


## Megachurches, Dominion Theology and Development

### **Introduction: De-essentializing Pentecostal Theology**

Recently, Karen Lauterbach deplored the relative silence in African Studies on the role of Christianity in Africa's development (Lauterbach 2016: 605). It is a somewhat paradoxical statement as it appears in her review of Paul Gifford's "Christianity, Development and Modernity in Africa" published in 2015. This volume may be seen as the scholarly résumé of Gifford's remarkable and long-standing exploration of transformative social dynamics in African religions. With a specific focus on Christianity Gifford set the tone for several influential studies on development in Africa since the 1980s (Gifford 1998, 2004, 2009, 2015). Moreover, from early on he put Pentecostalism at the centre stage in his cartography of contemporary African Christianity. In his 2004 volume on "Ghana's New Christianity", Gifford, a sociologist of religion, sought to profile the Pentecostal impact on society. "Undoubtedly", Gifford comments (2004: ix), "[...] they flourish mainly because they claim to have the answers to Ghanaian's existential problems and especially to their most pressing existential problem, economic survival." Gifford is pointing out the aspect of lived Pentecostalism, so to speak. Quite clearly Pentecostal impact on day-to-day life experiences goes hand-in-hand with the aspect of economic empowerment. On a similar note, social anthropologist Dena Freeman evaluates Pentecostal social ethics. Observing the social field in Ethiopian highlands, Freeman points out the long-lasting behavioural changes towards individual responsibility and motivational advantages of (rural) Pentecostalism within a multi-religious setting. She assumes that the Pentecostal impact on behavioural changes and transformative ethics is more profound than in secular projects of development aid (Freeman 2012). However, both Freeman as well as Gifford abstain from a discussion of Pentecostal theology. This is apparent in the call of interruption by church historian Ogbu Kalu in his response to Gifford's analysis of contemporary African Pentecostalism. Kalu misses an in-depth understanding of Pentecostal theological concepts, what he senses "the most important aspect" of Pentecostal self-presentations (Kalu 2008: 223). If one wished to orchestrate a dialogue, Gifford appears to answer Kalu in his most recent study on "Christianity,

Development and Modernity in Africa”. Here, he examines Pentecostal worldviews and theological components comprehensively. As in his earlier writings, Gifford draws on Weberian notions of rational-bureaucratic processes of modernization as prerogative of development in Africa against enchanted worldviews. He attributes a manifest relevance for social change solely to rational forms of religion. Identifying such an enlightened variant of bureaucratic rationality with historic Christianity, African Pentecostalism, in his reading, results in the prolongation of enchanted worldviews with no structural effect on society. He concludes his analysis with an apodictic denial of a merger of these two religious categories. These two basic forms of religious imaginations of society, he contends, “are not just different, but alternative. Not just diverse, but incompatible” (Gifford 2015: 156).

Indeed, if one surveys significant studies on African Pentecostalism in recent years, the theological frames are interpreted with hermeneutics of suspicion. In his “African Gifts of the Spirit” (2006) African historian David Maxwell, for instance, states the high impact of the Pentecostal movement on African societies. Yet, he qualifies Pentecostal beliefs and theology as expressions of a “primitive impulse”. His value judgement refers to a Pentecostal “powerfully *destructive* urge to smash all human traditions in order to return to a first-century world” (Maxwell 2006: 14, italics mine). Without any further discussion Maxwell’s verdict on the primitive impulse discards any constructive Pentecostal social agency. The dilemma of Pentecostal approaches to social change repeats with Ruth Marshall’s research on Nigerian Pentecostalism (Marshall 2009). From her political scientist perspective Marshall qualifies the Pentecostal concept of politics as “negative theology”. On the one hand she observes Pentecostal techniques of subjectivity aiming at shaping “political spiritualities”. On the other hand the intended “revolution” of all-day life is directed against the forces of evil in public spheres. Essentially, Pentecostal political conscientization bears a negative connotation, enforcing a deconstructive spiritual lifestyle rather than shaping productive contributions to society.

Taken together the discussion of Pentecostal theology remains sceptical about significant contributions of African Pentecostalism to development and social change. Engaging a dense texture of primitive impulse, negative theology, or enchanted vision of the world, interdisciplinary research predominantly portrays dysfunctional aspects of Pentecostal theologizing of society. Returning to Lauterbach’s review of Gifford’s concept of enchanted Christianity, she deplores his essentialising portrayal of African Pentecostalism: “Gifford essentializes the enchanted religious imagination” (Lauterbach 2016: 605). This  hands critical distance from the strategies

of presentation mentioned that categorically deny any Pentecostal agency for social transformation. Rather than reinforcing the binaries of the secular/the religious and the enchanted/the disenchanting, Lauterbach (2016: 605) posits, “it would be useful to transgress these binaries in order to reach an understanding of how the religious becomes political and vice versa”.

