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“YOUR MIRACLE IS ON THE WAY”

ORAL ROBERTS AND MEDIATED PENTECOSTALISM IN AFRICA

J. KWABENA ASAMOAH-GYADU

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Abstract

Oral Roberts is perhaps the first North American Pentecostal preacher to have a truly global ministry. This article discusses his influence on Pentecostalism in Africa through the holding of evangelical healing crusades around the world and also hosting a worldwide media ministry through the use of radio, television, and the distribution of books and magazines. Through these visits and media ministry, Oral Roberts inspired and influenced many leading Pentecostal leaders in Africa, including the late Archbishop Benson Idahosa of Nigeria and Archbishop Nicholas Duncan-Williams of Ghana. An important and enduring influence of the ministry of Oral Roberts in Africa, this article suggests, is in the theology of “Seed Faith,” founded on the principle of sowing and reaping, which was an important feature of what later became known as the prosperity gospel. In studying the ministry of Oral Roberts and its influence on the African Christian context, we have an important case study on the globalization of Christianity as a world phenomenon and its appropriation as a local stream of Christianity.

Introduction

This article is about how the ministry of Oral Roberts influenced Pentecostalism beyond the West, focusing on Africa. I first provide a very general impression of the ministry of Oral Roberts as a worldwide healing evangelist, pointing to pertinent areas in his theology and style that may be considered relevant for understanding his impact on contemporary African Pentecostalism. The article argues that although Pentecostalism in Africa is not necessarily an American import, the influence of American televangelism in the reshaping of African Pentecostal spirituality is not in doubt. My thesis is that the image of Oral Roberts looms large in Africa's Pentecostal story. The point is that in spite of whatever local content African Pentecostalism may possess, it is impossible, for example, to explain the neo-Pentecostal gospel of prosperity in Africa without reference to its North American televangelist versions. One of the key proponents was Oral Roberts. This article assesses the influence of Oral Roberts as an international Pentecostal evangelist on African Christianity.

I begin with a quotation about his ministry:

. . . from Manila, to Singapore, to Nairobi, to Santiago and Helsinki, the world of the 1970s and 1980s was saturated with the message that “something good is going to happen to you.”

The gospel that found such worldwide favor was a hopeful, Christian affirmation that one is never too low to look up. God is a good God, even though all of life may seem to deny it; one should expect a miracle, particularly if more conventional means have proven ineffective. The proof of the message lay in one's direct encounter with the supernatural through the baptism of the Holy Spirit, a “filling” that allows one to communicate immediately, directly, and frequently with God, bypassing intervening specialists and elites, including physicians. It was a message that had sustained the battered, defeated, poor whites (and blacks) of the South. It had offered them peace, healing, and the hope of prosperity—it offered wholeness.¹

Oral Granville Roberts is a very important name in twentieth-century Pentecostalism, and the quotation above summarizes what his ministry was about and how it affected the world. He is widely known across the world for his healing ministry. Testimonies exist in Africa of Pentecostal leaders who trace their conversion and Holy Spirit experiences to his preaching. Ghana's Archbishop Nicholas Duncan-Williams, who is the pioneering founder of neo-Pentecostal or charismatic churches in Ghana, cites Oral Roberts among those who inspired his efforts, especially as a word of faith preacher, when he started Action Chapel International in the late 1970s. There is hardly a publication on Pentecostalism as a global movement or the personalities behind it that does not mention Roberts, the American faith healer, televangelist, and apostle of the Seed Faith gospel, as a key figure in its historical development. Oral Roberts made his mark through the media—both print and electronic—but also traveled to many countries as a speaker at mass evangelistic healing crusades.

Outside of the US, Oral Roberts would be considered as the Pentecostal equivalent of the conservative evangelical Billy Graham. They both traveled the world to preach Jesus and the salvation of sinners. However, whereas Graham stayed with the “born-again” message, emphasizing its eschatological dimensions of heaven and hell, Roberts' message had a strong existential tone, laying the emphasis on divine health and wealth that is made possible through positive faith and seed-sowing or giving. The God of Oral Roberts was a God of miracles and possibilities, and religious empire building through mega ministries and structures was part of the new type of Christianity that he represented. If Graham preached the anger of God at sin and the looming reality of hellfire for sinners, Roberts talked about a God of miracles who was present in the power of the Spirit not only to forgive sin, but also to heal and make the faithful wealthy in this life. It is a message that now defines neo-Pentecostalism in Africa and that challenges the historic mission, or older, churches to look beyond their traditional preaching concerning wealth. The older, established Western mission denominations often presented wealth as one of the biggest obstacles to entrance into the Kingdom of God. In the new form of Christianity that Roberts represented, matters of sin, judgment, hell, and heaven

now lie subdued. The emphasis on existential matters meant the holiness theology of “retreat from the world” was reduced in positive faith preaching as wealth was increasingly understood as the “heritage of the true believer.”² What is projected is material blessings and empowerment for this life, and the preacher is usually the ultimate representation of the message.

