

Understanding sexuality from the security gospel perspective: Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries as a case study



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This article examines a new dimension in the Nigerian Pentecostal understanding of sexuality, which is influenced by the security gospel emanating from Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries in Nigeria. This new dimension is noted in how Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries intricately connects sexuality with destiny. This article shows how Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries promotes a conservative understanding of sexuality as the key to securing believers' destinies. Understanding sexuality from the security gospel perspective is an indication that the Pentecostal theology of sex is dynamic and ambivalent, especially when the theology is spiced with African traditional beliefs. This is demonstrated through a content analysis of the teachings and messages of Pastor Daniel Olukoya, the founder of Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries, which are available in print, audio and video clips. It is argued that the persuasive manner in which these teachings are presented tends to create a phobia of sex in the minds of listeners.

Introduction

The influence of the Pentecostal movements in Nigeria cannot be undercut, because Pentecostals have permeated every nook and cranny of the Nigerian religious and political landscape. Pentecostal spirituality was initially attacked, condemned and rejected by main-line Protestant churches as abnormal, excessive and an aberration. However, it has now been embraced by leading Nigerian main-line Protestant churches like the Anglican, Methodist, Baptist and Presbyterian churches to the extent that it is difficult to differentiate between a Pentecostal church and a main-line Protestant church (Ojo 2007:46). Thus, Pentecostal spirituality has been described as 'sources of vitality that mediate God with human lives' (So 2009:250). While commenting on the influence of Pentecostal spirituality in Nigeria, Ojo rightly notes that 'Pentecostalism has become an overbearing symbol of change enhancing and transforming individual world views, relationships among groups, and promoting certain religious values such as progress, peace, retribution, truth, success, etcetra'. (Ojo 2007:54). This explains why the main-line Protestant churches in Nigeria have been massively 'pentecostalised'.¹ Statistically, the Pentecostal movement has also been judged to be the fastest growing religious group in the world. The Pentecostal movement now has the largest population among Christians, having overtaken the Roman Catholic church. The population of Pentecostals was estimated in 2010 to be over 500 million all over the world (Anderson et al. 2010:1).

The indelible influence of Pentecostalism extends to the understanding of sexuality among Christians in Nigeria. Pentecostal leaders are at the forefront of promoting 'Christian sexuality'. They have preached and written a lot on sexual issues such as marriage, sex, dating and sexual behaviour. One of the leading Pentecostal churches in Nigeria is Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries (MFM, as it is popularly known), which was founded in the 1990s by Dr Daniel K. Olukoya. Whereas most Pentecostal churches in Nigeria are known for their emphasis on prosperity and their leaders are branded 'prosperity gospel preachers', MFM's brand of gospel has been recently tagged as 'security gospel' due to the church's teachings, which are drawn from a combination of biblical thoughts and Yoruba cosmological beliefs about the activities of witches and evil spirits in hampering humans' progress. MFM believes that Christians can be secured from the activities of evil spirits by obeying biblical instructions and saying some 'violent prayers'.² The emphasis on security gospel is reflected in the church's teachings on sexuality. Hence, by

1.The term 'pentecostalised' is used by W.J. Hollenweger (2004).

2.The term 'violent prayers' is derived from Matthew 11:12, which says that the violent take the kingdom of God with violence. MFM and other Pentecostals believe that Christians have to offer some prayers violently. This involves shouting and jerking of hands and legs.

analysing some of the messages of the founder of MFM, Dr Olukoya, this article focuses on the understanding of sexuality in MFM. This understanding accentuates the church's firm belief in security theology, which is a combination of African cosmogony and biblical beliefs.

Understanding sexuality from the security gospel perspective, which is the goal of this article, is different from the focus of existing literature on the understanding of sexuality among religious adherents in Nigeria. Ojo (1997) examines how Pentecostal churches impose restrictions on members in their bid to promote sexual purity and observes, perhaps rightly, that such moral codes or restrictions hamper full expression of believers' fundamental sexual rights. Ojo uses Deeper Christian Life Ministries as a case study (Ojo 1997:65–79). Igenzoza (2003) examines polygamous marriage among Nigerian Christians and perceives that some denominations still uphold Western missionaries' approach to polygamists by advising them to send away their wives except the first one. Igenzoza contends that there is no theological basis for such a practice, which Western missionaries erroneously imposed on Africa (Igenzoza 2003:1). In the same vein, Akintunde and Dairo (2011:33–45), Amolo (2006:151–166) and Abioje (2006:80–97) examine sexuality from a theological point of view with the conclusion that sexual purity is the norm found in the Bible. Scholars like Izugbara (2004:7) and Kolawole (2004:251–268) examine sexuality in Nigeria from a feminist perspective and conclude that Nigerian patriarchal society is a threat to gender equality.

