The gospel of prosperity and its concept of development: A Ghanaian Pentecostal-Charismatic experience

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ABSTRACT

The prosperity gospel, a doctrine in the global Pentecostal-Charismatic movement, characteristically demonstrates the nexus of the Christian faith and wealth. This article analyses Mensa Otabil, a Ghanaian prosperity preacher's '20-year personal development plan' for members of his church, the International Central Gospel Church (ICGC). It explores whether or not, why and how the members are aligning their lives and visions to his vision of how to achieve a better, prosperous community. Using ethnographic data obtained from selected members of the ICGC, this article investigates the idea and the implementation of the development plan, in order to understand the plan as Otabil's conscious effort to change society through the transformation of individuals. It argues that Otabil's efforts can be analysed as a form of religious engineering, where, the individual members are invited to act as engineers of their own life and subjectivity.

Introduction

The so-called prosperity gospel has become a key doctrine within the global Pentecostal-Charismatic movement, which has attracted considerable academic attention in recent times (Gifford 2004; Ayegboyin 2006; Asamoah-Gyadu 2013; Sharpe 2013; Heuser 2015; Agana 2015). It is a concept that states that God wants to bless Christians spiritually, physically, and materially (Attanasi 2012, 3). Generally, there have been mixed reviews on the subject. On the one hand, some scholars and religious actors have observed the theological affinity between prosperity preaching and African religious worldviews that connects deities with abundant life and prosperity as intrinsic to salvation (Heuser 2013). Indeed, it has been suggested as a means by which many have been lifted out of dire poverty in the global south (Alexander 2009; Hasu 2012). Moreover, other scholars see a more powerful ideological link between the prosperity gospel and the protestant ethic (Weber [1904–1905] 2008). Thus, individuals upon learning new values and behaviours tend to reassess what is important in life, whether it is the nuclear family instead of extended family; material success rather than an extensive social network; consumption or discipline etc. That is, they work on their own subjectivity such as their body, ideas and

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behaviours. Accordingly, they are transformed into persons who are adapted to a capitalist economic system and they become capitalist subjects (Freeman 2012). On the other hand, there are those scholars who argue against the doctrine describing it as a questionable theology, at times propagated only to justify some controversial practices. Indeed, in the foreword to Asamoah-Gyadu's (2013) book, *Contemporary Pentecostal Christianity: Interpretations from an African Context*, Allan Anderson, a Pentecostal scholar, points to some of the excesses of the prosperity preachers, labelling them as self-seeking at times and sometimes exploiting the poor. The prosperity gospel has also been critically interrogated due to its breaking of the obligations of reciprocity in Christianity, that is, the redistribution of wealth to the wider community (Heuser 2013), or rather sarcastically described as a 'divinely guaranteed version of the American dream: a house, a job, and money in the bank' (Alexander 2009, 64). Despite the controversies surrounding the prosperity gospel, it has become an important doctrine in African Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity to the extent that they have become synonymous. In fact, research figures show an overwhelming majority (over 90%) of Pentecostals in Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa believe that 'God will grant material prosperity to all believers who have faith' and 'God will grant good health and relief from sickness to believers who have enough faith' – two pillars of the prosperity gospel (PEW Forum 2006, 29).

In Ghana, the concept of connecting the Christian faith and wealth is pervasive – sometimes even extending to mainline historical churches, not least the charismatic elements within these churches. It is common to see prosperity preachers on national TV and behind their pulpits encouraging their members to 'give $100 to receive 100% life improvement' or '$70 to yield a perfect breakthrough' – what is known in Pentecostal circles as 'seed faith'. One such church that recently came under a barrage of criticism from the general public for endorsing this 'name-it-and-claim-it' model is the International Central Gospel Church (ICGC). The ICGC is a vibrant Pentecostal-Charismatic megachurch in Ghana, and it is a church that, in many ways, depends heavily on the vision and charisma of its founder, Mensa Otabil, a prominent churchman on the African Pentecostal scene. Christ Temple in Accra, the first of its hundreds of local and international churches, draws approximately 10 000 congregants, mostly educated urban middle class, to its Sunday services. During a convention in 2017 at the Christ Temple, notices were posted in the church which stated special rewards for specified donations such as 'give $5000 for millionaire status' and '$240 for a 24-hour miracle'. However, this backfired as the public accused the church of trading the gifts of God. Nonetheless, in a typical Pentecostal fashion, Otabil replied the critics that 'faith goes beyond logic' (cf. Mensah 2017).

