

THE SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES OF RELIGIOUS COMMUNICATION IN GHANA'S DIGITAL SPACE

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Abstract

The research focuses on the rise of misleading and false theologies/doctrines propagated through social networking sites, specifically emphasising the neo-prophetic wing of Pentecostalism in Ghana. The study employed an exploratory research design that included quantitative and qualitative methods. The study investigated the influence of modern Ghanaian prophetic ministries on people's religious attitudes and their integration into society. Some examples are false teachings that are readily available online, for example, the prosperity gospel, spiritual warfare narratives, sensationalised prophecies, etc. It emerged from the research that such teachings have great impact on what individuals believe in, how they act and even the decisions they make. This situation normally makes them vulnerable to people who take advantage of them economically and manipulate them psychologically. The study revealed that such teachings pose serious threats of public disunity, consumerism and low political participation, among others. The transformation brought about by the digital age of new prophetic movements offers an avenue for both positive and negative influences on spirituality. Various measures have been taken by civil society groups together with governmental agencies, such as conducting public education and enacting relevant laws; however, promoting critical thinking and media literacy turns out to be an effective way of dealing with misinformation.

Keywords: Misleading Theologies/Doctrines, Social Media Platforms, Ghana, Neo-Prophetic Movements, Digital Religion.

Introduction

Social media platforms are currently being used to determine what people think, as well as to spread information all over. Nevertheless, it is also very easy for such platforms to carry wrong information or even harmful messages, especially those related to religion.¹

The spread of misinformation on social media regarding various religious beliefs is an issue that has been given much attention because it greatly affects the unity of people, their psychological well-being, as well as economic conditions worldwide.² In modern society, changes have been experienced globally on matters touching on faith systems and their relation with social media.

A lot of people currently practise "digital religion", a term used to describe how one expresses faith or belief through online means, due to technological changes.³ This development has created a conducive environment for the rapid propagation of different kinds of religious beliefs, some of which may pose a danger to the public. On the other hand, most global socio-cultural practices have been influenced by organisations' leadership and guidelines on such issues since time immemorial.

Digital communication has played a significant role in accelerating the globalisation process. The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic changed how we live, and many people could no longer gather in churches for worship. Church services were, therefore, held online. This paved the way for many acclaimed men and women of God or prophets, to spread false and misleading messages to their followers. In addition,

on social media platforms all over Africa today, misconceptions relating to religion are shared every minute. This shows that the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated this trend, with many religious activities performed online and the increasing reliance on social media platforms for spiritual guidance.⁴

Furthermore, the combination of traditional African religions with Christianity and Islam, alongside the increasing presence of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements, characterises the religious terrain in Africa.⁵ Also, rapid urbanisation coupled with widespread technology use amidst pluralistic religious settings has provided an enabling environment for such cultic groups to thrive and adapt to the digital phase like other sectors do. Due to this reason, it does not come as a surprise that many Charismatic leaders take advantage of their position to influence people within such complex religious systems.⁶

Moreover, there has been an increase in religious content being shared on social media platforms in Ghana. The combination of a highly religious population and greater internet access has resulted in an environment where false doctrines thrive online.⁷ Ghanaian social media is full of messages like "end time" and "we need to be saved", which most of the time, come from respected pastors, as well as charlatan prophets.⁸ The rise of neo-prophetic ministries that use social media to gain huge followings and that often teach about a combination of the aforementioned is one good example, but there is more to it than meets the eye.

This research, therefore, focuses on how wrong theologies are getting into Ghanaian social networking sites and what they mean to the public. Through the analysis of the relationship between digital platforms, religious stories and socio-cultural issues, we hope to add to, and contribute to the existing

literature on digital religion and its societal effects in Africa, particularly Ghana. The study seeks to answer specifically the following questions:

1. In what ways do contemporary Ghanaian prophetic ministries (especially, those with online presence) influence religious expression, as well as social interaction within Ghana?
2. What does Ghanaian social media propagate about false doctrines?
3. How do these fallacious teachings influence individual cognitive processes, such as beliefs, actions and decision-making?
4. What are the wider societal effects posed by such erroneous doctrines on matters regarding unity among people, financial activities and political participation?

