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Breaking the Spirit of Poverty in African Pentecostal Christianity

A Traction or A Wither?

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Abstract

Poverty is one of Africa's most intractable problems. Decades of deliberate and strategic socioeconomic policies have not yielded considerable concrete results to eradicate it. Upon succeeding the brutal colonial administration, the burgeoning African governments promised their citizens material well-being through socioeconomic development. A half century later the continent is perpetually witnessing a blatant betrayal of dreams. Just like the African governments that succeeded colonial governments, religious organizations continue to promise poverty eradication by divine means to their adherents, whose numbers keep exploding across the continent. The Pentecostal variant of African Christianity is particularly renowned for its promises of wealth, health, and prosperity through supernatural divine power: in the Bible, God has promised to deliver immense material goods to those who believe in Jesus Christ. The expediency of these promises to alleviate poverty and bring about social transformation is debatable. Some scholars argue that African Pentecostalism is an elaborately complex increase in religious activities devoid of social structural transformation, while others opine that it contributes positively to development. In asking whether African Pentecostal Christianity is a move toward or a distraction from development, this article broadly explores discourses on Pentecostalism and development in Africa. Arguably, in the endeavor to preach and live out the experiential power of the Holy Spirit, Pentecostal Christianity in Africa inadvertently plays a role in the broader ongoing development discourse. Although they do not view themselves as 'religious' or 'religion', Pentecostal churches' attempts to make the teachings of Jesus Christ relevant to the mundane help individual believers cope with life's stresses and vulnerabilities. However, it does not transform the social conditions that create problems for individuals. The liberating hope of African Pentecostal Christianity lies in theologically nuancing its discourses to meaningfully engage in global development discourses.

Keywords

poverty – development – pentecostalism – discourses – sermons

1 Introduction

Despite the worldwide agreement to alleviate poverty through development strategies, the meaning of poverty is arguably the most unresolved issue. To date, the global descriptions and manifestations of poverty that cause alienation, insecurity, isolation, deprivation, and despondency (Ayako 1997) have not yielded a single agreed-on meaning. Throughout history, poverty has been framed in diverse ways. In the nineteenth century, poverty was explained in terms of the 'subsistence needs' necessary for the survival of a person. Lack of 'basic needs' was the idea of poverty that largely dominated the mid-twentieth century, encompassing education and sanitation. The definition evolved further in the late twentieth century to mean 'relative deprivation', broadly touching on income, social conditions, and other resources (Ludi and Bird 2007,1). Chambers (2006) expands the meaning of poverty on four levels. First, he terms income poverty, a condition in which there is an inadequate source of money for self-sustenance. The second is material. Unlike monetary lack, this includes low-quality or, to some extent, no shelter, clothing, or food coupled with the inability to access critical services. The third is 'capability deprivation'. This goes beyond the lack of material needs to what a person cannot do or be, especially in relation to skills, physical abilities, and self-respect in society. Fourth is multidimensional deprivation – the aspects and challenges that reinforce material lack. Chambers' definition points to poverty as that that deprives people of their freedom of choice and opportunities in the matters most important to them. In this case, poverty is not just a lack of material resources but also a lack of power and choices. The World Bank defines and measures poverty by:

presenting a new measure of social poverty that integrates the absolute concept of extreme poverty with a notion of relative poverty reflecting the needs of different countries. Introducing a multidimensional poverty measure that is anchored on household consumption and the \$1.90 and international poverty line but broadens the measure by including information on access to education and utilities. Investigating the difference in poverty within households including by age and gender. (World Bank 2020)

The 1995 Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen comprehensively explicates the multidimensional nature of poverty, not just in terms of material lack but also as

limited or lack of access to education and other basic services; increased morbidity and mortality from illness; homelessness and inadequate housing; unsafe environments; and social discrimination and exclusion. It is also characterized by a lack of participation in decision-making and in civil, social, and cultural life. Absolute poverty is a condition that Nations face by severe deprivation of basic human needs, including food, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, health, shelter, education, and information. It depends not only on income, but also on access to social services. (United Nations 1995)

At its core, poverty has the multidimensionality of all crucial human needs. Poverty reduction strategies correspondingly reflect how poverty is defined. A narrower definition and perspective on poverty will yield a limited policy and practice approach to poverty alleviation. The multidimensional nature of poverty calls for a broader policy strategy that potentially addresses monetary and capability development as well as social empowerment needs. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), through its Development Assistance Committee (DAC), one of its specialized committees that supports poverty eradication, defines poverty in part as excluding people from 'socially adequate living standards' with deprivations that encompass political, sociocultural, economic, human and protective capabilities.

The capability approach to poverty eradication is rooted in the work of Amartya Sen (2001). Sen's capability theory focuses on the means to improve human life through capability empowerment, apart from economic factors alone. Monetary and economic approaches to poverty reduction have totally neglected people's abilities and capabilities. Dating back to the 1980s, Sen's work questions the idea of gross domestic product (GDP) as the only measure of poverty eradication and development. His theory sought to measure human well-being and welfare by people's capacity to execute actions in pursuit of their interests through their own abilities. Sen's work broadened the understanding of poverty to include people's deprivation of abilities, such as becoming literate, avoiding hunger or not being able to participate in social activities. Capacity deprivation impedes the freedom to do and be what people want to be. Income and capability poverty emerge as key strands in the multidimensional meaning of poverty. Income poverty focuses on income and consumption, while the capability approach focuses on the deprivation of capacity.

Poverty mitigation strategies are largely dependent on definitions of poverty in context. The monetary approach inclines more toward increasing monetary incomes for economic growth, while the capability approach emphasizes empowering abilities and skills and supporting public goods.

