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(127B) THE PROSPERITY GOSPEL AND ECONOMIC GROWTH IN AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY

Moji Ruele

Introduction

This paper explores the socio-economic implications of the prosperity gospel in the lives of African Christian in the 21st century. For the purposes of this chapter, the prosperity gospel or theology is used to mean that God wants to bless Christians spiritually, physically and materially. The paper starts by defining the main concepts used in the paper such as Pentecostalism, the prosperity theology and economic growth. It then goes on to discuss some of the methods used by African Pentecostals, before showing how economic crises in many parts of Africa have contributed to the emergence of African Pentecostal churches.

Defining Prosperity Theology and Economic Growth by African Christian Pentecostalism

In order to understand how prosperity theology plays a role in economic growth in the case of African Pentecostalism, it is important first to understand and define the following terms: Pentecostalism in general, prosperity and economic growth. Pentecostal is a nomenclature corresponding with the name of the Jewish feast of Pentecost, which took place fifty days after Passover (Greek: *Pentekonta*). As described in the New Testament book of Acts, which is central to Pentecostal spirituality, Jesus' followers gathered together following his death (around the time of Passover), resurrection and ascension; on the Day of Pentecost, 'they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance' (Acts 2:4 RSV). Prosperity means to live in abundance, or to flourish, spiritually and materially. In public discourse, the term 'prosperity' is often understood to refer to material goods, by assuming that material well-being can be accurately assessed by one common currency. Thus, money or material wealth becomes the measure of abundance (or scarcity), that takes place in human history.¹ According to Gerardo Marti, 'prosperity theology' as a term therefore has a historical dimension.² Specifically, prosperity theology developed amid the progressive globalization of modern capitalism. Economic growth as understood in this context can best be defined largely as a matter of good stewardship of the world's resources. It is a matter of using human skills, knowledge and experience together with the natural resources of animal, vegetable and mineral so as to achieve a greater output of the means of meeting human needs out of a given input of the means of production. By doing this, we get a more effective material basis for men and women to better our lives, and to be adequately fed, clothed and housed, and to be freed from the grind for survival. Economic growth, like any other economic or political aim, cannot be regarded as an end in itself. It is a means of giving us greater resources which can be used in ways which promote God's glory. The understanding in Pentecostalism is that this is in line with God's purposes, that men should enjoy the good things of this world, receiving them as his gifts and using them to his glory.³

¹ Douglas A. Hicks, 'Prosperity, Theology, and Economy' in *Pentecostalism and Prosperity: The Socio-Economics of the Global Charismatic Movement*, eds., Katherine Attanasi and Amos Yong (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 240.

² Gerardo Marti, *Hollywood Faith: Holiness, Prosperity, and Ambition in a Los Angeles Church* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 132.

³ John F. Sleeman, *Economic Crises: A Christian Perspective* (London: SCM Press, 1976), 137-139.

Prosperity theology, therefore, is fundamentally about how we understand God's action in relation to human actions, which requires us to reflect upon how God acts in the world. What is the relationship between human prosperity and divine and human actions? Prosperity theology tends to emphasize entrepreneurial initiatives which can certainly enhance a sense of human agency or ability to shape one's own economic future.

The Pentecostals' Methods for Economic Growth and Prosperity

This section offers an overview of some of the methods used by the African Pentecostals in pursuit of economic growth and prosperity. The aim is to show the relation between some of the approaches, frameworks and strategies used by African Pentecostal churches to attain prosperity, in response to economic deprivation, poverty and economic crises. In what follows I briefly discuss five approaches used by Pentecostals in promoting the economic message of prosperity.

The Prosperity Model

The first is the Prosperity Model which presents a comprehensive picture of individualization and summarizes profound structural shifts in advanced capitalist structures, the welfare state, and corporate-backed commercialization (which are all aspects of globalization). Ulrich Beck sketches the model of individualization and summarizes how, amid increasing economic uncertainty, broad societal transformation leaves some individuals with greater economic development out of their own particular life course. He calls this approach an individualization thesis with chronic indeterminacy of risk and risk-taking, which must be followed by all Pentecostals, including African Pentecostals.⁴ As an approach, the Prosperity Model encourages individuals to take risks in order to attain economic growth and prosperity in their lives.

