tradition and culture to their religion. It is these Africans that are referred to in this thesis. For that fact, the term 'traditional' helps in distinguishing ATR from the rest of the world religions. ATR, therefore, refers to the indigenous, both ancient and modern, religions found in Africa and practised across the five regions of Africa. These five regions are Northern Africa, Central or Middle Africa, Southern Africa, East Africa, and Western Africa. These regions are homes to different ethnicities, cultures, customs, and traditions.

The term 'religion' in ATR is deliberate, as there are many different ethnic groups in Africa, and many languages and different cultures across the five regions of Africa.

Despite these differences, there are many basic similarities in these diverse indigenous religions. For instance, while God may go by different African names, the concept of God is the same across Africa (Awolalu 1979:1-2; Metuh 1987:110).

It is lamentable, though, that ATR is currently eclipsed by major modern world religions like Christianity. As a consequence, the eclipse has made ATR less known in the world, particularly in the West (Adedeji 2012:46). Despite this, Michael Ndemanu (2018:72-73) quotes a survey carried out by the Pew Research Center in 2010. This survey validates the view that, despite a continuous influence by Christianity and Islam, ATR is still present in many African countries. Ndemanu (2018:72) quotes the survey: 'Large numbers of Africans actively participate in Christianity or Islam yet also believe in witchcraft, evil spirits, sacrifices to ancestors, traditional religious healers, reincarnation and other elements of traditional African religions.'

It is therefore rather difficult to define the term 'religion' within an African context because it cannot be pinned down to one meaning. The task gets even more complex when 'religion' has to be defined within the conceptual framework of ATR. According to John Mbiti (1990:15), for the traditional African, religion 'is an ontological phenomenon; it pertains to the question of existence or being.' Thus, religion is engrained in the traditional African's soul. It starts before their birth and continues even beyond their death. For the African, to exist is to be religious.

John Mbiti's point that Africans are deeply religious, has in recent times been supported by Michael Ndemanu (2018). Ndemanu observes that even just a cursory survey of social media platforms in instances where Africans graduate, one cannot help but notice the countless comments by Africans praising God for their achievements. Ndemanu claims that half of the comments comes from Africans who do not even practise Christianity. Commenting on these Africans, Ndemanu (2018:70-71) claims: 'They are neither agnostic nor atheist because they believe in God following the teaching of traditional religions bequeathed to them by their ancestors.' According to Mogomme Masoga and Angelo Nicolaides (2021: 24), 'Africans view religion as part and parcel of life, and it is a typical way of looking at the world and what it offers from day-to-day.'

The Ugandan poet, novelist and social anthropologist Okot p'Bitek (1971) has, however, not only criticised Westerners for their low view of ATR, but he also criticises some African scholars for discussing ATR through Western theological lenses (Kanu 2021:119). For p'Bitek, ATR must be understood on its own merit not in 'the way the west could understand it' (Kanu 2021:122). p'Bitek (1973:72) criticises John Mbiti, for instance, for Westernising the African God when Mbiti uses terms such as God being 'eternal', 'omnipresent', 'omnipotent', and 'omniscient.' For p'Bitek, these terms are misleading and carry Westernised connotations about God. p'Bitek suggests African terms to refer to God such as 'old' as opposed to 'eternal,' great as opposed to 'omnipresent' and 'wise' as opposed to 'omniscient' (p'Bitek 1973:72; cf. Westerlund 1985:62).

While John Mbiti (1990) laboured in his scholarship to point out the similarities between Christianity and ATR, David Westerlund (1985:62) points out that Okot p'Bitek stressed, rather, the differences between the two religions. 'As a disbeliever and cultural nationalist,' Westerlund (1985:62) says that p'Bitek 'wanted to show that Christianity was an alien institution which did not belong in Africa.' It must be stated though, as Ikechukwu Kanu (2021:123) points out, that although p'Bitek was critical of the African scholars who modelled ATR after Western conceptual frameworks, he himself 'employed western patterns in his philosophy of decolonization.' This is to mean that while p'Bitek has a point in that ATR must be studied on its own, however, it is not necessarily easy to explain the richness of God's attributes in ATR using some African terms such as 'old' as opposed to 'omniscient.' These terms are limited in scope. Thus, using terms such as 'omniscient' and 'omnipresent' does not necessarily mean fashioning the African God after Western theological ideologies. Having explored the semantics entailed in ATR, I now move on to the nature of ATR.

4.2.2 The Character of ATR

Compared to the Western worldview, the traditional African worldview is holistic. In the West, for instance, life is often considered as comprising of the secular and the sacred. The sacred life tends to kick in only over the weekend when one attends church services. During the week, it is the secular component that is lived out. This is not the case with Africans. For them, a religious life is intertwined with everything they do. As

Richard Gehman (2019:51) argues, religion in Africa is 'life that is experienced to the full as each person is interconnected with all the elements of the universe.'

Africans generally believe that God is the head of ATR. This is so because God is believed to be the creator of everything. God as the head of ATR, as claimed by Thomas Riggs (2021:1), is mentioned in African creation myths. It must be noted that Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam religions were built around a figure. ATR, on the other hand, was not (Mabvurira *et al*. 2021:113). Joseph Awolalu (1979:2) states: 'It [ATR] has no founders or reformers like Gautama the Buddha, Asoka, Christ, or Muhammad. It is not the religion of one hero.' ATR is rather built around oral transmissions, not being written down on paper like it is the case in Christianity's Bible and the Qur'an of Islam.

ATR is proudly written in the hearts, minds, and oral traditions of the people of Africa (Agada 2022:2). It was never handed to these people by missionaries. It does not even have a list of biblical doctrines being systematically formed (Mabvurira *et al*. 2021:113). Commenting on this notion, Joseph Awolalu (1979:2) confirms: 'The adherents are loyal worshipers and probably because of this, Africans who have their roots in the indigenous religion, find it difficult to server connection with it.' Thomas Riggs (2021:4) aver the following about ATR:

> African religions rely on the memory of oral stories. Thus, doctrine tends to be more flexible than it is in the text-based religions, and it changes according to the immediate needs of religious followers. African traditional religions are a communal endeavour, and it is not required that an individual believe in every element.

ATR is a monotheistic religion, although it goes by different names in different cultural languages. For example, the Igbo of Nigeria call it Chukwuism, while the Mende of Sierra Leone call it Ngewoism, the Rundi of Ruanda call it Imanaism, and the Yoruba of Nigeria call it Olodumareism. A proper understanding of this is warranted to dispel the misconception that Africans are polytheists (Adedeji 2012:45). Although a considerable number of African theologians like Joseph Olanrewaju (2009:42), Emeka Ekeke and Chike Ekeopara (2010:212), as well as Masoga and Nicolaides (2021:24) maintain that ATR is monotheistic, Benno Toren (2001:242) disagrees. He argues that the line of separation regarding what is divine and what is not between God and divinities,

is thin in ATR. Toren's argument emanates from the observation that West Africans, for instance, seem to be closer to divinities than they are to God. His argument will be addressed below when I discuss God and the role that divinities play in ATR.

ATR is cultural in character. Culture is part of Africans' traditional heritage. Africans derive meaning and value from culture. Thus, it is not surprising that religion and culture are interlinked in Africa. The one cannot be understood in the absence of the other. According to Canaan Banana (1991:124), ATR cannot be separated from culture. In fact, culture is 'a basis for African Christianity' (Urbaniak & Manobo 2020:240).

According to Dirk Van der Merwe (2016:573), '[c]ulture is an indispensable part of being human. It denotes the various patterns of the thinking, acting and feelings of human beings.' Culture, therefore, is a way of living. Most importantly, culture, as Umar Danfulani (2012:46) puts it, 'provides the framework within which human life becomes meaningful, based on standards of morality/goodness, success, aesthetics/beauty reverence for God or gods, and the forces of nature or long dead ancestors.'

Culture, accordingly, forms the people's worldview or cosmology. In other words, whatever happens around a people group is often interpreted through the prism of culture. Thus, it becomes a gross misconduct on the part of Western theologians to canvass for African Christians to get rid of their culture to make room for a God who is foreign to them. In fact, even in the Bible, God has revealed himself without ridding off the locals of their cultural norms. This is because culture is the lens through which natives conceive God. Dogama Je'adayibe (2012:77) concurs: 'Culture is a human social construct which provides a people with a worldview in which they are guided and identified with. It shapes a people's world, provides values and norms and philosophy in life.'

In essence, therefore, culture is a worldview. The Willowbank consultations that convened in 1978 in Bermuda to reflect on the interrelation between the gospel and culture, have noted the following regarding culture: 'No theological statement is culture free' (in Obijole 2012:104). This is applicable to both Christian theology and ATR. It is therefore appalling that missionaries and some modern Christian theologies are comfortable to use their culture laden theologies to judge Africans' religious beliefs. Je'adayibe (2012:84) correctly claims: 'Africans have a cultural matrix which defined them as

a people. It provided them with beliefs, values and practices. It was a worldview characterized by an awareness of God, sense of morality, sense of communality, sanctity of life, sense of the sacred, harmony, and peaceful co-existence.'

The doctrine of the incarnation, as suggested by Olubayo Obijole (2012), sheds some light on the role that culture plays in theology. Obijole recommends that theologians must carry out their theological formulations with the aim to preserve God's character within a cultural framework. He states that Jesus Christ becoming incarnate was proof that the second Person of the Trinity could dwell within a Jewish cultural context without the Jewish culture swallowing up his divinity. Obijole (2012:104) ramparts the point: 'The incarnation is taken as a fitting model of such a theological enterprise, in that it demonstrates the possibility of the divine identification with the human and the culturally particular without loss of identity.' Thus, throughout history, the word of God has had to be contextualised in order for it to become applicable to the targeted context (Pobee 2012:4).

According to John Pobee (2012:13), the above incarnation metaphor could not have been more to the point. For Pobee, the word of God was incarnated in a Judeo-cultural tent and later on in an Euro-American tent. In the Euro-American tent, the Word (Jesus Christ) was received in the context of Western cultural norms. For Pobee, the Word has come to the African tent. Accordingly, the West must respect the Word and allow its full incarnation within the African cultural tent.

Any kind of Christian branding, therefore, canvassed for Africans at the ignorance of ATR and Africans' cultures is incomplete and will most likely not succeed (Ndemanu 2018:71). Not only do Africans receive meaning from culture, but culture injects meaning to their religion. It is in that regard that Adeleke Adedeji (2012:46) claims that 'African traditional religion has helped the Africans to cherish and treasure their culture and religion.' While culture is not religion, the fact is that to be religious is to be cultural. There can never be religion without culture. Religion is practised within the framework of culture. Accordingly, there can never be culture without a religious influence. Adedeji (2012:46-47) states: 'God is embedded in culture. Even when God is worshiped in spirit, man's [sic.] body, and spirit is a cultural entity. He [sic.] renders worship

to his [sic.] creator with his [sic.] cultural endowments. For this reason, African traditional Religion has been through time a memorial of what it is today.' Canaan Banana (1991:22) avows that 'African traditional religion is not an external affair, it is embedded in the individual person, in the individual culture and in the individual society.'

Theology should be carried out with the sole purpose of serving the community. John Pobee (2012:4) asserts that 'theology is not just for satisfying intellectual and academic curiosity. It is for renewal of self and community.' For this aim to be satisfied, the culture that informs the natives' cosmologies cannot be undermined. In brief, while religion is not culture, religion is practised within a cultural context. In fact, there is no religion in the world that has survived the cultural influence of Christianity, being at the top of the list (Manganyi & Buitendag 2013:1).

4.2.3 Colonial Attitudes Towards ATR

Since its genesis, ATR has not sailed without challenges (Riggs 2021:13). Almost all these challenges came from Western colonial explorers and missionaries, who dismissed ATR as ridiculous and barbaric. According to Aloysius Lugira (2009:123), Portuguese explorers who travelled to the Western and Eastern coast of Africa, for example, reported that Africans worshiped fetishes and that they were pagans.

Because Africa was a mystery to the West, the latter embarked on a task to explore this continent between 1768 and 1892. During this period, 10 explorers from the West were sent to Africa. Seven of these were British. The other three were French, German, and Anglo-American. All these explorers, Aloysius Lugira (2009:123) reports, worked for the British government. Their task led to what is now known as the colonisation of Africa. Upon arrival in Africa, explorer Samuel Baker is quoted to have been adamant that Africans do not have a religion. In his 1867 article, *Race of the Nile Basin*, Baker (in Lugira 2009:123) claims that, '[w]ithout any exception [Africans] are without a belief in a Supreme Being, neither have they any form of worship or idolatry; nor is the darkness of their minds enlightened by even a ray of superstition. The mind is as stagnant as the morass which forms its puny world.'

Sibusiso Masondo (2006:91) points out that '[t]he earlier missionaries said that Africans had degenerated from a superior civilization to an inferior one.' Apparently, the

evidence to that conclusion was based on Africans' belief in mystical powers and witchcraft. What was unfortunate for Africans, as Masondo (2006:91) asserts, was that, '[a]ccording to this Eurocentric worldview, the degeneration was so bad that Africans had reached the same level as animals and were thus referred to as beasts or brutes.' David Adamo (2011:3) claims that some missionaries even believed that Africans were half human. This speaks to the level of these missionaries' thoughts of Africans. To them, Africans were hopeless people that needed to be converted to Christianity.

The missionaries went as far as forcing Africans to abandon some of their religious and cultural practices such as polygamy and ancestor veneration. In the process, they caused these Africans to destroy some objects and animals which they thought Africans worshiped (Adamo 2011:3; cf. Manganyi & Buitendag 2013:1; Masoga & Nicolaides 2021:25).

Canaan Banana has also registered his discomfort towards the way Christian missionaries viewed ATR. According to Banana (1991:124), there were never efforts on the part of the missionaries to learn and understand the cultures and religious values of Africans. If anything, missionaries looked down upon Africans and this attitude gave 'missionaries and their white parishioners a false sense of importance and created in African minds a sense of self-rejection' (Banana 1991:124). Banana argues that if Christianity seeks to establish itself as authentically African, it must take the value systems of Africans seriously (Gunda 2012:134).

Another problem ATR faced was a lack of a written text on ATR beliefs. This meant, for ATR critics, that Africans had no God whom they worshiped. Next to this problem was the allegation that Africans lacked an intellectual capacity to grasp concepts about God. For the Westerners, ideas about God are a sophisticated intellectual territory that is beyond the reach of the African mind (Ndemanu (2018:72).

It must be stated, however, that one of the factors contributing to ATR not having a written holy text like the Bible or the Qur'an, is because there was no developed system of documentation among them. However, this factor does not mean that the religion did not exist. ATR was passed on from one generation to the other through, for

instance, beliefs, practices, myths, and rituals. This religion stands to this day through these transferences (Ezeugwu & Chinweuba 2018:28; Masoga & Nicolaides 2021:24).

Another accusation coming from missionaries was that because of a lack of visible temples, Africans had no God that they worshiped. Peter Bolink (1973:21), however, argues that Africans, with the exception of some people groups such as the Ewe and the Akan, who have cults for the worship of God, and the Masai and Nandi people of North-Eastern African who bring offerings to God, '[n]o one…will deny that in African traditional religion – at least among the Bantu of Central and South Africa – God is God without temple or alter, without priests and ritual.' Bolink's observation contrasts with Christianity where priests, temples, and altars play major roles when it comes to worshiping God.

Peter Bolink (1973:23-24) quotes the Nyarwanda people who ask: 'Why should we build a temple for Him who is omnipresent, or why bring offers to Him who is above every need and rich in everything?' This means that for Africans, the cult to worship God is inward rather than outward. A lack of these visible aspects deemed important by the Westerners, should not be used to dismiss Africans as untutored and lacking the knowledge of God. Geoffrey Parrinder (1962:39) certifies this thought:

> The general picture in Africa is that regular communal prayers to God are rare. Temples and priests are few, and only found among certain tribes, such as Dogon, Ashanti and Kikuyu. But individual prayer is widely practised, especially in time of exceptional necessity. God is the resort of the desperate, when all else has failed. Then, despite his greatness and distance, he can be appealed to directly, without special formulas or interning priests or godlings.

Commenting on the sacrificial systems in ATR, Michael Ndemanu argues that it predates Christianity. He observes that ATR's traditions and customs parallel some of those found in the Bible. Thus Ndemanu (2018:74) contends: 'The hallmark of traditional African religions which encompass prophecy, sacrifices, priests, ancestral worship, initiation, communion, temple, singing, dancing, reincarnation are not only referenced in the Bible, Qur'an, and other Holy texts, but they are or had been part of routine religious practices.'

Michael Ndemanu (2018:74) further avers that if ATR predates the Bible, 'it is important to underscore that the tradition of animal sacrifice which began where humanity originated, is inscribed in the Bible, and if Christians, unlike Moslems, have chosen not to continue with it, they should not find what is practiced in the Bible strange.'

Michael Ndemanu obviously writes to defend not only the longevity that ATR has endured, but also its authenticity. If Christianity finds some of the Africans' ceremonial rituals strange, the Africans just parallel those of the Old Testament. Christianity must then also exercise their demonising attitude on the Old Testament. For Africans, God is 'the Living One who is the ever-present, ever-active, and ever-acting reality in the world' (Idowu 1973:150). God does not need temples and alters to be involved in the lives of Africans.

Lastly, several major religions continue to compete for the attention of the Africans. The aim for these partisans is to convert Africans to their religions. Two of these religions are Christianity and Islam. As a matter of fact, these two religions have been received by a good number of Africans. Recently, some religions who have joined the scramble to converting Africans, are Hinduism and the Bahai faith. Inasmuch as these oriental religions have established their influence in Africa by canvasing the teachings of their founders, doing this at the expense of a workable knowledge of ATR, their efforts did not succeed. Cornelius Olowola (1993:7; cf. Imasogie 1985:226) reacts on this point, 'While Africans are being exposed today to Western education, traditional thought is still the source of the basic world-view of most of the people. The growing Christian population is certainly not exempt from such influences. In our day Christianity in Africa faces traditional religion as never before.'

There is evidence that Africans who have been Christianised, 'continue their veneration and worship of ancestors whilst upholding a Christian identity' (Manganyi & Buitendag 2013:1). Richard Gehman (2019) agrees that most Africans who accept Christianity do not totally rid themselves of the values and beliefs found in ATR. This demonstrates the deep-seated influence ATR has on the African people. To this end, Joel Mokhoathi (2017a:11 of 14) correctly declares that 'Christianity needs to communicate with the African cultural and religious heritage. This means that it needs to be couched

in a language that Africans understand and appreciate, and further be presented in a manner that does not require the alienation of Africans from their cultural heritage.'

In summation, ATR is a religion of the African people that has been in existence since time immemorial. It is dynamic and alive. It rests on the African's cultural norms and values. In other words, culture gives ATR the rhythm and life to exist.

4.2.4 Elements of ATR

As has already been noted, ATR is composed of several elements of which I will only focus on two. These two are God and the spirit world. The spirit world has, apart from God, three categories of spirits: Divinities, ancestral spirits, and other spiritual beings. I will focus only on divinities and ancestral spirits. The reason why I omit a discussion of other spirits is because those spiritual beings do not bare material relevance for this thesis, whereas divinities and ancestors play a pivotal role in how Africans relate to God and time. I start off here with the concept of God in ATR.

4.2.4.1 God – the Supreme Being

Defining God is never a simple theological task in any given religion, let alone in ATR. The difficulty lies in the fact that God is a hidden mystery. The best that can be stated about God, both in classical Christian theology and ATR, is that he is the creator of the world who can be regarded as a spirit. On these two areas the two religions agree. Although different theological terms are used to describe God, they all fail to explain exactly who God really is. Almost all languages have attempted to understand the meaning of 'God,' yet in doing this, different meanings have come to the fore. On this notion, Ben Knighton (1999:120) asserts that 'even philosophy allows meaning to our understanding as implicit knowledge.' Trying to understand the meaning of 'God' in ATR, therefore, is as complex as it is in any given religion. The problem becomes even bigger if we filter in the fact that the modern concepts of God are mostly done in English. These English terms, in addition, are linked to the Latin and Greek languages (Knighton 1999:120). As a result, these terms may not connote the same meaning to Christianity and ATR.