This chapter follows Lauterbach, but with a focus on Pentecostal theology. Current discourses on Pentecostal theologising in terms of societal relevance put an almost exclusive emphasis on the most controversial concept of Prosperity theology in Africa; Prosperity theology is commonly defined as an individualised expression of neo-capitalist economy (Heuser 2015; Heuser 2016). Widely unnoticed however is a theological theorem that crosscuts Pentecostal megachurch networks known as Dominion Theology. Dominion Theology unfolds a Pentecostal theory of society and social change. It is shared in megachurch networks as a master-narrative to exert hegemony over diverse “spheres” of society, including the economic sphere. What follows highlights the dominion theological concept of the economic sphere, with allusion made to the notion of “development”. The material base is from Ghana, with a sample of two of the most prominent megachurches in West Africa, Action Chapel International led by Archbishop Nicholas Duncan-Williams, and International Central Gospel Church, founded by Mensa Otabil. The case study presents local formats of Dominion Theology with significant international links and global network constructions. In order to bring out the dominion theological claims to transform society and the reality of such claims, I choose a ‘thick description’ of a first “Africa Business and Kingdom Leadership Summit”, organized by Duncan-Williams and showing a Dominion Theology texture. A clear Dominion Theology imprint is visible also in a subsequent case-study on Mensa Otabil’s “Greater Works” conferences. His contradictory involvement in the insolvency of a private bank in Ghana triggers a public discourse on Dominion Theology aspirations. Both events—the Africa Summit and the bank collapse—took place at the same time period in mid-2017 (partly lasting to mid-2018); they demonstrate the simultaneity of Dominion Theology euphoria and its limited factuality to “conquer the economic sphere”. The chapter finally demarcates some prospects on Dominion Theology as a Pentecostal social theory.

## “Africa Business and Kingdom Leadership Summit“

In September 2017 Archbishop Nicholas Duncan-Williams, leader of Action Chapel International headquartered in Accra, launched the first “Africa Business and Kingdom Leadership Summit“ (Heuser 2019). The initiator of the conference, Nicholas Duncan-Williams, is widely acknowledged as the pioneer of the recent emergence of megachurches in Ghana. Action Chapel International was founded in 1979 and belongs to the historic generation of megachurches in Africa. Meanwhile Duncan-Williams claims to be the “Presiding Archbishop and General Overseer” of a church with over 300 branches worldwide. Moreover he calls himself the “Apostle of Strategic Prayer”. Action Chapel is known for this specific ritual praxis. For Duncan-Williams “strategic prayer” is aimed at public life; it is the major constituent of the church’s internal spiritual cohesion and a core feature of all outreach programs:

“The most important lesson we can learn in life is how to pray. We must learn how to pray so that our prayers get God’s attention. Prophetically, I know that God is raising a new breed of intercessors and prayer warriors that will enforce God’s will for many generations. The destiny of cities, nations, and continents are birthed by the prayers of God’s people.”<sup>1</sup>

Strategic Prayer can be seen as political praxis; it covers categories of so-called ‘parliamentary prayers’, or ‘government prayers’, directed towards political actors respectively. These categories of prayers match with public images of Duncan-Williams spread in church-owned media. On websites, in church publications and even in sermons, he is portrayed by his closeness to social and political elites, and as a pastoral advisor or “intercessor and Minister for the numerous African Heads of State and government, civic and business leaders” (Duncan-Williams 2015a, cover page).

The most public category refers to the annual *Prayer Summits* convened at the church headquarters with international acclaimed speakers and preachers. In line with this international annual prayer summit the concept for a new public event was coined in 2017, a thematic summit focussing on economy, development and leadership in Africa. The “Africa Business and Kingdom Leadership Summit”, that lasted over three days, had been announced in national media weeks before. The official announcement of this conference promised an extraordinary opportunity for “movers and

1 <https://archbishopnicholasduncanwilliams.podbean.com/e/prayer-moves-god/> (last accessed 19 November 2019).  <https://www.nomos-elibrary.de/agb>

shakers and aspirants alike” to exchange strategies to accelerate economic growth in Africa and to stage Africa’s economic participation on global scale. Co-organizer of the summit is Rosa Whitaker, an African-American business woman. Whitaker is the first person to hold the position of Assistant U.S. Trade Representative for Africa, and she is married to Duncan-Williams. Among the invited speakers of the conference one finds an illustrious gallery of personalities from Ghana and Ghanaian diaspora, representatives of (former heads of) African states, an elite of diplomats, financial tycoons, business people of diverse backgrounds and leaders of NGOs, all classified under a heuristic code as “foremost leaders of Africa’s most influential spheres”.<sup>2</sup>

The proceedings of this first Africa Summit comprised a two-and-a-half-day conference at the church’s headquarters in Accra, accessible only for paying participants, and a final evening service free of charge, held on 3 September 2017 at Independence Square. Independence Square belongs to the privileged spaces of the country’s postcolonial collective memory. It was here, in the immediate vicinity of this widest public convention place in the capital of Ghana, where the independence of the first sub-Saharan country was declared in 1957. The main speaker of this evening service, announced as the “Grand Finale” of the first Africa Summit, is another key-figure in the global arena of megachurches, African-American Bishop T.D. Jakes, from Potter’s House in Texas. T.D. Jakes (b. 1957) has gained a reputation as “America’s Best Preacher” in leading US media such as Time Magazine and CNN. The conference flyer praises him as “world renowned pastor, media mogul, and visionary”.