Mountain of Fire and Miracles and its theological world view

MFM was founded by Daniel K. Olukoya. Olukoya was born in Ondo town on 15 July 1956 to Mr and Mrs Amos Olukoya, who were members of Christ Apostolic Church (Ajani 2013:80). Olukoya studied Microbiology at the University of Lagos. At the University of Reading, in the United Kingdom, Olukoya got his PhD in Molecular Genetics in 1984 (Omotoye 2011:188). MFM started as an interdenominational prayer group on a Wednesday in Dr Olukoya's living room at No. 3, Edmund Crescent, Yaba, Lagos, Nigeria. The prayer group metamorphosed to a full-fledged church on 24 April 1994, when they had their first Sunday service. The church claims that the name 'Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries' was revealed to Olukoya during a prayer session.³

The church's emphasis on deliverance from evil powers categorises in the rubric of churches referred to as 'Deliverance churches' (Ojo 2010:26). Some of the features of deliverance churches include consideration of African cultural roots as being responsible for the problems in the lives of believers; association of evil with some traditional names; and emphasis on the need to break ancestral or generational curses (Ojo 2010:26). The majority of Olukoya's messages are a clear demonstration of MFM's emphasis on the prevalence of evil

in Africa. As pointed out by Ayegboyin, 'most deliverance ministers in Africa, including the MFM, explain that evil may gain access to some lives through amulets, charms, incisions, tattoos and swallowed concoctions which parents give to or etch on their children' (Ayegboyin 2005:37). MFM cosmology is probably informed by Dr Olukoya's Yoruba cultural background, which stresses the concept of evil and its associated activities in society.

Analysis of Mountain of Fire and Miracles' teachings connecting sexuality with destiny

MFM does not have a clear and specific definition of destiny, but it is understood from the prosperity point of view. A believer's destiny is to prosper in whatever he or she does. Prosperity is seen as the purpose of God for Christians. No believer is supposed to be poor or experience failure in life. Barrenness, failure, sickness, accidents and other misfortunes are not part of God's plan for believers. The biblical basis for this belief is rooted in their interpretation of 3 John 2. The proponent of the prosperity gospel in Nigeria was Benson Idahosa, who was mentored by US televangelists such as T.L. Osborn, Oral Roberts, Gloria and Kenneth Copeland, and Gordon Lindsay (Ojo 2013:14). This belief guides Pentecostals' interpretation of other aspects of human life, including sexuality, which is seen as a key factor in fulfilling destiny. Good sexuality begets a fulfilled destiny. How believers handle their sexuality will determine how far they will prosper in the future. MFM believes that many of the problems that people have concerning their destinies can be traced to their sexuality.

This is reiterated in a message titled 'Dancers at the Gate of Death', where it is stated that '... access to your body is a sacred thing and once you make it loosed, you lose your destiny as well' (Olukoya 2008). By 'access' is meant the human sexual organs. Due to the importance of sexuality to destiny fulfilment, Olukoya does not mince words to condemn sexual perversion. To drive home the message to the audience, Olukoya does not use euphemistic words to describe sexual organs, as is commonly and culturally done in Nigeria. The male sexual organ is called the 'penis' while the female sexual organ is called the 'vagina' in order to express the seriousness and urgency attached to sexual issues.

Two areas of sexuality that attract MFM's attention are marriage and sexual behaviour. The church believes that the decision to marry is an important decision in one's life. Olukoya teaches that 'outside your decision to become a Christian, the next decision is your marriage partner' (Olukoya 2013). The decision to marry determines one's destiny and it is critical. It is believed that the next worse thing after hell fire is a bad marriage (Olukoya 2013).

MFM, in agreement with orthodox Christian belief about marriage, teaches that marriage was instituted by God; therefore instructions for it must come from God. Likewise,

³This is the claim of the church on its website, in the section 'Our History': <http://mountainoffire.org/index.php/2012-10-20-09-36-37/overview>, viewed 29 January 2013.

one should not be influenced by the flesh in choosing a marriage partner. Marriage should be between a man and a woman, not a man and a man, nor a woman and a woman. The church also teaches that marriage is meant for those who are physically, materially and spiritually mature. The minimum age for marriage is 21 for a man and 18 for a woman (Olukoya 2013).

