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JOURNAL OF PENTECOSTAL THEOLOGY XX (2021) 1-19



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# Pentecostal Engagement with the Concept of Salvation Employed by African Neopentecostalism

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## Abstract

This article argues for the necessity of continuing discourse between established Christianity and African Neopentecostalism to benefit both. The seeming popularity of the African Neopentecostal prosperity gospel is attributed to its ability to contextualise the gospel to Africans regarding the highly appreciated material, physical, and spiritual wellness values. It consists of being hopeful that a positive future will realise because of an entrepreneurial attitude that provides a handle on bettering the future and consistent tithing that guarantees God's blessings. Strong preacher-prophets proclaim the message with great authority. Its soteriology is described in terms of the Deuteronomist concept of guaranteed blessings that emphasises the material and immediate providence. It challenges established churches to reconsider how they view the relationship between faith and materiality, the doctrine of divine providence, contextualisation of the gospel and denial of the supernatural. The dialogue will also benefit Neopentecostalists when it confronts some abuses, eschatological expectations, understanding of time, understanding of evil in God's sovereignty and involvement in ecological challenges.

## Keywords

salvation – Africa Neopentecostalism – prosperity – health – mystical causality

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## Introduction

Prosperity theology influences African Neopentecostalism south of the Sahara to an inordinate extent, in some observers' opinion. That the prosperity gospel is popular in Africa is demonstrated by various research projects, including a survey Pew Research undertook in 2006 in various countries in Africa.<sup>1</sup> The Pew researchers asked participants if God would 'grant material prosperity to all believers who have enough faith'. No less than 85% of Kenyan Pentecostals, 90% of South African Pentecostals and 95% of Nigerian Pentecostals affirmed the statement unequivocally.

1 See the Pew Forum's reports *Spirit and Power: A 10-Country Survey of Pentecostals*, 2006 (<http://pewforum.org/Christian/Evangelical-Protestant-Churches/Spirit-and-Power.aspx>; accessed 2021-02-17) and *Tolerance and Tension: Islam and Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa*, 2010 (<http://pewforum.org/executive-summary-islam-and-christianity-in-sub-saharanafrica.aspx>; accessed 2021-02-17). The research does not distinguish between classical Pentecostals and Neopentecostals, a shortcoming that diminished the value of the research. Allan Anderson ('Varieties, Taxonomies, and Definitions', in Allan Anderson, Michael Bergunder and Andre F. Droogen [eds.], *Studying Global Pentecostalization: Theories and Methods* [Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010], pp. 18–20 distinguishes four types that are also recognisable in Africa: classical Pentecostal churches, older (African) independent churches, the charismatic movement within the traditional churches and Neopentecostal or neo-charismatic groups. Especially a part of the AICs and the latter group interests us here. Pentecostal-type or Spirit-type Indigenous Churches (part of the AICs) forms an integral part, accounting for more than 40 percent of the South African black population (Allan H. Anderson and Gerald J. Pillay, 'The Segregated Spirit: The Pentecostals', in Richard Elphick and Rodney Davenport [eds.], *Christianity in South Africa: A Political, Social, and Cultural History* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997], pp. 227, 233 [pp. 227–41]). AICs can be classified as Ethiopian, Zionist, prophet/healing and charismatic/Pentecostal or Spirit-churches (Allan H. Anderson, *African Reformation: African Initiated Christianity in the 20th Century* [Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2001], pp. 15–18). No less than 40% of the South African population belongs to African 'Zionist' and 'Apostolic' churches. The Zion Christian Church is the largest denomination in South Africa (Allan H. Anderson, 'New African Initiated Pentecostalism and Charismatics in South Africa', *Journal of Religion in Africa* 35.1 [2005], p. 68 [pp. 66–92]). There are also between 4,000 and 7,000 smaller church organizations of a similar type. In some parts of Africa, Spirit-churches constitute up to 40% of the total population (Robert M. Anderson, *Vision of the Disinherited: The Making of American Pentecostalism* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1979], p. 306). The Spirit (or spiritual) churches form the pentecostalization of African Christianity. If the Spirit AICs are included in the reckoning with classical Pentecostals, charismatic groups and independent Pentecostal related groups, 56% of Zimbabwe's population, 46% of South Africa's, 36% of Kenya's, 30% of the DRC's, 29% of Nigeria's and Ghana's, and 25% of Zambia's population should be grouped as Pentecostals (Allan H. Anderson, 'African Independent Churches and Pentecostalism: Historical Connections and Common Identities', *Ogbomoso Journal of Theology* 13.1 [2008], p. 23 [pp. 22–42]). See also Isaac Phiri and Joe Maxwell, 'Gospel Riches: Africa's Embrace of Prosperity Pentecostalism Provokes Concern-and Hope', *Christianity Today* (July 2007), pp. 23–29 (p. 24).

The question this article poses is to what extent the African version of the doctrine proclaimed among Neopentecostals agrees with its American relative and, related to the question, to what extent is the African Neopentecostal version influenced by African traditional religion (ATR).<sup>2</sup> In evaluating the influence of the doctrine and its practice in the African church, it is crucial to keep in mind the extent to which Neopentecostalism contextualised it.<sup>3</sup> It is argued that if Neopentecostalism contextualised the doctrine effectively, the ecumenical discourse might benefit by attending to different social and cultural contexts and how it influenced the Bible reading practices and hermeneutics of the movement.

Prosperity theology is concerned with soteriology and the significance of the life and death of Jesus Christ, which forms the heart of the Christian gospel. It differs from other theologies in that it defines salvation in terms of a holistic physical, material, and spiritual wellness, wellness that reflects the joy of living in communion with and participation of the life of God, shared with other people.<sup>4</sup> It is submitted that the ecumenical church can benefit from considering some of these relevant aspects and emphases of African prosperity theology.