Although poverty has often been discussed within the context of development, the relevance and meaning of development have changed over the years (Green 2006). The concept of development has no globally agreed-on meaning because of the historical and ideological assumptions shaping its theoretical nuance. Generally and etymologically, 'development' means gradual unfolding, a full working out or the disclosure of something. The word originally had the sense of 'to roll' or 'unfold', to come gradually into existence or operation. By the 1840s, it had acquired the meaning of moving from one stage to another toward a finished state. By the 1960s, under European imperialist expansion, 'developing' as an adjective came to refer to poor, subjugated nations or societies advancing in their economic, industrial, and social conditions. The word 'development' is often taken to mean the promotion of equity that comes by way of fighting poverty. However, as an economic discourse, it took on its contemporary meaning in the 1940s–1960s under European colonial expansion and as rhetoric or justification for violently subjugating other societies.

Developing it further, Rist (2014) opines that development is a multidimensional process to free people from socioeconomic and political oppression. In other words, development is a social and economic transformation meant to improve the living standards of the people. UNDP (1997) explains development as encompassing health, economics, education, and cultural categories. Arguing in the same line of thought, Winter, Steven, and Hawthorne are of the view that development ought to be holistic and transformational, a 'change in the whole of the person, material, social, and spiritual, as well as in the community, economics, social, and political (1999, 588). From Rist's point of view, development touches on human well-being holistically and is in agreement with Winter, Steven, and Hawthorne (1999). This way of defining development goes beyond previous studies that failed to demonstrate a correlation between the immaterial and material aspects of development in human life. Development is a complex process that touches both material and immaterial aspects of human life, so overemphasizing one is detrimental to the other.

Theories and conceptual understanding of human development have often been based on global human development reports (HDRs) and indices, often from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) that emphasize economic empowerment as well as the formation of human capabilities (HDR 1990). Generally, the commonly held understanding of development is

influenced by macroeconomic theory, a modernization theory that conceives of progress as moving from a 'third-world' country to a 'developed' country. Lately, development discourses have been shaped and fronted by the United Nations (UN) which has promoted the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) from 2005–2015 and the Sustainable Development Goals that began in 2016. Development discourses around the two are indicator-based. However, there is a need for a broader perspective.

The above makes it clear that, though it is broadly situated on building active and sustainable communities rooted in social justice, development embraces not only the physical and psychosocial aspects, but also the immaterial dimensions of human life. Adopting the views of Swanepoel and De Beer (2006) and Todaro (2006), development is a process by which people know their capabilities, acquire knowledge, and work in a collective to meet their abstract needs. In doing so, they collectively bring about social, economic, and political changes in society. Development is therefore not purely an economic activity; it is a multidimensional process with the aim of improving the quality of people's lives by reorienting the economic and social systems to raise people's living standards, create conditions for people's self-esteem to grow, and increase freedom of choice (Todaro and Smith 2006). The nature and meaning of poverty are central to understanding and implementation of the development agenda and policies as a means of alleviating poverty.

2 Poverty in Africa

In *Poverty and Shared Prosperity 2018: Piecing Together the Poverty Puzzle*, the World Bank found that sub-Saharan Africa has a poverty rate of about 41 per cent, with 27 out of the 28 poorest countries in the world. According to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals report for 2019, 736 million people worldwide lived in extreme poverty in 2015. Approximately 56 per cent of this population was located in five countries, three of which were in sub-Saharan Africa – Nigeria, the DRC, and Ethiopia (UN-SDG report, 2019). The 2019 Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) findings place sub-Saharan Africa as home of the largest share of multidimensional poor people, comprising 23 per cent of the world's poor (UNDP 2020). The estimation of extreme poverty in Africa by 2030 is in the range of 60 million people, according to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN-DESA 2020). The World Bank's *Poverty and Shared Prosperity 2020: Reversals of Fortune* projected the rise of global extreme poverty in 2020 for the first time in 20 years

due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This complicated the slow progress in poverty reduction that had been achieved so far. The World Bank estimated that 88 to 115 million people fell into poverty in 2020, with a total of approximately 150 million being extremely poor in 2021 with the continuation of the pandemic. Rather than the expected drop to 7.9 percent in 2020, the pandemic saw a regression to 9.4 percent. As the only region in the world where proportions of the poor are on the rise, sub-Saharan Africa is in dire need of development imperatives and practice.

The state of poverty in Africa is dismal and continues to be a perennial problem. However, as poverty prevalence increases, Pentecostal Christianity in Africa, through its churches, continues to promise hope and deliverance from sickness, unemployment, and bad governance through faith and deliverance services. There is therefore a need to interrogate the role of African Pentecostal Christianity in Africa's development process, even when Pentecostalism is not considered a development agent or considers itself a religious group or institution. From the sociological perspective of religion, Pentecostalism is currently a prominent feature on the world's religious stage, inevitably impacting socioeconomic matters. The growth and spread of Pentecostalism, particularly in Africa, is remarkable. Almost every country has the Pentecostal form of Christianity, and almost every denomination is influenced or impacted by Pentecostalism.

Defining and describing Pentecostal Christianity, as Allan Anderson observes, cannot be distilled into a single definition because of its varied doctrines and organization (Anderson 2010). This view is supported by Ruth Marshall, who in her book *Political Spiritualities: The Pentecostal Revolution in Nigeria* sees Pentecostalism not only as a revolution but also as a 'strategic program' (Marshall 2009,128). The Pentecostal movement is not only evangelistic and missional in nature; it is also demonstrative in its orientation (Van Dijk 1998). Historically, Pentecostalism has emerged as a significant social and cultural force, especially in its pentecostalization endeavors. Diverse and spreading globally, Pentecostalism can generally be referred to as 'churches with a family resemblance that emphasize the working of the Holy Spirit' (Anderson 2010,15). Anderson further divides Pentecostalism historically into four major groups. The first are the 'classical' Pentecostals, whose origin is traced to the beginning of the twentieth century; the second group is independent Pentecostal churches, mainly in Africa but with the same beginning period as classical Pentecostal churches; the third are the 'Charismatics' found in mainline churches but with their beginnings from the 1960s; and the fourth are the 'neocharismatics' that began in the mid-1970s and are the key promoters of the 'prosperity' gospel (Anderson 2019,1).