The African's concept of God is derived from divine theophanies, names given to God, sayings, statements, and attributes given to him by Africans (Adedeji 2012:47;

Olabamiji 2023:2). While writing on the Igbo people, the conclusion that Evaristus Ezeugwu and Gregory Chinweuba (2018:43) arrive at, could be expropriated to be representative of other Africans across the continent. These scholars state that ATR's God lacks the necessary ingredients that are articulated in traditional Christian theology. One of the reasons could be that ATR's conceptions of God were still at their embryonic stages when it was first encountered by Western Christians. In addition, the African peoples at the time did not have the necessary conceptual apparatus to systematically sketch a concept of God as it is done, for instance, in Christian theology. However, even though that is the case, Ezeugwu and Chinweuba seem to be writing from the perspective of judging ATR, using Christian theologies as a measuring stick. This case is important, as I will point out below that the African God does not seem to be lacking any ingredient that should make him who he is. As already stated, what is key to the doctrine of God in any religion is that God is the creator of the universe and that he transcends creation. These major ingredients are upheld in both ATR and Christianity. The Mende people of Sierra Leone serve as a good example, believing in a God called Ngewo, who is, according to them, creator of heaven and earth (Parrinder 1962:33).

How Africans conceive God, nevertheless, determines how they interact with one another and, in the same breath, how they relate with creation. Robert Agyarko (2013:51) lays his weight behind this thought: 'A community's conception of God is the central point for much of the rest of its belief. It might even be thought of as supplying the whole framework within which the community is constructed, lives its life, conducts its activities, and relates to non-human forms of life.'

Tokunboh Adeyemo (1998:136) proclaims that the knowledge of God among Africans is derived from intuition, natural phenomena, history, and oral tradition. Africans are perceiving God through creation, providence and preservation, experience, and cultural diffusion. Emefie Metuh (1987:98) agrees with Adeyemo, emphasising that God's names in African societies circle around four symbols: 1) Creator; 2) one who possesses superlative qualities; 3) the Supreme Being; and 4) one who inhabits the sky. These symbols appear throughout all the religions of Africa. Metuh (1987:98) writes: 'One could therefore conclude that not only the belief in God but also the symbols with

which this belief is expressed are widespread in Africa. One may therefore speak of the African conception of God.'

It needs to be pointed out, though, in line with Peter Bolink (1973:23), that it is not an easy task to gather traditional African conceptions of God, even from rural areas. This is because of the influence of Christianity and Islam on Africa. However, some traditional statements regarding the concept of God have managed to survive this influence. Some of those concepts are examined in this section.

Aloysius Lugira notes that the concepts of God for the Africans have a tendency of being influenced by social structures of a particular community. For instance, where a community has a king as its head, God tends to be viewed as a supreme king above people. This is why Lugira (2009:38-39) narrates, 'As there can be only one supreme king in a community, Africans have traditionally concluded that there can be only one Supreme Being for the entire human race.' This tendency, although anthropomorphic in nature, has Africans already placing God at the pinnacle of reality. In Africa, God is supreme and reigns above all humanity.

The names given to God by Africans reflect what the people think of God's character and attributes (Parrinder 1962:39). For instance, Bolaji Idowu (1962:36) points out that '[t]he name Oludumare has always carried with it the idea of One with Whom man [sic.] may enter into covenant or communion in any place and at any time, one who is supreme, superlatively great, incomparable and unsurpassable in majesty, excellent in attributes, stable, unchanging, constant, reliable.'

Judging from Africans' day-to-day language, it becomes apparent that God plays a pivotal role in their lives. Furthermore, the names of God used by Africans reveal God's ontological status and his position in Africans' lives (Ezeugwu & Chinweuba 2018:28). Africans, thus, are so God conscious that Emeka Ekeke and Chike Ekeopara (2010:209) conclude that in ATR there is no atheist.

God's existence is not a question of debate in ATR. God simply exists. This idea is certified by the following Ashanti proverb: 'No one shows a child the Supreme Being,' to which Emeka Ekeke and Chike Ekeopara (2010:210) aver that '[t]his proverb means

that anyone born in Africa does not need to go to school to learn about the existence of the Supreme Being, but God's existence is known by all including children.' No wonder, then, that God forms the top of all elements that make up ATR. God is the head of all reality (Masoga & Nicolaides 2021:24). As David Westerlund (1985:88) agrees, 'God is given the central position' in ATR.

It has already been noted that the existence of God in ATR is taken for granted. The only challenge that faces Africans is 'how to discern God at work' (Agyarko 2013:51) and to conceive exactly how God relates to humans. God, nevertheless, is believed to be the creator of all life and everything that exists (Olanrewaju 2009:42).

Writing on the relationship that the Akan people have with divinities and God, Robert Agyarko (2013:52) states that they regard God as existing in a league of his own. Although the Akan people give more attention and service to divinities, they still believe that God holds the highest form of existence. Agyarko remarks that the names with which the Akan address God, differ substantially with the names given to divinities. According to Agyarko (2013:54), '[t]hese special names express the idea of the uniqueness of God and reflect the attributes given to God.' By way of example, the Akan call God *Onyame* or *Onyankopong*. This name is used only in reference to God. The Igbo people are another group of Africans that believes that God exists in a class of his own (Ezeugwu & Chinweuba 2018:27). Emeka Ekeke and Chike Ekeopara (2010:212) echo the thought that not only does God exist in a league of his own, but he is also regarded as 'permanent, unchanging and reliable' by Africans.

In ATR, God is understood as one. However, for the people of Benin in West Africa, where God is called *Nana-Buluku*, God is thought of as two beings: Male and female. The Bambara people of the same region call God *Bemba* or *Ngala*. *Bemba* is a union of four beings who play different roles in the God-world relationship. These ideas by the people of Benin and the Bambara, as Aloysius Lugira (2009:39) contends, bare a resemblance to those in Western Christian thought where God is thought of as a holy Trinity. This point highlights the fact that although God may be understood as one in ATR, there are some African peoples who view him as a multiple of beings.

There are some thinkers, however, who believe that the African concept of God is derived either from Christianity or the Muslim religion. However, one may ask: 'Is the God of ATR the same God as the Christian God?' Discussions have also ensued where questions have been raised over whether Africans are monotheistic, pantheistic, or even polytheistic. Other scholars even asked if the God of ATR is a withdrawn God (Bolink 1973:24). Some of these questions will be addressed below, under God's attributes. For now, I will address the idea of an absent God – *Deus otiosus*.

That Africans had and continue to have a concept of God, is a view that is now widely accepted (Adamo 2011; Ndemanu 2018; Gehman 2019; Masoga & Nicolaides 2021: 24). According to Peter Bolink, this view finds support even in remote African tribes such as the Pygmie. Bolink (1973:19-20) argues:

> There is no more doubt that in all the diverse African traditional religions God has always been there and this belief has seemingly hardly been affected by Western materialistic influences of the past century or more, nor even by the horizontalistic 'Death of God' theology, which so greatly undermined the faith in the Western world.

Therefore, what is *Deus otiosus*? According to Justin Ukpong (1983:187), *Deus otiosus* is a theory proposed in the 1920s by the Roman historian of religion, Mircea Eliade (1907-1986). Applied to Africans, this theory suggests that the African God, after creating the world, retreated from the world to heaven. It is argued, however, that God did not leave creation to its own demise, but left it in the care of the divinities. In that case, God is viewed as not involved in human activities. As it will appear in the section where divinities are addressed, Africans tend to devote most of their time seeking assistance and blessings from ancestors and divinities, which depicts an attitude that seemingly validates the *Deus otiosus* theory. It is important, though, to indicate here that this theory does not claim that Africans are not God conscious, only that God does not involve himself in the affairs of Africans (Bolink 1973:22). He is a remote God.

The *Deus otiosus* theory has been criticised and rejected by most African scholars (Mbiti 1990; Lugira 2009; Adedeji 2012). These scholars have marshalled ontological evidence in the form of attributes, proving that the African God is not an absent God. Some of these attributes are God's omnipresence, providence, goodwill, omnipotence,

and omniscience. Peter Bolink (1973:22) suggests, though, that caution should be exercised about these attributes. He argues that some of these attributes may make ATR's God look like the God of the Bible. Bolink is adamant that most of these attributes are influenced by Christianity and Islam. If Bolink's caution is embraced, one wonders then, to what extent and in what sense did Christianity and Islam influence ATR. However, scholars like Emeka Ekeke and Chike Ekeopara (2010:211; cf. also Ushe 2017:158, 164) reject Bolink's caution and instead argue that the African God had these attributes long before Christianity and Islam made their way to Africa. This point is also favoured in the literature on the subject of this study.

Peter Bolink (1973:25) thus rejects the *Deus otiosus* theory. He claims that 'such a concept of God is not suitable for describing the African belief and experience of the Supreme Being.' For Justin Ukpong (1983:190), the *Deus otiosus* theory confuses a transcendent God with an absent God. For example, Africans tend to associate God with the sky to show his transcendence, and to show that he is not humankind who is associated with earth. This has got nothing to do with the idea that the African has no regard for God. Ukpong contends that in ATR, God is forever present. His presence is felt in the power which he exerts in the universe. Adeleke Adedeji also rejects the *Deus otiosus* theory, arguing:

> The most important thing we must remember regarding the African concept of God is that God is close to them [Africans] and they to Him. They do not feel abandoned by Him. They have confidence and assurance in his fatherly love and care. They always feel that He accepts their prayers and worship (Adedeji 2012:48-49).

Peter Bolink (1973:26) traces the *Deus otiosus* theory not only as a charge levelled against ATR's God, but also as it has been used in the Western concept of God. The *Deus otiosus* theory found its way into the academic mainstream when the 'Age of reason' hit Europe. The 'Age of reason' traces its roots to the Renaissance and Humanism period. One broad outline from this period is that less and less room remained for God in the affairs of humans. God was looked at as more of a watchmaker who after creation, left the laws of nature to run the universe. To this day, according to Bolink, most of the Western societies do think that God is no longer needed in the day-to-day running of the universe. It seems, therefore, that the Westerners may have used this lens to judge ATR's God.

Joseph Olanrewaju (2009:42) entertains the myth that exists in the Yoruba traditional thought. According to this belief, there was a time when heaven was close to earth. During this period, the people communicated easily with God. However, then, according to this myth, a greedy man stole food from heaven. This act offended God and as a consequence a distance ensued between God and the people. Yet another Yoruba myth suggests that a woman slapped the face of heaven, while, according to the myth, the face of heaven represents the face of God. This act resulted in heaven removing its nearness from earth, hence the distance that was created between God and humanity. Regardless of this distance, the Yoruba still believe that God can be approached, although this time through sacrifices and libations. Joseph Olanrewaju (2009:42) states: 'The worship Yoruba people render to the Supreme Being is often informal in nature, but they believe that the Supreme Being is fully involved in human affairs.' Evaristus Ezeugwu and Gregory Chinweuba (2018:29) concur with Olanrewaju's thesis.

Amon Kasambala (2005:318-320) identifies four metaphors that summarise who God is to Africans. These are God as father, God as mother, God as shepherd, and God as friend. According to Kasambala (2005:320), all these metaphors drive one imperative point, that 'African people convey a sense of relationship, communality and continuity.' Kasambala (2005:320) further makes a critical point by stating the following: 'For this reason, the formation of God-images is visibly influenced by African cultural understandings – the African understanding of human life, without which all images imposed on African people would become obsolete and invalid in the African context.'

The above quote speaks to the extent to which God is related to Africans and how Africans relate to God. For Amon Kasambala (2005:318), African conceptions of God 'are expressed through the metaphors that African people have found comfortable to depict their value and belief systems, as well as the ways they live daily and interact with one another, nature and God.'

In short, ATR revolves around God. God is the creator of everything that exists. His existence is taken for granted in ATR and does not require debate. Now that we have established the existence of God in ATR, we will discuss his attributes.

4.2.4.2 God's Attributes

The term 'attributes' refers to terms and phrases that describe God's qualities, properties, or traits. God's attributes in ATR are anthropomorphic in nature. Anthropomorphism is the attribution of human characteristics to God. Emeka Ekeke and Chike Ekeopara (2010:211; cf. Ushe 2017:158) are enlightening when they state that 'any religion that stripes the Supreme Being of anthropomorphic phenomenon will eventually end up as an abstract religion that does not have human feelings and is not fully realizable in the world.' Attributes, indeed, play a pivotal role in religion. Elisha Olabamiji (2023:2) states that in ATR, '[a]ttributes of God depict His personality as He relates with a man based on his volition, such as love and care for the creatures.' In this context it is safe to say that divine attributes and God's relationship to the world holds a central place both in Christian theology and ATR (Peckham 2021:262).

When enquiries about God's attributes are carried out in Christianity and Islam, scholars and theologians of these religions often have at their disposal the Bible and the Qur'an as guiding instruments. This is not the case in ATR as they have no canonical text that can be used as a guiding instrument. Therefore, an enquiry into God's attributes in ATR compels us to look at proverbs, sayings, names, myths, recitals, and attributes about God by Africans. These have been in existence long before the arrival of the missionaries in Africa in the 1490s. Emeka Ekeke and Chike Ekeopara (2010:213; cf. Ushe Ushe 2017:158, 164) argue this point when they say that God's attributes in ATR 'are not the product of missionary activities or colonial era. They are part and parcel of African.' In addition, Ekeke and Ekeopara (2010:213) argue that '[e]very child born into African culture grows with these concepts of God and he does not need to learn them because they are imbued in their folklores, myth, short stories, short sayings, proverbs, ceremonies and everything around them.'

Not much theological reflection has been displayed by Africans to study God's attributes, though. This could be because Africans speak of God's attributes in concrete rather than in abstract terms. Adeleke Adedeji (2012:47) states: 'The Africans do not conceive God with abstract philosophical mindedness and they do not approach Him from a systematic theological framework. They are simple, tender-hearted believers. They believe what they worship and live what they believe.'

There are many attributes about God in ATR, like God's omnipotence and God's holiness, to name but a few (Ushe 2017:164). However, the attributes I will focus on, are God's creatorship, eternity, omniscience, immanence, and transcendence. I will focus on these because they bare material relevance to this thesis as it will appear below when I sketch a picture of God's relation to time in ATR. These attributes, in addition, are the main attributes on which the timelessness of God theology is assembled in Christianity.

4.2.4.2.1 God as Creator

God's creatorship is acknowledged in ATR. For example, the Akamba of the eastern region in Kenya assert that God is the maker of all things. The Ovimbundu of the Biè Plateau of central Angola, also refer to God's creatorship. The Akan, who are a meta-ethnicity living primarily in the countries of present-day Ghana and the Ivory Coast, believe that God is the architect and originator of all things. For the Nguni speaking people of Southern Africa, God is the original source of creation, while according to the Zulu of South Africa, God created everything. From these few African ethnic groups it is evident that Africans believe in God's creatorship (Islam & Islam 2015:7-8; Ushe 2017:160).

According to Shafiul Islam and Didarul Islam (2015), some Africans even believe that God did not stop creating at creation. He continues to create throughout the universe. Islam and Islam (2015:7-8) quote the Twi from Southern Ghana who affirm this notion: 'God never ceases to create things.' Justin Ukpong (1983:189) agrees with this idea, arguing that 'Africans generally believe in the presence of God's creative power in all beings including trees and even stones.' Therefore, not only has God created in the past, he still continues to create in the present.

Justin Ukpong (1983) has investigated God's functions as understood in Christian theology and compares them to God's functions as comprehended in ATR within the context of creation. He claims that, in classical Christian tradition, God creates, conserves, and provides (Ukpong 1983:189). God has created beings and by conservation, God allows them the space to multiply according to their species. Through his providence, God provides and cares for his creation. In ATR, God also creates and governs crea-

tion. Even when it comes to the procreating of species, God is involved in the procreation process. Because of his involvement, the birth of a child in Africa is regarded as a miracle, directly made possible by God, whereas in most of the West, a child is viewed from a scientific point, in which a male seed meets a female egg which then produces a child.

Among the Yoruba there is a belief that God delegated some aspects of creation to some lesser gods (Gbadegesin 2018:47), but this is an exception in Africa. Other than that, God is generally understood as the sole creator of the universe (Ukpong 1983:189). God's creatorship separates him from divinities and human beings (Lugira 2009:40). This makes him unique in ATR and this could also be understood as the otherness of God in ATR.

According to the Banyarwanda of Rwanda, nothing existed before God created the universe (Lugira 2009:40). The implication is crucial as it entails the thought that God is not co-eternal with the universe. Following this line of thinking, Aloysius Lugira (2009:36) quotes the African proverb: 'No one saw the beginning, nor shall see the end, *except* God.' This proverb suggests that only God is from everlasting to everlasting.

Emefie Metuh (1987:110; original emphasis) notes that some of God's attributes derive from his creatorship motif: 'As creator of *All* things, he precedes all, both in order of time and excellence. He is therefore the "First Cause."' Even though Africans generally believe in ancestors and divinities, they also believe that ancestors and divinities were created by God. God 'alone is eternal with the ground of His Being within Him' (Gehman 1989:190).

God's supremacy in ATR encompasses all the visible and the invisible. The Zulu of South Africa call God UNkulunkulu, suggesting that God is above creation. For the Ndebele, God is the greatest of the great. According to the Tonga, Ngoni, the Akan, and the Baliba, he is a great God, or great king (Islam & Islam 2015:3). Aloysius Lugira (2009:44-45) provides more African names of God that express his creatorship.

The creatorship of God goes hand in hand with his providence. Africans believe that God did not only create, but he also sustains and provides for his creation. Emefie Metuh (1987:113-114) appeals to some African proverbs to substantiate God's care. One of those proverbs goes like this: 'God dries away flies for a cow that has one tail.' Another one reads: 'Those we cannot catch, we leave to God.' These two proverbs attest to the providential acts of God.

Tokunboh Adeyemo (1998:136) proclaims that Africans perceive God through creation, providence and preservation, experience, and cultural diffusion. Emefie Metuh (1987:98) agrees with Adeyemo, stating that God's names in African societies circle around four symbols, of which one of those symbols is God the creator.

4.2.4.2.2 God's Eternality and Omniscience

ATR views God as having no beginning and no potential to go out of existence. He is therefore eternal and immortal. A Yoruba sonnet captures God's eternality: 'Oyigiyi Ota Aiku', which means, 'The mighty, immovable, hard, ancient, durable Rock that never dies' (Ekeke & Ekeopara 2010:212). Ushe Ushe (2017:155) agrees with the idea of a God who is eternal in ATR. He writes on the Ewe people who call God 'Nana Buluku,' which means a God who is eternal.

The people of Ghana call God 'Onyame,' and that means that God is high and above everything. The Yoruba of Nigeria call God 'Olodumare,' which means the Supreme Being who is unique, reliable and most importantly unchanging (Gbadegesin 2018:46; Gehman 1989:190). The Ngombe state that 'God is the everlasting One of the woodlands.' The Ashanti and the Baganda refer to an 'eternal God.' The Tsonga associate God with heaven and the sky. Commenting on the eternality of God, Shafiul Islam and Didarul Islam (2015:5) quote the Pygmy hymn:

In the beginning was God
Today is God
Tomorrow will be God
Who can make an image of God?
He has no body
He is like a word which comes out of your mouth.

That word! It is no more,
It is past, and still it lives!
So is God.

All these sayings drum the idea that ATR's God is eternal, being from everlasting to everlasting.

God's eternality in ATR is often associated with his omniscience. Acknowledging God's omniscience, the Yoruba, for instance, would say, 'Arinurode Olumo, Okaan,' which means that God 'sees both the inside and the outside of a person.' The Yoruba also say, 'Olorunnikan logborn,' which means that 'only God is wise' (Olowola 1993: 12). According to the Barundi, God is the 'watcher of everything' (Islam & Islam 2015: 4). The Zulu and Banyarwanda also affirm that God is the only 'wise One.' In similar words the BaCongo recognise that 'God knows all.' All these affirmations confirm, as John Mbiti (1970:3) argues, that Africans believe that while humans are limited in knowl-edge, God is an all-knowing God. His knowledge encompasses all reality (Knighton 1999:121; Adedeji 2012:49).

