

RELIGION AND COMMODIFICATION: THE GHANAIAAN CHURCHES' COVID-19 ECONOMY

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Abstract: Ghana had its first COVID -19 pandemic victim in the second week of March 2020. This prompted the government to introduce restrictive measures such as a partial lockdown, which included halting economic activities, restricting movement, and banning public gatherings. Later, restrictions were relaxed to allow twenty-five people to attend funerals. These presidential directives, known as Number 1 in Ghana, meant a total shutdown of religious gatherings that constitute an economy of itself. While some church leaders tried to open their churches for worship and were arrested for doing so, most moved their services to virtual spaces to reach their members. The fascinating phenomenon that emerged was the creative ways various religious leaders used to monetise the services offered to members. Using the cyber-ethnographic method, we examine the various means deployed by five selected churches to manage church finances and membership. The results show that the churches' monetary interests and survival strategies were paramount amidst the pandemic. The financial, spiritual, and physical well-being of members/clients was dominant at the time.

Key Words: Commodification, COVID 19; Church finances, Ghana, Religion.

Introduction

This article examines the various means used by five selected churches in managing their members and finances in the wake of the pandemic COVID -19. It questions the monetisation of services offered to members. It argues that the churches' economic interests and survival strategy amid the pandemic were at the forefront of members' spiritual and physical well-being. We substantiate our claim with cyber-ethnographically obtained data and analyse it using the metaphor of religious economics.

The coronavirus said to have emerged from China in December 2019 has affected the standard social conditions of the people. In Ghana, it caught the media's attention in January 2020, and news condensed in late January and early February when Ghanaian students in China and

their parents in Ghana urged the Ghanaian government to airlift the students to Ghana as some countries had done. While some of the public felt that the students would be better off in China because China, the headquarters of the virus, could offer better diagnosis and treatment if one was infected, others felt that the students would be safer in Ghana. The primary public concern against transporting the students by air was the fear that the virus would be imported into the country when she was unprepared for the pandemic. At that time, citizens gave little thought to the pandemic, primarily since the comprehensive explanations on the 'streets' and the media focused on conspiracy theories that the virus was incapable of infecting Africans because of their genetic constitution. Later, this popular theory expanded to include the virus' inability to survive tropical weather. In late February, the Ministry of Health (MOH)/Ghana Health Service (GHS) received news of the confirmation of the first case of COVID -19 in Nigeria, a sub-regional neighbour. The MOH took the opportunity to assure Ghanaians that surveillance would be stepped up and recommended precautions for individuals to follow to avoid contracting the infection and measures to take if they suspect they have it. Ghanaians, however, did not seem to notice much of this, assuming that COVID -19 was still a long way off.

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization acknowledged the global outbreak of the coronavirus, calling it a pandemic. The next day, 12, 2020, MOH/GHS announced Ghana's first two confirmed cases of persons from Norway and Turkey, tagging the cases as imported and assuring Ghanaians of measures to contain the virus. This release served as a breaking point as it dawned on the populace that the earlier speculated theory of the virus not infecting Africans was false, creating fear and panic. It triggered the President of Ghana, Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo, to give a formal address, popularly referred to as the No.1 update on coronavirus, on the development of the pandemic in Ghana. In his speech on March 15, 2020, at 10 pm, the President outlined the government's plans, in consultation with the MOH/GHS, regarding the best practice to contain and stop the spread of the virus. He assured the populace of the safety measures to protect the citizenry from being infected and how infected persons would be tended to. He suspended all public gatherings for four weeks, including conferences, workshops, funerals, festivals, political rallies, religious activities, and other interrelated events. He allowed

only twenty-five persons to be present at private funerals.¹ He also directed that primary, senior high schools, and universities, both public and private, be closed, except for the final year students due to write their examination. Ghana's borders remained closed on Sunday, March 22, 2020, for two weeks to limit the country's importation and spread of COVID-19. The government's directives were based on WHO's practical reflections and recommendations for religious leaders and faith-based communities in COVID-19.

On March 28, 2020, President Nana Akufo-Addo announced a lockdown on the Greater Accra Metropolitan Area and the Greater Kumasi Metropolitan Area from 01:00 GMT on Monday, March 30, 2020. The authorities advised all individuals to stay at home as much as possible for the ensuing two weeks, permitted only to leave their homes for essential items such as food, medicine, and water, or to visit the bank and public toilets. Inter-city travel was suspended for private and commercial purposes, except for essential goods and services. All intra-city travel vehicles were required to reduce their number of passengers to observe social distancing.² Elizabeth Ohene, a retired journalist and politician commenting on the crisis, notes that “there are some things that are sacred in our lives and nobody touches them under any circumstance: Religion, handshakes, and funerals.”³

Not being able to do all three slaps the people twice with two forms of crises: the COVID-19 pandemic and the crisis of restriction on the core of their sociological makeup. For the Ghanaian, there is no such thing as not shaking hands, no such thing as a private burial, and, of course, no such thing as shutting religion down; yet “COVID-19 has taught us to love without hugs and kisses, greet without handshakes, and mourn without a crowd. Apart from the social turmoil, the other

¹ J. Nyabor, “Coronavirus: Government Bans Religious Activities, Funerals, All Other Public Gatherings,” March 15, 2020; <https://citinewsroom.com/2020/03/government-bans-church-activities-funerals-all-other-public-gatherings/> [Accessed March 20, 2020].

² Nana Akufo-Addo, “The President Addresses Nation on Updates to Ghana’s Enhanced Response to the Coronavirus Pandemic,” March 28, 2020; <https://presidency.gov.gh/index.php/briefing-room/speeches/1546-president-akufo-addo-addresses-nation-on-updates-to-ghana-s-enhanced-response-to-the-coronavirus-pandemic> [Accessed March 30, 2020].

