

Reflections on Victoria Harrison's Eastern Philosophy of Religion

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Victoria Harrison's Eastern Philosophy of Religion is a short book which seeks to guide scholars who are unfamiliar with some of the basic philosophical discourses original to Jainism, Hinduism, Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism. The 'Eastern,' in the title of Harrison's book refers to the philosophic-religious ideas peculiar to these philosophical traditions. I explore the contents of this book as a scholar committed to facilitating intellectual exchanges between philosophers of religion in the African traditions and the ones mentioned earlier. This is because some of these ideas she explores parallel some reflections which hitherto, I assumed to be original to African philosophy of religion. Specifically, I outline how the discourses on personhood, immortality and Jaina perspectival pluralism share similarities and can be more appreciated when assessed from an African perspective. Based on this conviction, I call to divest philosophy of religion away from Christian-and eurocentric assumptions so that it can attain a truly global character.

Key words: African philosophy of religion; philosophy of religion; Jainism; Hinduism; Taoism; Confucianism and Buddhism; immortality; logic; Victoria Harrison

In *Eastern Philosophy of Religion* (2022), Victoria Harrison addresses issues in Jainism, Hinduism, Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism by studying notions of self, being and emptiness, nothing and something, and pluralism. The last section in this short book is, however, entitled “global philosophy” (61-2). Here, she ruminates over ways through which the texts from these traditions that are now available in English serve as a basis for academic philosophy of religion in Euroamerica and Europe. Specifically, she mentions how “the phenomenological tools honed by Yogacara philosophers, along with the Madhyamikas’ approach to ontology, seem particularly ripe to contribute to the global philosophical project” (62). Whereas the central theme of Harrison’s book is to introduce the philosophic underpinnings of Jainism, Hinduism, Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism to a general audience, I am particularly fascinated by how the ideas of some of these traditions can ferment an intercultural exchange with African religious traditions—an affair which is long overdue.

In the first section which introduces the text, Harrison expresses her conviction that her short book does not substitute for the need to engage ideas on religion from these traditions in a robust manner. She explains how ideas in ancient China and India have developed and flourished with the doctrines of Jainism, Hinduism, Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism as prominent representatives. Of course, a short book as Harrison's would not be able to consider these topics fully and hence she makes a case for this by stating that her strategy "is to focus on a small number of important topics, debate about which reveals the key trajectories of the evolution of philosophy of religion in India and China" (4). It is at this juncture that she then proceeds to discuss the various interpretations that various Hindu and Buddhist traditions have offered in relation to the character of the self in the second section.

In her analysis of the idea of the self, which is the focus of the second section (6-24), Harrison relies on key points of relevant texts on the subject. She considers the view of Buddhism which denies the existence of God as well as the belief in the non-existence of self (*anatman*). Even as some of these religious cultures deny the existence of a self, Harrison reveals that Hindus, Buddhists and Jains "in one way or another, hold that rebirth into another physical form is a bad thing insofar as it commits us to another lifetime in the realm of causation, confusion, and suffering" (12). She makes brief allusions to the *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, *Samkhya Karikā* for understanding whether or not rebirth is a 'good thing' as well as the question of what kind of 'material' or 'identity' is 'moved' from a prior existence into the present in the form of rebirth/reincarnation. She queries the general Brahmanical view that what persists in rebirth is *atman* even as it also held that it lacks both physical and psychological properties in the *Upanishads*, since it is an aspect of *Brahman*. This necessarily runs contrary to the Buddhist notion of *anatman*, which denies a self altogether. What this reveals is that even within traditions subsumed under the category 'eastern,' there is no homogeneity. Rather, there are layers of divergences or discrepancies and this has been demonstrated with the subject of self.

The third section (24-42) in Harrison's short book discusses being and emptiness. This section illustrates how the religio-philosophic traditions of China and India "meet each other with shared concerns" (25). The issue of Being and nothingness, according to Harrison, is treated in the traditions she assesses in her book in a manner familiar to the mainstream European tradition of thought, which considers the distinction between contingent and necessary beings. For her, this is true for texts peculiar to traditions such as Advaita Vedānta, Yogācāra Buddhism and Lu-Wang Neo-Confucianism where the nature of Being in relation to emptiness indicates the metaphysical tension between necessary and contingent beings (26). Whereas some of these texts provide various analyses that leaves open the relationship between Being and emptiness, the Buddhist doctrine of two truths allows one to hold on to two seemingly opposing judgments rationally. Reading this section reminds one that perhaps in order to fully comprehend the message of these traditions, they could have been adapting indigenous logic system(s) unfamiliar to Europeans to systems familiar to the latter. Similarly, although African thought systems were (and continue) to be misrepresented and distorted through the inappropriate logic used to assess them, African indigenous knowledges continue to be unique. I will return to offer a brief elaboration on this topic. For the moment, I move to the fourth section of Harrison's book.

In section four (42-55), the third theme of the text is presented. Here, Harrison considers the relationship between nothing and something. She highlights how these religious texts indicate the complementary nature of nothing and something. Whereas 'nothing' may refer to "the emptiness within things, such as cups and rooms without which these things would not exist for people to use"

(46), ‘something’ talks about the utility or usefulness of these things. Personally, I find that both nothing and something as rendered in Harrison’s work complement each other in ways that one cannot be held consistently in the absence of another. My point here is that it is not possible to think of nothing without something and vice-versa. The presence of one necessarily invites the other in Jainism, Hinduism, Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism. Again, this runs contrary to the mainstream, dominant tactic in the European tradition where a binary opposition is overriding such, that *something* is the antonym of *nothing*, whereas they are but complements in the traditions reviewed in the book. The lesson here is that classical bivalent logic does not help with the comprehension of how nothing and something cannot be a contradiction but complements. In following fifth section, Harrison moves to consider pluralism in Jainism, Hinduism, Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism to make clear how two seemingly opposing variables like *something* and *nothing* can actually complement thereby implying a trivalent logic system.