One can ask why the prosperity gospel influenced Neopentecostalism to such an extent while most Western European Pentecostals ignore it and many American Pentecostals negate it. Is it due to a specific way of looking at the person of Jesus and salvation that may be culturally determined that betrays a theological difference between the different cultures? Furthermore, does it reflect specific values in the African worldview and culture that makes it attractive to Neopentecostals? What caused the effectiveness of the Neopentecostal contextualisation of the gospel? Moreover, what can the broader church learn from it?

In this contribution, discourse with the African Neopentecostal movement is conducted with the motive to ask what the wider church can learn about its seemingly adequate contextualisation of one aspect of the gospel and salvation (prosperity). It is acknowledged that Neopentecostalism is a problematic partner to converse with because a wide diversity characterises the movement,

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2 Although it is acknowledged that a categorisation of Pentecostalism is difficult because of the complicated diversity of the movement, classical Pentecostalism is distinguished from the many Neopentecostal independent churches and groups that originated since the 1980s.

3 See, e.g. Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985) for a discussion of contextualisations of the gospel.

4 In the words of Karl Barth (*Church Dogmatics* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1961], III:d, pp. 379–80), believers rejoice in God and invite other people to rejoice with them, enjoying true, radiant, and sincere joy that reflects wellness.

associated with the ministry of some 'super leaders' with a following and many other independent churches.<sup>5</sup> However, it seems possible to crystallise the prosperity gospel taught in sub-Saharan Neopentecostalism at the hand of published and broadcasted sermons and literature.<sup>6</sup>

- 5 There are approximately 5,000 independent Christian groups and denominations in Africa that may qualify as Neopentecostal, all born in the last forty years and bearing the familiar marks of Pentecostal spirituality but with each group displaying its own distinctive qualities (Harvey Cox, *Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-First Century* [New York: Addison-Wesley, 1995], pp. 246–47).
- 6 The African prosperity gospel is described by, e.g., Mwita Akiri, 'The Prosperity Gospel: Its Concise Theology, Challenges and Opportunities'. *GAFCON: Global Anglicans* (25 January 2019). (<https://www.gafcon.org/resources/the-prosperity-gospel-its-concise-theology-challenges-and-opportunities>); J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, 'In Search of a Better Country: Migration and Prosperity Hermeneutics in Contemporary African Pentecostalism', *PentecostStudies* 17.2 (January 2018), pp. 158–79 (<http://oi.org/10.1558/ptcs.34880>); Jean Comaroff, 'Privatizing the Millennium: New Protestant Ethics and Spirits of Capitalism in Africa and Elsewhere', in David Chidester, Abdulkader Tayob, and Wolfram Weisse (eds.), *Religion, Politics, and Identity in a Changing South Africa* (Waxmann: Münster, 2004), pp. 24–43; Maria Frahm-Arp, 'Pentecostalism, Politics, and Prosperity in South Africa', *Religions* 9.298 (2018), p. 3 (pp. 1–16); Nangayi Guyson, 'Of False Prophets and Profits: Meet the Pentecostal Preacher Taking on the Prosperity Gospel', *African Arguments* (12 September 2016) (<https://africanarguments.org/2016/09/12/of-false-prophets-and-profits-meet-the-Pentecostal-preacher-taking-on-the-prosperity-gospel/>); Mookgo S. Kgatle, 'The Unusual Practices Within Some Neo-Pentecostal Churches in South Africa: Reflections and Recommendations', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 73.3 (2017) (<https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v73i3.4656>); Hermen Kroesbergen, 'The Prosperity Gospel: A Way to Reclaim Dignity?', in Hermen Kroesbergen (ed.), *In Search of Health and Wealth* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014), pp. 74–84; Thinandavha D. Mashau and Mookgo S. Kgatle, 'Prosperity Gospel and the Culture of Greed in Post-Colonial Africa: Constructing an Alternative African Christian Theology of Ubuntu', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 40.1 (2019) (<https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v40i1.1901>); Kenneth Mbugua, 'Introduction: A False Gospel', in Michael O. Mbugua *et al.* (eds.), *Prosperity? Seeking the True Gospel* (Nairobi: Africa Christian Textbooks, 2015), pp. 1–14; Kenneth Mbugua, 'Misunderstanding the Bible', in Michael O. Mbugua *et al.* (eds.), *Prosperity? Seeking the True Gospel* (Nairobi: Africa Christian Textbooks, 2015), pp. 15–32; Kenneth Mbugua, 'Suffering', in Michael O. Mbugua *et al.* (eds.), *Prosperity? Seeking the True Gospel* (Nairobi: Africa Christian Textbooks, 2015), pp. 65–78; David T. Ngong, *The Holy Spirit and Salvation in African Christian Theology: Imagining a New Hopeful Future for Africa* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010); Lovemore Togarasei, 'African Gosprenurship: Assessing the Possible Contribution of the Gospel of Prosperity to Entrepreneurship in Light of Jesus' Teaching on Earthly Possessions', in Hermen Kroesbergen (ed.), *In Search of Health and Wealth* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014), pp. 110–25; Lovemore Togarasei, 'The Pentecostal Gospel of Prosperity in African Contexts of Poverty', *Exchange* 40 (2011), pp. 336–50; Dominic Umoh, 'Prosperity Gospel and the Spirit of Capitalism: The Nigerian Story', *African Journal of Scientific Research* 12.1 (2013), pp. 654–66; Nimi Wariboko, 'Pentecostal Paradigms of National Economic Prosperity in Africa', in Katherine Attanasi and Amos Yong (eds.), *Pentecostalism and Prosperity: The Socio-Economics of the Global Charismatic Movement* (New York:

In her analysis of African prosperity theology, Maria Frahm-Arp identifies several aspects such as an attitude of hopefulness about a positive future, an attitude that establishes entrepreneurship, breaking with traditional commands to care for one's extended families, an ethic of hard work and 'strong prayers', consistent tithing and 'seed' offerings and an emphasis on strong preacher-prophets' proclamation of denouncing the 'spirit of poverty'.<sup>7</sup>