Pentecostalism beyond the West

Much of what will appear in this article applies to many parts of the continent, although the primary focus of this discussion for practical reasons will be the West African countries of Ghana and Nigeria. The media features quite prominently in our discussion. Ruth Marshall has written about how Pentecostals expend enormous amounts of resources on the dissemination of messages in forms that “excite and inspire, bringing technologies of modern media to bear on the issues and idioms central to popular urban culture.”³ Marshall talks about how in the United States in particular “televangelism and intense mediatization of the Pentecostal message” has helped the movement impact popular culture.⁴ To that end, Oral Roberts has not left himself without witness in Africa because his use of media in the popularization of a certain type of Pentecostal culture has been intense and immense. He may have started off as a holiness preacher, but it is for the more “mundane” side of contemporary Pentecostalism, the exercise of faith for spiritual and material breakthroughs, that Roberts retains a place in the African Christian imagination.

The sources of assessment for these reflections are the publications on African Pentecostalism that refer to Oral Roberts, personal recollections, and communication from Nigerian Pentecostal scholars who have made references to Oral Roberts in their work.⁵ We will also refer to some of Oral Roberts’ writings. Many of them, mainly unauthorized African reprints, still circulate alongside the originals and are on sale in Ghanaian book stands and bookshops that stock popular Pentecostal material. Some oral information was also obtained from Rev. Dr. Seth Anyomi, a Ghanaian pastor, who for some time served as the Africa Director of Oral Roberts Ministries.

In the mid-1990s Harvey Cox, based on an assessment of the growth and future of Pentecostalism, wrote the book *Fire from Heaven*. He gave it the intriguing subtitle *The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-first Century*.⁶ I would suggest that the personalities whose ministries contributed to Pentecostal spirituality globally include many North American crusading televangelists such as T. L. Osborn and Oral Roberts. This essay makes the case that among the lot Roberts stands out for the way in which he very directly inspired and supported—including financially—Pentecostal churches in Africa, including some of the pioneers of charismatic Pentecostalism, such as the late Archbishop Benson Idahosa of Nigeria. These facts are difficult to contest because, in virtually all conversations regarding the historical links between American and African Pentecostalism, the name Oral Roberts stands out. His ministry inspired the establishment of many others around the world. His trademark message that God is a good God and that he wills to heal and prosper people is one that many still preach around the world.

Oral Roberts in the History of Pentecostalism

Vinson Synan, one of the world's most distinguished historians of Pentecostalism, begins a recent article on Pentecostalism by noting that "Oral Roberts was a Pentecostal pastor from Oklahoma who gained fame as a healing evangelist, television personality, and educator."⁷ In all three areas named, we can find connections between the ministry of Roberts and Pentecostal/charismatic churches in the world. I define Pentecostalism as any Christian movement that values, affirms, and consciously promotes the experiences of the Holy Spirit as part of normal Christian expression, in keeping with what we read especially in the Acts of the Apostles and Pauline epistles. That is exactly what Oral Roberts did. He consciously promoted the experiences of the Holy Spirit in his world evangelistic tours and media ministries. There are a number of areas in which Oral Roberts played a pioneering role in world Pentecostalism. These areas include: the organization of mass evangelistic crusades that focus on healing; the publication of popular books focusing on miracles, especially faith healing; the preaching of

what I now describe as “transactional giving,” which he referred to then as financial “sowing and reaping”; the use of modern media, especially televangelism and the distribution of books; the formation of the transnational charismatic group, the Full Gospel Businessmen’s Fellowship International, which is now also a global movement; and the (in)famous neo-Pentecostal gospel of prosperity in which material things, especially wealth, became a prime indicator of God’s blessing.

