



# Nimi Wariboko's *The Pentecostal Hypothesis* and African Pentecostalism during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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## Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has altered the world in significant ways just as it has opened new vistas of thought in both secular and religious circles. This article is situated within the frames of African Pentecostalism, which found itself in a gap during the lockdown in early 2020. This 'gap' is grounded on Nimi Wariboko's *The Pentecostal Hypothesis*, which I use as a theoretical framework to interrogate how the African Pentecostal churches, which inadvertently found themselves in a 'gap' responded to the predictions that Africa would be the most hit by the pandemic, and how it also impacted on their teaching and praxis. The thrust of *The Pentecostal Hypothesis* is the creation of, and insertion into, a gap between sense and spirit, and how such a gap creates an opportunity for meaning-making: "It does not make sense, but it makes spirit." That is, even though something may not make sense on the basis of scientific data and rational argument, there is a sense in which appealing to spiritual data, it will still be meaningful. In order to achieve this, the author adopted interpretive method, a qualitative method that helps to engage Wariboko's social-theological worlds of the Pentecostals within the context of COVID-19. Through this method, we analyze the responses of African Pentecostals and attempt to validate them against *The Pentecostal Hypothesis*. It was thus observed that many Pentecostals' theological explications of the COVID-19 pandemic cannot pass as absolute epistemology of the pandemic as some of them assumed. Consequently, it is concluded that there is the need for a constructive engagement so that sense and spirit can be utilized for human flourishing in a pandemic or crisis situation.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Pentecostalism, prosperity gospel, health and wealth, sense, spirit.

## Introduction

In envisaging a "new normal" in Nigeria, for instance, a country that has been deeply infested and riddled with inveterate corruption, Hoffmann and Patel (2017:4) posit that there must be a wide-scale change in behavior of the majority of people rather than a few who believe that change is possible. The new normal they spoke about in 2017 is different from the global experience of the new normal in the context of the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. But what is common to both contexts is that there must be behavioral change: in the context of corruption, a deliberate rejection of all forms of corruption in order to have a robust economy, while in the context of COVID-19, observation of all health protocols to keep safe and adjusting continuously to the new reality. Of course, things can longer be done in the same way they used to be done. The COVID-19's new normal does not only affect the secular space, but also the religious sphere. The two



spaces – secular and religious – have different, contentious, and yet synthetic, way of dealing with the COVID-19.

Many works on COVID-19 pandemic have focused largely on how churches responded to the pandemic in terms of transmission from physical to digital services. Although the digital turn occasioned by the pandemic has been of great interest for scholarship and praxis, it shows how sacraments that were once exclusively administered in person suddenly transformed into digital mode. The care for members of local assemblies also featured prominently in the growing literature of church and the COVID-19 pandemic. However, in this article, I argue that there are gaps: first, gap between the secular and religious (in fact, Pentecostal) responses to COVID-19; and second, the Pentecostals' stance in the gap between 'the sense and the spirit.' These two gaps are important in understanding how some African Pentecostal leaders responded to the COVID-19 pandemic particularly during the lockdown between March and October 2020. In the first instance, that is, the gap between secular and Pentecostal leaders, the argument is that the COVID-19 pandemic is first and foremost a political rather than health or religious issue.

The authority to act does not depend on even health leaders who are considered to be in the frontline nor on the spiritual leaders who believe in divine intervention, but political authorities who determine how the former two, that is, health workers and religious care givers, should, and in most instances, must respond to the pandemic (Wild-Wood et al., 2021). As Lee (2020) puts it, "COVID-19 isn't simply a medical or epidemiological crisis; it is a crisis of sovereignty." No other example drives home the authorities of the political than the declaration and enforcement of the lockdown order in order, as it were, to curtail the spread of the virus. The political decision to shut the space is based on sense data, that is, scientific evidence obviously produced by the World Health Organization (WHO) that declared COVID-19 a pandemic. WHO (2020) warned that the pandemic would affect the world in ways that were unprecedented particularly then (during the first wave) in the absence of vaccine. Consequently, consistent with the new normal, a set of protocols had to be announced in line with medical (scientific) means of keeping the population safe from the devastating consequences of the pandemic.

It is also argued that the Pentecostal brand in Africa did not have systematic or uniform responses to the pandemic. The Pentecostal churches had in some instances challenged the authorities of the government as it relates to freedom of worship, thus provoking church and state debate. Some of the leaders of the churches view the pandemic in eschatological, satanic, and secular lenses and as a ploy to undermine the relevance of the church in global space. These ended up in conspiracy theories that further questioned the Pentecostal understanding of the pandemic (Aluko, 2022). The Pentecostal churches also synthesized both sense and spirit in their dealing with the pandemic thus creating and stepping into gaps. In the next section, I explicate the theoretical anchorage of this article, especially the concept of the gap in relation to 'making sense and making spirit' as articulated by Nimi Wariboko.

### **Theoretical Foregrounding of the Gap**

Nimi Wariboko, who proposed the Pentecostal hypothesis, is a professor of Social Ethics in Boston University, United States who is also described as "the first global philosopher of Pentecostalism" (Oliverio Jr., 2018: 41; Falola, 2021: 8). While many scholars of Pentecostalism have devoted quite a number of volumes to Pentecostalism, focusing on its historical development, ethos (Adedibu & Igboin, 2018) and progressive theology and its criticisms (Kakwata, 2017; Ukah, 2020; Adedibu et al., 2021), Wariboko engages in philosophical argumentation and socio-ethical canons, using mostly continental philosophy of religion as his framework to dissect Pentecostalism, particularly African Pentecostalism.