The outcome of this study is significant for academia, as well as offers important information to policymakers, church leaders and NGOs who seek to mitigate the impact of misleading theologies/doctrines and fake news, among others, on social media.

Methodology

For this study, qualitative and quantitative research approaches that incorporated some elements of phenomenology were applied to explore how misinformation through social media affects Ghanaians. This involved using mixed-methods approach that included conducting detailed interviews, carrying out content analysis, as well as engaging in digital ethnography to get a full picture of the issue at hand. The qualitative data was collected through phenomenological interviews carried out on different Ghanaian social media users drawn from various

Christian backgrounds and sourced from platforms, including Facebook, Twitter (X), WhatsApp, YouTube and Instagram. The quantitative data was collected through closed-ended questionnaires. During these interviews, the researcher used some techniques, such as being empathetic and asking reflective questions about the experience, to understand what the respondents felt or thought about some given theological narratives, which may not be true or may mislead them. Purposive sampling was adopted for the study, while snowball sampling was used for hard-to-reach populations and theoretical sampling under content analysis.

Interview transcripts were analysed using phenomenological methods; social media contents were subjected to thematic analysis, and online religious discourses passed through critical discourse analysis. The researcher observed moral considerations like securing permission from the participants, keeping their identities confidential and following the set rules while carrying out digital ethnography to avoid any form of bias. The data analysis also involved checking on the consistency among responses obtained by different respondents (member checking), debriefing experienced colleagues (peer debriefing) and being self-evaluative throughout the research process (reflexive practice), so that valid and reliable results could be achieved from it. The study also recognised some limitations, such as sample size, generalizability, as well as difficulties in studying sensitive religious issues.

The Relationship Between Wealth, Prediction and Authority in Ghanaian Charismatic Evangelism

In Ghanaian Pentecostal prophetic circles, the talk about wealth unveils a complicated combination of religious beliefs, societal goals and matters concerning survival. This review explores

how prosperity has been understood; why there are emergent neo-prophetic churches; the role of spiritual beings or forces and what these issues mean for Ghanaian society under Pentecostalism.

The Conceptualisation of Prosperity and the Good Life

According to Quayesi-Amakye, prosperity symbolises one of the core aspects enshrined under the teachings of Jesus that make up for a "good life", which should be followed by all Christians. But this is not just a matter of having money or property; it also includes being healthy and feeling happy within oneself, thus serving as an expression of national identity. The writer posits that such an integrative perspective on success complies with typical African ethical standards that give precedence to general progress over personal riches.⁹

On the other hand, there is what may be described as a "bad life" in which one does not have access to such benefits as aforementioned. As a result, people will look for solutions through prophecies, with most cases involving some form of transformation rituals meant to ease their way through challenges believed to emanate from enemies or evil spirits.¹⁰ This opposition between good and bad lives establishes a fundamental rationale behind pursuing economic success within Ghanaian Pentecostal spheres.

The Concept of the 'Other' and Divine Intervention

The term 'other' may refer to evil spirits or ghosts that prevent one from living comfortably due to some factors like social order, while one is at fault for being too inactive or lazy to achieve success.¹¹ This character, known as 'other', is seen as responsible for causing poverty and suffering. It is in this light

that such forces are considered, and believers are required to seek supernatural assistance so that they can overcome any threats from these abstract forces.

In addition, Quayesi-Amakye uses the parables of Christ in Luke 16 as a basis for coming up with a conceptual framework that views prosperity as not just the accumulation of riches by individuals alone, but rather serving to promote a peaceful co-existence in the Ghanaian society. This view proposes that there are a complex nature and interaction between having enough and having to spare on one hand, and performing social duties or obligations towards others, on the other hand.

The Rise of New Prophetic Movements

According to Omenyo, the Neo-Prophetic Movement emerged within Ghanaian Pentecostalism in the 1980s, signifying a resurgence of prophetism in African Christianity. Charismatic individuals like Salifu Amoako, Emmanuel Kwaku Apraku and T.B. Joshua spearheaded this movement, which witnessed increased attention on matters of spirituality, dream analysis, as well as miracles.¹²

To be specific, within these movements, many individuals have been given the title "Prophet", but sometimes, people are worried about how these movements may change their belief systems and their relationship with the traditional churches. And in particular, Omenyo states that these new kinds of prophets have become very powerful, like T.B. Joshua, who was known all over the world and had top-level supporters. The case emphasises the role played by contemporary socio-political leaders not only within Ghana, but also far beyond.