The one-hour sermon by T.D. Jakes climaxes the final stage of the Africa Summit. It is prepared by a short intervention of Duncan-Williams. Nicholas Duncan-Williams, who was also born in 1957 as a son of a diplomat (Duncan-Williams 2015c), offers a postcolonial reading of African history. Independence Square, the historic place, provides the backstage for a profane revision of contemporary African history, exactly sixty years after the pronouncement of independence. By the very beginning of the evening Grand Finale the master of ceremony had declared a new era for Africa’s future. The stereotyping of Africa as the continent of poverty will be replaced, she announced, by prospects to transform Africa into a “place of oneness and hard work”. In his short speech Duncan-Williams interprets this in the pan-Africanist frame of politics, coined by the first Ghanaian

2 Cf. the four pages strong supplement of the Africa Summit in the national newspaper, Daily Graphic, 17 August 2017, <https://www.dailygraphic.com.gh/19783748907633-243>, am 30.06.2024, 08:44:54

President, Kwame Nkrumah (1909–1972). Nkrumah, a prime theoretician of Pan-Africanism and African socialism, occupies a fixed place in anticolonial liberation history. Duncan-Williams provides a selective reconstruction of Nkrumah's heritage. In an obvious turn to align postcolonial history with the economic frame of this first Africa Summit, Duncan-Williams seeks to redirect collective memory into just one dimension, namely the economic sphere. According to Duncan-Williams' interpretation, Nkrumah imagined the "prosperity" of Africa first and foremost. It goes by saying that he applies the guiding term of actual Pentecostal discourses, circling around the concept of Prosperity Theology. Prosperity Theology, in short, promises material wealth as sign of charismatic empowerment by the Holy Spirit (Heuser 2016). Duncan-Williams outlines his perspective on Africa's prosperity in terms of a neoliberal credo of economic liberalization, privatization, and deregulation, postulated also by Bretton Woods institutions (International Monetary Fund; World Bank) since the 1980s as the main path to development in Africa. The impact of structural adjustment programs is still felt in Ghanaian political life. In 2015 Ghana secured an IMF credit of over \$918 million USD. The current administration of newly elected President Akufo-Addo, who came into power in January 2017, follows a "Ghana Beyond Aid Agenda", i.e. a policy to quit any external financing by Bretton Woods Institutions by the end of 2018. In addition, it supports a policy of economic liberalisation that gives a primacy to private sectors. This made Ghana an African model country in international development politics. In World Bank reports, Ghana appears among the top nations with a robust economic growth rate (Bob-Millar & Paller 2018). Additionally President Akufo-Addo delivered the opening speech for the Africa Summit (1 September 2017, cf. Kwawukume 2017). Nkrumah's vision of independence, Duncan-Williams explains, can only come true in a political environment that guarantees free agency, be it on economic and political, but also on cultural and religious levels. His speech ends with an allusion to the "Black Star", the state emblem that overarches Independence Square. In the habitus of a political visionary, Duncan-Williams addressed a jubilant crowd of approximately 20,000 people: "Let the star rise!"

In his sermon that followed, T.D. Jakes took up this thread. He preached about the healing of the blind in Bethesda (Mk 8,22–26). Remarkably, he transgressed the usual Pentecostal narrative on spectacular divine intervention and individual response by strong acts of faith. Jakes' take on transformative faith is motivated by a theology of hope, as it were. The blind person trusts in God's grace into unknown territories, transcending

known parameters of social life: “Desire the spectacular in all day life! Transgress the normal! We are all leaders because we do not shy away from the risks of the unknown”, he encourages. “What I preach is a revolution! This is the revolution: stay together, form a single unit of power! God is at work to transform things—the economy, the nation!” The proclamation of a revolution ends the first Africa Business and Kingdom Leadership Summit.

## A Dominion Theological Script

The terminology used by the organizers to advertise the event points directly to categories and concepts of society employed by Dominion Theology. Dominion theological repertoires have gained enormous weight within megachurch global networks. Dominion Theology denotes an independent theory of social change; it is a specific genre of political Pentecostal theology. The most obvious dominion theological index used to publicise the Africa Summit refers to the analytical code of societal “spheres”. Dominion Theology perceives society in constellations of spheres, sometimes also termed as “pillars” or “mountains”. In theory, such spheres are operating according to their own reference systems but are not as strictly separated as the sub-systems in systemic functionalism. Although the versions of Dominion Theology may differ in the number of such spheres, standard readings distinguish seven spheres of impact. These core dimensions of society comprise religion, governance, education, family, the media, arts and entertainment, and economy. The vision of any dominion theology variant is to transform all these spheres by a transfer of power. The principal idea is to occupy each and every sphere of society by megachurch representatives, individual apostles and prophets. This rather stable format of strategic social intervention shines through the illustrious list of participants, a high-profile selection of international business people and African political leaders; it also glosses in the talks and sermons at the summit indicating the imminent revolutionary change of economy and society in Africa through alleged Kingdom Leadership.