According to Wariboko (2020: ix), “The Pentecostal hypothesis is the capacity to resist conventional wisdom in personal decision-making.” Conventional wisdom generally entails the long-standing rudiments of thinking, speaking and acting. To do anything outside this regime is thought of as unconventional, unscientific, sometimes uncivilized and therefore, unacceptable. To swim against this tide is not only a function of capacity, as Wariboko thinks, but also of courage to resist the consequences of resisting the regime in the first place. As Wariboko (2020: xv) makes clear: “It-does-not-make-sense means the particular action (decision) the believer is taking is not premised on human promise, which is usually plagued by uncertainty, slipperiness, and ambiguity. It-makes-spirit signifies the yea-and-amen certainty, unambiguity, and unshakable promise of God (2 Corinthians 1:20).” Human promise would connote human sense as the foundation for decision-making. The basis of that sense, which is usually argued to be open, accessible and common, has however been contentious from the perspective of those who tend to swim against its tide, because it is viewed and even prescribed as the sole and sure basis for the production and comprehension of decision and meaning. But both extremes – sense and spirit – cannot be validly sustained by the Pentecostals; they have to step into the gap, the split between them. This is why Wariboko (2020: 1) states that the Pentecostal hypothesis stakes the interaction of both sense and spirit for a singular goal: human flourishing. In a more elaborate way, Wariboko (2020:2) defines Pentecostal hypothesis as:

The capacity to constitute alternative ways of knowing. Broadly conceived, it is the way by which Pentecostals engage the world (their social realities) and the depths of their religious existence. It is a form of interpretation that enables Pentecostals, amid multiple options, to know what is the most fitting decision (action) relative to their interest and commitment to Christ. This interpretation is put into play every day and it is either confirmed or disconfirmed, reinforced or corrected.

What can be gleaned from the amenability of the Pentecostal hypothesis is that even though it is not an absolutized way of knowing, it is a disruptive, and yet an integrative way of knowing. It is a disruptive way of knowing because it does not fit into the Enlightenment rationalism and its regime of secular humanism that occludes all other forms of knowing from the realm of meaning. Resisting this logic is a courageous attempt to disrupt the patterned and instructed formula of reasoning into which everyone is expected to follow in order to make sense and be sensible. Pentecostal hypothesis is an integrative way of knowing because it does not exclusively rule out the exercise of sense, but also appeals to spiritual data when and where necessary to make sense or meaning. This integrative way of knowing is not self-serving; it is geared toward human flourishing. Although the integrative way of knowing may not be considered as universal, it is nonetheless a critical method of knowing for the Pentecostal whose everyday life experiences are thought not to derive exclusively from sense data. In addition, there is not confusion in the interpretation of everyday experiences of the Pentecostal whether or not such experiences are interpreted in terms of integrative knowing or exclusively through spiritual data. But the challenge, as we see later, is when to rely on sense data, spiritual data or integrative data, with particular reference to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In developing the Pentecostal hypothesis, Wariboko has endeavored to situate the daily life and experience of the Pentecostal in concrete terms: lived experience. In his *Split God*, for instance, Wariboko (2018) carefully elucidates the orality of African Pentecostalism and how and why the Pentecostal does not only believe in a God who has the powers to perform miracles, but also actually performs them abundantly and endlessly. He argues that the Pentecostals’ everyday practices are expressions of their belief in God of health and wealth. Thus, during worship, Pentecostals literally summon God into an arena of contact and encounter where God becomes



split and, in his split-ness manifests himself in ways that meet the variegated existential needs of the worshipers.

The God who is summoned in prayers and deliverance services pressed to perform endless miracles, and solicited in daily lives is alienated, separated, split from his substantial content, from his divine attributes, properties. Then by the sheer power of faith, persistent prayers, and name-it-and-claim-it techniques, these attributes as carriers of God's power and presence are summoned as partial organs to work independently of God himself (Wariboko, 2018: 2).

The import of a split God, according to Wariboko (2020), is that different aspects of God are believed and held as individual deity rather than an organic being/whole. This delicate theological-philosophical conception of God has to be understood from the lens of the Pentecostal as a hypothesis waiting validation or disconfirmation. Thus, this split literally results in many gods in a God; wherein "each aspect of the divine personality is seen as a separate deity" (Wariboko, 2018:124). Wariboko carefully elaborates this thought in the following argument:

In the notion of the split God, 'parts,' dimensions, signature traits, and attributes of God are separated from Godself and treated as self-standing rather than being in an organic simple world. Pentecostals have generated too many 'powerful gods' from God the Father as a result of isolating certain qualities of God and treating them as deities. They have projected their epistemological limitation about knowing God, their knowledge of ontological incompleteness to God.... Pentecostals hold that there are gaps in knowledge, reality, and God; these gaps become the foundation for miracles in a universe that is itself incomplete (Wariboko, 2020:133-134).

This notion of a split God is very well instantiated in Pentecostal worship. Worship, for the Pentecostal, as Grant (2018:47) observed in his fieldwork in Rwanda, is a journey from terrestrial to celestial realm, secular space to spiritual arc, sense to spirit; leaving behind the material and cleaving to the ethereal. As a journey, it starts with recognizing one's unworthiness before the divine, gravitates to purifying oneself through repentance and reaching the altitude where the divine presence is encountered and experienced. This last stage or state is where the divine responds to human yearnings in ways that are thought to be unspeakable. This state of inexpressibility produces and emits powers, divine powers that worshippers crave for, and also practically bring them to divinity, literally speaking. Although Pentecostal worship is largely framed in terms of unstructured and cacophonous rhythm, there is a sense in which it can be thought to have a direction and goal.