The Covenant Paradigm

The second model is the Covenant Model that argues that God blesses nations, either according to the covenant of giving, or in response to the covenant of good efforts. According to this theory, the individual's prosperity, which starts with ceaseless sacrificial giving of money or time and effort to the church, will lead to prosperity, economic growth and national development. In the Covenant Model, irrespective of the overall state of the national economy in many African countries, poverty is perceived as a religious problem caused either by a lack of faith, or a failure to trust in whatever God promises. Therefore, all poor people who live according to the covenant and faith in God will become prosperous and gain economic growth, whereas those who do not will become poor.⁵

The Spiritualist Paradigm

The third model is the Spiritualist/Scriptural Model also known as the Spiritualist Paradigm. It often emphasizes spiritual warfare as the necessary first step to national prosperity. It is perhaps the earliest paradigm to emerge in the pneumatological imagination of African Pentecostals as it confronted both western modernizing cultures associated with globalization and African traditional cultures, which they regarded as demonic. It is also based on an exchange model in which God and Satan act in history. The success or failure of individual and national actions therefore depends on fidelity to Jesus Christ. According to this model, the demands of faithfulness to Jesus Christ include strict obedience to biblical

⁴ Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (London: Sage Publications, 1992), 13.

⁵ Amos Yong, 'Salvation, Society, and the Spirit: Pentecostal Contextualization and the Political Theology from Cleveland to Birmingham, from Springfield to Seoul', *Paxpneuma: The Journal of Pentecostals & Charismatics for Peace and Justice* Vol. 5, no. 2, (2009): 22-34.

commandments, and the rejection of African Traditional Religions and repudiation of certain indigenous cultural practices believed to be demonic. The key to development, therefore, is intercessory prayer and deliverance (exorcism) to redeem the land – in this case the African continent. Spiritualist pastors and congregants believe political and economic powers have both an outer form and an inner spiritual dynamic that animate their manifestation and uphold them.⁶

The Excellence Model

Fourth is the Excellence Model which encourages one to have a strong work ethic and to strive for excellence in everything. The Excellence Model builds upon the prosperity gospel by adding to it the perspective of human capability development and Afrocentric sentiments. If Africans are sowing and reaping material blessings, they must do so according to the proponents of this model, with the best machinery and organization.⁷

The Missional and Contextual Arguments

Fifth is the Missional Argument also known as the Contextual Argument. This method uses sermons that teach people to give in abundance and that money is not evil. According to Akoko, this changed the thinking of a lot of Pentecostals who started establishing businesses in response to the economy that was in crisis.⁸

The African Economic Crisis as a Context for the Growth of African Christian Pentecostal Churches

Since the end of the era of colonialism, many African countries have regrettably been going through a serious economic crisis that has left few untouched and retarded progress significantly. This crisis has given rise to compounding poverty, misery and unemployment, and at the same time ferments fear, doubt and uncertainty is due to increases in social insecurity. Causes of the crisis are many, complex and very difficult to identify – not just by the ordinary man, but even by academics.⁹

Post-colonial government efforts in Africa to control the crisis have also yielded few dividends in specific terms, though there has been much official rhetoric and contradictory claims of recovery in progress. The traditionally established churches (such as the Roman Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Baptist, Lutheran and many others) have also been worried about the crisis. They have made their own spiritual contribution in explaining its causes and how to fight it. They have often expressed this through sermons in churches and in pastoral letters. However, they have neither succeeded in convincing their members nor the population at large on the practical relevance of their options and strategies.¹⁰

Since then, the most existential task facing Africans in general has been economic development to reverse the crisis. For African Pentecostal Christians, this raises the urgent question: what is the Pentecostal churches' understanding and teaching on the continent's economic predicament?

Part of the answer to this question was the rise and spread of Pentecostalism during this period of economic crisis in many parts of Africa. This was coupled with mass defections from the established churches to new Pentecostal churches, which could be interpreted as a public sign of dissatisfaction by

⁶ Yong, 'Salvation, Society, and the Spirit', 22-34.

