

THE RE-READING OF THE NEW TESTAMENT BY AFRICAN PENTECOSTAL CHARISMATIC CHURCHES WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF HIV AND AIDS

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Abstract

When, in spite of evidence-informed biomedical facts that HIV has, to date, no cure, individuals give testimonies of miraculous healings on the basis of a reading of selected biblical texts and discontinue antiretroviral therapy, it raises critical questions that certainly warrant scholarly inquiry. This is the primary focus of this paper; it is not about the truth or falsity of miraculous cures from HIV but acknowledging the visibility of a growing phenomenon characterising neo-Pentecostalism in Africa today. To argue my case, I revisit the place of the Bible in the spiritual lives of faithful believers against the background of a changed religious landscape - the availability of antiretrovirals and advanced scientific discoveries on the management of HIV and AIDS. The idea is to reason out why beliefs in miraculous cures from HIV persist to this day given that people openly disclose their sero-status during televised healing ministries as a strategy to receive their blessings (cf. James 5:16) and testify of the total eradication of the virus from their bodies on the basis of texts such as Mark 5:19 and 2 Timothy 1:8. I therefore see those texts emphasising a renewed commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour (Mark 9:23; 10:52; Luke 8:50; James 5:14-15; 1 Peter 2:24; etc.) for healing as the basis of unyielding interpretations embedded in a re-reading of the New Testament. This is an understanding that reinforces those "pinnacles of faith moments" orienting believers towards deferring coping strategies within the context of HIV and AIDS. I conclude by taking the position that, the theological thinking of neo-Pentecostal Churches is one of the greatest challenges of the millennium heightening the polarisation of messages communicated about the epidemic in Africa today.

Key words: Charismatics; false negative; HIV; miraculous healings; neo-Pentecostalism; proximity seeking behaviour; viral load; defective theology

Introduction

The paper is about the interpretation of the Bible particularly selected New Testament texts by religious organisations within the context of HIV and AIDS in Africa. I give special attention to neo-Pentecostalism and by this I mean those Christian organisations classified by writers (Martin 2002; Asamoah-Gyadu, 2005) as Pentecostal Charismatic Churches

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(PCCs). The paper primarily focuses on this religious group because followers believe in signs, miracles and wonders as manifestations of spiritual gifts (Charismata) of the Holy Ghost (Martin, 2002). In addition, some of the defining features in the faith and practice of PCCs relevant to this discussion are that of speaking in tongues – glossolalia - like what happened on the Day of the Pentecost as reported in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 2:1-4 cf. 1 Corinthians 12:1 – 14:40), the casting away of demons and the so-called Gospel of Prosperity (Martin 2002). Prosperity theology is basically a promise for abundant blessings – increased health and wealth – to those who give back generously their material possessions to the house of the Lord (Mbuga, Maura, *et. al.* 2015). By so doing, PCCs teach, are planting the seed and would reap abundantly when the Lord blesses them by doubling their wealth and health in the here and now. This teaching is partly rooted in Jesus’ statement that “... everyone who has given up house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or property, for my sake and for the Good News, will receive now in return a hundred times as many houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, children, and property—along with persecution” (Mark 10:29). In this paper, I illustrate ways in which the presence of HIV has shaped the theology and response of PCC to the epidemic at a time when drugs that can only suppress the virus not to degenerate into AIDS have been discovered. I demonstrate how scientific research on HIV and AIDS has shaped the theological thinking of those churches over the past three decades.

As I have said before, the paper specifically focuses on PCC because this brand of Christianity has developed a very distinctive theology of the virus, its diagnosis and management. As previous studies have shown, “[r]eligious leaders may give advice that reinforces or contradicts the prevention messages articulated by the government, international NGOs, and local health organisations” (Tirinapoli, 2011). This is not true for all religious organisations but is characteristic of some PCCs in Africa today. My interest in PCCs was generated in 2009 when I attended a conference at the School of Oriental and African Studies in the United Kingdom. In that conference, a renowned researcher from the United States of America presented a paper on healing techniques in religious organisations across the world, from Shamanism to prophetic deliverances in Christianity. For the first time ever, I did appreciate that ill bodies can do the unthinkable in search of health and protection from malicious spirits. In light of this, I examine ways in which PCCs have grown to be “the third therapeutic system” (Manglos and Tiritapoli, 2011:7) and one of the greatest challenges to best practices in HIV-AIDS management in Africa. To do so, I begin by looking at the reception of HIV and AIDS in their talk and how this understanding has “become powerful images in the religious imagination and has influenced theological interpretations of the way God deals with humanity” (Jonsen., Stryker, 1993). The point I make is that religious ideas about the epidemic have influenced and continue to influence the way people think of the virus to this day.

