

Propagating Afro-pessimism? The power of neo-Pentecostal prophetic objects on human agency and transcendence in Africa



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Dates:
Received: 10 Feb. 2022
Accepted: 03 May 2022
Published: 17 Aug. 2022

How to cite this article:
Banda, C., 2022, 'Propagating Afro-pessimism? The power of neo-Pentecostal prophetic objects on human agency and transcendence in Africa', *In die Skriflig* 56(1), a2845. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v56i1.2845>

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This article is a public systematic theological analysis of the power of the anointed objects of African neo-Pentecostal prophets (NPPs) on human agency and transcendence in the African context of enduring poverty and human brokenness. It analysed the public role played by anointed objects from a systematic theological perspective. The article argued that many African Christians rely on anointed objects without critically considering the negative implications on their human agency (power to act) and transcendence (power to overcome) as Africans. It highlighted the irony of teaching Africans to rely on anointed objects to overcome their poverty, while other races, especially white people in Western countries, continue to build prosperous economies even after rejecting religion and Christianity. This led to the question: What does the African reliance on anointed objects of the NPPs say about the state of African human agency and transcendence? The central argument was that anointed objects are fraught with Afro-pessimism, the negative connotations about African human agency and transcendence. A secondary question that emerged was: What is a biblical view of humanity that can be used to revive African human agency and transcendence, and lead to a meaningful response to poverty? As a public systematic theological critique, the question was answered by evaluating if the NPPs' use of anointed objects to overcome poverty resonates with what the Bible teaches about human potential in Genesis 1:26–28 and the extent to which it promotes Afro-optimism that enhances human agency and transcendence in Africa.

Contribution: This article calls African NPPs and their adherents to think critically and broadly about their public role in the context of poverty in Africa. It uses biblical doctrines and images to challenge NPPs to respond to poverty in ways that promote Afro-optimism by enhancing the human agency and transcendence of African people instead of the Afro-pessimism promoted by the relying on anointed objects.

Keywords: anointed objects; African neo-Pentecostal prophets; agency; transcendence; cultural mandate; image of God; poverty; new religious movements.

Introduction

This article uses systematic theology to critically evaluate the public role of African neo-Pentecostal prophetism in an African context of poverty filled with pessimism about the power of African people to transform their broken continent into a prosperous one. African neo-Pentecostal prophetism is growing in the continent as many poor Africans turn to it for the spiritual power to overcome poverty and flourish economically. Amongst the many spiritual solutions, prescribed by the African neo-Pentecostal prophets (NPPs), are anointed objects such as water, oil, stones, waistbands, wristbands, portraits of the prophets and several other paraphernalia. The objects are anointed in the form of blessing by the prophets by praying over them or speaking into them to give them spiritual power to effect miracles to the user. Through these anointed objects, NPPs control large portions of African public life as many Christians rely on them to overcome their poverty.

Given that many African Christians rely on these objects, it is necessary to evaluate their implications on the state of African human power to take responsibility (agency) and triumph (transcendence) over poverty. Evaluating the implications of anointed objects on African human agency and transcendence is necessary, because other races in secular post-Christian countries such as the United Kingdom and Germany, and non-Christian countries such as China are prospering without the aid of anointed objects and religion. If other races and nations of the

world can build prosperous economies without the help of religion, but Africans need religion to prosper, what does it say about the state of African humanity and its power of agency and transcendence? This article is motivated by the need to evaluate the strength of NPPs as agents of transformation and construction in a broken Africa. This article analyses the public role of African NPP, because many Africans rely on anointed objects to engage socioeconomic reality.

The question answered in this article is: What does the African reliance on anointed objects of the NPPs say about the state of African human agency and transcendence? This primary question leads to a secondary question: What is a biblical view of humanity that can be used to revive African human agency and transcendence, and lead to a meaningful response to poverty? As will be further elaborated, agency and transcendence are treated as mutually inclusive but not identical, with agency pointing to taking responsibility to act and transcendence pointing to overcoming an undesirable situation. This article is divided into the following sections, firstly the description of methodological issues as well as agency and transcendence. Secondly, the African NPPs and their anointed objects are described. Thirdly, the use of anointed objects to address African human powerlessness is explained. Fourthly, the weakening of African human agency and transcendence is described. Fifthly, the use of the commandment to humanity to fill, subdue and rule over the earth in Genesis 1:26–28, known in some theological circles as ‘the cultural mandate’, as a theological framework of humanity that challenges the African reliance on anointed objects. Sixthly, the article closes by proposing how Genesis 1:26–28 can be used to promote human agency and transcendence in Africa in a way that promotes Afro-optimism and replaces African reliance on anointed objects. The significance of this article lies in using biblical doctrines and images to challenge Afro-pessimism that promotes practices and teachings of African NPPs which, in turn, promote self-doubt and cripple the agency and transcendence of many African people.