4.2.4.2.3 God's Immanence and Transcendence

In ATR, an immanent God is a present God. God's immanence is revealed to Africans in divine theophanies. Divine theophanies are regarded in many different things in ATR, for example, Ben Knighton (1999:122, 124) points out that in the Karamojong, God's presence is believed to be occupying elders' meetings. Whenever and wherever the elders meet, God is there, present with them. According to the Karamojong belief, God's presence is sometimes experienced in a flurry of wind on top of branches of designated sacred trees where the elders meet. God is personal and relates with Af-rican communities (Ukpong 1983:190).

The African God is present to meet the people's needs. This notion is made clear in Africans' acts of prayer, invocations, offerings, and sacrifices. On this point, Shafiul Islam and Didarul Islam (2015:3-4) maintain that 'God is contemporaneous to the tra-ditional people of Africa…God's immanence is understood in association with acts of worship.' Ben Knighton (1999:122) concurs with Islam and Islam (2015:3-4), claiming that 'God is felt to be present in the world indirectly through divine Spirit of Spirits.'

John Mbiti (1970:17) quotes the Azende praise-name for God in which God is regarded as 'the All-pervasive.' According to Mbiti, this expression 'indicates that God is involved in his creation and immanent and close to everything' (Mbiti 1970:17). The Ngombe, expressing God's immanence, narrate that God fills everything. This, however, should not be misunderstood as a reference to pantheism. Indeed, Mbiti (1970:17) cautions: 'While God is believed to be immanent in all things, there is no evidence that everything is considered to be God. This would be pantheism, and as far as our sources are concerned pantheism does not occur among any of the African peoples.'

Emeka Ekeke and Chike Ekeopara (2010:212) claim that, '[a]s an immanent God, Africans see Him as God whose presence is felt by people within the natural world.' For Richard Gehman (1989: 190), Africans 'cannot wander away from the presence of God.' The Bena people acknowledge that God 'is everywhere at once.' Their view is affirmed by the Bamum of Cameron who call God 'Njinyi, Njinyi' – which connotes an omnipresent God (Lugira 2009:44-45). John Mbiti (1970:5) is correct when he argues that these expressions, although unintended, are theological and philosophical statements about God. Thus, in a nutshell, ATR's God is closer and present in Africans' ontology. What about God's transcendence?

Transcendence is a complex attribute in ATR which, according to John Mbiti (1970:12), must be balanced with immanence. These twin attributes belong to the same coin in ATR. While humans are in the world, God transcends the world (Masoga & Nicolaides 2021:24). Emeka Ekeke and Chike Ekeopara (2010:212) list five elements that certify God's transcendence in ATR, namely 1) time and place cannot limit God; 2) God exists outside space and time; 3) God is a mystery and, thus, incomprehensible; 4) God is the first cause of everything that exists; and 5) God is trustworthy.

Compared to other attributes of God in ATR, transcendence is one attribute around which most of the names of God revolve. In addition, transcendence, as compared to other attributes, is over-emphasised in ATR. Being transcendent means that God is set apart from divinities and human beings (Agyarko 2013:54; Ezeugwu & Chinweuba 2018:27). On this notion, Ben Knighton (1999:121; cf. Agada 2022:2) submits that God

is wholly other, God is 'radically transcendent, being above, and greater than, all in every sense.'

Richard Gehman (1989:190) suggests, however, that the overemphasis on this attribute has led ATR's God to be regarded by some Western scholars as *Deus otiosus*. I have already argued earlier that in their reference to God as transcendent, Africans are affirming that God is not human, not that God is absent from Africans' cosmologies.

The Tonga call God 'the Ancient of days.' John Mbiti (1970:12) argues that this exemplary expression suggests that 'there is no terminus of time when God was not, since from the most ancient time of which man can think, God was in existence.' Shafiul Islam and Didarul Islam (2015:3) agree: 'God's transcendence outlook stretches over and beyond the whole Zamani period. He is the prime reality of being without lacking any incompletion.' Islam and Islam add: 'God's existence is never ending and it preceded the beginning of His creation too. He transcends all boundaries and all things we ever know.' David Adamo (2011:3) cements this point when he states that God is 'the controller, the everlasting, the omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent and ever-lasing God, even if all divinities and the ancestors became silent.' He therefore emphasises that God transcends all reality in ATR.

In sum, therefore, in ATR, God is the creator of everything that exists. While present to his people, God also transcends reality, and this causes him to exist in a league of his own.

4.2.4.3 The Spirit World

The spirit world in ATR is comprised of divinities, ancestral spirits, and other spiritual beings. I will only focus on divinities and ancestral spirits.

4.2.4.3.1 Divinities

It is a futile theological exercise to try and ascertain the relationship that Africans have with God, without taking into consideration the role that divinities play in ATR (Ushe 2017:166). Joseph Olanrewaju (2009:44) claims that a relationship between God and humans in ATR cannot be understood outside of an understanding of the nature of the relationship that Africans have with divinities.

The issue of divinities divides Africans into two groups (Gehman 2019:171). The first group comprises Africans in the West and the second group comprises Africans in Central, Eastern, and Southern Africa. It is Africans in the West who hold divinities in high regard. Emeka Ekeke and Chike Ekeopara (2010:213) endorse this point when they aver that 'belief in divinities is a common phenomenon especially in West Africa, while in other parts of Africa, the concept is not succinctly expressed.' According to Richard Gehman, people in Western Africa do not only believe in divinities, but they also worship these divinities. Gehman (2019:172) records that the Yoruba people have about 1,700 divinities. The Ewe of Ghana have a countless number of divinities (Ekeke & Ekeopara 2010:213).

What are divinities and what role do they play in ATR? On the origins of divinities, Ushe Ushe (2017:166-167) mentions two schools of thought, one led by John Mbiti (1969) and the other by Bolaji Idowu (1973). The first school posits that divinities were created by God and serve as God's assistants. According to this school, divinities are extensions of God's attributes. The other school posits that divinities like Jesus and the Father, were brought forth into being from God's nature by God himself. In other words, divinities protrude from the Being of God. However, Ushe (2017:168) has a problem with the second school of thought because if divinities were not created but brought into being from God's nature, it would mean that they share the same nature as God. This would equate the divinities to God. Moreover, Ushe argues that this idea is foreign to ATR. A widely accepted view among scholars of ATR, though, is that divinities were created by God (Mbiti 1969; Idowu 1973; Olanrewaju 2009; Ezeugwu & Chinweuba 2018; Gbadegesin 2018; Gehman 2019).

Be that as it may, Africans believe that God works with divinities. Some divinities are even believed to have been involved in the creation of the world (Gbadegesin 2018:49). Additionally, it is held that after the creation, God left the universe to be run and cared for by divinities. Richard Gehman (2019:181) supports this view.

Divinities in ATR are experts in different roles: 'Each of the gods has its area of influence and operation and holds supreme authority and power in that sphere' (Ezeugwu & Chinweuba 2018:30). Enoch Gbadegesin (2018:49) concurs when he states that

God ‘delegated divinities to oversee the earth and take care of the people’s requests and concerns.’ The Yoruba people, for instance, before embarking on a journey, seeks protection from Ogun, who is the god of protection. In seeking for protection, sacrifices are often offered to the divinities. Joseph Olanrewaju (2009:44; cf. Ekeke & Ekeopara 2010: 213) writes that ‘[s]ome Yoruba go even further, giving theophoric names to their children as testimonies to the help they have received from their gods.’ In the Igbo traditional thought, Ani is the earth goddess, and she is believed to be a custodian of morality (Ezeugwu & Chinweuba 2018:31). Oluku is the god of fertility, Osu of medicine, and Ogiuwu of death (Ekeke & Ekeopara 2010:213). Each divinity operates in their specific area of influence.

Emeka Ekeke and Chike Ekeopara (2010:214-215; cf. Ushe 2017:168-169) list at least five key things about divinities: 1) Divinities are God’s creation. As such, they are subordinate to Him. 2) They do not possess power of their own. God grants it to them. Their power and authority are only exercised as far as God allows it. 3) Divinities are given duties by God. This means that they cannot perform a function that is outside the will of God. 4) Divinities serve God in different spheres in the theocratic way of governing the world. 5) They serve as intermediaries between God and humans. In this regard, humans’ prayers, offerings, and sacrifices to God are offered through divinities.

One key function of divinities in ATR is serving as intermediaries between God and Africans (Agada 2022:3). This ontological relationship calls to mind the picture presented in Christian theology where God works with lesser beings (Lugira 2009:38). For example, while ruling over saints, God works with angels to maintain relations with saints. Richard Gehman (2019:171) observes, though, that in Christianity, divinities are hostile to God while in ATR they work in harmony with God.

There are, however, some concerns regarding the attitude of Africans towards God and divinities. The major concern is the fact that Africans tend to devote more attention to divinities than to God. This observation has led some thinkers like Geoffrey Parrinder (1962) to the conclusion that Africans are polytheistic. Most recently, this concern has also been raised by Richard Gehman (2019). He has assessed the works of Bolaji Idowu (1962), Kofi Opoku (1978), and Theophilus Quarcoopome (1987) who

defend the idea that Africans are monotheistic. Having assessed their works, Gehman accuses these scholars of being apologetic towards ATR. His argument is grounded on the fact that West Africans have erected visible cults and shrines for the worship of divinities. Yet there are no cults for the worship of God. According to Gehman, this indicates that West Africans worship divinities and not God. He adds though, that '[w]hen peoples of West Africa are speaking, they constantly mention or imply the name of God. Prayers for help are sometimes offered to Him but sacrifices to God are rare' (Gehman 2019:183). He then derives that these observations are sufficient to conclude that West Africans worship divinities. Benno Toren concurs with Gehman. For Toren (2001:242), it appears as though that divinities in West Africa are viewed as divine the same way God is. Because of this, it is difficult to dismiss the idea that West Africans only worship divinities. By stating this, Toren agrees in essence with Gehman.

In recent times, however, Richard Gehman's accusations have been challenged by Ekeke and Ekeopara (2010:215), arguing that the overwhelming service given to divinities by West Africans should be understood as 'only a half-way house which is not meant to be permanent resting place for man's [sic.] soul. While man [sic.] may find the divinities "sufficient" for certain needs, something continues to warn him [sic.] that "sufficiency" is only in Deity…The divinities are only a means to an end and not an end in themselves.'

Emeka Ekeke and Chike Ekeopara (2010:215) further argue that the fact that Africans offer sacrifices and build shrines for divinities has not stopped them from directly praying to God. The two scholars liken ATR to a unitary theocratic government where 'powers are delegated to various deities or divinities for the governance of the universe, and they bring report to the Supreme Being at intervals' (Ekeke & Ekeopara 2010:216). Mogomme Masoga and Angelo Nicolaides (2021:24) also reject the idea that Africans worship divinities. According to them, Africans do not consider themselves worthy to approach God in worship, and then, instead, approach God through ancestors and divinities who, in turn, communicate to God on their behalf.

Jele Manganyi and Johan Buitendag (2013:2) argue that Africans offer sacrifices to God through ancestors and divinities because of the distance that they feel between

them and God. This implies that the activities that ensue between Africans and divinities have nothing to do with Africans worshiping these divinities, but Africans viewing divinities as intermediaries. A phenomenon like this, Manganyi and Buitendag (2013:2) argue, once took place in the Bible during the post-exilic period when the Jews felt a distance between them and God. The Jews turned to lesser gods for help who they believed were closer to them than God was (Ex 32; 1 Ki 12).

Ada Agada (2022:3) elucidates the aforementioned scholar's argument:

> The ubiquity of lesser deities in ATR is sometimes regarded as evidence that ATR is polytheistic rather than monotheistic, and that, consequently, the God of ATR cannot be a transcendent being. However, the ubiquity of lesser deities merely masks God's greatness. ATR conceives God as so great and majestic that he cannot deal directly with puny mortals without humans suffering the harm of direct encounter with divine majesty.

In brief, divinities are God's creation in ATR. They serve his will and purpose. Of paramount importance is that divinities act as intermediaries between God and humans.

4.2.4.3.2 Ancestral Spirits

Outside of God, there are two kinds of spirits in the spirit world: Spirits that were created by God and the spirits of dead people (Gehman 2019:197; Ekeke & Ekeopara 2010:212). Created spirits, ATR believes, can be found in forests, rivers, and unpopulated places. Some of these spirits actually are believed to live even in animals. 'Wherever the spirits may be, they are never far from man [sic.]' (Gehman 2019:198). The spirit world is a key component in ATR. It plays a major role in the life of traditional Africans. It is so key to the African that it is almost as if without the spirit world the traditional African would be totally incomplete.

Although I do not intend to delve into the category of spirits in ATR that are believed to have been created by God, I want to state a few things about them, considering the fact that Africans themselves are deeply a spiritual people. Indeed, the spirit world is a key component in ATR and plays a major role in the lives of Africans. As has been stated above, the spirit world is so key to Africans that, without it, they would almost be incomplete.

According to David Adamo (2011:4), spirits are ‘apparitional entities.’ Although they exist in the spirit world, they belong to a different group of beings than divinities. It is believed that spirits can inhabit objects including human beings. There are spirits of witches, ghost spirits, guardian spirits, and diviner spirits, to name but a few. The Toubouri peoples of Chad, for instance, believe in the spirits that animate everything including trees and stones. They are so scared of these spirits that they try by all means to not offend them. The Kichepo people believe that these spirits can possess individuals (Gehman 2019:197). Regarding spirits, David Adamo (2011:4) writes: ‘Belief in these spirits permeates the life of Africans and should be taken seriously.’ According to Richard Gehman (2019:198), these spirits are

> unpredictable and therefore dangerous. Since spirits cannot be seen, they are feared for they can strike any time. The nameless spirits are always attacking, molesting, destroying and harming the living. Since they are unpredictable, the safest step is to remain far from their places of abode. Any tragedy of illness, insanity or epilepsy may be blamed on them.

Because traditional Africans believe in the spirit world, refuge from the evil spirits is often sought for in the shrines and churches that claim to offer protection (Ndemanu 2018:76). For Africans, the existence of evil is a real phenomenon. Evil can be moral or physical. However, Africans believe that God does not cause evil. God only does good for humanity. The culprits that are usually blamed for causing evil, are ancestors, evil spirits that are roaming around, witches, divinities, or even broken taboos. According to David Adamo (2011:4), ‘[e]vil concerns any misfortune that befalls an individual or community or any voluntary anti-social behaviour or any infringement of the decrees of God, the deity or the ancestors.’ Africans believe that the world is populated with evil spirits that are destined to destroy and kill (Danfulani 2012:40; Obodoegbulam, Ngbara, & Kpe 2022:36).

It has already been mentioned that Africans take the existence of evil as caused by evil spirits seriously. Accordingly, Africans often take measures to deal with the problem of evil. Usually, the main way of dealing with the problem of evil is through sacrifices and offerings. These are carried out so that Africans can save themselves from the effects caused by these spirits. Here it is key to note that sacrifices and offerings differ from each other (cf. Adamo 2011:4). The difference between them is that sacrifices tend to be bloody while offerings are not. There are cases where the sacrifice of

a human being is carried out. Offerings are in most cases gifts such as food, milk, and honey. Masoga and Nicolaides (2021:25-26) shed some light: 'Where there are offerings given, these are for personal and communal reasons and such are normally made at sacred shrines or in sacred groves or other holy places, including inter-alia hills, lakes, waterfalls, while personal offerings are generally made in the home.' Regarding sacrifices, the sacrificial blood is usually taken from birds and animals (Masoga & Nicolaides 2021:25).

I needed to make these remarks regarding created spirits because the belief by Africans in the existence of evil spirits accounts for why Africans seek a closer relationship with their ancestors. One of those reasons is for ancestors to protect the Africans from these evil spirits. The ancestors in ATR will now be discussed.

The African worldview is twofold. On the one hand is the world of humans. This world is populated by visible things, both animate and inanimate. On the other hand is the spirit world which engulfs the natural world. The majority of the spirits in the spirit world are the ancestral spirits (Agyarko 2013:55). While divinities and ancestral spirits exist in the same world, the two belong to separate homogenous categories (Gehman 2019:171). In the regions of Africa, the idea of ancestral veneration is dominant among the Bantu speaking people. According to Richard Gehman (2019:197-198), the entire life of the average Bantu is lived to appease their ancestors.

Life in ATR is a process composed of birth, death, and rebirth. It is lived holistically as a relationship between humans and the spirit world, and, ultimately, with God. Commenting on the relationship between the living and the ancestral spirits, Richard Gehman (2019:204) argues, 'An essential element of ATR is the inter-dependence of the living and the living-dead. They live in a symbiotic relationship, interdependent with one another. The living-dead continue with their obligations as the elders of the family, while the living show respect by fulfilling their obligations to the elders.' Writing on the Karanga traditional religion, Tabona Shoko (2007:33) avers that some Africans believe that ancestors guide and control their lives.

Accordingly, the African's family is comprised of two classes: The living members and the ancestors who are often called the living-dead. Africans believe that the person who dies, continues to live in the spirit world. Some Africans even believe in the reincarnation of the dead (Ndemanu 2018:78). According to Abiodun Ige (2006:27), the 'ancestors are still present, watching over the household and the property of the family. They are the powerful part of the clan, maintaining a close link between the world of men [sic.] and the spirit world.' Ancestors operate in the space where their people exist. However, location does not mean that the ancestors' influence cannot be felt by members who are outside the place of the ancestors' operation. That is why a member of the family who lives far away, but experiences life difficulties, comes back home to appease the ancestors. Ancestors serve the interests of their clan. They are called for protection and guidance, particularly protection from evil spirits.

Ancestors exist in ATR to serve the interests of the family to whom they belong (Obodoegbulam *et al*. 2022:37). 'The ancestors, like the divinities, are intermediaries between the Supreme God and people. It is the ancestors who afford a connection between the past, present, and the future' (Olanrewaju 2009:45; cf. Westerlund 1985:88). The place that they hold in the life of Africans is so powerful that the Africans even keep on believing in them, even after they have converted to Christianity or Islam (Ndemanu 2018:72).

Who qualifies and what qualifies one to become an ancestor in ATR? Death is the main qualification to becoming an ancestor. Death alone, though, is not enough. One must die at an old and ripe age. Even in that case, the cause of their death must be natural (Shoko 2007:33). The death of a child does not qualify the child as an ancestor, and dying from factors such as a car accident, sleeping sickness, suicide, and epilepsy, disqualifies the individual from becoming an ancestor. It is believed that these deaths are because of a hidden crime one may have committed. Tabona Shoko (2007:33-34) goes on to state that evil people like witches are excluded from being ancestors. Additionally, a person who dies without having children to continue their bloodline, is not considered an ancestor (Ige 2006:29; Adedeji 2012:53-54). The same applies to a person who dies having not been married. Commenting on the idea of what makes one an ancestor, Richard Gehman (2019:199) claims: 'Those most likely to be revered after death are those who were revered in this life, namely, those who

exercised influence in society such as elders with large families and wealth and those who were feared because of their mystical power.'

David Adamo (2011:4) agrees: 'People's hope is to join the ranks of the ancestors in the spirit world, with all its rights and benefits and use their enhanced powers for the benefit of their families and clans.' In ATR, the living and the ancestors are required to live in harmony with each other. This is because ancestors are known to be sensitive. When unhappy, they can inflict pain on the lives of the living (Toren 2001:242).

Since ancestors belong to the spirit world, they are believed to be powerful. Abiodun Ige (2006:27) claims that this power is given to the ancestors by God, although God does not have control over how the ancestors use this power. This accounts for why in some instances, ancestors can use this power to harm the living (Adamo 2011:4). Since an ontological relationship between the living and ancestors cannot be denied, how then do Africans communicate with the ancestors?

