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Article

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Prophetism in the wake of a pandemic: Charismatic Christianity, conspiracy theories, and the Coronavirus outbreak in Africa

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ABSTRACT

The outbreak of COVID-19 subjected prophets and the prophetic ministry to ridicule and taunts by both disenchanted Christians and non-believers alike. This study examines responses to these challenges posed by COVID-19 to prophets and the prophetic movement in Africa. The study shows that Charismatic Christianity on the continent may serve as useful resource for public education amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, but also, a source of public health misinformation and thus, create doubts, uncertainties and fear. The paper argues that, the Covid-19 pandemic has both prospects and challenges for prophecies, as well as greater implications for Charismatic Christianity in Africa.

Introduction

The outbreak of COVID-19 in December 2019 has had serious implications for the world. Caused by SARS-CoV-2, COVID-19 is the first disease caused by a Coronavirus that has been declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization. The disease, which originated from Wuhan in China, has affected almost every country in the world. The outbreak has disordered every aspect of life including economic, political, social and religious activities. The Coronavirus sparked global panic as countries experienced economic decline, increased death rates, and the compulsory reordering of social activities. Governments across the globe and public health officials introduced many measures to help safeguard people and to halt the spread of the virus. In Africa, one area of social life that has been significantly affected by the outbreak of COVID-19 is religion, especially, Charismatic Christianity. The first case of the Covid-19 disease in Sub-Saharan Africa was recorded in Nigeria in February 2020. By the end of March of the same year the virus had spread to several countries on the continent. As part of public health measures to contain the spread of the virus governments prohibited all forms of public religious gatherings, leading to the indefinite closure of churches and mosques. This resulted not only into reduced forms of social contacts and communication but also curtailed religious activities. Yet in Africa, historical antecedents suggests that in crisis moments such as the Covid-19 pandemic, many people would resort to religion as a

source of comfort and space of refuge. For example, Adam Mohr (2011) has noted that the rapid expansion of the Faith Tabernacle movement in Ghana could be attributed to the outbreak of the 1918–19 influenza epidemic and the extreme suffering it engendered.

Thus, in Africa today, where Charismatic and prophetic movements are immensely popular, one would expect that in this crisis period, prophets and the prophetic ministries would become even more important mediators of people's faith and belief in divine protection. However, Covid-19 presents prophecy and the prophetic ministry on the continent with a dilemma. On the one hand, Covid-19 puts prophets and their prophecies to test, and produces ridicule, but it also fuels it. In Ghana and Nigeria for instance, the pandemic has caused many people, religious and non-religious alike to taunt and ridicule leading prophets and pastors for their inability to anticipate and respond prophetically to the pandemic (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2020; Fosu-Ankrah, 2020). Such expectations are fueled by the proclivities of some prophets to deliver prophecies, especially, in Ghana at the beginning of every year. The disenchantment with prophets and prophecies notwithstanding, certain "prophets" continue to wield some influence with their teachings and prophecies on the pandemic. Using prophets such as Emmanuel Makandiwa (Zimbabwe), Apostle Johnson Suleman (Nigeria), and Pastor Christopher Oyakhilome (Nigeria) as case studies, this paper explores the ways in which "prophets" have responded to, and interpreted the COVID-19 crisis. In addition, the paper examines

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misinformation and disinformation inherent in prophecies and prophetic teachings relating to the coronavirus pandemic and the implications of these for public health discourses in Africa. In doing so, the paper draws on the concept of waiting to frame its analysis. Waiting is a phenomenon which is characterised by anxieties and uncertainties on one hand, and faith and hope on the other hand (Janeja and Bandak 2018). We argue that, the Covid-19 pandemic has both prospects and challenges for prophecies, as well as greater implications for Charismatic Christianity and public health discourses in Africa.

Data for this paper was collected between the months of February and July 2020 during which period many African countries experienced increasing rates of Covid-19 infections. These months also witnessed the strict imposition of restrictions such as total and/or partial lockdowns, the closure of religious buildings and the banning of religious activities, as well as general ban other on public gathering and other forms of social activities. Due to the lockdown and other forms of public restrictions, social media platforms such as Twitter, WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and other online sources such as online news portals and blog posts were awash with varying forms of information which provided data for this article. Video clips and TV screening of discussions on the Coronavirus pandemic on YouTube were also collected and reviewed. We used these platforms because they were utilised by government agencies, religious institutions, media houses, and health institutions to disseminate information during this period. The basis for this choice is grounded mainly in the fact that these platforms are popular, easily accessible, and have wide national coverage within the selected countries, cuts across geographical boundaries, and have a global reach. Personal observations of video clip updates on prophetic claims by the selected prophets on friends WhatsApp statuses, both in Ghana and abroad, showed that these prophecies were widespread and highly followed on the African continent as well as outside of the continent. It was these WhatsApp statuses that prompted us to explore other social media platforms to be able to access the full content of these prophecies. The mediation of these media platforms, aside the pneumatic experience of religion by believers, is a contributing factor to the widespread of Charismatic Christianity, because it provides a personal link to spiritual mediation for devotees (Lindhardt, 2015; Meyer and Moors, 2006; Meyer, 2011; Meyer, 2010; Asamoah-Gyadu, 2015; de Witte, 2005). Hence, it is not surprising that social media platforms became a convenient vehicle for the dissemination of prophecies during the period.

Charismatic Christianity, the prophetic ministry and faith healing in Africa

Charismatic Christianity is a movement within Christianity that places much emphasis on the centrality of the pneumatic experience in the life of the believer. That is, the belief and practices of this strand of Christianity is characterised by a worldview that promote and acknowledge the notion that signs and wonders, miracles, and other supernatural occurrences are supposed to be part of the normal everyday life of the Christian. Hence, the “experiential presence of the Holy Spirit” is central to their profession of faith because the Holy Spirit is the source of restoration, transformation and authority (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2013: 6, 10; Burgess and Van der Mass, 2010). Quebedeaux (1976:2) summarises this Charismatic Christian belief and practices succinctly as:

When Christ promised his disciples that he would bestow upon them his Holy Spirit after departing from them, he anticipated three practical needs the Spirit would satisfy in their lives: (1) confirm faith, (2) bring joy in the midst of suffering, and (3) assure, guide, and teach those who would choose to follow Christ. Yet to many, if not most, Christians, Christ’s promise of his indwelling Spirit may be accepted intellectually, but it is not received experientially.

