

# 'Raising righteous billionaires': The prosperity gospel reconsidered

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How should we think of development within an ideological format in which individual subjects are abstracted from the constraints and necessities of social policy and the political structure? Using this question as a spark, this article critically deconstructs the Pentecostal prosperity gospel in Africa. Two overlapping arguments are advanced. One is that, in atomising the individual, Pentecostal prosperity gospel discounts power relations and the political, effectively dislocating the individual believer from the social matrix within which his or her agency is forged. Secondly, it is suggested that this attitude towards both the individual and the state puts Pentecostalism firmly within the orbit of neoliberalism. This article leverages this affinity for an understanding of how neoliberal ideas and conceptions of wealth, accumulation and self-actualisation are embedded and reproduced in Pentecostalism. It concludes that, because, on the one hand, it has no lever – historical or philosophical – on which it might be grounded, and on the other hand, since it has developed no cogent political economy to speak of, prosperity gospel, nay Pentecostal spirituality, offers no realistic path out of the African economic crisis.

## Introduction

Scholarly attempts to understand the inexorable rise of Pentecostal Christianity as a global – and globalising – force over the past three decades have converged on a number of factors. Key among these are Pentecostalism's appeal to the senses (see, for instance, the account in Meyer 2010); the opportunity it provides for individuals to acquire a new social identity, complete, as I have written elsewhere, with a new name (Obadare 2013); and its re-theorising of otherwise complex social, economic and political situations and struggles as matters for resolution within a paradigm of individual believers' unmediated interaction with the divine. Of a piece with the latter is Pentecostalism's promise of material prosperity as the necessary aftermath of the spiritual transformation that is mandatory for the born-again individual. Firstly, *personal* righteousness, followed by the billions,<sup>1</sup> as the banner (see Figure 1) adorning the wall of the Praise Outreach Community Center, Ogba, Lagos, Nigeria, proclaims.

The promise of material prosperity to the believer who seeks firstly the kingdom of righteousness is a constant refrain across the African Pentecostal universe, and not a few criticisms of Pentecostal praxes (Anderson 2013; Ukah 2007) have centred on the way in which, it is lamented, the logic is increasingly reversed, meaning that instead of righteousness firstly, Pentecostal churches seem to have placed an indecorous emphasis on wealth and personal accumulation. The bulk of recent criticism of the fantastic wealth of a growing number of Pentecostal pastors whose congregations remain desperately poor emerges against the backdrop of this realisation (Eyoboka 2012; Umoru & Akoni 2014).<sup>2</sup> Bayart's apt summary of Pentecostalism's prosperity principle channels an altogether legitimate criticism:

1. As opposed, instructively, to millions, the banner remarks not just on wealth as a desideratum for the born-again believer, but, perhaps more significantly, on the shift in the collective standard for being adjudged wealthy in the Nigerian society. Thus, when the Nigerian Naira was a strong currency, comparing favourably with the US dollar and other major western currencies, becoming a millionaire in Naira terms was the gold standard. The popular Lagos-based musician, Lagbaja, underscored the steep challenge that getting to a million represented with his popular number, Million, featuring the chorus 'She million po to yen ni?' (Translation: 'Is one million such a big number?'). With the depreciation of the currency, tracking of course the floundering of the Nigerian economy itself, the milestone has changed to a billion. This shift in the popular mind regarding how wealth is denominated is evident, for example, in Nigerian newspaper reports of official corruption. Not only are there, on balance, more stories of stolen billions, increasingly, among a reading public understandably fatigued by stories of corruption, reports of stolen millions tend to elicit nothing more than a resigned shrug.

2. In Nigeria, such criticisms have acquired a new vigour in the light of media reports of purchase of private jets by leading Pentecostal pastors.

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**FIGURE 1:** Banner adorning the wall of the Praise Outreach Community Center, Ogba, Lagos, Nigeria.