## 1 African Neopentecostalism

'Pentecostalism is big business in Africa ...'<sup>8</sup> Alan Anderson refers to the Pentecostalisation of African Christianity as the 'African Reformation of the twentieth century which has fundamentally altered the character of African Christianity, including that of the older mission churches'.<sup>9</sup>

It is possible to provide sociological reasons for Neopentecostalism as a popular choice among Africans, according to recent research by Pippa Norris and Ronald Ingleheart.<sup>10</sup> They identify existential security as a core sociological factor that accounts for most of the variations in religious practices found across the world. It shows that rich and emerging nations worldwide (their study included 79 countries) differ sharply in their levels of sustainable human development and socio-economic equality and thus in the primary living conditions of human security and vulnerability to risks. The experience of growing up in less secure societies will heighten the importance of religious values. Under conditions of greater security, one's need for religious assurance diminishes, as demonstrated by indifference to traditional religious leaders and

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Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 41–44. The African prosperity gospel influenced the classical Pentecostal movement as well, probably more than in the USA, and for the same reasons that the article will articulate, showing its relevance for an African worldview.

7 Frahm-Arp, 'Pentecostalism, Politics, and Prosperity in South Africa', p. 3.

8 Alan H. Anderson. *An Introduction to Pentecostalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2nd edn, 2014), p. 113.

9 Anderson, *Introduction to Pentecostalism*, p. 115. Ogbu Kalu ('Preserving a Worldview: Pentecostalism in the African Maps of the Universe', *Pneuma* 24.2 [Fall 2002], p. 110 [pp. 110–37]) asserts that Pentecostalism represents a third response by Africans to the gospel message propagated by the missionaries, in conjunction with the response of black cultural nationalists of the nineteenth century and the pneumatic response at the turn of the twentieth century by the so-called 'Bantu-Prophets' or 'Praying People' ('Aladura'). See also Ogbu U. Kalu, 'The Third Response: Pentecostalism and the Reconstruction of Christian Experience in Africa, 1970–1995', *Studia Ecclesiasticae Historiae* 24.2 (1998), pp. 1–34.

10 Pippa Norris and Ronald Ingleheart, *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

institutions in advanced industrial societies. At the same time, while developed societies are becoming secular in their values, their population shrinks. On the other hand, developing nations with much higher fertility rates are deeply religious in their values and spirituality.<sup>11</sup> Peter Watson concludes that the 'success' of religion can partly be described as a by-product of some countries' failure and regions to modernise and reduce their people's insecurities successfully.<sup>12</sup>

These independent churches originated in renewal movements within Evangelical churches and AICs. They do not represent clearly defined organisations but rather clusters of movements with flowing and shifting boundaries.<sup>13</sup> While AICs contextualised ATR elements, Neopentecostalism judged integral elements of ATR negatively, calling most of its practices such as ancestor worship, witchcraft and interest in hobgoblins and spirits demonic.<sup>14</sup> Its contextualisation of the gospel occurred at another level, in the universal human desire for wellness and prosperity, including health and material blessings.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, AICs are prevalent in rural areas where the African population exists in close connection with older roots and traditions, while Neopentecostal groups are prevalent in fast-growing cities and megacities and among the middle class. It connects with the traditional sense of life but at the same time confronts the challenges of surviving in the new urban environment.<sup>16</sup> Although AICs also preach and teach about healing, it cannot be denied that it is the search for prosperity in the contemporary globalising world that characterises Neopentecostals.<sup>17</sup>

11 While the rest of the world showed increasing economic prosperity (that is, before the Covid-19 pandemic caused havoc in international markets), large parts of Africa do not share this fate. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), twenty African countries (of 54 world-wide in total) are poorer now than in 1990 (Peter Watson, *The Age of Nothing: How We Have Sought to Live Since the Death of God* [London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2014], p. 12).

12 Watson, *Age of Nothing*, p. 14.

13 Anderson, 'Varieties, Taxonomies, and Definitions', pp. 18–20.

14 Maria Frahm-Arp, 'The Rise of the Megachurches in South Africa', in Vinson Synan, Amos Yong, and J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu (eds.), *Global Renewal Christianity: Spirit-Empowered Movements Past, Present, and Future. Africa* (Lake Mary, FL: Charisma House, 2016), 111, pp. 263–84 (p. 271).

15 Kalu, 'Preserving a Worldview', pp. 110–37.

16 Joseph Bosco Bangura, 'The Charismatic Movement in Sierra Leone (1980–2010): A Missio-Historical Analysis in View of African Culture, Prosperity Gospel and Power Theology' (PhD Dissertation, Amsterdam: VU University, 2013), p. 237.

17 Prosperity teaching in Africa goes back to David Oyedepo, a Word of Faith Movement preacher and founder of Winner's Chapel in Nigeria, according to Frahm-Arp

Most early historical research viewed African Pentecostalism as a form of Americanisation due to missionaries' work from the Azusa Street Revival.<sup>18</sup> However, today it is recognised that one should rather ascribe the worldwide Pentecostal movement to various Pentecostal-like awakenings. Liturgical and homiletical practices among African Neopentecostalism are unique in several respects and differ from those of the rest of the movement. Without denying the influence of American missionaries, local leadership and the accommodation of African values and needs have to be acknowledged.<sup>19</sup>

African Neopentecostalism's prosperity theology is more nuanced and varied than most secondary literature admits.<sup>20</sup> One reason why Western observers do not recognise the nuances is in the presentation of firm statements that Neopentecostal healers and prophets make about healing and prosperity that eventually turns out to be exaggerated and even false.<sup>21</sup> The testimonies may create the perspective that God always heals and provides in miraculous ways that suppose general theological convictions. However, when sickness or financial straits do appear among believers, it does not imply in general that Neopentecostals' faith is threatened, illustrating that the proclamation of healing and prosperity has a performative function in combating evil.

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(‘Pentecostalism, Politics, and Prosperity in South Africa’, p. 3). Oyedepo was influenced by Kenneth and Gloria Copeland. Their prosperity theology finds its origins in the teaching of Kenneth Hagin who asserted that poverty was the direct result of sin, not tithing regularly or adequately and incomprehension of the divine laws that guarantee wealth.