The backlash against Otabil was significant because he is generally considered as someone who transcends the typical 'name-it-and-claim-it' faith gospel preachers in the Ghanaian religious landscape (Gifford 2004). Admittedly, Otabil has shown over the years that he is a different type of prosperity preacher. Prosperity gospel takes variety of forms (Maxwell 1998; Yong 2012; Wariboko 2012; Arthur 2017), and Otabil is in the group of Pentecostals who believe that as much as their faith is central to financial success, 'hard work', 'education', 'government policies', and 'personal connection and contacts' are equally critical (PEW Forum 2006, 54). Also, Otabil's brand strongly emphasises black pride and self-actualisation, as well as incorporating the question of reciprocity and aspects of wealth redistribution, which most preachers and practitioners of the prosperity

gospel have tended to ignore. Thus, in Otabil's view, there is strong interconnection between individual and social development (Arthur 2017).[1]

With such prominence on individual agency in Otabil's theology, he instituted a '20-year personal development plan' in 2014 to help his church members attain 'personal development,' 'financial freedom' and to stir an entrepreneurial spirit by 2034. One could understand the '20-year development plan' as only a church-related private investment scheme. However, I read it as an expression of Otabil's brand of the prosperity gospel, which centres on the questions of how society can be transformed through planning, human and godly agency, and an emphasis on individual discipline, empowerment and responsibility. Understood this way, it can be analysed as a form of religious engineering. Six years after the launch of the plan, it is imperative to explore whether or not, why and how the members are aligning their lives and visions to Otabil's vision of how to achieve a better, prosperous community. Therefore, introducing Otabil's ideas on 'development' and using ethnographic data[2] obtained from selected members of the ICGC from 2014 to 2017 in Accra, Ghana, this article investigates the idea and the implementation of the development plan, in order to understand the plan as Otabil's conscious effort to change society through the transformation of individuals, and to study the impact of this plan from the perspective of church members. It argues that Otabil's efforts can be analysed as a form of religious engineering, where Otabil as 'engineer' designs and introduces the prosperity gospel as a tool not only to achieve personal development, but also social transformation. At the same time, the individual members are invited to act as engineers of their own life and subjectivity – albeit, sometimes they seem more like bricoleurs and less determined than engineers, as the short case studies in part three will show.

This article is divided into four parts. First, an explanation for the concept of religious engineering is provided. Second, the development of Otabil's project, including its purpose, implementation and the content of the plan, is explored. Third, some personal narratives are shared to show how members of the church are aligning themselves to the plan. Finally, some conclusions are drawn from this exploration.

Why religious engineering?

The connection between religion and development has been widely explored from different perspectives and contexts. As observed by Eva Spies and Paula Schrode (Introduction), these diverse approaches can be categorised into three main perspectives: applied, discourse-oriented and ethnographic approaches. This article takes the ethnographic approach to the religion-development nexus, a perspective informed by a rather extensive view of development as transformation of an individual or society. With this view of development, the concept of religious engineering is considered as an appropriate lens through which to examine the religion-development linkage, as the concept becomes a useful analytical tool for evaluating projects of transformation by both religious and

[1]I have addressed this aspect of reciprocity and wealth redistribution in an essay in the journal *Interkulturelle Theologie: Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft* (Arthur 2017).
[2]This includes data from participating in church activities, conversations, interviews and focus group discussions. In all 46 members of the ICGC were interviewed at least twice (for most of the respondents) within a three-year period and two focus group discussions involving 10 church members.

non-religious actors. Religious engineering refers to 'active and conscious ways of working on the future shape of a given society, of individuals or the world' (Spies and Schrode, Introduction). Therefore, this concept deals with two key words which helps us to appreciate transformational projects such as the 20-year development plan. The word 'religious' concerns traditions or forms of organisation, discourses and practices that are represented as 'religious' by the actors involved, whereas 'engineering' concerns the intentional activities by which people employ religious resources for transformative projects.

My choice of religious engineering as an analytical category was informed by three factors. First, while some existing approaches to studying the religion-development linkage have tended not to take 'religious' ideas, teachings and actors seriously (cf. Ter Haar 2011, 3), religious engineering does take 'religion' seriously. In this article, I take a position that religious teachings and practices, such as the prosperity gospel, are meaningful and thus deserve our attention: this is because Pentecostal-Charismatic churches' prosperity gospel engenders 'new ways of individual and societal transformation' (Van Dijk 2013). Second, religious engineering does not treat religion and development as exclusive categories. Religion and development are considered as intertwined in the sense that they are both geared towards the transformation of the individual and/or the larger society. Third, its recognition of religious actors as 'engineers' with specific notions of transformation and their practices, provides a good foundation to understand Otabil's theology of prosperity and its influence on his activities of how to achieve communal improvement through individual transformation. Thus, as a religious leader of the ICGC, Otabil (the engineer) has a vision of the future shape of society, and accordingly draws on the discourses of his religion (Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity), such as the prosperity gospel, to assemble a project to create the transformation he seeks for his members, individually and collectively. Taking up the conceptual discussion of religious engineering, Otabil's practices show not only how actors draw on religious resources as a strategy for development but also how a religious tradition is shaped by activities that seek development in a specific context. Furthermore, to analyse the 20-year personal development plan of the ICGC as a form of religious engineering, demonstrates the specific way religion and development are connected in Otabil's notion of planning and taking responsibility.