A public systematic theological critique of African neo-Pentecostal prophets in broken Africa

At the heart of systematic theology is understanding and describing what we believe as Christians, that is, that which we hold to be true given our faith in Christ (Grenz & Olson 1996:39). As a public systematic theological critique, this article evaluates if the NPPs’ use of anointed objects to overcome poverty resonates with what the Bible teaches about human potential in Genesis 1:26–28. Thus, this article evaluates the relevance of the NPP teaching on anointed objects on African public life and the engagement with the socioeconomic reality. The biblical fact that God created human beings in his image with a divine mandate (herein, cultural mandate) to rule over creation is employed to critique if the prescription of anointed objects is faithful to

the biblical idea of how people must use their agency and transcendence to build economic life. When compared with other human races, especially in prosperous Western countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States, it appears that many Africans remain unable to exercise the cultural mandate and turn their continent into a prosperous one. The reference to the Western countries does not overlook the fact that their economic development has been accompanied by human greed, disregard for divine authority, the elevation of human creations as God’s intentions, the conquering and exploitation of other nations and a serious damage to the environment leading to climate change. Rather, the reference to the Western countries is strictly focuses on their use of the God-given creative power to take responsibility (agency) and find meaningful solutions to existential problems (transcendence). The cultural mandate is used to evaluate the use of anointed objects to address African poverty, because relying on these objects raises questions about African people’s capacity to use the God-given creative power to take responsibility (agency) and find meaningful solutions to their socioeconomic problems (transcendence).

Although agency and transcendence are different, they are treated as mutually inclusive in this article. According to Muhwati (2010:152), agency and transcendence affirm that to be human is to be endowed with the power to affirm one’s identity resulting in positive participation (agency) in life and the power to overcome forces that threaten life (transcendence). Agency points to confident ownership of action that comes with identity and dignity to ask questions, while transcendence points to overcoming through the ability to act and execute a task. It will be argued that replacing the Afro-pessimistic reliance on anointed objects by engendering human agency and transcendence is key to propagating Afro-optimism in Africa. This means that, instead of being preoccupied in gathering wealth through miraculous (read: magical) means, Africans should be challenged to exercise their agency and transcendence in developing the cultural mandate in their context of poverty.

If systematic theology answers the question, ‘[w]hat does the whole Bible teach us today?’ about any given topic (Grudem 1994:21), then systematic theology in Africa must engage Africans’ pessimistic view of themselves (Afro-pessimism) by inculcating agency and transcendence in them. Afro-pessimism remains rife, as African Christians still believe they cannot overcome poverty, illness and destitution without spiritual aid such as anointed objects, without questioning why successful races have vibrant and flourishing economies, but do not rely on anointed objects or religion.

The African neo-Pentecostal prophetic churches

African neo-Pentecostal prophetic churches are a nascent and diverse movement within African and global Pentecostalism that distinguishes itself by a special emphasis

on prophetic figures whose prophetic works become the foundation and centre of their ministries and churches. Other names used to describe these churches include 'new Pentecostal churches' (Quayesi-Amakye in Tsekpoe 2019:284) and 'new prophetic churches' (Kgatle 2021a:6). Although African NPP shares a Pentecostal heritage rooted in the 1906 Azusa Street Revival in Los Angeles, United States of America, some of its practices such as faith healing and miracle working are similar to the pre-1906 Azusa Street Revival Europe and North America healing movements led by figures such as J.C. Blumhardt, Dorothea Trudel, Charles Cullis, John Alexander Dowie, Carrie Judd Montgomery and A.B. Simpson (Anderson 2013:16).

African NPP 'is principally a movement of prophets, apostles and pastors who claim unique and unparalleled anointing and appointment from God' (Banda 2020:1). African NPP distinguishes itself by being a movement based on prophetic figures 'who are foundational to both the rise and the survival of their prophetic churches' (Banda 2021:2). The prophetic standing of the prophets is the most significant feature and source of their growth (Kgatle 2020:3). Whereas in conservative classical Pentecostalism, the gift of prophecy belongs to all the believers, creating a notion of prophethood of all believers (Lum 2018:53), in the African NPP, the gift of prophecy exclusively belongs to special individuals often called 'Man of God' or 'Woman of God' (Gunda & Machingura 2013; Ramantswana 2019:4–6). As 'Men of God' and 'Women of God' they distinguish themselves with authoritative and superior prophetic titles such as Major One, forensic prophecy such as revealing people's biographical details and one-on-one consultations which creates regular pilgrimages to their shrine-like headquarters (Kgatle 2019:1). These unique functions accentuate the prophet's supreme standing over other Christians (Kgatle 2019:1). In some cases, African NPPs present themselves as superior to biblical prophets and even carrying new and superior revelation of God than the one in the Bible.¹ Even in cases where a notion of prophethood of all believers may be practiced, the founder prophet emerges as the chief prophetic figure as captured by supreme titles such as Major One and Seer One that are claimed by some of the prophets. As can be noted from some of the prophetic titles, there is intense rivalry between some prophets as exemplified by the public accusations of performing false miracles between South Africa's leading prophets, Paseka Motsoeneng and Alph Lukau (eNCA 2019; Jordaan 2019; Multimedia Live 2019).