Africa's key development partners include bilateral governments, the United Nations (UN), the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the African Development Bank (ADP), and the private sector through NGOs and faith-based NGOs. Through various umbrella organizations, religious actors in Africa, especially in mainline Christianity, play a significant role in the education and health sectors. Although Pentecostalism has persistently sought to exert public roles (Parsitau 2014) and make sociopolitical contributions (Owojaiye 2011), fewer studies have focused specifically on African Pentecostal Christianity, particularly in framing its role within the larger discourses of development. However, there has been a consensus that notable Pentecostal growth peaked in the wake of neoliberal economic adjustments in Africa.

3 The 1980s Economic Liberalization Program and Pentecostal Growth in Africa

As an example of an African country that has fought against poverty, Kenya, a country in sub-Saharan Africa, has since its independence in 1963, set out to eliminate not only poverty, but also diseases and ignorance. For example, Sessional Paper Number 10 of 1965 set out political, economic, and social programs for the execution of postcolonial economic policy. In it were the critical roles and partnerships of the private and public sectors (Goldsworthy 1975) to spur the country's economic growth. Poverty eradication and development were primarily the core business of the government, but Kenya's economic scene drastically changed in the 1980s with the introduction of economic liberalization. Economic liberalization consists of market-oriented reforms and structural adjustments driven by neoliberal economic philosophy. Neoliberalism is 'a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedom and skills within institutional frameworks characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade' (Harvey 2007,2).

Kenya became one of the first African countries to sign a structural adjustment loan with the World Bank in 1988. Structural adjustment programs in Kenya were policy reforms that aimed to reduce budget deficits by increasing taxes and reducing public expenditures. These series of economic reforms were designed by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). These changes saw the Kenyan government use much of the 1980s and 1990s to liberalize the country's economy. Unfortunately, this did not produce the intended sustained growth, except in the clothing and horticultural industries. Geoffrey Gertz observes that 'the incidence of poverty worsened during the

structural adjustment era, while there was little change in the level of income inequality' (2010,9). In the 1970s, the estimation of people living in poverty in Kenya was around 35 percent, while in the early 1980s it rose to about 40 percent. The 1990s had greater estimates of more than 50 percent (UNDP 1999; Kimalu et al. 2002). The Society for International Development (2004) records that Kenya's Gini coefficient of 0.57 in 1999 made it one of the top ten most unequal countries in the world. Jenkins (2005) and Were et al. (2005) conclude that there was an overall poverty increase in Kenya, just as was the case in other African countries and particularly in rural areas due to trade liberalization. The structural adjustment programs and market-oriented reforms of the late 1980s inverted the social development thesis because they led to a massive reduction of social expenditures, the key pillars of social development. The surrender of education, health, and other forms of public goods to private companies negatively impacted citizens on socioeconomic fronts. This created the poverty contexts in many of Africa's urban spaces.

As in other African countries like Nigeria and Kenya, the restructuring of the economy as designed by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund had a negative impact on the masses, who perceived that the government had failed to deliver on the development and progress agenda. The chaotic context of the socioeconomic crisis provided Pentecostal Christianity with an opportunity to become a public force (Meyer 2011). Pentecostalism's strategy to mobilize the masses through open-air meetings, the creative use of media, and flashy pastors is carried out in ways that matter to the community and are open to all people. They thus are public, 'a form that pertains to matters and groups characterized by openness and accessibility' (Meyer 2011,150). Meyer illustrates her findings through a field case study in Ghana, where, under the pressure of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, the Ghanaian economy was forced to embrace economic liberalization in the 1990s. Liberalization and commercialization of mass media, both in print and electronic, resulted from the larger economic liberalization of Ghana's economy. Just like Martin's (2002) observation that Pentecostalism has had great success among the disadvantaged in Latin American communities, the same is true for Africa. The aftermath of neoliberal economic adjustments that destabilized the economies of sub-Saharan African countries from the 1980s through the 2000s led to the unprecedented growth and spread of Pentecostalism. As liberalization of markets resulted in poverty and the disadvantaged sank deeper into poverty and hopelessness, Pentecostalism quickly seized this opportunity to offer hope.

4 Pentecostalism and Development in Africa

Until recently, religion was not considered significant for development theory or its practice. For example, it is hard to find any work from the period between the early 1980s and the late 1990s that integrates religion as a potent development agency. A great deal of literature on religion and development appeared after the dawn of the second millennium (Deneulin and Rakodi 2011). The increase of interest in religion and development is attributed to the recognition of religion as valuable to people's identities, the increase of faith-based NGOs globally, and changes in development theories that have recently accommodated concepts such as social capital (Swart and Nell 2016). Coupled with this is an upsurge of religious agents of development globally, such as the Aga Khan Foundation, World Vision, Catholic Relief Services, and Christian Aid, among others (Jones and Petersen 2011). These studies indicate that religious organizations are significant forces in development matters. However, the emergence of the field of religion and development has largely led to the contestation between the detrimental aspects of religion and its value to development theory and practice (Tyndale 2006; Haynes 2007; Berger 2010). This inconclusive debate continues to add significant literature to the field (Kaag and Saint-Lary 2011). Much of the literature is composed of theoretical debates with few empirical studies from the field.

Pentecostalism has been argued to be a public religion with a strong public presence and practice. The impetus that makes Pentecostalism a dominant social force amenable to social transformation is derived from its ethics and theology. There is significant divergence of opinion among scholars as to whether Pentecostalism is a positive or negative social force. Berger (2008) and Maxwell (1998) are proponents of the argument that Pentecostalism and its prosperity gospel replicate the Protestant ethic presented by Max Weber (1930) in the essay *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Accordingly, Pentecostalism and its doctrines promote a work ethic that enhances socio-economic change. On the other side are scholars of conflicting opinion who view Pentecostalism as an elaborately complex increase in religious activities devoid of societal structural transformation (Ukah 2017; Gifford 2016; Deacon 2012). Central to Pentecostal public Christianity is the wealth and health message championed through the prosperity gospel. The Pentecostal emphasis on success and prosperity is often assumed (though not proven) to impact the development of skills among its members (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005). Pentecostal structures such as prayers, conferences, healing sessions, and deliverance services are argued to facilitate believers' quest to make breakthroughs in their lives, thus motivating individuals to work hard (Berger 2008).

