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Chima Agazue

The Role of a Culture of Superstition in the Proliferation of Religio-Commercial Pastors in Nigeria

AuthorHouse UK Ltd, 1663 Liberty Drive, Bloomington, IN, 47403, USA.

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Reviewed by Andrew G. Wildsmith, Scott Christian University

Chima Agazue is an Igbo from Nigeria who studied criminology and the psychology of religion at the University of Huddersfield in the UK and also worked as a Research Fellow there. He now lives in London. The overflow of his academic research resulted in this self-published book.

Agazue's research encompasses on-line reports (facebook, newspaper articles, TV programs, blogs, academic papers) journals and monographs (most of them are non-theological, coming from the social sciences), academic theses, personal observations, conversations, and interviews in Nigeria.

Agazue focuses on what he calls "religio-commercial pastors" in Nigeria, people who trade on the fear caused by "the culture of superstition" wherein many people "seek magico-religious explanations for problems which already have scientific explanations" (p.23). Through the cynical use of false prophecies, faked miracles of healing, promises of instant prosperity, and violent exorcisms, these extreme, mostly Pentecostal-oriented pastors seek to become rich by duping and coercing their followers into purchasing "spiritual" practices and products. Agazue carefully and repeatedly distinguishes between religio-commercial "churches", and other churches that are not in that category, including conservative Pentecostal churches.

Throughout, the author's passionate opposition to the many ways that these pastors cause harm and even death is slightly tempered by occasional statements that save him from being merely another Western-oriented, scientific, secular opponent to these popular pastors. Two examples follow. "Although as a Christian, I do believe that God may reveal some mysteries to a person and may also perform wonders through someone, I am not convinced that the hundreds of thousands of prophets competing to sell prophecies or perform miracles on Nigerian streets on a daily basis do hear from God or have received powers from God when a careful observation can easily reveal the tricks which many of them apply" (pp. 13-14). "The points I make in this book are not to

suggest that evil spirits do not exist or that none of those who desperately seek prophecies and miracles from the men and women of God experience strange things which cannot be scientifically explained” (p. 22). Here is an authentic African worldview that has absorbed enough Western-oriented education to describe in detail how the extreme prosperity preachers take advantage of vulnerable people in Nigeria.

Agazue traces the origin of this culture of superstition to the unconverted aspects of traditional African religions, specifically the continuation of an excessive fear of evil spirits and witches that he labels “superstition”.¹ “Africans believe in spirits, therefore spirits are used to easily defraud them” (p. 28). For example, dedicated followers of a prophet (who functions as a Christian diviner) don’t waste money, time and energy on medical diagnoses and treatments when their prophet offers Holy Spirit revealed and instant miracles for barren women – for a price (p. 29). Witchcraft is one person using magical or spiritual powers to harm another person in a number of ways (p. 30).

Despite the adoption of Christianity and Islam as Nigeria’s major religions, and despite the acceptance of Western technology, medicine, and education, many people, including many educated people, still believe it is possible to manipulate spiritual beings (including God) and spiritual powers to achieve what they want. The continuing belief in witchcraft powers is “being reinforced by the exorcism merchants.” All of life’s problems and difficulties can be blamed on witchcraft. (p. 30). He uses the horrible example of child witchcraft accusations with many accused children being abandoned, mutilated, tortured and killed since 2008 in Akwa Ibom State. We lived and worked in that state in the 1980s and 1990s and my PhD research found a great fear of witchcraft and some accusations against children, but nothing like what the so-called Christian exorcists have perpetrated in this century. The area has always been plagued by periodic witch-hunts and witch cleansings, but nothing on this scale and certainly not with such a focus on children.

Each chapter in the book focuses on a different aspect of the main problem, that a culture of superstition enables spiritual fraud that causes immense suffering. In chapter 2 Agazue studied Nigerian internet postings and blogs and concluded that beliefs about evil people using magic or juju charms to amass a fortune or to bewitch other people are increasing significantly (p. 43). He then illustrates his point with a number of stories. For example, he found that many people believe that virtually all road accidents are caused by blood-sucking demons flying over Nigeria’s roads, and concludes that pastors pray for pay to deliver a

¹ In this book there is no sense that the word “superstition” is inappropriate or politically incorrect.

vehicle from their clutches, just as traditional diviners sell charms that are supposed protect passengers from harm on their journeys. Sensible precautions and defensive driving are replaced by 'spiritual protection'. Potholed roads, poorly maintained vehicles, careless and drunk driving, and drivers who don't really know how to drive properly are not seen as contributing factors in road accidents, but highway witches are the real cause of the carnage (p. 45).