The distinction between NPP and conservative or classical Pentecostalism is that conservatives use prophecy for holiness or sanctification, and for the spiritual renewal and endurance of the church. In African NPP, which is informed by realised eschatology, 'prophecy can be described as anthropocentric prophetism because it is primarily concerned with solving human problems in the present earthly life' (Banda 2021:2). Although some African NPPs do address the

1. For example, see some of Bushiri's claims (2019) of an encounter with God in heaven and a video of himself walking on air (BBC News 2018).

issue of holiness and spiritual endurance, much of their prophetic activities follow the prosperity theology promoted by Eseek William Kenyon, Kenneth Hagin, Kenneth Copeland and several others. Therefore, their prophetic work is largely concerned with material prosperity and health leading to what may be called 'diagnostic prophecy' whose main interests are in revealing people's problems, their causes and prescriptions (i.e. how to address them) (Anderson 2013:126–127). Kgatle (2021a:143–144) distinguishes the use of prophecy in African NPPs by indicating that, unlike in the classical conservative Pentecostalism where preaching is confrontational, it is motivational in the prophetic movement, which leads to prophecy that is more concerned with how people can flourish materially than in mending their spiritual relationship with God. As expressed by Kgatle (2021a:143), the African NPPs 'do not preach messages that will address sin in the church but will rather speak of blessing, promotion, a job, house, car and other good things'. Anointed objects function within this prophetic focus on improving one's livelihood in this present earthly life.

Although essentially derived from several biblical passages where special articles were used to perform miracles such as healing, the use of anointed objects among the African NPP has some influences from American prosperity theology. It also resembles African Traditional Religions (ATR) where magical objects are used to manipulate the spiritual realm to release riches and to acquire wealth. Furthermore, the use of anointed objects in African NPP is similar to that of African Independent Churches (AICs) churches such as the South African Zionist churches who have a wide range of holy objects for use by people to address their personal problems. It has some resemblances with the Roman Catholic use of the Holy Rosary to overcome impediments to one's health and wellbeing. However, NPPs have no regard for ATR which they view as work of the demons. Neo-Pentecostal Prophets further question the Christian integrity of Roman Catholicism which they castigate for approving things such as smoking and drinking. Neo-Pentecostal Prophets also have an inferior view of AICs which they project as influenced by the spirits of ATR rather than the Holy Spirit. Neo-Pentecostal Prophets claim to be superior to other Christians (Kgatle 2021b:144), and that their anointed objects are unique, because they come directly from God. The following sections will evaluate the implications of this reliance on anointed objects from NPPs on human agency and transcendence on African Christians.

Confronting African human powerlessness

The use of anointed objects in African NPP plays an important role in the motivational, diagnostic, consultative and miracle workings of the prophets (Anderson 2013:126–127; Kgatle 2019). The objects are seen as vessels of transmitting God's power into the users' situation (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005:236–237; Banda 2019:2–3) such as attracting clients to one's business, making one attractive to employers or funding agents and driving away impediments from one's success

path. Although the common substances used for anointed objects include water and oil, there is no limit to objects used for such purposes, because the prophets can use anything they deem fit for such purposes. This leads to questions and controversies on the objects and practices by media reports (Banda 2020:2). As stated above, some items used as anointed objects include armbands, wristbands, waistbands and clothes, writing pens, and facial portraits (pictures) of the prophets, which the prophets bless and give or sell to their followers (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005:234; Biri 2012:7; Deke 2015:17; Manzvanzvike 2014; PHD Ministries 2022).

Therefore, a key function of anointed objects is overcoming people's spiritual powerlessness that results in fruitlessness and failures in their endeavours. These objects embody the 'interventionist theology' (Asamoah-Gyadu 2004:338) or 'triumphalist theology' (Kgatle 2021b:142) of African NPP. Studying the theology of these objects opens for us a wider understanding of Afro-pessimism in African NPP. Anointed objects are essentially vessels of God's power; to possess such as object is to have direct access to the armoury of God's power. In their interventionist and triumphalist theology, NPPs 'see themselves as more powerful than other Christians' (Kgatle 2021b:144). The anointed objects 'effect healing, reverse misfortunes, or empower people for successful living, as the case may be' (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005:234). As stated by a leading Zimbabwean prophet, Walter Magaya (2015):

Anointing oil is a physical symbolism of God's healing and deliverance power. It is a point of contact in spiritual warfare and is a symbol of the Holy Spirit. It protects from deadly dangers and traps, and it does the cleansing and purification. It is the anointing of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit which is a powerful tool in spiritual warfare. The anointing oil destroys or breaks the bondage, burden and oppression caused by the devil because the enemy's yoke connects and binds you with sin, poverty, disease and limitation. The anointing oil therefore breaks all the yokes the devil is using to steal the promise God made to us, that of having dominion over earth and being seated in the heavenly places. (n.p.)

In other words, anointed objects bring a state of blessedness and victory that is needed by people to experience good health and wealth. Journalists Rupapa and Shumba (2014) recorded another leading Zimbabwean prophet, Emmanuel Makandiwa, preaching that anointing oil 'unlocks all the doors of impossibilities in one's life. It will lubricate your lives, and things will start moving smoothly'. In other words, anointed objects function as weapons of overcoming challenges in one's life (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005:241). Literature indicates that anointed objects in NPPs give people the strength and means of engaging and dislodging the forces that hinder them from living a life of blessedness (Banda 2019:2).