Oral Roberts is described as America’s “premier televangelist” who used the proceeds of his ministry to build an accredited university “named after himself.”⁸ Pentecostals the world over, initially suspicious of academic work because it tended to be too critical and dismissive of faith and the supernatural, have now followed the example of Roberts and own some of the best private universities. An invitation by Billy Graham, perhaps the best known American mass crusade evangelist of the twentieth century, for Roberts to join him at the 1967 World Congress on Evangelism in Berlin helped enhance the latter’s profile immensely. One of Roberts’ slogans, “your miracle is on the way,” was basically directed at the sick who were expectant of divine healing, but it was clear that he had incorporated into it the neo-Pentecostal emphasis on faith and prosperity. To that end, Roberts is credited with the creation of “Seed Faith,” which promised financial returns for those who supported his ministry.⁹ The significance of Oral Roberts as far as the preaching of Seed Faith was concerned is that many American televangelists developed variations of that theme, including well-known names like Pat Robertson, Jim Bakker, Kenneth and Gloria Copeland, and Kenneth Hagin. It is reported that thousands of viewers of his television ministry committed themselves to practicing Seed Faith and Blessing Pacts with Oral Roberts. His ministry also circulated *Abundant Life* magazine, which carried testimonies of those for whom the Seed Faith and Blessing Pacts worked. Testimonies constitute a major avenue for the enhancement of charismatic charm in neo-Pentecostalism. The stories in *Abundant Life*, therefore, helped to increase the public profile of Oral Roberts in America and beyond. His Seed Faith theology allowed Oral Roberts to build a personal religious empire that included the City of Faith Medical Center at Oral Roberts University.

Theologically speaking, therefore, Oral Roberts is an icon of the Faith Movement, which taught that “Christians receive good fortune and good health because they had a right to expect such things from God.”¹⁰ We are told that once when his view of Seed Faith seemed not to work because he lacked resources to build the City of Faith, Kenneth Hagin gave him an entire offering raised at a revival meeting.¹¹ That practice in reciprocal giving, in addition to the preaching of Seed Faith, has also developed as a subculture in neo-Pentecostal prosperity practices. Pastors simply raise faith offerings for other colleagues as a public demonstration that the principles of sowing and reaping work. In many cases, this has amounted to nothing more than reciprocal gift-giving as beneficiaries do the same for the benefactors when they preach for them. Steve Brouwer, Paul Gifford, and Susan Rose summarize the influence of Oral Roberts on American Pentecostalism well when they note that:

Oral Roberts, with his roots in hardscrabble Oklahoma, exemplified the origins of Pentecostal practice as it had evolved among the dispossessed, that is, the rural urban poor of the United States in the first half of the twentieth century. His genius lay in his ability to extend much the same experience of the Holy Spirit into the new blend of charismatic Pentecostalism, meeting the needs and desires of better off, more respectable worshippers.¹²

Oral Roberts is a leader among American Pentecostals who found biblical justification for healing in the example of Jesus and thought that in the power of the Holy Spirit diseases are healed, tumors disappear, deformities are corrected, demons of affliction are exorcised, and even the dead are raised to life.¹³ His ministry, as we have noted, made a great impact globally. We now turn to how his preaching and spirituality helped shape the movement in Africa from the second half of the twentieth century.

Oral Roberts in the African Scene

Matthews A. Ojo writes in his book, *The End-time Army: Charismatic Movements in Modern Nigeria*, that Oral Roberts was one

among a number of North American evangelists who visited Nigeria in the 1970s following Billy Graham.¹⁴ The full import of the ministry of Oral Roberts for American Christianity can be found in other sources, including his official biography. For our purposes, I have selected those portions that have a direct bearing on his influence in Africa. Oral Roberts has had both direct and indirect influences on the Pentecostal/charismatic movement. Let us begin with his healing ministry. On that the entry in the *Dictionary of Pentecostal/Charismatic Movements* reads as follows:

Roberts' success in healing evangelism thrust him to the leadership of a generation of dynamic revivalists who took the message of divine healing around the world after 1947. His ecumenical crusades were instrumental in the revitalization of Pentecostalism in the post-WWII era. . . . Roberts' most significant impact on American Christianity came in 1955, when he initiated a national weekly television program that took his healing crusades inside the homes of millions who had never been exposed to the healing message. Through this program, the healing message was literally lifted from the Pentecostal subculture of American Christianity to its widest audience in history.¹⁵