⁷ Yong, 'Salvation, Society, and the Spirit', 22-34.

⁸ Mbe Robert Akoko, 'Ask and You shall be Given.' *Pentecostalism and the Economic Crisis in Cameroon* (Leiden: African Studies Centre, African Studies Collection, 2007), 13.

⁹ Piet Konings, 'Plantation Labour and Economic Crises in Cameroon', *Development and Change* 26 no. 3, (1995): 525-549.

¹⁰ Pierre Titi Nwel, 'The Churches and the Democratic Upheaval in Cameroon 1982-1993', in *The Christian Churches and Democratization of Africa*, ed., Paul Gifford (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995), 168-187.

African Christians. Many Pentecostal African Christians felt that the way the established churches have gone about addressing the spiritual and material needs of their followers in Africa was not helpful. Such increasing disillusionment shows that a surging number of Christians do not consider it enough for mainline churches to make critical statements about the worsening economic situation. They also condemned the few who lived in obscene opulence while the majority wallowed in poverty and misery.¹¹ During the time of economic crisis, many parts of Africa have witnessed the proliferation and flourishing of Pentecostal groups, particularly in English-speaking areas. Some of these groups are the Apostolic churches, Full Gospel Mission, Church of Christ, Church of God, True Church of Christ, Assemblies of God, Africa Bible Church, Christian Missionary Fellowship International, Winners Chapel, Deeper Life Bible Church, Arm of God Church, New Generation, Celestial Frontiers Millennial Church, United Pentecostal Church, Bethel World Outreach Ministry, Living World Church, Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, Living Faith Worldwide Church – and many others.

Based on the ever-increasing numbers of African Pentecostal Christian churches, it is becoming clear that the African Christian landscape is very different from a century ago when the historic mission churches – Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Baptist and Lutheran – dominated the scene in fighting for economic growth and prosperity. As already indicated, available examples indicate that considerable changes have now taken place with the arrival of the Pentecostal churches in many parts of Africa. In South Africa, for example, the Apostolic Faith Mission is numerically stronger than the Dutch Reformed Church. The Church of the Pentecost is probably Ghana's largest Protestant body. Indeed, in Ghana, Kenya, South Africa, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe, 'born again' churches are so numerous and their leaders so influential that they may just be considered 'mainstreams', 'mainline' or as established as Anglicans and others.

An Application of African Christian Pentecostal Methods for Economic Growth and Prosperity

In order to apply African Pentecostal methods for economic growth and prosperity, one must first recognize that the most existential task facing Africans in general is economic development and prosperity. For African Pentecostals, prosperity theology emerges neither as a tool for the exploitation of workers nor a class pursuit of higher status. It is a practical process towards religious life to the demands of life, particularly with regard to economics.¹² Each of the Pentecostals, both on the African continent and the world over, adopts to a method of life figuring out how to acquire prosperity or a method of practical adaptation (developing practical ways of functioning in a particular society) as an economic message for the accumulation of wealth, in order to attain prosperity and fight poverty. Many of these methods have been used for a long time to persuade Pentecostals that God provides a solution to every problem, depending on the faith of the individual or people in general.

Below I make an attempt to show how these methods are applied by some African Christian Pentecostals. It is important to note that, generally, the processes of Bible reading and the application of the above-mentioned approaches and frameworks are very much dependent on the people's circumstances. As such, the African Pentecostal interpretation of the Bible and the application of this model is a result of their actual situation, due to prevailing socio-economic and political conditions. This context influenced their biblical exegesis. The socio-economic and political chaos that characterized post-colonial Africa became the springboard and a possible space for application of the above-mentioned methods. Below, I make an effort to blend these methods and frameworks within the African context described above.

¹¹ Mbe Robert Akoko, *'Ask and You shall be Given.'* *Pentecostalism and the Economic Crisis in Cameroon* (Leiden: African Studies Centre, African Studies Collection, 2007), 13.

¹² Gerardo Marti, *Hollywood Faith: Holiness, Prosperity, and Ambition in a Los Angeles Church* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 132.