Otabil's development goal is simply put, 'better' Christians, who are materially and morally well-off individuals who will be the building blocks of a 'better' society – a goal that links individual transformation with societal development. For example, for Otabil, a spiritually transformed Christian is one that is economically successful, socially responsible and educated, who is thus able to contribute to the spread of religious ideas in order to help other individuals to transform in the same way. Accordingly, an aggregation of many successful individual Christians culminates in a successful society. Those who adhere to the development plan, however, might not always be the successful engineers of the lives they envision for themselves.

Exploring the project

It was at a special New Year's Eve service, held at a fully packed Accra Sports Stadium, that Mensa Otabil publicly announced the 20-year personal development plan as a conscious transformational project for 2014. He mentioned this plan in relation to the projects the leadership of the church had drawn as part of 'The Year of Order' – a declaration for the

year 2014.[3] Subsequently, the plan was launched on the first Sunday of the year, during the first service at Christ Temple five days after its introduction. On that day, a printed version of the plan was placed on every seat in the auditorium along with pens, seed faith envelopes and visitors' cards. After an interlude of music from the Accra Symphony Orchestra, Mensa Otabil mounted the platform to preach, amidst the usual cheers and rousing welcome from the congregation. First, he led the worshippers through 'the confession of order', in what looked like the recitation of the Nicene Creed or the Westminster Confession of Faith but rather steeped in a theology of prosperity – positive confessions. Second, in his usual calm and restrained demeanour, he announced the title of his two-part sermon series designed to shed light on the project as 'My 20-Year Personal Development Plan'. Subsequently, Otabil urged the congregation to take the copies of the document placed on their seats and complete it with their personal data, specifically their 'name', 'current age' and 'age in 2034'. To this, he sounded a note of caution in a rather humorous fashion:

> I know it's a very scary thing to add twenty years to your life. Suddenly, you look extremely old and you feel very uncomfortable. But you know – whether you add it or not, twenty years from now you will be that age. Therefore, it's always important to face reality and for us to plan towards that reality. (Otabil 2014)

The pastor's comment does not strike a chord with many conventional prosperity preachers in Ghana, especially those with 'word of faith' inclinations, who focus on the principles of faith, sowing and reaping, and prayer as the only ways to success in life. While Otabil himself intermittently employs some word of faith ideas such as positive confessions and seed faith, here he is enjoining the members to be practical in their approach to success. He is arguing against the type of miracle-based approach to Pentecostal-Charismatic preaching, which leaves no room for planning, prevalent in the country.

To clarify why the church is embarking on such a project he offered several propositions, which he grounded on the Bible as well as secular business practices. First, he states that the idea behind the plan is to encourage the congregation to pursue long-term plans rather than focusing on short term ones. Otabil argues that long-term plans will enable them to look at the bigger picture, including considering the resources available to them and what can be mobilised to achieve their targets (Otabil 2014). Also, long-term goals, according to him, help believers to effectively deal with 'disappointments, failures and setbacks' that short-term plans do not offer (Otabil 2014). The notion of planning for success is a major theme in Otabil's sermons in general and here he cites Luke 4:28–33, where it states, in part, 'For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has *enough* to finish *it*'. Although in its specific context, taken as a whole, the reference passage denotes the price individuals pay for becoming Christians or the sacrifices to be made in following Christ, Otabil asserts that by extension, it refers to planning for success, as becoming a Christian is in itself equivalent to living a prosperous life. Accordingly, this is a clear case of Otabil, a

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[3]It is a practice in many Pentecostal-Charismatic churches to give names to years. It is believed that naming the year prophetically gives themes to talk about within the year but even more importantly, it is seen as a prophetic declaration, which will translate into a good year. In the ICGC, the name of the year always comes together with a form of confession of faith, which is recited in church every Sunday. For example, 2020 is designated 'The Year of Excellence' with an announcement that 'great things shall abound for you in 2020' (cf. International Central Gospel Church).

religious leader, using his interpretation of a religious text to fashion a project with the aim of helping his congregation to achieve development. This, he believes, has a wider ramification on the future shape of the Ghanaian society when these members are taken as a collective.