- 18 Cephas N. Omenyo, ‘African Pentecostalism’, in Cecil M. Robeck and Amos Yong (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Pentecostalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 145–46 (pp. 132–51), discusses the specifically African features of Pentecostalism, and refers to the deepened awareness regarding Satan, demons and evil, beliefs in libations, sacrificial objects, and incantations in line with the primal view of African religiosity, the view that circumstances in life are determined in the spiritual realm, the belief in anointing oils, prophetic prayers and seed sowing of money or material things in the lives of religious leaders and their churches and the view that the sacred and secular are inextricably bound together in all spheres of life. For that reason, Pentecostals expect miracles and the unexpected in response to their prayers.
- 19 Anderson, ‘Varieties, Taxonomies, and Definitions’, p. 19. The African indigenous/independent churches (AICs), including the Zionist and Apostolic factions, demonstrate the significance of local leadership and values that contributed to its unique essence.
- 20 Joseph Bosco Bangura, ‘“Abraham’s Blessings Are Mine!” Charismatics and the Prosperity Gospel in Sierra Leone’, *GEESTkracht: Bulletin voor Charismatische Theologie* (najaar 2012), pp. 32–48. See, e.g. Joseph Bangura’s (‘The Charismatic Movement in Sierra Leone (1980–2010)’, p. 237) distinction in theories about the means to prosperity that he observes within Sierra Leone.
- 21 Benno Van den Toren, ‘“Geliefde, Ik Wens Dat Het U In Alles Goed Gaat En Dat U Gezond Bent, Zoals Het Uw Ziel Goed Gaat”: In Gesprek Met Afrikaans (Neo)Pentecostalisme Over De Aard Van Het Heil’, *Theologia Reformata* 60.1 (2017), pp. 44–59 (p. 49).

Africa's nuanced prosperity theology is illustrated by Maria Frahm-Arp's helpful distinction of three types of prosperity theology that emerged from her empirical study that she calls 'abilities prosperity', 'progress prosperity', and 'miracle prosperity'.<sup>22</sup> Abilities prosperity proclaims that believers can build wealth by respecting and applying divine principles, claiming wealth, tithing generously and working hard. Progress prosperity identifies prosperity with progress and encourages members to view any small success as progress and, therefore, a sign of prosperity. It teaches that faith and righteous living result in prosperity while developing social outreach programs at the same time that uplifts communities. In the last instance, miracle prosperity proclaims that spiritual growth necessarily results in material wealth. One achieves material wealth when one is victorious in spiritual warfare, makes personal financial sacrifices and positively confess ('naming and claiming') wealth. In referring to 'prosperity theology' in the rest of the article, the reference is limited to 'miracle prosperity'.

### 1.1 *Theological Contributions of African Neopentecostalism*

That African Neopentecostalism is widespread and growing, as discussed above, does not imply implicitly that the movement represents or enjoys the Spirit's approval. The movement might just as well stir an attractive heartstring of Africans, implying that utilitarian and practical reasons guarantee its 'success'. Many of the available evaluations of prosperity theology proceed from this assumption, disqualifying any further discourse with Neopentecostal theology. However, it is submitted that the ecumenical church might learn something from its theology, especially its view of soteriology, necessitating thorough investigation of the elements of a possible contribution that it can make.

In his book, Robert Schreiter is in a conversation with several significant current theological streams such as liberation theology, feminist theology, eco-theology, and human rights theology. However, he deliberately ignores the Pentecostal movement completely, implying that it does not contribute in any way to a 'global theological flow'.<sup>23</sup> It is submitted that African Neopentecostalism can play a paradigmatic role in an intercultural theological conversation, as Benno Van den Toren illustrates.<sup>24</sup> Originally the missionaries translated the gospel and its Scriptures into indigenous languages, which,

22 Frahm-Arp, 'Pentecostalism, Politics, and Prosperity in South Africa', pp. 4–5.

23 Robert J. Schreiter, *The New Catholicity: Theology between the Global and the Local* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), p. 15.

24 Van den Toren, 'Geliefde, Ik Wens Dat Het U In Alles Goed Gaat', p. 50.



according to Lamin Sanneh destigmatised indigenous languages and cultures because it prevented its extinction, effectively conveyed the gospel and uplifted the lives of many peoples.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, however, and contrary to the early missionary attitude, which urged African culture's rejection, Pentecostals seriously took the African map of the universe. They acknowledge that culture can hijack the Christian gospel but realised that it could also become a redemptive gift. What makes the difference is the need for distinguishing and testing spirits. They explore the 'lines of congruence that go beyond deconstruction to a new construction of reality'.<sup>26</sup>

In the same way as missiologists in the 1960s investigated the AICs in a reflection on contextual theology without agreeing with every theological element and practise, realising that AICs represent the mission churches' unpaid bills, so Neopentecostalism needs to be investigated for their attractiveness for many urban Africans, presumably providing in needs that Western imported historical churches did not meet. Their theology is glocal, representing a new catholicity in a new globalising world and providing alternative modernities that confront secularisation, prosperity and materiality in an attractive way for many African urbanites.

A significant proportion of African cities' populations suffer from poverty and unemployment; prosperity theology is attractive to the poor as well as the *nouveau riche*, and its prosperity theology represents a theology from below. It is a grassroots theology that connects to squatter communities' contexts and claims dignity for the poor while serving as a motivation for the aspiring to reach for prosperity.<sup>27</sup>

In the article, Neopentecostalism's concept of soteriology is investigated to illustrate its potential for enriching the discourse with the ecumenical church. Such discourse is also the only way the ecumenical church can effectively discuss some Neopentecostal practice and theology weaknesses.

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25 Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989).

26 Kalu, 'Preserving a Worldview', pp. 130–31. 'Culture' is defined as the way of life, design for living and way of coping with all dimensions of the context in which people live. It includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by a group of people (Cephas N. Omenyo, 'Charismatic Churches in Ghana and Contextualization', *Exchange* 31.3 [2002], p. 253).