Data and Methods

To argue my case, I use testimonies of miraculous cures from HIV that are posted on the churches' official websites⁵⁸ and videos on YouTube.⁵⁹ I also use print media collected over the years and postings on social media such as WhatsApp, Facebook⁶⁰ and Twitter.⁶¹ In addition, I use what I have personally watched on television channels over the years from 2008 to the present. I would, in the process, take down the biblical texts cited by the charismatic prophet-healer and those giving testimonies to justify miraculous cures from HIV. Part of the primary data are also from the widely-publicised healing ministry of the Synagogue Church of All Nations broadcast on DStv channel 390 every Sunday between 3:00 p.m. and 6:00 p.m. In-depth interviews were used to gain insights on what people think of faith healing in the context of HIV and AIDS. I personally interviewed informants and all interviews were audio-recorded on consent. Those interviewed were purposively selected on grounds that informants are followers of a given PCC or in congregation-based networks of believers. The reason was to collect first-hand information on their views on miraculous claims of cures from HIV. The interviews were carried out on one-to-one basis in order to understand ways in which the Bible shapes their thinking in the presence of HIV. The names of People Living With the Virus (PLWV) in the public domain are given in some cases. For ethical reasons, the names of informants and/or places mentioned, in some cases, are withheld or assigned pseudo names in the write-up.

HIV and AIDS discourse in Pentecostal Charismatic Churches

From the outset, the church, especially Pentecostal Christianity "adopted a wait - and -see policy" (Parsitau, 2009:45) in its engagement with HIV and AIDS. This is partly because the church "often connected AIDS with sin, and church leaders tried to distance themselves and their churches from people living with the virus" (Paristau 2009: 50). Jonsen., Stryker, *et. al.* (1993) attribute this position to "Old" Testament ideas about catastrophic events in the lives of the covenant community. They write, "[t]he Hebrew scriptures (Old Testament), also revered by Christian faiths, contain many references to plague and pestilential disease, often in the context of divine wrath and punishment (Gen. 12:17; Lev. 26:6,21,25; Num. 8:19; 11:33; 15:37; 25:8; 31:16; Deut. 7:15; 28:22; 2 Sam. 4:8, 5:6; 2 Sam. 25; Jer. 21:6, 33:36)"

⁵⁸ T. B. Joshua Ministries. (2018). Official website Retrieved from [www. Scoan.org](http://www.scoan.org)

⁵⁹ Emmanuel TV. (2018, February 9). A cure for the incurable: Dealing with the HIV demon. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6cNgE518Xt4>

⁶⁰ T. B. Joshua Ministries. (2018). Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/tbjministries>

⁶¹ T. B. Joshua Ministries. (2018). Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/scoantbjoshua?lang=en>

(Jonsen., Stryker *et. al.* (1993). The point made is that the text in Exodus 9:14 which reads "[f]or now I will stretch out my hand, that I may smite thee and thy people with pestilence" (9:14) is one of the bases for the defective theology of HIV from the beginning (Jonsen., Stryker *et. al.* 1993). For that reason, HIV was viewed as a curse because there was no known way of preventing AIDS. Once a person lives with the virus, it would degenerate into AIDS leading to death. They have, Amanze (2000) posits, entered into a covenant with death! Then what is it that believers must do to have life and have it abundantly? The only immediate response was that people must refrain from pre-marital sex (cf 1 Cor. 7:2; 6:18; Heb. 13:14), be faithful to their spouses and practise chastity (ABC) as a panacea against HIV.

The response that faithful believers have to obey God's commandment by abstaining from sex outside marriage (see Genesis 2:24-25; 1 Corinthians 5:1; 6:18-20; 7:2, 8-9; Galatians 5:19-21; 1 Thessalonians 4:3-5; Acts 15:19-20) is not the final word today. This partly explains why, today, the use of condoms is no longer condemned as before in most religious organisations. The case of the Roman Catholic Church is a case in point (Kelly 2009). However, the thinking that HIV is a curse for sexual sins has not totally died away. This is because, one of my informants in white-garment apostolic churches said:

John: Look, in our church we marry many wives and as you can see (pointing to three wives and seven children), we are all healthy. None of us has the virus because I am faithful to my wives. What can you say about that? Don't you think that the Lord is communicating a message to the people?