Africans communicate with the ancestors through sacrifices and invocations. Often the presence of a specialist who knows how to connect people with the ancestral world is sought after by the family. In Zulu, this specialist is referred to as a 'sangoma' (Manganyi & Buitendag 2013:2). These specialists are often called by the ancestors to provide spiritual leadership and serve as healers (Masoga & Nicolaides 2021:24; cf. Gehman 2019:207). Sangomas and traditional healers act as intermediaries; a work that is also done by divinities in ATR (Gehman 2019:207). This leads us to the question of ancestor veneration.

Ancestor veneration refers to the act of awe, admiration, and reverence for the ancestors by Africans. Ancestor veneration, as Abiodun Ige (2006:28) narrates, has got nothing to do with ancestor worship as some Westerners claim. Ultimate worship in ATR goes to God.

Abiodun Ige compares the veneration that Africans have for ancestors to the veneration given by Catholics to the virgin Mary. In a typical Catholic church, a corner is usually dedicated to a statue of Mary. Prayers are then offered to her. According to Ige, the common Roman Catholic prayer line, 'Hail Mary, mother of God, pray for us

in earth now unto the hour of our death,' corroborates the African ancestor veneration theory (Ige 2006:29). Ige then concludes that 'this is also the African view in venerating their ancestors' (Ige 2006:29). Ige implies that Africans' ancestral veneration should not be confused with their worshiping the dead. According to Ige (2006:29), by worshiping the individual, one surrenders their entire being to the one superior to them, whereas in veneration, the individual is concerned with reverence and awe for the ancestor. While the line of demarcation between worship and veneration may be thin, the point is that 'Africans venerate their ancestors and not worship them' (Ige 2006:29). Jele Manganyi and Johan Buitendag (2013:2) agree with Ige. For Manganyi and Buitendag, the Roman Catholic Church practices 'the veneration of the saints,' a concept similar to ATR's ancestral veneration.

Jele Manganyi and Johan Buitendag (2013:2) sympathise with Africans. These scholars direct our attention to some of the African phrases used in service to the ancestors such as 'ukuhlabela amadlozi.' During this ceremony, Africans would be heard saying, 'umsebenzi kababa' or 'umama.' As these expressions imply, the work is that of service, that of 'remembering or thanking the ancestors but with an approach that is like being called church service' (Manganyi & Buitendag 2013:2). For John Mbiti, the idea of worshiping a human being is not heard of in ATR. Only God is worshiped. Mbiti (1969:178) even suggests that the term 'worship' does not exist in most of the African languages. Richard Gehman (2019:201) concurs: '"Ancestral spirits" are the most senior elders of the people. Conceptually, they are distinct from deity. In much the same way as West Africans make a conceptual distinction between the divinities and the Supreme Being, so Africans make a conceptual distinction between the departed ancestors and the Creator God.'

An overview of literature on ancestor veneration, however, reveals that Africans are closer to their ancestors than they are to God and divinities (Olanrewaju 2009:45). Jele Manganyi and Johan Buitendag (2013:4) suggest that 'the involvement of ancestors in African life may imply that God has a lesser role in influencing African life.' However, this, as has already been indicated, is not the case.

Africans offer sacrifices to God through ancestors and divinities. Michael Ndemanu (2018:74) states that as much as Africans do invoke the services of the ancestors, this

does not stop them from offering sacrifices and prayers to God directly. Jele Manganyi and Johan Buitendag (2013:2) concur, arguing that Africans offer sacrifices to God through ancestors and divinities because of the distance that they feel they have between them and God. This phenomenon, Manganyi and Buitendag argue, was also the case during the post-exilic period of the Israelites, as indicated above.

A last question in this regard is, 'Where is the spirit world of the ancestors located?' According to the evidence in the literature, the location of the abode of ancestors does not really interest Africans. They are rather interested in the relationship that they have with the ancestors. Nevertheless, there are some Africans, such as the Batswana of Botswana, who believe that ancestors live underground. This belief is influenced by the fact that the dead are buried underground. Still, others believe that the ancestors live somewhere in the sky above. In any case, the ancestral world is the destiny for specific Africans (as discussed above) upon death (Gehman 2019:204).

I have so far explored the nature of ATR in this section, where I have demonstrated that ATR predates Christianity, particularly the brand of Christianity that came with the Western missionaries. I have also indicated that despite the efforts by the missionaries to obliterate the elements of ATR, it has refused to die and continues to be the religion of Africans. This religion has God at its pinnacle. His otherness is noted in Africa and his immanence is fully embraced. This section has also demonstrated the vibrant and dynamic relation that Africans have with the spirit world. Apart from God, the spirit world comprises of divinities, ancestors, and spirits. Ancestors and divinities act as intermediaries between God and Africans. In the next section, the relation that God has to time in ATR will be discussed.

4.3 TOWARDS GOD'S RELATION TO TIME IN ATR

I have already alluded in chapter 1 that time in Africa is understood in the context of events. Events make time and time is reckoned in actual terms. For example,

> an expectant mother in the rural area of Zululand counts the lunar months of her pregnancy; a farmer in Ghana counts the rainy and dry seasons; a traveller from the rural areas of Kenya counts the number of days and nights it would take him to travel from one part of the country to another (Oladipo 2010:60).

John Mbiti (1990:159) has highlighted the fact that Africans are not necessarily concerned about the metaphysics of time as is the case in the West. Africans just take the existence of time for granted. They live life holistically. What this means, is that time and events are interconnected. Time cannot be separated from events because events are time. Time in ATR, then, is a collection of events and experiences lived by Africans (Kaunda 2020:83).

Not only is time reckoned through events and experiences in Africa, but it is also interconnected with space. Life and experiences in Africa are lived in space (Kaunda 2020:83). In the words of John Mbiti (1969:161), 'It is to be noted that Time and Space are closely connected in African life and thought.' In view of this, 'Africans are particularly tied to the land, because it is the concrete expression of both their Zamani and their Sasa' (Mbiti 1990: 26). Rudolph Oosthuizen (1993:199), like Mbiti, also refers to the space-time interconnectedness. The space-time fusion, we recall from chapter 2, is associated with Albert Einstein through his special theory of relativity. In physics, space-time is any mathematical model which fuses the three dimensions of space and the one dimension of time into a single four-dimensional manifold (Hales & Johnson 2003:528; Mullins 2013:32). Although it may not be his intention, Oosthuizen's point flirts with the view that there could be a sense in which time is static for Africans. However, he probably means that events take place in time the same way they do in space. In any case, it could imply that space and time are like the theatre in which events and experiences are lived.

Whether God exists in or outside time, in the end, all theologies must give an account of how God relates to the temporal world. After all, the world is God's creation and there has to be a way in which he relates to the world (Wolterstorff 2001; Craig 2009; Padgett 2011). If time forms part of the world's creation, theologies in all religions must demonstrate how God relates to time. In light of this, this section attempts to address the question from ATR's perspective.

Scholarly works on how God relates to time in ATR, however, are almost non-existent. Having stated that, two types of literature emerge from the African cosmological perspective. On the one hand, there is literature on African concepts of God, and on the other hand, literature on Africans' concepts of time. The first category of literature is

mostly written by theologians, while the second category is mostly written by philosophers. While there are scholarly works on God and scholarly works on time, none of these categories of literature address the question of God's relation to time.

This section aims to bridge that gap by way of making a theological composite sketch of what God's relation to time could look like in ATR. I plan to carry out this task in three ways. First, I will bring literature on time and on God into dialogue. Second, I will critically analyse attributes associated with God in ATR. I will analyse these attributes because I believe that they contain clues regarding God's relation to time. Clues and implications derived from these attributes, in turn, will be used to paint a theological picture of God's relation to time in ATR. This strategy mimics the one by Joseph Awolalu (1979) where he deals with the concept of God in ATR. He examines African beliefs and attributes concerning God and once done, he then fuses the implications with each other, which he has derived from these beliefs and attributes, and then paints a concept of God from that exercise. Awolalu (1979:9) reasons: 'We gain a greater insight into the people's concepts of God, as they are descriptive of His character and attributes.' In like manner, I believe that we can gain a picture of how God relates to time in ATR, utilising a deductive method as a theological instrument. For clarity of thought, I will focus only on the five attributes that I have discussed in the previous section, namely God's eternality, creatorship, omniscience, immanence, and transcendence. Third, I will also briefly examine the relationships that exist between humans, divinities, ancestors, and God. These relationships also contain some clues as to how God relates to time in ATR.

4.3.1 On Eternality and Creatorship

John Mbiti (1990:159) has correctly noted that 'in traditional thought, Africans are not concerned with academic questions of Time.' Although Africans take the existence of time for granted, metaphysical issues that come with time are not necessarily entertained in ATR. Time, therefore, is considered as a part of the whole, meaning that time cannot be isolated from the whole and be subjected to an academic analysis (Oosthuizen 1993:197-198). I agree with Rantoa Letšosa *et al*. (2011:1) when they assert that '[c]oncepts regarding time, and the historical consciousness that flows from it, have a definitive influence on the quality and purpose of human life.' One of the purposes that Africans pursue in life is to have a healthy relationship with God. In this

regard, Africans' view of time becomes a critical lens through which their relationship with God is interpreted. Lenard Nyirongo (1997:89) acknowledges this thought: 'How we interpret time, history and man's [sic.] calling on earth can reveal a great deal of whether or not we have a right relationship with our Creator. These are closely linked with God's dealings with us and our response to Him.' Consequently, issues relating to time and God are of paramount importance even in ATR.

Concerns about whether time was created or not, do not really occupy the minds of Africans. However, in Africa, time is interconnected with space. In this setup, time becomes a collection of events and experiences lived in space. John Mbiti (1990:26) argues that what is important for Africans, 'is what is geographically near, just as Sasa embraces the life that people experience. For this reason, Africans are particularly tied to the land, because it is the concrete expression of both their Zamani and their Sasa.'

From this angle, time is understood in concrete terms (Olupona 2014:8; Kaunda 2020:85). Because, according to African ontologies, time is viewed as concrete, it cannot exist on its own without events (Van Zyl 2007:145). African time thus depends on events for its existence. In this setup, African time is similar to the Aristotelian time and different from the Newtonian absolute time, and because time is linked with events in ATR, it implies that time came with creation (Knighton 1999:121). Consequently, time was created by God. It can be deduced from this notion then that before creation, time did not exist. However, depending on the mode of existence that God has assumed before creation, this and related questions are not available in ATR.

The fact that God existed alone before creation and at some point co-existed with creation, means that God possesses the potential to change (Mullins 2023:2-3 of 21). For instance, for God to bring creation into being, suggests that he experienced some intrinsic and extrinsic change. In view of this, Alan Padgett (2010:889) argues that, 'necessarily, if change is possible for something then that thing is temporal in some way.' Padgett (2010:890) adds:

> If God is even capable of change at all, then God is in some way temporal. When we reflect upon the very first change in the life of God, the momentous change of brining [sic.] about the physical space-time universe in the beginning, that change belongs to God alone. So God must be capable of change.

As already noted, God's existence in ATR is not contested (Islam & Islam 2015:7-8), while his creatorship is affirmed (Olabamiji 2023:1). Emefie Metuh (1987:110) comments that, '[a]s creator of All things, he [God] precedes all, both in order of time and excellence. He is therefore the "First Cause."' Ben Knighton (1999:121) argues that God, according to Africans, encompasses the whole of creation. This implies that if time has come with creation, then God encompasses the entire reality, including time. Put differently, God is understood as being above time in ATR.

Although God is generally believed to be One in ATR, there are some Africans who believe that God is a union of more than one being. Aloysius Lugira (2009:39) has done some research on the Bambara of Ghana who affirm this notion. According to the Bambara, God is a manifestation of four beings who play different roles in creation. If this belief is anything to go by, then three deductions can be made. First, ATR's God is a relational being. In this context, God is regarded in ATR as engaging in deliberations, planning, and executing decisions. Second, the mentioned activities that God is engaged in, imply that he is temporal. This means that the African God experiences time because planning, for example, requires a process to take place. Third, if God is temporal, he cannot be static. This means that as a union of four, God affects and is affected by the deliberations and decisions that take place. Thus, even though God is above time, he is temporal in that he can change from one moment to another.

We can therefore conclude that Africans conceive God as eternal. He is without beginning and will never go out of existence. As an eternal being, God is the creator of time. Because he stands in a causal relation with his creation, he acts in time, although he is also above time.

4.3.2 On Omniscience

It has already been noted that in ATR, God is depicted as absolute and wise (Islam & Islam 2015:4). His knowledge encompasses everything. Nothing takes place in the world outside of God's knowledge (Adedeji 2012:49). According to the Akan, 'God is He who knows and sees all.' The Zulu and the Banyarwanda affirm that 'God is the wise one.' According to the Yoruba, God knows everything, including the hearts of everyone. The Barundi believe that God is the 'Watcher of everything' (Mbiti 1970:3;

Islam & Islam 2015:4). These bits and pieces of beliefs about God substantiate the point that his knowledge is exhaustive and perfect.

In traditional Christian theology, God's omniscience is receiving theological and philosophical explanations. This is not the case in ATR (Mbiti 1970:4). What is of interest to Africans, though, is that God is aware of everything that takes place. While people may possess a certain level of knowledge, they have limitations. However, God's knowledge is limitless. John Mbiti (1970:3) asserts that '[n]o one else is worthy of, or is given, the attribute of omniscience,' except God.

When these statements about God's omniscience are knitted together, they paint a theological picture that ATR's God is temporal because he has a detailed knowledge of everything that takes place in the world. He knows these events as they happen in time. For example, if the African harvests crops today, God knows it. Harvesting is a temporal event that takes place through a process. Because events and times change, God's knowledge is understood in ATR as also changing.

4.3.3 Immanence and Transcendence

God's immanence is experienced through his presence everywhere in the natural world (Ekeke & Ekeopara 2010:212-213). For example, the Akan believe that God 'is immediately present to each creature' (Agyarko 2013:55). In addition, they believe that God is spirit. They liken God to the wind. In this regard, the Akan have a proverb that goes, 'If one wants to talk to God, they must speak to the wind.' As Spirit, therefore, God is omnipresent. For the Akan, God is everywhere and, when needed, can be called at any time (Agyarko 2013:53; cf. Ezeugwu & Chinweuba 2018:37). As a result, immanence in ATR suggests a present God.

Earlier I have pointed out that God's immanence is experienced through divine theophanies. For example, in the Karamojong belief, God's presence can be experienced in a flurry of wind on designated sacred trees where elders meet. The theological deduction we make from the immanence attribute, therefore, is that God is personal. This makes God a living and relational being (Knighton 1999:122, 124). Justin Ukpong (1983:190) corroborates this view: 'God is a person capable of maintaining a personal

relationship, and that he is worshiped.' For these relations to exist, God must be in time.

Theophanies in ATR show how close God is to Africans. Just as it appears to be the case in the Old Testament, in ATR, God is understood as moving with Africans through the passage of time.

Although God is immanent, he is in fact also transcendent in some way in ATR (Masoga & Nicolaides 2021:24). Writing on God's transcendence, Ben Knighton (1999: 121) asserts that God is wholly other, he is 'radically transcendent, being above, and greater than, all in every sense.' The idea, in this setup, is that God is far and beyond. What does this mean, considering the subject matter at hand? It means that although the African God acts in time, he is somehow also above time. This means that he does not suffer properties of time, and that he is not a prisoner of time.

It must be pointed out that despite the apparent contradiction between immanence and transcendence, theological attempts to reconcile the two attributes in ATR are scant. The two divine attributes are treated as two sides of the same coin. John Mbiti (1970: 12) advises, nevertheless, that when the two attributes are studied, they should be balanced together.

Based on the analysed attributes above, the conclusion is that in ATR, God acts in time. However, this does not make him a prisoner of time since, based on his eternality, he transcends the temporal world, including time.

4.3.4 On Divinities and Ancestors as Intermediaries

Divinities and ancestors are Africans' way in which they propound the presence of God. How Africans interact with divinities, provides a clue on how God relates to time, according to African cosmology (Ezeugwu & Chinweuba 2018:30). It has been established earlier that in ATR, God is understood as working with and through divinities and ancestors. For example, God assigns divinities some responsibilities in service of Africans. Divinities are well known for their intermediary role between God and the African people.

In view of the role that divinities play in ATR, it is necessary to make a theological deduction on how God relates to time through these divinities. This deduction, I would argue, verifies the idea that the African God is temporal as opposed to being timeless. This is because the relationship between God and divinities is causal and dynamic in nature. God interacts with divinities and these divinities in turn interact with Africans on behalf of God. The argument, therefore, is that for these interactions to be meaningful, they require a mutual and a dynamic – as opposed to static – kind of relationship between God and divinities to take place. Time also comes into play in this relationship because God would have to interact with these divinities on their time scale.

Moreover, the fact that Africans pray and give offerings to God through divinities, indicates that Africans believe that God is approachable and mutable (Gbadegesin 2018: 49). If God answers prayers, it also means that he works with Africans on their time scale, and therefore he should know what is going on in Africa, according to Africa's time. God must therefore know, for example, a time when an event is taking place and for how long that event lasts. God must know which African is praying at what time and from what place in Africa that person is praying. If God decides to answer the prayer, it stands to reason that the answering of prayer comes after the prayer has been offered. All these need a succession of events to take place and a process to unfold. Consequently, only a God who experiences events according to the passage of time, can answer prayers of Africans. This God must be temporally extended and exists at every moment of time.

Divinities are not the only spiritual beings that serve as intermediaries between God and Africans. Ancestors also fulfil this role (Olanrewaju 2009:45). According to Mogomme Masoga and Angelo Nicolaides (2021:24), ancestors are a way to God's presence. Generally, Africans worship God through their ancestors. In turn, ancestors present Africans' petitions before God. It must be stated though, that although Africans have a closer relationship with their ancestors than they have with God, they live their lives seeking a balanced relationship with God. Like it is the case with divinities, Africans, through their ancestors, offer sacrifices and prayers to God during their time of need (Manganyi & Buitendag 2013:4). Again, the implication entailed in this relationship between God, Africans, and ancestors is hard to ignore. For these relations to be possible, God must be temporally extended and exist at every moment of time. The

fact that Africans believe that God can speak to them through their ancestors, implies that they believe that God gets affected by their concerns and that he avails his presence to them in time.

The abovementioned serves as a composite sketch of the nature and the extent to which God relates to time. Because ATR is a pragmatic religion, it makes logical sense for God's relation to time to be temporal. Temporality on the part of God avails his presence to Africans. God acts in the affairs of Africans according to their time scale. This does not mean that he is a prisoner of time. Indeed, Africans believe that time is a creation of God and this fact causes God to transcend it. Time depends on God for its existence.

4.4 SUMMARY

The main aim of this chapter was to explore the character and nature of ATR with the intention to establish the nature of God's relation to time. This chapter, like the previous one, has laid a foundation upon which a critique of the timelessness of God theology could ensue. First, the nucleus of what ATR is, was sought. It was established that ATR has been in existence long before the arrival of missionaries, and that ATR continues to exist. ATR is the religion of Africans, handed down to modern generations by the religion's ancestors. Several elements are foundational to the existence and heartbeat of ATR. At the pinnacle of the African religion is the Supreme Being, God who goes by different names across the continent. It was also established that like in any other major religions of the world, culture plays a significant role in ATR. The African cosmology is informed and interpreted through a cultural framework.

Second, of material relevance for this chapter is the concept of God and the spirit world, and the role these entities play in the lives of Africans. This chapter has demonstrated the otherness of the African God, among other things. This was accomplished by way of investigating proverbs, statements, as well as the attributes and names of God by Africans. It indicated that God is understood by Africans as working with divinities and ancestors in governing the African continent. A note was also made regarding other spirits that were created by God. It was established that these spirits are known for causing evil among Africans.