Pentecostalism sings the praises of material success, a sign of sanctification and liberation from the feelings of jealousy that motivate witches. It emancipates the individual by hailing his personal ascent, blesses capitalist accumulation and the relation to merchandise, and 'armour-plates' believers against the menacing world of the invisible. In this respect, it inverts the 'equation that linked wealth to evil-doing and poverty to sanctity'. (Bayart 2007:170)

Extreme wealth amid generalised immiseration is bound to raise a sociologist's hackles. Nevertheless, I am not immediately concerned here with the material mismatch between the upper echelons of Pentecostal churches and their congregations. Rather, my interest is in what the emphasis on prosperity says about the character of Pentecostalism per se, and how an analysis of such a promise can be a point of departure for an understanding of the globality that has seen the emergence of, if not in fact produced, Pentecostalism. In addition, I am fascinated by the extent to which, given its many contradictions and avoidances, some of which are outlined presently, the prosperity gospel in an African context can be said to represent or offer a cogent formula for economic development in Africa.

With this in mind, I wish to advance two related arguments. The first, which is straightforward enough, is that because of its emphasis on the individual believer's direct, unmediated relationship with God, Pentecostalism is liable to ignore social structure. In atomising the individual – ironically in the process of seeking the same agent's 'empowerment' – Pentecostalism discounts power relations and the political, and more or less dislocates the individual believer from the social matrix within which his or her agency, never mind the relationship with God, is forged. As a result, not only is its understanding of prosperity necessarily shallow – a point I shall revisit a bit later – but also Pentecostalism's attitude towards the state is extremely permissive. It is therefore not altogether surprising that, even amid constant shifts in the boundaries of the theological and the political, leading Pentecostal leaders have, warts and all, been pulled in the general direction of the state, judging at least by the evidence from Nigeria, Ghana, Zambia and, to some extent, South Africa.

My second argument is that this attitude towards both the individual and the state puts Pentecostalism firmly within the orbit of the neoliberal Zeitgeist that has been on the

global ascendance since the early 1980s. If this proposition is true, the question then shifts from polemical denunciation of the tackiness of the prosperity in the prosperity gospel, which is quite common, to a quest to understand how neoliberal ideas and conceptions of wealth, accumulation and self-actualisation are embedded and reproduced in Pentecostalism. Though never less than absorbing, the convergences between neoliberalism and Pentecostalism are only just beginning to receive adequate scholarly attention (Comaroff 2010; de Witte 2011; Hackett & Smith 2012), and my claim is that perhaps nothing epitomises these convergences better than their mutual emphasis on prosperity and the methodologies for its attainment.

In the rest of the essay, I briefly examine the historical context for the emergence of Pentecostalism in Africa, emphasising its economic aspects and the parallels with neoliberalism. After that, I amplify the contradictions inherent in the emphasis on prosperity by mobilising examples from Nigeria. This is followed by an analysis of the limitations of the prosperity gospel as a philosophical vehicle for engineering African development. In a concluding section, I summarise the articles' arguments, while flagging the conditions under which Pentecostalism might become a 'developmental' religion.

## Structural adjustment, neoliberalism, and the making of the prosperity gospel

Prosperity is not an 'American gospel'. It will work in Africa, India, China, or anywhere else God's people practice the truth of His word. If it is not true in the poorest place on earth, it is not true at all! (Kenneth E. Hagin 2000:166)

There is a general agreement that the prosperity gospel was a direct transfer from the American evangelicalism that gained rapid popularity in Africa in the 1980s, and subsequently changed the religious landscape for good (Anderson & Hollenweger 1999; Ayegboyin 2011; Gifford 2009; Martin 2002; Ugba 2009; for a history of the American prosperity gospel, see Bowler 2013). As part of this accounting, the acceptance of the prosperity gospel is often attributed to its putative universality, or the fact that, while conceived in the United States, it was intended, pace Hagin above, to work in Africa and 'the poorest places on earth'. What tends to be overlooked in such reckoning is the question of what, beyond the universal appeal, made the prosperity gospel (as an idea inextricably bound up with Pentecostalism itself) especially resonant across Africa.