Ancestral Spirits and Witchcraft Fears

The work by Christian Tsekpoe posits that Africans believe in God whose power is manifested through spiritual entities occupying various levels in the spiritual realm, namely, deities and deceased relatives' spirits.¹³ This perspective explains why Ghanaians still live in constant fear that somebody might carry out their plans with help from evil worldly forces.

In his analysis, for instance, regarding Ghana, Tsekpoe observes that before the arrival of Christianity, accusations of witchcraft followed certain norms of cultural rules; however, the introduction and subsequent spread of Christian principles led to increased levels and degree of fear associated with such spiritual forces, thereby creating continuous enmity, including cases where people fight or kill each other because of witchcraft issues.¹⁴

Prophetic Ministries and their Importance

African Christianity has seen an increase in the prophetic ministries that provide practices, such as exorcism and spiritual cleansing. This is because they are against the norms of the traditional churches, but at the same time, there have been accusations of exploiting people. Despite these issues, Tsekpoe points out that such ministries have greatly facilitated Africans' understanding of the Gospel by creating a space within which both their cultural spirituality and Christian faith could be accommodated.¹⁵

Societal Implications and Literary Representation

Agboadannon and Dossoumou's analysis of Amma Darko's novel, *Not Without Flowers*, provides insights into the literary representation of these religious phenomena. The increase of

the so-called 'new prophets' all over Ghanaian towns, which are illustrated within Darko's work, reflects upon wider socio-economic issues comprising poverty and joblessness, but also has some roots from the past, such as colonisation and evangelism.¹⁶

The literature clearly describes how fraudulent prophets exploit their followers and prey on innocent people within society. This poses a challenge for academics, politicians and followers on how to prevent or minimise this harm to African societies. The advent of neo-prophetic groups in Ghana has posed a challenge to conventional forms of worship by introducing new platforms for expressing one's faith, but this has not been without moral implications.

The fact that prosperity is perceived as something different from just having money; the continued belief in evil forces and their possible harm, and the role played by prophets in dealing with such issues, create a unique combination experienced within the religious sector. Such combinations are like cross-roads where two different paths meet – one representing traditional norms, while the other is linked with Christianity, calling upon people to follow what is right before God alone. It may, therefore, call for additional studies into the future implications in Ghanaian society or any other related issues concerning these matters, like African Christianity's theology, vis-à-vis interculturality.

The Digital Revolution of Neo-Prophetic Movements in Ghana: Transformations, Opportunities and Challenges

The emergence of the neo-prophetic movement within Ghana clearly indicates that there have been changes in what was known before within the religious setting. This kind of movement is characterised by a contemporary form of spirituality, as

well as leadership that is highly charismatic. It differs from classical Pentecostalism and emerged at the end of the Twentieth Century because it focuses on direct revelations from God, miracles and prophecies. Through this movement, Ghana's spiritual landscape has experienced a revolution that has affected the way people worship and what they believe in.

The study identified several prominent neo-prophets, including Elvis Agyemang, Owusu Bempah, Patricia Asiedu (*Agradaa*), Ebenezer Adarkwa Yiadom (Opambour), Bishop Daniel Obinim, Obofour, Adom Kyei-Duah (Adom Nyame/Second Chance), Prophet Kumchacha, Pastor Selina and Prophet Nigel Gaisie. These individuals have gained followers owing to their perceived spiritual authority, which they utilise to address both individual and communal challenges through other-worldly means. Incidentally, some are seen as public figures who live expensively or engage in controversial matters, thereby presenting another dimension to their stories.

Furthermore, the rise of social media has fundamentally altered the reach and means by which followers and neo-prophetic figures in Ghana can be accessed. Today, these leaders can readily leverage a range of social platforms, including Facebook, YouTube, Twitter (X), WhatsApp and Instagram, to reach beyond conventional boundaries. According to the study, it has been observed that, through the internet, a prophet can reach many people globally as he gives live preachings, as well as carries out virtual miracles and prays with them – acts that seem to cross all physical obstacles or distance. This change has greatly increased their visibility and influence because now followers can share content on social networks, such as Facebook; comment on it and engage with each other in real-time; for instance, by typing 'Amen' if they agree, thereby creating an enhanced form of online worship.

