



THE PROSPERITY GOSPEL IN GHANA AND THE PRIMAL IMAGINATION

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Abstract

This paper makes the assertion that despite the significant influence of American neo-pentecostalism in shaping prosperity theology in the charismatic churches in Ghana, it is crucial to note that the primal aspirations of prosperity also continue to play a significant role. Second, the thriving prosperity teaching in the charismatic ministries is largely due to the fact that the charismatics have tapped into fertile ground already nurtured by the traditional concept of prosperity, which is to be understood in terms of wealth, longevity and fertility or procreativity. In the African cosmology, the belief and pursuit of prosperity is paramount. Africans do not 'honour' or accept suffering or poverty, it is a battle they have always sought to fight, and the belief in the gods is primarily to ensure prosperity and well-being. Thus the influence of American-type prosperity teaching only served as a catalyst and also reinforced what was already prevailing in the matrix of the primal world-view.

The focus of this prayer is centred on material prosperity, fertility (procreation) and long life (health), which cannot come about without the blessing of the divinities. Harmony with the divinities therefore becomes a prerequisite not only for physical and spiritual protection from evil forces but also for the enjoyment of good health, fertility and longevity.

Introduction

This reflection makes the assertion that despite the significant influence of American neo-pentecostalism in shaping prosperity teaching in the charismatic churches in Ghana, it is important to note that the primal aspirations of prosperity also continue to play a significant role in the shaping of prosperity theology in Ghana. The thriving prosperity teaching in the charismatic ministries is largely due to the fact that the charismatics have tapped into fertile ground already nurtured by the traditional concept of prosperity, which is to be understood in terms of wealth, longevity, and fertility or procreativity. In African cosmology, the belief in and pursuit of prosperity is paramount. Africans do not 'honour' or accept suffering or poverty. It is a battle they have always sought to fight. The belief in the gods is primarily to ensure prosperity and well-being. The influence of American-type prosperity teaching only served as a catalyst and also reinforced what was already prevailing in the matrix of the primal world-view. Thus local primal considerations offer important perspective in interpreting contemporary African Christianity.

Prosperity Gospel, or the Gospel of Prosperity, has traditionally been associated with American neo-pentecostalism. The

chief proponents include Kenneth Hagin, Fred Price, Kenneth and Gloria Copeland, John Avanzini, Charles Capps and Benny Hinn. The Prosperity Gospel is significantly influenced by the teachings of E.W. Kenyon, Norman Vincent Peale and Robert Schuller. Various terminologies have been used to describe prosperity teaching such as "Abundant Life", "Faith Message", "Faith Gospel", "The Gospel of Health and Wealth", and "Theology of Success", amongst others. Prosperity Gospel has received mixed responses from both Evangelical leaders and scholars.

The impact of the Prosperity Gospel in contemporary African Christianity has been noted by scholars and it has often been associated with the development of new charismatic movements. Although prosperity teaching in Ghana is best understood in the context of the new charismatic ministries or churches, the churches themselves are not the products of the American-type Prosperity Gospel; it is rather the result of an evangelical renewal movement the nation experienced in the late 1960s through to the early 1970s. This absorbed the thinking of American-type Prosperity Gospel. Thus, although the charismatic movements in Ghana had developed locally, their theology has been significantly influenced by the American-type Prosperity Gospel and more importantly, by other local factors such as the primal imagination and socio-economic conditions. One could establish at least three major charismatic expressions in Ghana at the moment: the Word of Faith Charismatic Churches, the Deliverance Charismatic Churches, and the Prophetic Charismatic or Super-charismatic Churches. Each espouses prosperity teaching to different degrees. Characteristic of the theology of the Word of Faith charismatic expression is faith and the use of talents, whilst the 'Word of Knowledge', the understanding of destiny and belief in the role of the divinities in the

daily ordering of life constitute a central theme in the theology of the Deliverance and Prophetic charismatic expressions.