Charismatic Christianity, as Quebedeaux (1976) relates above, seeks to offer answers that has to do with experiencing the Holy Spirit, and

assurance of the promise of God in “signs and wonders”. Charismatic Christianity rejects liberal interpretation of a supernatural deity who is only experienced intellectually and not in reality or practically. They preach a god one can feel, respond to, love and one who cares about the present and future of his adherents. Charismatic Christianity is therefore committed to the evidential ways through which the Holy Spirit affects the lives of those committed to him. Four major characteristics of Charismatic Christianity, can be inferred, namely; (a) the belief and emphasis on the practical work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer, (b) the affirmation of the believer’s faith and demonstration of joy and hope, even in the midst of suffering (c) the assurance, guidance and teaching of not only the Holy Spirit, but also of the leaders through whom the Holy Spirit works and (d) the rejection of intellectual (rational) Christianity, without a corresponding pneumatic experience. This background of Charismatic Christianity’s characteristics provides the context for the discussion of the movement in Africa, and particularly, the various responses of the prophets to the challenge posed by COVID-19.

One of the crucial moments for Christianity in Africa is the upsurge of Pentecostal/Charismatic movement (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2005; Omenyo, 2002; Gifford 2004; Ogbu, 2008; Larbi, 2001). This movement is marked by high spirit of excitement and enthusiasm and has been shaping the religious landscape and the transformation of society on the continent in the last three decades (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2014). A significant marker of the Charismatic movement is its prophetic and healing ministries which distinguishes it from the mainstream churches. The prophetic ministry is not a new phenomenon in Sub-Saharan Africa. On his seminal work on charismatic Christianity, Baeta (1962) predicted that the prophetic ministry which characterised Christianity in the 1960 s was bound to reoccur, particularly in Ghanaian Christianity (Baeta, 1962). Paul Gifford’s work on charismatic Christianity has confirmed Baeta’s prediction about the reemergence of the prophetic ministry as part of Ghanaian/African Christianity in the twenty-first century (Gifford, 2004). The emergence of the charismatic movement and the accompanying prophetic ministries disrupted the religious organization of mainline churches on the continent (Omenyo, 2002; Asamoah-Gyadu, 2018; Kodua, 2018). In the past decade, prophets have been ubiquitous in the public space on the continent. Their prophecies have been characterised by fear mongering, especially making pronouncements of the death of public officials and important personalities (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2020; Fosu-Ankrah, 2020). They also compete among themselves on their ability to cure all forms of ailments, and mediate divine favour for their followers. Not only do their prophetic utterances help them attract huge following, but also it gives them publicity, creates network, and provide them with power (influence) and wealth (Fosu-Ankrah, 2020). Besides, their prophecies catapult them into mainstream political activities.

The popularity of prophets is evident in the ways in which politicians align themselves with them especially during election periods (Marshall, 2009; Obadare 2018; Burgess, 2015; McCauley, 2005; Fosu-Ankrah, 2020). Their influence in politics is a redefinition of the big man rule in Africa (McCauley, 2005). This implies that the figure of the prophet is not merely a “religious” person, but a political one too, because politicians trust in their prophecies and they depend on the prophets to also mobilise voters. This seemingly multidimensional role of the Charismatic prophet makes him a ‘religious functionary par excellence’ (Ekem, 2009:14). These charismatic prophets in Africa today, embodies the role of a teacher, seer, counselor, healer, miracle worker, and a politician. This image of the contemporary African prophet/prophets elevate them and makes them very influential on the corridors of political power in the African society. It is within the context of this image of the prophet that this paper addresses the responses of the African Charismatic prophets and the prophetic ministry to the Covid-19 pandemic on the continent and the disenchantment of their followers and other believers and non-believers alike. Many of their followers believe in the power of their prophets to proffer solutions and give directions, and allay their

fears during uncertain times such as the Covid-19 presents. Thus, the limited ability of the prophetic ministry to respond to the COVID-19 outbreak in ways that fulfil the expectations of their followers have left their followers feeling uncertain distraught, and disenchanted even as they continue in "waiting" for a miracle to happen. That is not to say, however, they have abandoned their faith. Indeed, as we will show below, prophets and their followers devised adaptive strategies to counteract criticisms following the seeming disconfirmation of their prophecies.

The role of religion in health and wellness has long been underscored. Many religious practitioners may turn to prayer rather than medicine when they fall ill or get afflicted with a disease (Koenig, 2005; Levin, 2001; Huguélet and Koenig, 2009; Csordas, 1997; Kleinman, 2006; Flanagan, 2008). Within African Charismatic Christian cosmology, it is believed that the outbreak of diseases or a pandemic is usually caused by an imbalance between human actors and spiritual agents. To restore this disconnection between the visible and invisible, series of healing processes are initiated, and faith healing is one of such processes. In a similar vein, faith healing features prominently in contemporary Charismatic Christianity (Brown, 2011; Brown, 2012; Asamoah-Gyadu, 2015). In Pentecostal and Charismatic theology health is interpreted as an aspect of salvation. Health is principal in the explanation of wholeness of the individual which various Charismatic and Pentecostal religious practitioners aspire to attain. Faith healing aims at curing and protecting the religious practitioner from the attacks of malevolent forces which disrupt life. Within the larger Christian tradition faith healing is important. Faith healing, sometimes termed as spiritual healing, in the Christian context, and particularly among Charismatic Christians, refers to healing received or administered through the agency of the Holy Spirit. This kind of healing is also dependent on the faith of the healer and the sick or afflicted person (Baeta, 1962; Akrong, 2009; Appiah-Kubi, 1981). And the Priest (in our context the prophet), as Ekem (2005, 2009) demonstrate, becomes the chief pacifier and mediator between the spiritual and physical universe. While faith healing has not been very manifest during the Covid-19 outbreak, some prophets have delivered sermons instructing their followers to use the medium of prayer to seek protection against the outbreak and perhaps cure when infected. In the section below, we turn to a brief discussion of the concept of waiting.