Gifford's *African Christianity: Its Public Role* (1998) asserts that Africa's Christianity, especially the Charismatic and Pentecostal wings, are devoid of meaningful social agendas since they cannot be involved in direct political engagement because they lack an impactful conception of public theology (Gifford 1998). After visiting CITAM, Jesus is Alive Ministries (JIAM), Winners' Chapel, and Maximum Miracle Centre (MMC) in Kenya. Gifford (1998) notes that Pentecostalism has no social significance in Kenya's public space. In Gifford's view (1998) this lack of impact is due to the lack of theological training among its ministers. They propagate a theology that claims that social ills are spiritual in nature. This in turn makes believers of this religious group believe that they are not in charge of their lives. The Pentecostal church thus lacks a prophetic role in Kenya's public space.

Gifford's *Christianity, Development and Modernity in Africa* (2015) seeks to answer the question of what role Christianity plays in an African continent that is in search of modern development. His core thesis is that there are two answers available that are opposite but have 'public effects': Pentecostalism and the Catholic Church. Gifford comparatively demonstrates that Pentecostalism is harmful and dysfunctional, while Catholicism enhances development. As an African 'enchanted imaginary', Pentecostalism teaches that human life is under the control of spiritual forces that call for spiritual attention. As such, human life is beyond one's control; the world of the spirit has the final say, and not individual responsibility. He illustrates this point through case studies of two Pentecostal churches in Lagos, Nigeria: Mountain of Fire and Miracle Ministries (MFM) and Living Faith Church Worldwide, commonly known as Winners Chapel. Gifford asserts that the emphasis of these churches on themes of spiritual forces undermines socioeconomic endeavors because they tend to dismiss the scientific view of things and weaken social capital, thus becoming 'dysfunctional' (2015,67). They cannot advance development or embrace modernity. On the other side of the spectrum is the Catholic Church. Gifford refers to it as 'disenchanted and internally secularized' (2015,157). Unlike Pentecostalism in Africa, the Catholic Church is a significant development actor. To Gifford, it is 'a super-NGO, the supreme example of global civil society' (2015,80). Although he notes the contribution of the Catholic Church across Africa in matters of health and education, he is quick to point out that through its theologians the Catholic Church in Africa 'entirely ignores the religious imagination of African people', which is Pentecostalism's strength (2015,144).

As a pioneer in the study of Nigerian Pentecostalism, Mathew Ojo (1988) emphasizes the role of print media and educational institutions in its expansion, noting that Pentecostalism has an 'incentive towards self-determination

for other religious movements in Nigeria' (1992,153). As such, it promises to emancipate urban dwellers from the challenges of joblessness and loneliness attributed to being culturally uprooted from one's own village community. In its creativity, Pentecostalism promises 'socioeconomic changes' (Ojo 1996,110), which it has not delivered except for hope. Pentecostal fellowship offers social networks and a community to cushion against urban harsh realities, but it does not deliver 'socioeconomic changes', as Ojo puts it.

Gukurume (2020) argues that Pentecostalism is a profit-making organization that diverts people's attention from the root causes of poverty and inequality. Marshall (1993), Gifford (2004), and Ukah (2005) echo the same sentiments. Through an ethnographic study of Pentecostal Charismatic Churches (PCCs) in Zimbabwe, Gukurume finds that development in Pentecostalism is largely embedded in teachings, theology, and activities. Based on the foundation of key scholars such as Freeman (2012, 2015), Togarasei (2012), and Musoni (2013), Gukurume theorizes the possible role of Pentecostalism in the development process, stating in summary that Pentecostalism inculcates discipline and moral aptitude to do well in business and other professions. Although he cites examples of workshops and business seminars conducted by PCCs in Harare, he is quick to point out that the means to bring about socioeconomic well-being are contested. One case in point is when Gukurume notes that the prosperity is not produced as easily as it sounds: 'This prosperity does not always come cheap for the PCC congregants. To stand a chance to be prosperous and wealthy, members are ordered to pay huge amounts of money and gifts as sacrifices to the church' (Gukurume 2020,272). It is not clear how this will bring prosperity to the members. From his fieldwork, he observes 'What happens in PCCs is that the 'men of God' are becoming prosperously richer, while their congregants' poverty and suffering worsen due to the huge financial sacrifices they make to the church' (Gukurume 2020,273). This is a strong argument against those who claim that Pentecostalism helps its members save money since the money they do not spend on social vices is claimed by the same churches in the form of tithes, donations, and offerings. It does not help the members improve their living standards. This is the reason why Ukah (2007) claims that Pentecostalism is a profit-making enterprise, a self-seeking entity not interested at all in the common good. The 'common good' is a philosophical concept that is embedded in social development but glaringly lacking in Pentecostal engagement with the social. Because Pentecostalism focuses on the salvation of the individual rather than the community, it cannot develop society. The argument that by saving the individual the society is saved is ill-conceived because a society is not developed when everyone becomes a

millionaire. Being a millionaire is not a common good but an individual good. Society cannot develop without strong institutions in education, healthcare, and other social infrastructures.