27 Hermen Kroesbergen, 'The Prosperity Gospel: A Way to Reclaim Dignity?', in Hermen Kroesbergen (ed.) *In Search of Health and Wealth: The Prosperity Gospel in African, Reformed Perspective* (Wellington, Zambia: Christian Literature Fund, 2013), pp. 78–88.

### 1.2 *African Neopentecostalism's Soteriology*

Academic theology is sceptical about at least two Neopentecostal prosperity theology elements: the seeming lack of a biblical basis and the extravagant lifestyle and abuses of some of the movement's leaders. In the second case, such criticism is timely and well-deserved. Some leaders were responsible for abuses such as 'resurrecting' a man from the dead<sup>28</sup> or forcing church members to drink petrol;<sup>29</sup> they acted from psychic dysfunctionalities that result in their extremist behaviour.<sup>30</sup> They are bringing the whole movement in discredit. In guaranteeing financial success for those who believe by utilising the Deuteronomist formula<sup>31</sup> and emphasising prosperity and health as the essence of the gospel, prosperity theology does not match the image of Jesus and the apostles that the New Testament creates. Condemning the abuses and extravagance that violate a part of the movement may not, however, disqualify the potential profit of investigating the theological elements of its soteriology. In the rest of the article, we will discuss the most significant of these elements and comment on its possible contribution to a possible ecumenical dialogue.

### 1.3 *African Social Setting in Soteriology*

American prosperity theology speaks directly to American neo-capitalists, using language that is familiar to them. The African consonant doctrine found among Africans differs from its American nephew in the first place because it addresses a different social context.

As noted, empirical research demonstrated that African Neopentecostalism is widespread, especially among urbanites. One can argue that it would have posed a question about the relevance of the prosperity gospel for poor people if only privileged people accepted the doctrine. However, perhaps most people who attend the services are from impoverished areas, including slums and squatter camps that disfigure most African cities, suggesting that it also

28 Referring to the widely-publicised practice of Pastor Alph Lukau of Alleluiah Ministries International in Johannesburg (<https://religionnews.com/2019/03/05/south-african-pastors-resurrection-stunt-draws-mockery-and-memes/>; accessed 2021-02-15).

29 Pastor Lesego Daniel of Rabboni Centre Ministries in Garankuwa, near Pretoria (<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2794275/first-congregation-eating-grass-make-close-god-controversial-south-african-preacher-makes-flock-drink-petrol.html>; accessed 2021-02-15).

30 Ben Du Toit, *God: Is Daar 'n Antwoord* (God: Is There an Answer?) (Pretoria: LAPA, 2020), p. 227.

31 'If you will only obey the LORD your God, by diligently observing all his commandments that I am commanding you today ... all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you ... But if you will not obey the LORD your God by diligently observing all his commandments and decrees, which I am commanding you today, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you ...' (Deut. 28.1-2, 15).

addresses people attempting to survive in the uncertain and competitive environment that young African cities imply. The levels of corruption in many African countries are high;<sup>32</sup> it is nearly impossible to acquire an identity document, passport and visa, or pass an exam without presenting a bribe. Simultaneously, anxiety about mishaps such as poor health or loss of income or employment due to a curse of a jealous colleague or neighbour threatens the welfare of one's family. These are the issues charismatic services address where they invite people to present their challenges and fears to someone who prays for them and assures them of God's insured answer. Simultaneously, people testified during worship services that God's power touched and changed their lives, strengthening their faith in God's provision. While many African Western mainline churches accommodate mostly the middle-class, it seems that Neopentecostal groups reach people across social and economic divisions, implying that many churches' proclamation and spirituality originating from Western missionary labours may not be relevant in addressing African issues. In John V. Taylor's words,

Christ has been presented as the answer to questions a white man would ask, the solution to needs that western man would feel, the Saviour of the world of the European worldview, the object of the adoration and prayer of historic Christendom. But if Christ were to appear as the answer to questions that Africans are asking, what would he look like?<sup>33</sup>

Neopentecostals contextualise the African Christ in a way that captures many people's imagination, in the same manner as the AICs.<sup>34</sup> They relate the gospel directly to the 'felt needs' of Africans; the process of understanding the gospel essentially begins in the context of felt needs.<sup>35</sup> One can state without expecting any contradiction that success and prosperity are an integral part of human longing. Neopentecostalism seemingly realised it, and it influenced their view of God, in contrast to a prevailing view based on the Stoics and Immanuel

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32 See, for one example, the upsetting 2021 'Report on Cartel Power Dynamics in Zimbabwe', representing research by *Maverick Citizen* (02 February 2021) (<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2021-02-10-daily-maverick-report-on-zimbabwe-state-capture-gains-international-attention/>; [https://www.scribd.com/document/493789960/Power-Dynamics-02-FEB-2021-Optimized#download&from\\_embed](https://www.scribd.com/document/493789960/Power-Dynamics-02-FEB-2021-Optimized#download&from_embed); accessed 2021-02-11).

33 John V. Taylor, *The Primal Vision: Christian Presence amid African Religion* (London: SCM Press, 1963), p. 16.

34 See especially Kwame Bediako's (*Jesus in African Culture: A Ghanaian Perspective* [Accra: Asempa, 1990]) imaginative description of the contextualisation of the African Christ.

35 Anderson, *Introduction to Pentecostalism*, p. 226.

Kant that the desire for one's wellness and joy is a bad thing that needs to be avoided by Christian believers.<sup>36</sup> God's compassion with human beings and the infinity of the power of the God of prosperity imply that Christians may dream about the nearly impossible. The Pentecostal God stands above any challenge or potential solution to a problem because believers can do all things through God's power (Phil. 4.13), however impossible and unreachable it may seem. Their view of God attracts people in need of a miracle to save them from difficult circumstances. It is one of their most attractive features, emphasised by people relating the miracles they have experienced that characterise their meetings.