Oral Roberts visited South Africa in 1955 where it was reported that his meetings attracted up to 125,000 people with his team recording more than 20,000 conversions to Christ. He visited Nigeria and Ghana too. He popularized the idea of the "healing crusade" in Africa. At the time the best known North American evangelist was Billy Graham. His evangelistic crusades followed closely the evangelical agenda of preaching the word of salvation in Christ and getting people to respond to him through altar calls. Ogbu U. Kalu specifically mentions Oral Roberts as one of the visiting evangelists that influenced the mass evangelistic healing crusades of many African preachers.¹⁶ When he visited Kenya in 1968, a leader of the students' Christian fellowship working as a missionary in East Africa named his son born that year after Oral Roberts. That is what I mean by suggesting that Roberts did not leave himself without witness in Africa. The Oral Roberts healing

crusade thus amounted to a paradigm shift from the word-based type of evangelism represented by Graham. Roberts' slogan for the miracle crusades was "your miracle is on the way." Crusades under Roberts did not only dwell on preaching the word, but also encouraged families to bring their sick and afflicted to be healed.

Influence through Media

Christians in sub-Saharan Africa first encountered Oral Roberts through his media ministry. Ojo discusses how prior to the 1970s, Pentecostal doctrines were largely confined to their enclaves and were thus of little influence. What led to the wider influence of Pentecostalism on Nigerian public and church life, he notes, was the influx of Pentecostal evangelists and literature from the mid-1970s. A lot of this material was sent virtually free of charge to anyone who ordered it. The thrill of being invited at the school assembly to pick up your parcel—which a lot of the times turned out to be from Oral Roberts—led to the indiscriminate ordering of these materials among primary school boys.¹⁷ To put his influence in a more systematic form, first, Roberts appeared on national television stations in Ghana and Nigeria. These were not the days of media pluralism, and so without alternatives, his programs enjoyed wide viewership. Second, Roberts sent out his book publications to those who wrote to him, and in Africa one of the most popular of such publications was the book titled, *Your Miracle Is on the Way*. Third, when audiocassette tapes came into vogue, young Christians in Africa, fascinated with the then new media resource, received recordings of Oral Roberts' sermons. This was in the middle to late 1970s when a number of African evangelical movements, especially at the university level, were turning charismatic in defiance of the resistance to such charismatic experiences as speaking in tongues and the prophetic.

Today, the media has become part of the self-definition of the global Pentecostal/charismatic movement. However, in Africa, Pentecostalism as a media-driven religious phenomenon cannot be explained in terms of historical development without the story of Oral Roberts. His media ministry influenced many of the pioneering

founders of neo-Pentecostal churches in Africa, and he must be credited with the Pentecostal/charismatic theology of seed sowing in which it is believed that a person's blessing is directly related to the level of giving in tithes, offerings, and gifts "sown" in the lives and ministries of the anointed of God. The use of media, as Marshall explains, allows for the multiplication of narrative forms and the delocalization of messages.¹⁸ The development of electronic storage devices, beginning with audio and video cassette tapes, made it possible for the easy circulation and distribution of Pentecostal materials across countries and among friends and family. Marshall succinctly articulates the effect of media in the development of religious culture as follows:

Born Again "communities of sentiment" are formed through Bible Study, and through reading, watching, and discussing sermons, tracts, magazines, and videos—interchanges that entail articulations and discussion not only of "correct" behavior and new regimes of personal and collective discipline, but also of new attitudes toward consumption, dress styles, aesthetics, and ways of speaking and moving. In the prosperity or new wave churches, these articulations are made with reference, often self-conscious, to a global Pentecostal community, and its perceived modes of worship, models of behavior, styles, and culture.¹⁹

In terms of its indigenous progenitors, the late Archbishop Benson Idahosa ranks highest regarding the personalities behind the emergence of the contemporary Pentecostal movement and its trendy prosperity message in Africa. Archbishop Idahosa was a protégé of Oral Roberts, and the former and his wife were both recipients of honorary doctorates from Oral Roberts University.²⁰ His encounter with Roberts' influence led to Idahosa's formation of All Nations Bible School in Benin City, Nigeria. Many contemporary Pentecostal pastors trained in that institute. Among the list from Ghana would include the Archbishop Nicholas Duncan-Williams, the pioneering founder of a charismatic church in Ghana; Bishop James Saah, also of Action Chapel International; Bishop Charles Agyinasare, founder and leader of Perez Chapel International; and Christina Doe Tetteh, founder and leader

of Solid Rock Chapel International. In Ghana Oral Roberts became known for his TV program *Abundant Life* with its catchy slogan “something good is going to happen to you.”²¹ He was on Ghanaian television on Sunday evenings from 6:00 to 7:00 p.m. In 1988, Oral Roberts visited West Africa, including Ghana. A report in the publication *West Africa* put the figure attending this crusade, held at the sports stadium in the capital Accra, at about 70,000 people. As noted earlier, a strong component of the teachings of Oral Roberts was the idea of “Seed Faith.” It was disseminated through the circulation of partners’ letters, popular publications, and his mode of televangelism. He stayed in touch with Ghanaian and Nigerian partners through customized letters, and as we have noted earlier, also through his books and the magazine *Abundant Life*.