The purpose of performing worship, particularly in a participatively electric manner is to translate from communal level to an ultimate presence; the gap in transitioning and translation is the very place where the Pentecostal hopes to meet with the divine. Grant (2018:49-50) expresses this view further when he writes: "By going through a specific pattern of praise and worship songs, one oriented oneself and one's body toward God.... The desired goal of praise and worship was to dwell in God's presence, and it was here that divine intervention in one's life was possible." This is what Butticci (2016:121) regards as mysterious "wonderment and visionary ecstasy" where the enduring experience of the mystery of the presence of God is made real in worship, provisioning a sort of the contact zones that makes more sense in the tension warped in presence and immersion of the aesthetic order. This mystery of presence resonates with the contending voices of the solicitous worshipers. The absence of abundant miracles during the lockdown, from this point of view, one can hypothesize, could perhaps be located in the absence of corporate worship.



According to Asamoah-Gyadu (2021a:196), the idea of a split God is uniquely Pentecostal. Unlike the established churches and their leaders, Pentecostals make sense of what “critical philosophy and critical theory” would pass as “nonsense and powerless.” Pentecostals’ unorthodox concept of God is radical on the one hand, and “incomplete” on the other. Expectation and production of miracles in the Pentecostal world as the hallmark of Pentecostalism have resulted in many criticisms and theological arguments in non-Pentecostal circle. Ukah (2021) criticizes the Pentecostals’ excessive belief in the production of miracles as evidence for the presence of God, which makes God an instrument for human utility while the miracles are idolized. This split God, Ukah argues, is in dire need of rescue because Pentecostals’ obesity with miracles does not make sense in a world that requires human decision and impact to change or make it better. According to Ukah (2020:430),

African Pentecostalism, especially the prosperity variant, has been at the forefront of promising to make its members healthy and wealthy through divine means. How the theology of plenty and healing has practically improved the economic and therapeutic systems of Africa is a question of debate.... The COVID-19 pandemic presents an important challenge but also an opportunity to test the doctrines and claims of pentecostal leaders.

In addition, Ukah (2021:211) conceives of Pentecostalism as “a religion of miracles; believers expect and claim to have experienced miracles as a common occurrence in their everyday life. The miracle is an anchor for practice and behavior, not just belief and opinion.” The material expectation and production of miracles also highlight a split or gap between “Spirit and spirit,” where much emphasis is placed on material evidence of spiritual inversion (Acolatse, 2021:234). But what is evident is that the Pentecostal stands, inserts and mediates between the Spirit and spirit; standing in the gap between the Spirit and spirit brings to them the sense of satisfaction of God’s presence as well as belief in the material manifestation of the Spirit. The split between the Spirit and spirit is critical to the Pentecostal because it does make spirit, though it may not make sense to those outside the Pentecostal circle.

More specifically, Wariboko argues in his *The Pentecostal Hypothesis* that there is a gap between sense and spirit. According to him, the sense conforms with factual or scientific ways of reasoning whose conceptual schemes follow a defined pattern that excludes or excuses the transcendental realm. Generally, when people say something does not make sense, they mean that a statement, decision or action does not follow a particular rule of logic or rudiment that humans have set. In other words, “it-makes-sense in this context refers to the secular conception and practices of knowledge that hold that knowledge is generally available and accessible to all, whereas it-makes-spirit refers to an alternate conception and practices of knowledge that are embodied and generally not available to everyone” (Wariboko, 2020: xiv).

As noted earlier, “it-does-not-make-sense means the particular action (decision) the believer is taking is not premised on human promise, which is usually plagued by uncertainty, slipperiness, and ambiguity. It-makes-spirit signifies the yea-and-amen certainty, unambiguity, and the unshakable promise of God” (Wariboko, 2020: xv). Thus, if a decision or action does not make sense in the secular logic of sense-making, such decision or action in the perception of the Pentecostal does not become automatically meaningless. The Pentecostals appeal to another basis of meaning-making, which they refer to as “it makes spirit,” the spirit rather than sense becomes the ‘logic’ through which their decision or action is explained and rendered meaningful. In appealing to the spirit, the Pentecostal is creating and stepping into a gap between the sense and the spirit. This gap is embodied in Christ: “Christ is the sense of the spirit and the spirit of the sense. Christ is the referential ideality of Pentecostal sense of existence, the ultimate goal of the praxis of the spirit, and the model of the finite human being living in the infinite.... It-makes-spirit





is the revelation (pneumatological imagination) of the Holy Spirit in the inner life” (Wariboko, 2020: 5).

The spirit is not an absolutely impersonal or incorporeal being; it can be processed or it processes its data using the human mind that is open to it (John 16: 12-16). It is in this sense that Wariboko (2020:5) conceives the spirit as “a set of concepts, ways of proceeding, logics of discernment, or creative self-interpretations of themselves that is used to organize their worldly sensations or information about the world.” This is what he refers to as “spiritual data,” which stands against conventional wisdom or sense data (Wariboko, 2020: x). The Pentecostals insert themselves in this gap to ask what is at stake as they tune to a different wave of knowing. Pentecostal epistemology becomes instantiated in this sense because it uncloses the Pentecostal perception, thought process, moral-political rationality, and thus creates and maintains a gap that privileges their appeal to spiritual data, which ultimately leads to human flourishing. Spiritual data is nuanced and transposed into the public sphere despite the fact that most secular thinkers would argue that it is or should be private data. “The gap between the phenomenal and noumenal realm must be recognized as being there to be transgressed with the appropriate tension. Spirit without bodies abolishes both the tension and the gap, bringing the two realms in the same plane” (Wariboko, 2014:123).