#### 1.4 *Biblical 'Guarantee' of Health and Prosperity*

Neopentecostals' emphasis on the Deuteronomist 'guarantee' of blessings that God always commands God's blessing on those people who obey God attracts marginal believers and nonbelievers in need. It poses a question to the ecumenical church about its view of the validity for Christian believers of the Deuteronomist accent that forms a significant element of the Deuteronomist history found in the *Torah* and *Ketubim* (Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings). People attend the meetings in large numbers for the same reasons people seek Jesus during his life on earth because he fed and healed them (Mk 6.56; Lk. 6.18–19; 9.11).

'Christian hedonism', a term developed by John Piper,<sup>37</sup> confronts the ecumenical church in their discourse with Neopentecostals. Suppose one can ascribe African Neopentecostals' popularity to its relevance for people who have realised their need for divine intervention and blessing. In that case, it serves as a witness to Neopentecostals' pastoral sensitivity and theological realism that discounts the cross and resurrection power through the power of the Spirit in a relevant way. A theology that denies or ignores supernatural phenomena necessarily abandons a significant part of the multicoloured Bible and betrays a lack of such sensitivity, social consciousness, and intercultural openness.<sup>38</sup>

That does not imply that one approves of or denies the abuses in some Neopentecostal practices. Their contextualising of the gospel may represent a skewed gospel. At the same time, their successful contextualisation process requires attention. On the one hand, African Neopentecostalism needs

36 John Piper, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1986), p. 20.

37 Piper, *Desiring God*.

38 Van den Toren, 'Geliefde, Ik Wens Dat Het U In Alles Goed Gaat', p. 58.

to hear that God sometimes chooses not to heal, that suffering is part of the divine economy, that a more realistic and sensitive view of the Deuteronomist 'guaranteed blessings for believers' and Isaianic 'healing in the atonement' is needed and that the ministry of the healing evangelist requires the support of a corporate healing ministry in the church.<sup>39</sup> On the other hand, African Neopentecostalism poses the question to the ecumenical church to what extent it succeeds in reaching diverse social groups and subcultures in multi-cultural societies.

### 1.5 *Emphasis on the Material as an Integral Element of Pentecostal Spirituality*

The crucial question that African prosperity theology poses to ecumenical theology may be whether the church should not reconsider the way it considered (or did not consider) materiality as an integral element of spirituality. Prosperity theology links spirituality closely with corporeality, embodiment, profession, and prosperity of the believer, illustrated in the vital role its embodied and participatory joyful worship practices play in its wellness theology.<sup>40</sup> Prosperity includes both material and spiritual wellness, and it is not limited to the attainment of wealth but also reflects inner peace, satisfaction, contentment and the maintenance of social networks, implying a comprehensive definition of 'wellness'.<sup>41</sup>

In a post-Newtonian world, a worldview originated that forced the spiritual to retreat to the 'transcendent' and meta-empirical world while it attended exclusively to the perceptible world investigated by the natural sciences. In the process, religion was relegated to the personal quest to find existential and ethical meaning. As a result of the Enlightenment, religion and faith became divorced from human life's concrete reality, with limited implications for a worldview determined by theories such as the Big Bang and evolution.<sup>42</sup> Faith

39 Anderson, *Introduction to Pentecostalism*, p. 230.

40 One finds the same emphasis in abilities prosperity, 'progress prosperity' and 'miracle prosperity' (see discussion above of Frahm-Arp's distinction in 'Pentecostalism, Politics, and Prosperity in South Africa', pp. 4–5).

41 Omenyo, 'African Pentecostalism', p. 140. However, one should also keep in mind that African Christians traditionally do not, according to John Mbiti ('Some African Concepts of Christology', in José Miguez-Bonino *et al* [eds.], *Christ and the Younger Churches* [London, SPCK, 1972], p. 58), have well-developed eschatological expectations because they did not function within African thought-forms, histories, and traditions. The same is true for the major titles of Jesus such as the Messiah or the Christ, the Son of David and the Son of man. They are without any parallel in African thought-forms.

42 Jan Platvoet en Henk J. van Rinsum, 'Is Africa Incurably Religious? III, A Reply to a Rhetorical Response', *Exchange* 37.2 (2008), pp. 123–53 (p. 150).

was limited to spiritual experiences that could not be related to the rigorous methods of scientific investigations. Such experiences do not meet the requirements set for scientific analysis that formulates hypotheses by way of observations about the natural world, developing hypotheses about why things are the way they are, and doing additional tests and experiments that prove the hypothesis's viability.

Its openness to divine interventions and expectation of the miraculous, due to its continuationist primitivist-restorationist urge, traditionally distanced Pentecostalism from liberal and most conservative theology with their cessationist stance, not to mention scientific research into non-recurrent phenomena that one cannot explain in terms of cause and effect. The dominant effect of a cessationist perspective is demonstrated by many contemporary Western Pentecostals that view divine healing as limited to extreme cases where medical science cannot provide further help. It limits God's acting in believers' daily health and business. In contrast, among African Neopentecostals, expectations about divine interventions are kept alive by the consistent preaching and teaching of prosperity and health as integral elements of salvation's heritage. Healing is seen as an essential part of the provision in Christ's atonement, as explicated in Isa. 53:3–7,<sup>43</sup> implying the radicalisation of the Holiness movement's (Pentecostals' predecessors) doctrine of instantaneous sanctification that argued that the atonement overcame the consequences of sin, including diseases and death, were overcome in the atonement, implying that they were already vanquished during this life.<sup>44</sup>

Africans found biblical support for revelatory phenomena such as dreams, visions and prophetic utterances and practices, such as traditional polygamy and ritual purity. Their traditional dualist worldview<sup>45</sup> of good and evil forces determining events in the visible world accommodated Satan and the demon's

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43 See the discussion in Marius Nel ('Isaiah 53 and Its Use in the New Testament and Classical Pentecostal Churches in Southern Africa', *Australasian Pentecostal Studies* 21.1 [2020], pp. 70–90) about the way African Pentecostals interpret Isaiah 53 in terms of Jesus' atonement.