Dominion Theology emerged in conservative milieus of American reformed theology, gaining prominence from the 1970s through its discourses on the authoritarian “reconstruction” of society. Conceptualized by R.J. Rushdoony (1916–2001), the agenda of Christian reconstruction was to organize contemporary society according to biblical “laws” of social order. The political design of Christian reconstruction was termed Dominion



Theology. In order to implement the so-called biblical laws, Dominion Theology projected society as compartmentalised into diverse “spheres”. All of these spheres should be anchored in and dominated by profound theocratic principles of governance. However, by the 1990s its impact on Christian political theology almost completely waned. Any trace of Dominion Theology came under suspicion, disavowed by its guiding theocratic vision (Ingersoll 2015). Considering the deeply-felt legitimacy crisis surrounding Dominion Theology, surprisingly a renaissance of Dominion Theology took shape around 2005, this time in American Pentecostal and megachurch circles. The mastermind to revive the concept was C. Peter Wagner (1930–2016) who authored several publications on the theme, and “how to change the world by Kingdom action” (Wagner 2005). The revision of Dominion Theology avoided a conscious link to the previous theory design. Wagner attributed the term to autonomous visionary inspiration (Wagner 2008: 18), and to simultaneous directions given to him by Bill Bright, founder of Campus Crusade for Christ, and Loren Cunningham, founder of Youth With a Mission (Wagner 2008: 143) respectively. Consequently, Wagner undertook any effort to locate the fresh take on Dominion Theology within genuine Pentecostal and American megachurch discourse. The Pentecostal variant uses terminologies such as spheres, applies similar rhetoric of societal transformation, and insists on taking action, but most importantly denies any theocratic imagination categorically. This has helped to popularise the ideas of social change connected to Dominion Theology. Currently, the concept is well promoted in the new media; one of the most visible Dominion Theology representatives, self-styled visionary Lance Wallnau, is known for his claim to have predicted the presidency of Donald Trump. Hence American Dominion Theology affirms close and established ties with conservative elites in business and politics. Moreover the global flow of dominion theological concepts, key terms, and personalities is secured by megachurch networks. One main channel to receive and debate Dominion Theology in Ghana is the link between African American megachurch heroes such as T.D. Jakes and Nicholas Duncan-Williams. The last and major publication by Duncan Williams, published in 2015, circles around the meaning of prayer yet its central chapter is preoccupied with an understanding of the “Dominion Mandate” (Duncan-Williams, 2015b: 17–33).

Duncan-Williams, the aforementioned “intercessor and Minister for the numerous African Heads of State and government, civic and business leaders” (Duncan-Williams 2015a, cover page), is a central African figure in the horizontal megachurch networks to diffuse Dominion Theology. These



megachurch networks have been investigated in more detail by Brad Christerson and Richard Flory (2017). Christerson and Flory focus on American networks shaped around C. Peter Wagner's so-called "New Apostolic Revolution". Spearheaded by an "apostolic and prophetic" avant-garde of megachurch leaders, these networks are sharing dominion theological constructions of society. Network structures comprise vertical, or hierarchical cooperation between subsidiary individual leaders, and horizontal, mutual collaboration between the most prominent personalities. Yet, they are all part of a densely networked and highly influential avant-garde termed by Christerson and Flory "Independent Network Charismatic Christianity" (or "INC Christianity"). Essential in all networking features is the reciprocal acceptance of extraordinary apostolic-prophetic authority, declaring them legitimate porters of dominion mandate, directed by unmediated divine intervention. The independent networks are relational (not institutional) in the first place. With a declared intention to transform society, these networks are less interested in defining church related issues, such as establishing parameters of being a church, or negotiating church growth strategies. What they are interested in is the distribution of basic concepts of society and praxis models of social change in contours of Dominion Theology. A popular technique of the diffusion of Dominion Theology is to organize joint conferences such as the first Africa Summit.

The Africa Business and Kingdom Leadership Summit surpasses the networks analysed by Christerson and Flory. While Christerson and Flory highlight the white, US-American scenery, the Africa Summit sheds light on a transnational network of African and African-American Pentecostal megastars.<sup>3</sup> The dynamics of globally active networks of independent megaministries is enormous. It shows for instance in the presence of Duncan-Williams at the inauguration of Donald J. Trump as 45<sup>th</sup> President of the United States. The election of Trump was heavily backed by the networks of megachurch leaders. Facilitated by his African-American wife, Rosa Whitaker, and mediated by his close affiliation with T.D. Jakes Duncan-Williams has entered the American circle of INC Christianity. In accordance with dominion theological visions the Ghanaian megachurch leader participated at the "Inauguration Day Prayer Service", 20 January 2017 in Washington, DC. More precisely, he followed his own classification for "strategic prayers" and offered a governmental prayer to newly elect Presi-

3 Cf. the network analysis of Nigerian and African-American megachurches by David Daniels (2015). Cooperation is inspired mainly by educational projects on tertiary level.

dent Trump.<sup>4</sup> This event ranked high on the agenda of independent network Christianity and is taken as evidence of dominion theological aspirations to transform society. The dominion theological script, networks, and spiritual praxis pervade the concept of the Africa Summit as well as the choreography of the evening service, with T.D. Jakes' call for a revolution of politics and the economy as its grand finale.

### **“Greater Works”—and the Collapse of Capital Bank**

Mensa Otabil (b. 1959) is the founder-leader and General Overseer of International Central Gospel Church (ICGC) with headquarters in Accra, too. ICGC was founded in 1984, thus belonging to the first generation of megachurches in Ghana (Larbi 2001; Gifford 2004). ICGC has a network of churches across Ghana, some other African countries and further beyond the continent in Europe, the USA and Australia. Its daily broadcast “Living Word” is received in Ghana, but also in radio and TV networks in Kenya and in South Africa. Otabil is respected in Ghanaian society as a motivational speaker. The formation of Central University College, the premier private university in the country in 1998 documents Otabil's interest in academic-style education. He has gained a reputation of a theological teacher respected in all religious communities, also outside Christianity.