I suggest that this has to do with the prevailing social mood at the time, particularly the way in which structural adjustment programmes (SAPs), inaugurating the dawn of the neoliberal era in Africa, became emblematic of an ideological shift from a socially responsible state to the self-empowering individual.

The mid-1980s through the early 1990s was a decisive moment in the post-independence history of African states (Ferguson 2006; Mkandawire 2005). Politically, it was a period of exhilaration as long-established dictatorial rulers yielded, even if only temporarily, to the rapidly advancing third wave of democratisation. But economically, the prospects were far darker. Many African countries, either dependent on the fortunes of single commodities or otherwise badly exposed to the asperities of the global economy, were roiled by the global economic recession. In the event, structural adjustment policies, the brainchild of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), were promoted and embraced as a panacea to the economic woes of African countries. Holding the free market sacrosanct (or the market as God, in Harvey Cox's (1999) famous phrase), SAP's core elements were trade liberalisation, privatisation of state enterprises and an overall abbreviation in the role of the state, primarily in the economy, but also in several other aspects of social life, including health, physical infrastructure and public education. Crucially, SAP's emphasis on 'small government' logically implied an outsized role for the individual, now reimagined and postulated as the much sought after driver of economic transformation.

The massive social disruption occasioned by the implementation of SAP, undertaken with religious fervency by the political elite in several African states, is well documented (see, for instance, the chapters in Mkandawire & Soludo 2003). Indeed, in several cases – the emigration of highly skilled individuals from key sectors of the African economy, the virtual collapse of higher education, say – the reverberations continue to be felt despite the passage of time. Foreshadowing the generalised precarity of the first decade of the 21st century, structural adjustment caused immeasurable social despair, strained relations between state and society, and all but shredded lingering hopes of constructing a socially sensitive state in Africa.

In retrospect, it, that is, SAP, also prepared the way for the ascendance of Pentecostalism. For one thing, Pentecostal theology, at least to the extent that it can be said to constitute a coherent and systematic programme, was a perfectly timed metaphysical sop for the traumatised African subject. For another, Pentecostal churches and sundry faith-based non-governmental organisations (NGOs) were quick to step into the breach vacated by a retreating state, a process consistent with the gradual incursion into the political space of non-state agents which became increasingly visible, and in a few instances even flourished, in the shadow of state evacuation.<sup>3</sup> Lastly, and as I have been pursuing, the core personalised ethic of Pentecostalism meshed with the anti-state agenda of the SAP, and all told, it comes as no surprise that both structural adjustment – as a forerunner of neoliberalism – (McGuigan 2014; cf. Gill 2011) and Pentecostalism broadly agree on the techniques of self-actualisation, personal enrichment and prosperity.

3. Gifford (2009) proposes other parallels between NGOs and what he calls the 'Pentecostal sector', among them the fact that both are 'significant conduits of resources, all tax-free' (p. 160) and 'the utility of both as a springboard to vault into the real power and money of politics' (p. 161). Both, suffice to add, are 'anti-state' in principle.

The similarities between neoliberalism and Pentecostalism go even further, so much so that it is not unreasonable to suggest that, so far as prosperity is the *raison d'être* of neoliberalism, Pentecostalism may rightly be seen as its religious mode or extension. Borne on the wings of globalisation, neoliberalism and Pentecostalism have travelled fast, far and wide, spreading the same gospel of material success through individual responsibility. And each, at least in its own way, celebrates the miraculous – in one, the miracle of the heroic all-conquering self-repossessed; in the other, the sheer magic of what Pentecostals like to call 'divine favour'.

Below, I analyse the prosperity gospel within the Nigerian Pentecostal context.