Lastly, this chapter attempted to draw a composite sketch of how God relates to time in ATR. This exercise has led me to the conclusion that the African God is the creator of time. In this regard, God transcends time. However, in his transcendence, God avails his presence to Africans. This causes God to be temporally extended and located in African time. The following chapter will critically examine the timelessness of God theology. The basis for this topic has been laid in the previous chapters.

Chapter 5
A Critical Analysis of the Timelessness of God

5.1 INTRODUCTION

The previous two chapters investigated the nature of God's relation to time in the timelessness of God theology and ATR. Conclusions reached were that in the timelessness theology, God exists outside of time, while in ATR, God exists in time. These chapters supply enough information on which the timelessness model can now be critiqued. To achieve the purpose of this chapter, the critical analysis that follows will rely on the comparative method. This, however, does not mean that other methods will not be employed, for instance, the analytical method. I utilised both African and Western Christian theologians and philosophers to carry out the burden of this chapter. This chapter is the crux of this thesis because the contribution that the thesis wants to make is made clear here.

That Christian theology has made inroads into Africa and Africans' religious ontology, is a point that is attested for in modern African literature (cf. Ushe 2017; Gehman 2019; Masoga & Nicolaides 2021:24). Africa is now largely a Christianised continent, and more Africans continue to convert to Christianity. It has since emerged in the literature, however, that many of these Christianised Africans find themselves battling with completely shedding off their traditional beliefs embedded in ATR upon and even after their conversion to Christianity. This is evident, for example, when sometimes in times of crisis, Africans turn to ATR for alternative sources of power.

When Africans experience an existential crisis, such as dealing with unemployment or when needing healing from sickness, what usually is recommended in Christianity is to ask them to wait on God while praying and hoping that at some point he will intervene and resolve the crisis. ATR, on the other hand, is a pragmatic religion that promises Africans tangible and immediate answers to their problems. The use of African medicines, for instance, is a living practice in ATR. Although Christianity dismisses these ATR elements as demonic, evidence continues to suggest that some African Christians still turn to these avenues for their relieve. The following articulation by Joel Mokhoathi (2017a:7 of 14) is worth stating:

> The pragmatic nature of traditional beliefs and ritual practices therefore, seem to underpin the manner in which African people attend to pressing matters. Because they obtain immediate returns from them, many professed Christians tend to revert back to African traditional practices for worrying socio-spiritual issues. This is because Mainstream Christianity lacks this attitude.

As I am of the view that God may not always resolve Africans' crises almost immediately, I, however, will contend in this chapter that a timeless God makes the African existential situation even worse. Like in the case of other Christians across the globe, Africans have their own struggles with evil (Danfulani 2012:40). They too wish for this problem to be attended to by God. Indeed, Africans do pray to God for his intervention in their day-to-day struggles. In this chapter, I will demonstrate how a timeless God becomes redundant to Africans' cosmology, particularly in the context of Africans' cosmology being pragmatic in nature. I will argue that the timelessness of God model has the potential to even push African Christians further back to ATR values and beliefs.

The continuous increase in membership among the so-called AICs is a phenomenon that cannot be ignored by Christian theologians. Over and above reasons of colonialism and white supremacy given to explain why these churches grow in the literature, the problem that this thesis singles out is of a dogmatic nature. That is, Christian doctrine is devoid of pragmatism. At times, Christian doctrine is in tension with some of ATR's theologies, while in other instances, Christian doctrine ignores how Africans view and interpret reality.

Christianity appears to lack enough force to completely rid Africans of their African worldview which is entrenched in ATR. The fact that professing African Christians keep going back to ATR, particularly in times of crisis, is evident that something is deficient concerning Christian theologies (Adamo 2011:1). That Christianity has had a tremendous impact and influence on the ways of living for Africans, is an observation that cannot be contested. The same goes for the observation that Africans continue to embrace innovative developments introduced by Westerners. Because of their adherence to ATR's ontologies, however, many Africans find themselves having to live a dual life. The one life is that of living the Western way, while, on the other hand, practicing the African way of living (Van der Merwe 2016:571). My point is that it seems that there is tension between worldviews going on in African Christians.

Christian theology is dogmatic theology. Just like ATR has its own essential elements on which the religion stands, Christianity stands on doctrinal statements. Therefore, when an African converts to Christianity, they actually start to embrace the doctrinal statements as formulated in Christianity. However, doctrine is a human enterprise. It is not divinely ordained, meaning that it is inappropriate for a person to use one religion's doctrinal statements to judge other religions' dogma. Olubayo Obijole (2012:106) notes:

> In the history of dogma, the affirmations of the truths of God's revelation in Scripture have always involved a selection of themes and contextualized language in response to the particular theological and ethical issues confronting the church in that moment of history. The creeds, confessions and statements of faith reflect this process.

It will become evident that the brand of Christian theology that is being canvassed to Africans for their conversion to Christianity, is nothing but theological ideas that belong to a Euro-American context. African conceptions of God 'are somewhat like maps that present shared African worldviews and value assumptions and implicit theories about Africa and the world' (Kasambala 2005:317). These conceptual tenets by Africans emanate from the soil of ATR.

I contend in this chapter that while there are other reasons that could be cited for why African Christians turn to ATR in times of need, one of the reasons revolves around the inadequacies and incoherent theological tenets attached to Christian theology.

For many years, Christian theology had 'the timelessness of God theology' as a control model. The aim of this chapter is to critically analyse and point out the theological insufficiencies entailed in this model for an African Christian. I also offer reasons why this model should not be recommended for African Christians. Towards the end of the chapter, I offer my own suggestions regarding the subject matter, with the hope to bring the timelessness theology and ATR together for a common goal.

This chapter is divided into three main sections. The first section examines the central thesis underlying the timelessness of God model. The second section tests the timelessness thesis against the backdrop of ATR. The third section proposes a model that mitigates for a way forward regarding the subject matter. This section will also offer some recommendations.

5.2 THE TIMELESSNESS OF GOD THEOLOGY

That God exists is a fact that is embraced in both Christian theology and ATR. Africans generally take God's existence for granted, so much so that they do not see a need to even prove his existence. That God is eternal, in addition, is a basic theological tenet in both Christian theology and ATR. It is the nature of God's relation to time, however, that sets the two religions apart. Christian theology holds that God is timeless while ATR affirms God as existing in time. This section examines the central thesis and theological assumptions underlying the timelessness view.

5.2.1 Argument from Maximal Perfection

The central thesis underlying the timelessness model stands on two influential standpoints: The argument from 'maximal perfection' theology, and the argument from creation (Taliaferro 1998:145).

The timelessness of God was developed at a time when medieval theologians were battling with the Greek philosophical ideas about what constitutes perfection. It quickly became evident that to maintain the otherness of God, it would create problems in the philosophical debates to suggest that God was temporal. The medieval theistic theologians were convinced that a temporal God looks like a human being and is therefore imperfect (Taliaferro 1998:143). In fact, Thomas Schärtl (2011:50-51) argues that modern theologians who reject God's timelessness fall into the Heideggerian philosophical trap in which Heidegger suggested that God is an event. Based on the event ideology, God is an interactive and personal being. For medieval theologians and modern defenders of the timelessness model, God cannot be associated with anything that is temporal. If God is temporal, like he is depicted in ATR, then God is imperfect. Temporal succession equals existential change on the part of God (Tegtmeier 2014:76).

As background to the discussion below on what maximal perfection means and why it is a central component to the timelessness of God theology, I use the ancient Greek philosopher, Xenophanes (570-478 BCE). On a quest to demonstrate the difference between God and creatures, Xenophanes in his *Fragments* 4 claims that 'always he [God] remains in the same state, in no way changing, nor is it fitting for him to go now here now there' (Mann 2005:35). In this quote about the timelessness of God theology, Xenophanes deduces that God is the most perfect being ever because he does not

change. He exists in the same perfect static state where change does not take place. According to William Mann (2005:35), Xenophanes' remark about perfection is the earliest recorded statement advocating for a timeless God. Proponents of this view are, among others, Plato, Augustine, Boethius, Anselm, Aquinas, and Spinoza. It appears, therefore, that the idea of maximal perfection, also known as 'perfect being' theology, was already in existence long before Anselm popularised it.

The maximal perfection argument is used by the defenders of the timelessness model, even in modern debates. Maximal perfection translates into what is today known as Anselm's perfect being theology, according to which God is the greatest possible being. William Rowe (2005:32) notes that '[i]f God is, as this tradition holds, the greatest possible being, then he must possess…perfections in the highest possible degree.' Charles Taliaferro (1998:145) notes that the maximal perfection ideology implies that 'God is free from malleable, changeable, limitations of temporality.' For God to be perfect in this sense, he must exist outside of time. This is because any being that exists in time becomes a prisoner of time, and any being that is in time goes through change. However, because God is changeless, he cannot go through processes of change (Mullins 2021: 148). While humans have cognitive limitations because they exist in time, God does not have limitations because He is maximally perfect (Blaber 2023:8 of 21; Miksa 2023:14 of 26). This is why Taliaferro (1998:146) claims, 'God's perfection thereby secures God's changelessness.'

The maximal perfection ideology thus implies that temporal life is incomplete. Because of that, classical theists argue that God cannot be associated with temporality, as temporality would render him incomplete. Brian Leftow (2001), as well as Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann (1981) maintain that if God were to be temporal, he would not be able to possess all of his life at once. According to these theologians, since all times are present to God in the eternal now, any limitations that time places on temporal beings, do not apply to God (Craig 2009:152). In this context, God is not temporally extended, and neither can he be in time (Loke 2023:3). However, to fully appreciate this thesis, we must explore his simplicity, immutability, and omniscience attributes. This is because the maximal perfection notion relies on these divine attributes to stand as an argument for timelessness theologians.

5.2.1.1 Simplicity and Immutability

Entailed in the maximal perfection ideology are the simplicity, immutability, and omniscience attributes (Everitt 1998:25; Craig 2009:148). Nicholas Wolterstorff (2001:212) states:

> So far as I can determine; the arguments come down to three: mutability is incompatible with God's simplicity, simplicity in turn being grounded in aseity; mutability is incompatible with God's supreme excellence; and to suppose that God changes would blur the distinction between Creator and creature. All three of these reasons are developed, and sometimes blended together, in what is perhaps the most rigorous and sustained defence of God's timelessness in the Christian theological tradition.

According to Joseph Schmid and Daniel Linford (2023:4), divine simplicity in classical theism means that 'God is completely devoid of physical, metaphysical, and logical parts.' In this setup, as Schmid and Linford (2023:4) point out, 'God is identical to God's essence, existence, attributes, action, power, and so on.' Augustine, Boethius, and Aquinas connect God's simplicity to his eternity. They hold that God is metaphysically simple. Brian Leftow (1998:193-194) represents their idea correctly when he states,

> God exemplifies no metaphysical distinctions of any sort. This means, for instance, that whether or not it is true that God is good, if God is simple, it is false that God is the subject of distinct attribute, goodness. Rather, if God is simple, 'God is good' is true because of precisely the same state of affairs making 'God is good' true, and this 'state of affairs' contains no components or complexity of any sort.

According to Aquinas, God is one. In view of this, God does not possess distinct properties. For Aquinas, God is not omniscient separately from being omnipotent. All of God's properties, including his existence, are one. Aquinas argues that God is the complete act of existence (*ST* 1.10.3; Aquinas 1947:54). Jeffrey Brower (2009:105) concurs with Aquinas: 'God is an absolutely simple being, completely devoid of any metaphysical complexity.' Underlying simplicity is the notion that God is noncomplex, meaning that God is not a composition of parts (Dodds 2023:195; Blaber 2023:2 of 21). If God had parts, it is argued, he was going to be dependent on those parts (Mann 2005:52). It can also be added that not far from divine simplicity is divine aseity. In his *Summa theologica* 1.3.7, Aquinas speaks of God's aseity and simplicity as interlinked (Aquinas 1947:23). His argument is that if God lacks parts, as aseity teaches, it goes without saying that God lacks distinct attributes (Brower 2009:107). The doctrine of

aseity warrants that God should 'be equally stable and steadfast in his resolve, not subject to growth, decay, alteration, whim, or change of plan' (Mann 2005:48). The idea that God is simple in the timelessness theology, consequently, systematically leads to the idea that God is immutable.

Immutability is the notion that God does not change in any way or form, whether this change is intrinsic or extrinsic. This is what Godfrey Harold (2021:2) calls 'absolute immutability' – a kind of immutability that is embraced in classical theism. Samsa Korpela (2021:56; cf. Launonen & Mullins 2021:5; Mohammdinia & Dibaji 2023:388; cf. Miksa 2023:2 of 26) asserts:

> The concept of God's timelessness is strongly tied to His immutability: any succession in God's existence would lead to the conclusion that he is mutable. God's immutability (and thus timelessness) can also be derived from the concept of God's metaphysical simplicity: as God's simplicity is derived from Him being fully actualized potentiality, there can be no change in Him. There can be no unactualized potentiality in God, otherwise there would be potentiality for change and thus potentiality for succession.

This notion contrasts with that of divine temporality in which God is understood as experiencing moments of change throughout his life. This means, therefore, that a temporal God cannot be regarded as being timeless. Classical theologians connect the timelessness of God to divine immutability (Loke 2023:4). Some even postulate that God's eternality entails his immutability (Helm 2010:73). Paul Helm (2010:87, 94) affirms immutability strongly, arguing that immutability implies 'total changelessness.' For Helm, eternity, omniscience, and immutability link with each other. Some traditional theologians, such as Kevin Timpe (2007:311), hold that while God does not change in character, he may change in other aspects, such as in having a causal relation with creation, yet remaining immutable.

As can be gathered, the aforementioned divine attributes are appealed to in Christian theology to uphold the view that God is the most perfect being ever. What this entails in basic terms is that God is simple and immutable. Because he is not composed of parts, he does not go through or experience change. He exists in a state of changeless perfection.

5.2.1.2 Omniscience

Divine omniscience has been appealed to in support of a maximal perfect being concept of God. The timelessness of God theologians maintain that God's knowledge encompasses knowledge of all times. Augustine, Boethius, and Aquinas claim that all events in all times exist simultaneously before God in the eternal present. In recent times, this understanding has been supported by four-dimensionalists like Michael Tooley (2000) and Theodore Sider (1997; 2001). As has been indicated in chapter 2, these philosophers of time embrace the tenseless theory of time, also known as the stasis theory of time. According to this perspective, all events in time are instantaneously present to God (Craig 2009:148). What this means is that events never come or go out of existence. They exist eternally before God.

Edward Wierenga (2009:129-130) mentions three sources that support God's omniscience in the way mentioned above. The first source that Wierenga refers to is the Bible, specifically Romans 11:33, Job 12:13, and Hebrews 4:13. He further claims that Aquinas (*ST* 1q.14; Aquinas 1947:112) relies on these texts in his discussion of God's timeless omniscience. Hebrews 4:13, for instance, reads: 'Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him.' The second source, according to Wierenga, is the 'perfect being theology.' Anselm (*Mono* 3; Anselm 2000:10), an advocate of this theology, is quoted to have stated that 'God is whatever it is better to be than not' (Wierenga 2009:130). The last source that Wierenga considers is divine providence. According to him, God has an all-encompassing plan for his creation, adding that '[i]t is hard to see how God could order things according to such a detailed plan without having vast, if not unlimited, knowledge' (Wierenga 2009:130). Wierenga (2009:142) underscores the following: 'Omniscience may be understood as perfect knowledge and, thus, as knowledge of all truths. Perfect knowledge would also have additional features, such as infallibility, being essential, and being whole or non-discursive.'

In the end it can thus be stated that the maximal perfection theology is the central thesis that underlies the timelessness of God theology. The maximal perfection ideology relies on attributes such as simplicity, immutability, and omniscience to arrive at the conclusion that God is timeless. So far, the maximal perfection notion is one thesis

central to the classical timelessness of God theology. The other notion that is equally central to the timelessness of God view is the argument from creation.

5.2.2 Argument from Creation

This argument, propounded by the advocates of the timelessness theology, is based on the premise that God created the world out of nothing. As Genesis 1 accounts, in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Charles Taliaferro (1998:146) comments: 'This has frequently been read as marking God's act of creating a spatial, temporal world. There was no spatio-temporal stuff out of which God made the cosmos. In fact there was no time at all. God from eternity willed that time and space come into existence.'

The argument, accordingly, is that creation is temporal and as such does not share the same ontological status with God. Creation only points us to the otherness of God, it is argued. According to classical theists, only a timeless being can create a temporal world. Even Augustine viewed the timelessness of God against the backdrop of creation's temporality (*Conf* 11.15.20; Augustine 1999:156).

At this point, one could ask how a timeless God was able to create in successive moments as creation seems to suggest that it took place over a period of six days. Six-day moments of creation seem to presume a temporal extension on the part of God. However, this was something done by a God who is incapable of change. How then did God do it? To answer this question, classical theologians reply that God eternally willed for everything at once to take place in succession, without himself changing. As Charles Taliaferro (1998:147) puts it, 'God wills that there will be changes but God's will itself does not change.' Brian Leftow (2014:248) claims, 'None of God's life ever passes away. The events of God's life can have no successors. They just occur – period. Because of this, God is outside the order of time, the order of what passes.' In essence, Leftow is saying that God has ordered for temporal things to go through change without him experiencing change (cf. Epsen 2010:424; Helm 2010).

Augustine (*Conf* 11.14; cf. Aquinas 1947:106) argues in the same vein. He maintains that God eternally wills at once for the creation of things and for those things to unfold in the manner they do, without them bringing change into God's being. If this is the

case, though, it would mean that God exists in a sort of lifeless state of no change, where He is not able to react to people's needs. This is inherently incoherent and at odds with Africans' conceptions of God (discussed below). Richard Swinburne (1993:221) suggests that '[w]e should note, further, that if God did not change at all, he would not think now of this, now of that. His thoughts would be one thought which lasted for ever.' In summary, the argument from creation holds that God cannot be in time because time is God's creation.

Before I conclude this section, I want to briefly look into the argument of the STR. This argument has also been used to argue that God is timeless. According to the STR, there is no such thing as universal time. This is because different inertial frames have their own times. This means that each inertial frame, for example, has its own 'now.' Derivatively, it becomes dubious to suggest that God exists in different inertial time frames. In addition, even if we would assume that God exists in one inertial frame, this would make God temporal. Furthermore, God would then be confined to only one inertial frame, implying that he is not aware of what is happening in other inertial frames. According to the classical theists, God is therefore timeless because he cannot be placed in any inertial frame (Craig 2009:150).

The timelessness model thus stands on two critical arguments: The argument from the maximal perfection theology and the argument from creation. The assumptions underlying the maximal perfection theology, derive from the argument that God is simple, immutable, and omniscient. The assumptions underlying the argument from creation, revolve around the view that God has transcended creation, including time. In this section, I have tried to state the central thesis upon which the timelessness of God theology rests. I will do a critical examination of this theology with the sole purpose of pointing out the problems that this theology encounters particularly for African Christians.

5.3 A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE TIMELESSNESS OF GOD THEOLOGY

The aim of this section is to show the limitations that the timelessness of God theology has for African Christians. While this theology is part of the backbone of Christian theology, it is not without problems.

Joel Mokhoathi (2017a) concurs that Western theologies are inadequate and indeed problematic for African Christians. According to him (Mokhoathi 2017a:2 of 14), 'imported theologies do not sufficiently touch the hearts of African believers because they are couched in a language that is foreign to them.' While several Christian theologies fall short of touching the hearts of Africans, this thesis is interested in pointing out the shortfalls implied in the timelessness of God theology.

Nelson Pike (1970:xii) has also expressed his concerns over the timelessness of God theology, arguing that it 'is extremely hard to understand why the doctrine of timelessness has had a place in traditional Christian theology.' The implication of his words is that the timelessness of God theology is not only problematic for African Christians. Its incoherences are a point of dissatisfaction even among some Christian theologians in the West. Pike is not the only one having problems with the timelessness model. In this section, I draw some of the insights from these Christian theologians to build my own argument that the timelessness of God theology is challenging for African Christians. I will build this section by way of responding to the two arguments which were given in the previous section, in defence of the timelessness model, namely the maximal perfection theology and the argument from creation.