Waiting, uncertainties and the prophetic ministry

Janeja and Bandak (2018) in their *Ethnography of Waiting* provide conceptual insight into waiting as an aspect of human life. They show that waiting is a social phenomenon that is central in every society. Using waiting as an analytic category they demonstrate that waiting is the interaction between doubting and hoping. Reinhardt (2018) indicates that the idea of waiting has many dimensions including ethical, spiritual, economic and political. During the months of February and May 2020 people on the African continent experienced a period of waiting, a situation that was characterised by uncertainties, despair and expectations. During this period everyday activities such as selling and buying, schooling, religious gathering, footballing, clubbing amongst others ceased indefinitely. Voluntary and involuntary actions such as sneezing, coughing, loud laughing, talking, shaking of hands etcetera became strictly controlled. Adding to this frustration was the constant washing of hands from every point of entry or contact. This situation created uneasiness, and anxieties about when such restrictions would end. Many charismatic Christians during this period became expectant and remained in a period of waiting in anticipation of directions and solutions from their prophets. However, some of these prophet leaders rather exacerbated the uncertainties, fear and panic of their followers with their pronouncements – a development that intensified doubts among devotees (Fosu-Ankrah, 2020).

For instance, on 29 February 2020 T.B Joshua of the Synagogue Church of All Nations in Nigeria prophesied that Covid-19 will vanish on

27 March 2020. March 27 arrived and the disease continued to spread unabated. Consequently he became the subject of ridicule on social media platforms, even as his followers remained unperturbed and continued to wait for clear directions (Thomas, 2020; Njoku, 2020). In a similar vein, in a breakfast meeting with religious leaders organized by Nana Addo Danquah Akuffo-Addo, the President of Ghana, to pray for divine intervention in fighting Covid-19, the founder and leader of the Action Faith Chapel International, Archbishop Nicholas Duncan-Williams declared that no government official will die of Coronavirus in Ghana (Ayanga, 2020a). In the months that followed however, some key government officials died from Covid-19 infections. Subsequently, he also became the subject of a failed prophecy and taunts. Thus, in the period of waiting, eclipsed by both doubt and hope, the prophetic ministry seemed to have lost some credibility. Many people, believers and non-believers alike rejected what was declared as prophecy and challenged the prophets to find an enduring solution to the Coronavirus pandemic (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2020; Fosu-Ankrah, 2020). In this crisis period, two things emerge from the relationship between Charismatic Christian adherents and the prophetic ministry on one hand, and the responses of other people, believers and non-believers alike, on the other hand. The first is that, Covid-19 presents Christians with a difficulty in finding spiritual answers and solutions. To this extent, prophets and the prophetic ministry seemed to have been immobilised and were less useful in mediating divine favour for their adherents. Many Christian adherents have tended to doubt self-acclaimed prophets, and skeptics seem to have found favourable grounds to subject these prophets to ridicule. Not only are the prophets ridiculed but their prophecies are subjected to doubt and rarely given any serious attention. The second is that, the prophetic ministry is itself in crisis and it is struggling to make meaning out of the challenge that Covid-19 has posed to it.

Spiritual Causality, faith in prayer and Covid-19

In the wake of the Covid-19 outbreak in Africa, many charismatic pastors have adopted the strategy of prayer as a key tool of intervention. Prayer in Charismatic and Pentecostal Christianity as Asamoah-Gyadu (2013) points out, is a theological interventionist strategy. Whereas there are differences in theories concerning the cause of the virus, there seem to be a converging ground among some prophets. Some prophets perceive the Coronavirus as a spiritual issue rather than a medical or even scientific phenomenon. For such prophets, Covid-19 is spiritual onslaught or punishment on the world and thus has to be addressed spiritually. Prophet Dr. Kofi Oduro, the head pastor of the Alabaster Ministry International for instance asked the rhetorical question on his Facebook page: 'Coronavirus, is it from God, the devil, or by nature?' In response to his own question, he claims that the virus is neither from the devil nor by nature, but instead, a punishment from God because:

Coronavirus can never attack spirits because he that is born of the spirits is spirit. And he that is born of the flesh is flesh. Corona is a virus, it can only attack the flesh, but he that is spirit can never go through that, therefore the righteous should rather relax and enjoy your life. He that is born of God overcomes the world, overcomes anything that attacks the world system. If there is anything anyone would have to do, is to repent. Stop arguing on useless philosophical, medical, psychological and sociological nonsense and repent. The virus is dangerous, you cannot joke with it. The world and the nations have sinned against God (cited in Fosu-Ankrah, 2020)

It is noticeable from the above statement that, not only does the prophet trivialise the virus as a medical calamity, but he also dismisses all the medical, professional and intellectual discourses surrounding the Covid-19 outbreak as 'nonsense'. He instead calls for repentance of people. He further points out that true Christians, that is, those "born of the spirit" are immune to the Coronavirus infection, hence 'the righteous should rather relax and enjoy'. Not only does this spiritual rhetoric pose

as a public health challenge, but it also undermines professional skills and formal knowledge, and privileges faith as a viable approach to redeeming the Covid-19 menace. Similarly, in Nigeria, Prophet T.B Joshua prayed against the virus and declared that the 'real Coronavirus is gone'. He prayed for the healing and restoration of people infected by the virus as well as for the frontline medical professionals. He then asked that the caregivers 'sense the presence of God' as the pandemic 'is a test of faith' (Iranzi, 2020). Expounding on the notion of faith he said:

Real faith thrives on a test. If there was nothing serious in the past to test our faith, here is something to test our faith in a unique way—a real situation. Fear exposes the level of our relationship with God. Fear means we are not serving God with all our hearts. The opening of the eyes of our faith will be the silencing of our fears (quoted in Iranzi, 2020).