Sense is construed in temporality while spirit has ultimacy. A new temporality can be constructed in which the Pentecostals can stand to act or negotiate between sense and spirit. The gap between sense and spirit becomes important because it is the space where time and timelessness meet; it is the site of human-divine encounter where the Pentecostals squeeze themselves to experience the ultimacy. Here, liturgical structures collapse and the Pentecostals “are oriented to the extraordinary as mundane and in which miracles can be experienced” (Wariboko, 2011: 99).

In sum, the Pentecostals believe that while sense is important for human beings to make some judgement or decisions, spirit also helps in the same direction. In fact, where the former does not seem to shed light on the literality of the scripture, it is to be suspended in favor of the latter. This, it must be emphasized, does not immediately rule out the possibility of complementarity of sense and spirit. For example, Knibbe’s (2020) “Wash your hands and be washed in the Blood of the Lamb: Pentecostalism and Corona in Nigeria” articulately underscores this complementarity. The metaphor and literality of washing one’s hand as prescribed by health experts based on sense data in order to prevent contracting COVID-19 does not vitiate or invalidate the belief in the efficacy of being washed in the blood of the Lamb for the Pentecostal. While the first ‘wash’ deals with sense data, the second ‘wash’ deals with spiritual data – the invisible washing of the sins of the penitent and the belief that the blood could prevent or heal COVID-19 patients. It thus suggests that while Pentecostals hold on to their belief in the efficacy of the blood of the Lamb to wash away their sins or even heal them, washing their hands helps them to maintain healthy life (Adogame, 2022). After all, why will one want to be sick in the first place when one can practically avoid being sick, and thereafter begin the process of “militarized prayers” for deliverance from sickness?

However, at first, it appears that it-makes-spirit is subjective; it is a private possession of the Pentecostal. In fact, it-makes-spirit is a choice that is legitimate within and outside the Pentecostal community. The seeming subjective choice is enacted as the Pentecostal interacts with others in the secular space, holding onto their belief. “The many voices in *The Pentecostal Hypothesis* echo dialectical spirituality, dialectical philosophy, dialectical Christianity, even dialectical Pentecostalism, all toward the symphony – human flourishing” (Igboin, 2022a). As it will be made clearer later, the utterances that Pentecostals make resonate in public sphere, and they often attract responses from secular authorities (Obadare, 2021). Thus, it-makes-spirit does not override sense; it sometimes appropriates the sense data to embody its significance. It is this



conclusion that opens up the gap that exists in how the COVID-19 rhetoric between the scientific sense-world and Pentecostal spirit-world in Africa can be explored and perhaps negotiated. This will be foregrounded on the fiery predictions and counter prophecies during the outbreak of the pandemic.

### **Predictions, Prophecies and the Gap**

As stated earlier, the COVID-19 pandemic is first and foremost a political rather than medical or religious issue. It is partly for this reason that governments at national and international levels took it upon themselves to take critical decisions, sometimes ostensibly based on scientific advice, to prevent or curtail the spread of the virus. For WHO, the pandemic should be conceived in purely scientific ways; in other words, to ascribe it to extraneous provenance would complicate its understanding and possibly tackling it. This becomes important given the religious or spiritual explanations that have also been given to the outbreak of the virus. Zizek, for instance, dismisses the belief in supernatural explanation, claiming that COVID-19 is purely a natural occurrence. According to him,

However, we resist the temptation to treat the ongoing pandemic as something that has a deeper meaning: the cruel but just punishment of humanity for the ruthless exploitation of other forms of life in the earth. If we search for such a hidden message, we remain premodern: we treat our universe as a partner in communication. Even if our very survival is threatened, there is something reassuring in the fact that we are punished (or even Somebody-out-there) is engaging with us. We matter in some profound way. The real difficult thing to accept is the fact that the ongoing epidemic is a result of natural contingency at its purest, that it just happened and hides no deeper meaning (Zizek, 2020:14).

Zizek (2020:14) hinges his position on COVID-19 above on his argument that creating a void is a fantasy and it tends towards “the abyss of a pure act.” To explain the occurrence or outbreak of COVID-19 in a supernatural rather than naturalistic way is to avoid responsibility, “with the terrible burden of freedom and responsibility for the fate of divine creation, and thus of God himself” (Zizek cited in Moody, 2014:114). Since there is “no big Other to provide the ultimate guarantee, the ontological cover for the subject’s decision,” humans, at least, in this case of COVID-19, should act “to avoid the void that signals the groundlessness of autonomy” (Zizek cited in Moody, 2014:114). Many African Pentecostal leaders did not have a united voice on the origin and understanding of the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the widespread acceptance that it originated from Wuhan, China, such physical etiology hardly satisfied some of the Pentecostal leaders’ yearning for explanation of why the pandemic must take place at all. Despite the historical fact that the COVID-19 was not the first pandemic the world would be experiencing, some of these Pentecostal leaders had to, at least, step into the gap to proffer their understanding of the pandemic. One of the most prominent explanations of the COVID-19 was that it corresponds with the mark of the beast (666) in Revelation 13:15-18. They quickly even worked out the mathematics to the effect that corona equates the mark thus:

C - 3

O - 15

R - 18

O - 15

N - 14

A - 1

6 - 66 = 666 (Aluko, 2022:9).



Pastor Chris Oyakhilome's 5G technology was the most controversial of the explanations of the pandemic. Oyakhilome, the founder of Christ Embassy argues that the powerful nations of the world had concluded plans to establish a new world order. In order to effect their plan, there was the need for a global shut down so that they could install and activate the 5G network, and once the vaccines were produced, all those who would take it would automatically be monitored through the chip. The vaccine, the argument goes, is a chip deliberately created to enable the superpowers monitor the inhabitants of the world. It is also a manifestation of the Christian eschatology toward the reign of the anti-Christ. Despite the vim with which Oyakhilome propagated his pseudo-scientific theories, some African Pentecostal leaders stoutly criticized his position as false (Aluko, 2022; Adelokun, 2022).