Religious belonging is a class-based cultural distinction. Burchardt (2020). In his article, 'Salvation as Cultural Distinction: Religion and Neoliberalism in Urban Africa', Marian Burchardt attempts to answer three core questions: (1) How is religion related to individual economic success and upward social mobility? (2) How is economic success conceptualized in religious traditions such as evangelical and Pentecostal Christianity? (3) How does religion feed into social inequalities and processes of social class formation? Through an ethnographic study that focused on a case study of a Pentecostal church in Cape Town, South Africa, Burchardt interrogates the rise of Pentecostalism and neoliberalism using a Bourdieusian approach. Drawing from long-term participatory observation of Pentecostal churches and their cell groups, problem-centered interviews, focus group discussions, and triangulated data analysis, Burchardt determines that forms of cultural subject formation and practices mediate relationships between religion, economic structures, and orientations. The two concepts of cultural subject formation are Weber's concept of Protestant inner-worldly ascetics and Bourdieu's cultural sociology. In the first concept Pentecostalism reorients toward this worldly salvation and at the same time promotes personal autonomy in which radical personal change through conversion is exhibited. On the other hand, Bourdieu's cultural sociology offers a personal autonomy and images of Pentecostal modernity displayed within cultural distinction practice. This means that Pentecostalism is both a cultural creativity and an economic dynamism that significantly benefits the pastors and leaders at the expense of the members. Forms of cultural subject formation and practices of distinction are what facilitate religion and economic structures.

Gifford's study of Pentecostal prosperity theology and its doctrines in relation to social transformation is in line with the preceding findings. The teachings supported by prosperity theology undermine one's ability to improve oneself (1991). His decade-long study of the prosperity theology of David Oyedepo's Living Faith Church Worldwide (LFCW) in Nigeria is revealing. Its logical conclusion, as Gifford notes, is that it cannot bring about socio-economic transformation in Africa (2015). Oyedepo's sermon discourses and writings lack political and public theology adequate for challenging social systems or offering alternatives for eradicating poverty (2015), but only focus on building the individual (Oyedepo) and advancing the agenda of the church as an organization. Prosperity theology becomes the content of cushioning and

offering social capital for members to cope with individual troubles, but not for social transformation or poverty eradication.

In research conducted in Kenya, Colin G. Smith's 'Informal Pentecostal: The Emergence and Growth of Pentecostal Churches Within Kibera Informal Settlement, Nairobi', concluded:

If transformation is to be understood in terms of running projects and ministries that improve the living conditions of people in Kibera, then there was little evidence at the time of the research that the informal Pentecostal churches were having a significant impact on the community, at least in proportion to their numerical presence. However, it may be that these churches contribute in other ways ... by creating social and spiritual capital in contexts where traditional social structures have, to some degree, broken down, and economic security is fragile (SMITH 2007,78)

Church ties in urban contexts offer a trajectory of hope and support to new migrants by providing room to replace lost identities and ties. Pentecostal churches become homes, communities, and families where people can feel a sense of belonging. As such, social capital is provided to all as a platform for self-reinvention. The strength of Pentecostal churches 'lies in their ability to provide environments of intimacy, community, and belonging that foster social and spiritual capital' (Smith 2007,79). In this case the aim of social capital is 'to sustain rather than transform communities. They provide more of a localized coping mechanism than a catalyst for social transformation' (2007,79). Smith's research focuses on Pentecostal churches in Kibera, an informal settlement in Nairobi largely characterized by inadequate housing and a lack of basic services. Another study within Nairobi, 'Pentecostalism and Development in Kibera Informal Settlement, Nairobi' by Gregory Deacon (2012), echoes Colin G. Smith's (2007) findings that 'Pentecostal adherents tend to utilize their faith and church activities in attempts to survive conditions as they are rather than in seeking to transform them' (Deacon 2012,664). Relating theoretical descriptions of the role of global Pentecostalism in improving livelihoods and well-being, Deacon's study focuses on Pentecostal perceptions of entrepreneurship in Africa's largest slum, Kibera in Nairobi. Observing and participating in a Kibera seminar on 'Growing Your Business for God', sponsored by a Pentecostal faith-based organization (FBO), Deacon notes that Neo-Pentecostal ideas of recovery from economic desolation and a search for excellence in financial prosperity were repeatedly emphasized in

the seminar discourse. The goal of the seminar was to encourage attendees to be intentional about wealth accumulation through entrepreneurial habits and business acumen. However, Deacon argues that Kibera's life conditions and the capitalist nature of Kenya's economic system could not allow the Pentecostal proposition to thrive: 'In practice, moving out of a situation of social exclusion in Kibera is immensely difficult. Instead, it is my contention that the Pentecostal adherents with whom I worked utilized their faith, religious language, and rituals in attempts to express, understand, survive, and control – rather than change – their life worlds' (Deacon 2012,666).

The low skill levels and capability limitations of Kibera residents leads them to resort to using networks that are ineffective. The Kenyan government has not invested in infrastructure through which Kibera residents could access resources to improve their lives. The ineffective available 'social capital networks', as Deacon notes, can only facilitate adjustment to the circumstances they are in, not change their daily circumstances or empower people trapped in poverty. Kibera's Neo-Pentecostal discourses express a sense of oppression and survival struggles heavily toned with biblical imagery of tribulation and spiritual warfare, stating that even in the uncertainties of Kibera's life situation, God has a purpose. The narrative of the divine plan discourse offers reassurance that believers can cross over to prosperity. This 'ritualized, repetitive and standardized behavior' (Deacon 2012,672) among Pentecostal churches in Kibera allows believers to have a sense of control over life's unbearable situations. However, there was no action that resulted in change, growth, improvement in well-being, or secure livelihoods as a result of Pentecostal seminars and teachings (Deacon 2012,672). Relevant especially to this article's argument is Deacon's conclusion: 'Pentecostal churches in Kibera are useful social institutions through which to consider the structures of power and inequality that development discourse seeks to theorise and challenge' (Deacon 2012,672).

