Exploring the intersectionality of culture, sacrificial offering, and exploitative prosperity gospel rhetoric in Africa

Judith I. Udechukwu
Department of Communication, Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, PA, USA

ABSTRACT
Research has well documented the evidence of the growth of prosperity gospel churches across the globe, but there is a dearth of studies that investigate the interface between culture and exploitative rhetoric among African prosperity gospel ministers. Examining the concept of making sacrificial offerings in the traditional African context, I theorize that culture has significant influence on the exploitative power of prosperity gospel ministers by the following considerations: the African tradition of consulting oracles for solution to spiritual and physical problems, the cultural practice of making sacrificial offerings to the gods in exchange for favor, and the poor socio-economic condition of many prosperity gospel adherents in Africa. This study highlights the use of the rhetoric of spiritual engagement and liberation for audience manipulation, examines the idea of the pure gift, proposes some ethical questions that should govern the prosperity movement, and underscores the need for scholarly engagement.

1. Introduction: the influence of culture on religious engagement

It is common knowledge among scholars of African religions that religion is at the core of the existence of a typical African person. It is reflected in almost every aspect of the individual’s life, concurrently acting as the propeller, signpost, and guardrails for actions. In fact, so powerful is the influence of religion on their lives that some scholars such as Metuh (1987), and Mbti (1969), rightfully observe that among Africans, there is no formal distinction between the sacred and the profane, the religious and the non-religious, or the spiritual and material areas of life. The intensity of African religiosity echoes through the words of Mbti (1969) who argues that Africans are willing to sacrifice anything for the sake of their religion.

There are ontological worldviews that ground African religious beliefs and practices. For example, the Igbo of Nigeria believe that everyone has a personal Chi (God/god),

CONTACT Judith I. Udechukwu udechukwum@duq.edu Department of Communication, Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, PA, USA

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the deity considered as the invisible force that influences an individual’s destiny. Indeed, many people attribute their unsuccessful ventures or physical ailments to the agency of the devil and resign their fate to their Chi. According to Ejizu (1992), the Chi concept helps the typical Igbo person to rationalize and accept many of the inexplicable events of life by attributing such experiences to the inscrutable will and character of cosmic entities and forces. Therefore, although an individual works very hard for self-improvement and success, the individual eventually submits the outcome of his or her efforts to the activities of Chi.

Of course, such a culturally informed religious disposition explains why people consult the Oracle through the appropriate traditional medium for answers to their spiritual and physical problems. Consequently, in accord with the phenomena of spiritual exchange that informs the African traditional religious cosmology, they are willing to make sacrificial offerings to the gods for a positive outcome. This concept of spiritual exchange that leads to sacrificial offerings in the African context constitutes the core of the form of rhetoric employed by African prosperity ministers, and their exploitative maneuvers hinge upon it. It is a rhetoric of manipulation aimed at persuading the adherents to make contractual obligations of giving to the church in return for prosperity from God. To a large extent, prosperity gospel scholars have focused on the discourse of prosperity and poverty (see for instance the foundational study of Domke and Coe [2010], and Kaylor [2010]), but have ignored the relationship between culture and the prosperity gospel rhetoric. However, prosperity ministry in Africa demonstrates a totalizing approach that almost completely integrates the mundane aspects of everyday life as lived within this culture in practical ways. So, there is need to address this scholastic chasm in the religio-cultural tradition in which culture serves as a significant underpinning for the popularity of such rhetoric among believers. Besides, without engaging this discourse from a cultural standpoint, this religious-themed abuse will continue to be perpetrated in the society. Thus, this study attempts to fill the gap in this area of scholarship by examining how African prosperity gospel ministers employ the rhetoric of spiritual engagement, which reflects the cultural practice of sacrificial gift-giving to exploit their audience. Highlighting the distinctive wealth gap that exists between African prosperity gospel preachers and their faithful, I explore the intersectionality of sacrificial offering within the African religio-cultural milieu and prosperity rhetoric, with a focus on the Igbo cultural context. I counter-vail the exploitative ideology of prosperity gospel ministers by utilizing Jean-Luc Marion’s hermeneutic of the pure gift to underscore that the gift of God’s blessing is neither mechanical nor dependent on the parallel gift of the devotee as in a quid pro quo relationship. The study ultimately highlights the imperativeness of ethical questions, and the need to follow effective standardized economic plans for financial improvement, rather than the divine magical route, advocated by prosperity ministers that depicts God as a money-doubler, devoid of any concrete actualization except in the minds and emotions of believers.

2. Oracle consultation

Igbo Oracles play a central role in different aspects of Igbo life. Indeed, ‘the oracle systems… integrated sections of Ibo society beyond the local level more than did any
other kind of Igbo organizations’ (Simon Ottenberg 1958, 313). One of the several customs in the Igbo culture is to consult Oracles before making any major decisions. The Igbo view the Oracles as a type of liaison between them and their gods so they consult different Oracles for different issues as appropriate. In Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart for example, even though Umofia was a village well known and feared by its neighbors because of its prowess in war and magic, and its priests and medicine men were feared in all the surrounding country, the people still consulted the Oracle before engaging any serious undertaking such as war. Achebe writes, ‘And in fairness to Umofia it should be recorded that it never went to war unless its case was clear and just and was accepted as such by its Oracle–the oracle of the Hills and Caves. And there were indeed occasions when the Oracle had forbidden Umuofia to wage a war’ (Achebe 1959, 12). Far from representing a culturally established method of seeking spiritual and physical information, the Igbo society has undergone significant shifts in response to religious transformations brought about by Christianity. Modern Igbo society frowns at the practice of Oracle consultation, therefore, the Igbo tends to replace this religious custom by consulting prosperity preachers. It is this sort of religious disposition that makes them vulnerable to methods of control preferred by these pastors.