The incorporation of deliverance thinking into prosperity teaching in Ghana suggests to us that primal religious beliefs still offer perspectives for the faith of the majority of African Christians, an assertion, which also challenges Horton's thesis that the adoption of a High God in African conversion eventually edges out belief in local gods and spiritual entities. Primal beliefs constitute a fundamental paradigm not only in the development of the charismatic churches but also the way in which prosperity theology is reconstructed. Faith and 'giving' alone was not adequate to engineer the necessary prosperity as people sought deliverance.

The Argument

Some have argued that the Prosperity Gospel is more of an American invention than a traditional experience, which has been exported to the continent of Africa. However, like the argument on the origins of Pentecostalism, evidence suggests that although the American factor is indisputable, the concept of prosperity is neither new nor foreign to the Ghanaian culture. Prosperity is a key concept not only for Pentecostal/Charismatics but also for Africans as a whole. Thus Nyamiti observes, "the driving motive for cultic contact with God is mainly the acquisition of earthly benefits and protection from bodily evils". Therefore, Prosperity Theology in the Ghanaian context can be understood not only in terms of external influences, such as the Prosperity Gospel that emanated from the United States of America and Nigeria, but more importantly in terms of the pre-existing thought patterns and values, which also underpin

African traditional religions and cosmology. Here, Gifford makes the observation:

It is obvious that the faith gospel is an American doctrine, devised by the media evangelists in the 1950s and 1960s; yet much of Africa's traditional religion is concerned with fertility, health and plenty.

The reference to primal aspirations has, therefore, made the Deliverance and the Prophetic Charismatic Churches appeal to a cross section of the Ghanaian society. In asserting this claim, I have sought to use African linguistic and cultural categories, such as popular Akan proverbs, songs and prayers as a springboard to illustrate my argument. In examining the concept of prosperity in the Ghanaian tradition, it is essential that one understands some of the underlying religious beliefs and value systems, which govern the Akan culture. This will be done by looking at the Akan worldview.

The Akan Worldview

The importance of a traditional cosmology or worldview in understanding contemporary religious phenomena has been noted by theologians, missiologists, and anthropologists. Kraft defines worldview as...“the culturally patterned basic understanding (e.g. assumptions, presuppositions, beliefs, etc.) of reality by which the members of a society organise and live their lives”. The Akan worldview expresses life in two worlds - the visible and the invisible but the two remain in constant interaction.

Human beings, plants and animals inhabit the visible world, whereas the invisible or spirit world is inhabited by Onyame (God), nananom nsamanfo (the ancestors) and abosom (the gods). Onyame, who is the supreme source of all life and chief of the

spirit-world is generally approached through his agents or messengers, abosom (gods). The gods are thought to have been created by God, and constitute a pantheon of divinities through which God manifests Himself. The spirits have responsibility to bring peace and prosperity by protecting crops and domestic animals against enemies. Thus Hackett observes:

In traditional, pre-colonial societies, it was common for people to associate the deities with prosperity [...] it was believed that a harmonious relationship with the spiritual forces was necessary to ensure good health, long life and prosperity and to ensure that one's destiny was not altered for the worse.

Similarly, Bediako has noted that traditional beliefs suggest,.... “the well being of the society depends upon maintaining good relations with the ancestors on whom the living depend for help and protection...” These observations point to the conclusion that religious considerations not only dominate the ordering of daily life among Ghanaians, but also that their shared religious beliefs constitute the fundamental basis of their sense of social identity, values and destiny.

The Akan and Prosperity

There is an Akan saying that, “There is no one who does not like to eat salt”; in other words everybody wants to prosper. All Akan people see themselves as Onyame mma (God's children). Onyame (God) is understood to be Obaatanpa (good parent), who is involved in the daily affairs of his people by providing for their needs. Thus, He is Toturobonsu (The Source and Giver of rain), providing his people with rain and sunshine, which are essential for their livelihood. McCaskie has rightly observed that the name Onyame comprises two words: 'onya', to get, to achieve and 'mee', to

be full up, satisfied, or complete. It implies plenitude or a fulfilled state. It is believed that Onyame *Qbaatanpa*, also known as *Qdomakoma* (God of grace), has made available every good thing for the well-being of His children. To be Onyame ba (God's child) suggests that one has the fullness of life and is in a state of plenitude. Therefore, if things are not going as expected, there must be some reason(s) for it, and this is usually taken to mean a particular evil spirit or influence might have been engineered by a relative who might be jealous or envious of the one attacked.