Similar to Duncan-Williams, Otabil organizes an annual conference known as Greater Works to address Ghanaian public spheres. The Greater Works conferences have one and the same mandate, namely, “Raising Leaders, Shaping Vision and Influencing Society through Christ”. The Greater Works conferences form an integral part of Otabil's vision to develop what he calls model “New Testament churches”. However, he is less interested in institutional ecclesiology instead preferring to prepare individual persons to impact society. Therefore ICGC assists with practical self-help programmes, support systems, and small-scale projects primarily in the educational field. Theologically Otabil builds on concepts of positive confession. Since 2005 he has designed annual motifs recited in all church branches and theorised upon in series of sermons throughout the year. Among these crucial terms one finds for instance “Perfection”, “Taking New Territories”, “Influence”, “Leadership”, “Breakthrough”, or “Leadership”. In addition, in 2014 the church launched a 20-year development plan designed to ignite a long-term financial savings culture among church members, including advice on how to accumulate material wealth, or to improve

social status. The template to personal achievements also includes aspects of wealth redistribution, interpreted as supporting church-run charities in the first place. The notion of development applied in this scheme may be restricted to individual progress and church-run projects, however, such conscious approach to development issues remains a novelty within Ghanaian Pentecostalism (Arthur 2017).

The Greater Works conference format comprises two daily sessions—a morning and an evening session—with international speakers. Advertisement for the conference was on a large scale, with oversized banners visible all over the metropolitan area, and a special supplement in the national newspaper, *Daily Graphic* (30 July 2018), over 16 pages. In 2018 the invited guest speakers were Nigerian Bishop Mike Okonkwo (Redeemed Evangelical Mission), Bishop Tudor Bismark of the Zimbabwe-based Jabula New Life Ministries International, and Senior Pastor Matthew Ashimolowo of Kingsway International Christian Centre, based in London. All three high-profile leaders were introduced in the program brochure by characteristic features of their ministries. Bishop Okonkwo was portrayed as a founder of several NGOs “committed to alleviating the plight of the less privileged in the society”, while Matthew Ashimolowo’s field of expertise would cover global media enterprises and book publications on subjects of “wealth creation”. Bishop Bismark was recognised as “Africa’s apostolic voice to the nations”, heading the Council of African Apostles. In fact, all speakers were introduced as successful businessmen, primarily in media enterprises next to their outstanding profile as global leaders of the Pentecostal movement. Their host and conference speaker, Mensa Otabil, was lauded in similar diction as chairing numerous boards, and pioneering “a number of life-changing social interventions in the areas of health care, education, sports and the provision of social amenities and scholarships for hundreds of underprivileged children over years”. Like any other of the previous conferences, the 2018 Greater Works conference, held from 30 July to 3 August, climaxed a longer period of fasting and prayer that ended with a final public service at Accra’s Independence Square. Usually the fasting period would last over thirty days; in 2018 it was extended to forty days “through the direction of the General Overseer”.<sup>5</sup>

The 2018 Greater works conference was held in an acute atmosphere of public controversies over Otabil’s ministry. The exceptional fasting and prayer period dubbed “40 Days of Power” had a subtext never mentioned

5 All quotations are from the supplement issue on the Greater Works conference in the *Daily Graphic*, 30 July 2018.

in any of the church's announcements and publication on the conference, namely Otobil's role in the scandalous liquidation of several Ghanaian banks the year before. Otobil had a special long-standing engagement with one of these bankrupt banks, Capital Bank. Serving as chairperson of the board of six directors he was the bank's highest representative in public life. Capital Bank had close connections with ICGC, therefore the insolvency of the bank was widely discussed and covered in the media in August 2017.<sup>6</sup>

In mid-August 2017, Otobil's social capital was severely reduced. The Greater Works conference aroused discontent about malpractices experienced that year. The Greater Works conference had earned harsh comments triggered by reports to monetarize religious practises. In 2017 Ashimolowo, who already acted as guest speaker, had introduced several categories of divine healing, classified along the financial budgets of believers. In evening healing services he offered miraculous healings according to what individuals would pay for in US-Dollars. The range of healings started from the "seed of perfection" at the cost of \$70, to "Life Improvement" for a donation of \$100, and several middle stages of the healing ladder until you reach the top ranking "Millionaire status" for \$5,000. The outrage in social media was enormous.<sup>7</sup>

Otobil's nimbus as a teacher of the nation was dwindling, the church's reputation of raising responsible leaders was seriously endangered. Public discussions about his handling of the bank collapse were lingering in national media, on radio and TV, as well as in newspapers throughout the year. However, Otobil kept silent. Only one year later, in August 2018, was he prepared to comment on his involvement in the collapse of Capital Bank. In his statement to the press he affirmed that in his position as a "non-executive chairman" he "was not involved in day-to-day operations".<sup>8</sup> He supported his argument in a service that same week. Otobil preached in his ICGC headquarters over the nature of his involvement in the bank collapse. The press headline welcomed his sermon as a rather convincing state-of-the-art reaction to open criticism: "Dr Otobil arms congregation". Addressing his congregation Otobil insisted that the decisions made under his mandate of board chairperson were all done "with the best of intentions

6 The bank affair around improper financial administration was published first in the Daily Graphic, 15 August 2017, and then followed up for the rest of the month.