Additionally, Otabil believes this project enables members to follow the pattern set by God in relation to successful Christian living (Otabil 2014). This assertion is supported with a biblical text drawn from Acts 15:18,[4] where it states 'Known to God from eternity are all His works', and Isaiah 46:9–10: 'I am God, and there is none like Me,[10] Declaring the end from the beginning, And from ancient times things that are not yet done. Saying, My counsel shall stand, And I will do all My pleasure.' From this, Otabil establishes three things that he believes Christians are to emulate from God to be successful. Foremost, he argues that God sees the end before he begins any venture. Therefore, Christians should not begin projects and hope that it will work out – they need to create the world they want to live in with words and proper planning. Thus, the plan presents the opportunity for the members to envision the future they desire. Similarly, Otabil asserts that God works with the end in mind and accordingly, believers are enjoined to do same. He argues that what the plan provides in this direction is an unflinching focus on the stipulated goals, even when obstacles are encountered. Likewise, God is able to bring the beginning to the end. He affirms that when God gives a vision to his people, it implies he intends for that idea to come to fruition. Consequently, since the idea of the plan was inspired, God will help every member to complete the project. This clearly shows Otabil's conviction of the plan as inspired and a practical means to change individual circumstances, which will culminate in a transformed society.

After explaining the plan to the members on two continuous Sundays, it was made available online for everyone who wanted to partake in the project. In the next three months, discussions on the plan went on in church groups, such as the leadership teams, youth church and women's group. It is important, therefore, to consider the various aspects of the plan and how they relate to the prosperity gospel practised in the ICGC. Having discussed the reasons behind the launch of the project, the next section considers the specific aspects contained within the plan.

The 20-year personal development plan (2014–2034)[5]

The plan, like any guide to self-actualisation in management and consultancy literature, is a step-by-step document beginning with the name of the participant, their current age and their expected age by 2034. This is followed by the foundational biblical texts on which the entire project is based, namely Genesis 13:14–15[6] and Habakkuk 2:2–3.[7] An explanation of the texts and an exhortation for participants to endeavour to plan the next 20 years of their lives is then offered. In the exhortation, members are encouraged to look at the plan as a

[4]All scriptural quotations in this article are in the New King James Version (NKJV) of the Bible.
[5]For a copy of the plan, see: https://www.centralgospel.com/directory/gallery/downloads/20_Year_Plan.pdf
[6]14 And the LORD said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him: 'Lift your eyes now and look from the place where you are – northward, southward, eastward, and westward; 15 for all the land which you see I give to you and your descendants forever.'
[7]2 Then the LORD answered me and said: 'Write the vision and make it plain on tablets, That he may run who reads it. 3 For the vision is yet for an appointed time; But at the end it will speak, and it will not lie. Though it tarries, wait for it; Because it will surely come, It will not tarry.'

guide, a kind of a blue print on which they carve out their personal short-term plans. They are invited to ponder four cardinal questions: what kind of person do they want to be in 20 years? What is it they want to achieve in that period? What should they be engaged in during this time? What should they own after this period? These questions are summarised under broader topics: *character*, *accomplishments*, *occupation*, and *assets*.

The next step deals with helping participants to define their dreams by answering some probing questions regarding their present condition and the future they envisage for themselves. For example, each participant is invited to answer a question related to what exactly they would like to be remembered for. Again, participants are asked to weigh the relationships they want to maintain and to re-evaluate immediate family relations. Following these probing questions is a section that is intended to help the members to develop their main goals for the 20-year period. The goals are to be set in nine broad areas, which Otabil and the leadership of the church believe, if strictly followed, will enable participants to achieve the desired personal transformation. Thus, an individual's responses to these areas is understood as 'a summary of my life in 20 years from now'. Therefore, it is necessary to elaborate on these cardinal areas deemed by the ICGC as relevant to achieving individual development.

To begin with, participants are to set 'spiritual' goals, which according to Otabil (2014) refers to consciously working on their personal and corporate relationship with God, including Bible study, praying on daily basis and attending church meetings. This means that to achieve the desired change, the focus of the believers' social life becomes the church: a fixed routine of Bible studies, prayer meetings, leadership meetings, wedding attendances, church musical concerts, and church services, among others – a routine common among Pentecostal-Charismatic Christians. Therefore, material success is considered as closely linked to spiritual development in the theology of the ICGC. Thus, members are to work at developing their spirituality to develop materially.