## The prosperity gospel: The view from (Western) Nigeria

The Nigerian Pentecostal scene is unarguably one of Africa's most ebullient. As a matter of fact, it is widely held that most of what passes for African Pentecostalism today ultimately traces its roots back to an original Nigerian source. For Nimi Wariboko (2014), not only are Nigerian Pentecostals 'struggling to raise the global profile of blackness, reshaping the identity of Africans and reconceptualising Christian Africanness' but also 'Their interest is to develop Pentecostal spirituality as the best ground and lens for interpreting, evaluating, and guiding economic policy and for producing a new ethic of economic development' (p. 11).

Whether one accepts or rejects this claim, there is no disputing, for instance, the visibility and influence of the country's leading Pentecostal pastors across the continent, especially in Pentecostal hotspots like Ghana, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Uganda and Kenya. Here and elsewhere, magnetic Nigerian pastors circulate freely, galvanising a continental spiritual economy in which devotional principles and modalities are freely traded. Furthermore, and notably on the trail of an ever-expanding Nigerian diaspora, Nigerian mega churches have established branches in various parts of Africa – and the rest of the world. Perhaps the most successful in this regard are the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), and the Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries (MFM), overseen by Pastor Enoch Adejare Adeboye and Dr. Daniel Kolawole Olukoya, respectively. Although the online global directory<sup>4</sup> of the MFM lists the church as having branches in at least 66 countries worldwide, the RCCG is the undoubted behemoth, planting an estimated 1000 parishes in over 100 countries of the world annually.<sup>5</sup>

Prosperity is integral to the corporate identity of Pentecostalism in Nigeria. As explained earlier, this is not unconnected to the fact that Pentecostalism in Nigeria became ascendant at precisely the same moment that the country was witnessing perhaps its most exacting period of

economic upheaval since independence in 1960. Put differently, the promise of untold riches found a willing audience among subjects experiencing acute deprivation and general uncertainty, and for the first time, the message was insistently broadcast that one's chances of (material) success had less to do with social structures creating opportunities, and more with pernicious, ubiquitous spirits (e.g. 'the spirit of unemployment'), which can only be combated and brought to heel through faith in the power of prayer. Unsurprisingly, testimonies of eye-popping turnarounds in which the attesters' fortunes change for the better literally overnight are a staple of Nigerian Pentecostal discourse. The average individual testimony distils the Pentecostal mindset, particularly with its emphasis on the totally gratuitous character of prosperity. For instance:

*An unsolicited, unexpected and a (sic) sudden door of opportunities (sic) opened for my husband and I after the Words of God from Pastor ID<sup>6</sup> at the July 2015 last Dance Service. My husband has just been appointed to manage one of the leading electricity companies in the nation, with a very good package, remuneration and holidays abroad for myself. Praise the Lord! (Emphases added)<sup>7</sup>*

Testimonies aside, it is difficult to find a better purveyor of the prosperity in the Nigerian prosperity gospel than the Pentecostal pastor, a subject for analysis in his own right. And although a thoroughgoing sociology of the pastor is well outside the remit of this essay, a few contextual remarks are in order. The first is that, as postcolonial secular modernity chokes on its founding promises in the majority of African states, and as the state loses its empirical solidity and becomes more of an abstraction in people's everyday lives, Pentecostal pastors have slowly emerged as substitute authorities, 'consultants' who are entrusted with the final word on a range of subjects, from the pietistic to the private. This is the specific back drop to the emergence of the Pentecostal pastor as a totalising agent, one whose word is, quite often, and often times quite literally, law.

Secondly, and perhaps in affirmation of their capacity to generate narratives that buffer their own claims to social distinction, Pentecostal pastors have profited from mass anxiety produced by deepening economic uncertainty. They do so not only, as already indicated, by attributing Africa's economic crisis to a variety of spiritual perversions – the 'debate' over homosexuality and gay rights comes to mind here (Obadare 2015a) – but they also almost invariably position themselves as the only agents with the spiritual wherewithal to provide the solution. In this manner, pastors garner a measure of public valorisation as agents uniquely positioned to balance the secular and the theological.