5 Pentecostalism as Prodevelopment

According to Afe Adogame, religion has historically had 'contradictory complex and cross-cutting relationships with development goals and values' (2016,1). From the perspective of Adogame, the role of religion in development has long relegated to the periphery. This look down on religion was fed by the idea that development is primarily an economic endeavor and that religion would therefore hinder the development agenda. However, Adogame argues that any meaningful human development ought to include 'religious and spiritual dimensions of life' (2016,1). As such, Adogame proposes an epistemological

framework of 'development from below' in relation to African Christianity to enable us to capture a development category that is real among African people but cannot be captured by a Human Development Index (HDI) measurement. As a composite of variables, HDI tends to capture only three scopes of human development: economic, health, and education. For Adogame, HDI's inability to consider religion or people's spirituality as a component of human development is tragic since 'religion is a human meaning-making activity or enterprise that is intricately linked to other spheres of development, social progress, and human flourishing' (2016,4). African Christianities become generators of social capital in contexts such as 'governments, trade unions, blue-collar work places ..., where social networks have deteriorated' (Adogame 2016,7).

Using the case of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), an indigenous Nigerian Pentecostal church that has spread to close to 120 countries, Adogame notes how such churches have made their membership self-reliant through 'loans, savings, insurance, and remittances', allowing them to have 'extra religious functions such as social welfare programs within Africa and the diaspora context' (2016,8). However, taking out loans is indicative of the lack of self-reliance. At the same time, self-reliance is not tantamount to development. This church's extra religious functions drive toward seeking relevance rather than social or community development. Adogame disputes an understanding of development that is primarily conceptualized in economic terms. He suggests that the current study is mainly concerned with 'fieldwork research'. Scholars should keep an eye on how religious groups like Pentecostalism 'concretely negotiate the exigencies', in other words proposing a theoretical understanding of having a 'development from below' as opposed to 'development from above'. The former focuses on how region in the local context empowers people in terms relevant to contextual realities as opposed to the latter, an understanding of development mainly imported from the western world.

Babatunde Adedibu's 'Approach to Transformation and Development: The case of the Redeemed Christian Church of God, Nigeria' advances Adogame's concept of development from below (2012,2) using a phenomenological approach grounded in the RCCG case study to decrease doubts regarding religion's contribution to development from below. Through a case study, Adedibu argues that Pentecostal churches such as the RCCG have positively contributed to development in the respective communities where they are established. He specifically mentions schools, health centers, microfinance banks, and general poverty alleviation initiatives, but only in passing and without providing concrete examples of specific projects. He theorizes the RCCG's development framework under the concept of social and spiritual capital which he illustrates well. In his opinion, social capital, in particular, is what has made RCCG

execute corporate social responsibility initiatives in communities. RCCG social capital is executed through elements of 'bonding, bridging, and liking' (Adedibu 2020,143). Although relevant and insightful, Adedibu's article lacks the depth of a serious empirical case study. His core argument that RCCG is an agent of social transformation in Nigeria is shallow since it only looks at the mission and vision statement and the mission ethos of RCCG and does not confirm through fieldwork whether the conclusions correspond to what is happening on the ground.

Ajibade's work (2020), 'The Role of Pentecostalism in Sustainable Development in Nigeria' utilizes Gaiya's (2015) centrifugal approach to explain how Pentecostal churches confront political and social problems. Ajibade analyzes three Pentecostal churches: Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), Winners' Chapel, and Christ Way Ministries, all in Ile-Ife, Nigeria. He reiterates the idea that Pentecostalism (in this case, in Nigeria) provides personal and individualistic comfort and hope to those undergoing socioeconomic crises. Through their social networks, these churches meet the needs of their members in terms of educational development and humanitarian services. As distinct from social transformation, Pentecostalism does not produce change or transform the social conditions that create problems for individuals.

David Maxwell's article 'Delivered from the Spirit of Poverty: Pentecostalism, Prosperity, and Modernity in Zimbabwe', an ethnographic case study of Pentecostalism in Zimbabwe, argues that Pentecostal's prosperity doctrine cushions believers against the swift social changes that threaten socioeconomic stability. The doctrine is a bulwark against sinking into poverty and destitution. In this case poverty is an instability that shakes up values and institutions. Maxwell's work illustratively points out how Pentecostalism in Zimbabwe re-socializes believers 'through continuous involvement in religious, social, and welfare activities centered upon the church' (1998,353), which consequently insulates them against both economic and social turmoil. Maxwell's case study of Zimbabwe Assemblies of God Africa (ZAOGA) explicates an understanding of poverty within Pentecostalism, often termed 'a spirit of poverty', that reverberates throughout Africa:

Africans remain poor not because of structural injustice, but because of a spirit of poverty. Even though they are born again, only their soul has, in fact, been redeemed. Ancestral spirits, along with their pernicious influence, remain in their blood. These ancestors were social and economic failures during their own lifetimes ... And these ancestral spirits account for the precarious existence of Zimbabweans in the age of liberal economic structural programs (ESAPs). They explain the experience of never being able to accumulate: the new shirts that are burned by the iron; the

car that always breaks down; the money vanishing from a person's pockets with little sense of where it goes. Misfortune is passed from generation to generation via demonic ancestral spirits. (MAXWELL 1998,358)

Ironically, deliverance from the spirit of poverty is found in giving. How do you give what you do not have? This doctrine synchronizes well with the traditional African worldview that hinges on physical catastrophes and mundane challenges to unseen spiritual forces. The doctrine, however, is devoid of macro and sociocultural explanation. The bottom line is that the Spirit of Poverty discourse within Pentecostalism is only a framework that assuages the pressures of modernization and socioeconomic challenges, helpful in coping but not tangibly significant. Maxwell's conclusion contradicts his observations and field findings. Pentecostalism, he claims, does not offer to its believers 'a realizable advance in their livelihoods' (1998,370). When Pentecostal believers stop drinking alcohol or avoid promiscuous lives and other social vices, they potentially have the capability to fight poverty due to a transformed life. However, this makes Pentecostal believers potentially useful to its leadership since their earnings translate to more giving and service to Pentecostal pastors and the church as the promised 'deliverance' from the spirit of poverty.