Next, they are to set 'ministry' goals, which Otabil explains as finding your area of strength or talent, such as singing, preaching, or hospitality, and using them to serve in the church. This is closely related to the first point in that they both refer to the individuals' spiritual development. Thus, an accumulation of religious capital through constant participation in church rituals by an individual is understood to amount to spiritual maturity (Rey 2004, 337; Rey 2014).[8] It is in this state of maturity that a member is expected to define their gifts in order to serve within the church community. Therefore, serving in the church community is also connected to spiritual development, a critical part of the 20-year development plan.

Moreover, 'family/relational' goals are also considered central to achieving success. This does not only deal with the prioritisation of the individual's immediate family, but also the external relationships that an individual has to either relinquish or take up in order to be able to focus on his/her development. Thus, ties with extended family members, common in the Ghanaian society, are discouraged as participants are to focus all their energies towards building their nuclear family. Discouraging extended family ties in the ICGC is significant for two reasons. First, it is to help members to break from traditional rituals, which Pentecostal-Charismatic Christians consider as having a retrogressing effect

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[8]Terry Rey sees the concept of religious capital as the accumulation of religious power defined as the ensurance of salvation, community membership, sacraments, moral sanction, enlightenment, or holiness (2004, 337).

(Meyer 1998; Van Dijk 2013).[9] Second, it enables personal accumulation, because resources which they would have otherwise expended on the wider family is freed up. Also, one important aspect of this goal is investing resources, such as time and money, in ones children and spouse, as well as working on family cohesion. These are understood as a prerequisite for 'development' by practitioners of the prosperity gospel and Pentecostals in general. Consequently, maintaining a good relationship with participants' immediate family and 'church family' is considered a critical part of the personal success of the individual. Thus, to submit to a development plan includes a commitment to control and refashion one's own social relationships. This could involve the breakup of traditional extended family relations as well as the creation of new social networks, more precisely of the 'church family'. Accordingly, through the indivduals the church plays a pivotal role in every single development plan.

Additionally, participants are to draw a 'fitness' regime in order to improve on their health. While the prosperity gospel emphasises the contract with God, which guarantees Christians health and wealth, in the ICGC, members are encouraged to also take practical steps to ensure a healthy lifestyle, including a regular exercise regime, physical activity, healthy eating and consistent medical examinations. In fact, the church has a modern gymnasium that is free for members of the Christ Temple on Sundays, after church service. Hence health consciousness is understood as intertwined with personal development with the assumption that many healthy individuals will make up a society of healthy people. This connects with the predominant prosperity gospel notion that a successful Christian is one who is also physically fit and healthy (Walton 2012). It also complements the analysis of for instance Marshall (2009) and Van Dijk (2013) according to which bodily techniques of self-control, discipline and the work on the moral self, are ways to form the born-again subject.

The next goal is in the area of 'educational and personal development'. Otabil's teaching emphasises education as a critical factor for achieving personal and social transformation. It is believed in the ICGC that the more educated an individual is, the better their chances for upward mobility. It is Otabil's way of encouraging members of the church to engineer a better future for themselves. Accordingly, it is very common to find in the church, members, who prior to joining the church had only a basic education, going on to achieve higher educational goals. Part of Otabil's engineering practices is not only to emphasise education as a central transformative tool aiming to develop church members' intellectual capacities and job opportunities, but also to create the space to work with this tool and shape such possibilities: To this effect, the ICGC established the private Central University in 1998. It is arguably the biggest private university in Ghana, having trained many employees as well as members of the church, despite the high tuition fees.

Furthermore, to achieve a complete transformation, members are to prioritise their 'careers/occupations'. Here entrepreneurship drive is taught and encouraged as the way to success. Unlike many prosperity preachers, the acknowledgement of the human role and individual responsibility to achieve prosperity is prominent within the ICGC. The entrepreneurial spirit is believed to be the main means by which overdependence on

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[9]The aspect of breaking family and other unwanted social and spiritual ties has been critically interrogated by Birgit Meyer in her article, 'Make a Complete Break with the Past' (Meyer 1998).

the national government for job creation can be diminished (Otabil 2014). Nevertheless, Paul Gifford (2004, 154), for example, remains sceptical about some prosperity preachers, arguing that they only use 'hard work' as a rhetorical code to obscure the essential belief in God's miraculous favour. Nonetheless, beyond educational opportunities members of the ICGC have created a wide range of industries and employment for all manner of artisans, professionals and business people who play a significant role in the national economy. Like many Pentecostal Christians, the ICGC prefer to employ their own (Marshall 1993, 230), both at the Central University and in other branches of the church.