However, there is a wide array of special objects that were used by prophets, apostles, evangelists and judges in the Old and New Testament. In many biblical cases, various objects are used to perform miracles: Jacob used peeled sticks to increase his flocks (Gn 30:41); Moses used a rod to bring the

plagues to Egypt; and the Israelites protected themselves from the angel of death by applying the blood of sheep on their doorposts (Ex 12:13). In the New Testament, Jesus used mud and his spit to heal the eyes of a blind man; Peter also used his shadow and clothing to heal the sick; and items that had touched Paul's body could heal those who touched them. In James 5:14, church elders are commanded to anoint the sick with oil while praying for them. Similarly, even Christian churches that claim to be only led by the Bible and no other extra-biblical tradition use various objects such as water for baptism, and bread and/or wine for the Communion. Elements in baptism and the Lord's Supper arguably have an important spiritual significance, even though some may treat them as symbolic elements, otherwise the rituals become meaningless to participants.

However, the use of articles in the Bible was neither commercialised nor commoditised to the extent to which NPPs are doing today. In the Bible, the use of elements is cautioned by fear of turning them into formalistic rituals and idols, as objects become perfunctory, ritualistic and idolatrous to distract followers from the true worship of God (Ex 20:4; Hs 6:6). Furthermore, the NPPs' use of elements to receive God's blessings defies the biblical teaching that Christ is the only mediator between God and humanity (2 Tm 2:15). The ongoing debate in the Protestant movement, concerning Baptism and the Lord Supper, centres on the fear that these rituals may end up being made absolute, thereby distorting personal faith in God. The enduring question is how these elements connect them to God and the role they play in their salvation.

However, in NPP, a direct dependence on special objects for both temporal and spiritual power is marked by the constant hunt for newer and more powerful anointed objects. The folly in the believers is witnessed, as they *globe-trot* churches and ministries in search of newer and more powerful prophets. Therefore, whatever may be said in support of the anointed objects of the African NPPs, their use and significance are challenged by both their commercialisation and the extent to which they create a parallel faith structure that ends up competing, complementing and even replacing the believer's direct dependence on Christ (Banda 2018a; Kgatle, Nel & Banda 2021:3-7). The anointed objects also distort God's relational personhood by projecting God as an impersonal being that can be controlled and manipulated by possessing anointed objects.

Weakening African human agency and transcendence

Anointed objects have a positive disposition by giving their users the impetus to confidently pursue their endeavours. As seen in the previous section, anointed objects break all the yokes placed by the devil in people's lives to hinder them from exercising dominion over earth and achieving their goals. However, despite this positive disposition, the NPP use of anointed objects in Africa seems to thrive on the belief

that Africanness is naturally shrouded in generational curses and demons that must not only be overcome in the present, but also be continually fought from resurfacing in one's life to interfere with their progress (Banda 2022; Degbe 2014; Makandiwa 2018a, 2018b; Meyer 1998; Phamodi 2015). The African belief in generational curses, which is strong in traditional African thinking, has coalesced with the colonial and Apartheid theological view that Africans inherently bear the curse pronounced by Noah on Ham (Gn 9:25–26). Therefore, regardless of whatever positive role they may play, anointed objects should be criticised for seriously weakening African human agency and transcendence by reinforcing the idea that Africans are inherently cursed and therefore inherently humanly weak and even empty of power to progress.² Ultimately, anointed objects convey a message of African emptiness in the power that exercises the cultural mandate to subdue and rule over all of creation and to build healthy economies.

It is therefore argued that the entire religious system of African NPPs thrives on presenting Africans as powerless or as drained of the power to progress by evil spirits, and therefore disabled to act and rise above their poverty and related problems. This pessimism about Africanness is often conveyed through negative attitudes towards ATR (Meyer 1998) and presenting African Christians needing the meditation of the prophetic figures to be thrive in life (Biri 2012, 2018). Ultimately, the requirement for anointed objects to succeed in life, comparatively projects Africans as inherently weaker than other races such as the white people in non-Christian and post-Christian Western countries who have rejected religion, and yet continue to build prosperous economies. The idea that Africans should rely on anointed objects to make economic breakthroughs and to defeat poverty, brings into question the power of African humanness to be an agent of change and transcendence. African NPPs promote a dependence on anointed objects in ways that raise questions about the source of human agency and transcendence amongst Africans. It triggers the question: Where does the power for agency and transcendence amongst Africans rest? Does this power rest in something extrinsic that they must reach out to, or it is in something that they intrinsically possess by virtue of being humans? If Africans must reach for this power outside themselves, what does their human condition mean? If their humanness has the power for human agency and transcendence but need the power of anointed objects to activate it, what does it say about the state of African human condition? In simpler terms: Does it mean that, without anointed objects, Africans anthropologically lack the human power to produce creative and sustainable solutions to overcome their problems? This article raises questions it cannot fully answer. However, the interesting thing is that other races that have rejected religion (Christianity in particular), are still building prosperous

2. Although it can be argued that a person's act of seeking anointed objects and applying them in their life constitute agency and transcendence; the problem is that it absolves people of their responsibility in creating the crises and their role in solving them (Chitando & Manyonganise 2011:101). It can equally be argued that prayer to God is like using anointed objects. This is disputed by the fact that responsible prayer involves asking God for wisdom and enablement in one's efforts to address one's problems instead of just asking for the problems to disappear.

economies while Africans with anointed objects wallow in poverty with the hope of a magical escape from poverty.