Between the naturalistic thesis of the origin of COVID-19 and the Pentecostal explanations lies what Zhou, Tan and Liu (2020:544) refer to as "a new-type coronavirus of unknown origin." Zhou, Tan and Liu do not explain what precisely they mean when they posit that COVID-19's origin is unknown. However, their position opens up new 'gap' of interpretation that borders on the political and medical; the tendentious political relationship between the US and China and the position that COVID-19 is a "medical myth" (Bolarinwa, 2020:30). By maintaining this position, Zhou, Tan and Liu inevitably evince an argument in defense of the position of Chinese government to impose stringent measures to curtail the spread of the virus, measures which raised critical human rights issues in the West. According to Zhou, Tan and Liu (2020:544), "When China's COVID-19 epidemic governance has been very effectively implemented, it will be shifted from an innovative to non-innovative field, i.e., from exercising the right to be wrong to that to be right. Conversely, if China's program is not implemented and the COVID-19 spread, it will be regarded as a violation of people's right to life, freedom, and property in non-innovative fields." Simon (2020) and Zizek (2020) also express this notion of rights. Simon puts it thus:

One of the consequences – and one of the most discussed ones – is that the restrictions taken by authorities in order to ban the virus producing inevitably a trade-off between freedom and safety, notable of health safety; in other words, granting more freedom means providing less (health-) safety and vice versa. There is a consensus in the discussions that this trade-off can pose a serious threat to human dignity and human rights, in that freedom is generally seen as the indispensable foundation of human dignity, while safety, on the other hand, is considered a basic need that serves as a condition for freedom and therefore, in turn, is a fundamental human right (Simon, 2020:445).

In fact, the gap created by the two positions above are filled by Pentecostal interpretations or what has been referred to as spiritualization of the pandemic as divine punishment from God (Bolarinwa, 2020: 31), "a test from God" (Stack, 2020), an end-time final warning to humanity, a demonstration of God's omnipotence or sovereignty, a global conspiracy (Adelokun, 2022) and so on. The battle metaphor that often resonates with Pentecostal theology is again emphasized in the conception of COVID-19, namely that the pandemic is a spiritual evil that needs to be battled spiritually through violent prayers. This introduces Manichean dualism: the forces of good versus evil, but in reality, it totally does not provide for separation of State and Church as in some cases in Africa, where political leaders even became spiritual, standing in the gap between the political and the prophetic (Kirby et al., 2020). These interpretations are contentious even though they seemed to have satisfied some segments of the Pentecostal bloc, at least, during the lockdown. However, the critical questions these Pentecostal interpretations raise border on philosophical and theological ones because if God were to punish the whole world with the COVID-19, it would be necessary to know what particular sin it was being punished. In addition, would God demonstrate his sovereignty in the world by a pandemic? "One of the great temptations is to





consider COVID-19 a punishment for some transgression.... To claim it is a punishment raises serious challenges in terms of identifying the sin and proportionality of the punishment” (Goshen-Gottstein, 2020:13).

Moreover, the question about the goodness of God in the face of the intractable problem of evil of COVID-19 is not only an intellectual one, but also a practical one. Everyone who experiences evil (in this case COVID-19), suffering and pain, especially unexplainable one, is bound to ask deep questions. Such questions often border on God’s existence, goodness, power and so on. For the sceptics, God’s existence, goodness, omnibenevolence and omnipotence are incompatible with the volume of evil human beings face daily. On the other hand, it may be asked, does the presence of evil presuppose the non-existence of God? Does God have purpose for humanity and yet permit evil to bring about that purpose? How does one reconcile the problem of evil with the problem of good? In this case, how do we explain the position that for God to demonstrate his power over the world, he must allow coronavirus? What happens if God’s power is not recognized eventually by those who believe that COVID-19 is purely a natural/medical or scientific concern, that requires vaccine rather than divine intervention? (Igboin, 2022b). For the purpose of this present work, Goshen-Gottstein’s position would suffice, namely; “the answer is not the rational answers we give” to these mounting questions (Goshen-Gottstein, 2020:13).

Perhaps, countenancing the parlous state of medical facilities, inveterate corruption, widespread conflict, insurgency, terrorism, poverty and political ineptitude that currently engulf much of African continent, WHO’s Director General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus predicted that Africa would be the most hit by the pandemic. According to him, “The best advice for Africa is to prepare for the worst” (Omanga, 2020; Adelokun, 2022). Ghebreyesus’s sobering prediction and warning was re-emphasized with imaginary graphic depiction by Melinda Gates who says: “I am worried.... I see dead bodies in the streets of Africa” (Omanga, 2020; Adelokun, 2022). In addition, the International Director of SOS Children’s Villages in Eastern and Southern Africa, Senait Bayessa also predicted that “Africa will be the hardest hit by the impact of the outbreak.” In the same vein, the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) predicted that there would be about 3.3 million deaths and 1.2 billion infections throughout Africa (Adebowale, 2021). With this dangling axe of the COVID-19 pandemic hovering over Africa portending an inevitable fall; the concern for the rest of the world was how to deal with the consequences of the pandemic in Africa rather than prevent the catastrophe. These predictions could have also resulted from historical experience: the 1918-20 Spanish flu that claimed the lives of an estimated number of 500,000 Africans (Heaton, Matthew & Falola, 2014).