This nascent centrality of Pentecostal pastors is not without its implications. Socially speaking, for instance, it translates into the contemporary situation in which the pastor is a

6. For Pastor Idowu Olusola Iluyomade. Senior Pastor, the redeemed Christian Church of God, City of David, Victoria Island, Lagos.

7. Taken from *The Eagle, City of David Weekly Bulletin*, Sunday 19 July 2015, p. 3. For more, see: <http://www.cityofdauidng.org/Resources/Interactive/COD-Eagle>. See also the accounts in Akoko (2007).

4. Available from <http://mountainoffire.ipower.com/globalsite/directory/>

5. See <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2013/08/rccg-plants-1000-parishes-in-one-year/>

widely sought after existential micromanager – a blend of ecclesiastical supervisor, financial coach, marriage counsellor, travel advisor, all-purpose celebrity, and last but not least, and as we have seen all too frequently from a stream of media reports, object of erotic fascination.

Above all, and consistent with the immediate foregoing, the pastor is the purveyor and physical embodiment of the prosperity gospel in African Pentecostalism. Part celebrity and part fashion icon, he is expected to *display* wealth almost as confirmation of his spiritual bona fides, proof that he is, shall we say, 'blessed'. Among observers of the African Pentecostal scene, the question of the stupendous wealth of leading Pentecostal pastors (a growing number of whom now prefer to travel in private jets) has sparked heated contention. But I think such questioning could be misguided especially if not informed by cognisance of the way in which material prosperity itself is understood among Pentecostals, and how material poverty is perceived as a 'curse' to be avoided at any cost (for more on this, see the account in Ukah 2008).

Although I speak of a shared understanding of prosperity, I do not wish to downplay the continuing tensions within the same community about prosperity, wealth and its implications for Christian praxes. What, in a manner of speaking, we might call the old spirit (for instance, 'And Abram was very rich in cattle, in silver, and in gold', Genesis 13:2; and 'By humility and fear of the Lord are riches, and honor, and life', Proverbs 22:4; or 'And they rose early in the morning, and went forth into the wilderness of Tekoa: and as they went forth, Jehoshaphat stood and said, Hear me, O Judah, and ye inhabitants of Jerusalem; Believe in the Lord your God, so shall ye be established; believe his prophets, so shall ye prosper', 2 Chronicles 20:20) duels implacably with the new ('It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God' Mark 10: 25; or 'But they that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows', 1 Timothy 6: 9–10). (All quotes taken from the King James Version of the Bible.)

Nor is the tension new. On the contrary, it evokes a longstanding debate in Africa and elsewhere, not just on the proper relationship between the Christian and money, but also on Christian theology and practice as they relate to property, poverty, social good and, last but not least, capitalism itself.

Yet, in Nigeria, and to a large degree across African Pentecostalism, there is no doubting that the spirit that currently prevails is the 'old' one, and to underscore the argument I have been pursuing, this (Pentecostal embrace of prosperity) is materially inextricable from the generalised precarity born of structural adjustment. With state abdication more or less a fact of everyday life, and with opportunities

for legitimate employment drastically reduced, if not totally foreclosed, the tenor of social interaction came to be defined by money, that is, the scarcity of it. Pentecostal pursuit of personal (rarely social) prosperity is, I would argue, a plangent echo of this reality.

But exclusive focus on personal prosperity can and often means that Pentecostalism is merely scratching at the surface, which means that its understanding of prosperity is shallow at best. The point bears illustrating, and the western Nigerian scenario seems apposite. Here, the idea of prosperity enunciated by the prosperity gospel is pointedly at odds with, if not contradictory to what the Yoruba understand as *Alafia*, 'an all-round state of ease or well-being, including health, sufficiency, freedom from worries etc' (Peel 2016). Not only is Pentecostal prosperity not the equivalence of *Alafia*, one may reasonably suppose that, at its core, and insofar as it continues to be defined simply as 'getting rich', Pentecostal prosperity can be inimical to *Alafia*, a state of spiritual, physical, psychic and medical *wholeness*. Hence, for Yoruba people, whose language makes clear distinctions among *Owó*-money, *Orò*-wealth, *Dúkíá*- property, *Ìfokànbalè*-satisfaction, *Alafia* cannot possibly exist without contentment (*Ìtélórùn*).