Nonetheless, the research also discovered that the migration of prophetic ministries to social media has led to a proliferation of false teachings and heresies. The unregulated nature of the internet facilitates the ease with which such teachings may travel across without any form of control. This is because personalities like Bishop Daniel Obinim and Rev. Obofour are known for preaching the prosperity gospel, while at the same time carrying some miracle money plans that may fail, but work on desperate people who believe everything will be all right without any problem on their side. For example, a respondent stated that Patricia Asiedu (Agradaa) was previously reported for engaging in fraudulent activities; yet surprisingly, she later presented herself as an evangelist. This case vividly demonstrates how misinformation can circulate among followers, especially now that we live in a digital world.

As evident from this analysis, the conversions within these new religious movements cut both ways. On the one hand, it has surely broadened the reach and availability of spiritual guides, but on the other hand, telling what a good spiritual guide from a bad one has become even more difficult. The high speed at which sensational statements and unverified spiritual cures spread through social media underlies why people must critically think about everything they encounter online, including religion.

It is crucial to consider both the demerits and potential benefits of incorporating technology in worship as the Neo-Prophetic Movement advances in Ghana. The advancement of this sect will likely be determined by their ability to effectively utilise digital platforms whilst simultaneously upholding spiritual teachings, without compromising anything for all involved. To a degree, it may be argued that this constantly-evolving nature not only affects changes experienced within the religious sector, but also demonstrates a

difference seen in information-sharing at large due to the increased use of technology.

Characteristics of Misleading Theologies in Ghana

According to the collected data, misleading theologies in Ghana often place a heavy focus on fear, which makes followers live in perpetual worry about their lives falling apart. For instance, some pastors claim to have heard from God and say awful things would soon happen, like deadly accidents or mass sickness. These messages do not come with specific details, but play on deep fears Ghanaians already have, such as spiritual attacks from demons. A well-known figure caused panic recently when he warned there would be a plane crash; another scared people about post-election violence. With these prophets always predicting doom, people feel like they need special help to avoid disaster. Also, people are manipulated emotionally as well. These preachers also maintain control and sway within their communities by posing as saviours protecting the people from harm.

In addition, the study revealed that the second big theme among Ghanaian false prophets is "deliverance", a term used to describe various rituals that are meant to free individuals from negative forces, such as curses or the devil. Some prophets insist that, for one to be completely free from curses or evil forces, they need several sessions of deliverance, which cost hundreds of Ghana cedis each.¹⁷ These rituals are said to be the only way to get God's favour and protection. Consequently, people become dependent on the prophets, and by heavily emphasising deliverance, the prophets also flaunt their spiritual power while profiting substantially. One pastor became famous for his 'spiritual' baths that followers believed could wash away bad luck: They had to buy expensive oils and pay for many

sessions.¹⁸ What they do is not just play with the emotions of people, but also that these religious leaders can keep hold of cash, as well as influence whole communities.¹⁹

Furthermore, the study discovered that deceiving vulnerable people is central to how these preachers mislead their followers with fabricated messages from God. They exploit poverty, poor health and unhappiness, offering false hope and fake cures, but only if individuals show loyalty through gifts or payments. For instance, if someone is gravely ill or in debt, they may be told they will experience a sudden recovery or become wealthy after donating to their church or ministry. Often, those who want to hear about good fortune coming their way soon, have first handed over quite large sums as part of "seed sowing" offerings.²⁰ One man said he could heal AIDS with prayer, then charged patients lots of money for special services, leaving some even more sick or poorer than before.²¹ In search of a miracle, those in need end up worse off because they have very little to start with, yet feel compelled to give what they can to religious leaders who promise supernatural help: This cycle of exploitation can deepen believers' despair, as well as their poverty.