Moreover, 'financial/investment' goals are to be given utmost attention in order to achieve the needed transformation within the 20-year period. This ranges from spiritual investments, such as faithfully paying tithes, offerings, first fruits, to mundane investments such as saving a percentage of an individual's income or preparing a personal will and testament. Such financial investments, whether spiritual or material, are believed to yield dividends for the members. Members of the ICGC, as practitioners of the prosperity gospel, hold that financial donations to the church, such as seed faith, attracts even more financial blessings from God. A member states in an interview in 2014 that 'it is more blessing to give to the Lord than any financial institution', supporting this view with an array of biblical texts such as Luke 6:38–40; 1 Corinthians 16:2; Proverbs 3:9; Ecclesiastes 11:1. Thus, prosperity preachers and their adherents typically link giving or investing in the church to future personal development and financial independence.

Also, participants are to set goals to acquire 'real estate and infrastructure'. This means the idea of individual change encapsulates acquisition of properties, such as homes, plots of land or market shops. This is a common theme that runs through Otabil's sermons – at one point he announced in church that the leadership were in negotiation to purchase a 200-acre prime land in Accra, which will further be made available for members to acquire to build a Christian village (Otabil 2014). Acquiring properties is actually a major theme in prosperity theology, believed to be one of the surest ways to individual development (Maxwell 1998).

Finally, the document talks about 'societal impact/legacy'. Unlike many prosperity preachers, Otabil has championed a theology that includes social action and welfare of the poor. Whereas the previously mentioned points on the document point to personal accumulation, the goal of social impact is at the heart of wealth redistribution and reciprocity that many Pentecostal-Charismatic churches have been accused of violating. This goal shows that the theology practised in the ICGC involves both the accumulation and redistribution of wealth, although the latter is not as prominent as the former. More significantly, it is clear from the document that prosperity messages take various forms and its definition transcends material wellbeing. It also includes spiritual, moral, physical, emotional and societal wellbeing, albeit the material aspects are overly emphasised. Although many of the tenets of Otabil's 20-year-development plan concern the individual, there are notions of social responsibility showing through. Again, it seems that the future individual he tries to engineer forms the basis of a future society, because a fully developed moral self also involves the care for the other. Individuals and society in 2034 will then be characterised by the fact that all development goals have been sustainably achieved and Otabil's version of the prosperity gospel prevails. In the sense of the religious engineering concept, the development

plan shows how Otabil draws on the prosperity gospel as a resource to engineer individual and societal developments, and at the same time shapes the prosperity gospel in his search for transformation. While the church members adhere to Otabil's developmental plan, it is also evident that they tend to be engineers of the lives they envision for themselves albeit not always successful in achieving that.

Pentecostal narratives and personal development

In the following paragraphs, I refer to only four out of 46 interviews conducted in Accra between 2014 and 2017. The stories of George, Jennifer, Elorm and Peter with whom I conducted one or two interviews, are representative of the views espoused by the research respondents. As well as the diversity within the participants, the selected narratives show various aspects of the project. The individuals involved are all members of Christ Temple, the headquarters church pastored by Otabil himself. The stories provide insight into how members are aligning themselves to the plan.

Breaking the back of deprivation

The first narrative is about a man who introduced himself only as George,[10] and who was quite a friendly and engaging person that smiled all through our discussions. He and his wife, Emma, have been attending the ICGC Christ Temple since 1998. George has been a church worker for almost a decade. After revealing myself as a researcher interested in the project, he became even more loquacious and he was happy to share his thoughts on the project with me during our numerous encounters. When I asked George whether he will participate in the project, he looked particularly stunned as if to say, 'are you really asking me this?' After a pause, he answered, 'I have been in this church for almost twenty years and none of Dr. Otabil's teachings have failed me.' He continued, 'I am definitely going to participate.' Thus, Otabil's teachings and the plan serve as a motivation to help George engineer a future he desires. It is evident that Otabil's teachings have had immense influence on George, which seems to be the main reason he decided to participate in the project. George is clear in his personal plan and envisions a debt-free financially independent family within the duration of the project. Coming from the impoverished northern part of Ghana, George intends to use this project to 'completely break the back of deprivation in my family'. He foresees himself becoming a 'very successful business man' and 'leave a legacy for his community'. While his goals appear a little vague, George was clearly determined to change his and his family's economic conditions.

However, when we met again three years later, and I enquired about the project, he began to expound in a seemingly sincere way,

> My brother, let me tell you the truth. Your visit today has actually served as a reminder for me. I totally forgot about it. The first three months of the project were so intense because the project took centre stage in all church activities. Since then, the drive has waned because the concentration has shifted to other things. But thank God, I set up a monthly direct debit

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[10]I first interviewed George on the day of the launch of the project on the 5th of January 2014 and subsequently on the 11th of June 2017 at the Gymnasium, Christ Temple, Accra.

account at the beginning. I need to go back to see what has accrued and start some investments.