The efficacy and value of African Pentecostal Christianity intent to tangibly fight poverty and promote development beyond just giving individuals hope requires more than preaching and deliverance services. Historically, churches have dealt with poverty and human suffering through the establishment of institutions that serve the public good, such as hospitals, schools, and social movements that pushed for the abolition of slavery. Liberation and black theologies in Latin America, North America, and South Africa, for example, have invariably addressed social challenges and poverty. Pentecostal Christianity in Africa would do well to have a robust theological framework to engage with sociopolitical issues. It has to intently aim to be heard in the public domain with an agenda for influencing public space with Christian faith. Pentecostal poverty discourses and social transformation agendas must be theologically nuanced and linked social forces that promote justice and equity in society.

6 Pentecostal Prosperity Discourses: African Pentecostalism as Both a Spiritual Organization and Political Dogma

Ruth Marshall (2009) offers a political understanding of Nigeria's Pentecostalism as ingrained in its teaching and organizational structure. The significance of this work is in its enumeration of Pentecostal political theology. Marshall shows Pentecostal political assumptions as not being in tune with democracy as we

know it today. As such, Pentecostal political theology, as in the Nigerian case, is incapable of delivering meaningful sociopolitical transformation. Part of the reason for this, as Marshall points out, is that Pentecostalism engagement with sociopolitical concerns is through the lens of 'socio-magining' with a view to using government to manage what they think is disorderly. Pentecostalism is an occurrence emanating from a web of contradiction and confusion within and without (2009,45). As a critical political and theological analysis of Nigerian Pentecostalism, the book's conclusion is revealing: Pentecostals are slaves to what they are promising to deliver people from (Marshall 2009). Marshall's earlier work, 'Power in the Name of Jesus' (1991), explores the discourse of power among Pentecostals in Nigeria in the context of politics. Her analysis reveals that Pentecostalism is not just a spiritual organization, it is also political dogma with practices aimed at gaining political influence for the benefit of its followers. In her view the aim of Pentecostal fascination with politics is to gain the power and goods that come with it. Drawing on ethnographic research in Lagos, Marshall finds that Pentecostals seek to transform their social and economic world through the symbolic construction of new multifaceted concepts regarding the nature of the world. Social reconstruction is often related to and connected with the power to form a new cultural fabric. This, however, has unclear social and political impacts, which calls for the study of the institutionalization of their proclamations in their attempt to bring about social transformation. Social change and empowerment can then be appropriated into material benefits after accessing political power. In Marshall's view, finding political space in their discourses is another approach that Pentecostalism in Africa seeks for social transformation.

According to Okosun (2018), poverty and illiteracy are directly related to adherence to the prosperity gospel. The more people are illiterate and poor, the greater the chance that they will embrace prosperity theology. Prosperity theology impresses on its believers that they have a right to the blessings of wealth and health obtainable through confessions of faith and the payment of tithes and offerings. This is contradictory to what the literature revealed: most believers in prosperity theology were not doing well financially, but their pastors and preachers were gaining financially at their expense.

Katherine Attanasi and Amos Yong (2012) argue against the idea that there is a single prosperity theology within Pentecostalism. Offering a broad description of prosperity discourses and how they have been appropriated in South Africa, Philippines, Chile, and the United States, their work links the parallel between Pentecostalism and Weber's Protestant ethic. In particular, Nimi Wariboko sensibly locates prosperity discourses within a broader theologically informed approach to faith and economic life. He is concerned that market

practices should be challenged, and that prosperity be reimagined as the capability for all to prosper.

In 'Pentecostalism, the Prosperity Gospel, and Poverty in Africa' Ijaola (2018) argues that prosperity theology in Africa is both a 'promise and an attraction'. Pentecostal prosperity theology can only be said to be working if it improves the socioeconomic well-being of its members. Ijaola's core question is: has the prosperity gospel delivered on its promise to eradicate poverty by the World Bank's determinants standard? His answer is it has not come close to the World Bank standards. He is of the view that the Pentecostal movement only provides spaces for social capital that can provide well-being in the form of fellowship. This fellowship provides social networks through which psychological and emotional challenges can be addressed through rituals and services such as deliverances, anointing and business empowerment seminars, among others. In Ijaola's view empowerment is personal and psychological in nature because it deconstructs negative mentality by offering a positive outlook. In simple terms, it empowers through hope. In particular, Neo-Pentecostals provide a religious space for motivation. He loosely corroborates his argument that Pentecostal prosperity theology yields tangible developments to fight poverty through the examples of RCCG and Winners' Chapel programs such as schools, health centers, and banks. However, most of these programs are funded through members' contributions, and in many cases, these are businesses that profit the churches' leadership. Again, this goes against the Neo-Pentecostal mantra of 'claim it and have it' to 'work for it and have it'. His arguments lack empirical support.

Andreas Heuser (2016) opines that the socioeconomics of Pentecostal prosperity theology defy the view that it leads to social transformation. Its discourses of prosperity revolve around speech enactment of victory, wealth, and faith ritually done as a claim of God's blessings. Heuser's work shows the relationships between prosperity gospel discourses, social capital, and the ritualized enactment of the message. He situates Pentecostal prosperity theology as American Christianity reinvented and transposed through globalization to postcolonial Africa. The inspirational promises of prosperity theology have the potential to be accommodated socioculturally in diverse geographical spaces. Utilizing Csordas (2009), Heuser theorizes transnational religious modalities as 'the transposability of religious messages' and 'the portability of religious practices'. This work questions the economic agency of prosperity theology. Heuser concludes that the transformational potential of prosperity theology in Africa remains a Pentecostal dream. Local prosperity theology is a complex mix of historical, economic, and political factors. Pentecostal prosperity theology and its relation to social transformation in Africa is a subject of academic

discourse yet to be concluded. Heuser's work lacks any empirical data. It is more of a review of literature on Pentecostal prosperity theology but with a strong bias on exposition of the nature of this theology with significant relevance to the current study.

