

NEW PENTECOSTALISM IN THE WAKE OF THE ECONOMIC CRISIS IN CAMEROON

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ABSTRACT

In recent decades there has been an upsurge of Pentecostal groups in Cameroon. This new wave of Pentecostal groups is coming in with the 'prosperity doctrine' as an economic message at a time when Cameroon is experiencing a serious economic crisis. This is contrary to the ascetic position taken by the mainline Pentecostal churches before the economic crisis started. This article reveals that the mainline Pentecostal churches have, with the crisis, shifted their attention to the 'prosperity doctrine'. It argues that the economic crisis has contributed to the flourishing of these churches and that the shift in the economic message of the mainline groups is a survival strategy.

Keywords: Pentecostalism, Cameroon, economy

1. INTRODUCTION

Cameroon, like other independent African states, constitutionally defends the right to religious worship. As a consequence of this fundamental aspect of human rights, the last decade has witnessed a proliferation of religious groups in the country, particularly in the Anglophone Provinces, and most of them are Pentecostal in their theology. In the literature, the recent spectacular spread of Pentecostalism in many parts of Africa is explained in terms of politics and the pursuit of modernity. However, Pentecostalism also carries with it a clear economic message of individual prosperity and enrichment within a local-global context.

This development unfolds against the background of a serious economic crisis that has left few untouched and has retarded economic progress significantly. Although predictable and indeed foreseen, the crisis seems to have taken the government by surprise, since very little was done to avert or prepare for it. The crisis has exacerbated poverty, misery, unemployment, fear, doubt and uncertainty among Cameroonians. Simultaneously, banks have been facing a lot of liquidity problems and some have been liquidated. The state is faced with difficulties in paying employees and in honouring its other obligations. Public and private institutions have laid off personnel, and continue to do so, while this situation has been worsened as the recruitment of new workers has been drastically reduced. The salaries of workers have been slashed several times, and this has inflicted innumerable hardships on them and their families, with a sharp increase in social insecurity. Armed banditry is now commonplace,

with bandits operating in broad daylight and often with impunity. More and more young people and even whole families (cf. the America lottery organized yearly by the American government for other nationals wishing to migrate to the US) are either dreaming of or actually migrating to the West to seek greener pastures. With the added advantage of the Internet, Cameroonians in the diaspora daily liaise with relatives and friends at home, coaching them in how to avoid the increasingly sophisticated immigration hurdles set up by Western governments. As a strategy to leave the country, young unemployed women now frequent Internet business places in a bid to acquire Western nationals as husbands, even though they have never met or known them previously.

The causes of the crisis are many, complex and difficult for most, including academics and other experts, to comprehend (Tedga 1990; Jua 1991; Konings 1996; Nyamnjoh 1998). Yet government efforts over the years to tackle the crisis have yielded few dividends in concrete terms, despite the official rhetoric and contradictory claims of recovery in circulation. The 1998 and 1999 classification of Cameroon as the most corrupt country in the world, according to criteria elaborated by *transparency international*, and its subsequent placement in seventh position from the bottom of the list in the 2000 ranking by the same organization, speaks as much for the government's failure to redress the economy as for the actuality of the crisis.

Also concerned in the crisis have been the Churches. The mainline churches, the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon and the Roman Catholic Church in particular, have been making their own spiritual contribution to the fight against the crisis. This has often been expressed during sermons in churches, in interviews in newspapers, and in the course of pastoral letters. But they have succeeded neither in extracting the concessions they want from the government nor in convincing their members of the practical relevance of their options and strategies (Titi Nwel 1993; Medard 1997).

The rise and spread of Pentecostalism during this period of the crisis - as in many other parts in Africa - coupled with mass defections from the established churches to the new churches - could be interpreted as a public sign of dissatisfaction by Christians with the way the established churches have gone about addressing the spiritual and material needs of their followers. Such increasing disillusionment shows that a swelling number of Christians do not consider it enough for the churches simply to make critical statements about the worsening economic situation or condemning the few who live in obscene opulence while the majority wallow in misery and poverty. Thus, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, for example, when faced with this ineptitude on the part of the mainline churches and the state, healing Charismatic Churches have mushroomed in Kinshasa and other urban centres (De Haes 1992; Devisch 1996).