5.3.1 The Maximal Perfection Argument

As already mentioned above, a perfect being theology rests on three traditional divine attributes: Simplicity, immutability, and omniscience. These attributes, however, face problems of their own, particularly as articulated by classical theists (Craig 2009). My argument against the timelessness model, therefore, will be aimed at these attributes.

5.3.1.1 On Immutability and Simplicity

These attributes are problematic for Africans, specifically when they are understood from the timelessness viewpoint. William Craig (2009) avows that these attributes are problematic even for the biblical revelation regarding the God-world relation. Take for example the idea that God is immutable. According to Craig (2009:147), there is enough Scriptural latitude to suggest that God does go through changes in his life: 'While we may freely admit that a simple or immutable God must be timeless, we have even less reason to think God simple or immutable than to think him timeless' (cf. also Epsen 2010). The fact that God is depicted in the Bible as experiencing changes and

going through different phases in time, suggests only one thing, and that is that immutability is incompatible with the biblical world, particularly the Old Testament narratives. This makes for an interesting point, given the observation that to some extent, the Old Testament narratives mirror ATR's world. In ATR, God is depicted as being involved in the affairs of Africans. God blesses them in matters of procreation. He gives them great harvests after they have prayed to him for crops. Africans believe that God is everywhere one goes. No one can run away from the presence of God.

In basic terms, since ATR is a pragmatic religion, immutability from the standpoint of timelessness becomes foreign to Africans' conception of God. They believe that God answers their prayers and that he protects them. These are acts that are understood by Africans in concrete terms, not abstract terms as is the case of the Christian theology, discussed above. To be more to the point, the timelessness concept finds no place in ATR and the African cosmology at large. The timelessness concept is therefore nothing but a threat to ATR, since it removes God from people.

Immutability in ATR is understood in terms of God's unchanging faithfulness and character towards Africans. God may be unchanging in his character and faithfulness, but he does go through changes in other areas of his life. For example, God goes through changes when he answers prayers and certainly went through changes when he created the world. On the notion of immutability, William Mann (2005:36) contends:

> Even so, if the ascription of a particular attribute to God were to entail that God does not or cannot engage in the kinds of personal interactions…then so much the worse for that ascription. To the extent to which philosophical theologians wish to emphasize that God is not an ordinary being, they are liable to bear the accusation that in making God Wholly Other, they have made God wholly disconnected.

Drawing insights from William Mann (2005:36) and Alan Padgett (2010:887), the timelessness concept robs the God-world relations from their dynamic nature as presented in ATR. This is because an immutable God 'never thinks successive thoughts, He never performs successive actions, He never undergoes even the most trivial alteration' (Craig 2001a: 30-31). Basically put, a timeless God is impersonal to Africans because he cannot engage with personal beings who exist in time. As John Feinberg (2001:293-294) indicates, a personal being must, among other things, plan, anticipate,

reason, act, and provide. However, a timeless God cannot do these things, as they expect him to be mutable.

Moreover, a timeless God is removed and beyond the reach of Africans. As far as Africans are concerned, God is reachable, whether through prayers, divinities, and/or ancestors. To argue that God is immutable, is to suggest to Africans that the sacrifices and the prayers that they offer to God do not affect God in any way. What this also means is that God cannot answer Africans' prayers because by doing so, he will have to suffer change.

Another point I want to raise at this stage is about the influence of Neoplatonism on the timelessness theology. I laboured at length and showed in chapter 3 that the medieval theologians – to whom the roots of timelessness are traced – used Neoplatonism as their point of departure in developing this model (Epsen 2010:419). The problem that Neoplatonism creates, is that this philosophical tradition presents God as abstract and removed from temporal reality (Plotinus 2018:294-295). However, the God of ATR is viewed by most Africans in concrete terms and he is present to Africans (Gehman 2019:52). The fact that the timelessness of God theology is built around Greek ideologies, does not only pose a challenge of conceptualisation for African Christians, but it also should be a worry for the mainstream Christianity. This is because Christian theology claims that it uses the Bible as its court of appeal for doctrinal formulations. Yet the evidence in the literature suggests that the timelessness of God theology is built on Greek philosophical concepts of perfection and ultimate reality (Rogers 1997; Timpe 2007:301). Again, a God forged in Greek philosophy is too abstract for Africans.

Dirk Van der Merwe (2016:573) correctly argues that '[t]hroughout the epochs of history the character of Christianity has changed, though not its identity.' In line with this, I do not think that Christian theology would suffer a blow if the classical conception of God has allowed itself to recognise African conceptions of God. Indeed, God is a core teaching in both classical theology and ATR. It is only that the timelessness of God theology was fashioned after Greek philosophies. These philosophies disregarded how biblical writers conceived of God. On the other hand, the similarities that the narratives of the Bible and the African ontologies have about God, are striking. This invites

researchers of both religions to appreciate that God revealed himself in the Bible in almost similar ways he has in ATR.

It is a fact that Christian theologians have the impression that African forms of thought and expression differ significantly from Western thought patterns. Africans' forms of conceiving God have 'become the premise and a solid foundation of African theology' (Mokhoathi 2017a:2 of 14). In this concern, the timelessness of God theologians argue that God is simple, implying that he is identical with his attributes. This idea traces all the way back to Aquinas (*ST* 1a.13.1, 2; Aquinas 1947:23). The problem with simplicity is that, just like immutability, this attribute makes God abstract. This similarly contrasts with the African worldview where God is understood in concrete terms. It must also be pointed out that, while ATR upholds God's otherness, the simplicity attribute of God is almost absent in the religion. Most likely, the absence of this attribute in ATR is due to the attribute portraying God in abstract terms.

The concept of simplicity, moreover, is incoherent and finds no support even in the Bible. According to Edward Epsen (2010:427; cf. Craig 2001b:130), divine simplicity is difficult to reconcile with the longstanding doctrine of the Trinity which teaches that God, although he is One, exists as a dynamic unity of three distinct Persons. These three Persons exist in an interpersonal relation and, according to this perspective, the concept of simplicity fails to stand (cf. also DeWeese 2002:57). Jürgen Moltmann (2013:248-249) affirms this view.

I have already indicated that, in ATR, some Africans, such as the people of Benin in West Africa, understand God as two beings, male and female, while the Bambara people of the same region call God Bemba or Ngala, where Bemba indicates a union of four beings who play different roles in the God-world relation (Lugira 2009:39). This point certifies the notion that to Africans, God is interpersonal and relational. In this setup, the doctrine of divine simplicity cannot be entertained. This lends credence to the view that African Christians need not embrace this way of thinking, as it is incongruous with their conceptions of God in ATR.

In brief, despite the immutability and omniscience attributes playing a crucial role for the maintenance of the timelessness of God theology, these attributes are incompatible with Africans' ways of conceiving God. These attributes make God appear static and uninvolved in the affairs of Africans, something that is unthinkable in ATR.

5.3.1.2 On Omniscience

In the timelessness of God theology, when it is stated that God is omniscient, it implies that he knows everything from his eternity standpoint. From this standpoint, all events in all times exist simultaneously at once before God. This kind of omniscience is used as proof that God is maximally perfect and that he exists outside of time. This way of viewing his timelessness finds its full development in the works of medieval theistic scholars who have been explored in chapter 3 of this thesis. These are Augustine, Boethius, and Aquinas. According to these scholars, God is omniscient because he exists outside of time. Richard Swinburne (2017:683) informs this discussion: '[M]ost Christian theologians, and some doctrinal definitions, have held that God is omniscient in the strong sense – because they thought that otherwise God would not be as great as they believed him to be.'

Such was the understanding of the medieval theologians, that a perfect being must be omniscient in the strongest sense of the word. This view has been embraced by Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann (1981), Brian Leftow (2001), and Paul Helm (2010). This way of understanding omniscience, however, must be rejected from an African point of view because it is foreign to ATR. One major area on which it must be rejected, is the idea of libertarian freewill. Edward Wierenga (2009:142) states that '[o]mniscience may be understood as perfect knowledge and, thus, as knowledge of all truths. Perfect knowledge would also have additional features, such as, infallibility, being essential, and being whole or non-discursive.'

If Edward Wierenga's definition of omniscience is correct, then it can be argued that divine omniscience is incompatible with human libertarian freewill. What I mean is that if Africans are free in the sense of libertarian freedom, then God cannot know what Africans are going to do in advance, as this would cancel the freedom to do on the part of Africans. This point needs more elaboration.

In seeking for a relationship that is controlled by love, God created human beings and endowed them with libertarian freedom. For this freedom to be truly free, God cannot know what humans are going to do in the future (Pinnock 2001:3; cf. Boyd 2011:191; Baker 2013:101). Africans generally believe that they are responsible for the choices they make in life. An omniscient God in a timeless state suggests that everything is predetermined. Thus, there is nothing on the part of Africans that they can do to change decisions that are in the future.

In addition, it is difficult to imagine how an immutable God is able to know temporal things that go through processes and changes without his knowledge. Added to this, if all events are static from God's timeless perspective, then he would not know that yesterday is in the past and that I will graduate in the future. Knowledge of all these requires changes through different phases (Timpe 2007:302). Unfortunately, a timeless God does not go through such.

John Mbiti has suggested that the African concept of time lacks the future. At most, the future in Africa, according to Mbiti, extends to two years, and even on this scale, the future is just potential time because it does not yet exist. The argument, therefore, is that to suggest that things already exist in the future, causes a conceptual challenge for African Christians. This point is certified also by the fact that Africans generally do not imagine a paradise existing in the future as it is taught in Christian theology. God's absolute omniscience therefore poses theoretical challenges for Africans. This is not to deny that God in ATR is all knowing, as his omniscience encompasses knowledge of everything that exists and even those that have potential to exist. However, for Africans, God's knowledge is dynamic rather than static.

Writing on divine omniscience, Paul Helm (2010:74) expropriates the third point of the argument regarding a timeless God by Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann (1981:455). This point maintains that '[a] being that knows everything always knows what time it is.' This argument demonstrates how closely intertwined omniscience and eternity are in the timelessness of God theology. However, Helm believes that divine omniscience and libertarian freewill are incompatible. He claims that if there were to be one thing that God does not know, then God would cease to be God (Helm 2010:74). However, if God were to be omniscient, thus knowing everything, including

what time it is, he would cease to be timeless. What Helm means, in essence, is that only a God who exists in time can know with accuracy what time it is.

Besides the problems already stated about an absolute omniscience, there are some biblical texts that challenge the absolute omniscience idea. For example, in Genesis 6:6, God is presented by the writer as regretting a decision that he has made in the past: 'The Lord regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled.' The argument, accordingly, is that if God were omniscient, he would have known ahead what humanity was going to do; hence no need for him to express regret. This argument clearly places God in time, rather than outside of time. This biblical view also fits inside ATR where the future is viewed as potential because it does not yet exist (Padgett 2010:887; Swinburne 2017:682).

Even if it were to be granted that God's omniscience is all-encompassing, it cannot be maintained that he foreknows things, as 'foreknowing' would place God inside time. As William Rowe (2005:28-29) argues, to state that God foreknows events, is to imply that God is temporal. Contrary to the classical way of understanding omniscience, God does not have to be timeless for his knowledge to be perfect. In light of biblical evidence, God's perfect knowledge should be understood that, compared to human beings, he has a perfect recollection of the past and knows everything possible to be known both in the present and in the future. In support of this view, William Craig (2009:152) writes: 'His [God's] past experiences do not fade as ours do, and he has perfect prescience of what the future holds.' Not only does this type of knowledge on the part of God fits the biblical world, but it is also on par with ATR. Again, the classical doctrine of omniscience must be rejected on the ground that it is clearly a Greek philosophical idea. It stands in tension with God's revelations, both in the Bible and ATR.

Not only is God's timelessness incompatible with libertarian freewill, it is also incompatible with other key attributes of the African God, such as God's mercy and justice. For example, the problem of evil is real in ATR. It is another area that sometimes makes some African Christians abandon the Christian God and go and seek solutions in alternative sources of relieve, found in ATR. If God is to help in this regard, he must be present to Africans in time and on their time scale. It is incomprehensible for Africans that God deals with this problem from outside space-time (Epsen 2010:417).

In the end, it is inconceivable for Africans that a God who exists outside of time is able to help them in times of crisis. God's absolute omniscience does not help either. The omniscience of God in Christian theology remains too abstract and removes God from African events. It is also hard to understand how a timeless God knows events that are in time, without him becoming temporal. Basically, a timeless God is unrecognisable for Africans and certainly does not inspire confidence that he can take care of the needs of Africans.

5.3.2 Response to Stump and Kretzmann, as well as Leftow

In chapter 3, I have outlined some of the problems attached to the concept of a God who exists outside of time. The main problem that the timelessness of God theology faces is a God who is static, uninvolved, and beyond the reach of African Christians. Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann (1981), as well as Brian Leftow (2001), however, have provided a model in which they claim that a timeless God can still relate with the temporal world. In other words, it is claimed that a timeless God can stand in a causal relationship with creation. Standing on a similar theological ground as Boethius, the above theologians argue that all times and events exist before God at once. According to this viewpoint, God's immediate cognitive ability affords him a relation with everything that takes place.

The above perspective, however, is incompatible with ATR because it suggests that God is aware of temporal events by virtue of cognition. What the perspective fails to do, is to show how an immutable and timeless God is able to act or respond to events that are in time. According to Alan Padgett (2011:122), to claim that all times exist simultaneously before God, strips creation from its temporal and dynamic nature. Creation then becomes static in God's eyes.

Treading a similar theological trajectory as Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, as well as Brian Leftow, is Greg Ganssle (2002) who argues that, while humans know things through beliefs, God's knowledge is that of direct awareness. Ganssle (2002:167) posits that '[d]irect awareness is a greater mode of knowledge than knowledge by way of belief because it grants God's cognitions the most metaphysical independence.' According to this view, God knows all facts from all times in one direct

awareness. However, the question could still be asked: Is God, according to Ganssle's theoretical framework, able to tell which events are in the past and which ones are in the temporal now? To this question, Ganssle (2002:178) replies: Although temporal events take place sequentially, 'God cannot locate them in time.' William Hasker (2002:190) asks: 'How can it be that the temporal stages of a temporal being are simultaneously metaphysically present to God, and yet those stages do not exist simultaneously?' Indeed, this notion is incoherent and would not convince African Christians that a timeless God cares. This is because Ganssle's God only possesses all facts but cannot act on those facts. Still, this God remains outside space-time where Africans grapple with day-to-day issues.

Greg Ganssle's view faces yet another problem, particularly when it is observed in the context of the incarnation of Jesus. Since Ganssle admits that a timeless God cannot tell if events are in the past, present, or future, he implies that in his earthly life, Jesus could not tell if the things he was doing were in the past, present, or future. As William Hasker (2002:202) points out, 'for a timeless knower, the distinction of "before" and "after" the Messiah, so crucial for all the writers of the New Testament, has no significance whatsoever.'

In a follow-up paper in 2011, Eleonore Stump makes some addition to the argument that she and Norman Kretzmann presented in their 1981 paper (Stump 2011). She narrates that what is lacking in their original argument, is what psychologists today call 'shared attention' (Stump 2011:44). She then gives an example of where two people gaze at each other. Stump states that gazing, in this case, is a form of shared attention, stating that when God called Abraham and Abraham replied, 'Here I am,' this was a form of shared attention. Stump (2011:44) concludes that 'God can be present to human beings, not only with direct and immediate causal and cognitive connection, but also with the shared attention which is the basis for personal presence.' She, however, cautions that '[i]t is not necessary for God to share a temporal mode of existence in order to be present to a person in time, as long as God can be known by that temporal person.'

While Eleonore Stump's argument is attractive, it suffers the same problems as their 1981 argument. The problem is that, according to Stump's argument, God is only present to the temporal world through shared attention. This God still cannot act in a temporal world, and as Stump has admitted, God does not have to be in time to experience a shared attention with human beings. For Africans, it is not only God's attention that they are looking for, but they also want to feel God's presence and they want to see his acts of power. They want God to help them with their problems of unemployment, witchcraft, illnesses, and other existential crises which they face from time to time. Because they are God conscious, as shown in the previous chapter, God is always present to them in their conscience. To suggest that God exists outside time is a strange concept to ATR.

In trying to defend the idea that a timeless God can have causal relations with the temporal world, Paul Helm (2010) offers a creative explanation of how that is possible. He claims that there are some temporal indexicals that God knows, but not in the same way that humans know them. I will illustrate this by means of an analogy. Suppose I am married, and God knows that I am married. However, what God cannot know, as Helm argues, is how I feel when I say, 'I am married.' I am the only one who possesses that feeling of being married. According to Helm, it would require God to be me for him to experience how I feel when I say, 'I am married.' Helm (2010:84-85) states the following:

> An omniscient being cannot know that I am married in precisely the way in which I know I am married, or that an eternal being cannot know in precisely the same way as I do that 30 July is now. And since ways of knowing facts are themselves facts, there are facts that a timeless being does not know, and hence such a being cannot be omniscient.

Helm (2010:85) argues further:

> For though there are ways in which an eternal being cannot represent certain facts to himself he can still know those facts, or at least he knows facts that entail the facts that he cannot represent to himself, and he knows that this entailment holds. And this is sufficient for omniscience. It is satisfactory, in other words, simply to deny that certain ways of representing facts are themselves additional facts of any great significance for the understanding of omniscience.

While Paul Helm's defence is welcome, it faces the same difficulty as Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, and Brian Leftow. Helm's argument simply states that God is related to the world through cognition. This God, nevertheless, cannot act in the world.

Another reply that has been given about a timeless God that is involved in the world, is by Aquinas. He argues that God created everything in one act in eternity. In his *Summa contra gentiles* 2.35 (Aquinas 2005:198; cf. Wolterstorff 2001:204), he contends that

> God acts voluntarily in creation…With God to understand and will is to produce; and the effect produced follows upon the understanding and will according to the determination of the understanding and the command of the will. But as by the understanding there is determined the production of the thing, and its every other condition, so there is also prescribed for it the time at which it is to be; just as any art determines not only that a thing be of this or that character, but also that it be at this or that time, as the physician fixes the time for giving the medicine. Thus, assuming God's will to be of itself effectual for the production of an effect, the effect would follow fresh from the ancient will, without any fresh action coming to be put forth on the part of God.

What Aquinas contends, is that in one eternal act, God created all events including the series of events that follow from them. However, while God should be credited for the one act of creation, he does not take part in the aftereffects of these events. So, while God is timeless, 'the temporal sequence is entirely in the events, not at all in God' (Wolterstorff 2001:205). This is to suggest that God does not respond to what humans do, and certainly, whatever takes place in the temporal world is not in direct response to God. In other words, for Aquinas, the temporal world stands in relation to God, but God does not stand in direct relation to the temporal world.

Aquinas' thesis also faces similar challenges for African Christians. His solution is unintelligible. To argue that God has created a world that he has no relation with, is like saying, '[O]ne can have real effects without a real cause – which seems self-contradictory or incomprehensible' (Wolterstorff 2001:205).

The doctrine of the incarnation brings into question Aquinas' one eternal act view. The incarnation is not just about the dual nature of Jesus, it is the history of God dwelling in Jesus to bring about human actions. The incarnation is a story about God. The incarnation brings God into time (Wolterstorff 2001:210). Furthermore, there is no indication in ATR that God timelessly does everything in one eternal act (Feinberg 2001:400).

Do these replies from the timelessness of God theologians change the *status quo* for traditional African Christians? The answer is negative. Cognitive awareness to what is happening in the world still removes God from Africans and renders God useless for Africans. Africans relate to a God who acts in time, a God who attends to their immediate needs. Now that I have analysed and shown the limitations that the timelessness of God theology has, I will make a proposal of what Christian theology could do for African Christians.

5.4 GOD AS LANDLORD OF TIME: A PROPOSAL

The proposal I am making is propounded through the conceptual lenses of what Alan Padgett (2011) regards as God being relatively timeless prior to creation and entering time upon creation.