In some cases, misfortunes may also be explained as consequences of a breach of customary regulation. Here, we have the proverb: "Se wotwe ahoma na emba a na biribi de mu" (if you pull a rope and it does not come through, it means there is something holding it at the other end). In an attempt to provide explanations for misfortune and assurances of peace, security and prosperity, anti-witchcraft shrines such as *Aberewa*, *Tongo*, *Senyakupo*, *Kwasi Kurkuro*, *Kune* and others were noted to have swept across the Gold Coast from the early part of the 1900s.

Although most of these cultic shrines have become less popular with the passing of years, partly due to their lack of modernisation, new ones of similar nature continue to spring up. At the same time the Spiritual churches (*Sunsum sgre*) such as *The Twelve Apostles*, *Aladura*, *Cherubim and Seraphim*, and *Musama Disco Christo Church (MDCC)* tended to offer a Christian alternative. In recent times, it is the *Deliverance and Prophetic ministries* which are the big winners in the prosperity supermarket as their modern approach to dealing with prosperity and well-being attracts a wider following.

Another Akan saying is: "Sika nye aboa, sika tre mogya" (money is not a beast or animal,

money begets blood [life]). The notion of this saying is captured in a song by Pat Thomas, which has been adopted and is played by the National Weekly Lotto before the winning numbers are drawn. Also synonymous with *sika* (money) is *ahonya* (wealth), and its importance is noted by *Ackah* when he maintains:

A person desires to acquire wealth (*ahonya*) because it is extremely valuable and guarantees protection against hunger, cold and other privations. Knowing that "ahonya" prevents need is a wonderful feeling and makes its acquisition desirable.

However, unlike in North America and other parts of the West where prosperity is mainly focused on the individual, the Akan concept of prosperity largely focuses on the community or family (clan) and is based on kinship survival, as wealth is considered a common good that must be shared by the community or clan. Thus, prosperity in traditional Akan, is based on the idea of the person reaching beyond himself for the interests of others: "wopere wo man na woanya a wopere wo kurow; wopere wo kurow na woanya a, wopere wo fi; wo perewo fi nso na woanya a, wopere wo nkoara wo ti" (if you strive for your nation without success, strive for your town; if you strive for your town without success, strive for your family; if you strive for your family without success, then strive for your own head)."

In Akan ontology, poverty is regarded as a curse and a disgrace (*ohia ye animguase*). The extent to which the Akan perceive the seriousness of poverty is expressed in the proverb: *obi be wo dua se, "ma onwu!"* a *enyeyaw se ose "ma ohia nka no!"* (if someone curses you saying, "let this person die!" he is not doing you as much harm as he would if he were to say: "let poverty lay hold on this person!"). The poor person has no

friends and could be left destitute: *ohiani nni yonko*. It is also said that, "it is poverty that turned an Akan person into an animal": *ohia na emaa okanni ye aboa*. Thus, people would do all they could to escape poverty of any kind or form. In post-colonial days, young men were noted to have pooled resources together and bought powerful *suman* (talisman) which were "intended to bring prosperity and which people copied and sold at will."

Whereas prosperity teaching as experienced by American neo-pentecostalism may require that the individual has 'faith in faith' and also employs positive thinking and positive confession in order to engineer prosperity, the primal imagination requires that the individual has faith in the prophet or healer. The efficacy of the prophet or healer is judged by how successful he or she is in mediating success and prosperity on behalf of his/her client. As a result, the failure to experience prosperity or blessing amongst traditional healing communities or shrines is not seen as the lack of faith on the part of the client but rather the lack of potency on the part of the spiritual leader. This may in part underscore Gifford's observation:

It is possible to view the rise of deliverance theology as a response to, or mutation, in the face of the shortfall of faith preaching. Faith did not bring about all that was promised. Deliverance still allows the emphasis on success, as long as something more than faith is added.