Higher Education

According to Ghanaian Pentecostal historian E. Kingsley Larbi, the influence of Oral Roberts on African Pentecostalism occurred in part through the formation of Oral Roberts University.²² Classical Pentecostalism, in particular, was for many years self-identified as an anti-academic movement. There are stories in Pentecostal history of leading figures, moved by the Spirit, abandoning their studies in response to the call of God to win souls for Christ. The Pentecostal theological emphasis of “Christ as the Soon Coming King” led to an urgent attention to mission and evangelism in preparation for the *parousia*. The Pentecostal message was from the beginning very eschatological in tone and participants in the Azusa Street Revival under the leadership of William J. Seymour, for example, traveled across the US and beyond to the “ends of the earth” to win as many souls for the kingdom as the Spirit enabled them. The pursuit of higher education and wealth were denounced as worldly obstacles to entry into the kingdom of God. All that mattered in the early years of the North American revival was saving sinners from hellfire, and as some put it, they went out “to depopulate hell and populate heaven.” The eschatological agenda was evident in the preaching of the reality of heaven and hell, the futility of going after material riches, and the composition of

songs that spoke of the beauty and serenity of heaven and the suffering in hell.

When Oral Roberts started a university in Oklahoma, it broke with academic protocol in many ways. First, the building of a prayer tower in the university and the institutionalization of around the clock prayer meant a new integration of spirituality and academia in a union that the Enlightenment heritage of the West had frowned upon. Second, Oral Roberts University brought to bear on the agenda of the Pentecostal movement a new way of looking at the world through education, not just in Spirit-led theology, but also in other disciplines where it was believed that Christians were to be in control of the social institutions of the world, including economics, politics, and other areas of human concern. Third, the sort of attention that prosperity preachers started to give to things earthly automatically led to a weakening of the eschatological message associated especially with classical Pentecostalism. This is evident in the sort of prosperity theology that has come to be associated with contemporary Pentecostalism. Oral Roberts set himself an ambitious fundraising agenda to build a university that would stand as a testament to God's greatness and faithfulness and also train Spirit-filled and Spirit-led Christians as they sought to influence the world through the participation in public institutions, such as the areas of politics, economics, governance, engineering, medicine, science, and technology. The opening in 1981 of the \$250-million-dollar City of Faith Medical and Research Center is considered an apex in the ministry of Oral Roberts. The philosophy of the center was the merger of prayer and medical care in the treatment of the whole person.²³

This agenda of spiritual control through education at the highest level first attracted a number of African Pentecostals to Oral Roberts University. One of them was Rev. Dr. Seth Ablorh, a medical doctor who returned to Ghana and in the early 1980s established the Manna Mission Hospital in Accra, Ghana. While still in operation as a "mission hospital," Dr. Ablorh established a Pentecostal church called Manna Ministries on the same compound as his hospital. In imitation of Oral Roberts' medical center, it combined prayer and medical practice in the treatment of patients. Oral Roberts' initiative in higher education has also inspired the establishment of Pentecostal/charismatic private

universities in contemporary Africa. These include Benson Idahosa University in Nigeria, Central University in Ghana, which belongs to the International Central Gospel Church, and Covenant University in Nigeria, owned by Living Faith Church Worldwide. The following brief from the website of Benson Idahosa University is very revealing when it comes to the influence of Oral Roberts (although he is not explicitly mentioned):

After the establishment of the Church of God Mission in the 1960's, Archbishop Benson Idahosa *received specific directions from God* to venture into the area of education By 1981, the vision of Christian Faith University (CFU), which was later renamed Benson Idahosa University, had matured in the mind of the Archbishop. . . . In 1992, Archbishop Benson Idahosa applied to the Honorable Minister of Education for a license to establish and operate a private University. Following this development, an expert team of academics and professionals was set up to prepare a feasibility report, an academic brief and develop a Master Plan for the proposed university. Operating as the Institute of Continuous Learning (ICL), the proposed University organized academic and professional programs for young students. Christian Faith University became Benson Idahosa University, and F. E. B. Idahosa became the university's second president. In February 2002, ten years after the application to start a private University, the Federal Government, acting through the National Universities Commission (NUC), graciously granted Benson Idahosa University a license to operate. The University started operating as a fully licensed institution in March 2002 with an initial student enrolment of 400, registered into two faculties (Faculty of Arts, Social Sciences, Education and Faculty of Basic and Applied Sciences).²⁴