7 Notably a popular former musician, Kwame A-Plus, raised doubts about the integrity of such practises, cf. <https://yen.com.gh/96254-social-media-outraged-by-icgcs-special-offerings.html#96254> (last accessed 20 November 2018).

8 Daily Graphic, 15 August 2018. <https://www.nomos-elibrary.de/agb>

and the interest of various stakeholders in mind". He did not go into further detail. Rather, he mentioned that criticism from outside should not test any member's allegiance to him or ICGC. Being a member of ICGC would not mean to rely on him personally, but to "worship God". Reminding his congregation on his recent preaching invitation by his Zimbabwean friend, Tudor Bismark, he claimed that his role as a church leader was intact and should remain untouched. He should deserve due respect as a pastor who directed the focus of all spiritual life on God. The right response to any outside critique should simply consist of the three-pronged response that "God is good".<sup>9</sup>

This service aimed at equipping church members with counter-arguments against the likely loss of credibility and professional reputation. Again, in that same week, Otabil coupled this internal coping strategy with his public appearance at a non-religious conference. As if there was no sign of public erosion of his status, Otabil was catching the attention as "teacher of the nation". He figured as keynote speaker in a high-profile business conference. Seemingly untouched by any criticism he addressed business managers, directors and senior management representatives at the "Night with Great Minds", termed Ghana's flagship business conference. In his keynote Otabil pondered about "audacity" as a compass for achievements and success. "Longing for the extraordinary, and creating "our own success stories" were the catchphrases in his speech. With his unconventional proposition for Ghana's economy to strive for an annual 20 % growth rate, he made the headline story in the daily news. Empowering people to be their own success stories should be coupled with long-term thinking, i.e. not to jeopardize growth prospects for today's material gain. He closed by stating that "the mindset remains the continent's major development challenge. [...] When are we going to have our own Apple?"<sup>10</sup>

In sum, we may say that Otabil applied a mixture of strategies to cope with the obvious fiasco of his involvement in the financial sphere. Otabil's strategy was threefold. He first tapped into the support system of horizontal, in this case, African megachurch networks. His weakening national prestige was reinforced again by his liaison with internationally acclaimed church leaders. The second aspect that needs mentioning was his obvious

9 Daily Graphic, 22 August 2018, report by Donald Ato Dapatem.

10 Daily Graphic, 20 August 2018. The issue entails two main reports of Otabil's appearance at the conference, coupled with an image while lecturing in the Business Report section. The conference "Festival of Ideas" took place at the expensive Marriott Hotel in Accra, at an admission rate of 2,500 Cedis (ca. 500 €).

strategy of avoidance. Being under public scrutiny for one year now, Otobil never disclosed his radical failure as a board chairperson in the business and banking sector. He centred on his spiritual guidance, and depoliticised his role as a pastor of his congregation. More generally, he had successfully avoided any further comment on his activities in the wider sphere of economy and ‘development’ he was praised for in previous years. Did he, by consequence, abandon the dominion theological ambition to control the sphere of economy altogether? No. His third strategy came into play which may be termed affirmation by visionary intensification. The method went in line with the annual “Greater Works” conferences: Otobil was disinterested in details of failure, instead he simply coined greater visions for the development of the country. But how convincing was this set of arguments, and what were public reactions to it?

### Public Debates and Irritations

With the annual Greater Works conference and his following public and semi-public statements the memory of his involvement in the banking collapse was revived in mid-2018. His self-exculpation came under attack by diverse representatives of public life.

Professionals from the banking sector in Ghana were quite outspoken. The more moderate voices deplored the still weak social institutions in the country that could fall prey to maladministration and individual mismanagement. They referred specifically to the fragile state of economic and financial institutions in the country, missing reliable tools of crisis management. Other commentators offended Otobil directly. Otobil’s claims of non-responsibility would affirm that he had “no practical expertise nor theoretical knowledge in banking, finance and economics”. Otobil should confine his motivational message of self-reliance, and long-term planning strictly to the running of his church affairs. Yet, he would miss any professional requirements to chair a board to give policy directions.<sup>11</sup>

The most controversial dispute, however, was launched by spokespersons from the Pentecostal networks of megachurches in Ghana. They sided with Otobil who was undoubtedly their previous mentor in vertical networks. They positioned themselves as church leaders who were raised under Otobil to form their own prophetic stature. Anyone raising a voice in defence of Otobil could earn higher status in the network. Rev. Isaac Ofori, founder of Overcomers Bread International, stood in for Otobil as follows:

<https://doi.org/10.5771/9783748907633-243>, am 30.06.2024, 08:44:54

11 Daily Graphic, 16 August 2019.  <https://www.nomos-elibrary.de/agn>

“We have [...] seen the symptoms of a perverse generation that have revealed a gross disrespect for the voice of a prophet”.<sup>12</sup> Allusion was made to controversial comments expressing doubts on prophetic interventions as such, predicting everything yet failing to foresee the possible fold-ups of these banks. The defenders of Otobil from local Pentecostal networks realised that the bankruptcy case endangered the Dominion Theological concept to impact society. This lengthy intervention of a whole page was titled: “Is God concerned about our economy?” Rev. Ofori insisted on the need for an “Elisha”, an “economic prophet” to redirect the minds of the people, exactly in times of crises. The economic challenge would help to redefine people’s “relationship with God and correct many false beliefs”. In accordance with Otobil’s sermon, he referred to the God-centeredness of faith, instead of the belief in money. The source of the trouble would be, he claimed, the demonic “greed”. His answer to this problem resonated dominion theology at its best. The “right people should be brought into positions of responsibility” to start a “germination process of the word of God (laws)”. Finally, he urged the nation to “embrace the prophetic ministry”.