Me: I see, you all look healthy but have you all tested of HIV?

Esiteri: (First wife intervening) Why should we? There is no reason for doing so because our husband is faithful to the five of us We are also faithful to him.... We have not been to the hospital in all our lives The Bible prohibits blood tests ... blood is life. (Personal communication, December 12, 2017).

This is also true for the understanding of the disease as a plague heralding the apocalyptic end of the world (Genrich and Brathwaite 2005; Ruth., Denis and Dijk 2009). In an interview, it also emerged that HIV and AIDS are considered as epidemics of the end times in some religious communities:

Mavis: Why is it that there is no vaccine for the virus today? I have even buried many people who were taking ARVs I can count ... one, two, three, four We must return to the Lord for the prophecies of the old that, in the end times, there will be incurable diseases are being fulfilled. Now it is Ebola and there are earthquakes, wars and disasters everywhere killing people. We are living in the end times I tell you Our priest is the last priest (Roughly in the seventies according to the informant) before the Lord comes. (Personal communication, December 12, 2017).

The reasoning of this informant is that nothing has changed; is of the belief that HIV and AIDS are telling signs of the Last Days, the denouement is approaching!

However, with the discovery of ARVs, ideas of HIV as a curse from the spiritual world for sexual sins are slowly weakening and disappearing. How would one explain this development? It is arguable that religious ideas about HIV and AIDS are closely associated with advances in scientific knowledge about the virus and the disease. The reason being that, from the beginning, HIV and AIDS were understood as one and the same thing as People living with HIV would eventually succumb to AIDS. There were no ARVs by then and the hopes for a vaccine are frustrated by the secrets behind the origin and prognosis of HIV. When faithful believers died of AIDS, religious organisations were constrained to refine ideas of seeing AIDS as a fulfilment of the prophecy by Jesus Christ that “there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and pestilences; and there will be terrors and great signs from heaven” (Luke 21:11). Now it is almost four decades and AIDS is no longer one of the leading killer diseases given that people can live positively with the virus for the rest of their lives.

In light of this discovery, PCCs have come up with a new theology of the virus. The explanation is that the Lord answers the prayers of the faithful. This is a common belief in PCCs as the man of God proclaims: “Where can sickness hide? Where can disease hide? Where can affliction hide? I order the disease to go....”⁶² From what the charismatic healer says, the disease is personified; is interpreted as an agent of the evil one – of Satan! And this belief, has led to the understanding of HIV in some PCCs. In one of the most publicised miracle crusade under the theme of Judgement Night, a Zimbabwean prophet prayed over the sick “casting out the HIV demon” (Zimbabwe Mail, 2014). This is also true in the Synagogue Church of All Nations in which the charismatic healer has “a cure for the incurable: Dealing with the HIV demon”.⁶³ From such statements, one could see where these ideas are emanating from: Is an “attempt to understand and answer this question, the so-called problem of theodicy, is a perennial endeavour for believers and nonbelievers alike” (Jonsen., Stryker, *et. al.*, 1993). The reasoning is like, it is a demon that comes and goes! To this end, it is evident that a re-interpretation of memories of epidemics in Christian and Jewish religious history “have become powerful images in the religious imagination and have influenced theological interpretations of the way God deals with humanity” (Jonsen., Stryker, *et. al.* 1993).

⁶² Emmanuel TV. (2018, February 9). Be healed of every sickness. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2P4L6ohE-u4>

⁶³ Emmanuel TV. (2018, February 9), A cure for the incurable: Dealing with the HIV demon. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6cNgE5I8Xt4>

The New Testament and miraculous healing within the context of HIV

In a healing crusade, a very popular prophet claimed that "[a]fter this oil touches your body, all diseases will go, even HIV and AIDS. Death will also go!" (Rupapa and Shumba, 2014). Such claims dominate the healing spaces of PCCs in Africa today:

My name is --, I am -- years old and I have been living with HIV for -- years. I am here to confess what the Lord has done to me. His name is Jesus Christ...Whatever situation you are in, you will be healed. My favourite verse is [to cite one example] James 5.13-15 which says "Are you suffering? Call the elders of the church to pray for you and you will be healed"⁶⁴

The claims of miraculous cures from HIV are reinforced by clinical tests. The person comes to the church with a medical report confirming the presence of the virus in the body. The man of God prays over him or her and then returns days later with a medical report indicating sero-negative results displayed alongside HIV positive results.⁶⁵

Most recently, the founder of the Prophetic Healing and Deliverance ministry announced that God showed him Aretha-Aguma as the vaccine for HIV: "God has given me a revelation, we tested it and it's perfect. God showed me a certain tree and a certain people. We have found a cure for HIV and AIDS" (Mabhena, 2018). And how would one explain these claims? My paper is not about the truth or falsity of miraculous cures but to acknowledge the visibility of a growing phenomenon characterising neo-Pentecostalism in Africa today. Of my primary concern is to make sense of those claims in the background of scientific and religious constructions surrounding HIV and AIDS.