5.4.1 Relative Timelessness

In religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, similarities between humans and God are taken seriously. This is also the case in ATR. In ATR, Africans want a God to whom they can relate, a God who can come to their aid when they need him and a God who can sympathise with their day-to-day challenges. A timeless God is devoid of these (Mann 2005:35). The model that I propose, argues for a God who can be located in time to meet the needs of Africans, yet, in a certain sense, a God who transcends time. A part of this idea is already present in ATR, but needs to be developed. To develop this model appropriately, I will rely on Alan Padgett's theoretical framework as my guide.

The crux of Alan Padgett's model is that 'God is timeless relative to the created space-time cosmos, but also in some ways temporal' (Padgett 2011:117). Here is the model's structure (Padgett 2011:118):

1) God's time is infinite and immeasurable. Because they are involved in created frames of reference and depend upon stable laws of nature, measured time and words like 'day' or 'week' do not properly apply to eternity. All points of our created time are simultaneous with some points of God's eternity, but our space-time universe does not measure God's infinite temporality.
2) God's life is in no way defective or undermined by the passage of time. God is the Lord of time, not its prisoner.

3) Because God is a dynamic and changing being, he is still temporal in some way: God is immutable in essence, but changing in interrelationship with the world and with us. Because God is a changing being, God has to be temporal to some degree. For this reason, there are intervals within God's life, but those intervals have some specific or intrinsic temporal measures.

In brief, Alan Padgett's conceptual framework argues for a God who is temporal, yet being above time (Taliaferro 1998:153). Padgett refers to two times – metaphysical and physical time. Metaphysical time is God's time and physical time is created time. Metaphysical time is superior to created time. Regarding metaphysical time, Padgett (2011:124) argues that it should be viewed as 'the dimension of the possibility of change.' This suggestion is crucial for my proposal as it means that, before creation, God possessed the potential to change. Padgett (2011:124) avers that there was a time when God existed alone without creation. At that stage, he was timeless. Then, upon creation, God's status changed. He changed from existing alone to now co-existing with his creation. This means, according to Padgett, that all along, God had the potential to create. The potential to create implies a potential to change. Thus, when Padgett (2011:124) speaks of relative timelessness, he refers to it in the strictest sense of 'the non-finite eternity of God before creation and before all change.' In this mode of existence, God is temporal, meaning that there is a possibility that he can experience change.

Bearing this in mind, God, therefore, changed upon creation. Alan Padgett (2011:124) argues that, '[o]nce God does bring about a world, then things change for God as well as for creatures.' At creation, God entered into a causal relationship with the created order: 'With creation God becomes omnitemporal, entering into a relative change with us, while still being immutable in those essential properties that set off God as fully divine' (Padgett's 2011:124). Therefore,

> [p]rior to creation, God is changeless and free of temporal measure or temporal decay, that is, *before creation God is relatively timeless*. After creation, God is essentially immutable but changes in relationship with a dynamic world of time. In other words, after creation God is *omnitemporal*. For all eternity God is in some ways temporal, yet is never bound by time (Padgett 2011:124-125; original emphasis).

The argument, therefore, is that Alan Padgett affirms the concept of God's immutability, but his understanding of immutability differs with that of the advocates of a timeless God. For the proponents of the timelessness theology, God is immutable in the strongest sense, implying that even after creation, he remained unchanging, whereas for Padgett, after creation, God remained unchanging only in his essence. However, since he now stands in a causal relation with the world, God changes in relation to it.

5.4.2 The Landlord of Time

To build my proposition of God's relation to time for African Christians, I appeal to five areas of inquiry: 1) The Trinitarian thesis; 2) the Byzantine Fathers; 3) *Imago Dei*; 4) the standpoints of Garry DeWeese and William Craig; and 5) the biblical standpoint.

5.4.2.1 The Trinitarian Thesis

With the phrase 'relative timeless' I mean that God, prior to creation, had no experience of created time, since created time did not then exist. God was in this sense, therefore, timeless. However, prior to creation, God existed in his own time which is metaphysical time (cf. Padgett 2011). The doctrine of the Trinity helps to unpack this idea.

That God existed as an interpersonal Trinity before creation, appears to be a view that is accepted by many theologians. Edward Epsen (2010) suggests that God's Trinitarian existence, prior to creation, consisted of interpersonal relationships. At the centre of these interpersonal relationships is eternity. Eternity, therefore, is a mode of existence for God. I suggest that eternity in this context should be understood as God's metaphysical time. Hence, eternity, or metaphysical time, is superior to created time (Taliaferro 1998:155).

If God exists in an interpersonal relationship of three Persons, it stands to reason that God is a living personal being. However, 'God is not a living being in that he grows, ages, and decays, but living in the mode of the supreme reality of which our own life is an image' (Epsen 2010:423). Garry DeWeese (2002:57; original emphasis) notes that, 'in Trinitarian theology, the individual persons of the Trinity would exist in a dy-

namic relationship before the creation of the temporal world, thus grounding the dynamic emphasis of the *perichoresis*, the mutual indwelling, or interpretation of the Trinity.'

The implication is that the Trinitarian relationship is not static, even before creation. This suggests that in his community of three, there exists a mutual relationship where activities take place. It is a fact that God first planned the idea to create before he executed it, and this planning and execution were activities that required intervals and a process to unfold. These processes were made possible by God's metaphysical time. Thus, metaphysical time necessitates that there should be, at least, intrinsic changes taking place in God's life. Dean Zimmerman (2002:78) is in congruence with this idea: 'If there were periods during which only God existed, then God himself must have been undergoing constant intrinsic change during those times.' Some of these intrinsic changes may even have involved the creation of other beings such as angels (Diekemper 2014:223). Thus, the argument that God was temporal before creation should be understood in this context.

Considering the above, Nelson Pike (1970) doubts if a timeless God possesses creative powers. This is because, to create, dictates that God should be temporal, that he should be able to change from a state of existing alone to a state of co-existing with the world, for example. Pike (1970) appeals to the incarnation of Jesus to support this argument. He argues that Christ, being pictured to have been begotten before the ages (Jn 1:15, 18; 17:5) carries theological consequences that are not always entertained by advocates of the timelessness of God theology. For Pike (1970:181-182), '[t]o say that God exists "before the ages" is to say that God exists at a time before the sun was created and thus before time, itself, could be divided into measurable units.' Pike argues that this does not only imply that God has temporal location, but also that he has temporal extension, at least because '[h]is life is indefinitely extended both forward and backward in time.' Although metaphysical time may have always existed with God, it is, however, dependent upon God, not the other way around (Padgett 2011:120).

Traversing the same theological path as Nelson Pike (1970) on the incarnation thought, is Andreas May. From the outset, May (2023:30) acknowledges that the incarnation doctrine is a crucial truth in Christian theology. Dismissing the timelessness of God theology on the basis of the incarnation, May (2023:30) contends:

> While the part of the Apostles' Creed about God the Father radiates something eternal, static-untouchable, eternally unchanging, the part dealing with Jesus Christ is of a breathtaking dynamism. This can be seen, for example, in the fact that this part is dominated by verbs. First of all, there are the verbs conceived, born, suffered, crucified, died and buried. These verbs could describe the life of any human being. And that is what it is all about: the eternally unchanging God becomes human, fully human! The God who lives before and outside of all time and all matter becomes matter and submits himself to time. The Son of God submits himself radically to time and to all the other laws and limitations of this world created by him. He is conceived, born, suffers, dies and is buried. He solidarises with us and our suffering.

Thus, we note two times in the God-world relationship: God's metaphysical time and created time. Metaphysical time, coupled with the Trinitarian thesis, suggests that God was temporal even before creation. He was temporal in the sense that he could go through phases of change. If this view is expropriated for African Christians, it would make sense to the African cosmology. Rather than turning God into an abstract philosophical idea, this view concretises God for Africans and brings him closer to the African people. This view accomplishes this by way of demonstrating to Africans that God is capable of change and that he interacts with them on their time scale.

5.4.2.2 The Byzantine Fathers

Unlike the medieval theologians, the Byzantine Greek Fathers appear to have believed in a God who is relatively timeless prior to creation. Gregory of Nyssa in his *Dogmatic treatises, Against Eunomius* 1.42 (Schaff n.d.:135; cf. Epsen 2010:420) states: 'Of God's eternity we say that which we have heard from prophecy (Psalms 10:16); viz. that God is a king "of old," and rules for ages, and for ever, and beyond (Psalms 74:12). Therefore we define Him to be earlier than any beginning, and exceeding any end.' As it is obvious, the Byzantine Greek Father understood God to be temporal prior to creation. In his *Dionysius the Areopagite* 1.5.10 (Dionisius 2005:46; cf. Epsen 2010:422), Dionysius also writes:

> And neither does any of the things eternally existing, or those temporarily subsisting, entirely come up to Him, but He towers above time and eternity, and all things eternal and temporal. Wherefore also, He is Eternity itself, and things existing, and the measures of things existing, and things measured though Him and from Him.

These Fathers have affirmed God's temporality, and maintain that he is the landlord of time in that he is above time. Not only does God tower above time, but he also towers above the metaphysical time. My interest, nevertheless, is in the idea that God was temporal, prior to creation. The Trinitarian theses and ideas from some of the Byzantine Greek Fathers support this proposition that God was temporal, even before creation. Once again, it appears that these Fathers understood God in concrete rather philosophical terms.

5.4.2.3 Imago Dei

Joseph Diekemper argues for the temporality of God prior to creation, using as a lens the concept of the *Imago Dei*. According to this perspective, human beings are created after the image of God. Accordingly for Diekemper, the similarity we share with God as humans should be understood, based on personhood. For Diekemper, personhood makes a person relational. He contends:

> We have much more in common with God than the classical conception allows. The classical conception claims that God is simple, impassible, and strongly immutable; the relational conception of the image of God entails that he changes in his relations; and, of course, all of this entails that he is not simple (Diekemper 2014:227).

The criticism from partisans of the timelessness model, however, has been that when God is understood in terms of the preceding argument, he becomes too anthropomorphic. To that, Joseph Diekemper (2014:227) replies: 'We unacceptably anthropomorphize God only when we project our finite attributes to him. It is the infinity of attributes which distinguishes God from human beings, not the generic attributes themselves.'

Some of the common attributes that Joseph Diekemper refers to are creativity, rationality, and imagination. While our attributes are clearly limited, God's are not. In line with the *Imago Dei* concept, God experiences emotions in similar ways that we do. God would therefore not be able to experience emotions in this way if he is static as he appears in the timelessness model. Diekemper (2014:227-228) argues that God's mental life 'necessarily involves the dynamic experience of events.' It can therefore be averred that before creation, God's creative power was exercised in his inner mental life. Like it is the case in the previous arguments, being created in the image of God is

an idea that suggests to Africans that God is relatable. Although God transcends creation, he can still relate to Africans' struggles, since Africans are created in his image. This view too, suggests that God should be understood in concrete terms as opposed to philosophical terms.

The above argument, however, does not mean that the concept of *Imago Dei* is not without some interpretive problems. It is not even easy to explain with certainty what it means to be created in the image of God. According to Daniel Simango (2016:187), in modern period the 'image and the likeness of God…are interpreted from the functional, relational, and substantive perspectives or a combination of these.' All these interpretations understand God as Lord over creation. But most importantly, God is understood as being in a functional relationship with his creation. This, still, does not take away the fact that there are interpretive issues entailed in the *Imago Dei* topic. As Daniel Simango (2016:188) notes when commenting on Genesis 1:26-27, 'most interpreters and commentators do not think that the biblical context of Genesis 1:26-27 is sufficient to define what it means to be created in the image of God.' In the end, though, there is a sense in which God is seen in these interpretations as being in time.

5.4.2.4 The Viewpoints of DeWeese and Craig

With metaphysical time, the Trinitarian thesis, the Byzantine Fathers, and the concept of the *Imago Dei*, we have suggested the temporality of God before creation. In this section, we will consider the insights of Garry DeWeese and William Craig on the subject matter.

5.4.2.4.1 DeWeese's Theoretical Framework

Garry DeWeese (2002) proposes a theory with which he demonstrates how God acts in time, although he still remains the landlord of time. To have a better grasp of this view, we must understand what he means by temporality. DeWeese argues that temporality is a mode of existence for a being that is in time. A being that is in time can be regarded as having existed in the past, exists in the present, and will exist in the future. The consequences of temporality, as DeWeese (2002:51) explains, are that a temporal being must be in time, it must be concrete in nature, and because a temporal being has a temporal location, that being must exist in time. If time then would cease to exist, the being would also cease to exist. DeWeese (2002:51) brings in a fourth

element to temporality, narrating that, 'since a temporal entity is one that has temporal location, and a temporal location may be a point in time, a durationless instant, it follows that a temporal entity need not be an enduring entity.'

Basically, Garry DeWeese proposes that God, whom he considers timeless, can be in time without having to suffer time properties. He makes this point, as it prepares to him to present his theory that God can endure time, even though he is timeless.

Garry DeWeese (2002:52) claims that God can be in time, but that he does not exist at any time. He qualifies himself by adding that timeless entities are abstract in nature (DeWeese 2002:53), and since timeless beings are abstract, they are immutable. He calls his theory 'omnitemporality.' Underlying this theory, is the presupposition that there are two kinds of times: Physical and metaphysical time. Garry DeWeese (2002:50) explains that metaphysical time

> roughly, is the succession of moments or events through which concrete objects persist, but since concrete objects need not be material objects, metaphysical time is not identical to physical time. The flow and direction of metaphysical time grounds the ordering relations of physical time. Thus even if a temporal physical world lacked regular laws, and hence lacked a temporal metric, that world would undergo a succession of moment (flow) with a determinate order (direction) which is grounded in metaphysical time.

This leads Garry DeWeese to posit that, '[i]f God experiences succession in his being, then metaphysical time is "divine time."' Being aware of the challenges that come with the timelessness of God view, DeWeese (2002:57) argues in line with his 'omnitemporal' model that 'God as an omnitemporal being must be able to sustain temporal relations.' He further states that 'God would be "above" physical time but still temporally present and thus able to enter into relations with temporal entities.' He adds:

> As omnitemporal, God would experience succession in his mental states, thus being much more analogous to what we mean by 'person.' As omnitemporal, God could experience change in his relational properties, so that an individual would at one time be an object of God's wrath and at a later time, after redemption, would be an adopted child of God (DeWeese 2002:57).

Garry DeWeese's model has some theological advantages that are in line with my proposition. First, the model offers a better understanding of the doctrine of providence. This is because, for God to provide and care for his creation, he needs to be present to his creation. This is the only way God can make sense to African Christians.

Second, the subject of petitionary prayer makes sense in this model. Generally, African Christians believe that their prayers reach God and in turn God answers their prayers. Since this process can take time to unfold on both Africans' and God's sides, God must go through different phases of time to deal with them. Third, the Trinitarian theology rests comfortably in this model. God would still remain immutable in his essence, while maintaining a relationship with the world. Finally, the 'omnitemporal' model accounts better for the incarnation of Christ.

Garry DeWeese's omnitemporality model aids, furthermore, in arguing that although God can act and be located in time, he is the landlord of time, as physical time cannot imprison him. The fact that God has created time, acts in time, and coexists with creation, does not necessarily mean that he should suffer time limitations (Zimmerman 2002:86).

Before I bring this subsection to close, Jürgen Moltmann (2013) warrants mentioning at this point. Moltmann recently argued for the possibility of God. In his book *The Crucified God,* Moltmann (2013:234-235) connects the suffering of God to the suffering of Jesus Christ during Christ's crucifixion. For Moltmann, the love of God compels God to be passible because God is not timeless. According to Moltmann, not only does God understand people's suffering, but when people go through suffering God feels their suffering. As Moltmann (2013:281) puts it, God 'suffers in his passion for his people.' For Moltmann (2013:229), if God is impassible and timeless, then God is uncaring and unloving. On this note Moltmann rejects the timelessness of God model.

5.4.2.4.2 Craig's Theoretical Framework

According to William Craig (2009), God was timeless, prior to creation. In this mode of existence, God did not go through change – whether intrinsic or extrinsic. However, upon creation, Craig (2009:155) claims that God then went through an extrinsic change. Because God created the world, he now stands in a relationship with the world, or, at the very least, into coexistence with the temporal world. Craig (2009:155) argues:

> Thus, even if it is not the case that God is temporal prior to his creation of the world, he nonetheless undergoes an extrinsic change at the moment of creation that draws him into time in virtue of his real relation to the world. So even if God is timeless without creation, his free

> decision to create a temporal world also constitutes a free decision on his part to exist temporally.

Ryan Mullins (2023:2-3 of 21) captures William Craig's model in a more poignant way:

> God can change in various respects, both intrinsically and extrinsically. When God freely exercises His essential power, He changes intrinsically by performing a new action. When God forgives a repentant sinner, God changes both intrinsically and extrinsically. God changes extrinsically in that God comes to stand in a new relation to a creature. Namely, being the one to whom a sinner is repenting of her sins. Yet, God also changes intrinsically in that God's knowledge will perfectly track the changes in reality. God now knows that He is being prayed to, and God now knows that He is forgiving the sinner.

Hence, for William Craig, God was timeless without creation and entered (created) time upon creation. Andrew Loke (2023:6-7) elucidates Craig's point by stating that when God entered the dimension of time He did not lose his atemporality. According to Craig (2009:156), therefore, 'anything that changes, even extrinsically, must be in time.' The advantage that Craig's model has, is that it takes the God-world relationship seriously. Craig's model differs from the one that I propose in this section concerning the status of God before creation. For the model, I propose that God was temporal before creation by virtue of him possessing the potential to change. This view is backed by the Trinitarian argument surveyed earlier and also that God created angels before creation. Craig's model, however, is in congruence with my proposition that God stands in relation to a temporal world. In recent times, Craig's model has been embraced by Erik Wielenberg (2021:86) in his paper, *Craig's contradictory Kalam*: *Trouble at the moment of creation* and Loke (2023) in his paper, *On God and the beginning of the universe*: *An evaluation of recent discussions*.

Alan Padgett (2010; 2011), though, experiences challenges in William Craig's model. After acknowledging that Craig affirms the creation out of nothing theology, Padgett argues that while creation out of nothing is a Christian doctrine, he, nevertheless, does not think that Genesis 1 teaches that. Padgett (2011:119) contends: 'The presence of a formless waste and the waters of the deep lead to the conclusion that this chapter is teaching a creation out of chaos, as almost all academic exegetes will agree.' He adds that Genesis 1 is 'the beginning of ordered time or measured time' and marshals this argument to defend his thesis that God's temporality did not begin at creation, as God always had the potential to change in himself. For Dean Zimmerman (2002:80),

it is incoherent to suppose that God before creation was timeless and upon creation entered time.

In line with William Craig, Robert Pasnau (2011:11) refers to God as a 'holochronic being, i.e., a being that exists as a whole, all at once, for all its existence, and does not partly exist at different times.' In this temporal all at once existence, God endures through time. By this, Pasnau rejects the traditional notion that God exists outside time. However, if God exists temporally as a whole, does this not mean that he shares temporality with humans? According to Pasnau (2011:27-28), the temporal all at once existence means that God 'must be immutable, and so contemporaneous with creatures but still not responsive to creatures in the way proponents of a temporal conception of God often seek.' He claims that there is an epistemic possibility that God endures time through his own time (Pasnau 2011:16). Like Craig (2009), he also conjures that God entered our time at creation, but unlike Craig, Pasnau's model has located God in time, al-though still existing in his own metaphysical time. On this point, Pasnau concurs with Alan Padgett's theoretical model.

What is noteworthy of William Craig's mode for Africans, though, is that God is capable of change and is present to his people in the temporal world. Regardless of the mode of existence that God had before creation, he entered (created) time to be with his creation.