Unsurprisingly perhaps, a shallow understanding of prosperity often leads Pentecostalism into a moral rabbit hole in which churches more or less license flagrant criminality. For example: in 2002, one Lawrence Agada, a cashier with Lagos Sheraton Hotel and Towers and a Christ Embassy<sup>8</sup> assistant pastor, reportedly donated cash and various gifts in excess of N40million (about \$200 000) to his church. The money belonged to his employers, who cried foul and notified the church about the theft. However, not only did Pastor Chris Oyakhilome, the church's founder and president, refuse to put pressure on Mr. Agada to return the stolen money,<sup>9</sup> despite admission that he had in fact made large donations to the church; there were unconfirmed reports that he, Oyakhilome, had in fact written a letter of appreciation to Mr. Agada, thanking him for his stupendous charity.

Example two: when, in April 2015, the Nigerian anti-corruption agency, the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) arrested Mrs Imaobong Akon Esu-Nte, an accountant with the Nigerian Prisons Service in connection with allegations of money laundering, one of the more interesting discoveries was that she had 'tithed' nearly N60million (about \$300 000) into the account of her church, the RCCG in Karu, a suburb of Abuja, the Nigerian Federal Capital Territory (FCT). At the time, her monthly federal salary was less than \$800.<sup>10</sup>

Through these and similar examples reported almost daily in the media, we are afforded a view of how Pentecostalism

8. Also Believers' Love Word Incorporated, a Nigerian mega church with headquarters in Lagos. Established 1990.

9. See Femi Aribisala, 'What Man of God is Pastor Chris Oyakhilome?' Available at: <http://www.femiaribisala.com/what-man-of-god-is-pastor-chris-oyakhilome/>

10. See <http://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/top-news/181557-how-prison-accountant-esu-nte-laundered-prisons-funds-witness.html>

'helps further the general ethos of unaccountability' (Gifford 2009:241) in the country.

## Development with a small 'd'?

In February 2016, the attention of the Nigerian public was riveted by the story of Olajumoke Orisaguna, the 27-year-old mother of two who, having fortuitously wandered onto the scene of a celebrity photo shoot on location in Lagos, was instantly catapulted from unassuming street hawker to instant celebrity. Hers is the perfect rags-to-riches story – and more. Not only was she not angling for fame and riches, she was, having very little formal education, positively underprepared for it. Yet, quite literally in the blink of an eye, her life changed dramatically as she landed multiple endorsement deals and was courted and feted by the high and mighty in the world of Nigerian entertainment.

Orisaguna's is a story with many parts, but there is no gainsaying that it is also a story that cuts right to the heart of the Nigerian Pentecostal Zeitgeist. In fact, this may be part of the reason why the story found such resonance among the Nigerian public. T.Y. Bello, the photographer who 'discovered' Olajumoke Orisaguna is a Pentecostal Christian and is convinced of the divine provenance of her (Orisaguna's) story.<sup>11</sup> Crucially, the Orisaguna story has all the constitutive elements of the prosperity gospel – it was gratuitous, totally coincidental, arguably 'underserved' and involved no deliberate agency on the part of the beneficiary – a miracle, in short.

How should we think of development within an ideological format in which individual subjects are abstracted from the constraints and necessities of social policy and the political structure? What are the ethical and practical implications of Pentecostalism's reduction of prosperity to material riches? Under what conditions can the prosperity gospel become a paradigm for development? In other words, can Pentecostalism's theological nostrums ultimately produce the kind of social transformation that will change Africa's current position in the global economic hierarchy? Finally, how feasible is Nigerian Pentecostalism's aim of 'guiding economic policy and ... producing a new ethic of economic development?' (Waribiko op. cit.).