Peter Berger has been instrumental in exploring the Weberian concept of the Protestant ethic among the Pentecostals and in development (2010). Berger strongly encourages a study on the correlation of Pentecostal prosperity theology with a conceptual understanding of the ethics of social responsibility. As such, this seeks to define some Pentecostal activities and rituals as potential agencies for socioeconomic changes. His work prompted the Centre for Development and Enterprise (CDE) in South Africa to undertake an explorative study in 2008 to determine the potential role of Pentecostalism in South Africa's socioeconomic development. The data from the study shows that the ethical impact of prosperity gospel churches is questionable. South Africa's Centre for Development and Enterprise (CDE) indicates doubtful financial resource management among Pentecostal churches. Pastors from these churches were enriching themselves because of organizational deficiencies of control at the expense of contributing members (Center for Development and Enterprise 2012).

Asonzeh Ukah's (2005,2013) criticism of prosperity gospel's utilization of both social capital and finances led him to detect what he calls 'sacred secrecy' (Ukah 2005,272). In his ethnographic study of Nigerian megachurches in South Africa (2013) he concludes that they are led by 'prophets for profit' who lead business empires in God's name. Ukah seeks to investigate how these churches negotiate power, prophecy, and profits in the South African context. In Ukah's analysis, Pentecostals are led by religious entrepreneurs who adopt corporate world marketing strategies to operationalize 'economic missionaries' for monetary benefits, but not to reach out with the goal of the common good (2013, 151). The founding leaders of these megachurches lack financial accountability and use 'sacred secrecy' to have a global appearance in order to avoid local influence and accountability regarding the day-to-day running of the church (Ukah 2013). As such, the church is commoditized, but at the heart of this commercialization and commodification is prosperity theology.

From the evidence of these studies, Pentecostal development and poverty discourses lack empirical evidence that shows that Pentecostal churches improve the living conditions of people living in poverty contexts, in spite of their significant numerical presence (Smith 2007). If anything, Pentecostalism only offers 'environments of intimacy, community, and belonging that foster social and spiritual capital' (Smith 2007,79). It is a personal potency but not a force for social transformation. Pentecostalism represents attempts at

survival rather than transformation or improvement in terms of the well-being of its members; it cannot address wider inequalities (Deacons 2012). Marian Burchardt argues that ‘Pentecostal Christianity does not generate economic attitudes that lead to economic upward mobility’ (2020,162). Asonzeh Ukah (2019) describes Pentecostalism as an elaborately complex increase in religious activities devoid of societal structural transformation (Ukah 2019). Paul Gifford (1998) asserts that Africa’s charismatic and Pentecostal wings of Christianity are devoid of a meaningful social agenda. Individuals turn to Pentecostalism for protection against a host of personal threats and challenges (Burchardt 2015). Pentecostalism helps individuals cope with stress and manage their vulnerability, but it does not produce change or transform the social conditions that create these problems.

7 Is African Pentecostal Christianity a Move toward or a Distraction from Development?

Pentecostal discourses across Africa have a consistent element of a miraculous salvation that they claim will translate to both material and spiritual benefits for their adherents. The challenge of poverty, in particular, has defied well-designed and well-intentioned policies and strategies of governments. Even with these facts, Pentecostal discourses on poverty and development continue to permeate the lives of many adherents in Kenya, a reality echoed across Africa. Massive centers of worship and the ever-increasing numbers strongly indicate a Pentecostal religious economy across the country. This dizzying popularity of Pentecostalism has received endorsement from scholars who argue for development from below (Adogame 2016; Freeman 2012), claiming it transforms Africa for the better. The ‘sowing of seeds’ of prosperity in these churches is not for the common good. As they sow generously with the expectation of a good harvest, the Pentecostal churches receive all the money, which provides their leadership with a lavish lifestyle. These monies do not go to build schools, hospitals, or roads, the key indices of development. Even when they build schools and universities, as is the case in Kenya, most of the members of these Pentecostal churches cannot afford them since the fee is beyond their financial ability. On the other hand, the defenders of Pentecostal prosperity gospel as a tool of poverty alleviation (Asomoa-Gyadu 2007; Togarasei 2011) cite the idea that Pentecostalism tends to inculcate an entrepreneurial spirit among its adherents and employs many people in their massive building projects, including churches. However, these are not supported by empirical evidence.

At the core of Pentecostal poverty and prosperity discourses is the notion that by faith God has already materially blessed all who believe. The devil is the agent of poverty and unproductivity. Deliverance from the spirit of poverty is the only remedy (Maxwell 1998). Although deliverance involves hard work, unfortunately any money gained is plucked back into the church and its leadership leaving the believers again in a state of poverty. It is paradoxical that the Pentecostal prosperity gospel thrives in poverty contexts across Africa. The latest United Nations' Human Development Index locates most African countries as having low human development (UNDP 2020). The greater the prosperity gospel and its discourses by Pentecostal churches, the deeper the level of extreme poverty. Also paradoxical is the fact that richer countries are less religious, which begs the question of whether the poor are attracted by the prosperity gospel.

8 Conclusion

The Pentecostal wing of Christianity continues to grow and expand in the milieu of Africa's socioeconomic crisis. Pentecostalism's relevance to social transformation and poverty alleviation continues to be debated. This article has examined Pentecostal discourses in regard to poverty, development, and prosperity. Pentecostal Christianity continues to increase in numbers and expansion, especially across Africa, through their key selling points: health, wealth, and economic prosperity discourses, which unfortunately ultimately benefit its entrepreneurial leaders and founders.

The Pentecostal presence even in civic and public roles has not translated into social transformation. Its prosperity discourses have not heralded positive quotidian experiences for the people of Africa. Practices and Pentecostal religious beliefs have never been empirically proven to yield material benefits or socioeconomic development. The relevance of Pentecostalism to poverty reduction in Africa would require that it has a development trajectory that produces common goods accessible to all, irrespective of religious background. However, there is a gap in the interactional connection between Pentecostal prosperity discourse and social reality. Beyond humanitarian initiatives, Pentecostalism's conversation on development needs to be nuanced within solid public theology to meaningfully enable development theory and practice in global development conversations.

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