Marriage is recommended as a way out of lust and sexual sins, especially for those who are mature enough to get married. The church believes that the unmarried should pray before choosing their partners, as this will help them to avoid marrying witches or destiny destroyers. Women are not supposed to find or look for husbands; it is men who should be looking for them (Olukoya 2013). The church condemns cohabitation among the unmarried and will even decline to participate in the naming ceremony of children who are born from such relationships. The church believes that it is better for the unmarried to remain single than to marry an unbeliever. Premarital and extramarital sex is frowned upon in the church because sex outside marriage is a killer and it has successfully destroyed millions of destinies (Olukoya 2012a:9). Apart from this, 'immorality and sexual intercourse outside marriage attract strange spirits that move from one person to the other' (Olukoya 2012b:91). Contrary to the popular practice among Christians, MFM does not use wedding rings in joining couples together because, as Olukoya puts it, 'wedding rings can be stolen, wedding rings can be jinxed, wedding rings can be manipulated and the origin of it is questionable' (Olukoya 2013). All the rules set to guide marriage are meant to secure believers' destinies. As noted above, having sex outside marriage is a sure way of destroying one's destiny. Olukoya recommends deliverance for those who have had sex outside marriage (Olukoya 2008).

Polygamy is totally prohibited in MFM and no known polygamist can become a pastor or worker in the church. Even if a polygamist were to divorce all his wives except the first one he would not be allowed to be a worker in the church, contrary to practice in denominations like the Deeper Life Christian Ministries and the Redeemed Christian Church of God (Olukoya 2013). The children of wives other than the first wife cannot be christened by the church because such children are regarded as 'bastards'.

Polygamy is also regarded as a manifestation of marine spirits. It is the first source of marine bondage. In Olukoya's (1999) words:

Polygamy is a common African practice, especially among riverine communities. Hardly can you find a man who practices monogamy among those who come from riverine areas. For people from those areas, monogamy is an abomination rather than the norm. What do you expect from a man who has six wives? You can be sure that at least one of them is a member of the marine kingdom. If you visit their homes, you will see that all the wives are sharing everything in common. Their children also share everything in common. Such a situation is a breeding ground for multiple demonic bondages. As they share everything, they also become initiated. (pp. 58–59)

Olukoya also believes that people from riverine areas do not always have settled homes because the sexual organs of most of their men contain 'demonic deposits' that make it difficult for them to stay with one woman (Olukoya 1999:8).

MFM further teaches that sex was designed by God. Just like every other thing God created, sex was very good and is still very good as long as one follows God's commandments on it. God created sex for procreation and companionship in marriage. Sexual intercourse in the confines of marriage attracts God's blessings, but when done outside marriage, it brings plenty of problems, woes, tragedy and even death to those involved (Olukoya 2008). It is likened to atomic energy, which is very useful and contains immense power but when misused may have damaging consequences. Sex is not the forbidden fruit of the creation story. The problem that people have, according to Olukoya, is that they do not want to obey God's commandments on sex. Hence, the whole world has been polluted with sexual sin (Olukoya 2012a:20). Sex is more than a physical union of the sexual organs of the body. It has spiritual implications. Olukoya (2012a) teaches that:

Immediately you complete the act of sexual intercourse with someone, you have a bonding with the person: whether you know him or her or not, like him or her or not; it does not really matter. There is a bond already in existence and it can cause the transfer and exchange of both curses and blessings ... It can bring barriers, death, and prevent marriage. (p. 21)

He gives about 100 reasons youths must abstain from premarital sex. Some of those reasons are highlighted here. The first reason is that God, the designer of sex, reserves it for marriage. The second reason is that sex with a person creates emotional and spiritual bonding. When one has sex with another person, there is a transfer between the two parties: all the good and bad luck will be transferred. There is also a soul-tie with the person (Olukoya 2012a:57). This, according to Olukoya, brings misfortune to people who engage in extra or premarital sex. Another important reason is the need to avoid sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and death from STDs. Apart from this, most children born through premarital sex are already in the covenant of fornication, which requires deliverance in order to avoid the steps of their parents in future. Congruent to this is the fact that most children born through premarital sex do not live long, and if they do they are not perfectly cared for and loved by both parents (Olukoya 2012a:27–104).