I have italicized the phrase “received special directions from God” in order to highlight that Oral Roberts made the same claim to justify the establishment of his university. Most significantly, Benson Idahosa made this claim around the mid-1960s; that is around the same time that

Oral Roberts University had begun. Furthermore, Benson Idahosa followed the example of Oral Roberts in renaming his university, initially called Christian Faith University, after himself.

There are many others across the West African sub-region. The establishment of universities by these new Pentecostals must, therefore, be understood as part of a deliberate mission agenda to extend evangelical influence into public space. Indeed, International Central Gospel Church (ICGC) in Ghana, which owns Central University College, is inspired by the slogan: “Raising Leaders, Shaping Vision and Influencing Society through Christ.” This is how its founder and Chancellor, Pastor Mensa Otabil, explains God’s word to humankind to “fill the earth and subdue it” (Gen 1:28). According to Otabil, “people who fill the earth are the ones who have influence.”²⁵ In the midst of many failed economic policies and corruption in Africa, the new churches focus on leadership as the key to the influence they seek to exercise in society as part of their mission. One such university is owned by Living Faith Church Worldwide, also known as Winners’ Chapel. Its founder, Bishop David O. Oyedepo, claims that God has called him to make people materially wealthy. This is very much a prosperity focus in the mode of Oral Roberts. His Covenant University, one of the most well-resourced in Nigeria today after just a little over a decade of existence, goes by the slogan, “Raising a New Generation of Leaders who will positively impact their nation, the African continent and the world at large.”

Action Chapel International, also based in Ghana, has named its new university Dominion University, a name that proverbially speaks louder than words in terms of the self-understanding of the leadership of the charismatic ministries and the mission of the churches they have established. Thus this agenda of influence fits very much into the dominion theology of the new Pentecostals and is now being expressed through their participation in and the administering of university-level education as part of a new Pentecostal mission agenda. Increasingly, the disciplines of choice in the new Pentecostal universities are management, economics, architecture, engineering, information technology, medicine, pharmacy, nursing, and education. These are disciplines and professions of local and global importance in the modern world of

commerce and in the expanding economies of Africa; these are the areas that are in demand. In an essay that focuses on new evangelical universities, Joel Carpenter refers to higher education as “one of the most striking contemporary forms of globalization.”²⁶ There are new universities arising out of movements for evangelization and spiritual renewal in many parts of the world, Carpenter observes, and any attempt to investigate the relationship between the spread of evangelical forms of Christianity in the non-Western world and the forces of globalization would do well to consider these educational movements. They are responding to global economic and political conditions, Carpenter notes, “and they are addressing local dynamics as well.”²⁷ My point is that the inspiration for this came from Oral Roberts.

Oral Roberts’ Theological Legacy

The theology of prosperity has become one of the theological hallmarks of contemporary Pentecostalism. Although African traditional religions also focus on things to do with good health, wealth, vitality, fertility, longevity, and abundance, that is not the primary source of appeal for prosperity preaching in Africa. Most preachers of prosperity appeal to the Bible in terms of its justification, but as we have noted the human inspiration behind it includes Oral Roberts. The principles of biblical prosperity, according to popular neo-Pentecostal understanding, include sowing and reaping and positive confessions, all backed by a strong faith in the God of (im)possibilities. One of the books by Oral Roberts still circulating in Africa and from which neo-Pentecostal preachers frequently cite is titled *Seed-Faith*. The subtitle is very instructive: *Spiritual, Physical, and Financial Increase through the Power of Seed-Faith*. In it Roberts writes:

When I plant my seed to God, it becomes a driving force for me to carry out my calling, realize my destiny, and reach the God-inspired goals that I’ve set before me. Seed sown to God can bring miraculous results. I am a living testimony to the miracle of seedtime and harvest, of sowing, reaping, of giving and receiving.²⁸