Similarly, especially over the last fifteen years, Cameroon has witnessed the proliferation of Pentecostal churches, especially in the English-speaking Provinces. These churches include: The Full Gospel Church, The Apostolic Church, The Church of Christ, The Church of God, The True Church of God,

The Church of God of Prophecy, The Deeper Life Bible Church, The Celestial Church of Christ, The Cameroon Celestial Church Assemblies of God, The Africa Evangelisation Bible Church, Evangelistic Centre, Global Frontiers, Millennial Church, United Pentecostal Church, The Cameroon Church of Christ, The Pentecostal Assembly of God, The Lutheran Church of Christ, Living Word Fellowship, Faith and Truth Fellowship Centre, Christ Church Chapel (International Churches) and The Christian Millennial Fellowship. These churches, which are often denoted as 'born-again', have a certain number of doctrines in common, as we describe below, but there are also important subtle differences in their teachings on wealth and the gospel of prosperity.

The aims of this paper are twofold. The first is to explore the reasons behind the rise of the numerous Pentecostal Churches in Cameroon and also the problems they encounter. The second is to discuss and evaluate the specific content of their economic message, which make them better able to deal with the present crisis compared to the mainline Churches and the government.

2. REASONS FOR THE EXPLOSION OF PENTECOSTALISM IN CAMEROON

Before looking at the reasons underlying the growth of Pentecostalism in Cameroon, it would be important to first take a brief look at its doctrines. The doctrines of a religion are very important in attracting people, and those of Pentecostalism have undoubtedly been so attractive for large numbers of people. In addition to its doctrines, a good number of other factors could be advanced to explain the growth of Pentecostalism in the country.

2.1 DISTINCTIVE DOCTRINES

Pentecostalism is a recent dimension in Christianity, and like the holiness movement in the USA from which it originated in the early 20th century, it believes its doctrines are not new but a commitment to the 'full gospel', i.e., they are re-emphasizing the old doctrines as found in the Bible. Nichol (1996) outlines the old doctrines as:

- a) The biblical emphasis on salvation and justification by faith
- b) The doctrine of the second coming of Christ
- c) The stress on divine healing
- d) The doctrine of the holy spirit that empowers a Christian to live victoriously and to witness effectively and whose gift enables a believer to perform the supernatural.

Pentecostals believe strongly in the baptism of the Holy Spirit that occurred on the day of Pentecost amongst the early disciples. They believe that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the disciples that made them speak in tongues on the day of Pentecost was not only for that day and only to the early disciples.

It is a relevant and recurring phenomenon that can be experienced by every believer. Its experience is signified by speaking in tongues (glossolalia). However, they hold that glossolalia is not the individual's final goal in his/her religious experience but rather a beginning of a new kind of Christian living that is empowered and graced by one of the nine gifts of the spirit: discernment of error, power over satanic influences, healing and miracle-working abilities, wisdom, etc. (Nichol 1966: 15).

Pentecostals believe physical illness should be treated through spiritual means. A good number of them prefer praying to physically ill persons rather than taking them to the hospital. They believe everyone can have this spiritual ability to treat illnesses. This is accomplished by the laying on of hands on the head of the patient and praying. Testimonies from people healed are usually made during crusades and regular church services. Unlike the other denominations, Pentecostalism with its faith healing doctrine provides a strong solution to the problem of ill health, thereby attracting many people. Many people have been persuaded to join the Pentecostal faith because of their own ill health or that of a relative. In the case of women in particular, some have been converted not because of physical ill health but because of family crises resulting from alcoholism, unemployment, or domestic strife.