44 Donald Dayton, *Theological Roots of Pentecostalism* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987), pp. 127–30.

45 Harold W. Turner, 'The Primal Religions of the World & Their Study', in Victor C. Hayes (ed.), *Australian Essays in World Religions* (Bedford Park, South Australia: AASR, 1977), pp. 27–37, analyses the African primal worldview in terms of six features: a sense of kinship with nature, the sense of human beings' powerlessness and impurity in need of a higher power, the existence of a spiritual world of powers more powerful and ultimate than theirs, a belief that they can enter into relationships with the benevolent spiritual world and receive protection from evil powers, the reality of an afterlife that explains the significance of ancestors or the 'living dead', and the conviction that they live in a sacramental world without a sharp

challenge to God readily, with the cure in exorcism and deliverance,<sup>46</sup> which most missionaries had abandoned under the Enlightenment's influence.<sup>47</sup> In this sense, Pentecostals share with the biblical worldview the perception that life is precarious because outside forces determined its course. They are keenly aware of evil forces' presence, the enemy ranging from principalities, powers and rulers of darkness to wickedness in high places.<sup>48</sup>

Traditionally, Pentecostals proclaimed a 'full gospel', consisting of the four-fold (or fivefold) understanding of the work of Jesus as saviour, Spirit-baptiser, healer, and soon-coming king (and sanctifier, the fifth element emphasised by some, due to the influence of the Holiness movement). At the same time, glossolalia served as the evidence of Spirit baptism.<sup>49</sup> The full gospel is essentially a Christological construct, emphasising the good news of Jesus Christ who came to solve all life's problems. It is a message that is relevant to the Majority World societies where disease and poverty are rife. 'Salvation' (also called 'full salvation') is an all-embracing term that implies a sense of well-being evidenced in freedom from sickness, poverty, and misfortune as well as deliverance from sin and evil. It defines African Neopentecostal proclamation's central themes of healing from sickness and deliverance from evil powers.<sup>50</sup> While the traditional African worldview used mystical causalities to explain misfortune and illness, African Neopentecostals opened up access to the sacred and formulated interventionist rituals that help believers cope with the fears and insecurities of

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distinction between the physical and the spiritual. Kwame Bediako (*Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* [Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995], p. 96) emphasises that it is the last feature, the primal conception of the universe as a unified cosmic system that is essentially spiritual, serving to unlock the entire structure. In such a unified universe, by merely existing people participate in the constant interplay of the divine-human encounter. The transcendent is limited to the 'spiritual' world as a separate entity separate from the realm of regular human existence (Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, p. 101).

46 The fierce debate about Roman Catholic Archbishop Emanuel Milingo of Lusaka, Zambia's views of the gospel's understanding in terms of primal African spirituality in the late 1980s illustrates the tension between Western and African spiritualities. See discussion in Aylward Shorter, *Jesus as the Witchdoctor* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985).

47 Kalu, 'Preserving a Worldview', p. 115.

48 Kalu, 'Preserving a Worldview', p. 131. In this regard, Walter Wink (*Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament* [Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1984], p. 5) explains that every power has an outer and inner spirit or driving force, distinguished as principalities and powers, that animates, legitimates, and regulates its physical manifestation in the world. They represent the spirituality of institutions and inner essence of outer organisations of power.

49 Harlyn G. Purdy. *A Distinct Twenty-First Century Pentecostal Hermeneutic* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015), p. 33.

50 Anderson, *Introduction to Pentecostalism*, p. 225.

life interpreted on the basis of mystical causality.<sup>51</sup> Salvation was reinterpreted from the experience of fearsome and feared evil forces ranged against people.<sup>52</sup> African cosmology was filled with fearsome and unpredictable occurrences that demanded a Christian solution to its disempowerment; Neopentecostals offer biblical answers in the form of deliverance from the real fear of evil, misfortune and affliction.

### 1.6 *Human-Centred Prosperity and Theocentrism*

African Neopentecostalism addresses the social and economic context of urbanites, explaining its apparent success. A significant criticism of prosperity theology might be that it emphasises human needs to such an extent that it excludes a God-centered theology. Linked to this observation, Peter Watson provides a psychological reason for the popularity of prosperity theology among believers.<sup>53</sup> He describes it as exploitation and manipulation of people's psychological needs and blatant exploitation of psychological dysfunctions to finance church leaders' extravagant affluent lifestyle.

Neopentecostalism links closely with the traditional African worldview that views religious participation in terms of participants' benefits.<sup>54</sup> In the process, one can argue that some Neopentecostal prosperity theology elements represent a negation of the theocentric focus found in the Bible that defines humankind in terms of their dedication to and love for God. At the same time, its theology may cause Neopentecostalism to be defenceless in the face of secularism. When believers become affluent, their need for God as the provider may diminish. However, it is noticeable that even when adherents become more affluent among Neopentecostal groups, they keep on attending worship and prayer meetings and supporting the ministry.

African Neopentecostalism should be challenged to reconsider how it defines the relationship between God and God's blessings and gifts.<sup>55</sup> What does the explicit theocentric focus in the Bible imply in its emphasis on

51 Omenyo, 'African Pentecostalism', p. 139.

52 Anderson, *Introduction to Pentecostalism*, p. 226.

53 Watson, *Age of Nothing*, p. 15.

54 'Worldview' refers to the unconscious patterning of behaviour in society, looking outward on the universe, a mental picture of what ought to be and the order of things (Kalu, 'Preserving a Worldview', p. 117).

55 Benno Van den Toren ('African Neopentecostalism in the Face of Secularization: Problems and Possibilities', *Cairo Journal of Theology* 2 [2015], pp. 103–20) argues for the need of 'a holistic and integrated understanding of salvation' that does not make the immediacy of blessings pragmatically dependent on commitment to God and based on the expectation that the God of Israel has acted and still acts (Van den Toren, 'African Neopentecostalism in the Face of Secularization: Problems and Possibilities', p. 120).



materiality? Does it imply that God's providence is emphasised at the expense of God's honour? John Piper refers to the Shorter Westminster Catechism that asks what the chief end of man consists of and answers that it is to glorify God and enjoy God forever.