Whatever positive disposition is created by anointed objects, it cannot be overlooked that dependence on them means that African humanness is fatally broken and totally bankrupt of any power for agency and transcendence. The message proclaimed to Africans by anointed objects is that to be African is to be inherently weak and even useless, which leaves Africans vulnerable for subjugation and exploitation by other nations. Consequently, in the notion of anointed objects and subsequently in the whole religious system on which it is based, is Afro-pessimism, which instils self-doubt in Africans as it projects Africanness as cursed and bankrupt of any power to rise and develop oneself. This notion undermines the power of the African mind and heart to change unfavourable situations without the aid of the power of anointed objects, and the power of Christianity in general.

However, African NPPs are not alone in promoting Afro-pessimism and African self-doubt. Christian traditions of colonising nations have done it, and some continue to do so. Christianity entered and took root in Africa by projecting the notion of 'dark lands of Africa' (Hastings 1994:299–300) whose inhabitants bore the curse of Ham. In various ways, many contemporary pastors continue to perpetuate the same colonial idea. For example, one of Zimbabwe's leading pastors, Tom Deuschle (2003:71), founder leader of Celebration Church International, has categorically stated, 'Without an economic revival based on biblical principles, we can say goodbye to Africa.'³ The problem is not that Deuschle is promoting adherence to biblical principles, but the idea that Africa and Africans are intrinsically empty of the power of economic development and need Christianity and the Bible to have economic power. His statement ultimately says Africa is poor, because it lacks God and is poorly Christianised.

Perhaps Deuschle's assessment is true; but its irony is that, firstly, it ignores the fact that the slavery and exploitation of Africans by Europeans was carried out based on biblical principles. Secondly, as already mentioned above, there are many contemporary secular countries in the West that were once Christian countries and have now openly rejected Christianity and the Bible, but have still managed to revive their economies to unprecedented levels. This leads to the following question: If white Western Europeans do not need God to fulfil the cultural mandate and establish flourishing economies, and can still prosper even after rejecting God, why then do black Africans need God or religion to actualise their human potential? The question is, 'what is so wrong with the African human capital that unlike other races of the world, it can only economically thrive when penetrated by the Bible?' (Banda 2018b:6). Similarly, Vengeyi (2011:234) questions how it can be explained that other nations are able

3. To his credit, Deuschle's Celebration Church International, that started as Rhema Ministries and then became Hear the Word Ministries before its current name, is the spiritual home of some of Zimbabwe's eminent entrepreneurs including Strive Masiyiwa, the founder of the country's leading mobile phone network, Econet Wireless, and Nigel Chanakira, a banker and investment specialist (Togarasei 2014:122).

to have progressive human capital that builds better economies after de-Christianising themselves and discarding religion all together. Kenyan theologian Jesse Mugambi (1995:33), sounded his call for the reconstruction of Africa by questioning the touted link between poverty and irreligion in Africa, and pointed out that contemporary Africa remains probably the most 'religious' continent in the world; yet its people are continually the most abused of all in history. Mugambi (1995) expressed the torment in his heart by asking:

How could it be that the peoples who continue to call on God most reverently are the ones whom God seems to neglect most vehemently? Could it be that irreligion is the key to success, and that religion is the key to backwardness? (p. 33)

Mugambi's question rejected the denigration of African humanity and further questioned the developmental value of the Christianity preached in Africa, because it has seemingly taken the African 'backwards' rather than 'frontwards'. To some extent, Mugambi is saying that Africa was poor without Christianity, but now is poorer with Christianity. And it remains true that, whatever economic power Africa had before the arrival of Christianity, has been lost, as a large bulk of its wealth is now controlled by foreign white conglomerates.

The problem in linking poverty and religiosity in Africa is the failure to consider the socioeconomic and political factors that impede on their human efforts to change their undesirable situations. Often, religious approaches to poverty such as anointed objects, spiritualise poverty such that the response to it is imposed in ways that do not help the poor to evaluate how they are applying their agency and transcendence, as they become more focused on overcoming the spiritual powers responsible for their poverty than in overcoming poverty (Chitando & Manyonganise 2011:101). Consequently, the idea that Africans need to adhere to biblical principles by using anointed mantles and be exorcised of demons, paganises and dehumanises African human potential, because it treats Africans as a people whose poverty is caused by a lack of religion to empower them to act in progressive human ways. Ultimately, African human potential is paganised by presenting it as fatally cursed, empty of God's presence and therefore utterly barren of any capacity for progress without the aid of anointed objects (Banda 2018b:5–6). This form of denigration of human potential must be challenged and debunked, because it does not provide an objective way of addressing both human un(der)development and the reality of poverty in Africa.

The cultural mandate in challenging the dependence on anointed objects in Africa

The weakening of the African power for agency and transcendence by anointed objects raises the following question: What is the biblical view of humanity that can be used to revive African human agency and transcendence and lead to the abandonment of relying on prophetic anointed objects? The cultural mandate (Gn 1:26–28) is suggested as an ideal response to the African reliance on anointed objects

amongst African NPP Christians. As will be argued below, the cultural mandate challenges Africans to own their agency and transcendence, while anointed objects promote uncritical blame-shifting to spiritual causes. Instead of seeking ways to critically engage the factors behind their poverty, the followers are convinced to uncritically believe and follow the machinations of the prophets.