Pentecostals vehemently condemn the baptism of children as a public profession of faith after conversion. As a practical manifestation of belief, every 'believer' is expected to engage in personal evangelization. They are very charismatic in their preaching and move with their Bibles ready to preach to 'unbelievers', displaying a good knowledge of quotable passages from the Bible.

During crusades everyone is active. They are expected to manifest personal holiness of life, to give up smoking, alcohol, secular dancing and going to theatres, which are considered demonic. Their services are characterized by attractive, lively singing, and dancing, with the opportunity at communion services for extemporary prayers and speaking in tongues, interpretation and prophecy (Marshall 1992; Meyer 1999a). Pentecostalism opposes vehemently any church that has connections with 'traditional' beliefs and rituals and Eastern mysticism. It sees these as satanic. Through discussion, their doctrines focus on a direct relationship with God through prayer, and their Pastors provide a simple explanation of the scriptures. They give everyone the opportunity for more personal involvement in the Church, and they exercise a firm moral discipline.

Although Pentecostalism refers to a specific set of doctrinal tenets, rituals, and practices, a global picture reveals that there are many and varied denominations of the faith. Inasmuch as these may stem from only slight doctrinal differences, there are also those who derive from social and para-church organizations. In Cameroon there are no less than twenty Pentecostal denominations, with a greater concentration in the northwest and southwest Provinces.

Despite their differences, the Pentecostals see themselves as part of a special and sacred community whose identity and unity is aggressively promoted to those who are outside. They consider themselves to be 'born-again' Christians

and have often been called as such in Cameroon. This is derived from the cornerstone of Christianity, which requires every individual to repent and 'give his life to Christ'.

2.2 OTHER REASONS

The Pentecostals, unlike other denominations, strongly believe in evangelization as a strong weapon for converting 'unbelievers'. This method has been adopted with great success in Cameroon. As mentioned earlier, every 'believer' is expected to engage in evangelization and also to be active in every evangelistic crusade. Evangelistic campaign rallies are organised on school campuses or any open ground capable of accommodating large crowds of people. At some rallies video films on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ are screened. Guest preachers are sometimes invited from outside, notably from Nigeria, the USA and Europe.

Campaign rallies are usually highly attended and most often provision is made for the 'unbelievers' who, moved by the spirit, have given their life to Christ during the rally to declare openly so that others can see and believe. One of the most celebrated Pentecostal leaders ever invited to Cameroon has been the German-born Reinhard Bonnke. On 21-26 Feb. 1989 and 20-25 Feb. 1990, rallies were organized in Kumba and Bamenda respectively, and he was the guest preacher. These rallies were attended by thousands of people and many opted for Pentecostalism on those occasions.

An evangelistic strategy often used is the circulation of Christian literature, either free of charge or at give-away prices, including stickers. They are famous for the distribution of Bibles free of charge to hospital wards, patients, students, prisoners and teachers. These free materials are usually funded or provided by wealthy overseas partners.

The new democratic 'gospel' sweeping across a good number of nations with its freedom of worship and association has also paved the way for Pentecostalism to flourish in Cameroon. The Pentecostals, with their evangelistic strategies that surpass the mainline churches, have been able to take advantage of this to make converts. In the later part of the 1970s the 'born-again' in Cameroon had problems with the government and their evangelistic activities were banned, but when the ban was lifted in the 1980s, they completely recovered their old position and were able to win many souls.

Another factor that accounts for the growth of the faith is the whole range of economic opportunities that have been opened up by these groups during this period of economic crisis affecting Cameroon. These Churches need a team of Pastors and other workers to work in their establishments. Many unemployed people have enrolled in Pentecostal Bible Colleges, not because of the pastoral call to serve but to earn a living. Some of the Churches have enormous projects and establishments such as schools, hospitals and banks. Employment

opportunities are offered only to members of the Church and, as such, many people have joined in order to be employed.

Given all of such conditions that have paved the way for Pentecostalism to flourish, the rate would have been much higher than expected but several problems have been acting as barriers to its growth.