These predictions did not resonate with the Pentecostal spirit even though they were grounded on medical or historical facts. For the Pentecostals, to accept such prediction was to lose faith in the God of miracles. This is why they argue that the pandemic would not have its epicenter in Africa, which according to them, is God’s home. In other words, these Pentecostal leaders were of the view that Africa would be fortified against the devastating effects of the pandemic because God has special interest in the continent. T.B. Joshua, the founder of The Synagogue Church of all Nations, for example, prophesied that the pandemic would disappear on March 27, 2020, a prophecy that elicited ‘thunderous’ Amen from his congregation. Pastor Joshua emphasized the point that Nigeria would be safe and the whole world would be cured of the virus. However, after the date he prophesied that the pandemic would disappear passed and the pandemic persisted, he re-adjusted his prophecy, positing that he meant that COVID-19 would by that date be halted in Wuhan, where it broke out, an adjustment that was followed with vehement backlashing from the public (Adelokun, 2022, Aluko, 2022). Of course, many people did not take that prophecy seriously given the nature of the pandemic. This is despite the fact that the country has been known for its notorious belief in prophetic declarations by religious leaders. Pastor Enoch Adeboye, the General Overseer of the Redeemed Christian Church of God, one of the fasting



growing Pentecostal churches in Africa, also responded that such a prophecy was not genuine because, for him, the pandemic would only subside globally but would be “around for a long time” (Alao, 2020).

Bishop Oyedepo of the Living Faith Church International (aka Winners’ Chapel) also dismisses the predictions that Africa would be the most hit by the pandemic. According to him, statistical evidence has demonstrated thus far that Africa is the least affected because God has fortified the continent against the pandemic’s invasion (Nnaem, 2020; Adedibu, 2022). His words are apposite here: “Some scientific experts claimed that there will be no burying place in Africa because the death toll would be so high. They were disappointed. Africa records the least, the least of casualties from COVID-19. Amen. You know the secret? The dominant presence of God” (Elike, 2021). Oyedepo further maintains that prayers were critical to the low number of casualties of the pandemic. Supporting his claim, he opines that science is important in human endeavor but should not be the absolute basis to explain all things. For instance, they say that our weather did not make the COVID-19 affect us the way it affected people in other places outside Africa. Then, I ask: who created the weather? Is it not God? God created everything and orders them accordingly. If our weather makes us safe from the pandemic, we must glorify God who created it for us that way.

Despite the emphasis on spiritual healing of the COVID-19, it is important to stress that the Pentecostal leadership took cognizance of personal agency in observing the health protocols as announced by the government.

Nigeria’s Pentecostal leadership responses range from archconservative strands of socio-theological thought that highlight the perceived decay of global human ethics as the chief trigger underpinning the spread of COVID-19 to politico-theological arguments that posit that the best way to overcome the COVID-19 crisis involves adhering to the recently imposed social and public health policies of the Nigerian federal government (Wadibia, 2020).

This personal responsibility blended the spirit and the sense in ways that constituted safety for them and their congregations. This is not to suggest that all the Pentecostal churches responded immediately to the lockdown order in Nigeria. In fact, some of them flouted the order, which attracted the attention of government (Igboin, 2022b).

Adeboye stepped into the gap when he argued that God allowing COVID-19 to happen in the world has a way of understanding God’s “providential sovereignty,” (Wadibia, 2020) “I believe that this is a time to show that there is a difference between those who serve Him wholeheartedly and those who do not” (Oyero, 2020). Consequently, Christians, Adeboye maintains, are safe and secure from the ravages of the pandemic through God’s providence. Evidently, Adeboye is creating and straddling between a gap: the human and divine, non-believers and believers: “I want to assure you that there is no virus that is going to come near you at all, because it is written that they that dwell in the secret place of the Most High shall dwell under the shadow of the Almighty” (Haustein 2020). According to Wadibia (2020), “Adeboye situates his understanding of the pandemic’s spread on a playing field that straddles between the material and ethereal realms.” According to Ukah (2020), one way of interpreting Adeboye’s asseverations would be that Christians who have died as a consequence of the COVID-19 did not serve God wholeheartedly. In another way, it would suggest that Christians who serve God wholeheartedly are immune from contracting the virus. But Ukah (2020:456) argues that it can be inferred that serving God wholeheartedly “includes principally paying one’s tithes.” However, it is difficult to input this interpretation into Adeboye’s averment at this moment because his focus was to give hope to a despondent Christians.



Even though it might appear logically unreasonable to assume, like Adeboye did, that Christians are insulated from contracting the virus because they serve God, “it makes spirit” to think so in the context of theology of hope. Ukah’s reaction further supports Wariboko’s hypothesis that Pentecostals step into the public by their worship and words. This they did via words of hope and encouragement. Osei (2020) is of the view that empathizing with one’s congregation is stepping into the gap. In fact, in times of crises, fear, loneliness, stress and anxiety can negatively affect people, and as such a time, words of comfort can give strength and courage to a congregation. According to him, “I try to remind my congregants that God is still in the business of protecting his own and to stay strong until the Lord’s delivering power is fully exerted over the coronavirus outbreak.” Such comforting words should not be taken out of context, that is, the context of faith in the public.

### **Health and Wealth, and the Gap**

Now, does paying tithes principally make one a good Christian? Before the COVID-19 pandemic, a staple in most Pentecostal pastors’ messages was material prosperity. Prosperity was elevated to such a height that those who lived in abject poverty in the churches were literally viewed as the worst sinners. In the extreme, material prosperity seemed to confer some level of righteousness on those who are wealthy in the church because of the emphasis placed on the teaching that God can only bless the righteous. Prosperity teaching states that payment of tithes and offerings, and material care for the pastors and donations to church for building and other programs are fundamental ways to attract divine blessings from God. In fact, some of the pastors have taught that there was a divine mathematical formula that ensured that those who pay tithes and give fat offerings would be rewarded geometrically (Ezema 2013). Apart from material blessings, this class of people are also specially protected from both physical and spiritual attacks; they are assured that divine health was theirs, as no plagues were permitted to touch them. Such divine protection promised them also extended to their families, however on the basis of continuous renewal of the covenant: constant payment of tithes and offering.