³ Elizabeth Ohene, “Coronavirus: Why Ghana Has Gone into Mourning After the Mass Funeral Ban,” March 26, 2020; <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-52010868> [Accessed March 29, 2020].

thriving issue was hunger endured by the many people who survive daily hustling on the streets. A popular social media text message circulated at the time bemoans the 'hunger pandemic' in a sarcastic but thoughtful way. It read, 'there are two forms of viruses in Ghana, the coronavirus and poverty virus, and the latter kills faster than the former.' Social commentaries denote the effect of the pandemic on Ghanaian life. One social tool that has served as a glueing addict to help society cope with the situation is religion.

Religion, particularly Christianity, has become a potent social force in every facet of Ghanaian life, a framework through which an average Ghanaian interprets daily life from family life, economic activities, occupation, health, and education to the future.⁴ In crises, people turn to religion when the very foundations of existence are shaken. Consequently, halting religious and economic activities and a constant reminder that desperate situations call for desperate measures was a blow to Ghanaians. In almost every address to the people, the President of the republic reminded them that "we are not in normal times," meaning they must understand and cope with the situation, insisting that the economy could be recovered, but the dead could not be resurrected. He referred to his Christian affiliation and negotiated with the leadership of the various denominations on the issue at stake, believing that adherents would listen to their leaders and comply with the guidelines. The tone of combating the virus physically and spiritually thus, commenced at the seat of government with a breakfast meeting to which selected heads of religious organisations were invited, followed by a national day of fasting and prayers recommended to all Ghanaians.

Some religious leaders who had a counter idea that the solution to ending the virus lay in going to Church to pray did not take the temporary partial lockdown lightly. Therefore, in a defiant move, Apostle Kofi Nkansah, popularly called Saint Sark of Open Arms Ministry at Kumasi, assembled with his members and was consequently arrested.⁵ His case resonates well with that of others elsewhere. Tony Spell of Evangelical Life Tabernacle Church, Louisiana, defied the lockdown

⁴ Y. Fredua-Kwarteng, "The Potent Force of Religion in Ghana's Economic Development," April 10, 2006; <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/features/The-Potent-Force-of-Religion-in-Ghana-s-Economic-Development-102402> [Accessed April 25, 2020].

⁵ Kingsley, Hope, E. "Ghana: Pastor Arrested for Flouting Ban on Church Service." March 19, 2020. *Ghanaian Times* [Accessed March 27, 2020].

orders and held Easter Sunday services with more than 1300 congregants in the USA. In addition, Bishop Gerald Glenn of the New Deliverance Evangelistic Church defied the order and met his congregation, shouting ‘God is larger than the virus covid-19.’⁶ Despite the resistance, the intriguing phenomenon that ensued was the creative ways various religious leaders devised to meet their members in virtual spaces. Some used the good old radio and T.V. to preach to their members. In contrast, others used contemporary, sophisticated interactive mediums such as zoom, google class, skype, Facebook, YouTube live streaming and videos, WhatsApp video and audio, and phone and phone text messages to reach members. We observed in Ghana that houses of worship quickly adapted to new digital alternatives. Churches such as the International Central Gospel Church (ICGC), Perez Chapel International (PCI), Action Chapel International (ACI), International God's Way Church (IGWC), and Moment of Glory Prayer Army (MOGPA) complied with the directives issued by the government and went virtual. Others, such as the Catholic Archdiocese of Kumasi, did live T.V. streaming of the celebration of the Holy Mass. Some churches, however, defied the rules to hold an in-person gathering and got into trouble with the law. The paper will discuss the data collection of churches, covid-19, the Economy of Religion, Innovations in the church business through Technology, Commodification of the Faith and the State and Religiosity in Ghana.

The Churches

The data was collected on Christian churches during the lockdown in Ghana using cyber ethnography. Meeting with church leaders/pastors and members at their church premises was impossible. The pandemic had put so much strain on people at the time that pastors of the various denominations were extremely busy. They were busy praying with members whose families had contracted the deadly coronavirus and encouraging members who were hysterical in the face of fear. Consequently, we contacted the study participants through emails, Twitter, phone calls, and WhatsApp chats. Participants are made up of

⁶Michelle Boorstein. “Virginia Pastor Gerald Glenn Dies of COVID-19 After Saying ‘God is Larger Than the COVID-19,’” April 13, 2020; <https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2020/04/13/virginia-pastor-church-dies-coronavirus/> [Accessed April 25, 2020].

members and leaders of five Pentecostal-charismatic churches. Okyerefo refers to them as Ghana's New Churches because they are relatively recent in the country compared to the historic mission churches and are steeped in the theology of health and wealth, objects they readily commodify.⁷ The International Central Gospel Church (ICGC), Perez Chapel International (Perez Chapel), Christian Action Faith Ministries (Action Chapel), International God's Way Church (IGWC), and the Moment of Glory Prayer Army (MOGPA) were studied, and their activities monitored through their social media/virtual handles following the governments' lockdown ultimatum. We specifically selected active posters and commenters on their social media platform. Some of them were pastors or administrators, while others were just members. Twenty people per Church were contacted by sending inbox messages. When people became comfortable, they gave us their phone numbers and followed up with calls or simply engaged via WhatsApp. We had an uneven number of respondents distributed across the churches. Eleven (11) people from ICGC responded and chatted with us; seven (7) from Perez Chapel; eight (8) from Christian Action Faith, ten (10) from MOGPA: and four (4) from the International God's Way Church. In all, we communicated with 40 respondents drawn from the five churches.