3. SOME OF THE PROBLEMS CONFRONTING THE GROWTH OF THE PENTECOSTAL MOVEMENT

The mainline Churches, older Pentecostal groups and other Religious bodies have always, in protection of their own interests prevented or discouraged the entry of new religious bodies into their stronghold because they very much understand the consequences of such innovations on their own membership. If a new group does succeed in entering, everything is done to frustrate its activities or block the members of pre-existing churches from crossing over. Unfortunately, in Cameroon Pentecostalism is the hardest hit since a greater proportion of these new Churches are Pentecostals. The moderator of the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon (PCC), is known to have dismissed the development of Pentecostalism as the work of ‘commercial Nigerian preachers’ because a good number of them have indeed been introduced from Nigeria. In the recent past the church has either suspended or sacked pastors who “over-pentecostalise” their congregations. A good example is the ‘Revival’ issue that started at the PCC’s major congregation in Yaounde led by the congregational pastor, the Reverend Bame Bame. Bame was suspended from his pastoral duty in the PCC and he later resigned from the church (Buma Kor 1997).

Before 1992, the government discouraged the formation of associations, including religious groups, for political reasons. But the established churches, taking advantage of this, used the state security to prevent any challenge being made to their privileged position with the state, thereby also guaranteeing their hegemonic control. This was a big problem to Pentecostalism since most of the aspiring new churches were Pentecostals. The difficulties in the legal registration of Churches caused some new ones to operate under the name of some of the churches already registered. The USA Assembly of God chose to work with The Full Gospel Mission rather than attempt to open a church of its own, and the same is true of the United Pentecostal Church (UPC) with the Cameroon Church of Christ (CCC). The law was, however, relaxed as from 1992, with the introduction of democracy, thus opening the way for the faith.

A pathetic case is that of Nancy Porter (an American) who, after working in Africa for many years, came to Cameroon in 1992 under the sponsorship of the Harvest Heartbeat Ministry in the USA to establish a church and to open a Bible College. She brought along a young Nigeria Pentecostal pastor called Justice Sunday to assist her. Unfortunately, she died in 1993 and, impressed by the way Pastor Sunday had handled her funeral, the funding body decided to sponsor him

to continue the projects. He was harassed by the security service and, as a result, was later instructed by the funding body to give up the idea of establishing a church, but to continue with the school project that was to be affiliated with the Vision Christian College, California. He succeeded in the project and the school was named the Nancy Porter Bible School in memory of his late mentor.

Internal wrangling with Pentecostals and the blocking of the entry of new ones by the already existing ones is a serious problem hindering the growth of the faith. In the Nancy Porter case, Pastor Sunday insisted that the Full Gospel and Apostolic Churches should instigate the harassment of other organisations in order to frustrate the opening of the church. It is obvious he had encountered problems with these groups that did not support the idea.

Governments or institutions have sometimes banned the activities of the churches in the name of peace. In the late 1970s, the Cameroon government placed a ban on public evangelization, especially where loudspeakers were used, which was frequently the case with the Pentecostals, and this proved an obstacle to the growth of the faith. Recently, the governor of the Southwest Province in Cameroon placed a ban, still in force, on public rallies, especially those using loudspeakers, in a bid to frustrate SCNC activities. The University of Buea, in the name of 'campus peace', in 1995 banned the activities of the University Pentecostal Students' Union (Buea University Christian Union) on the campus.

The attitudes and beliefs of some non-Pentecostals towards the Pentecostals is so disturbing that some people would not feel comfortable associating with the faith. In Cameroon, it is generally believed (rightly or wrongly) that only frustrated people join the faith. Some call them 'social misfits' because of their practice of avoiding certain places considered ungodly, such as nightclubs and bars, whatever their popularity with other people. Some people capitalize on the questionable behaviour of some of the Pentecostals (i.e., behaviour contrary to what they preach) as a reason for not joining.