Although prosperity teaching has become the weal and woe for Pentecostalism, one observed that during the lockdown most popular African Pentecostal pastors consciously or unconsciously created a gap between health and wealth messages, with heavier dosage of messages on health rather than wealth. As Asamoah-Gyadu (2021b:164) also notes,

With businesses, domestic economies, and the personal health of many people taking a hit, the messages of prosperity were simply confronted with a reality check in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.... In contrast to the regular messages that those who fulfill certain religious obligations would be successful and win the battles of life, this particular demon of a coronavirus was affecting the fortunes of everyone including pastors and prophets who had assured us that faithful Christians were beyond the logic of suffering.

Pentecostal pastors centered on care, love, prayer, consolation, safety, health, fortitude rather than wealth (Kroesbergen-Kamps, 2019). This is understandable in the context of the lockdown and also shows the humaneness of these pastors. Preaching hope rather than wealth became an inspiration as well as strength for the congregations. Many Pentecostal leaders emphasized living by faith in a precarious moment birthed by the pandemic (White, 2022). Faith and ostentatious lifestyle were two opposing values at the time of the lockdown. Of course, it was unreasonable to be flamboyant when almost everyone was shut out of the public space.

According to Adedibu and Igboin (2019), African Pentecostals believe and practice what is commonly referred to as *eschato-praxis*; that is, rehearsing eternal bliss here on earth. As a



demonstration of God's blessings on them, Pentecostals believe that flaunting wealth, and enjoying life devoid of suffering, pain, self-denial and sacrifices are to be lived here on earth ahead of heaven. They argue that this lifestyle occludes the teaching of the cross, holiness, righteousness, sanctification and other Christian virtues. By imbibing *eschaton-praxis*, these Pentecostals envisaged that heavenly joy can be fully enjoyed on earth. However, Asamoah-Gyadu (2021b:171) further notes that "in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, people who previously preached about prosperity suddenly found the space in the times to talk about the issues of heaven and hell." In other words, Pentecostal pastors stepped into the gap between *eschato-praxis* and eschatology, emphasizing that the former is ephemeral while the latter would be eternal. The conditions for attaining the latter were the Christian virtues, which they had neglected prior to the outbreak of the pandemic. Asamoah-Gyadu (2021b) observes that some of the pastors even got to the point of almost renouncing *eschato-praxis* and material prosperity when they preached about the vanity of prosperity during the lockdown.

### Science and Faith Gap

One other gap created by some of the Pentecostal leaders is between science and faith broadly understood. The question borders on whether or not it is reasonable to take adhere to safety protocols, the vaccine (when available) or pray to avert the consequences of the pandemic. Many Pentecostal pastors publicly called the vaccine a demonic drug which embeds the mark of the beast. Others think that it is a drug invented to wipe out the population of Africa. Some others believe that the vaccine would sterilize young Africans and consequently prevent them from reproducing. The faith in science versus faith in God was entrenched in such a way to mean that faith triumphs over science. However, Kgtle (2022) notes that Pentecostals' insensitive demonization of vaccine has resulted in loss of lives. Their emphasis on faith-healing means that vaccination repudiates faith in God. They argue that if faith in God leads one to salvation and sanctification, that same faith is potent enough to deliver and heal COVID-19. Faith is therefore not just an alternative to the vaccine, it is the sole 'pill' needed to cure the pandemic.

In Kenya, the argument and position of most vocal Pentecostal leaders was that faith alone makes sense and work (medicine or science) does not. They tend to misunderstand the 'if' in Pentecostal hypothesis, that is, when to apply faith alone, sense alone or integrative data in deciding on how to apprehend the pandemic. This insensitive posture seemed to have pushed Damaris Parsitau to frontally challenge the education and anointing of the pastors thus:

the clergy has been averse to scientific discoveries because science makes their miraculous shenanigans questionable. Prayers for healing have not calmed a shocked and scared populace. Many a clergy has frowned on science, medicine and theological education, instead spiritualising even nonspiritual matters as serious as the coronavirus pandemic. Science shakes the foundation of their spiritual teachings. After all, and in the case of this pandemic, science has proved to be more practical and reliable than faith (cited in Gathogo, 2022: 137).

Parsitau's definite judgment can be situated within the context of clergy who overzealously anticipated that faith alone was capable of preventing the spread of the virus. Like we hinted earlier, there is a sense in which corporate worship empowers the production of miracles in African Pentecostalism. The absence of corporate worship, faith in the 'real presence' should also be countenanced in discoursing the overall faith of the Pentecostal in the pandemic. Like Humbe (2022) observed in the case of Zimbabwe, the faith alone (or prayer) emphasis on dealing with the pandemic by the Pentecostal leaders is borne out of African spiritual response to suffering and illness. This African background to understanding African Pentecostalism provides a





perspective to addressing religious responses to the pandemic. Furthermore, the dismissive judgment on prayers has to be situated more empirically, than emotionally, during the pandemic. Bentzen (2020), for instance, observes that in May 2020 alone, global daily search on Google on the word prayer incomparably reached a zenith never before had. The searchers, according to him, cut across religions, race and class, raising the question of the role and function of prayers in managing a pandemic. The emphasis on the presence, power, mercy, grace, omnipotence and love of God became suffusing for most people. Tolmie and Venter (2021:8) aver that “Sense-making entails more than an intellectual explanation.”