Pastor Mensa Otobil founded International Central Gospel Church (ICGC) with a philosophy based on Practical Christianity, Human Dignity, and Excellence. The membership is young and educated. ICGC has branches locally in the major cities in Ghana, with over forty churches in the Accra - Tema metropolis alone. ICGC also has international destinations in Europe and the United States and uses the T.V., radio, Facebook and YouTube streaming. Messages are posted on their website and Facebook. There are also several WhatsApp groups of different ministries in the Church, which connect them as subsets of the whole.

The Most Rev. Dr Charles Agyin-Asare founded Perez Chapel International in 1985. In 1994, he moved from Tamale to Accra and in 1997 bought the Meat Marketing Board in Dwowulu that was rebuilt into the famous Perez Dome we see today with a seating capacity of 14,000 worshipers. In 2013, the Church rebranded from WMCI to

⁷ Micheal P.K Okyerefo, "Scrambling for the Centre: Ghana's New Churches as an Alternative Ideology and Power," *Religions* 10 (2019): 3.

Perez Chapel International. Presently, the Church has 530 branches in 22 countries. Accra and its environs have 86 branches. It owns a Precious TV network that broadcasts miracle services in Ghana and abroad. During the lockdown, the Church fell on that and added live Facebook and Youtube streaming and zoom for smaller groups.

Christian Action Faith Ministries, now branded Action Chapel International (ACI), was founded by Nicholas Duncan-Williams in Accra in 1979 after a pupilage under Benson Idahosa in Benin City, Nigeria. ACI was the first Charismatic Church in Ghana, so the founder is often referred to as the father of the Charismatic Movement in Ghana and other parts of West Africa. In 1992 the Church bought land near the airport and built an auditorium called the "Prayer Cathedral." In reality, it metamorphosed from a shed to a hall to its final stage, a 'cathedral.' Action Chapel International has over 300 churches across Africa, Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and North America (action-chapel.net). The seating capacity of the Prayer Cathedral of Action Chapel is 8,000, and they have four services on Sundays. ACI owns Dominion Television (DTV) and used YouTube channels, Facebook, and podcasts to disseminate sermons to their members across the globe during the ban on in-person worship.

Bishop Daniel Obinim founded the International God's Way Church (IGWC) mid-2000s. The spokesperson of the Church would not tell us exactly when but kept saying, "we started long ago."⁸ Obinim rose to popularity through self-proclaimed spiritual powers and extreme Christian practices, which have often sparked national outrage regarding their infringement on the rights of church members. He conferred the title "Angel" and informed his Church in 2016 of his ability to turn into objects and animals and visit people in their dreams. The International God's Way Ministries has three churches in Kumasi, Accra, and Tema, with about 3000 members in the Kumasi church alone. He charges his member's consultation fees and sells religious products at outrageous prices. IGWC owns OB TV used to broadcast its prophetic and healing services. During the lockdown, there were re-runs of past recorded sections. They also posted old videos on Facebook, and a few literate members sent messages to ask for prayers. They use phone calls a lot as their membership has a higher illiteracy rate; they

⁸ Ebenezer Zolo, interviewed granted to G. Nrenzah, May 11, 2020.

call Obinim to offer spiritual direction to them at a fee, and they obligingly wire him the money through mobile money services.

The Moment of Glory Prayer Army, popularly called MOGPA, is led by Rev. Isaac Osei Bonsu (Rev. O. B.), a former Church of Methodist evangelist. He started this prayer group in 1995 within the Methodist church in Kumasi. The leaders of the Methodist Church asked Rev. O. B. to either stop operating the prayer group or denounce his membership in the Church.⁹ He did the latter and launched a full-time non-denominational prayer group. It has membership across Ghana and among the African/Ghanaian diaspora through online and physical worshipping places abroad. The new headquarters is at Mfensi in Kumasi. His group has some presence dotted in cities and towns in Ghana, Europe, and North America, replicating several halls of glory. A typical Sunday meeting at the Kumasi headquarters hosts about 5000 members. The service is broadcasted across Ghana and abroad. The membership is a mixed group of literate and illiterate people. MOGPA owns a T.V. network called MOGPA Aseda TV. Kessen TV and radio are also used to propagate their live services. During the lockdown, the Church used all of its mediums live, as has always been the case. Facebook was used to send messages and prayer topics to members and connect with members. As our data shows, it is interesting that commodifying faith would become such a pronounced development during a pandemic of uncertainty.

The Economy of Religion: Innovations in the Church Business through Technology

In the new global society of COVID-19, the acceptable ‘new normal’ involves following WHO directives and the government of Ghana’s ban on mass gatherings. The abrupt cancellation of in-person worship for churches, synagogues, and mosques worldwide is one of history’s most sudden and widespread disruptions of religious practice.¹⁰ Several religious agitations urged the governments to allow churches to meet to pray to God for healing because humans have sinned against

⁹ Genevieve Nrenzah, “Sacralizing Natural Spaces: Competitive Performances in Contemporary Ghanaian Religiosity,” *Ghana Journal of Religion and Theology* 9 (2019): 66.

¹⁰ MacLeod, G. “Religion-Ally or Enemy of Chang” (Unpublish paper; Center for Religion and Society, University of Victoria, B.C., Canada, March 2001).

God for ills such as LGBT, adherence to false gods, and abortion.¹¹ Their utterances also feed into a narrative that God is above the virus. The other view was that the virus was politically driven to put fear into people casting doubt on the existence of the virus and insisting believers be allowed to serve their God.¹²

It would seem that the religious economy was lurking behind, as could be gleaned from the ensuing reactions of the churches. On May 31, 2020, the President announced to gradually lift the ban on religious activities from June 05, 2020 and directed that only 100 worshippers could congregate in a church for an hour. The directive stipulated that cash offerings, tithes, and all monies were supposed to deposit in a collection box outside the Church before entering the building, strictly following safety protocols. Some churches welcomed this announcement, but most church leaders were concerned with the money, arguing that leaving money outside was unacceptable as thieves could steal it. Some even quoted scripture saying that offerings should be placed on the altar, not outside the Church.