3. Sacrificial gift-giving in the African religious context

The values of a particular culture lead to a set of expectations and rules prescribing how people should behave in that culture (Galvin 2011). Consequently, an organizing principle for high morality in the Igbo traditional religion (as in African traditional communities) is conceptualized on the ethical framework that one must work hard and strive to abide by the values, traditions and norms of the land (omenala) to be successful and to receive blessings and protection of the gods. Thus, maintaining the interdependence between human beings and the gods entails a standard of moral ideal, achieved through compliance to the set of written and unwritten rules governing behavior in this culture, including the dedication of sacrificial offerings to the gods, which constitutes a vital core in African religious practice. In fact, some scholars argue that making sacrificial offerings is one of the oldest forms of communication between human beings and the deities in the African religious tradition. It is a means of establishing and sustaining mutually binding links and obligations between transactors (see for instance, Mauss [1967] and Mbiti [1969] for a detailed study).

While there are diverse forms of worship in Africa, Mbiti (1969) suggests that the dedication of sacrifices constitutes one of the commonest acts of worship among African peoples. It is an act and occasion of making and renewing contact between God, the spirits, and human beings, that is, the spiritual and the physical world as well as ‘a psychological device to restore an ontological balance between God and man’ (75–76). This concept derives from the African cosmology that conceives of the universe as ‘a moving equilibrium of forces’ (Ejizu 1992, 388), which must be maintained for the wellbeing and stability of humanity. Thus, sacrificial offerings become the homeostatic control mechanism that help the universe maintain constancy despite human activities or lack thereof that elicit consequential responses from the gods of the land. Against this backdrop, people may offer sacrifices to the gods at certain times of
the year, for example, during the seed and harvest time to obtain a bountiful harvest from the gods, or as stipulated by the diviner.

4. Sacrificial offerings and prosperity gospel churches

The act of dedicating sacrificial offerings to the gods in African traditional religion runs parallel to the practice of gift-giving in the prosperity gospel churches. For indigenous Africans, observes Ejizu (1992, 385), the religious practices associated with sacrificial dedications are not meaningless repetitive actions, rather they are essentially an integral part of the ‘traditional system of communication and explanation’. In this tradition therefore, sacrifices not only represent a communicative link with the gods, they also highlight a symbiotic relationship that exists between the human and supernatural worlds. This is reflected in the contemporary practices of offering money and other forms of gifts to prosperity gospel preachers in exchange for blessings and prosperity from the almighty God.

The preponderance of the above act of religious practice demonstrates that sacrificial offerings carry considerable weight among Africans and highlight their inclination to dedicate their time and money to the prosperity gospel preachers in exchange for financial breakthrough and other blessings from God. Undoubtedly, the revered African tradition of making sacrifices to god at the great festivals of seed-time and harvest, positions African prosperity gospel ministers at a greater advantage of using the rhetoric of ‘seed sowing’ (a biblical concept suggesting that an individual will only reap if the person sows the seed of faith), for financial exploitation of their followers. By invoking wealth and blessings on those who faithfully fulfil their religious obligations through financial contributions to the church, prosperity gospel preachers effectively utilize a cultural orientation to enrich themselves. As such, a brief overview of prosperity gospel is necessary for the understanding of its ideological connection to the African culture of sacrifices.

5. Prosperity gospel: a brief overview

Prosperity gospel ministry has its origins in America (Niemandt 2017, 205; Obadare 2016). Several well-known ministers, including A.A. Allen, T. L. Osborn, Kenneth Hagin, and John Avanzini contributed to the development of the gospel of prosperity in its present form (Anim 2010, 67; Young 1996, 4). As a global phenomenon, this form of Christianity has grown exponentially around the world over the past several decades, and Africa has proved a fertile ground for this expansion. In Africa, prosperity gospel finds its most ostentatious expressions in the wildly successful ministries of preachers like Nigeria’s David Oyedepo and Ghana’s Nicholas Duncan Williams (Jenkin 2010), among others. Central to its message is the use of various biblical texts to promote materialism and appeal to the audience for financial contributions to the church through the rhetoric of ‘seed sowing’. Scriptural verses such as Mk. 11:23–23; Dt. 23–30; 3 Jn. 2; Mal. 3: 8–11; Phil.4:19; Ps. 91; Is. 53:4–5; 1 Pet.2, 24 and Mt. 9:27–31, are utilized to support its acquisitive perspective.
Also known as the ‘faith gospel’ or ‘health and wealth gospel’, the message of prosperity is that it is God’s will for believers to be rich, healthy, and successful (Coleman 2000; Ukah 2005; Kintz 1997; Maxwell 1998). Prosperity gospel suggests that God has met all the needs of human beings in the suffering and death of Christ, therefore, every Christian should share the victory of Christ over sin, sickness, and poverty. For proponents of this belief, sacrificial poverty is not a virtue, because it rejects the prosperity that Christ won through his death for the born-again believers (Hunt 2002). Accordingly, a believer has a right to the blessings of health and wealth that Christ won for all and can obtain these blessings simply by a positive confession of faith. This rhetoric of affluence, which underlies the prosperity gospel ministry, stems from the pursuit of materialism that has become the bane of modern-day society. As a result, the prosperity gospel movement in Africa has morphed into the gospel of ‘greed and consumption’ and feeds into the consumer culture where members are encouraged to give to the church in return for blessings from God (see, Achunike [2007, 91]; Gbote and Kgatla [2014, 5]; De Boeck [2004, 198]). These gifts, usually referred to as ‘seeds’ of faith are understood to convey the promise of a divinely increased ‘harvest’.