T.B. Joshua's approach to the problem was addressed via the dimension of faith and prayer. It is rather a situation of demonstrating one's power over the virus due to one's relationship with God. Both Prophets TB Joshua and Kofi Oduro allude to the theory of spiritual causality which attributes illness or sickness to spiritual causes. Hence in atoning for the Coronavirus crises, prayer, repentance and faith are recommended. However, the use of sanctified objects such as stickers, handkerchiefs, water etcetera—regular practice among Charismatic Christians, particularly those in Africa, have been relegated to the background in this context. These sanctified objects play a central role in the healing practices of Charismatic Christians in Africa, hence the relegation of these objects to the background during the COVID-19 period shows how the disease posed a real challenge to prophets. Also, the responses of these two prophets to the COVID-19 crisis is symptomatic of the role of religion in other epidemics such as AIDS and Ebola in Africa. Religion in this context either aids the spread or stoppage of the spread of these epidemics (Trinitapoli and Weinreb, 2012; Oxlund, 2014; Simpson, 2014; Marshall, 2016; Marshall and Smith, 2015).

Since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic several conspiracy theories have been peddled on social media networks on its origin and cause. Fueling these speculations are two books—*The Eye of Darkness* (Koontz, 1996) and *End of Days* (Browne and Harrison, 2008) that gained instant popularity. Both books predict the outbreak of a flu-like pandemic around the year 2020. The *End of Days* details a number of catastrophes that will plague the world in 2020 and beyond. The speculation is that Coronavirus fits the flu-like virus described in this book. The *Eye of Darkness* on the other hand describes a Chinese scientist named Li Chen who defected to the United States with a diskette that contained key and dangerous Chinese new biological weapon in the decade. The content in the diskette, the book narrates, is called 'Wuhan 400' and thus a perfect weapon. As these conspiracies continue to gain traction, some prophets on the African continent have developed their own theories which dovetail into these popular but dubious narratives (See also Ibrahim, 2020).

African Prophets, global Politics, conspiracy theories and global public health

We define conspiracy theories in this context to mean grand narratives or beliefs that are mobilised by one religious group against another group as acting as a "hidden hand" that is manipulating political events from behind the scene (Robertson, 2015). Conspiracy narratives mostly function to explain a number of important social events. Even though, most of these narratives rely on politico-economical ideologies, many conspiracy beliefs involve supernatural ideas. Conspiracy theories and beliefs are difficult to dispute and some may even be resistant to counterevidence given by experts, as these experts are often suspected to be part of the conspiracy (Newheiser et al., 2011; Bezalel, 2019). Conspiracy narratives have a great effect on people's lives and may serve three basic psychological motives (i.e., epistemic, existential, and

relational) for individuals. That is, conspiracy narratives mostly serve a psychological function by providing a sense of meaning and control, particularly in situations of lack of trust, and feeling of powerlessness. Secondly, conspiracy beliefs may be understood within the context of a psychological need to explain events, especially complex societal events. Finally, conspiracy beliefs may allow one to direct anger towards individuals or groups suspected to be responsible for one's social condition (Newheiser et al., 2011; Marques et al., 2021; Jasinskaja-Lahti and Jetten, 2019). All the three functions stated reflects in the stories narrated in the subsequent sections.

The Covid-19 outbreak resurrected some nascent conspiracy theories – some of which were deployed by charismatic prophetic movements in Africa to lend credence to their prophetic claims (Ibrahim, 2020). We draw on some of the most prevalent conspiracy beliefs during the Covid 19 pandemic that was propagated by Apostle Suleman, Prophet Makandiwa, and Pastor Chris to argue that conspiracy narratives by these religious leaders go beyond the question of coping with existential threat and death-related anxiety posed by the pandemic. We demonstrate that declarations of such conspiracy beliefs are a means by these religious functionaries to exert their influence in the social space of knowledge production. And this means that, their epistemic declarations rivals those of public health experts. We further show how anti-intellectualism and political mistrust are intertwined in these conspiracy narratives.

In times of crisis like the COVID-19, religion and faith serves as a source of individual security and community resilience. However, the outbreak of Covid-19 in Africa created a heightened tension between some Charismatic Christian leaders and science. Whereas some pastors made conscious efforts to align their policies with advice by medical experts and governments to help curb the spread of the virus, "others invoked religious ideology to confront the virus, assuring followers and devotees that faith offers adequate protection" (Lichtenstein et al., 2020). For example, the Nigerian pastor, E. A. Adeboye of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), assured his followers via a message on Instagram that "no virus can come near your dwelling" but he also drew their attention to the fact that "basic hygienic measures are next to Godliness":

I want to assure you that so far you are in the secret place of the Most High, no virus can come near your dwelling. Remember being able to abide under his shadow involves you living a life of cleanliness. The basic things like washing your hands, keeping your environment clean and adhering to basic hygienic measures are next to Godliness. God bless you (cited in Lichtenstein et al., 2020)

In the above post, Pastor Adeboye adopt an ambivalent attitude towards the Coronavirus menace. He demonstrates faith and encourages his followers, but he also admonishes adherence to scientific recommendations. In this way, the Pastor shows that religion and science are not in conflict but play complimentary roles. Contrary to E.A Adeboye's approach, there are other pastors who defied government orders and public health protocols by the WHO and health professional. For instance, the Ugandan Pastor, Augustine Yiga, was arrested for allegedly telling his Revival Christian Church members on television that COVID-19 does not exist in Africa. Patrick Onyango, Uganda police spokesperson, argued that this "undermines government efforts in fighting the epidemic and exposes the public to great danger of laxity in observing the guidelines on its control and prevention" (African News Agency, 2020).