In the previous discussion I mentioned that the body is believed to be under attack from the demons - Satan and allied forces (see 2 Corinthians 4:4; 12:7; 1 Peter 5:8) out to thwart God's beautiful plan for humanity: "I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). This is the main reason why Jesus healed people of various diseases and demons: "...many who were possessed with demons, and he cast out the spirits with a word, and healed all who were sick" (Matthew 8:16). The Church is the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:17; Ephesians 5:23; Colossians 1:24) and Christians, are God's children living under the guidance of the Holy Spirit (1 John 4:4). To this end, the children of God cannot be under oppression by the devil forever. They have to "Be loosened! Be free! In the name of Jesus..." (Tofa, 2014). We can make sense of those within the context of an all-powerful God, beliefs in demons and demon-possession. The reasoning is something like: Are HIV and AIDS God's will and for what purpose? This presents a theological dilemma and PCCs see HIV as a manifestation of the works of the evil one. To this end, in PCCs' healing ministries, lines were drawn between the forces of darkness and God's faithful servant(s). It does not matter where you are: "Viewers, receive your own portion, in the name of Jesus! Are you on the sickbed? Wherever you are and wherever your affliction or disease is located, I

⁶⁴ Testimonies of this nature are common in the healing ministry of the Synagogue Church of All Nations broadcast on DStv channel 390 every Sunday between 3:00 p.m. and 6:00 p.m.

⁶⁵ Emmanuel TV. (2014, September 31). Healed of HIV. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nvS1dVuPdVI>

command them out, in the name of Jesus! Dry bones - rise again!!!⁶⁶ In the posting the prophet healer also commands "Every sickness and disease, wherever it is located - BE REMOVED, in the mighty name of Jesus Christ!" - T.B. Joshua.⁶⁷ To which followers, quoted as is, respond:

Rofiat Olorunlogbon: Amen any diseases in my body, husband body, daughter body and that of my family be removed ijn I receive my healing in Jesus mighty name, no more hypertension, no more pains again am free ijn. Spirit of anger, fight and hot tempered be removed ijn amen, Save delivery is my portion in Jesus name Amen.

Celeh Pule: Amen in the mighty name of Jesus Christ...I receive my healing, deliverance, breakthrough, success, I am free in Jesus name and my family is also free from poverty, lack of jobs and diseases in Jesus name.

As simple Google search on official websites reveals that testimonies of this kind are numerous and I have selected these for the purpose of discussion. From the postings, it is evident that followers believe that they received instant healings from whatever condition that was frustrating a full celebration of life. The question that arises is: What can we say of these claims?

The answer is partly embedded in the belief that God is involved in the lives of the peoples and taking the word of the man of God seriously is some kind of proximity seeking behaviour (Ellison, 2014:212); an attempt to have a safe haven in a world that is otherwise a wilderness. By following the prophet and physically going to church or following postings on social media, adherents seek some kind of attachment with God in the manner we build intimate relationships with the significant others – the man of God in this case. This kind of behaviour, as the postings indicate, produce positive psychological outcomes – the belief that believers are covered by the blood of Jesus. To this end, prayers “in the context of a secure (as opposed to insecure or avoidant) relationship with God – an ideal attachment figure – may offer greater emotional comfort, resulting in more favourable mental health outcomes” (Eliot, 2014:214). The point I make here is that, research has shown that “in almost any society, around twenty per-cent of diseases are primarily psychological” (Bourdillon, 1993:100) and for all physical illness, the psychological state of the person is very critical for quick recovery. It is also true that psychological stress impacts negatively on the body’s immune system which, in turn, reduces the body’s ability to cope with any disease. What this means is that drugs work effectively when one is in a sound mental state. In this regard, PCCs’ theology of HIV bolsters pro-active coping strategies when combined