However, in Zambia, Pentecostal leaders largely cooperated with secular authorities to ensure the safety of the population. According to Mwale and Chita (2022:160),

The Church umbrella bodies contributed towards providing solutions through their response to the pandemic. This was largely by offering solidarity through: Suspending public worship; offering public health education and service provision; pastoral care and advocacy so as to address different forms of suffering resulting from the pandemic.

Mwale and Chita argue that Zambian churches solidarity and cooperation with the secular authorities during the pandemic does not mean that they abandoned their prophetic role of criticizing government policies or corruption. But the churches understood that the pandemic posed an existential threat to both state and church in the same way. In the meantime, the churches resolved as follows:

Adhere and follow all instructions and guidelines being shared by the government and other authentic stakeholders and pray for God’s intervention. It was time that science and gospel worked together to save the world from calamity. Encourage people to go for medical attention while you pray for them. Avoid telling your members to depend on prayer alone. Let them get both prayer and medical attention from health facilities. The Church must avoid being an obstacle in the fight against the spread of the coronavirus disease (Mwale & Chita, 2022:163).

The gap between science and faith is not just an African Pentecostal affair. In the United States, for instance, the same debate resonated so furiously as to whether or not faith has any role to play in public health. Daniels, III (2021) argues that Spirit-empowered Pentecostals could not just be dismissed from caring without consequences. According to him, there are Pentecostals who advised against vaccination, not due to testable or scientific reason, but on the basis of faith in God. He however points out that there is the need for constructive engagement between science and faith; scientific literacy is critically important to Pentecostal leaders so that even when they express their faith in God, they can as well understand that God works in other ways toward human flourishing. The point that many of the reactions missed is that they do not place Pentecostal leaders’ averments within the purview of the prophetic but on sense data. This does not also obviate the fact that the Pentecostal leaders by their utterances are stepping into the contact zone, a public sphere where utterances meet, melt, grapple and subvert, and hardly regulated. In any case, it can be argued that to dismiss the role of faith as non-essential in the fight against the pandemic is to also miss an important point in the lives of the people, especially the Pentecostals. The psychological or emotional fortitude that faith provides in times of crises cannot be discountenanced without dire consequences. For instance, Wang, et al (2022) found out that those who projected their faith and see God playing a more active role in suffering or in times of the pandemic specifically were more satisfactorily adjustment than those who did not. Those who lost their faith were also most likely to fear about the pandemic’s devastating effects, become traumatic and less able to confront the reality of the crisis.





In addition, it can be emphasized that it will not be a good idea not to isolate what some of the Pentecostal leaders said because they also run hospitals just as they stressed cleanliness and observance of the COVID-19 protocols. This thus suggests that “Pentecostal supernatural assurances do not entail a retreat from this-worldly solutions” (Haustein, 2020). In other words, for the Pentecostal leaders we have examined their responses above, faith in God does not occlude the practice of medicine, but in the absence of the vaccine, it would be unreasonable not to encourage their members to live by faith. Even the availability of vaccine does not also invalidate their position in living by faith. A careful dialogue between the use of medicine and faith in God has been an ongoing engagement among the Pentecostals, and must be further encouraged.

The near absence of modern and adequate health facilities coupled with little or no scientific knowledge has led many of the pastors to exclusively believe that faith in God only can save the world. The advance in technology which they have turned to in the face of the lockdown is a gap they stepped into in order to keep their congregations together to fulfil the work of God. The same understanding and application are needed to engage with vaccination.

### **Conclusion**

It is difficult to put the Pentecostals’ reactions to the COVID-19 pandemic into one basket. The reason is simple: there are different levels of call and understanding of the situation. The panic caused by the pandemic was huge enough to dazzle them just as it did to governments all over the world. Naturally, gaps cannot be left unfilled, therefore, the Pentecostals had to create or step into a gap caused by the pandemic. We have argued that there are gaps in conceiving and responding to the COVID-19 pandemic from sense to spirit or between sense and spirit on the one hand, and between sense, no sense and not non-sense on the other. The sense data painted a fainting picture for Africa, so scaring were the predictions that they would have killed some Africans in spite of the virus. The spiritual data created hope and faith to stand up to the challenges posed by the pandemic and the fearful predictions. The gap between scientific predictions and their consequences on Africa were not left unattended to as Pentecostals literally ‘squeezed’ themselves into it to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the sense and spirit make sense to different set of people in different ways in response to COVID-19, the impact of the Pentecostals in Africa cannot be over-emphasized even though they did not maintain uniform or coordinated responses. But the reverberating question is: do the responses make sense or spirit? Can the predictions and prophecies be validated in the context of the COVID-19 realities in Africa?

The answers to these questions from Wariboko’s *Pentecostal Hypothesis* would be that sense and spirit are not exclusive to each other. Sometimes, they are transitional, dependent, functional, and mutual even though they can also be mutually exclusive. But what is critical is that defining their moments toward human flourishing should not be missed. The COVID-19 pandemic provided such a context for the test, and the Pentecostals stepped into that gap to minister. Interestingly, for the first time, the Pentecostals created a gap between health and wealth, laying more emphasis on the former than the latter. It would not make sense to emphasize wealth to an infested dying or fear-gripped congregation; it makes spirit to minister hope and comfort at that time. This is where constructive engagement with science and faith, sense and spirit becomes more critical. Finally, it will be relieving to have more nuanced research to unravel why the production of miracles of healing was less experienced during the lockdown, despite the suggestion that it might be due to the absence of corporate worship, which is usually a site for the production of abundance of miracles among Pentecostals.



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