It seems remarkable that this discourse, despite all critical comments on Otobil’s involvement in the failure of the banking system, fully sustains the essential texture of Dominion Theology. Key notions of dominion theological provenance clearly stand out: by recalling codes such as biblically based “laws” direct allusion is made to the reconstructionist concept of society. In addition Rev. Ofori reiterated the elementary top-down strategy of political praxis. It is an elite project of leadership whose premise is that by occupying social spheres through the “right people” the systems would perform well. This effect does not come automatically, but in accordance with directions provided by “prophetic ministry”. In other words the idea is to spread so-called Kingdom values of behaviour as guiding norms in social life.

However, some public announcements nuanced the conception of Dominion Theology in the following week. The news covered several reports about the installation of newly elected church leaders from diverse denominations. In one of these reports the Daily Graphic (27 August 2018) dealt in length with the newly inducted Chairman of the Church of Pentecost, Apostle Eric Nyamekye. The Church of Pentecost is a classic Pentecostal church of national importance, and a mother church to many founders of megachurches in Ghana. The report provided space for

12 Daily Graphic, 20 August 2018. All following quotations in this paragraph are from there.



Apostle Nyamekye to explicate the motto he had selected for his five-year term: “Possessing the Nations”. He would “concentrate on equipping the church to transform every sphere of society with the plannings (sic) of the principles of the kingdom of God”. This seems congruent with the Dominion Theology script offered by Rev. Ofori’s apologetics of, as it were, Otabil’s “prophetic ministry”. Yet, the affirmation is tied to a sceptical tone. Apostle Nyamekye affirms the critical agency of the churches in social change. “I believe that the destiny of our nation lies in the hand of the churches”. The ecumenical vision, however, is limited. He addresses his own church as the avant-garde for “possessing the nation”: “The size of our church and the resources we have been blessed with should become the means by which we take all nations and influence them through values and principles of the kingdom of God”.

In conclusion, the focus is set no more on obedience to the “voice of a prophet”. The charismatic genius of a single megachurch leader is replaced by the transformative agency of a distinct social body. By localising the authority over designs, priorities, and structural resources of social change in the church, this view inherently criticises the common Dominion Theology concept of power. By pointing to the church as the essential agency for the development of the nation, it reverses the personalising model of establishing hegemony by conquering the social spheres through individual leadership. The public debate applies codes that are drawn from Dominion Theology categories; however, it also reveals the limits of the prophetic megachurch ministry to implement the Dominion Theology visionary. Such reframing praxis leads us to the final section which is interested in the question of the practical relevance of Dominion Theology concepts of social change.

## Whither Dominion Theology?

Dominion Theology has gained enormous interpretive as well as analytical weight in international circles of megachurches. In Pentecostal perspective Dominion Theology represents a kind of political theology directing Pentecostal engagement with the world, at least to a certain measure. It offers a reservoir of terms and strategies to expand Pentecostal impact on society. Dominion Theology terminology combines spiritual warfare visionary to “conquer” territories and nations for Christ with social scientific frameworks structuring society into seven compartmentalised spheres of influence, including the economic sphere. In view of our two case-studies from

Ghana, the first “Africa Business and Kingdom Leadership Summit” exemplifies dominion theological policy to exert hegemony over the economic sphere. An essential Dominion Theology tool is the wide-ranging, international networking policy. It finds expression in alliances between megachurch, political, and business elites. The networking policy dovetails with the various ways of engaging public discourse, be it through a considerable presence in mass media, or be it through the staging of metropolitan events of different quality, purpose, and meaning. Conferences are defined as public markers of high impact in the business world. They are celebrated in a “grand finale”, ritualized as mass services. These services, or crusades in spiritual warfare diction, are located in symbolic spaces of national significance, but spread globally in social media. In revolutionary rhetoric megachurch heroes are trying to reshape collective memory, and heralding the dawn of a new era in imagery of eschatological immediacy. Taken together, the “Africa Business and Kingdom Leadership Summit” orchestrates triumphant Dominion Theology. Such eschatological tremor, as it were, receives a heavy blow with the case-study on the banking fiasco, leaving serious questions on the responsibility, management quality and involvement of megachurch leaders in the business and financing systems. The public discourse emerging on megachurch leadership aspirations in the economic sphere does not conclude in a total dismissal of Dominion Theology axioms. However, it urges for self-reflexive reframing of its social script. The intervention does not defy dominion theological competency in the analysis of spheres but seeks to correct the megachurch personalisation of leadership. Dominion theological agency rests no longer in the charismatic individual who is taking social spheres in heroic action but rather in the body of the church. The transformation of spheres and of society at large is subject of collective visionary and praxis of the church. In contexts of open critique the public discourse therefore reinstates Dominion Theology by an ecclesiological reading.