George's initial determination to use the project to seek financial success seemed to have diminished due to what he perceives as a lack of sustained intermittent reminders by Otabil and the leadership of the church. It is clear, therefore, that participants' continuing fidelity to such a project could be hinged on processes of occasional monitoring in order to engender the required transformation in the congregation. Nevertheless, George's strategy resonates with Otabil's teaching that the two most important principles of prosperity are savings and investments (Otabil 2014).

Health and fitness

Jennifer is a middle-aged single mother, a professional banker, who has been with the church for seven years when I first met her in 2014.[11] With three children and a very busy daily schedule, she still finds time to attend church services at least two times per week. When I first interviewed her in 2014, she was enthusiastic and clearly determined to partake in the project. She spoke boastfully about being a typical example of how Otabil's teaching can help people to 'sort out their lives'. She continues, 'I was a total mess when I first came to ICGC, but today, through God's grace and Dr. Otabil's teaching, I feel very fulfilled.' 'Being here [ICGC] has taught me that although God promises to supply all my needs, I have to act on the word of God', she continued demurely. Jennifer shows adherence to some of the pillars of Otabil's brand of prosperity gospel: personal responsibility and faith in God's provision. She appears to have fully embraced the development project as a platform on which ultimate personal responsibility to a successful Christian life can be achieved.

Nevertheless, she too had completely forgotten about the project during our second meeting three years later, citing overwhelming workload. Jennifer explains,

> Honestly, I never finished filling the forms for the personal development plan. I had intended to use the plan to build my spiritual life, put in a weight management programme and work on my relationship with the boys. As for financial freedom, by the grace of God my personal investments are going well. Now I will go back to the plan because these things are extremely important to me.

Jennifer's comments highlight the comprehensive nature of the development plan, as I indicated earlier. It is clearly not only about accumulation of material resources but also about an improved relationship with God and family. It shows a kind of health and wealth gospel, where the practitioner recognises her responsibility in the contractual agreement between the Christian and God, as espoused by adherents of the prosperity gospel. Moreover, Jennifer brings her own interpretive framework to the project, thus, she has selected aspects she thinks best applies to her needs, namely a fitness regime, improved relationship with her children and with God. Ostensibly, like George, Jennifer also believes that she might not have forgotten about the plan had the engineer of the project put in place a mechanism to 'keep participants on their toes'. Once again, religious

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[11]I had two separate interviews with Jennifer on the compound of Christ Temple, Accra on 12th January 2014 and 8th June 2017 respectively.

engineering is shown to be a two-way process, involving commitment from both the engineer and the 'beneficiaries'.

Leaving a legacy

Elorm was an enthusiastic 20-year-old freshman at the University of Ghana Medical School when we first met in 2014.[12] Now she has two years left until her *housemanship* and subsequent qualification as a medical doctor. Both of her parents have been members of the ICGC for a long time. Thus, she was born into the church, rising through Sunday school to the adult church. She attributes going to the medical school to her parents' guidance and Mensa Otabil's inspirational teachings. Elorm is a typical Ghanaian Pentecostal-Charismatic youth, a group described locally as 'on fire for God'. Biblical narratives flowed effortlessly from her mouth, especially in support of the development project and regarding successful Christian living. Her idea was to adopt the plan and carve out five-year mini plans that would enable her to build a national medical charity, in the mode of *Doctors Without Borders,* to help deprived communities in northern Ghana. She speaks continuously of her passion for the poor and desire to leave a legacy as her motivation. This is perhaps in reference to 'societal impact/legacy', one of the main goals captured on the plan. In 2017, Elorm showed me different versions of her plan and stated that she looks at them on a daily basis – a ritual she has kept since the launch of the project. While the legacy aspect was still prominent in our discussions in 2017, she seemed to have mini plans for all the various aspects of the plan. On whether the project and her passion were enough to help her achieve her goals, Elorm smiles and states, 'my God shall supply all my needs. I have to put in more effort regarding my savings; I need to cut down on my spending'. For her, the project serves as a code of conduct that guards her from falling into the traps of youthful excesses. Therefore, money that would have been used on night clubs and other indulgences are channelled into savings – of course, as a typical Pentecostal, she considers them as sinful. Also, partaking in this project is giving Elorm a sense of self-worth, which prosperity messages encourage.