Variations of this theme reverberate from neo-Pentecostal churches throughout Africa. African Pentecostal/charismatic televangelism, except for a few cases, has been reduced to preaching about money in terms of the payments of tithes, offerings, and other forms of financial and material seeds expected to be sown for God's blessing. It is not just the fact that Oral Roberts was one of the leading advocates of this teaching that is important. Equally important is the fact that the publications bearing his name are reprints of the original versions from African, particularly Nigerian, publishers. Thus Oral Roberts may no longer be on Africa's television screens, but the principle of Seed Faith that he popularized and that informs much of what goes in the gospel of prosperity continues to circulate among Christians interested in that sort of discourse. The appeal of such material lies in the many testimonies that they contain of people claiming that the principles of sowing and reaping work. In the same book, one Alan from California testifies as follows:

I had never thought about my company tithing, but I sensed that God wanted to take my business into a new dimension of faith. Shortly after planting my first fruit check toward ORU debt, I received a contract with a profit margin greater than anything I had ever seen in my company's history. I believe this is just the beginning of the fulfillment of the vision God has for my business.²⁹

An important and critical issue that emerges out the Seed Faith gospel is the fact that it promotes transactional giving for blessing to the neglect of a theology of pain and suffering that is very much related to the cross of Christ. It is instructive that at a time when we are revisiting the theological heritage of Oral Roberts in Africa, we are also celebrating the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther's Reformation. The collection of money and the supply of prayer cloths, olive oils, blessed water, and the like that have been incorporated into African Pentecostal/charismatic prosperity discourses have their roots in the sort of presentations that people received from Oral Roberts and other practitioners of American televangelism. Consider the following comment

on how this Seed Faith gospel is translated into reality in Nigeria through the lives of those who preach it:

Suddenly the possibility of achieving private wealth through God's work seemed within reach. Many pastors now possessed fleets of luxury cars; presided over marble-tiled, air-conditioned churches, with the latest sound systems and Windows XP on the office computers; and produced weekly televangelism shows where miracles and divine healing were staged.³⁰

The references that Marshall makes to luxurious living, televangelism, and divine healing are those things that we have associated most strongly with the ministry of Oral Roberts. It would be presumptuous to argue that everything originated from him, but the fact is that he represented the redefinition of Pentecostalism as articulated in this observation on the Nigerian versions of the movement. Additionally, Marshall makes another observation that is worth mentioning. She makes the point that scriptural citations were invoked by Nigeria's prosperity preachers to justify their material acquisitions. The use of proof-texts to support the prosperity message is something that those critical of it often cite as a concern.

Mensa Otabil's International Central Gospel Church celebrated its flagship convention, Greater Works, in July 2017. As with most neo-Pentecostal programs organized especially by the megachurches, it was heavily advertised in any imaginable media platform. The program was also very heavily patronized with numbers ranging from 20,000 to 30,000 adults attending the weeklong program at Ghana's Independence Square. The preachers were also internationally known neo-Pentecostals, including Matthew Ashimolowo from London. Unfortunately, more than a month after the program, what the general public was talking about was not the impressive and motivational sermons that came from the preachers. Television, radio, internet, and social media conversations centered on how one of the speakers had offered God's grace for sale by asking participants, during fundraising, to sow seeds ranging from \$1,000 to \$5,000. All this was supposed to be in US dollars, and people asked why God did not know that Ghana's

currency was the cedi. I heard many asking, “Why is God asking us to give him dollars in Ghana?” The commentaries did not stop there as some questioned whether the poor could be blessed since they do not have that sort of money. The truth, though, is that in Ghana, it is only the *nouveau riche* who can realistically afford such financial seed. The other thing that people questioned was the theological basis for grading the financial seeds according to the amount sown, that is, why does God not bless those who give \$5,000 more than those who give \$1,000? These are questions that have come up in other contexts, too, but the point is that in the principle of seed-sowing, we have been given a legacy that does not stand up to theological scrutiny in the light of the grace of God as far as his blessings are concerned.