The Deliverance and Prophetic Churches do not emphasise faith as much as dealing with the spiritual entities that are believed to militate against one's prosperity. Thus, whereas the exercise of faith may be a defining factor in the Word of Faith charismatic churches, manifestations of divine powers (such as prophecy, exorcism, and the Word of Knowledge) characterise the Deliverance and Prophetic charismatic

churches. All are directed at diagnosing and solving people's problems in order to bring them prosperity and success in life.

Prosperity understood in terms of Wealth, Long-life and Fertility or Procreativity

John Pobee, an eminent Ghanaian theologian has observed, in traditional Akan society that well-being [prosperity] is outlined in the *nsare-nson*, seven graces for which he prays regularly:

Nkwa, which embraces (life, vitality, good health, longevity); *adom*, God's gifts of food, life, any favour that the spirit world may shower on the living; *asomdwee*, peace of self, (body and spirit), the family, the clan and human kind; *abawotum*, procreativity, potency, fertility of individuals as of clan...; *anihutum*, good and powerful eyesight and perception; *asotatum*, good hearing power; and *amandoree*, rainfall on the tribe as well as the increase and general prosperity of the family; clan and tribe.

Thus, in the popular Akan worldview, prosperity and well-being is not regarded as merely material possession but is also fullness of life and peace. Prosperity in Akan epistemology can therefore be said to embrace three main components: wealth, health and fertility or procreativity. The three concepts are usually illustrated in proverbs and their impact cannot be underestimated. The Akan see health and longevity as an important material possession: *nkwa tenten nti na Odomankoma boo yare no, oboo aduro nsu kaa ho* (it is because of long life that the Creator created medicine when He created diseases). But fertility or procreation occupies the prime locus in the African concept of prosperity. Opoku has rightly noted, "children are highly valued by the Akan. In spite of all the changes introduced into Akan society by modernity, procreation remains the aim of marriage, for without

offspring, marriage is incomplete." Opoku's assertion is sustained by Pobee, who maintains that "childlessness is a disaster in so far as it means the dying out of family and incompleteness." Thus, unlike in the West, wealthy persons in Africa are still considered poor if they have no children of their own, here the Akans have the saying: *enyɛ sika nko ne ohia* (poverty is not only the lack of money). Childlessness as *ohia* (poverty) is considered a curse and humiliation. It is therefore a common feature in traditional African prayers to ask God not only for wealth, good health or long life but also for children as the following prayer on the occasion of a Yam festival of the people of Aburi illustrates:

Oh Tweaduaɱpon Kwame,
 Toturobonsu, the rain-maker,
 Amaowia- the giver of sunshine,
 Receive drink,
 Yaa, the Earth goddess,
 Receive drink...
 When I call one of you
 I have called all
 Ye departed spirit of the seven Akan clans.
 Receive drink
 Today is your lustral day
 I have brought you sheep, drink
 And new yam.
 Receive these and visit us
This new year with a good harvest,
wealth and prosperity, fertility and long life,
Peace and fame and rain and sunshine
 At the appropriate times
 If ever we are called upon
 To share three things with any other nation
 Let us have two
 Let the evil one that plans evil for us
 Receive evil in return

Property and Ownership in Akan and the Nuisance of Wealth Accumulation.

Most significant to our understanding of prosperity in the Ghanaian context is the Akan attitude to property and ownership. Foster has pointed out in "The Image of the

Limited Good", that in peasant societies, wealth is considered a common good that must be shared. To accumulate wealth however is to deprive someone else of his share of the common good. Therefore, conspicuous or hedonistic consumption attracts not only the envy, but also "the suspicion, the enmity, the gossip, the character assassination and perhaps the witchcraft and physical attack of his fellows."

Parish and others have observed in their studies in Ghana that "far from disappearing in the face of post-colonial developments, accusations of witchcraft may provide the medium for exploring a critique of new forms of economic individualism." In Ghana, rich and successful people are sometimes accused of having gone for *sika duro* (money medicine). This is normally taken to mean, exchanging the blood [life] of a family member or relative for potential riches. This accusation of witchcraft is often asserted when there is a tragic death of a close family member or offspring, or any chronic and unexplained sickness in the family.