In Ghana, Apostle Kofi Nkrumah Sarkodie, Head Pastor of the Open Arms Ministries, was allegedly arrested by the Ashanti Regional Police Command for holding a church service (Ayamga, 2020b). This was an act that clearly showed the utter disregard and flouting of the ban on public gatherings in the wake of the Coronavirus outbreak. These total disregard for government policies and public health protocols occurred within the context of the closure of churches, a period we have alluded

to as “waiting”. This “waiting” period was explained by some of these pastors in apocalyptic and eschatological terms. They interpreted COVID-19 to be orchestrated by human agents on a grand scheme to disrupt Christianity. On 30 April 2020 Pastor Chris Oyakhilome, Founder of Believers Loveworld (aka Christ Embassy), challenged the continual lockdown of churches because he believed that the church is “a place of healing” (Egbunike, 2020). Chiding his colleague pastors who favoured the lockdown he stated:

So, those of you who love to run around government officials to get your validation, come and get COVID-19 compliant registration for your church. That is the last day Jesus will be in that church. But that is coming (ibid).

By this statement the pastor implicates his colleagues who obeyed the government’s directives and accused them of allegedly receiving compensations from the government. He argued that:

In different cities, countries, states, before the government went ahead with the lockdown, they held meetings with pastors, leaders of churches. Why did the pastors and leaders not say give us a few days to go and pray? Because they were not prayerful before. Hearing such a thing as Ministers of God and you are called for such a meeting, you couldn’t say give us a few days and you would call the Ministers and say this is what we just heard from the government authorities and we need to pray. We have asked them to give us three days. Then you would have seen the hand of God. But you weren’t thinking about the father’s house. Do you know what it is for you to shut down the congregations of the lord? Do you know what that means? It never meant anything to you, that is why. And there were pastors and Ministers that were sending strong warnings to others not to venture entering the church because of the virus. This is because Christ has never truly been your lord. You have been the master of your life. You have never truly known him (cited in Desalu, 2020).

In this message, Pastor Chris questions the authenticity and motives of these pastors. In essence, he sees these pastors as caring more about themselves than the work of God.

Pastor Chris is however not the only person who opposed lockdown. Sharing his thought on the lockdown, Bishop David O. Oyedepo, founder and leader of Living Faith Church Worldwide (aka Winners’ Chapel International), argued in his video message on in a twitter post that the protracted period of the lockdown on churches is a demonic attack. He quizzed why markets were opened while churches continued to be closed. He therefore concluded: “I can smell a rat. The forces of darkness are influencing people at various levels because the growth of the church is the greatest headache of the devil” (Egbunike, 2020). These pastors, he argued, represented governments and public health institutions, and that pastors who were in favour of the lockdown are agents that were used to attack Christians. These sentiments were not expressed by Nigerian pastors alone. In Ghana, certain pastors framed their attitudes against lockdown and the government satirically. For instance, Prophet Ebenezer Adarkwa Yiadom saw lockdown as a level playing field between both the rich and the poor, the powerful and the marginalised. Prophet Kofi Oduro and Isaiah Ampong, a gospel musician, also taunted the use of anointed relics/objects such as water, oil, and handkerchiefs by certain pastors as irrelevant as these could not help remedy the COVID-19 situation (Fosu-Ankrah, 2020).

However, not all pastors shared in this theory of demonic onslaught on the church. Pastor Sam Adeyemi of the Dayster Christian Center for instance against the idea that lockdown is a conspiracy. In a live Instagram session with Pastor Poju Oyemade of The Covenant Nation he stated that:

[In] 1918 September, when the thing hit, the way air travel now is the main thing for global transportation and it was air travel that moved the coronavirus around, it was sea travel that spread the

influenza around then. The ships that brought sick people into the Lagos port; I got the names, the dates they arrived, how it spread in Nigeria. I’d tell you the one that I saw and almost screamed, they closed churches, they closed mosques, they shut down schools, they shut down markets. 1918. So, some of us now think it is the anti-Christ that is at work, he does not want us to gather together and fellowship. We should just be thanking God that we have internet now and we can be relating without meeting together. They shut churches in 1918. So, when the leader takes perspective like that, then you can calm people down and tell them there will be life after this thing (Fajana, 2020).

In the above quote, not only does Pastor Adeyemi debunk unnecessary spiritual speculations, but he demonstrates the relevance of the need to pay attention to history in everyday discourses, especially in crisis period like COVID-19. In the Gold Coast and Lome for instance, Patterson presents a report on the 1918 influenza outbreak which is not different from Pastor Adeyemi’s findings (Patterson, 1983). Patterson (1983: 492) indicates the use of measures such as quarantine, ban on public gathering, and closure of schools and churches. In a YouTube video message, Pastor Matthew Ashimolowo also challenged the misinformation spread by Pastors Chris and Oyedepo. He advised that Christians should “Stay locked down. Lock down is biblical. Stay alive. We will be in church, doing thanksgiving when this thing is over”. Both Pastors Adeyemi and Ashimolowo provide historical as well Biblical justification for lockdown. Either way, we see in these contestations a subtle and implicit articulation of the concept of waiting.

Nonetheless, some African prophets such as Apostle Johnson Suleman, the General Overseer of the Omega Fire Ministry (OFM) in Nigeria continued to propound grand theories about the Covid-19 outbreak. Suleman is one of the few pastors/prophets on the continent who declared that there is a ‘hidden hand’ behind the outbreak of the Coronavirus pandemic. His theory feeds into the pervasive conspiracy theories that have been peddled in popular and social media since the Covid-19 outbreak. Apostle Suleman describes the Covid-19 as a political experiment among global political leaders whose target is Donald Trump, the President of the USA. The virus, he argues, was manufactured by China and is according to him, a chemical weapon. He stresses that many people contacted the virus through testing, but he does not state what kind of medical testing and when this took place across the globe. He further claims that, a vaccine for the virus will be created but the intended purpose of the virus is to control and manage people of the world. He then calls on the Church to rise in unity and in purity to pray as this is the only way to overcome what he calls ‘the anti-Christ’. In his ‘Fire Night’ programme held on Friday 27 March 2020 during which this prophecy was made, the pastor gave an elaborate description on what he claims to be a grand scheme behind the Covid-19 and its relations to the quest to create a new world order. In his live sermon on OMF TV, which has also been uploaded on YouTube, he declared thus:

The Lord said I gave this world to man and as such I don’t do anything in the world until man invites me with understanding in the place of prayer. The nation in question (China) has sinned greatly against the Lord. They wanted to make their own moon shine brighter than the natural moon. Their power tussle is between a particular nation and they want to bring that nation under their feet. Covid-19 is an experiment and they are happy that they could shake the world and they would wait for another two years. In 2022 if I tarry to come, something worse will still come and it will originate from them. The world leaders are coming together to make a synergy that will make all religions have a common ground and the pope is part of it. America is their target but the current president Donald Trump is their obstacle. America should not joke with the next general elections as they will all support the opponent. The opponent is not the issue but his running mate is the issue. The running mate is a lady and if the opponent wins, the opponent will be impeached for

the lady to take over and fulfill the new world order. Their agenda is to humiliate him (Trump). They have succeeded in humiliating him while they are free from it but the prayer of the saints will reverse it and America will be healed. The virus was manufactured by this people (China) it is not a biological issue, it is a chemical weapon. Many people contacted it through testing, once you go for the test you are infected. The few that are not positive is to balance the equation and make people believe it is real. (OFM TV 2020, cited in [Onajite, 2020](#))

He further explains the ban on religious gathering as a deliberate orchestrated policy because it is aimed at disrupting believers from getting together to pray as this will stop the agenda of the new world order. He then directs all believers to pray against what he calls “the spirit of the new world order” and to scatter the agenda of the anti-Christ (ibid).

In the above prophesy, aside prayer, the antidote to counteracting the disease is to purify one’s body because the body is the target of these invisible hands. The claims of Apostle Suleman is not only dubious but also, vexatious because in the first instance, he does not provide any evidence about the people he claims were infected by the testing, neither does he provide further information on where the testing took place and how this was done. Secondly, his advice that the body of the individual is the target and that it has to be purified is an indirect way of asking his followers to reject all forms of biomedical advice and treat such with the outmost suspicion. Not only does his claims and advice create a public health dilemma, but it also intensifies fear and endangers the lives of people.

Similar to Apostle Suleman’s claims, Prophet Emmanuel Makandiwa, the founder and leader of the United Faith International Church (UFIC) in Zimbabwe who became an overnight star on the African continent because of the claim that he prophesied in 2015, 2016 and 2017 about the outbreak of the Coronavirus pandemic during church services held at the City Sports Center in Harare, also makes some startling claims. His prophecies are posted on the UFIC website. He avers that the disease emerged from the sea, a demonic spirit on the rampage, and that nothing can stop it. In a YouTube video by Christ TV, the Prophet Makandiwa on November 2016 for instance claimed that:

There is a deadly disease more dangerous than cancer or HIV originating from the sea. Thousands of people, if not millions, will die. There will be no cure. Only prayers will slow it down. It will be very fast and most people will seek God’s intervention while some will insult him for the deadly disease. I said, it is a plague and it moves by air. There is a creature **that I saw**, it’s the virus, faster than any disease known to man. It will make the educated people cry. It is a bird of the air because it moves by air. Covering your nose won’t help because it can get into your ears, because it is a fowl air. ([Christ TV, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c](#))

He then asserts that the ‘numbers you are hearing about the affected people are a lie because they are trying to manage it’. He also makes the assertion that the virus cannot be cured scientifically and proffers prayers as the solution. He is alleged to have told his congregation that they will be ‘spared’ from the virus. This, he said, will happen through prayers and divine protection, so ‘you will not die, because the son is involved in what we are doing’. And also calls this as the ‘freedom that no medication can offer’. He declares: ‘Everyone under the sound of my voice, as long as you can hear me, you’re spared. There’s not even one person listening to me tonight who shall be killed by this disease. You will not die because the Son (Jesus) is involved in what we’re doing.’ And continues by assuring his followers that he was giving them ‘freedom no medication can offer’. And that: ‘You can’t find this freedom in any pharmacy. If you can hear my voice tonight, start praying for others, stop praying for yourself... you’re covered, you’re protected’ ([Christ TV, 2020a; The Zimbabwe Mail, 2020](#))

Makandiwa’s exemplifies Pentecostal exceptionalism which is

reflected in the proclamation: ‘in this world but not of this world’ ([Kirby et al., 2020](#)) and what he is doing essentially entails the perpetuation of misinformation and conspiracy theories. In his sermons on Covid-19 he alludes to what he calls the ‘mark of the beast’ and cautions his congregation and followers against a ‘microchip implant’ ([Makandiwa, 2020b](#)). This prophesy is popular in Zimbabwe and in many African countries. For instance, a private TV station in Ghana, Metro TV, aired this prophesy, and subsequently uploaded it on YouTube. The host, Paul Adom-Otchere, had said not all the prophets on the continent are false prophets and therefore encouraged his viewers to pray as directed by the “man of God” ([Adom-Otchere and Metro TV, 2020](#)). Not only does this demonstrate that the prophesy is pervasive, but it shows that such dubious claims have gained traction from a section of the ‘believing’ population to be true, and thus shifting the discourse on Covid-19 from a medical issue to a spiritual battleground where political leaders are the invisible enemies.

Again, Makandiwa pushes the boundaries further about the political cause of the Covid-19 outbreak. In a sermon titled, ‘Bible Politics, Technology and Plagues II’, which is uploaded on YouTube by Christ TV, Prophet Makandiwa sermonises about the role of technology in the Covid-19 outbreak and its politics. Makandiwa alleges that the outbreak of the Coronavirus will lead to the creation of microchips implant which will be inserted into human beings. He used Genesis 3 and Revelation 13 as the points of entry to this discussion. He argues that the microchip is the handiwork of the beast and this is its final ploy to deceive mankind and to control the entire world. Women feature very prominently in this story as he claims this will be pushed into the market via the activities of women. He further asserts that “with 5G technology there is no covering, there is no more information we can hide, this is the level of nakedness. That is why nations are fighting this technology because it uncovers all the secrets, there is no more covering’. Prophet Makandiwa teaches that there is a direct link between the outbreak of COVID-19 and fifth generation (5G) technology ([Christ TV, 2020b](#)). In this sermon, the prophet makes a connection between politicians (whom he calls serpents), pharmaceutical companies, and the technology industry (agents of the beast) and their roles in the outbreak of Covid-19 and their grand scheme to control the world through the pandemic (ibid).