Furthermore, in the message titled *Dancers at the Gate of Death*, Olukoya lists about 50 sexual sins that people commit that can bring indelible and protracted problems into their lives. Such problems require 'deliverance sessions'⁴ to be free from their consequences. Some of the acts Olukoya mentions as sexual sins include oral sex, masturbation, bestiality (which also includes sleeping with teddy bears), incest, paedophilia, fornication, adultery, prostitution, lust, premarital sex, having boyfriends or

⁴'Deliverance Sessions' refers to a special prayer common among Pentecostals wherein demons are cast out with loud prayers and speaking in tongues. It is believed to be efficacious in exorcism.

girlfriends and pornography, among others. These sexual sins cause believers to lose their glory and are the major reasons why Nigeria is having problems as a nation. Olukoya alleges that Nigerian political leaders, in whose hands are the destiny of the nation, are fond of sleeping with prostitutes. Hence, they rule the country with demonic powers, which they have acquired through having sex with possessed girls (Olukoya 2008). This means that prostitutes are carriers of demonic powers and anyone who has sex with them will contact demons. In this sense, demons are likened to STDs that one can get through sexual contact with the carrier.

Sexual sins are also linked with marine spirits, which the church strongly believes are common in the riverine areas. It is a common belief in southern Nigeria that there are marine spirits in the riverine areas. Marine spirits are believed to be spiritual powers that reside in the water, ocean and sea. They have interactions with human beings and can cause havoc in the lives of their acquaintances. Traditionally, it is believed the spirits appear in human form, especially as women. The spirits are called 'mummy water' spirits (or *Ogbanje*) in south-eastern and south-southern Nigeria, while they are known as *emi omi* [spirits of the water] among the Yoruba in the south-west. Apart from this, communities that are surrounded by rivers have a goddess associated with each river. Thus, Yemoja and Osun are the goddesses of the sea and the Osun River, respectively, among the Yoruba people, while Oya is believed to be the goddess of the Niger River. Among Pentecostals, marine spirits are believed to be malevolent and are believed to be the principal demons in charge of adultery, fornication, abortion, incest, homosexuality, lesbianism, pornography, polygamy and other sexual perversions (Olukoya 1999:57). To substantiate this assertion, Olukoya notes that many of the women and men who come from riverine communities are loose sexually (Olukoya 1999:36). Hence, marriages are generally unstable in the area. Members of these communities are often sidelined in life (Olukoya 1999:36). Some of the women who are possessed by marine spirits are married in the spiritual realm. Thus, they always give their earthly husbands problems. Olukoya (1999) admits that people are not aware of the activities of marine spirits:

Survey the entire complete range of calamities, e.g. accidents, deaths, failure, bankruptcy, divorce, sicknesses, misfortunes, sudden loss of valuable properties, unexplainable attacks and other embarrassing life situations, you will discover that most of them are planned and executed by marine spirits. (p. 4)

Apart from this, it is alleged that some of the people on the streets today are partly human and partly fish, especially if they are exceptionally beautiful. Such women have serpentine spirits inside their reproductive organs (Olukoya 1999:14). Olukoya notes further that 'most of the attractive women which litter our streets are from the marine kingdom. They are exceptionally beautiful. Some of them are so beautiful that they do not appear natural at all' (Olukoya 1999:17). Men who have sexual intercourse with them will lose their blessings and may not fulfil their destinies in life. The only solution for such people is 'deliverance'. In addition:

many of the women from riverine areas who are extremely beautiful find it difficult to get married while their counterparts who are ugly easily find husbands. Such women wonder why they have such strange experiences. (Olukoya 1999:40)

Some of the signs exhibited by people who have been inflicted by marine spirits include seeing dead people in a dream, returning to one's village or town in a dream or dreaming about one's former house or school (Olukoya 1999:37).

Sexuality and destiny are inseparable. Success in life depends on how people handle their sexuality. For those who have committed any sexual sins that have damaged their destinies, MFM has special prayers they can say to be delivered from misfortunes. They must first of all confess their sins before they proceed in their prayers. Samples of the prayer points are as follows:

- Blood of Jesus, correct my past, in the name of Jesus; in any way that my past is attacking my star, my Father, manifest your power and deliver me, in the name of Jesus; I break loose from the yoke of marital failure in the name of Jesus.
- Every witchcraft of infirmity planted in my body to prevent me from getting married, be ejected by the blood of Jesus, in the name of Jesus.
- Anything planted in my body by the spirit husband or wife, die, in the name of Jesus.
- I receive my healing by fire (*say it 30 times*), in the name of Jesus.
- Curses and covenants of satanic delay, issued against my marriage, break, in the name of Jesus (Olukoya 2012a:135–136).