In his third chapter and the conclusion Agazue virtually equates superstition with belief in the supernatural as he finds that Christianization increases superstition because it shares a belief in the supernatural with other religions, including African Traditional Religion (ATR). When the religio-commercial pastors cash in on this belief in the supernatural, they adopt the ATR worldview and fear of evil spirits (including traditional spirits such *Ogbanje* and newer ones such as *Mamiwata*), magnify those fears through lies (as with the child-witches above), and then sell very expensive exorcism packages. "The overlap of the teachings of both the old and the new religions on evil spirits has remained a significant promoter of superstition among African Christians" (p. 69). As in some other chapters, Agazue makes comparisons and contrasts with Pentecostal religio-commercial pastors, traditional diviners, and prophet-healers from the "syncretistic churches" – and by this, he means the African Initiated Churches.

Agazue briefly notes that the commercialization of Christianity is the antithesis of loving one's neighbours and instead breeds mistrust and jealousy between people, especially between rich and poor, (p. 78), and even between the village people and city dwellers, for example when someone suffers a stroke after a visit to the ancestral village (pp. 82-83). Two studies in this century reveal a new pattern of seeking help when health is threatened. Many Nigerians, including many Christians, first seek magical/religious solutions to their health problems, and when they fail, then head for the hospital (p. 83). The older pattern was for Christians to pray, go to the hospital and seek prayer from the church, and if no resolution is forthcoming, then seek help from the prophet-healer at the Pentecostal church compound, then the prayer house, and then, under cover of darkness (Nicodemously), the traditional diviner.

In chapters 4 through 10 Agazue continues to describe how religio-commercial pastors use, magnify, and even invent many superstitious beliefs that create fears which they then claim to relieve, all the while financially, physically and/or psychologically harming their victims. These are the false beliefs he focuses on: divorce and death are always the result of witchcraft; suffering is always the work of evil spirits; there are no psychological disorders because the symptoms of these are really manifestations of possession by evil spirits; any abnormal behaviour is

really evidence of possession by evil spirits; miracles are the only solution to these essentially “spiritual” problems; pastors and prophets are like Jesus so people desperate to achieve something must have “faith” to expect miracles – which are then fabricated; religio-commercial pastors and prophets have a direct hotline of revelation through the Holy Spirit – though in reality they covertly gather information to identify and learn about the lives of potential clients. This information they then present to the client as if it is divine revelation. Diviners have been doing this in Nigeria since the first researchers studied divination in Nigeria.

In a few places Agazue quotes a series of Biblical passages that are correctly understood as indications of how Christians should treat and help other people (e.g. circa p. 194 and p. 207). He then describes how the religio-commercial pastors and prophets violate the intentions of the passages. For example, some of these religious predators visit the sick in hospital, but with the intention of defrauding them. The victims “are advised to cast their anxieties to God because he cares for them (1 Peter, 5:7), but thereafter, they are turned into the money-making-machines of their pastors with the promise – often a guarantee – that God will pay them back in abundance” (p. 208).

This book is not organized into clear sections on different topics that then build up to a conclusion. But once the reader recognizes this, he sees that Agazue weaves peoples’ false beliefs and real life examples of how false pastors take advantage of those beliefs for financial gain into a tapestry that organically reveals the patterns of deception. He looks ahead to other parts of the book with some examples and refers back with others. The book is not difficult to read, and clearly proves his point over and over again, that a culture of superstition fuels the proliferation of religio-commercial pastors in Nigeria.

In chapter 11 Agazue describes how religio-commercial pastors entice and pry members from mainstream churches. He notes that mainstream churches are tempted to adopt regular Pentecostal worship styles to keep members, and how a few of their priests and pastors adopt the fear tactics of the religio-commercial pastors for personal gain. As a Roman Catholic, he quotes examples mainly from that church.

Agazue is not a theologian, does not write in a scholarly voice, and does not write from a Christian point of view, but his book is a gold mine of information about how religio-commercial pastors operate. This can be translated into ways to protect people from being deceived by false pastors and prophets. Pastors and theological libraries would benefit from having it available.