First, I start with the Prosperity Model, which is seen by many Pentecostals as a specific and pragmatic method to address economic crises in general. Amos Yong notes that prosperity theology has the potential to contribute to African economic growth and prosperity.¹³ He posits a mentality that has the potential to transform global economies, suggesting that economic theory has the potential to focus on a new form of renewal economics. Christian missionary work, understood within this framework, is that there is not only the forgiveness of sins but also spiritual healing and deliverance for people from the powers and the forces that oppress them, such as economic factors. Thus it involves not only health and spiritual well-being, but wealth. It also engenders hope in impoverished situations; it may motivate actions that could gradually overcome poverty. The prosperity gospel message also puts emphasis on members achieving high levels of prosperity. It associates failure to thrive with the devil's machinations. People who use this method also appeal to the Bible to support teaching and preaching on wealth. Akoko singles out Cameroon as an example, where African Pentecostals have placed much emphasis on this method as a way of responding to the economic crisis bedevilling their country.¹⁴ This view is shared by Jua, who notes that, when an individual or a group is deprived of certain things considered important to society such as education, nourishment or money (as is the case in many parts of Africa), two religious doctrinal alternatives could be used to help overcome deprivation.¹⁵

Secondly, I discuss the Covenant Model through which Christians demonstrate their faith in God to turn around their bad economic circumstances, by giving financial and other material resources to the church. The covenant model/paradigm is based on the agricultural metaphor of sowing and reaping: sow tithes and offerings (among other elements of a self-sacrificial way of life) into the church and reap a bumper harvest of wealth.

Thirdly, the Spiritualist Paradigm sees African economic crises as demonic forces. The underlying factor under this model or theory is that the continent has been mortgaged to evil forces, and needs to be bought back by persistent and fervent prayer. It sees national poverty as spiritual, and economic wisdom begins by seeking God's deliverance from powers, principalities and rulers (Eph. 6:12) who foul up the economies of Africa. Pastors who believe in this model (such as Emeka Nwankpa) argue that spiritual forces, demons and the devil hold back Africa's economic development. Therefore, they pray and cast out these powers.¹⁶

Fourthly, the Excellence Model is based on a strong work ethic. An African Pentecostal pastor identified with this model is Bishop David Oyedepo of Winners Chapel (Ota, near Metropolitan) Lagos. His Afrocentric perspective situates the task of economic development within a pan-African context. As an example of how he applies this method, he delivers his Afrocentric message in ways that transcend narrow identification. His method also has transnational and transracial appeal, because it is couched in the typical born-again rhetoric of destiny (*telos*). In applying this method, he claims God has given him a special task for African nations and African Pentecostals, to conquer their poverty and recover their dignity. He encourages his followers to pursue excellence. There is no doubt that his message harbours salient features of the prosperity gospel model but his ego goes beyond crass, vulgar wealth and health to the extent that it embraces a teleological conception of Africans, based on a vision of professional excellence. This pastor argues that African Pentecostals can uplift Africa to her glorious destiny when they execute their work at a

¹³ Amos Yong, 'A Typology of Prosperity Theology: A Religious Economy of Global Renewal or a Renewal Economics?' in *Pentecostalism and Prosperity: The Socio-Economics of the Global Charismatic Movement*, ed., Katherine Attanasi & Amos Yong (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 15-33.

¹⁴ Mbe Robert Akoko, 'Ask and You shall be Given.' *Pentecostalism and the Economic Crisis in Cameroon* (Leiden: African Studies Centre, African Studies Collection, Vol. 2, 2007).

¹⁵ Nantang Jua, 'Cameroon: Jump-Starting Economic Crises', *Africa Insight*, Vol. 21, no. 3, (1991): 162-170.

¹⁶ Emeka Nwankpa, *Redeeming the Land* (Achimota, Ghana: African Christian Publishers, 1995), 7.