Pastor Christopher Oyakhilome also makes assertions that resonates with Prophet Makandiwa’s teachings on 5G technology. Like Makandiwa, Pastor Chris implicates the emerging 5G technology as a public health threat that also has spiritual implications. He asserts that 5G network is part of a grand scheme by world leaders who intend to build a religion, an economy and a government to control the world. He claims that what killed people in Wuhan in China was not the Coronavirus but rather the installation of the 5G network in the region. He alleges that the lockdown imposed on Abuja and Lagos during the Covid-19 outbreak was a ploy to secretly install the 5G network in these cities. The 5G network, he alleges, is championed by a satanic agent who will introduce a Covid-19 vaccine composed of microchip which will be implanted in people. This will be used to control human beings. Humanity will therefore, no longer have agency, and they will be manipulated into serving Satan instead of God ([WatchPastorChris, 2020; Murtala, 2020; Bello, 2020; Ntneh, 2020; Owolawi, 2020; Awosika, 2020; Nwachukwu, 2020](#)). Responding to an interview on TV on what he sees as a conspiracy against Christianity, the pastor stated:

Don’t think what is happening right now has to do with a virus. It’s not a virus. The world has chosen to be deceived. As they have been deceived many times before. This is not the pandemic. Question, where did the other ones go? No one is asking. I have asked the question, ‘Where do viruses come from? They are not found in nature, it means they’re created. I’m trying to let you know the reason you’re in your house. I call it a global siege. What they don’t tell you is that your body can be connected. Did you know that once that happens you can also be controlled as your devices are controlled? Meaning that, signals can be sent to your brain, your brain can be

controlled. Once that happens you are no longer yourself. The idea is controlling the new race. So since they can't vaccinate everyone, they started vaccinating children and raising them that way. That's what the groups that are interested in the new world order are up to, to put vaccine in your body containing a digital ID, by which you as a human being can be controlled, you cease to be yourself. They are using 2 things: 1. They created a pandemic (Covid19) in order to create fear and panic. 2. They use internet of things (IOT), and created 5G (people can easily embrace it), which causes health issues, but you wouldn't know because they made you love the high internet speed. Both strategies lead to achieving their initial plan, vaccination with digital ID. They forced everyone to stay indoors (aka quarantine/lockdown), but they have people busy installing 5G connections outside. If you still don't yet know what is going on, know today; it's not about the Coronavirus. This is basically a group of people serving a devilish cause trying to checkmate humanity to hell (*PM News, 2020*).

The implication of above prophecies on public health is that, they encourage the waging of a Pentecostal/Charismatic spiritual warfare against Covid-19 (*Kirby et al., 2020*). What this also means is that, medical advice is downplayed and treated with suspicion as both pastors seek to reveal what they see as a hidden agenda against Christianity and Christians in general.

However, it is not everybody who agrees with these pastors and their teachings. Both Pastor Chris and Prophet Makandiwa have been severely criticized by many people including Pastors within the Charismatic movement for spreading misinformation in the public domain. For instance, Pastor Matthew Ashimolowo, founder of Kingsway International Christian Centre (KICC) London, described those theories that seeks to explicate the relations between 5G network, Covid-19 and the anti-Christ as "foolish theories" (*Abiodun, 2020; Olajide, 2020*). In a post on Twitter and Instagram, he argues further that:

If coronavirus is caused by 5G, why is it in his village that does not have a 5G? It has always been the nature of Christian leaders to plant fear in their members whenever there was going to be a major world occurrence. The church should be more concerned about preparing their members for the Second Coming of the Lord instead of condemning a major technological breakthrough. It's fake news to associate 5G to coronavirus (*Olowolagba, 2020; Olajide, 2020*)

In addition, he points out that:

There are too many theories, too many fake video and too many fake news out there- 5Gs this, 5Gs that. Please stay out of these theories, keep your eyes on the lord do not be afraid and don't think this is the Antichrist. During the era of great men, the likes of Napoleon Bonaparte, Benito Mussolini of Italy, Adolf Hitler the church began to teach the Antichrist have risen, Please I'm not a scientist I'm a Pastor but all these 5G theories are not Biblical, not practical. There is a virus out there killing people, stay locked down. Don't think is some 5G that is killing. How come it got to my village where there is no 5G? I'm very disappointed in pastors who have shown graphs. It doesn't make sense. I am ashamed and embarrassed by the action of some Pastors who are ill informed, partly informed. They took videos, patched them together to mislead the Body of Christ. It has to stop. God will expose the anti-Christ when the time comes. Don't let us put people in fear. This is a disease killing people and we as Christians will come out to testify. Use it as an opportunity to witness to your friends who have been cursing God and laughing at Jesus. Evangelise the Word; let us populate the Kingdom of God, instead of carrying a foolish theory. Stay locked down. Lock down is biblical. Stay alive. We will be in church, doing thanksgiving when this thing is over (*Tabernacle, 2020*).

Pastor Ashimolowo is not alone in his objection to such dubious theories of his colleague pastors. In a live Instagram meeting with Pastor

Oyemade, Pastor Sam Adeyemi equally faulted the claims of Pastors Chris and Makandiwa as conspiracy theories. Pastor Adeyemi for example noted that: "Some leaders are giving extreme interpretations to the crisis". He points out that, this is not the first time a global pandemic has forced the closure of markets, churches, mosques and schools. He said that he studied how the 1918 pandemic affected Nigeria and found out that country experienced restriction. In his Instagram post he reveals:

[In] 1918 September, when the thing [influenza epidemic] hit, the way air travel now is the main thing for global transportation and it was air travel that moved the coronavirus around, it was sea travel that spread the influenza around then. The ships that brought sick people into the Lagos port; I got the names, the dates they arrived, how it spread in Nigeria. I'd tell you the one that I saw and almost screamed, they closed churches, they closed mosques, they shut down schools, they shut down markets in 1918. So, some of us now think it is the anti-Christ that is at work, he does not want us to gather together and fellowship. We should just be thanking God that we have internet now and we can be relating without meeting together. They shut churches in 1918. So, when the leader takes perspective like that, then you can calm people down and tell them there will be life after this thing (*Fajana, 2020*).