In Nairobi, the Nairobi Times reported that the Conference of Catholic Bishops of Kenya lost over eight billion Kenyan Shillings in offerings since the Church was closed.¹³ Although no such estimates have been made for churches in Ghana, the underlining reasons for pastors resisting the ban on collecting money inside churches in the country appeared to be economical. Many religious institutions in Ghana, particularly the new churches of the Pentecostal-charismatic extraction, exhibit organisational structures akin to business ventures, scrambling for power and wealth.¹⁴ They offer goods and services to clients (church members/subscribers), often-using marketing strategies to recruit more followers. Peter Berger surmises that the relationship between the religious group and pluralistic society engenders a free-

¹¹ D. T. Hill, K. Gonzalez and A. Burdette, "The Blood of Christ Compels Them: State Religiosity and State Population Mobility During the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic," *Journal of Religion and Health* 59, no. 5 (2020):2229-2242.

¹² Hill, Gonzalez and Burdette, "The Blood of Christ."

¹³ Nairobi Times, "Covid-19 on the Cross: How Kenyan Churches lost 8 Billion in Two Weeks," March 31 2020; <https://ke.opera.news/ke/en/religion/987bdbc5e6aadfe7e6d830d7bb1cc1fd> [Accessed April 15, 2020]

¹⁴ Okyerefo, "Scrambling for the Centre," 1.

market situation that aids religious groups in competing for adherents and public patronage.¹⁵

Iannaccone argues that “if individual denominations function as religious firms, they collectively constitute a religious market,” while Stark and Finke see the religious economy as a commercial venture.¹⁶ These theoretical explanations offer an apt description of the contemporary religious landscape of Ghana, where the acts and activities of a good number of churches depict the ‘businesses’ of the sector. Scholars such as Roy Willis and Steve Bruce have opposed the forebearers of the religious economy theory for likening religions to a commodity market situation, pointing out its shortage of selectivity.¹⁷ However, Mathias Opfinger’s market theory versus secularisation concludes that the Religious Market Theory sits on three pillars:

First, a monopolistic church has less incentive to produce high-quality religious goods than churches in a fully competitive market. Second, a monopolistic church can satisfy only a smaller fraction of beliefs than many competing churches. Hence, higher religious diversity should lead to higher levels of religiosity. Third, market forces have crowded out religion, and the development of welfare states reduces the Church’s importance. Many competing churches can supply better social services, which attract more people to each religion.¹⁸

The efforts expended by many new churches proliferating in the Ghanaian religious landscape and their competing interests for membership, mega-church buildings, and the marketing of their services exhibit characteristics of the first two pillars. In contrast, the third pillar does not hold. Market forces have not crowded out Religion in Ghana. On the contrary, Okyerefo has argued that “a good number of the said churches have taken over the premises of collapsed industries, making the churches a symbolic representation of their failure.”¹⁹ By this, he

¹⁵ Peter Berger, “A Market Model for the Analysis of Ecumenicity,” *Social Research* 30, no. 2 (1963):79.

¹⁶ Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, “Religious Economies and Sacred Canopies: Religious Mobilisation in American Cities,” *American Sociological Review* 53, no. 1(1988): 42.

¹⁷ Willis Roy and Steve Bruce, “The Stark-Bainbridge Theory of Religion: A Critical Analysis of Counter Proposals,” *Sociological Analysis* 45, no. 1 (1984): 11-28.

¹⁸ M. Oplinger, “Religious Market Theory vs Secularisation: The Role of Religious Diversity Revisited” (Diskussionsbeitrag, Leibniz Universität Hannover, Wirtschaftswissenschaftliche Fakultät, Hannover, 2011).

¹⁹ Okyerefo, “Scrambling for the Centre,” 3.

means the new churches have assumed the role of Ghana's new industries. Typical of these religious groups, the leader/founder/prophet/general overseer, as they variously describe themselves, is the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and sits at the top management level. The middle class comprises the professionals who assist the manager, younger pastors, trainees, and deacons. The frontline workers - secretaries, cleaners, errand boys, and security- occupy the operation level last. The consumers are the church members.

Religion's two-fold dimensions in Ghanaian society are herein evident, to serve God and man. The firm's workforce must be remunerated for a business to run well. Consequently, the workers' rent, offices, electricity, and water bills all come with a cost that religious leaders must pay. With a shutdown of the Church and members' inability to engage in regular business, the Church was stuck with virtually no income. The religious leaders' fight to defy lockdown directives in the name of 'putting God' high above the pandemic was a manifest reason to stem their struggle to survive the challenging landscape of the business world. It is the mark of a suitable business entity to have a backup plan. To this end, since the government would not budge in receding the ban on religious gatherings during the lockdown, many church leaders and their congregations' found ways of deploying a wide range of digital alternatives to continue providing services to their followers for their returns. Some have even gotten creative with in-person gatherings, turning to drive-in theatres as a safe venue for collective worship in the USA.²⁰ A Pew research reveals that the coronavirus outbreak has influenced the worship habits of Americans in virtual spaces.²¹

The Commodification of the Faith

The intriguing phenomenon was the creative ways various religious leaders devised to monetise the services offered to members. The sale of religious products such as oil, water, bangles, bands, beads, car

²⁰Brenda K. Wiederhold, "Turning to faith and Technology During the Coronavirus Disease 2019 Crisis," *Cyberpsychology Behavior and Social Networking* 23, no. 8 (2020): 503-504.