It is in the pages of the fifth section (55-61) of Harrison’s short book that I can confidently say that I learned a great deal. The Jaina notion of perspectival pluralism that assigns truth-values contextually, suggests that a complementary logic which does not entertain contradiction as a sign of failure is operational among Asian and Africans philosophical traditions. On this note, it becomes easier to deduce semblances between *Ezumezu* an Afro-inspired logic system, developed by Nigeria’s Jonathan Chimakonam with the Jaina perspectival pluralism. While explaining how perspectival pluralism works, Harrison points out: “an assertion about an object might be true with respect to some set of parameters, a particular time and place, for instance, and false with respect to another set of parameters” (58). In some quarters, the position of the Jain regarding how reality may be perceived has been rendered as “a model for a form of epistemic pluralism that is not a pluralism of theories but a pluralism of epistemic stances or standpoints” (62). This clearly runs parallels with the principle of CdV (i.e. Context-dependent Variable) in *Ezumezu* logic wherein truth or falsity are assigned to propositions based on the *context* of their utterance(s). The last section: “Global Philosophy” (61-2) illustrates how a philosophy of religion based on Jainism, Hinduism, Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism is capable of providing a comprehensive exposition over some philosophical themes in the history of European philosophy.

Being a scholar interested in studying how world-philosophical traditions may complement African philosophical themes on the global stage, the publication has inspired me. Important aspects of Harrison’s work have fortified me with reasons to consider the urgency for intellectual exchange between African philosophies and their Asian counterparts.

First, it is worth stating that irrespective of the fact that Harrison’s short book aims to provide a cursory exposition for whoever wishes to explore the tenets of Jainism, Hinduism, Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism, elements of reincarnation present in Advaita Vedānta can be found in several chapters of the *Ifá* literary corpus, original to *Yorùbá* of West Africa. The notion of how deeds in a previous life may affect the current place of a person in the present life in Advaita Vedānta is also endorsed in *Ifá*. Nevertheless, the *Yorùbá* will definitely oppose the Buddhist notion of *anatman* since the belief in a self or soul, tied to a prenatally ordained destiny is central to *Yorùbá* notion of person. This is due to the tripartite conception of a person as comprising of *ara* (body); *èmi* (soul/life-force); *orí* (destiny and life-course in earthly sojourn) among the *Yorùbá*. It is clear that from this understanding, the *Yorùbá* notion of reincarnation is closer to Advaita Vedānta than to the Buddhism.

Second, Harrison's work from the beginning sets out to provide the readers with a condensed but informative exposition of some of the core contentions in Jainism, Hinduism, Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism. From the outset, she is humble enough to admit that she lacks the wherewithal to articulate all the thoughts on religion contained in these traditions in such a short compendium. She restricts herself to taking some key themes and providing a hermeneutic assessment of them relying on the sacred texts of the relevant tradition. Personally, I find no issues with her use of the word 'Eastern' in the text since she had already indicated she will be restricting her interests to topics with relevance for philosophy of religion in the religious cultures of Jainism, Hinduism, Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism. Although the title bears the phrase, 'philosophy of religion,' the work is filled with ideas and discourses pertaining to metaphysical and ethical ideals.

Harrison's work illustrates to me how some popular perennial problems especially in the Anglo-American and European traditions of philosophy have been antedated as well as worked out extensively in the religio-philosophical traditions studied in the book. I was also able to see how several ideas offered in them cross paths with some of the postulations in African philosophy. It is for this reason that I make the bold claim that Harrison's short book may actually direct attention for more cross-cultural engagement between African and Asian philosophic traditions. Specifically, topics such as personhood, death and reincarnation, alternative logic systems for comprehending ontology, and theodicy are some issues on which both can provide more robust answers to questions of philosophy.

Although short like any other Cambridge Element, there is no doubt that Harrison's book is a success as a primer for someone like me whose aim is to explore some intercultural themes between Asia and Africa. I have been able to notice how much there is in thought and practice between wisdom traditions in ancient Africa and Asia. I have learned that the form of logic which mediates thought, theory and practice in Asia is similar to that employed among traditional Africans but absent in the mainstream and dominant Anglo-American and European traditions. Harrison's book has succeeded in its aim of introducing the primary topics and debates in Jainism, Hinduism, Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism for a novice who wishes to delve into these traditions and learn from them in a concise manner.

Emmanuel Ofuasia teaches philosophy at the Philosophy Department of National Open University of Nigeria. Although he specializes in Process Ontology and African Philosophy of Religion, his research also extends to African Logic, *Ifá* Studies, and Animal Rights/Welfare within the African context. To further some of his research, he has received local and international grants from organizations and institutions such as: the English Language Support of the Global Philosophy of Religion Project led by Yujin Nagasawa; Culture and Animal Foundation (CAF); and the Institute of African and Diaspora Studies (IADS) in the University of Lagos, Lagos. At the moment, he is working on a monograph on African metaphysics.