Impact on Ghanaian Society

The study found that the widespread use of fear-based communication by new prophets in the country has a strong impact on people's minds. Hearing nothing but forecasts of death and ruin can render followers highly anxious and paranoid; they feel they cannot do anything but worry. This constant state of dread is detrimental to mental well-being; individuals become so preoccupied with what may befall them or their loved ones that they cannot plan for the future, which may explain why some also report feeling emotionally vulnerable constantly. If one is

frequently told that something dreadful is imminent and that only a select few can foresee it, this type of prophecy instils fear in the people concerned, which results in anxiety.

These prophets' acolytes have discovered that existential fear does not promote feelings of empowerment or independence.²² Instead, many people become stuck in cycles of anxiety or behave erratically due to ongoing stress.²³ They may even stop making decisions without first consulting their chosen guide, further undermining notions of individual safety-net creation, as well as personal freedom from psychological manipulation.

When community leaders promote rituals, such as deliverance sessions, there are wider implications. In addition to these individual effects, there are also societal implications. The study found that some people prioritise prayer over medical treatment when confronting epidemics like HIV AIDS, thereby perpetuating prejudice surrounding its spread, while also curtailing public health initiatives designed to curtail it. In addition to these individual effects, there are societal ones too. This cultural shift contributes to the marginalisation of individuals perceived as being targeted by evil spirits, rendering those already at risk even more vulnerable. For instance, instead of seeking medical assistance, such as anti-seizure medication for epilepsy or other neurological conditions, individuals may be isolated and compelled to undergo dangerous rituals like exorcisms.

Furthermore, the study discovered that substantial sums of money are exchanged within Neo-Prophetic groups, typically not in ways that benefit their members, but rather the leaders. Followers frequently face immense pressure from prophets (religious leaders, claiming divine inspiration) to contribute substantial donations if they wish to receive blessings, maintain

good health or avoid misfortune. Such financial exploitation can leave individuals impoverished and struggling to provide for their families. Generally, these practices have an ongoing effect of keeping poor people poorer, while making profits for others.

Notwithstanding, the mainstream churches also do their part by making efforts to bring the truth before the followers of these false prophets, which sometimes creates differences between both groups. This tension, along with wider feelings of disappointment brought about by these prophets, is a big worry to them, as submitted by one of the respondents, who is a close friend of one of such prophets, in an interview. However, the respondent observed that some prophetic figures enjoy extremely comfortable lives, thanks to contributions from believers whose everyday existence is nothing to write home about.

Nonetheless, the study discovered that civil society in Ghana is taking measures against deceptive religious messages on social media. Non-governmental organisations, religious groups and advocacy organisations have all started campaigns to warn the public about lies in prophecy and religion that are designed to exploit them. For example, the Christian Council of Ghana has criticised self-styled prophets who scare worshippers for money and has informed Ghanaians to be careful around such figures.²⁴ Meanwhile, IMANI Africa, a think-tank based in Accra, in an interview with some of their officers, stated that they are educating and cautioning the public to be able to tell the difference between real religious teachings and scams. Their campaign, called 'Faith and Reason', tries to do just that by using facts to show why some practices may not be very holy after all. Campaign activities include educating communities through schools and churches; ensuring that information about what is true or false is disseminated as

widely as possible via newspapers and organising events where these issues can be publicly debated. There are even some radio programmes that have established debates between Christian experts regarding these acts. Listeners then receive both sides' perspectives before formulating their own conclusions about the phenomenon. By encouraging people to think more critically, these organisations hope individuals will not be deceived by charlatans seeking cash donations, as someone must put an end to these crimes.

Additionally, seeking legal counsel from the National Communication Authority to task television stations and internet service providers to act as watchdogs to help regulate as well as scrutinise the contents of these prophets before broadcasting them on TV and publishing them online could help.

In an interview with a police officer of the Ghana Police Service, it was made clear that there are police officers responsible for crimes committed on the internet. Some of their duties include investigating fraud, which involves deceiving people into giving money through Neo-Prophetic activities online. If such offenders are found, the Cybercrime Unit will investigate the incident, and if one is found guilty, the person will be prosecuted.²⁵ In addition, Ghana is in the process of developing comprehensive cybersecurity laws to address the growing challenges posed by cybercrime and to protect its burgeoning digital economy. The need for such legislation is underscored by the increasing prevalence of cybercrime.²⁶

These laws would aim at preventing individuals from suffering mental harm or losing wealth due to someone making a false claim linked to religion online. These steps indicate how the government has pledged to protect ordinary people against the negative effects of false beliefs circulating on social media.