In another book, *When You See the Invisible You Can Do the Impossible*, Oral Roberts talks about a theme that is also central to neo-Pentecostalism. It is a stream of Christianity that, as we have sought to point out, talks very much of success, positives, and possibilities. In that book he writes:

It was the awakening of my life and ministry from the rut of limitation I had allowed myself to fall into, when after my conversion God had given me His unmistakable call to preach His gospel, to take His healing power to my generation, and someday to build Him a university.³¹

All this Oral Roberts carried out faithfully. How much of it was attributable to divine mandate and how much to sheer ambition, we may never know. What we know is that apart from his own failures, there are a number of other preachers, like Jim Bakker of the PTL Club, who became casualties of the religious empire building ministries that Oral Roberts exemplified. Eventually, Jim Bakker failed and was jailed for fraud. On his release, he confessed that he had preached a gospel that in many cases was self-serving. He poured out his confessions and apologies in the book, *I Was Wrong*.³² It will suffice to quote part of Jim Bakker’s opening words for our purposes:

For most of my life, I believed that my understanding of God and how He wants us to live was not only correct but worth

exporting to the world. One reason I have risked putting my heart into print is to tell you that my previous philosophy of life, out of which my attitudes and actions flowed, was fundamentally flawed. . . . God does promise that He will never leave us or forsake us, no matter what trial or pain we must go through . . . whether it be loss or reputation, loss of position or power, financial calamity, addiction, separation, divorce or imprisonment The mistakes I made are still being perpetuated in ministries, churches, businesses, marriages, and families.³³

This sounds like an indictment on a message that may have been a blessing to many, but people seldom take into account of the experiences of those who have believed it but have been hurt by it because health and material prosperity did not come the way they had been taught. Most importantly those who preach this sort of gospel, following its proponents like Oral Roberts, do not share their failures and help their hearers make theological sense out of why things do not always work even after following all the principles suggested. In a continent like Africa, with its endemic poverty, corruption at the highest level of governance, and broken medical and economic systems, there is needless suffering. Faith in God is the only hope that people may have, so when they pray “give us our daily bread,” they mean it literally. Helping such people come out of the quagmires of life inflicted on them by those who wield power may be the best way to help them. Unfortunately, preachers exploit the same vulnerable people with principles of sowing and reaping that many have practiced for years without the expected results, keeping the cycle of poverty running by blaming insufficient tithes and offerings and demons for the unworkable principles that they are taught.

Concluding Assessment: Oral Roberts and the Pentecostal Heritage in Africa

Pentecostalism in Africa cannot be assessed in totally negative terms because there are credible testimonies of people who have experienced empowerment inspired by the motivational messages first formulated by

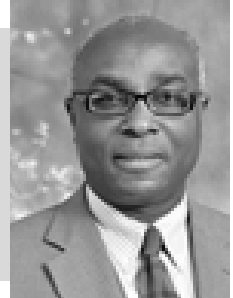
people like Oral Roberts and disseminated by modern media across the globe. To that end, I share Nimi Wariboko's submission that "regardless of what we think of the excesses and malfeasance of some of the wealth-and-health gospel preachers, Nigerian Pentecostal preachers have crafted a theology of hope to deal with the exigencies of everyday existence, to imaginatively transform dire socioeconomic conditions of ordinary Nigerians and to offer their followers a robust sense of dignity."³⁴ African scholars of Pentecostalism have often felt frustrated by the fact that in spite of their protestations and hard evidence in local initiatives, the presence of the movement in Africa has often been attributed to its North American influence. There are some who are unwilling to countenance the fact that, historically speaking, we cannot attribute all forms of Pentecostalism in Africa to the evangelistic efforts of the Azusa Street Revival of 1906. It is the title of the book *Exporting the American Gospel* that, for instance, led the African Pentecostal scholar Ogbu Kalu to write:

This is a stupendous claim that assumes that all the protagonists in the non-American Pentecostal and Charismatic movements trace their genealogy to Azusa Street and merely adopted and adapted the spirituality without paying due deference to the origin. . . . The most benign response is that the storyline ignores the clues from different regions that that same Holy Spirit started the process by manifesting itself to believers all over the whole inhabited earth without deference to any single geographical source.³⁵

Whatever protestations we may have concerning the North American role in the rise of Pentecostalism in Africa, the effects of people like Oral Roberts in reshaping the nature of African Pentecostal discourses, theologies, and practices cannot be denied. There were pictorial images of Ghana's Nicholas Duncan-Williams and Oral Roberts when he visited Ghana in the early 1980s. We have also talked about an East African naming his son after Roberts. He inspired the African Pentecostal interest in the establishment of universities and was certainly a model in terms of the way media, in general, and televangelism,

in particular, are used by Pentecostals. One of the most enduring legacies of Oral Roberts in Africa is his influence on the preaching of prosperity messages, especially the formulaic theologies of sowing and reaping. This legacy, however, leaves more questions than answers regarding the workings of the grace of God. Oral Roberts will remain a historical figure of great importance in the development of world Pentecostalism, including its African versions.

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