Although the key targets of the prosperity gospel message of freedom, abundance and empowerment are the disadvantaged, lower and middle class, this gospel is not entirely about liberation for the underprivileged as the gospel would want us to believe (Kalder 2010). Paradoxically, it is entrenched in duplicity (Dada 2004), and serves as an apologia for wealthy people rather than acting as an advocate for the people in the lower and middle class (Hunt 2002).

Consequently, critics of this movement view it with a mixture of contempt and cynicism. Negative terminologies such as ‘greed’, ‘crass fundraising’, ‘greasy leaders’, and ‘overt religious entrepreneurism’ have been used by critical observers to express their skepticism (see Bowler [2013]). African prosperity theology thrives on the enactments of tithing and offerings. Thus, in addition to the numerous avenues for financial contribution already operative in these churches, it has also become a norm for followers to submit 10 per cent of their monthly earnings (tithes) to their pastors as a fundamental requirement for the worshipper’s spiritual and economic breakthrough. Therefore, Nigerian mega churches have become mere business ventures led by ‘prophets for profit’ who adopt marketing strategies to mobilize and organize funds while acting as ‘economic missionaries’ focused on generating funds instead of supporting the spiritual aims (Ukah 2013, 151).

The gospel of prosperity exemplifies how wealth is often generated by systems of exploitation and oppression, a situation that Harrison (2005) decries as worrisome. Indeed, the twisting of the gospel by prosperity pastors to advance selfish financial goals not only unmasks this form of religious belief as a spiritual aberration, but also exposes a form of religious corruption, of which rhetoric has become a handy tool. Many unsuspecting followers who flock to these churches to improve their financial situations get duped into contributing to the wealth of the church and the ministers rather than achieving economic security and comfort (Dada 2004). The practice of giving has become even more controversial in the African context due to the abuses at the hands of healing and prosperity ambassadors who defraud people by requiring them to give more of their earnings in pursuit of God’s blessings.
Although one can argue that prosperity gospel pastors inspire a positive sense of disposition and blessedness in their adherents, in the actual sense, many of these faithful do not experience concrete benefits of these blessings in terms of financial gains or social mobility. While on the one hand the pastors continue to experience the joy of increased wealth, on the other hand, the riches of prosperity continue to elude the believers of this gospel. This apparent irony can become a serious problem for the faith and self-image of those who believe, but do not see the benefits of their spiritual engagement (Harrison 2005). It also undermines any effort to promote self-help, self-reliance, self-esteem, self-determination, responsibility, and autonomy in its believers (Gifford 1998). Prosperity gospel rhetoric characteristically appeals to the senses, hence, by emphasizing spiritual forces working against the adherents and promoting an ‘enchanted religious imagination’ which downplays ‘functional rationality’ prosperity gospel churches in Africa have exposed many people to duping, false teaching, false faith, and false expectations (Gifford 2016, 55), as well as loss of faith when it seems God has not heeded to their needs.

Unsurprisingly, the African continent produces some of the richest prosperity gospel ministers across the globe. In fact, ‘religion appears to be the most lucrative business today’ (Umoh 2013, 656) because of the proliferation of the Pentecostal churches in this region. Accordingly, some prosperity gospel scholars have expressed concern over the wealth disparity between prosperity gospel ministers and their followers who increasingly make financial contributions to the church despite the lack of any concrete material progress in their economic and social situations. Togarasei (2011) and Dada (2004) describe this paradox as an impetus for delusion among believers whose gullibility is exploited by the pastors. A sample of this blatant discrepancy is demonstrated by the number of jets and properties owned by some Nigerian prosperity gospel pastors as shown in the diagram below (Table 1).