Before attempting to answer these critical questions, let me introduce some caveats. The first is that we would be wrong to take the prosperity gospel or Pentecostal attitudes towards wealth as static or unchanging. What I have summarised in the foregoing only applies to African Pentecostalism in its contemporary iteration, and there is no reason to suppose that its approach to prosperity will not change as Pentecostalism itself continues to evolve.

Furthermore, although it is true that Christianity in Africa has been massively Pentecostalised, meaning that mainline

11. See T.Y. Bello's interview with Pastor Wale Adefarasin, General Overseer of the Guiding Light Assembly, Lagos, here: <https://www.bellanaija.com/2016/04/ty-bello-shares-her-journey-to-christianity-being-a-light-for-olajumoke-orisaguna-her-twins-more-on-heart-of-the-matter-with-wale-adefarasin-watch/>

or established churches have adopted a significant part of Pentecostalism's devotional methodologies, recruitment strategies and overall aesthetics, Pentecostal prosperity gospel is in no way exhaustive of the broader Christian approach to wealth, prosperity or development. Hence, a critique of prosperity gospel, the kind I have attempted here, is not the same thing as a critique of Christianity and prosperity, or the development process. As a matter of fact, if there is anything that many non-Pentecostal Christians agree upon, it is the criticism that the Pentecostal approach to wealth (accumulation) as seen in the prosperity gospel is a perversion of *authentic* Christian understanding of prosperity. Still, the focus on Pentecostalism is justified by the simple fact that it is without doubt the most intriguing and most influential tradition of Christianity in Africa today.

Thirdly, my position on Pentecostal attitudes towards the state, social structure and the individual should not be taken as implying that a state-driven development approach is by definition superior or that it is wrong to hold individuals to account for their personal salvation, as the prosperity gospel seems to do. I am not even sure it is necessarily a case of one or the other. Instead, what I wish to draw attention to is that when the prosperity gospel either privileges the individual or downplays the agency of the state, this is not a triviality; rather, it is a loaded move which, I suggest, makes Pentecostalism a philosophical ally of neoliberalism.

In any case, and no matter how much it seems to obsess about the individual, Pentecostalism never really seems interested in developing a robust philosophical defence of individuality proper, a quite different matter, one should think, from celebrating personal wealth. Nor, for that matter, does it seem fully engaged with individual *striving*, or how a focus on individual attainment might translate into generalised economic development. This is what is implied by development with a small 'd': that there is little evidence that African Pentecostalism as such makes any deliberate efforts to understand or link to the big debates about the history of underdevelopment in Africa and the continent's protracted economic crisis, let alone contemporary global conversations about inequality and wealth redistribution. Instead, and contra the protestant ethic's much debated emphasis on personal industry and frugality (Weber 1992),<sup>12</sup> wealth or success in the Pentecostal world is consistently advertised as something that happens 'accidentally' or miraculously, and not necessarily issuing from prior investment in terms of individual preparation. Things happen to the individual at the centre of the Pentecostal prosperity gospel; the individual himself/herself, it seems, rarely makes them happen.

A final caveat: although, as I argue, Pentecostalism largely ignores social context and the fundamental issues of politics – the organisation of power, how resources are distributed

12. Peter Heslam (2014) writes:

For Weber's Protestants, it meant being disciplined about consumption, not merely about production. Avoiding debt and excess, they developed habits of saving and investment that helped them establish businesses and to reinvest profits back into them, thereby stimulating the rise of capitalism. (p. 366)

within a particular human constellation and the contestation among social agents for the allocation of scarce values – nevertheless, leading Pentecostal figures, their frequent assertions of bipartisanship notwithstanding, are in fact active in everyday politics, not least in the electoral moment (Anderson 2009; Obadare 2015b). David Maxwell's (2013) distinction in the Zimbabwean context between 'a theology of politics' and 'politicking' is on target and applies to the political behaviour of Pentecostal leaders in several African countries. In Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya and Zambia, Pentecostal pastors hobnob with the political elite; increasingly, they are the ones who determine what should even count as 'political' in the first instance. In this key interpretive role, they mediate – and often times dilute – politics for their congregations, ensuring regime preservation by deflecting attention away from social conflict.