²¹ Pew Research Center, "Americans Oppose Religious Exemptions from Coronavirus-Related Restrictions," August 07 2020; <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2020/08/07/americans-oppose-religious-exemptions-from-coronavirus-related-restrictions/> [Accessed August 10, 2020].

stickers and wall stickers, scarfs, sprays, and creams, all believed to possess potent spiritual powers that protect members and their families. The sale of such products went up just before the lockdown and afterwards. Adwoa Pokua, a member of the International God's Way Church, headed by Bishop Obinim, remarked as follows:

Sister, the *abayiefor nsuo* (witchcraft water) I got from Obinim protected me from COVID-19. I live next to Sir John's family, so when his sister died, my sisters and I used to go there every day, but we did not know she died of COVID-19 until Sir John died himself. For me, I think it is the spiritual water that we use day and night before stepping out that protects me.²²

When asked whether the money they paid for the religious goods and services was worth it as Jesus offered spiritual power for free, ten of the respondents said they were happy with the cost because they got results from the products they bought from the religious leaders, besides 'pastors must eat.' Below are some of the spiritual products of the churches.²³



The products on display above include bottled water with a photo of Angel Obinim of the International God's Way Church. Others are

²² Adwoa, interviewed granted to G. Nzenzah, July 05, 2020.

²³ Pictures accessed from Angel Obinim facebook: www.facebook.com/profile-php [Accessed April 25, 2020]

some spiritual oils, stickers, hand sanitisers, and armbands for sale to members who swear by the protection these objects offer. MOGPA sells customised hand bands, stickers, and scarves. Other kinds of stuff that are sold in and around the premises like olive oil, water, communion wine, wafers, and handkerchiefs do not belong to MOGPA, but people believe that once those materials find their way to their church premises, they become fortified with supernatural abilities to do everything they believe; it is all by faith.

The mega-churches such as ICGC, ACI, and Perez do not necessarily sell tangible religious products; instead, they impress it on the faith of their members to give more if they wish to be blessed perpetually. For example, in an online sermon on May 20, 2020, Archbishop Duncan Williams said in his sermons, “Your tithe has a special place, and it works against the devil; that is why the devil finds all sorts of arguments against the tithe.”²⁴ He urged his members to contribute generously to fund the churches and pay their tithes in whatever circumstances they find themselves. He continued that the tithe is the only thing that authorises God to rebuke the devourer. Therefore, it is essential to pay your tithe and offerings for God to bless you, as tithe is the only thing a Christian can use to test God. In another sermon, Archbishop Duncan Williams preached, “The power of the seed.”²⁵ Using the analogy of seeds which, when planted, grows into fruits, he told his members to sow seed. He continued that what a person sows is what he will harvest; when you sow love, you harvest love. When you sow money, you harvest money so give because givers never lack. With the strong message on giving in a time referred to by many in Ghana as not 'normal' times and restrictions on face-to-face church meetings, devices were put in place for the faithful who want to be blessed by cheerfully giving to God.

On offerings and tithes, the social media handles of the churches were also awash with advertised mobile money and bank account numbers, as well as other channels for sending offertory and tithes to the churches. Those sophisticated churches whose members were literate

²⁴ Duncan Williams, “Your Tithe Has a Special Place and Works Against the Devil,” May 20, 2020; <https://youtu.be/VRyRB3Khvvo> [Accessed May 27, 2020].

²⁵ Duncan Williams, “The Power of the Seed,” May 23, 2020; <https://youtu.be/tstq5SGnjag> [Accessed May 27, 2020].

encouraged members to get bank apps to transfer their tithes and offerings to the church account without necessarily stepping out of their homes. ICGC, for example, had the following offering solicitation. International Central Gospel Church - Online Giving. Welcome to our online giving portal, where you can make payments using our local (G.H.) or International VISA, MasterCard system, and mobile money (G.H.) system. For Perez Chapel giving is executed through different online payment systems. Tithes donation, for instance, is via the Zenith Bank branch of Dzorwulu. Contribution towards the crusade is through Ecobank and offered via Slydepay. Finally, the Supernatural Empowerment Summit of Action Chapel is via mobile money and bank transfers.

Obinim's IGWC solicited donations via mobile money. Similarly, at the Moment of Glory Prayer Army, the offering to the Church and redeeming one's tithe are made through mobile money and bank transfer. In all cases, the members/clients' offered donations based on their location. Consequently, a potential donor must state which currency they want to donate and follow the instructions.

The elitist Pentecostal charismatic church membership made use of the banking system. The data indicates that about 90% of the educated members work either in the public or private sectors. The churches' giving patterns also depict members' education level and accompanying employment status. The following apps are examples of the various outlets deployed by the churches in soliciting a financial contribution from members:²⁶

²⁶ Pictures downloaded from Online-giving portal of Centralgospel.com ; Give-Perez Chapel-Perezdome.org; Giving offering-Mogpa and Mogpa.org [Accessed May 27, 2020].

From the designed techniques for raising money, we find that the commercialisation of religion during the period of COVID -19 was deliberate. Churches were aware that they would lose money because of the restrictions, and churches are run like companies to emphasise what Stark and Finke mean, so the show must run on the terms the church (company) sees fit to operate. The various ways of accumulating money mentioned above have been developed, especially recently, because of the COVID -19 19 restrictions on face-to-face church meetings. Most churches used mobile money, but in the COVID -19 era, collecting money from members became more sophisticated as face-to-face meetings were impossible. Most preached on this, but others also showed their online money collection points at the end of their sermons so members could do what was needed. Rev.