⁶⁶ T. B. Joshua Ministries. (2018, September 6). Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/tbjministries/videos/dry-bones-rise-again-tb-joshua-prayer-for-viewers/1052517881574932/>

⁶⁷ Ibid.

with anti-retroviral therapy. The danger comes when PLWH discontinue ARVs on the belief that they are completely healed from the virus:

Tendai: My brother, it really pains me. I do not know why even educated people believe that they can be healed of HIV when they join those churches. My close aunt, who was a Lecturer at a university with a Ph.D tested positive to HIV. We did everything possible to support her and I personally accompanied her to the local clinic where she received medication. She got better after some time but when she joined – church, she discontinued ARVs and joined their school in (country). The next thing I heard was that she was no more. It pains me (zvinondirwadza) and I do not know why people believe in that teaching. (Personal communication, January 15 2017).

The message communicated in Pentecostal Charismatic Churches: “with Christ all things are possible” is certainly “the third therapeutic systems” (Manglos and Trinitapoli, 2011) in as far as it promotes positive living. The claims of instant cures from HIV on the basis of those texts emphasising a renewed commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour (Mark 9:23;10:52; Luke 8:50; James 5:14-15; 1 Peter 2:24; etc.) are unyielding interpretations embedded in a re-reading of the New Testament. This is an understanding that reinforces those “pinnacles of faith moments” orienting believers towards deferring coping strategies within the context of HIV and AIDS. This is because, biomedical research has shown the HIV progresses in three stages: acute; chronic and AIDS. At the first stage, the virus replicates in the body rapidly and as HIV progresses to the chronic stage, the virus replicates less rapidly and the viral load drops only to increase at the AIDS stage. When one is on ARVs, depending on one’s immunity, the viral load could drop to undetectable levels. HIV test may be a false negative. What this means is that ARVs do not eradicate HIV, the virus is present in the body and accelerates into AIDS if one stops taking medication.

To this end, the belief that in Christ all things are possible: “He disarmed the principalities and powers and made a public example of them through over them in him” (Colossians 2:15) are etiological ideas associated with ill-bodies extended to HIV in some PCCs. What we see today is a paradigm shift in the understanding of the virus and the disease. Those primitive theologies that associated HIV with “immoral behaviours involving sex and prostitution, and religious leaders often preached that AIDS was a punishment from God for sexual sin” (World Bank 1997 in Paristau, 2009:5) are waning given the presence of ARVs. However the fact that there is no cure for HIV, PCCs, on the basis of a literal reading of the “Old” through New Testament, make sense of the epidemic in the framework of the core beliefs in Christianity: that with Christ all things are possible. This is a message of hope and keeps the people engaged as we wait for a breakthrough in HIV research, treatment and management posing great danger when faithful believers discontinue ARVs.

Conclusion

From what I have said, it is evident that the understanding of HIV in PCCs is closely associated with clinical research on the virus and the disease. At a time when there were no ARVs and many people were succumbing to AIDS, it was a curse. With the arrival of ARVs, HIV is personified as a demon and is exorcised by Pentecostal Charismatic healers. These notions are reinforced in the talk and symbols performed during healing session. The charismatic leader, I have observed in the healing channel on DStv 390, performs symbolic acts such as talking to the demon or perform incantations to drive away the evil spirit. In response, the demon screams or wiggles out in submission and “departs from this body!”⁶⁸ Days-or-weeks-or-years later, the individual returns to the church to give a live testimony detailing how he/she was miraculously healed of any medical condition including HIV. I see those testimonies as attempt to present themselves as faithful believers and great Christians: Jesus said, “Were not the ten cleansed? Where are the nine? Were there not any found to return and give glory to God except this foreigner?” (Luke 17:17-18).⁶⁹ On this belief, they return to “to your home, and declare how much God has done for you” (Luke 8:39). They, in their understanding, return to the man of God to give glory not to him but to God: “Beware of practicing your piety before men in order to be seen by them; for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven” (Luke 8:38). To prove that they have been healed, PCCs leaders use medical reports as a way to prove that those discoveries show that God has intervened but humanity is failing to realise that the prayers of faithful believers have been answered. The message that prayer is the panacea for HIV is one of the greatest challenges of the millennium heightening the polarisation of messages communicated about the epidemic in Africa today.

⁶⁸ The catchphrase is commonly used in the healing ministry of PCCs.

⁶⁹ The prophet healer televises testimonies of total deliverance during the Sunday services every week which are documented on the said websites.

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