Once the implications of these caveats are internalised, it is difficult to see how, per the questions posed above, the prosperity gospel can be a systematic path to economic development in Africa. In actual fact, it may not be far-fetched to suggest that, considering its overarching principles and *modus operandi*, it could actually be an impediment to the emergence of an ethic of economic development.

In the concluding part of the essay, I summarise the article's core argument and consider the 'developmental' prospects of Pentecostalism.

## Coda

Development is one of the most popular ideas in the social sciences. It is also one of the most controversial, hence not easily apprehended. Definitive cross-disciplinary works by Ferguson (1994), Escobar (1995), Scott (1998) and Sen (1999), respectively, mark crucial axes and milestones in the evolution of recent development thinking. Historically, radical readings of development, in particular those clumped around 'post-development', 'anti-development', 'alternative development' and 'beyond development', respectively, have tended to posit 'development' itself as the problem, rather than the solution (Cowen & Shenton 2004; Kriekhaus 2006; Pieterse 2000; Trainer 1989; Vattimo 1988). Most recently, in the all-embracing shadow of globalisation, old tensions in the development literature are being foregrounded to invigorate conversations around wealth, poverty and power (see, for example, Goldin & Reinert 2012; Pieterse & Kim 2012).

However, for a discourse otherwise preoccupied with the question of power – who wields it, how it is distributed and enforced – and given the global resurgence of religion, mainstream development thinking has been surprisingly silent on the role of religion (Heslam 2014:op. cit.; cf. Deneulin & Bano 2009). Recent studies by Erica Bornstein (2005) Gerrie Ter Haar and Stephen Ellis (2006) are representative of growing attempts to close the gap. Although Ter Haar and Ellis underscore the need for scholars, policymakers and development agents to 'take the development potential of religion seriously' by 'lending serious attention to religious

worldviews with which they may be familiar or even uncomfortable' (2006:365), Bornstein analyses how protestant NGOs in Zimbabwe balance the often conflicting imperatives of spirituality and economic development.

Some of Bornstein's largely sympathetic concerns feed into and find amplification in a growing literature specifically engaged with the social implications of Pentecostal sociality in Africa. But even within this literature, the guardedly upbeat mood seen in Marshall (2009), Wariboko (2014) and Freeman (2012), for instance, noticeably clashes with the far more sceptical appraisal of Haynes (2012) and Boyd (2015).

For reasons already indicated, the sceptics' argument seems more persuasive, especially insofar as it continues to highlight Pentecostalism's blindness to structure and social facts. As I have pursued, and contra what seems to be the overriding optimistic spirit of the chapters in Freeman (*supra*), it is difficult to see how a gospel of personal transformation can produce 'development' without recognition of, never mind consistent engagement with, the constraints inherent in the social ecology. It comes as no surprise that, on the Zambian Copperbelt, Naomi Haynes discovers that Pentecostal celebration of 'personal efforts' has merely helped in 'promoting visible economic inequality through the display of consumer goods...' (Haynes 2012:135). Similarly, in her work on born-again Christianity and the AIDS crisis in Uganda, Boyd demonstrates how 'The intense focus on the individual self-management of disease is obviously limited in scope by certain structural factors – for instance, poverty, gender inequality, and domestic violence' (2015:183). She concludes that 'Certain populations will never be "empowered" to make the healthiest decisions and avoid disease without broader social changes that permit their empowerment' (*Ibid*).

On this evidence, Pentecostal spirituality offers no realistic path out of the economic crisis in Africa. To its identified critical blind spots – faux individuation, ethical sloppiness, susceptibility to being a regulatory valve for the state, neglect of structural barriers to upward mobility – may be added the fact that it has developed no cogent political economy to speak of. The prosperity gospel has no lever – historical or philosophical – on which it might be grounded.

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