This apparent wealth gap that exists between prosperity gospel ministers and their followers is not only reflected by the number of jets owned by the pastors but also by their vast number of businesses, houses, cars and spiffy outfits which they acquire using the language of spiritual engagement. It therefore defies logic, by any stretch of imagination, that people continue making sacrificial contributions to prosperity gospel ministers even when their expectations are not met. So why do proponents of this belief continue to fall into this trap, we might ask. I theorize that this behavior is probably influenced by the following three considerations: (1) the traditional African spirituality that encourages oracle consultation, and sacrificial offerings. (2) the power of the rhetoric of prosperity as a mode of persuasion used by the pastors, and (3) the strategic

| Name of Pastor       | Church                                      | Number of Aircrafts |
|----------------------|---------------------------------------------|---------------------|
| Oyedepo David        | Living Faith Church Worldwide               | 4                   |
| Adebayo Enoch        | Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG)    | 2                   |
| T. B Joshua          | The Synagogue Church of All Nations (SCOAN) | 1                   |
| Oritsejafor Ayo      | Word of Life Bible Church (WBLC)            | 1                   |
| Okonkwo Mike         | The Redeemed Evangelical Mission (TREM)     | 1                   |
| Oyakhilome Chris     | Love Word Ministries                        | Unspecified         |
| Johnson Suleiman     | Omega Fire Ministries International         | Unspecified         |

Source: Onyekachi (2021).
and dynamic fusion of rhetoric and cultural values. As a result, I have chosen to explore the rhetor-cultural dimension of prosperity gospel in Africa to understand how prosperity pastors use the rhetoric of wealth to navigate their way through a cultural context of gift giving in which their followers exist. Having already examined the practices of sacrificial offering, and oracle consultation in the African context, I now turn to the rhetorical analysis of this phenomenon, and its intersectionality with the African cultural context. I note from the onset that one critical challenge with regards to this analytical perspective is the paucity of research. Accordingly, a comprehensive knowledge of this assessment cannot be achieved in this article. My ultimate goal, however, is to initiate a scholarly conversation on the rhetorical aspect of prosperity ministry. This discussion is imperative in addressing the excesses encountered in this religious and spiritual ideology.

6. Prosperity gospel in the African context: a rhetorical analysis

Rhetoric, as an art, refers to the principles and practice of persuasive speaking (See Melchert 2011). According to Aristotle, rhetoric as a type of discourse, is goal-oriented speaking or writing that seeks, by means of the resources of symbols, to adapt ideas to an audience. For the purpose of this article, prosperity gospel rhetoric is defined as a language employed by prosperity gospel ministers to specifically modify the orthodox method of interpreting biblical texts and symbols in order to achieve their aims of acquiring wealth. Prosperity discourse is used to 'alter the reality of prosperity gospel adherents through the mediation of thought and action' (see Bitzer [1968]), by transmitting 'the energy inherent in emotion and thought' (Kennedy 1991, 7) of the pastor to the followers. It is the use of 'verbal trickery and specious arguments' of prosperity to motivate the faithful for action. This mode of interpretation elicits positive response from the audience, which culminates in cash and in-kind contributions to the church, invariably meant for the consumption of the pastor. For this reason, one can argue that prosperity rhetoric is akin to sophistic rhetoric, which has been widely associated with deceptive argumentation due to the sophists 'extravagant displays of language', and for amazing audiences with their 'brilliant styles … colorful appearances and flamboyant personalities' (Poulakos 1995). Just like the sophists, prosperity preachers manipulate their audience for their own benefit even though this contradicts the goal of rhetoric in itself. Thus, those who accuse religion of being manipulative find enough materials in prosperity rhetoric to prove their thesis.

Because religion in Africa has an integral dimension with culture, African prosperity gospel ministers engage in situated rhetoric. Hence, their rhetoric of prosperity occurs within the framework of the cultural and socio-economic situatedness of worshippers. In this milieu, prosperity discourse is designed to respond to the social and material exigencies of believers by telling them exactly what they want to hear. Such rhetorical approach, however, does not resolve the pressing issues that affect the faithful but only falsely hypes their hopes. Besides, the cultural orientation of Africans to offer gifts to the gods, juxtaposed with their socio-economic condition creates a perfect storm for exploitation by prosperity ministers.
While this strand of the gospel has been central to anthropological, economic, or political discourse, little or no research has focused on the intersectionality of prosperity rhetoric and culture in the African context. The emergence of eloquent, well-educated, and highly influential prosperity gospel ministers such as David Oyedepo, and Chris Oyakhilome of Nigeria, as well as the complexity of the socio-economic landscape of Africa makes it even more compelling to engage in this rhetor-religio-cultural analysis. Anchored with lexical prowess, prosperity prophets diligently persuade their audience to engage in financial obligation to their ministry even when ‘it is obvious to them that most of their adherents will fail to achieve prosperity’ (Rosin 2009).

As such, prosperity messaging thrives in the context of poverty while projecting among its proponents a general sense of successful and affluent living in a declining socio-economic environment. Given this incongruity, we might ask, what rhetorical strategies enable African prosperity prophets to entice their followers and motivate them for action? To respond to this question, we may refer to Aristotle’s teachings on the importance of artistic proofs (Logos, pathos, ethos), and inartistic proofs such as testimonies, in making persuasive arguments. African prosperity preachers exhibit strategic shrewdness in delivering homilies as they rely on a unique set of stylistic patterns that juxtapose artistic proofs and other rhetorical tropes to connect with their audiences’ experiences, values and beliefs in order to maximize their influence over them. Much of this methodological diversity stems from their verbal acumen in devising rhetorical categories that are provisionally useful in addressing the needs of their followers. Thus, using the appropriate biblical theme, prosperity pastors essentially balance rhetorical forms while leveraging the socio-economic condition of the country by appealing to the emotions and aspirations of believers, as well as their cynicism towards the government, for their personal gain. For example, speaking of the toxic economic status quo of the country, Oyedepo of Nigeria declares:

Riches is also part of seven-fold redemptive heritage. Jesus also received for us riches. That’s why the Bible says in 2 Corinthians 8:9 … redemption is a cure for poverty as it gives you access to the cure of poverty. When you were saved, you were redeemed from the plague of poverty, because your father is wealthy … Jesus said, in my father’s house are many mansions, if it were not so I would have told you (Jn. 14: 2). There are no houses in heaven, only mansions. That gives you an idea of the kind of riches you inherited from your father. They were earlier stolen from you, but Jesus restored them back to you by his death and resurrection … (2006, 77–76)

This biblical theme, and choice of words demonstrate that this pastor has a good grasp of the feelings of his audience, so he logically makes the argument of the stolen riches. He uses the language, ‘stolen’ to validate his follower’s perception of a corrupt system that has become the bane of their reality. Thus, rhetoric also provides him with a cultural context through which his audience can visualize the stolen wealth that will be restored by God through financial commitment to the church.

Another important dimension to prosperity gospel is the use of narratives to promote the pastors’ views. Of course, the connection between rhetoric and story is an ancient one, tracing back to Plato’s Phaedrus, where Socrates employs the use of stories to argue for a particular view of the human soul, as seen for instance in the myth of the Charisteer. As such, narrative is central to the discourses of prosperity in Africa because of its inherent ability to articulate time and events from the narrator’s
perspective. More so, orality is the primary method of transmitting information in the African culture. Since ‘you can persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, identifying your ways with his’ (Burke 1969, 55), it is no coincidence therefore, that African prosperity gospel preachers largely utilize narratives in the form of biblical stories, personal narratives, historical backgrounds, and/or public testimonies of believers to attest to the credibility of their ministry. The biblical story of the woman by the brook (I kings 17:1–7) who fed the prophet Elijah, and in return was promised consistent supply of food and oil is one among the stories that prosperity pastors utilize to convince worshippers that one has to give in order to receive from God.

To prove their authenticity, or perhaps disguise their fraudulent traits, (see for instance Ukah [2013]), some prosperity ministers recall their historical background of rags to riches or share with their audience, the story of their calling by emphasizing how God empowered them with a liberation mandate to save the faithful from poverty. For example, in his book, *Understanding Financial Prosperity*, Oyedepo (2005) illustrates the importance of ethical appeal in prosperity movement by comparing the story of his divine call with the call of Moses whom God chose to liberate the Israelites from the hands of Pharaoh in Egypt. Of his call, he narrates that he received the task of liberation on 1 May 1981, while on a conference in the United States, when God asked him to ‘arise go home and make my people rich’ (14), on the morning of his scheduled speech. Consequently, he cancelled his speaking engagement and went back home as commanded. By evoking personal religious history, he impresses his relevance on his audience, which ensures their fidelity to him. Furthermore, due to the influence of materialism in modern times, prosperity gospel preachers have found in narrative the flexible structure necessary to account for the pursuit and accumulation of material goods as crucial to spiritual fulfilment. In some health and wealth churches, the pastors encourage those who claim to be beneficiaries of God’s blessings to openly testify before members as a testament to the character of the church. Accordingly, their testimonies are published for the consumption of the public through various media platforms including Television, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram. Most of these testimonies focus on the material realm such as finances, travel visas, marriage, and job promotion, accentuating the view that these churches are about the success of their followers. Certainly, most proponents of this gospel are emphatically convinced of the power of their pastors to heal and deliver them from poverty, as the excerpt below affirms:

An ‘anointed man of God’ could release your blockage. He did not need a questionnaire. He often did not require you to tell him your problem; both the problem and the remedy are either evident to him because of his gifts or are revealed to him. In the past few years this anointed man of God, or prophet, has become the standard means of deliverance. Often before the suppliant speaks (often before one knows one is a suppliant), the prophet can tell what the spiritual cause is of ‘stagnation’ and can affect the deliverance right there. (Gifford 2004, 173)

This excerpt demonstrates the degree of trust which African prosperity adherents have in their pastors. This type of trust also has a cultural undertone that is rooted on the African philosophy that believes in oracle consultation for solution to both spiritual and physical problems.
In high-context cultures such as Africa where non-verbal communication is a typical mode of communication, people have shared meanings about many unstated realities. Thus, prosperity preachers find enthymeme as an effective communication tool for delivering homilies in a manner that ultimately results in conformity to their demands. Generally speaking, enthymeme refers to a rhetorical syllogism, or an argument that is founded on values, beliefs, or knowledge held in common by a speaker and an audience. To a large extent, shared meanings between pastors and believers might be so clear as not to warrant further articulations by the pastor because both the unsaid words or the unstated reason are literally held in the hearts of the pastor and the faithful, such that they are simultaneously completed or constructed by both parties (see Walker [2000] and Bitzer [1959]). Consequently, prosperity ministers utilize enthymeme to relate with their audience in a manner that has been described as the most faithful, and intimate of ways that connect with the believers’ present realities, while transcending their simple cognitive level, and plunging deep into their spiritual realm (Woodford 2015). For example, while addressing his audience on the secret of prosperity, Oyedepo states:

Also, remember Christ became poor that ye through His poverty might be rich (2 Corinthians 8:9). So, do you mean Christ died to give you everything in life and yet, you decide to remain in poverty? Is that your way of saying thank you to all He did? Of course, not! If wealth, riches, and money wasn’t God’s plan or agenda for His people then why do the following scriptures defend wealth, riches, and money for good and for those who seek after God? (2016, 7–13)

Of course, here he applies the enthymeme in his prosperity discourse in the form of rhetorical questions. Both the preacher and his followers have a shared understanding of the above questions and literally hold the response in their hearts. This rhetoric strategy is highly effective in the African context where a lot of things are left unsaid among communicators because of the natural inclination of people to complete each other’s thoughts.