One way to address wrong religious teachings online is to promote skills that enable readers or viewers to think critically about what they see or hear in media reports. This type of education is needed now more than ever before. Different bodies could collaborate on educational projects to teach the importance of scrutinising various news sources and techniques for identifying purposefully distorted facts. This is something known formally as 'media literacy'. Such teachings may be incorporated across formally taught school subjects and also included in campaigns aimed at a wider audience. Religious leaders could also play a role by coming out with criteria to judge between good and misleading theologies. This will go a long way to minimise the spread of misleading theologies in Ghana.

Moreover, the study found that the Christian Council of Ghana has started this campaign to educate the youth about these false prophets and their message.²⁷ The Council fears, among other issues, that false prophets may take advantage of young people, particularly if their messages are rebroadcast on social networks, such as Facebook and WhatsApp. By giving individuals these abilities, society can develop resilience against misinformation and promote a climate of critical thinking. If people talk more openly about their religious beliefs and practices, then wild claims will seem less mysterious. Sensationalist stories may carry less weight if taboos surrounding questioning spiritual leaders can also be broken down. People may feel more able to decide for themselves how to act, including whether or not to donate money. Such skills do not just aid personal judgement, but they foster community resistance towards dogmatic messages too (from those intending exploitation).

The Impact of Social Media on Ghanaian Prophetic Ministries and Religious Expression

The use, of social media by contemporary prophetic ministries in Ghana has significantly impacted how people practise religion and engage with society. The study discovered that the ministries, whose leaders claim to possess prophetic powers and are frequently charismatic, do not merely address their congregations in church, but also broadcast across platforms, such as Facebook, YouTube, TikTok and WhatsApp. This has transformed the way Ghanaians engage with religion, as more individuals can now participate in discussions and activities. It also means there exists an archive of videos for them to revisit or share. One needs only to watch the live streams from these groups to see how influential and popular some have become, and their posts can reach thousands of viewers who may then share clips via their accounts. Community building used to work offline mainly, but now it occurs both online and offline as people join diverse groups based on common interests or experiences. Networking this way may even accentuate theological divides between two "friends", especially if they follow rival church figures.

Numerous Ghanaian social media users will be familiar with key concepts when hearing them explained in live videos or seeing quotations superimposed on images shared on Facebook. They might never set foot inside a particular church building, but exposure via friends' shares can mean that some names of leaders and places of worship become quite familiar. Just because someone has hundreds of thousands of followers does not necessarily make him or her a household name across the entire country's online population. However, what constitutes a mass medium here still tends to be divided along linguistic lines. WhatsApp and TikTok are additional platforms where the circulation of sermons and video clips is made simple. Utilising these channels from a hand-held smartphone

has allowed for an entirely new kind of activity that previously would have been impossible.

There seems to be little doubt that different kinds of Christian expressions are now flourishing within the mediated public sphere. At any given time, one can come across posts calling on people to develop personal relationships with Jesus, alongside others stressing the importance of community sacraments, such as baptism or Holy Communion. In addition, while some users share digital content produced entirely abroad (such as links to American preachers' broadcasts), others prefer digital content that is made by their fellow nationals. Many exorcisms and deliverance sessions are glamorised on social media, sometimes with personalised spins. Sensationalism is rife as well, particularly when prophetic figures share forecasts around national or global affairs, some of which may later appear true only in retrospect (or if details are reinterpreted post-facto).