For fear of character assassination and a diabolic attack on their lives and that of their families, people usually conceal their economic fortunes or wealth. The fear of witchcraft attack therefore becomes a 'traditional barrier' to accumulation of wealth and hedonistic consumption. However, although economic individualism is usually greeted with suspicion, human and supernatural agents from outside the system are acceptable explanations for one's fortune. For example, the wealth of a person can be explained by the finding of buried treasure, making of a pact with the devil, or winning on the lottery. In Ghana, working for wages in the cities or the diaspora is also regarded as tapping outside wealth and other desirable forms of good.

Since the "good" is known to have come from beyond the systems' boundaries, it is acknowledged as not being at the expense of others, it is "safe" and can therefore be displayed."

Breaking the Traditional Barriers: The Charismatics and the Prosperity Gospel, Towards the Global Process?

Prosperity teaching in the Charismatic Churches in Ghana has sought not only to engender belief in the Supreme Being but also to demonize the divinities and denounce the limits they impose on social change such as economic individualism and conspicuous consumption. In the process, the Charismatic Churches, through their prosperity teachings have provided new avenues for expression and action through their teachings on faith and positive confession.

By depending on resources outside the 'system', adherents of the charismatic faith push beyond the boundaries of the 'limited good', whilst at the same time undermining the cosmic microcosm and its constraints on social change. This process of breaking the traditional plausibility structures tends to produce free modern individuals who create their own destiny through their own choices and reflection and without fear of guilt, character assassination, or economic loss through real or imagined chicanery.

However, the Charismatics' approach to prosperity has its own consequences. In modern-day Ghana, economic individualism is still seen as conflicting with the kinship obligations and values of the family. The clash between the traditional African concept of prosperity and the kind propagated by the Charismatic Churches has resulted, in some cases, in tensions between existing relations in the family system as young Charismatic adherents mount assaults on tradition because they consider it diabolical and at odds with the Christian faith.

Kinship commitments begin to crumble as enthusiastic Charismatics in the urban areas focus their resources and energy on the nuclear family, while other Charismatics are determined to remain single or delay their marriages. The Charismatics are not encouraged to participate in family or communal rituals and festivities, or provide resources for them. Even provision of alcoholic drinks as part of the bride price is discouraged by some Pentecostals-/Charismatics as untenable since the drinks would or may be used for pouring libation on behalf of the couple.

The church becomes the believers' new extended family and the source of their new identity. Such a "complete break with the past" often contributes to the creation of free subjects who are able to embrace certain aspects of modernity. As believers are freed from their kinship commitments as well as other community obligations, which impinge on their financial resources and energy, they are enabled to accumulate wealth and other material resources for their own benefit. Thus, the Charismatic Ministries, with their prosperity teaching, have succeeded in creating new economic individualism in Ghanaian communities, which though may pose a threat to existing relations and kinship survival, also offers opportunities to those who can take advantage of a changing economic climate and invest in new business opportunities.

The faith and trust in God, rather than in the divinities as providers, creates a sense of assurance and immunity in the event of real or imagined witchcraft attack. Faith in Jesus, rather than traditional divinities, has also meant that one is able to dispel any fear of ancestral judgement on account of economic individualism or greed at the expense of kinship commitment. For those who still do not get answers for their lack of prosperity despite the application of faith and positive

confessions, the traditional religious beliefs still provide the paradigm for understanding or solving the problem of poverty or creation of wealth. The key advocates have been the Deliverance and Prophetic Churches or Ministries.

Conclusion

In many respects, the Charismatic Churches or Ministries, particularly the Deliverance and Prophetic, expressions may be said to be phenomenologically similar to the traditional healing communities or the so-called Spiritual churches, as they all pursue prosperity and well-being in reference to the African *Weltanschauung*. The concept of prosperity as

we have tried to show, exists in the context of the primal worldview or cosmology of the Ghanaian people. This has become a *praeparatio evangelica* for the nurture and spread of the Prosperity Gospel. The charismatics have shown elements of discontinuity and innovation with respect to the traditional concept of prosperity by providing new perspectives and avenues for expression and action. The American influence is phenomenal in as far as it served as a catalyst and provided a headway and legitimacy to what already existed within the domain of the African primal cosmology by making it not only popular with the masses but also desirable.

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