However, this is not the place to conduct a detailed exegetical analysis of Genesis 1:26–28 or to delve into the various interpretations of the image of God. This article will limit itself to aspects that are pertinent to human agency and transcendence that challenge the African Christian reliance on anointed objects in addressing socioeconomic problems. Hoekema (1986:79) explains that Genesis 1:26–28's command to Adam and Eve to fill the earth, subdue it and rule over all creation mandated humanity 'to develop a God-glorifying culture'. God gave humanity the responsibility to exercise his creative rule over his creation. As Lindsley (2013) explains:

Genesis 1:26–28 has been called 'the cultural mandate' because it shows the place of human beings in creation and calls us to work with the things God has made – ruling over, ordering, classifying, reshaping, developing, and unfolding the potential which we have been given. It is a key to knowing who we are and what we are to do. (n.p.)

The cultural mandate or creation mandate shows that God set human beings as rulers over the earth on God's behalf as his stewards. For the purposes of this article, the important thing to be emphasised is that this mandate of creative stewardship over the earth is based on being bearers of God's image. Ultimately, the elements of agency and transcendence are necessary for human beings to exercise the cultural mandate. As Wright (2006:224) points out, the cultural mandate is the 'essence of our human nature. We were created to be workers, like God, the worker'. In other words, God created human beings to bear responsibility for the earth's wellbeing.

However, the Bible is silent on both the definition of the image of God, and neither does it explain the human qualities that constitute the image. In the history of the church, the image of God has been explained in three theories: substantive or structural, relational and functional theories, with each theory focussing on particular aspects of humanity (Erickson 1998:459–467).⁴ However, it is more helpful to think of the image as not something we possess, but as what we are. For:

To be human is to be the image of God. It is not an extra feature added on to our species; it is definitive of what it means to be human. (Wright 2006:421 [*italics original!*])

Systematic theologians such as Hoekema (1986:83–84) and Erickson (1998:470) share this substantive view and highlight that it is in line with the biblical intimation that the sin or the

⁴The substantive or structural theory links the image of God to certain structural characteristics in human beings such as the physical, psychological or spiritual elements like the reasoning capacity. The relational theory refers to the ability and longing to experience relationship between God and humanity and with other humans, and the functional theory refers to what people do or how they function, such as ruling over creation.

fall of Adam only damaged the image of God, but did not eradicate it. Although the Bible does not directly quantify the image of God in humans – if to be human is to be in the image of God – then it is helpful to think of the image along the lines of God’s communicable attributes such as personality or selfhood which incorporates intelligence, will and emotions (Erickson 1998:471; Grudem 1994:445–450). This view is pertinent to the quest for human agency and transcendence by acknowledging that the image involves the powers of personality that make humans, like God, being capable of relating with other people, of thinking, reflecting and freely willing – all which make the fulfilment of human destiny possible (Erickson 1998:470). It is further acknowledged that, although the image is no longer in the perfect state as it was in the pre-fall state, it is universal in all humanity in equal measure, in both Christians and non-Christians. Therefore, whereas the gospel mandate (Mt 28:18–20) exclusively applies to Jesus’s followers, the cultural mandate universally applies to all humanity regardless of gender, religion and race. Thus, it can be categorically stated, black Africans are in the same image of God in equal measure as other races including those in wealthy white Western nations, and therefore able to fulfil the cultural mandate in their African contexts. This universal nature of cultural mandate and the image of God, dissuades the African reliance on anointed objects and spurs them to take active responsibility in addressing their socioeconomic poverty and personal problems. The cultural mandate reminds poor Africans relying on anointed objects for their economic recovery that ‘[h]umans are most fully human when they are active in these relationships and performing this function, fulfilling their telos, God’s purpose for them’ (Erickson 1998:471).

Therefore, anointed objects effectively de-humanise Africans by stripping them of the essence of living out the image of God in their lives, because it denies them of the opportunity to practically exercise the cultural mandate by actively engaging their socioeconomic situation. Furthermore, the cultural mandate redeems the value of work by depicting it as an expression of the image of God. Therefore:

[W]ork, then is not a curse, but part of God’s good plan. The basis for the work ethics is to be found in the very nature of what God created us to be. (Erickson 1998:473)

Therefore, instead of being preoccupied with gathering wealth through miraculous (read: magical) means, Africans should exercise their agency and transcendence in developing the cultural mandate in their context of poverty.

Replacing anointed objects by the promotion of the cultural mandate

The image of God challenges African neo-Pentecostal Christians to replace their reliance on anointed objects by developing the cultural mandate.