These prayers are meant to be said violently. Olukoya notes that waging war against the forces of marital delay, for example, can only be done through aggressive and violent warfare prayers. The prayers must also be accompanied by fasting (Olukoya 2012c:195). To believers in the security gospel, marital delay is beyond ordinary. It is caused by either a demonic power or generational curses. Social and economic factors are not considered as causes of marital delay.

An appraisal of Pentecostals' beliefs about sexuality and destiny

As noted above, MFM's connection of sexuality with destiny is informed by the church's emphasis on deliverance and the security gospel. Deliverance churches believe that there are evil spirits armed to destroy people's destinies. The spirits manifest in various ways and one can only be set free from them through deliverance ministration by a deliverance minister. Deliverance churches get their beliefs about evil spirits hampering believers from Yoruba cosmology (Ayegboyan 2005:38–39). Some of the assertions made by MFM have their origins in Yoruba or African beliefs and not from the Bible. For instance, there are cases of people being possessed by demons in the Bible, but none of them are believers. The idea that a believer (whose body is the temple

of God, according to 1 Cor 6:19) can be possessed or be controlled by demons is not found anywhere in the Bible.

Similarly, the concept of marine spirits is foreign to Christian theology. There is no single reference to such a concept in the Bible. Likewise, there is no biblical or scientific evidence to support the claims that beautiful women are marine spirits or that marine spirits are responsible for mishaps in society (Akintunde & Ayantayo 2008:94–96). Olukoya, despite being a scientist, does not provide any statistics to prove that people from riverine areas are more promiscuous than people elsewhere. Theologically, it is believed that God created everything that is beautiful, including beautiful women. The teachings also raise questions on how to differentiate the activities of human beings from the so-called marine spirits. Who is to be held responsible for misfortunes people suffer? Other claims by MFM that are based on the African cultural world view are the view about wedding rings and the belief that prostitutes are carriers of demons.

That having sex is more spiritual than physical is a belief commonly held among Christians in Nigeria and this is based on an interpretation of 1 Corinthians 6:16. Arising from the interpretation of 1 Corinthians 6:16, Olukoya concludes that sexual intercourse brings two people together into a spiritual union. This is a misinterpretation of the text, in which Paul talks about a conjugal union and not a spiritual union (1 Cor 6:12–20). Paul and other New Testament writers believe that sexual immorality is morally wrong and believers who engage in it need repentance and not deliverance ministration (cf. Rm 1:24–32; 1 Cor 6:9–20). Keener (2005:58) provides good background information on 1 Corinthians 6:12–20, which establishes the fact that having sexual relations with a prostitute is having a physical union with the prostitute, that is, becoming one flesh with the prostitute. Keener also emphasises morality as one of the reasons Paul admonishes the Corinthians to flee immorality. The claim that there is a transfer of power or destiny from one person to another, as alleged by Olukoya, is difficult to substantiate theologically. Hence, the whole idea of sex being a determinant of one's success in life is not biblical. In other words, there is no place in the Bible where sexuality is linked with destiny. If the assertion were true, people like Judah, Moses, Rahab, David, Solomon and the Samaritan woman would not have been given the attention accorded them in the Bible.

Conclusion

As noted above, MFM's view on sexuality is deeply rooted in traditional African beliefs and practices. In traditional African society it was believed that misfortunes were caused by evil spirits. Hence, sacrifices were offered to the gods to attract their favour and security against malevolent spirits (Awolalu 1979:137). MFM believes that deliverance and aggressive prayers are the solutions to all the problems that arise from sexuality. Olukoya's teachings are always saturated with stories and testimonies of those who have been victims of

sexual immorality. Due to Olukoya's eloquence and the emphatic and graphic manner in which the teachings are presented, one cannot but develop a phobia of sex. Even though most of Olukoya's claims cannot be proved theologically or scientifically, the testimonies that accompany them are strong enough to create fears in such a way that one will want to make a vow of celibacy. There is no doubt that the intention of such teachings is to encourage sexual purity among young people. Is the MFM rhetoric linking sexuality with destiny working? Are Pentecostal youths and adults faithfully abiding by the teachings of their churches on sexuality? These are possible areas for future research on sexuality and Pentecostalism in Nigeria to focus on. The focus of this article is on the rhetoric of sexuality from the security gospel world view.

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