O B of MOGPA, on April 13, 2020, after a live-streamed sermon and prayer for the nations and the world, ended the sermon with thanksgiving and showing the handles for collecting money. Different numbers for mobile money and bank accounts for the people of Ghana and abroad. Whether the church members would survive the pandemic did not seem to matter to the church leaders, apart from the daily prayers for them, which were supposed to give them spiritual immunity against the virus, prayers for which the members paid in many cases.

This observation can be compared, for example, to the charitable works of the Roman Catholic Church. Some of the public commended the constant action of the Catholic Archdiocese of Accra for donating food and other personal items to the poor, in general, but more intensely during the lockdown. Instead of giving to the poor, most church representatives donated to a government relief fund. For example, the General Secretary of the ICGC, Reverend Morris Appiah, donated GHS 100,000 on behalf of the Church to the National COVID-19 Trust Fund to support the government's fight against the spread of coronavirus in Ghana.²⁷ At that time, church members and other poor people in the society required food and daily necessities that had become unattainable due to lack of money.

Interestingly, churches streamed live services on YouTube, Facebook, and podcasts and asked members to donate as if nothing had happened. The findings from the data show that the churches we studied were interested in their physical survival in the moment and beyond the crisis. We conclude that the spiritual needs of the members were in some way dependent on the physical ones; the leaders tried to reconcile the two, understandably as a business unit. The other exciting issue we wish to note is the state's and religion's interaction during the pandemic.

COVID-19, the State, and Religiosity in Ghana

The raging effect of the coronavirus on the world has been so devastating that people have put a spin with a theological exposition that God is punishing the world just as he punished Sodom and Gomorrah for the evil actions of people. In Ghana, President Nana Akufo-Addo,

²⁷ Ernest Arhinful, "ICGC Donates GHS100, 000 to COVID-19 Fund," April 02, 2020; <https://citinewsroom.com/2020/04/icgc-donates-ghs100000-to-covid-19-fund/> [Accessed April 4, 2020].

who constantly invoked Christianity and came into power with the Christian slogan “the battle is the Lords,” believes that the nation must turn to God for help in dealing with the coronavirus. He, thus, decided to solicit spiritual support from the various religious traditions to deal with a virus that had gotten out of hand despite contemporary advances in scientific knowledge. Invoking God to fill the gaps and spaces in this instance seems practicable, as most religious people would explain strange happenings as the design of God. However, Kojonen points out that the phrase “God of the gaps” (GOG) is understood in many different ways, just as all theistic arguments by some atheists are – “all theistic explanations are examples of GOG, and we should expect science to banish GOG altogether ultimately.”²⁸ Not everyone believes that God controls the world and has a hand in the daily affairs of the world, but those who think it uses it as a framework to understand the situations. The President of Ghana, for example, believed the pandemic could be handled by leaning on God for strength (Religion) and observing all the COVID-19 directives stipulated by WHO (science). In such instances, religion serves a dual purpose of the soul and body or spiritual and physical needs. However, it has sparked a debate in the current evidence-based world that values science and rationality over belief. Nonetheless, “age after age...faith persists with 84% of the world population identifying with a religious group.”²⁹ Religion and spirituality help believers adjust and cope better with crises, such as ill-health. Meanwhile, ahead of the 2020 rise in Religion, PEW had projected 2015 an increase in religion and a decline in non-religious affiliation by 2050 (PEW, 2015). It was, therefore, not surprising that some people worldwide sought solace in prayer for an end to the spread of the virus.³⁰ The benefits of religion are celebrated so much that the American Psychological Association has outlined tips for using religion as a constructive coping mechanism.³¹

²⁸ Erkki V. R. Kojonen, “The God of the Gaps, Natural Theology, and Intelligent Design,” *Journal of Analytic Theology* 4 (2016): 292.

²⁹ Wiederhold, “Turning to Faith;” H. Sherwood, “Religion: Why Faith Is Becoming More and More Popular,” August 27, 2018; www.theguardian.com/news/2018/aug/27/ [Accessed April 24, 2020].

³⁰ Wiederhold, “Turning to Faith.”

³¹ Wiederhold, “Turning to Faith.”

Naturally, calamities, epidemics/pandemics, and events that lead to social change often provoke social-spiritual mechanisms that aid closure or cling to some form of protection from a presumably higher and bigger Being believed to have control over the situation. asserts that “response to anomie and social stress” draws people to religion. Towards the end of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth centuries, several anti-witchcraft shrines emerged because of the social change in Ghana.³² David K. Patterson recounts that during the 1918 influenza epidemic, some saw “the Hand of God at work in the epidemic, and an open-air prayer meeting” was called to deal with its effects.³³ The influenza epidemic that plagued the world occasioned an African invention of an indigenous Christian prophet from Ijebuode in Nigeria, Joseph B. Shadare, who formed a prayer group that offered “spiritual help” against the plague.³⁴ The 1983 drought in Ghana that brought untold hardship led to religious ferment, which we have today. In the same vein, the COVID-19 pandemic is stimulating religious sentiments.

All around the world, people of diverse faiths and groups have devised various “coping strategies, from denial of the effect of the virus to the healing practice.”³⁵ More and more people are accessing religion as it offers social support. Social support eliminates *as well as* reduces the effect of stress experiences. Research has shown that “prayer can make people less reactive to negative emotions and less angry.”³⁶ With a lockdown in most countries, people took to virtual spaces to connect with humans and God. Dan Kraker formed a virtual dance group of prayer to connect with other dancers, but a more significant reason was to involve the wider community. She said, “We were not

³² Elom Dovlo, “The Church in Africa and Religious Pluralism: The Challenge of New Religious Movements and Charismatic Churches,” *Journal of Missiological and Ecumenical Research*, 27 (1998): 53; J. Parker, “Witchcraft, Anti-Witchcraft and Trans-Regional Ritual Innovation in Early Ghana: Sakrabundi and Aberewa,” *Journal of Africa History* 45, no. 3 (2004): 393; T. C. McCaskie, “Anti-Witchcraft in Ashanti: An Essay in the Social History of an African People,” *History in Africa* 8 (1981):125.