Central to the health and wealth messaging in Africa is the gift discourse, as well as the practice of tithing – ‘give and you shall receive’ mentality. One of the hallmarks underpinning this rhetoric is the focus on the devil as the source of physical, psychological and financial problems, notwithstanding any medical or professional evidence to the contrary. Hence, just as Africans are usually willing to make sacrificial offerings to the traditional gods, they are by the same token, eager to make financial donations to the church in return for solution to their problems. Prosperity teachings exalt successes and ridicule the poor as stubborn infidels who have evidently refused to seek God’s aid. This version of the gospel teaches that faith leads to tithing, and tithing ignites prosperity. So, a believer must play to win, and if the church’s pastor follows an affluent lifestyle, that is just his way of exhibiting God’s munificence to the world (Jenkin 2010). Therefore, those who decide to play by giving to the church are sure to receive God’s blessings and happiness. Thus, African prosperity gospel preachers persuade the adherents to engage in the practice of tithing by invoking appropriate texts in the Bible such as Malachi 4:1–4, Malachi 3:10, Leviticus 27:30, and other accessible information available to them. Such preaching builds its appeal in its audience’s ‘spirituality of longing’, the deep desire for the slow-coming reward of faithfulness to
God’s covenant in the face of injustice and trial (Mitchem 2007, 30–36). The ultimate purpose is to exploit and ensure a pecuniary flow from the followers to their already fatty bank accounts. So far, the rhetorical methods analyzed in this section crystalize how prosperity gospel ministers continue to modify rhetoric, in a manner consistent with cultural values, to persuade their audience.

7. Prosperity rhetoric: a means of exploitation

Any critical observer of prosperity gospel churches will notice that prosperity ministers often carefully calibrate their rhetoric to fit their follower’s desires and expectations. Given the content of their homilies, which emphasize the need for making offerings to receive blessings, there are ample reasons to conclude that personal financial calculation plays a substantial role in determining the themes and content of their homilies. The continuous emphasis on the need for planting the ‘seed of faith’, a religious rhetoric equivalent to demanding contributions to the church, and the declaration of liberation from both spiritual and financial poverty for those who ‘play to win’ highlight their personal interest. Targeted religious themes designed simultaneously to appeal to the spiritual and social emotions of the faithful in fact make them subjects to exploitation by the church. Thus, prosperity ministers’ emphasis on liberation from poverty, their invocation of the socio-economic crisis affecting the faithful, and their focus on the need for spiritual engagement in terms of making sacrificial offerings, are meant to be ‘heartfelt’ and revealing messages which permit the minsters to connect with the adherents’ cultural and spiritual experiences while providing them with opportunities to advance their goals (see Walker [2000, 175]). The charade of prosperity gospel in Africa is that while believers’ sense in the pastors’ religious language a commitment to resolve their desperate issues, the pastors continue to enrich themselves using donations from the same poor adherents that they are supposed to help. The application of the above prosperity gospel rhetorical exploits to the gratuitous nature of God’s gift leaves more to be desired. By anchoring the gift of God’s blessings to the economy of exchange, where the blessing received from God is quantified, and becomes dependent on the financial donation of the devotee, couched in the rhetoric of seed sowing, wealth, liberation and the likes, prosperity gospel preachers undermine the use of religious rhetoric as a means for moral persuasion.

The manner of worship in many of these churches today where offering time has unfortunately become the focus of worship encourages this exploitation. In this form of worship, prosperity pastors frame offering time as an occasion for future investment in the Lord. Unfortunately, the Word itself has been severely twisted to back the centrality of offering in the churches today. Hence, one cannot but feel a sense that prosperity pastors fleece their audience (Adeleye 2010). In the light of this discourse, one can conclude that the language of prosperity is indisputably a make-believe rhetoric that projects God as someone who automatically turns poverty into riches. Thus, God becomes a vending machine from which believers can always draw blessings in the form of money, homes, cars, beautiful spouses, clever kids, good neighbors, big churches, and plush vacations once they play their part. Consequently, it will be quite illusive to suggest that prosperity gospel is geared towards the liberation of its
followers. Rather it is a manipulative ploy for persuading the faithful to commit to making sacrifices that ultimately benefit the pastors, who like African oracle priests and priestesses, are considered mediators between the divine and the human. The rhetorical approach to prosperity doctrine in Africa which reflect the cultural values of sacrifice serves to ensnare believers in deceit. As we have seen, in the African context, the art of prosperity rhetoric is performed through various approaches. Given the ubiquity of this deception encapsulated in verbal scam, we might ask, can God’s blessings be liberated from this rhetorical exploit? French philosopher Jean-Luc Marion’s hermeneutic of the pure gift helps us to address these excesses and rethink the prosperity ideology.