This shift in dominion theological agency still validates the primary theological dimension in development. Nevertheless, as mentioned in the introduction the plausibility of the Pentecostal script of social transformation remains disputed. Paul Gifford consistently explicates “enchanted Christianity” as irrelevant to implementing social change, while Ruth Marshall qualifies the Pentecostal concept of society and politics as “negative theology”. In both influential categorisations of Pentecostal social agency there is hardly any space left for identifying internal disputes on Pentecostal imaginings of transformation, or development. Not only are insights into internal processes of differentiation within the Pentecostal movement

missing, more importantly no mention is even made to the recent paradigmatic shift in the political repertoire of Pentecostal theology indicated by the rise of Dominion Theology.

Relating to the public debates on the Africa Summit as well as on Otabil's involvement in the banking sector, one may draw three final conclusions: First, Dominion Theology has evolved as a visionary Pentecostal script to analyse society. It offers an analysis of society organized into different spheres. According to Dominion Theology these spheres are operating autonomously, demanding practises adapted to their respective causalities. This script has already made it into the arena of development policies in Africa. Obviously, this Pentecostal genre of Dominion Theology does not exclude the possibility of multiple modernities, an option emphatically denied by Gifford. Second, the public discourse on Otabil's responsibility in the collapse of a bank reveals an internal Pentecostal debate on the future directions of Dominion Theology. Against Marshall's diction of a merely "negative theology" this debate is about constructive Pentecostal participation in social transformation. Third, scepticism about dominion theological ideas of development and social change still remains acute. To this point it is not possible to claim long-term Pentecostal participation in social dynamics. Dominion Theology offers a broad repertoire of rhetoric codes to express hegemony over the spheres of society. However, the Pentecostal call to revolutionise society and to conquer the economic and financial spheres still remains. The transition from Africa Summit visionary to structural implementation seems fragile. The attempts to reach structural permanency, as seen in the Capital Bank crisis, are endangered of collapsing. Dominion Theology paves the ground for continuous socio-political consciousness within Pentecostal networks, however, it has not surpassed an experimental state to offer sustainable social praxis.

## References

- Arthur, Justice Anquandah, “Prosperity Theology(ies): The Case of Mensa Otabil and the ICGC.” *Interkulturelle Theologie* 43(4), 2017: 401–419.
- Bob-Millar, George M. and Paller, Jeffrey W., “Democratic Ruptures and Electoral Outcomes in Africa: Ghana’s 2016 Election.” *Africa Spectrum* 47(1), 2018: 5–35.
- Christerson, Brad and Flory, Richard, *The Rise of Network Christianity: How Independent Leaders Are Changing the Religious Landscape*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.
- Daniels, David III, “Prosperity Gospel of Entrepreneurship in Africa and Black America: A pragmatist Christian innovation”, in Heuser, Andreas (ed.), *Pastures of Plenty: Tracing Religio-scapes of Prosperity Gospel in Africa and Beyond*, Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 2015: 265–277.
- Duncan-Williams, Nicholas, *The Lamp*, Accra: Action Chapel, 2015a.
- Duncan-Williams, Nicholas, *Prayer Moves God*, Accra: Action Chapel, 2015b.
- Duncan-Williams, Nicholas, *Providence and Destiny: The Nicholas Duncan-Williams Story*, Accra: Action Chapel, 2015c.
- Freeman, Dena, “The Pentecostal Ethic and the Spirit of Development”, in *Pentecostalism and Development: Churches, NGOs and Social Change in Africa*, edited by Freeman, Dena. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012: 1–38.
- Gifford, Paul, *African Christianity: Its Public Role*, Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998.
- Gifford, Paul, *Ghana’s New Christianity: Pentecostalism in a Globalizing African Economy*, Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004.
- Gifford, Paul, *Christianity, Politics and Public Life in Kenya*, London: Hurst, 2009.
- Gifford, Paul, *Christianity, Development and Modernity in Africa*, London: Hurst, 2015.
- Heuser, Andreas (ed.), *Pastures of Plenty: Tracing Religio-scapes of Prosperity Gospel in Africa and Beyond*, Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 2015.
- Heuser, Andreas, “Charting African Prosperity Gospel Economies.” *HTS Theologiese Studies Theological Studies* 72(4), 2016: 1–9.
- Heuser, Andreas, “‘Visionäres Branding’ zur okularen Hermeneutik politischer Theologie in afrikanischen Megakirchen.” *Berliner Theologische Zeitschrift* 36(1), 2019: 86–109.
- Ingersoll, Julie J., *Building God’s Kingdom: Inside the World of Christian Reconstruction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

- Kalu, Ogbu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Kwawukume, V., “Govt working to improve business environment Prez”, *Daily Graphic*, 4 September 2017: 81.
- Larbi, Emmanuel Kingsley, *Pentecostalism: The Eddies of Ghanaian Christianity*, Accra: Blessed Publications, 2001.
- Lauterbach, Karen, “Book Review.” *Africa* 86(3), 2016: 604–605.
- Maxwell, David, *African Gifts of the Spirit: Pentecostalism and the Rise of a Zimbabwean Traditional Religious Movement*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Wagner, C. Peter, *Dominion! How Kingdom Action Can Change the World*, Grand Rapids: Chosen Books, 2008.