Another common thread the study found is cult leaders fostering harmful dependencies with devotees, convinced they alone have a hotline to heaven. But what happens when people buy into beliefs that are bad for society? It messes them up with something chronic – distorting views on everything from personal growth to the entire community. Unhealthy fixations between prophets who claim to have connections with divinities, claim that their followers need links from these divinities to receive salvation, and also acquire material things in life. These themes play out repeatedly among different cults analysed here. Leaders sugar-coat control with claims, such as what a respondent stated her prophet told her: "Only my prayers keep you safe". Such statements create anxious flocks who are scared to step out of line. Individuals' worldviews, actions and choices can be radically reshaped by exposure to misleading religious teachings. These exaggerated, manipulated broadcasts of misleading theologies on social media make us question how

much these doctrines warp one's own beliefs, behaviour and decision-making processes. There might be times when someone hears something said by their pastor during a Sunday morning service and then spends the rest of the week worrying. A respondent stated that some prophets told them not to go on holidays on particular days of the week, such as Wednesday evenings, because things may fall apart that day. One of the churches that is more involved in these acts is the 'Thursday lunchtime ministry' that encourages this kind of magical thinking. Here is a story illustrating the point stated by a key informant:

A person who falls ill refuses to seek medical help because he or she has been promised a cure forthcoming via divine intervention instead. Financial promises also have huge sway and often lead to terrible investment decisions, donations, and pockets becoming emptier as time goes by, growing disillusioned that nothing ever pans out. Clerics guaranteed lots of cashback straight off the bat, but this never happens.

The respondent highlights a critical issue regarding the reliance on divine intervention over practical medical help, which can have grave consequences for individuals' health. It underscores the dangers of placing faith in promises made by religious leaders or clerics, particularly when these assurances lead to neglecting necessary medical care. Additionally, the mention of financial promises reflects a broader concern about how charismatic figures can manipulate followers into making poor investment decisions or donations based on unrealistic expectations. This can result in financial strain and disillusionment when the anticipated returns or miracles do not materialise. This, therefore, serves as a cautionary reminder of the importance of balancing faith with practical actions and the need for critical thinking when faced with such promises.

The Societal Impact of Misleading Theologies on Social Cohesion, Economy and Politics

The implications of these foregoing discussed misleading theologies go beyond individuals, as they have far-reaching effects on society. Socially, such beliefs can divide families and communities.

The study found that these misleading theologies weaken social ties and split communities into rival camps. They encourage believers to chase after divine cash prizes, instead of working hard to achieve their goals in life. This could stall economic growth if nobody works hard to invest. These also bring down standards in education because most of the youth are deceived by these prophets that their trust in God can bring them a degree when they sow seeds for heaven.

Furthermore, politics in the country is also affected by these prophets, as politics is also played out among the owners of prophetic ministries. The study revealed that these prophets can influence policies in the country by giving false revelations from God about future events to people in power. They also use these false prophecies to gain favours from government officials to back them in what they do and their ministries over other ministries. This creates rivalry and competition among these prophets. This might amount to religious interference in the country's government, which undermines democracy. By suggesting spiritual answers to social problems, some politicians then take up and overlook the practical steps that are needed to resolve national problems.

Tackling poverty becomes more difficult, too, as officials and church members listen to church leaders who say joblessness is due to insufficient belief in God and the people's inability to sow seeds for God rather than a lack of decent jobs.

Conclusion

The study investigated the circulation of misleading theologies or false religious ideas on social media by some acclaimed men of God, popularly referred to as prophets in Ghana, that challenge concepts of truth, and how these have impacted society. The key focus of the study was the activities of these prophets and prophetesses (individuals who claim an ability to communicate with God). The study revealed how such figures are now able to reach more Ghanaians than ever before – all thanks to platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp and TikTok – and, in response, how many people are choosing to participate in their online, as well as offline activities. Sometimes, what the new preachers are saying is incompatible with orthodox Christian thought. On other occasions, it appears they are primarily motivated by money-making agendas or establishing power networks, but whatever the mix, when large numbers take up these beliefs after encountering them online, there can be negative effects.

Data from our project reveal just how influential claims of this sort have grown within Ghana's digital ecology, reshaping both patterns of religious observance and behaviours that were previously considered to be separate from faith traditions, such as economic activity or family life. The repercussions are numerous, including individual adherents finding themselves unable to meet essential needs because they have given excessively, alongside broader societal impacts like reduced community cohesion as families may split along the lines of believers/non-believers, regarding church allegiance and practices.