In the above quote, Pastor Adeyemi shows how in the midst of danger certain stringent measures are put in place by governments to ensure the safety of the public. Such measures, he points out, are not to be associated with the anti-Christ because these are practical steps which were instituted to curb the spread of the influenza epidemic. Hence, the lockdown measures instituted by various government on the continent were laudable and rational steps to stop the spread the COVID-19 virus. Therefore, these measures are not to be interpreted in apocalyptic and eschatological contexts. The two positions, namely those by pastors Chris, Makandiwa, and Suleman versus the stance taken by Pastors Ashimolowo and Adeyemi for instance, as the study shows, points to the fact that even within the same Charismatic movement, pastors do not agree with what Makandiwa calls "not just information but the truth". Not only do these tensions between the pastors create unfriendly relations among their respective followers but also, they create a heightened sense of doubt. Unsettling about these tensions is the fact that charismatic churches may serve as useful resources for public health education, but the divergent views that they present do not help in the dissemination of a single and consistent information to their followers and the general public. The implication of this is that people become more anxious and vulnerable.

When prophecies Fail: Covid-19 and prophetic failures in Africa

Failed prophecies among religious groups is not a new phenomenon, and thus not limited to contemporary African Charismatic/Pentecostal Christianity. Indeed, evidence from history is replete with many failed prophecies, and sociologist of religion have subsequently analysed the adaptive strategies of groups confronted with failure of prophecies (see *Dein, 2001; Festinger et al., 2012; Jenkins, 2013*). For instance, Leon *Festinger et al. (2012)* taking as their case study the failed prophecy of the Mrs. Marion Keech, the leader of the *Seekers* occult group, developed the theory of cognitive dissonance to provide a schema for understanding how religious leaders respond to the phenomenon of prophetic disconfirmation. They argue that, rather than failed prophecies immobilising religious groups, it emboldens them to continue to proselytise. Yet, for this proselytisation to occur: there must be strong conviction; there must be public commitment to this conviction; the conviction must be amenable to explicit disconfirmation; such explicit disconfirmation must transpire; and finally, social support must be available to the believer following the disconfirmation (*Festinger et al., 2012*, see also *Dein, 2001; Dawson, 1999*). This theory of cognitive dissonance has

been criticised by scholars on both methodological and theoretical grounds. The validity and reliability of their original research has been questioned (Dein, 2001; Melton, 1985; Zygmunt, 1972). Zygmunt (1972) for example, provides an alternative model for looking at the phenomenon of failed prophecies. He suggests three modes of adaptation to prophetic disconfirmation: adaptation, reaffirmation and reappraisal. That is, believers may, firstly, admit a fault in dating such as happened among the Millerites. Secondly, the blame may be directed at some force inside or outside the group which obstructs the cosmic plan. And finally, believers may claim or suggest that the event in fact occurred, but on the spiritual and not on the material plane, and that this was not, therefore, directly observable to believers (see also Melton, 1985; Dawson, 1999; Bader, 1999; Stark, 1996, and Weiser, 1974). These studies demonstrate that in the midst of prophetic disconfirmation, believers do not necessarily abandon their commitment to their faith but instead adopt varying survival strategies. How did the African prophets and their followers respond to attacks on their seemingly failed prophecies?

The notion of adaptation as an interventionist strategy typifies responses to failed prophecies in the African context. In most cases, such responses assume the form of rationalisations – that attempts to explain why their prophecies failed or why certain occurrences were not seen or revealed by God. Oftentimes, these rationalisations were couched in a manner akin to conspiracy theories. These rationalisations often received backlashes as critics lunched scathing criticisms against prophets and their followers (www.ghanaweb.com, 2020). For instances, in the midst of the Covid-19 prophetic confusion, Pastor Chris came under severe attacks for his rationalisation that linked the 5G to Covid-19. One social media critic Ifedayo Olarinde, popularly known as Daddy Freeze, described him on twitter as a “disappointment” (*Daily News*, 2020). Again, Victor Asemator, a Nigerian investor, who seemed to be sympathetic towards Pastor Chris publicly “disowned” him and vowed to stay away “until he retracts” his teachings on 5G and Covid-19 (Blow, 2020). In response to the attacks on the pastor, his followers launched the hashtag #IStandWithPastorChris on Twitter, Facebook and other social media platforms. The hashtag was recorded to have accumulated over 30.8 K mentions and peaked at 15th worldwide on Twitter. Also, it was registered on trending charts in Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and Canada. In Nigeria for example, the hashtag was mentioned as the second highest trending topic on twitter (Pulse Mix, 2020). This demonstrates the expression of solidarity of his followers support and commitment to him in the midst of uncertainties and prophetic disconfirmations – and thus reflects the general trends regarding how religious groups respond to prophetic failures.

Conclusion

The outbreak of Covid-19 posed a challenge for the prophetic ministry of Charismatic Christianity in Africa. The virus subjected prophecies during this period to ridicule and suspicion, however, it also created possibilities that fueled these prophecies. Many Charismatic Christian churches may have served as important resources for public health education, but contradictory and dubious information from different pastors and prophets within the prophetic and charismatic movement caused public health concerns. Thus, the important roles of Charismatic Christianity in the lives of believers notwithstanding, public health misinformation on Covid-19 by some of these prophets and pastors such as Chris, Suleman and Makandiwa undermined biomedical discourse on the COVID-19 pandemic, were anti-science and antagonistic towards public health efforts by governments and WHO to halt the spread of the virus. This misinformation and antagonistic stance which these prophets took against rational science explanations of disease causation and biomedical and socio-medical approaches to dealing with pandemics tended to project Charismatic Christianity as highly speculative, fear mongering and irrational. Yet, responses of the prophetic ministry and their followers following this backlash regarding their failed prophecies

does not depart from the norm. Indeed, their responses reflect adaptation as an interventionist strategy to counteract backlash and criticism.

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The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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