8. A hermeneutic of the pure gift

Pushing phenomenology to its limits, Marion (1991) develops the biblical image of God who is givenness before Being and is not caught up in the language of exchange which is the bane of prosperity gospel preachers. In *God Without Being*, Marion presents God as gift, a giving that is not exhausted within Being, but surpasses Being. He writes, ‘because God does not fall within the domain of Being, he comes to us in and as gift’, (3). The biblical parable of the prodigal son (LK 15: 11–32) gives Marion a framework in which to explain how God [is] Love before Being, highlighting the aspect of God’s giving. The parable shows how the gift can easily be lost into the sphere of economic exchange or to an economy of idolatry, unless operated by love. The son approached the gift from the perspective of appropriation rather than disappropriation, so he possesses and spends the gift. For him, the gift has only a finite, monetary value. It is a product that can be commodified and possessed. He therefore asks to possess it, but in doing so ‘he asks that one deprive him of something he already has: he has the enjoyment of the *ousia* as given, he asks for the *ousia* without the concession, the *ousia* less the gift… without having to concede that it comes to him by a gracious concession… from gift received, *ousia* becomes property appropriated without the gift….because first abandoning the gift – to be lost as dispersed liquid’ (Marion 1991, 97–100).

The gift here becomes objectified, scarce, insufficient, rationed, and thus takes its place outside the domain of the pure gift. To this effect, the parable shows how commodification of the gift can frustrate the infinite depth of giving. It shows how there is no ground for the gift other than love. It shows how the gift cannot be understood in terms of being, (what is), but rather in terms of givenness. Unlike the son therefore, the father ‘is not fixed on the *ousia* because with his gaze he transpierces all that is not inscribed in the rigor of a gift, giving, received, given: goods common by definition and circulation, are presented as the indifferent stakes of those who, through them, give themselves to each other in a circulation of what is more essential than what it exchanges’ (Marion 1991, 99). Everything is thus transformed by the father’s love, and salvation of the son takes place in his return to the logic of the pure gift.

Giving oneself therefore means giving oneself in love, which is, in fact a *kenosis* governed by dispossession and unconditionality. For Van den Bossche (2001), by translating being into love and givenness according to the logic (non-logic) of love, Marion
achieves two things: he develops an iconic figure through which God gazes at us (iconic gaze), and the figure of the pure gift that makes present God’s transcendence in immanence, according to the logic of the Bible. God is not the one whom we see (or do not see) but he is the one who sees us. Sacrificial offering occupies a significant place for prosperity gospel preachers. Contrary to the idea of pure gift however, it is construed as an exchange of earthly love for divine love. Here, the concept of God’s gratuitous love is considered as a commodity in the hands of God (the transcendent giver), who then divides it up into different categories, and decides who and who not to give, according to each believer’s ability to contribute to the church, thereby contradicting the very concept of love, self-abandonment and kenosis.

Marion’s hermeneutic of God’s gift-giving in Christ helps to give a better explication of the gift of God’s blessings in terms of givenness. Accordingly, God’s blessings can be understood as a gift, but not as a ‘thing’ that is received because of good deeds or cut off because of sin, or quantified in accordance with what the devotee is able to give in exchange, but as God’s free and gratuitous love. God’s gift of love comes to human beings in the gift of Christ. The pure gift as experienced in the person of Christ defies the prosperity gospel understanding of gift as a mechanically ‘caused’ product, occurring in an instant of time, on the model of physical generation, as seen for instance in the mechanical loss and regaining of blessings through ‘not sowing’ and ‘sowing’ of biblical seeds respectively, that has been the hallmark of prosperity gospel rhetoric. God gives God-self such that the tension between giver, givee and gift is overcome because what is given in the present is not something, no-thing is given, but the gift of God-self, the givenness of God, which is originary, and in the words of Madathummuriyil (2012) ‘always already’. Blessing from God is not an object that could be amassed or piled up to a greater or lesser degree in accordance with the moral disposition of the individual. It is not something that God dishes out according to the amount, quality, or quantity of an individual’s contribution to the prosperity gospel church. Blessing is non-calculable.

This ‘non-calculable’ nature of God’s blessings comes to light in the Christ-event. For Paul, this is love beyond imagination. Paul employs the term \(\chi\rho\iota\varsigma\) (grace), which means God’s salvific act in Jesus Christ (Brown 1997) to designate the boundless love that he experienced from God who loved him and gave himself for him. \(\chi\rho\iota\varsigma\) for Paul, is not ‘something’ but ‘someone’. It is the presence of the one who gives himself freely and gratuitously. He writes, ‘...God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us’ (Rom. 5: 6,8). For Paul therefore, \(\chi\rho\iota\varsigma\) is actually the excess of God’s love. In the paradoxical figure of the Cross, the excess of Love bedazzles, a Love which only the gaze that loves can bear and recognize, as the figure of God in his kenosis (Marion, 2002). Gifts escape economy exactly to the extent they are no longer passive pawns in a successive game of quid pro quo (Miller 2008, 80-81).