Another challenge is to address the tension between the 'already' and 'not yet' of the gospel's eschatology. Christ died and brought 'full' salvation for humankind, but that does not negate the New Testament's acknowledgement that a significant part of salvation would only realise with the second coming of Christ. While God blesses people on earth, believers await a hopeful future when God would be all in all (1 Cor. 15.27–28). Then Christ would transform their bodies to become like his resurrected body, by the power that would also enable him to make all things subject to himself (Phil. 3.21).

### 1.7 *Spirit and Providence*

The last issue is concerned with providence. By limiting their expectation of God's involvement through divine guidance and intervention in natural and social processes in daily life, it is suggested that Western theology has to reconsider its traditional doctrine of divine providence. They limited God's intervention to moral support in suffering and ethical choices, without expecting that God would act in concrete ways. African Neopentecostalism's emphasis on divine providence challenges Western theology to reconsider the way it defines providence in terms of the relation between God as Creator and the created reality, in terms of God's care and maintenance built into the natural laws (mediate providence) while at the same time emphasising God's freedom from these laws. Such a providence doctrine neglects to think through divine providence in trinitarian terms, ignoring the Spirit's role and immediate providence. The Pentecostal tradition views material reality as inspired by the Spirit of creation and re-creation, inviting Western theology to reconsider divine providence with the God as Spirit immediately involved in natural, social and cultural processes by inspiring, guiding and, at times, even breaking open the processes.<sup>56</sup> Such considerations of finding the Triune God intervening in the world led to a recent discourse between faith and science by several Pentecostal theologians.<sup>57</sup> African Neopentecostalism emphasises the possibility of God's involvement in the 'natural' and 'supernatural'.

56 Even evolution as a biological principle and process in the development of life forms find room within such a pneumatological providence doctrine.

57 See especially the work of Amos Yong, *The Spirit of Creation: Modern Science and Divine Action in the Pentecostal-Charismatic Imagination*, Pentecostal Manifestos 4 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011); Amos Yong, *The Spirit Renews the Face of the Earth: Pentecostal Forays in Science and Theology of Creation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009); Clark H. Pinnock,

## 2 Synthesis

It has been argued that several questions can enrich the conversation between the ecumenical church and African Neopentecostalism, posed to both the established church and its conversation partners. What is the relationship between faith and materiality? Can the Western church benefit by reconsidering its perspectives about materiality? In terms of its relation to the doctrine of divine providence, what happens when one interprets divine providence in terms of the Spirit's involvement in caring and maintaining creation (mediate providence) as well as answering prayer through divine intervention (immediate providence)? To what extent does the attractiveness of African Neopentecostalism serve to understand the importance of contextualisation of the gospel that links to large segments of the population's direct interests and needs? How can the church effectively address the human longing for success and prosperity in terms of a theocentric gospel focused on the incarnation of Christ? What is the correct view of the Deuteronomist accent that God commands God's blessing on those who obey God? Should the denial of the supernatural in some theological endeavours not be reconsidered in terms of a pastoral and missionary sensitivity for people's needs and the Bible's clear answer in God's immediate provision of these needs? Where does the anthropocentric emphasis in prosperity theology fit into the theocentric focus found in the Bible? And what does a balanced relationship consist of between God and God's blessings, and the 'already' and 'not yet' that characterise eschatological expectations?

Such a dialogue will also benefit the Neopentecostalist movement. Neopentecostalism does not need only to address unacceptable and unethical behaviour of some of its leaders and redesign its accountability structures but also to reconsider elements of its theological construct. One of these elements is its underemphasis of eschatological expectations, a characteristic it shares with the African primal worldview. Christians' hope may not be limited to this world but should extend to a new world promised in the Bible. It is suggested that they reorient their understanding of time to the future where ultimate consummation awaits, resulting in a reorientation of individual purpose and

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*Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove Ill: IVP Academic, 1996); James K.A. Smith, *Thinking in Tongues: Pentecostal Contributions to Christian Philosophy* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2010). I discuss the issue in greater length in a book scheduled to be published in 2021 at Wipf & Stock, *Pentecostals Reading Genesis 1–2's Creation Narratives: Some Hermeneutical Considerations*.

moral accountability.<sup>58</sup> It should also reconsider the doctrine of God's sovereignty that does not leave room for evil powers to disrupt believers' lives, seemingly without divine approval. It should take care not to emphasise the power of evil forces at the cost of God's Spirit. Evil should be explained as moral pollution rather than the result of demonical powers and ritual pollution. It is primarily located internally in the individual and not only externally in evil forces. Power should also be detached from magic and related to faith and science. They should create a society that is open and pluralist rather than closed, unitary, and sacral.<sup>59</sup> The last remark is that African Neopentecostalism is ideally situated to emphasise ecological aspects as an integral element of human wellness, contributing to a much-needed emphasis on the challenges that climate warming presents, especially to developing Africa.<sup>60</sup>

These possible items on the agenda of a discourse between the established churches and African Neopentecostalism underline the necessity that both sides should strive for such a conversation.

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58 John Hitchen, 'Mission to Primal Religious Groups in a Postmodern Context', in Rolv Olsen (ed.), *Mission and Postmodernities* (Oxford: Regnum, 2011), pp. 139–71 (p. 169).

59 See also Harold W. Turner, 'The Relationship Between Development and New Religious Movements in the Tribal Societies of the Third World', in Frederick Ferre and Rita H. Mataragnon (eds.), *God and Global Justice: Religion and Poverty in an Unequal World* (New York: Paragon House, 1985), pp. 84–110 (p. 92).

60 Hitchen, 'Mission to Primal Religious Groups in a Postmodern Context', p. 154.

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