Affirming human legitimacy by stimulating human agency and transcendence amongst Africans

The cultural mandate challenges the Afro-pessimism propagated by the anointed objects by calling Africans to realise their God-endowed power to be active economic agents. The universal essence of the cultural mandate emphasises the human legitimacy of all human beings, including Africans, and therefore questions the NPP preaching that Africans need anointed objects to be functional human beings. The idea that Africans need the anointed objects of African NPPs to enhance their human function approves and promotes the old colonial view of Africans as bearers of the curse of Ham and further endorses the idea of Africans as an inferior human race. African NPPs approach Africanness as cursed by presenting Africans, including born again Christians, as victims of generational curses that need to be constantly exorcised. Their treatment of Africanness as cursed is affirmed by their view of some African lands and unique physical features like mountains and rivers as controlled by various forms of capricious territorial spirits (Biri 2018:83–84). While this nature of ‘spiritual mapping’ (Taylor 2001) exists in global Pentecostalism in Africa, it perpetuates self-doubt and self-pessimism by making people believe that their families, lands, tribes, villages, countries, workplaces and the like are cursed and empty of progress. The perspective of the African NPPs that leads to reliance on anointed objects instils victimhood and slavery to evil forces which subsequently instils fear and powerlessness to take action against poverty so as to overcome it. Therefore, the universal nature of the cultural mandate challenges the Afro-pessimism expressed in the anointed objects by projecting Africans as legitimate human beings who are able to fulfil God’s universal mandate to human beings and can be held fully accountable for their actions. Based on the cultural mandate, Africans must reject philosophical perspectives, religious beliefs and practices that dehumanise them by presenting Africanness as cursed illegitimate humanness. As legitimate human beings, Africans do not need to rely on anointed objects that instil victimhood and the slavery of the Christian to evil forces that result in fear and powerlessness, and the inability of the believer to act against poverty or to overcome it.

Promoting just public systems that allow people to exercise their agency and transcendence

Instead of promoting reliance on their anointed objects, African NPPs must promote a development of just public systems that allow people to exercise their agency and transcendence. African NPPs often blame spiritual forces for people’s poverty and suffering without realising the oppressive, unjust and un(der)developed human social, economic and political structures, including systems that impoverish people and hinder them from improving their lives. Indeed, it is a biblical fact that poverty is ultimately a spiritual issue with spiritual causes when traced to the fall of humankind and the subsequent broken relationship between God and humanity (Gn 3:17–18). Theologians who have

studied poverty and economic un(der)development, emphasise the multi-dimensional nature of poverty which includes unjust socioeconomic and political structures, greed, corruption, poor economic leadership, people's lack of skills and economic knowledge (Bedford-Strohm 2010; Myers 2011; Speckman 2007).

The Bible, however, also shows that behind poverty are systemic issues of injustice and oppression of the poor (Ps 94:20–21; Is 10:1–3) and a lack of sound knowledge of issues (Pr 6:6–8; Hs 4:6). The prioritisation of the spiritual factors must be done together with the development of systems that allow people to fulfil the cultural mandate. An important component of promoting just public systems that allow people to exercise their agency and transcendence is recognising the critical role played by African politicians in establishing and maintaining systemic injustices through implementing laws and regulations that hinder the poor from participating in local and national economic life. Therefore, it is not enough to just dish out anointed objects to the poor without challenging politicians to implement laws that promote poor people's access to the economy. Addressing the problem of human agency and transcendence entails a component of activism. This requires that African NPPs invest in sharpening the agency and transcendence of their people by understanding the complexities of the socioeconomic and political reality. In the cultural mandate humanity is essentially:

[C]alled by God to develop all the potentialities found in nature and in humankind as a whole and this calls for the development of not only agriculture, horticulture, and animal husbandry, but also science, technology, and art. (Hoekema 1986:79)

African NPPs are therefore challenged to empower their people with the skills and systems to respond to their poverty and related problems responsibly and proactively. Therefore, any attempt to govern the complex reality of life created by God through the miraculous (read: magical) power of the anointed articles of the prophets is not only unbiblical and in conflict with the cultural mandate, but also reduces life to a simple routine of miraculously (read: magically) receiving things, instead of actively applying the God-given creative power. Therefore, it can be stated that, instead of magically creating things, the cultural mandate is embedded in a holistic approach to human economic capabilities that call people to rise and take responsibility for their economic condition and seek ways of overcoming it.

The promotion of just systems entails thinking about economic reality in multi-dimensional terms. Indeed, several studies positively present some progressive African Pentecostal leaders who pursue sustainable and transformational development in their churches (eds. Chingarande et al. 2021; Musoni 2013; Öhlmann, Gräb & Frost 2020). However, a significant problem that ends up being a drawback on their interventions is that they continue to emphasise the spiritual elements of poverty and wealth in a way that relegates sound economic practices to the margins. For example, spiritual elements such as giving to the pastor

and tithing continue to feature as main elements that lead to the success or failure of a business. This approach ultimately subverts the multi-dimensional aspects of the economic life and leads to undermining the agency and transcendence of the poor.

The multi-dimensional approach must also challenge the poor to take personal responsibility for their own contribution to their poverty as well as their own contribution and role in the failure to get up and fulfil the cultural mandate in their personal life and communities. Instead of being preoccupied with investing in miraculous (read: magical) interventions, followers of African NPPs should also invest in scientific and industrialised interventions in line with the emerging Fourth Industrial Revolution.

Viewing the Holy Spirit as an enabler instead of a primitivistic magical power

A Christian perspective of the cultural mandate must also include the role of the Holy Spirit in the daily life of a Christian. The Bible presents the Holy Spirit as the third person of the Trinity who enables Christians to accomplish the gospel mandate of Christ (Ac 1:8), and also empowers them to live the Christian life in all its multi-dimensional nature which includes socioeconomic matters. The use of anointed objects to draw power from God for one's socioeconomic and personal struggles arguably represents a view of how the Holy Spirit functions in the believers' life and affairs. African NPPs view the Holy Spirit as a miracle worker, and this enhances their focus on miraculous acquisition of material things like miracle money and miracle babies.