³³ K. D. Patterson, “The Influenza Epidemic of 1918-19,” *The Journal of African History* 24, no. 4 (1983): 489.

³⁴ Lamin Sanneh. *West African Christianity: The Religious Impact* (New York: Orbis Books, 1983).

³⁵ Mahsa Alimardani and Mona Elswah, “Trust, Religion, and Politics: Coronavirus Misinformation in Iran.” *Meedan 2020. 2020 Misinfodemic Report: COVID-19 in Emerging Economies* (May 24, 2020); <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3634677> [Accessed June 10, 2020].

³⁶ Wiederhold, “Turning to Faith.”

only dancing for our healing but also to guide our scientists and physicians into finding a cure or help for the people."³⁷

In Ghana, religious groups organised intercessory religious services under the auspices of the state to avert the coronavirus. The act meant that the state added a spiritual dimension to the fight against the pandemic apart from following WHO physical directives. Indeed, the virus was spiritualised by many African states, possibly pointing to a dual cosmology of indigenous African beliefs. Bruce³⁸ set the tone in his message that "just as there are physical viruses (SARS, Ebola, and HIV) that plague mankind at every turn, *spiritual viruses* seek to plague the minds and lives of all true Christians." Duncan Williams, a well-known charismatic archbishop in Ghana, stated in a prayer, "The coronavirus is a name, a person without body and in the name of Jesus, as we bow our knee and we pray, this plague, pestilence, and the virus will bow the knee and stand down and go back to where it came from."³⁹

Somehow, it could be said of the Prez. Akuffo-Addo 'spiritualised' the virus as he called for spiritual tools to combat the virus during a breakfast prayer meeting with the clergy at Jubilee House, the seat of government, on March 19, 2020, to seek God's intervention. He said, "I have called you to this prayer meeting for us to join together and pray to the almighty God to protect our nation, heal this land and save us from this pandemic" (Yakubu, 2020). In a televised address to the nation, the President declared March 25, 2020, as a National Day of Prayer and fasting and appealed to Christians, and Muslims, to observe it "to seek the face of the Almighty...together and by the grace

³⁷ D. Kraker, "Every Step You Take is Prayer: As Coronavirus Spreads, Women Lead the Virtual Dance for Healing," *Pandemic Response and Religion in the USA: Race, Ethnicity, and Gender* December 2020; <https://www.mprnews.org/story/2020/03/17/every-step-you-take-is-prayer-as-coronavirus-spreads-women-lead-virtual-dance-for-healing> [Accessed March 20, 2020]; M. Saud, A. Ashfaq, A. Abbas and Q. K. Mahmood, "Seeking Social Support Through Religion, Psychological Well-being and Social Capital: A Global Survey on Coronavirus Situational Stress and Coping Strategies," 2020; DOI : 1021203/rs.3.rs-67434/v1.

³⁸ Bruce A. Ritter, "The Danger of Spiritual Viruses, Are You Immune," *Pillar* 5, no. 1 (2020); [tps://rcg.org/pillar/0501pp-tdosv.html](https://rcg.org/pillar/0501pp-tdosv.html)

³⁹ Yakubu Nasiba, "Duncan-Williams Declares Thirty-days Fasting, Prayers Against Coronavirus," March 16, 2020; <https://www.myjoyonline.com/coronavirus-duncan-williams-declares-30-days-fasting-prayers-against-coronavirus/> [Accessed March 30, 2020].

of God, we shall overcome, and this too will pass.”⁴⁰ These individual Christians and Muslims voluntarily participated, but priests and priestesses of the traditional African religion were upset at the government for not inviting them to the meeting at the seat of government. They battled their grievances in the media, arguing that three major religious traditions typically feature in state functions, wherefore the complainants would not understand their exclusion this time.

The priests and priestesses of the indigenous religion pushed the position that they have spiritual and physical powers that are key to fighting the coronavirus. They claimed they could battle it spiritually and offer traditional medicine, particularly herbal medicines, which are accessible and affordable, to clear the physical sickness. The striking thing they said was that they had resolved previous pandemics and, thereby, had the prerequisite to fighting the novel COVID-19 pandemic.⁴¹ The government finally gave them an audience to offer libation for the nation at independence square. According to Ntewusu and Nkumbam⁴² pouring libation at the place Ghana gained independence from the British was very significant and symbolic in that "it was an attempt to regain independence from Covid-19", just as the nation did from the British (2020).

Despite the spiritual efforts from all the spiritual quarters of the country, a severe weakness that raises eyebrows regarding the efficacy of those prayers from whatever source is that religious leader, especially self-acclaimed prophets who have been prophesying doom on government officials and celebrities, was unable to foresee to warn Ghana and the world of the impending pandemic. People questioned the potency of religion, especially as espoused by prophets who claim to be the spiritual eyes of the state. In a critique, Fosu-Ankrah⁴³ alleged,

⁴⁰ Communications Bureau, "Let's Seek The Face Of God; This, Too, Will Pass" – President Akufo-Addo On Coronavirus," March 20, 2020; <https://www.presidency.gov.gh/index.php/briefing-room/news-style2/1539-let-s-seek-the-face-of-god-this-too-will-pass-president-akufo-addo-on-coronavirus> [Accessed March 30, 2020].