5.4.2.5 The Biblical Point of View

African Christians have embraced the Bible as a credible source for their devotional lives. Their relation with the Bible has, in fact, led two of the early African theologians, John Mbiti (1969) and Kwame Bediako (2011), to advocate for the Bible's use as a primary source of African theology: 'Among African Christians, the Bible is normative and sets the tone and manner in which they are expected to live their lives. It also inspires humanity to love God' (Oladipo 2010:51). Caleb Oladipo (2010:52) adds: 'The Bible did not introduce God to Africans, but stimulated them to rekindle the love of God they already knew.' This prompts me to suggest that biblical narratives should inform our theological discourses about God's relation to time. Classical theists seem to only pay lip service to such a view. They have allowed Greek philosophical discourses, rather than biblical narratives to shape their theological model.

With that in mind, it is important to state here that the Bible does not provide us with an explanation of how God came into existence. He is just existing from everlasting to everlasting. However, the Bible presents a history of God acting in time, and if God has a history of acting in time, it makes sense that God is temporal and in time.

The proponents of the timelessness of God theology are using specific Bible verses to defend this model, like Psalm 90:4: 'A thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night.' This text is understood by classical theists as implying that God is timeless. However, upon closer inspection, this text appears to have nothing to do with timelessness. It seems as if this text is interested in the idea that God existed before creation, and not that he is timeless. This notion is supported by verse 2 of the same text: 'Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the whole world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.' This text therefore refers to God's everlastingness and not his timelessness. Regarding the comparison between a thousand years and a day mentioned by the text, the comparison only invokes temporality on the part of God. The comparison means that God does experience time and that he experiences it differently from the way in which humans do. Nicholas Wolterstorff (2001: 192) endorses this thought: 'God has years, indeed, but to those years there is no end.' The proposal that Psalm 90:4 suggests that God is timeless, is therefore unconvincing.

The writer of the book of John supports the above thought. In John 8:58, Jesus states that he has existed before Abraham: 'Before Abraham was born, I am.' Contrary to the idea that God exists outside of time, this text places Jesus before Abraham on the time scale. Nicholas Wolterstorff (2001:190) asks: 'If I AM existed before Abraham, how could I AM be timeless?'

Another text used to defend the timelessness of God theology is Malachi 3:6: 'I the Lord do not change.' The timelessness idea is inserted here by means of God's immutability. Hence, it is stated that this text teaches that God is changeless, which in turn suggests that God is timeless. Contextually though, it seems as if the writer of Malachi is speaking of God not changing in reference to his faithfulness. The writer is not here referring to God's ontological immutability, but, as Nicholas Wolterstorff

(2001:191) puts it, 'that God's fidelity to the covenant he has made with his people remains unalterable. The passage affirms covenantal fidelity, not ontological immutability.' According to William Craig (2009:147), God is portrayed in the Bible as unchanging, only in terms of his unchanging faithfulness and character, although he does change in relation to his creation.

Psalm 102:23-28 is also used to defend the timelessness theology. Verse 27 reads: 'You remain the same.' This, once again, suggests the unchangeability of God according to the advocates of the timelessness model. Understood in context, however, this text dispels the idea that God is timeless. The Psalmist seems to be referring to God's cosmological rather than his ontological immutability. The implication is that, compared to the cosmos, God endures forever (Wolterstorff 2001:191).

James 1:16-18 is also a favourite text among the timelessness theologians. This is because this Bible text speaks of a God 'who does not change like shifting shadows.' However, understood in context, this Bible text does not address the timelessness of God. As Nicholas Wolterstorff (2001:193) points out, the writer of this text employs an imagery of a beam of light that shines upon a rotating object to show the superiority of God. As the light shines upon this object, different parts of the object fall into shadow as the object rotates. Based on this metaphor, God is contrasted with such an object. As the shining light, God, and not the object, does not change like shifting shadows. In view of this, this text has nothing to do with God's timelessness.

The Bible generally presents God as dynamic and interactive in creation. As Alan Padgett (2011:118) puts it, it is hard to ignore the fact that 'the Christian Bible presents us with a view of God in which God is not absolutely timeless but rather eternal in the sense of everlasting.' In Psalm 90:2, the Hebrew term for 'eternity' is '*olam*.' As opposed to timeless, *olam* refers to 'a long period of time.' Padgett (2011:118-119) contends: 'For this reason as a Christian theologian I believe that the everlasting model is the one we should begin with in thinking about God and time in the discipline of systematic theology.' Thus, the Bible (and ATR) speaks of eternity in the everlasting sense. It is in this sense that God becomes the landlord of time. Therefore, because God is from everlasting to everlasting, he stands above of and superior to time, without being removed from acting in time.

In Exodus 3, God speaks with Moses. He is concerned about the situation in Egypt. God then comes up with a plan that he and Moses will put in motion. This and other related Bible accounts make sense, only when understood in temporal terms. That is, God sets events in motion and these events take place in succession. God then responds to these situations. This has led Nicholas Wolterstorff (2001:188) to declare: 'The God of Scripture is One of whom a narrative can be told; we know that not because Scripture tells us that but because it offers such a narrative.' Charles Taliaferro (1998:154) agrees: 'A God who transcends time enjoys an eternal view of created, temporal persons. A temporal God who prizes relationships with creation would at least appear to be equally or more motivated to preserve the creation in an ongoing successive relation.'

The medieval tradition held that a being who is in space-time, has parts and suffers change. Geoffrey Gorham (2009:860) notes the early dilemma that the medieval theologians faced. On the one hand, they were faced with a biblical revelation in which God is actively involved in the world. As Lord and Saviour, God needed to be in the space-time realm to carry out his plan of salvation. On the other hand, it bothered these theologians that God has parts and goes through different phases of time. Accordingly, their burden was to reconcile the two apparently contradictory views. Thus, Augustine, Boethius, and Aquinas produced a model in which God views all times at once. Gorham (2009:860) notes: 'It is not surprising that the doctrine that God is somehow everywhere entirely and always all at once…became commonplace in medieval theology.' Gorham indicates correctly that medieval theologians sacrificed the biblical evidence, which referred to the temporality of God, for a Greek conception of a timeless God.

If the Christian tradition is to be faithful to the Bible, it should begin by taking biblical narratives regarding God and creation seriously. When the biblical world is upheld over Greek conceptions, the timelessness theology will fall (Padgett 2010:885-886; Pasnau 2011:19).

When I propose that God is in time, I do not mean that God is altogether in time. What I want to convey is that 'God is not in time...but he is with time since he is the creator.

Certainly, the creator cannot be limited by his creatures or he would not be creator' (Mohammdinia & Dibaji 2023:390). In this context, a transcendent God is capable to reach out to Africans without time limitations affecting him (May 2023:26).

In the end, the model that I canvass, rests on the following premises: 1) God first and foremost exists in his own time which is metaphysical by nature and is superior to created time; 2) the Trinitarian theology renders God interpersonal and temporal before creation; 3) the Byzantine Fathers affirmed the temporality of God; 4) the concept of the *Imago Dei* warrants that God should be personal; 5) the theoretical frameworks of Garry DeWeese and William Craig place God in time; and 6) the Bible speaks about a God who has a history. The implication is that God always had the potential to go through change. Thus, it does not come as a surprise that, after creation, he entered into a personal relationship with Africans. This though, does not mean that by being present to creation, caused him to lose his landlordship over time. In that case, God does not change in his faithfulness, but in his interpersonal relationships with humans. To my mind, this model preserves God's transcendence and immanence, a notion that is present in ATR. I also think that this model is faithful to the biblical tradition, and most importantly, it brings God closer to his people without making him look like his people.

In that spirit, I suggest that for the timelessness of God theology to reach the Christian needs of Africans, it must recognise the worldview from which Africans operate. This worldview is outlined in ATR as holistic and concrete. An abstract God is foreign to traditional Africans. I also suggest that the timelessness theology should be reformulated, taking the biblical tradition as its source of theologising. In any event, the Bible is supposed to be the yardstick by which our theologies are measured.

5.5 SUMMARY

In this chapter, I argued that the timelessness of God model is incoherent and causes conceptual problems for African Christians. I started off by presenting the presuppositions that underly the timelessness theology. These presuppositions were identified as arguments, emanating from the maximal perfection theology and creation. I then sub-

jected these presuppositions to a critical examination and concluded that the timelessness model makes God too abstract for African Christians. Most critically, however, the timelessness of God theology removes God from the world of Africans.

I concluded the chapter by proposing a model called ‘the landlord of time.’ This model preserves both God’s transcendence and immanence with the overarching argument that God relates to people in time. The following chapter brings this study project to a conclusion.

Chapter 6

Summary, Recommendations and Conclusion

6.1 INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter critically examined the timelessness of God theology with the aim to ascertain its suitability for African Christians. This chapter brings this thesis to a close by way of summaries, limitations encountered, commendation of the thesis, and recommendations for future studies.

6.2 SUMMARIES

Chapter 1 problematised the research question, which is a theological investigation of the timelessness of God model in Christian theology. Subsidiary objectives of the thesis circled around three questions:

- In what sense and to what extent is God timeless in the timelessness of God theology?
- What is the nature of God's relation to time in ATR?
- In what sense is the timelessness of God problematic for African Christians?

A qualitative method was adopted as guidance to addressing these questions.

To address the above questions, chapter 2 provided some groundwork by exploring the metaphysics of time in the Bible, as well as in the Western and African traditions. The premise in chapter 2 was that, for the nature of God's relation to time to be established, the metaphysics of time had to be explored to find out what time really is. It was found that the Bible speaks of two kinds of times – cyclical and linear time. It appeared that cyclical time tends to dominate the biblical world as compared to linear time. Also, what is significant from the biblical point of view is that time is relational. This implies that time in the Bible is linked with events. Regarding the Western tradition, multiple theories of time emerged. It was found that in the end, though, time in the West is viewed as either static or relational. On relational grounds, time is linear, moving from the past into the present and into the future. On static ground, however, all times exist simultaneously. Regarding the African ontology of time, it was established that time in

Africa is cyclical. Africans' conception of time is concrete and understood from a holistic perspective, meaning that time is a part of the whole of the African worldview. In this regard, time cannot be separated from events. Time depends on events for its existence in ATR.

Having explored the metaphysics of time from the mentioned contexts, chapter 3 explored the question of God's timelessness in Christian theology. The main purpose of the chapter was to explore the genesis of the timelessness model with the intention to identify the model's broad outlines. The reason for doing this was to lay a foundation on which chapter 5 would proceed. The timelessness theology was traced back to medieval theologians. Augustine, Boethius, and Aquinas were identified as representatives of the model in medieval times. It was found that these theologians developed the model at a time when philosophical attacks on God and creation were at their peak. Their model therefore emerged as a response to these attacks. The broad outlines identified, were that God is timeless and that he lives his life all at once. Furthermore, all events exist simultaneously at once before God, from his vantage point of living outside of time. Although some concerns over this model were raised, it was also shown that modern defenders of this model have made attempts to revise this model with the aim to show that a timeless God relates with the temporal world.

Chapter 4 focused on ATR. Since this thesis evaluates the timelessness of God in the context of traditional African Christians, a discussion of what ATR is, needed to be explored. This chapter discovered that Africans' conception of God is concrete, rather than abstract. Compared to the previous chapter, chapter 4 established that the African God acts in time, although sometimes he does this through divinities and ancestors.

Chapter 5 then offered a critical analysis of the timelessness of God theology. What made this analysis possible, were insights gathered from the findings of chapters 3 and 4. This chapter showed that modern defenders of the timelessness theology rely on two arguments – the maximal perfection argument and the argument from creation. Maximal perfection posits that God is the greatest ever because he is simple, immutable, and omniscient. This is basically the perfect being theology that was popularised by Anselm. The argument from creation posits that because creation is temporal, God

can neither be thought of in temporal terms, nor can He be located in the temporal world. God is no prisoner of his own creation, and hence, exists outside of time. Upon closer inspection though, this model was rejected, not only for its incoherence, but also that it is unsuitable for African Christians who think of God as being present for his creation. Not only is a timeless concept of God foreign to the Bible, but it is also foreign to ATR.

For a way forward on the subject matter, a model was proposed which views God as landlord of time. This model argued that even before creation, God was temporal, meaning that he could go through change. The fact that God was mutable even before creation, accounts for the fact that he could create in the first place. This model, in addition, argued that, although God is in time, God transcends time because as the creator of time, he is above time. This model is proposed to be in sync with the biblical worldview and helps in meeting the spiritual as well as religious needs of African Christians without sacrificing the biblical witness.

6.3 LIMITATIONS

Like other academic research, this thesis also has its own limitations. I note several here.

The first limitation I encountered was about the philosophical and scientific theories that I did not pursue exhaustively. For instance, the theories of time of Aristotle, Isaac Newton, and Albert Einstein need to be explored deeper, as their implications are central to the modern discussions of God and time. The Bible should not be used as the only source for the relation between God and time. Additionally, the famous exchange of five papers between Leibniz and Clark that took place between 1715 and 1716 relating to the nature of time, deserves attention (Sorabji 1983:79). I chose to leave out this exchange in my thesis, as it would only confirm what has been stated in the discussion. For the theories of time that I entertained, care was exercised to extrapolate main theses of these theories to build this thesis' argument. Even so, the strategy was to remain within the confines of theology by only giving limited attention to philosophical and scientific theories that could be relevant for this study's main question. For a detailed theory of time in the Western tradition, the reader can be referred to *Debates in the metaphysics of time* by Nathan Oaklander (2014).

The second limitation that I encountered, was about the historical discussions surrounding the timelessness of God theology. The reader will notice that I only gave attention to three medieval theologians' treatment of the subject – Augustine, Boethius, and Aquinas. Having discussed these, I have skipped the entire history about God and time till modern times. This in no way suggests that history has been silent on this matter since the medieval period. For example, the reformer, Calvin did discuss the idea of God and time and later on, also Karl Barth. Once again, in line with the title of my thesis, I strategically decided to go with the medieval theologians and supplemented their views with those of the contemporary advocates of the timelessness model. These contemporary theologians were specifically Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, as well as Brian Leftow.

A third limitation regards ATR. The reader might have noticed that I did not discuss all the elements that are characteristic to ATR, as I only picked those elements which I believed were relevant for the purpose of this thesis. For example, I left out elements such as the use of mystical powers in ATR. Leaving out these elements was not detrimental to the aims of this thesis, though. The reader may also notice that I did not bring Africans' relationship with divinities and ancestors to biblical scrutiny. This is because the interest of this thesis centred on the nature of the relationship that Africans have with God – a relationship that helped me to unlock the nature of God's relation to time in ATR. Therefore, divinities and ancestors were key because they are Africans' ways to the presence of God. These and related limitations are addressed competently in Richard Gehman's book, *African traditional religion in biblical perspective* (Gehman 2019).

6.4 COMMENDING THE THESIS

Despite the limitations indicated above, I believe that this thesis contributes to the ongoing discussions on God and time in at least three ways.

First, discussions on God's relation to time have been carried out in Western Christian theology, mostly at the exclusion of ATR's cosmology. This thesis attempted to bridge this gap. In addition, with the findings of this thesis in their mind, Christian theologians would benefit in compiling a concept of God's relation to time that is sensitive and

sympathetic to Africans' worldview. Furthermore, this thesis will hopefully bring ATR and traditional Christian theology into dialogue.

The second contribution covers the nature of God's relation to time in ATR. To my mind, there is no academic work done on how God relates to time in ATR. Beyond the overall purpose of this thesis, I have created a theological composite sketch of how God relates to time in ATR, based on African statements, proverbs, and attributes about God. I did this also by way of bringing African theologians and African philosophers of time into dialogue, something that has, to my mind, not been done before.

Above all, I believe that this thesis contributes to the field of systematic theology by showing the incoherence, unsuitability, and conceptual problems of the timelessness of God theology for African Christians. This model may be responsible for African Christians turning their back on the Christian God for ATR.

6.5 RECOMMENDATIONS

First, I recommend that Christian and African theologians should start a dialogue about God's relation to time. I believe that this dialogue would help to dispel tensions that exist between conceptions of God in ATR and Christian theology. I think that Christian theology needs to humble itself enough to come to the level of Africans' cosmologies. This is so, particularly seeing that Christianity hopes to convert Africans, despite Africans' worldview which is deeply influenced by ATR's beliefs and value systems.

A theological dialogue between the two religions would open up a sharing of views among theologians of these religions. Dialogue, according to David Adamo (2011:5), is a conversation that ensues between two religions with the sole purpose to exchange ideas and learn from each other. For the purposes of this thesis, dialogue is more than the exchange of ideas and opinions. Dialogue 'means the sharing of religious conviction for the purpose of mutual understanding that will eventually' lead to a harmonious co-existence between two different worldviews (Adamo 2011:5). The timelessness of God theology may need a revision, and this revision can benefit from insights gathered from ATR (Mohammdinia & Dibaji 2023:389).

David Adamo (2011) relies on the work of Jerald Gort (2008), referring to four kinds of inter-religious dialogue. He refers to the first kind of dialogue as the 'dialogue of histories.' This kind of dialogue tends to concern itself with similarities that the two religions share. The purpose for doing this is to gauge the level of respect that the two religions may be having for one another. On the basis of this, 'questions of justice, injustice, power, domination, wealth and poverty is [sic.] discussed and ironed out' (Adamo 2011:5). As already indicated in this thesis, both ATR and Christian theology agree on two major core tenets of Christianity, which are that God is the creator of the universe, and that God transcends all creation, including time. These commonalities already demonstrate that there need not be any hostility between the two religions.

The second kind of inter-religious dialogue is called 'the dialogue of theologies.' David Adamo (2011:5) asserts that the aim of the dialogue of theologies 'is to remove inter-religious nescience and misunderstanding, so as to foster respect and tolerance amongst participants.' He adds that '[e]very participant recognises the right of the others to deny and contradict the truth to which they hold and to speak their own mind.' Certainly, there are things that Christian theologians can learn from ATR and things that African scholars of ATR can learn from Christian theologians. This is the respect that Adamo is speaking of.

The third kind of dialogue is 'the dialogue of spiritualities' (Adamo 2011:5). This kind of dialogue is also key, considering that Africans by nature are deeply a religious people. This type of dialogue invites participants to allow themselves to be vulnerable enough to share their existential religious feelings and fears without being judged by the other religion.

The last kind of dialogue is 'the dialogue of life' (Adamo 2011:5). This kind of dialogue moves beyond matters of spirituality and theology to issues that affect life, such as poverty and inequality. Perhaps this kind of dialogue can inform Christian theologians on why Africans tend to view reality in concrete terms – a phenomenon that has made Africans prefer a God who is near to them than one who is removed from reality.

Second, I recommend that both groups of theologians appreciate the benefits of theological ideas that are formulated in context (Banana 1991:41). In other words, theologians must seriously take the subject of contextualising theological doctrine. John Pobee (2012:6) defines contextualisation as 'a commitment to developing theological ideas in ways consistent with thoughts of the locale and the time. Culture, a socio-reality is the identity and wavelength and code of a specific community, laying out the schemata of intelligibility in particular context.'

Accordingly, it would benefit both Christian and African theologians to come up with a contextualised theology of how God relates to time, according to Africans' cosmological ontologies. I stand with scholars like Dirk Van der Merwe (2016:576) who advocate for an African Christian theology that emanates among Africans, a theology that should 'consist of a *Christian* doctrine [of God] from which faith principles and the conduct of the church emanate' (original emphasis).

The last recommendation I want to make, is motivated by one of the limitations that I have encountered while writing this thesis. It concerns God's relation to time in ATR. While I attempted in the thesis to give a theological sketch of what God's relation to time in ATR looks like, I have only scratched the surface. This is because the argument of my thesis revolved around only proving that the timelessness of God theology is unsuitable for African Christians, hence, I had to narrow the study topic to that. I have, however, made a composite sketch in passing. A more detailed and sustained study of how God relates to time in ATR remains a viable academic task to be undertaken in future.

6.6 CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the timelessness of God theology contains some internal and external theological incoherences. Most importantly, this theological model is incongruous with Africans' notion of God and time. This model is unsuitable for African Christians who interpret reality from the African traditional religion worldview. Conceptual problems of the timelessness of God theology may be responsible for African Christians turning their back on the Christian God for ATR.

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