However, this focus on miraculous acquisition of material things represents a primitivistic and magical worldview in pre-modern cosmology that viewed spirituality as gaining power over nature and evil spiritual powers such as demons and witchcraft that made life precarious and hindered people from attaining material prosperity. This view of the Holy Spirit is also consumeristic in that the purpose of the Spirit is largely seen as that of giving things to people for their own consumption instead of empowering them to live for God's glory (Ngong 2010:128). In pre-modern scientific cosmology, the world was seen as controlled by spirits; therefore, people's quality of life was reflected by their ability (or lack of it) to gain control of the spiritual realm and to make it work for them such as giving them wealth or health. African NPPs essentially function in this primitivistic magical manner that treats the Holy Spirit as subject to the control of anointed objects. From a primitivistic magical view, anointed objects control the Holy Spirit and the function of the Spirit is to achieve human flourishing (Ngong 2010:128).

An understanding of the cultural mandate that is informed by the role of the Holy Spirit in the gospel mandate and Christian living, controverts this magical and consumeristic view of the Holy Spirit. Biblically, the Spirit primarily enables Christians to exercise their agency and transcendence in

pursuing God's calling to humankind for his glory and for the wellbeing of his people and his creation (Ac 1:8). Grudem (1994:636–647) summarises the enabling work of the Holy Spirit in the church into four categories: empowering, purifying, revealing and unifying. Kakwata (2018), an African theologian specialising in transformational development, adopted Grudem in formulating a theology of transformational development based on the Holy Spirit. Concerning empowerment, Kakwata (2018:203–206) says the Holy Spirit enabled disciples in the early Christian community to live up to the values of the kingdom of God, and not according to the patterns of their society. This entailed spiritual, social and economic transformation. Regarding the purifying element, Kakwata (2018:207) highlights that the Holy Spirit transforms individuals from being unjust, selfish and greedy people to people that work for the good of others by being concerned about poverty, oppression and the wholistic liberation of other people. The revelation component points towards the spiritual knowledge, insights, guidance and discernment provided by the Holy Spirit concerning the situation that people are confronted with that needs to be addressed (Kakwata 2018:208–210). The unity provided by the Holy Spirit enhances transformational development by stimulating compassion, mutual love and unity that promotes the sharing of goods, caring for one another and uplifting one another (Kakwata 2018:211). This view of the Holy Spirit as an enabler calls believers to be active agents by relying on God and seeking his revelation concerning their situation and also actively participating in meeting the needs of other people.

Teaching Africans to directly rely on God because they are accountable to him

In the final analysis, the cultural mandate promotes human agency and transcendence by reminding people of their personal accountability to God who created them in his image so that they rule over the earth on his behalf. As God has mandated each person 'to develop a God-glorifying culture' (Hoekema 1986:79) wherever they are, Christians should directly depend on him instead of on anointed objects. From a Christian eschatological perspective, the cultural mandate reminds humanity that they will have to give an account to God of how they exercised their rule over God's affairs tasked to them. Therefore, instead of relying on anointed objects, African Christians must directly rely on God by having a personal relationship with him and seek to understand his will for their socioeconomic wellbeing. It can be argued that when people take direct ownership of their relationship with God, it empowers them to take direct ownership of their economic issues by responding to what they hear God say to them about their situation. They must seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit in responding to their problems, because God is the source of wealth. A direct relationship with God can promote Afro-optimism by restoring African human dignity that propels them to be actively responsible for their situation and actively seek meaningful and sustainable ways of addressing it.

Conclusion

This article was a public systematic theological attempt to use the cultural mandate to critique the crippling of African human agency and transcendence by African NPPs in their reliance on anointed objects. Agency and transcendence were used as inseparably interrelated concepts, because agency points towards the power to participate positively in life, and transcendence points towards overcoming the forces that threaten life. While anointed objects express African human powerlessness, the cultural mandate signifies the responsibility and the power to stand up, act and overcome one's socioeconomic challenges. It was contended that the reliance on anointed objects thrives on promoting human powerlessness amongst Africans, which leaves them vulnerable and desperate to overcome problems such as poverty. The article argued that the cultural mandate reminds Africans that they should exercise their agency and transcendence, because they are made in the image of God. This article attempted to use biblical doctrines and images to challenge the Afro-pessimism promoted by practices and teachings of African NPPs that promote self-doubt and cripple the agency and transcendence of many African people. Neo-Pentecostal Prophets are therefore challenged to critically consider their prophetic role in the African public life by enhancing African human agency and transcendence by fostering Afro-optimism instead of the Afro-pessimism that they are currently promoting.

Acknowledgements

I acknowledge the gracious help from Dr Michael Burges, Dr Gift Masengwe and Dr Dambudzo Mbendana read the final draft manuscript and offered helpful comments. However, any deficiencies that remain are mine and mine alone.

Competing interests

The author declares that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Author's contributions

C.B. is the sole author of this article.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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