⁴¹ Samuel A. Ntewusu and Samuel N. Nkumbaan. "Fighting Covid-19: Interventions from Ghana's Traditional Priests," *Religious Matters in an Entangled World*, May 13, 2020; <https://religiousmatters.nl/fighting-covid-19-interventions-from-ghanas-traditional-priests/> [Accessed May 26, 2020].

⁴² Ntewusu and Nkumbaan, "Fighting Covid-19."

⁴³ Joseph Fosu-Ankrah, "Pandemic, Prophets, and Policies: Religio-Satirical Framing of Fear amid 'Corona' in Ghana," *Religious Matters in an Entangled World*, May 25, 2020 ; <https://religiousmatters.nl/pandemic-prophets-and-policies-religio-satirical-framing-of-fear-in-the-midst-of-corona-in-ghana/> [Accessed May 6, 2020].

“politicians align themselves with prophets, especially during election periods. This gives credence to the current popularity of the prophetic institution in the country...sic”, yet none of them saw the calamity coming.⁴⁴

The public has ridiculed prophets and pastors for failing to divine the pandemic ahead of time. Kwaku Sintim Misa, a high-profile Ghanaian comedian, commented on his Twitter handle: “Dear God, on the 31st, you told your prophets about the results of the 2020 election, but you forgot to mention that Corona was coming? Oh, why?”⁴⁵ It raises the issue of the prophets/pastors not just creating sensationalism with their utterances to get “attention and create networks, power, and money.”⁴⁶ What happens is that when a prophet/pastor's prediction manifests, subscribers patronise their facility. The social capital those prophecies contract translates into economic prosperity in that the more people consult the prophet, the more money and fame they get. Religious activities these days are streamed through the media, which feed into the moneymaking avenue of the media as well.⁴⁷ The media comes in handy but not without disadvantages.

Asamoah-Gyadu notes an important development regarding the attention most reputable media houses give to the government's religious activities by broadcasting them live or later in the major news bulletin of the day. In Iran, the Revolutionary Guard (a separate military force from the Iranian national military) and channels affiliated with state news promoted conspiracy theories about the virus, saying it was an attack by the U.S. against Iran.⁴⁸ All of these affirm that the media could aid religion positively or negatively. However, it could be dicey, as religious authorities can falsely believe sacred protection would prevent the virus from spreading in religious shrines. The use of religion in subverting the otherwise heavy load of uncertainty the virus emits psychologically affects the populace, especially if the one

⁴⁴ Fosu-Ankrah, “Pandemic, Prophets, and Policies.”

⁴⁵ Francis Addo, “KSM Mocks Prophets Over Coronavirus,” March 23, 2020; <https://www.ado-monline.com/ksm-mocks-prophets-over-coronavirus/> [Accessed May 25, 2020].

⁴⁶ Fosu-Ankrah, “Pandemic, Prophets, and Policies.”

⁴⁷ J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, “Dealing with a Spiritual Virus: Whither the Prophetic,” *Religious Matters in Entangled World*, April 13, 2020; <https://religiousmatters.nl/tag/j-kwabena-asamoah-gyadu/> [Accessed May 26, 2020].

⁴⁸ Alimardani and Elswah, “Trust, Religion, and Politics.”

encouraging the practice is the country's President.⁴⁹ Furthermore, resist closing the religious facility down, as in the case of Apostle Kofi Nkrumah Sarkodie. He was arrested twice for flouting the no in-person service rule in Ghana because he felt he and his members were immune to the virus.

A pertinent question this article poses is why the President of a secular state would call on religious leaders to help stem the pandemic in the first place. Was this to affirm Macleod's assertion that the "sword and the cross were intertwined"?⁵⁰ Although Italy harbours the mother church, the Roman Catholic, and the Pope, the country tried to stem the pandemic by utilising science, medical expertise, and not religious leaders. What makes it normal for the President representing the state to appeal to religious leaders to help combat a pandemic in Ghana? It has often been argued that religiosity is undoubtedly a factor involved in the "management of health even in today's modern world where it is considered that science has replaced belief system to some extent."⁵¹ In Ghana, religion has been a visible part of the society with a religiously charged media that offers a fertile environment for innovation such as virtual religiosity. Religious and non-religious people connected to deal with the pandemic but also deployed creative means to make money from the situation.

Conclusion

We have shown how religion has played an essential role in both the public and private spheres since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic. In Ghana, state and religious institutions have invoked religion to fight against the COVID -19 pandemic. We also point out that the novel means that churches are using it to raise funds for preserving body and soul.

Perhaps the most worrying observation in this work is that religion is caught in a paradoxical quandary. On the one hand, it is assumed to serve needy people gratuitously to represent its essence as laid down in the Bible and other religious texts. However, in Ghana today, religious institutions, especially the charismatic Pentecostal churches, have taken on business traits where goods and services are sold to the

⁴⁹ Alimardani and Elswah, "Trust, Religion, and Politics."

⁵⁰ MacLeod, "Religion-Ally or Enemy of Chang."

⁵¹ Hill, Gonzalez and Burdette, "The Blood of Christ."

highest bidder. In a crisis like COVID -19, most of them have decided to donate to the government fund rather than to individual needy members and the poor people around their mega-churches. Contributing to the government makes sense because it is part of their advertising and business strategy. The people who watch the television and listen to the radio find out about their government donations. This shows their uniqueness and kindness, but this act could influence them to become potential members.

The other thing is that the media has brought freedom and bondage simultaneously. Fear and panic are being spread in the media within minutes. At the same time, the excesses of some religious organisations are being exposed, taking undue advantage of the pandemic COVID -19. It is also known that the same media provides the opportunity to exploit people, which manifests in how some churches make money from their services. Ghana's media has become fertile ground for the religious landscape, which is why it is worth discussing in another study.

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