Balancing faith and hard work

The case of Peter, in 2017 a 30-year-old civil servant, is somewhat unique for two reasons. First, he is in a group of respondents I encountered only once – three years after the launch. Second, because he only joined the ICGC a year after the project began in 2014. Introduced to the project by a friend, he downloaded the plan and got the accompanying sermons on compact discs. Thereafter, he headed for a weekend retreat in the outskirts of Accra to make time to listen to the sermons and fill out the plan. Peter explains that he 'felt compelled to participate in the project'. The reason for this compulsion, according to him, was that he 'see[s] Dr. Otabil's life as a good example of what a project like this can do to an individual, he is a living proof of what he teaches. I have been a big beneficiary in the two years I have been at the ICGC'. Peter further states that during this period, he has managed to wean himself off debts that had engulfed him, by living within his means. He asserts,

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[12]Interviews were held on three different occasions in the compound of Christ Temple, Accra on 5th and 19th January 2014 and 6th July 2017.

> I have had to restrain myself from indulgences and curb all gratification, so that I could be freed up to build some savings. Although I believe in God's promises of prosperity to me as a believer. I think it does not mean I should ignore the reality of my own financial conditions. I needed to take the bull by the horn and say it is enough to debts and struggles.

While most adherents of the prosperity gospel would rather live in denial regarding the fragility of their economic situations, Peter is here admitting his own failings, recognising human effort while still recognising his covenantal relationship with God. He believes that the plan is the right project that has enabled him to cultivate a savings culture in order to stay out of 'the shackles of debt.' This metaphor reveals the debilitating nature of debt, a perception held by many Pentecostal-Charismatics. Debt is considered as a scourge that has to be uprooted with all the resolve one can garner. Additionally, Peter is determined to build his own house in three years to cater for the rising cost of rents in the Greater Accra area. Citing Zechariah 4:6, which reads, in part, 'Not by might nor by power', he admitted, 'it is going to be a difficult task but with hard work, commitment to the project and God's help, we shall get there'. Peter's narrative reveals that beyond the accumulation of material resources, the development project in the ICGC also entails the 'creation of new persons, attitudes and personal morality by way of character building' (Simensen 2006, 84).

Conclusion

The prosperity gospel has thrived in the Pentecostal-Charismatic religious landscape in Ghana, especially as it is considered as the movements' answer to addressing issues of wealth, deprivation and inequality. It has appealed to both the rural poor and educated urban middle-class congregations, like the ICGC. In a country where religion plays a significant role in its social fabric, the prosperity gospel provides a means by which many people adapt to the uncertainty of their social and economic realities. These religious notions become relevant to the ways through which many Pentecostal Christians interpret and work on their economic circumstances. Also, these religious ideas become the foundation upon which their leaders create projects aimed at engendering personal and social transformation. The 20-year personal development plan designed by Mensa Otabil for the members of the ICGC is a typical example of such projects. This project is clearly very heavily influenced by Otabil's brand of prosperity oriented messages that encourage development by emphasising human agency, education, significance of hard work, responsibility and proper planning as the way to create personal, social and economic development.

It is also evident that the implementation process and the actors involved are essential elements that stand out in this project. Although designed as a one-size-fits-all personal development plan, the participants were intentional in tailoring the project to their own needs: The four narratives indicate that members of the ICGC related to the project in more specific terms – adapting the plan in the light of the future transformation they envision for themselves and their community. Therefore, each of the stories gives prominence to a part of the plan, rather than the entirety of it. Moreover, all four acknowledge participating in the project because it is engineered by someone they consider as a representative of God in their lives, and whose teachings have contributed immensely to their lives. Fundamentally, Otabil is considered by these adherents of the ICGC as someone with an enormous deposit of religious power and ideas through his close connection to God. The

proof of this accumulation of religious capital is the loyalty he attracts from these followers, who readily align their lives to the development plan. Therefore, the plan is used by Otabil as a means to galvanise and gather his followers behind him. Thus, the actions of his followers become the benefit he gets for showing his religious power, and with it his ability to plan and work towards 'better futures' for them, with the help of God.

Finally, I consider religious engineering as a useful concept to approach the activities of Mensa Otabil because it helps to see them in a whole new way: foremost, it points to the ways how Otabil draws on religion, in the form of ideas, practices and religious actors to fashion a project of transformation. Also, it reveals the significance of intentionality shown by Otabil, on both the design and implementation of the project, as well as by the members of ICGC in aligning their lives to this project. Furthermore, while the aim of the prosperity gospel is mainly to create personal development, the project shows that it has implications on the entire society, because according to Otabil, the transformation of individual Christians ultimately leads to development in the society. However, the concept of religious engineering needs elaboration on themes such as: monitoring, especially in cases like the implementation of the development plan and questions of legitimacy, such as, how and why an engineer is respected or accepted as one, and also how he reconciles failures and individual practices of bricolage with his overall plan.

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