9. Ethical considerations

The gospel of prosperity fails to discern how wealth is often generated by systems of exploitation and oppression (Smith 2009). Indeed, rhetoric has been historically appropriated to the needs of church hierarchies that developed its own peculiar forms of
government, discourse, education, and art. The art most easily associated with the purposes of the church was preaching, \textit{(ars praedicandi)} (Kennedy 1980, 190). Numerous preaching manuals were authored during the Christian Middle Ages, particularly during the thirteenth century (Jennings 1978), to provide a guide for preaching and to prevent the abuse of sacred rhetoric. Accordingly, the preaching instructions contained in these manuals encourage expanding on the meanings of brief biblical texts or themes, toward the goal of improving the moral conduct and religious understanding of one’s audience, presumed to be Christians, since it was recognized that many members of the preacher’s audience would be illiterate and generally unfamiliar with the contents of scripture. This thematic preaching emphasized the location of appropriate and accessible texts as well as careful audience adaptation for ‘the moral persuasion of many, within a moderate length of time, to meritorious conduct’ (Murphy 1971, 124), and not for the deception of believers.

Besides, prosperity gospel rhetoric should not only be ‘thematic’ by focusing on biblical texts that facilitate the financial exploitation of the audience, but ‘pragmatic’ by centering on events that positively contribute to the lives of the adherents (Poulakos 1995, 134). Thus, rather than becoming a very useful asset of financial income for religious entrepreneurs functioning as Christian pastors (Rosin 2009), prosperity gospel should focus on concrete measures that help to alleviate poverty among the faithful, such as employment, skills training, and education. It is ethically imperative therefore, that religious scholars should be one of the ‘louder voices’ (Olson 2002) calling out against the abuse of prosperity rhetoric. I contend that communication scholars exploring prosperity gospel rhetoric should not ignore to ask these fundamental ethical questions: How do prosperity ministers utilize the donations they receive through tithes and other offerings? How do they make enough money to afford private jets, houses and other landed properties? Why does the economic gap between the ministers and their followers keep expanding while members of their congregation continue to wait in endless hope for divine prosperity? Are devotees too gullible to be trapped by the grandiloquence of prosperity gospel preachers, or are they desperate enough for an escape in the consoling and promising words of these pastors? By exploring these questions through more scholarly research, prosperity gospel scholars can provide an alternative framework for prosperity discourse that more genuinely upholds the morals of rhetoric. It will help Christians who embrace this doctrine to protect themselves from the exploitative tendencies of prosperity minsters.

10. Conclusion

Prosperity gospel in its present form, especially in the African religious context is a one stop panacea that provides an way of escape to its adherents who are dissatisfied with the current state of affairs in their lives. Prosperity gospel pastors teach their followers that receiving blessings and prosperity from God depends on their sacrificial gift-giving and financial contributions to the church. In this way, these pastors exploit their members while enriching themselves. Jean-Luc Marion’s concept of gift-giving, however, debunks this idea that God quantifies his blessings on people based on their ability to give to the pastors through their churches. The prosperity gospel’s rhetoric that poverty
is a sign of God’s disfavor as well as the consequence of sin is a matter of great concern in our society today. Certainly, the prosperity message has incredible resonance with its adherents in Africa, chiefly because of their financial instability and lack of material wellbeing. While the vibrant and positive message of prosperity promotes a discourse that allows the wealthy and the powerful to justify their material affluence, by the same token, it obscures the exploitative rhetoric that persuades the audience into making sacrificial offerings, and financial commitments to their own economic detriment. Prosperity gospel precludes the scriptural model of the self-gift of Christ who gives himself devoid of the exchange rhetoric.

In this essay, through the examples of rhetorical approaches provided, I have shown some of the direct and indirect ways that culture influences prosperity rhetoric and raised some moral questions. In exploring this idea, I highlighted the many ways in which prosperity pastors calibrate their religious rhetoric to reflect the cultural understanding of gift giving, generate emotional enthusiasm for divine blessings, and enforce monetary donations. There is therefore an urgent and clarion call for the African faithful to begin to ask critical ethical questions about the operative maneuvers of prosperity gospel ministers as seen in a continent that, by all means of measurement, ranks very high on the poverty scale. Prosperity gospel rhetoric definitely exemplifies how a group’s religious sense can easily be manipulated. Though prosperity ministers ignore all economic standards of wealth accumulation, and proffer a divine magical route, adherents who have not experienced the proffered magical turn in their lives continue to accept the unproven arguments of these prosperity ministers as doctrinal. Unless these questions are posited, and the proper economic route followed, any hope of financial recovery and/or accumulation of wealth both for individuals and communities will only amount to clutching at thin air. As the Igbo proverb says: anaghi ebute Ukwa n’osisi Ugba (Literally – one cannot harvest Breadfruit from an Oil Bean tree, metaphorically - you cannot get a desired outcome from the wrong source).

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Notes on contributor
Judith Udechukwu is a religious in the Order of the Daughters of Mary Mother of Mercy. She is currently a Ph.D. Candidate in the Department of Rhetoric and Philosophy of Communication, Duquesne University Pittsburgh. She has taught as a graduate assistant and adjunct professor in the same University from 2015-2020. Her research interest is in the field of Intercultural and Interpersonal Communication.

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