The study highlights an urgent need for individuals to develop both media literacy and critical thinking skills if they are to effectively negotiate religious materials online. An

example of such negotiation would be understanding faith that considers spiritual aspects, while also acknowledging worldly concerns. The findings of the study indicate that it might be beneficial for various groups, ranging from governments and educational establishments to religious authorities or civil society organisations, to collaborate more closely to minimise the phenomenon. One explanation is that working together could make it easier for individuals to recognise instances in which they are being exploited; thus, enabling them to take action to protect themselves. Researchers might also wish to explore how holding false beliefs about religion can impact people's lives over time. Even though individuals can now access religious materials with greater ease than ever before, there remains a risk associated with certain theological concepts being disseminated widely by way of digital platforms. Indeed, some ideas fit into categories that are easy to identify after they have crossed over from Ghana via posts on social networks.

Furthermore, 'Prosperity Gospel Ministry' is one of the leading prophetic ministries in Ghana, and their teachings emphasise the different types of wealth and health the prophet can offer or make available to all believers, making spiritual warfare seem sensational, like what we see in television programmes and movies. Public events where evil spirits are said to be cast out of people who then behave dramatically during "deliverance" by these prophets promote harmful dependencies upon prophetic figures for personal guidance and protection. Such doctrines exploit vulnerable followers, and the ramifications can be deeply impactful, not merely shaping the beliefs or "normal" actions of individuals, but also their decision-making when adversity arises.

The effects of this phenomenon persist in harming its adherents. For example, when one loses one's job, these

prophets counsel one to pray more fervently and remain at ease in seeking work, or donate money they cannot afford, in the expectation that divine intervention will swiftly double their wealth. Should an entire community adopt these attitudes, it may create division between those who disagree, or establish new social expectations so forceful that locals act against their own best interests.

Things get even trickier when individuals start dabbling in high-profile religious, as well as political leadership, because there is then a risk in the sense that politics will be distorted with figures like these using faith-based arguments to influence voters. This kind of scenario plays out regularly across Sub-Saharan Africa, where staged, but openly contested general elections are rare events. It is all very well having free and fair polls; however, it becomes a different matter altogether if, every time, results appear skewed because sermons by these ministers have implied 'changing government would offend God'. Therefore, it is vital to equip citizens, particularly the youth, with skills to identify sacred and false doctrines regarding the Christian religion. This may significantly reduce the influence and power of these self-proclaimed prophets in the nation.

Also, researchers could carry out further studies to investigate whether the widespread belief in these misleading theologies/doctrines could lead to harm in the long run that affects both the nation's socio-political indicators, such as falling voter turnouts and worsening poverty rates. Researchers could also investigate whether teaching people media analysis skills (through programmes promoting media literacy) might help reduce the harm caused by these beliefs, or if there are legal regulations that can balance religious freedom and the need to keep the public safe from harmful trends. Additionally, scholars may wish to investigate the long-term effects when an individ-

ual encounters and shares these mistaken ideas on social media with their friends.

Lastly, if Ghana aims to fully utilise digital religion while minimising faith-related risks, such as misleading theologies/doctrines on the internet, policymakers must take further action to curb the spread of these theologies, particularly as new technologies continue to emerge.

We propose that education in critical thinking and media literacy be made a central component of school and community learning. Students must learn not only how digital media functions, but also be provided with tools to verify facts. They should be encouraged to question religious teachings, including their own. Religious leaders should also be involved in this endeavour. One project could involve young Ghanaians discussing online sermons with clergy.

To counter harmful religious content on social media, we recommend establishing a dedicated team at the telecommunications regulator, that could then demand the removal of misleading materials. There must also be a proper legal framework, balancing freedom of belief against exploitation, and the police should collaborate closely with units combatting cybercrime and financial fraud. At times, sermons incite antisocial sentiments: Should preachers be held responsible?

People from diverse religions ought to have more opportunities to socialise, perhaps through organising football matches or interfaith dialogues, to foster understanding and respect among different religious groups. Currently, there appears to be little interaction between those engaged with new religious movements, such as Christian neo-prophetic churches, which some perceive as dangerous, and mainstream Christians. Perhaps, programmes could be developed where members of both groups work towards shared goals like improving sanita-

tion or reducing motor accidents, which can also go a long way to foster accountability of false/misleading theologies with a focus on social cohesion and collective well-being.

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