First World level of excellence.¹⁷ Through this method, African Pentecostal sermons also quote popular verses such as 'Blessed are the poor'. In response to dwindling funding of local churches, they often quote: 'Jesus came to bring abundant life and prosperity.' In Jesus' teaching, the exorcism of evil spirits needs to be followed by receiving the Holy Spirit (Matt. 12:43-45). Thus, with deliverance comes faith that can move mountains and make possible what is otherwise impossible (Matt. 17:20-21) so that, 'Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive' (Matt. 21:22). On numerous occasions, the synoptic evangelists affirm that Jesus healed all the sick who came to him (Matt. 4:36; Mark 1:34, 6:56; Luke 6:19, 9:11; Acts 5:16, 8:7, 28:9). The Prosperity Model thus involves not just wealth; it involves health *and* physical well-being.¹⁸

Going back to the Old Testament, the Prosperity Model advocates suggest that God not only called Abraham the 'father' of God's chosen and elect people, but also blessed him abundantly in every way: socially, economically and materially. Joseph's many-coloured robe foreshadowed his later prosperity as second-in-command over the whole of Egypt. Job's faithfulness was rewarded, not only with the full restoration of his health but also with double the prosperity that he had had before his calamity. In each instance and many others, the Bible portrays God's desire to bless his people with spiritual, physical and material abundance.¹⁹ Above all, the operation of these purposes is sustained and advanced by the ethos of professional excellence. Thus, the Excellence Model is a triangle of nationalism (the Afrocentric view), professionalism (human capacity-building), and the prosperity gospel's orientation to development.²⁰

Fifthly, the missional argument and contextual argument interface with the global economy through investing in development efforts or entrepreneurial projects. In applying both the missional and contextual argument to the African context, Amos Yong outlines and frequently quotes scriptural texts such as 3 John 2: 'Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in good health, just as it is well with your soul.' This prayer is understood by African Pentecostals as having three dimensions of blessings: the spiritual, the physical and life in totality.²¹

According to Kalu, the Scriptures, from this perspective, have promised salvation for souls (both now and in the after-life), divine healing for the body, and material prosperity for physical beings. Christ's ministry, understood within this prosperity framework, operates at each of these levels, as well as emphasizing material prosperity. It also teaches that there is not only forgiveness of sins, but also spiritual healing and deliverance of people from the physical and material powers and forces that oppress them.²²

Conclusion

In approaching this paper, I started by defining its main concepts such as the prosperity gospel, before briefly outlining and discussing five examples of the methods of Pentecostalism. I have attempted to show

¹⁷ Nimi Wariboko, 'Pentecostal paradigms of National Economic Prosperity in Africa', in *Pentecostalism and Prosperity: The Socio-Economics of the Global Charismatic Movement*, eds., Katherine Attanasi and Amos Yong (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 36-59.

¹⁸ Gary S. Greig & Kevin N. Springer (eds), *The Kingdom and the Power: Are Healing and the Spiritual Gifts Used by Jesus and the Early Church Meant for the Church Today? A Biblical Look at How to Bring the Gospel to the World with Power* (Ventura, California: Regal Books, 1993).

¹⁹ H.L. Bosman, I.G.P. Gous and I.J.J. Spangenberg (eds.), *Plutocrats and Paupers: Wealth and Poverty in the Old Testament* (Pretoria: Van Schaik, 1991).

²⁰ Jean-Francois Medard 'Les eglises protestantes au Cameroun, entre tradition autoritaire et ethnicité', in *Religion et Transition Democratique en Afrique*, eds., F. Constantine and C. Coulon (Paris: Karthala, 1997), 17.

²¹ Amos Yong, 'A Typology of Prosperity Theology: A Religious Economy of Global Renewal or a Renewal Economics?', in *Pentecostalism and Prosperity: The Socio-Economics of the Global Charismatic Movement*, eds., Katherine Attanasi and Amos Yong (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 15-33.

²² Ogbu U. Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 9.

how the African economic context creates a breeding ground for the spread of Pentecostalism, before showing in conclusion how such methods are applied in that context. When making an application of the five methods used by African Pentecostals, it becomes very clear that they all agree that the African context which is characterized by economic crisis, corruption and mismanagement requires some form of moral regeneration and spiritual uplift. They also see poverty as demonic, evil and blasphemous. Therefore it requires some form of spiritual intervention as well as relevant biblical exegesis.

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