Financial difficulty has also been one of the factors hindering the growth of the faith. A good number of the converts are from the lower social class and with low financial status, and as such they contribute only small sums of money that can be used in the running of the church and evangelization. Money is needed for evangelization and infrastructure development, which most of the churches lack. Some of the mainline churches such as the Presbyterian, Roman Catholic and Baptists have used their financial weight to open schools as a strategy to gain converts, and in this they have succeeded. The Pentecostals have few resources and as such cannot make use of this strategy. Support sometimes comes from abroad to some of the Pentecostal churches, but usually not enough to support the work.

Mainline doctrinal conservatism has been another of the factors hindering the successful implantation of Pentecostalism in the country, especially in the rural areas, and extending into the realm of marriage. Parents have prevented their children from getting married to partners from other churches because it would entail changing faith. Every village is almost dominated by the mainline church that was first established there, and hence where the villagers are already

versed in its doctrines. It is usually difficult for other groups to penetrate. If any other group is found, it will be small and tend to be dominated by the mainline church. For example, Ngwo (a village in the North West Province of the country with a population of about fifteen thousand), has a Christian population of about 89 per cent. Of this number, some 94 per cent are Presbyterians (the first denomination that entered the village). The rest are divided between Islam, Roman Catholicism and Pentecostalism. These minority groups are dominated by non-indigenes. Some of the external members of the elite who joined Pentecostalism in Yaounde and in other major cities in the mid- 1970s attempted several times by means of crusades to introduce their own religion amongst the people, but failed. Interestingly, the villagers saw them as people who had mental problems. They could not imagine themselves burning some of the items considered vital to their culture as preached by these people. The unsuccessful attempts caused a majority of these Pentecostals to dissociate themselves from that day onwards from anything that had to do with the development of the village. Some have boycotted the village and associate more with the Pentecostal family.

In a bid to stop the further defection of members to the Pentecostal Churches, the mainline churches have started to introduce liturgical changes and have incorporated some Pentecostal beliefs and practices into their worship. Singing accompanied by clapping and dancing, a practice little used earlier by the mainline churches but a part of Pentecostal worship, is a good example. The mainline churches have incorporated such practices into their own mode of worships to make them equally lively and attractive. In the Presbyterian and Baptist Churches it is now normal for the congregation to respond spontaneously aloud with 'Amen' as soon as the Pastor says 'Praise the Lord' or 'hallelujah', a practice, which was once unique to the Pentecostals.

Most Pentecostal Churches entered the country through the Anglophone area before moving into the Francophone region, though they still tend to flourish more amongst the Anglophone than the Francophone. Many started as spillovers from Nigeria, and the phenomenon has a clear Nigerian element. For example, The Lutheran Church of Christ, United Pentecostal Church, The Apostolic Church, The Full Gospel Church, The Pentecostal Assemblies of God, The Church of Christ and Deeper Life Bible Church came in from Nigeria. However, with the preoccupation of the country with security problems, stringent controls have been placed on the entry of these churches from Nigeria. A good number of fake Pentecostal missionaries from Nigeria have been arrested in Cameroon for involvement in criminal activities, pushing the government to place stringent controls on their activities (Gifford 1998).

Almost all the local co-pioneers of these groups were originally ministers or elders in an established Church who had become disgruntled with a particular aspect either in the worship or in the doctrines of the church to which they belonged before the split. An example is The Evangelistic Centres, founded by Professor Zachariah Fomum, who is a university academic and was once an

elder in one of the mainline churches (the Presbyterian Church) in Yaounde (and incidentally also the son of a deceased pastor of the church).

Kumba serves as the birthplace and headquarters of most of the groups in the country. It harbors many of the churches, amongst which there are The Apostolic Church, Full Gospel, Church of Christ, The Church of God, The True Church of God, The Church of God of Prophecy, The Deeper Life Bible Church, The Celestial Church of Christ, Assemblies of God, Africa Bible Church, Evangelistic Centre, and the Millennial Church. The gregarious attitude of the indigenous inhabitants, the freedom of worship that prevails in the area, and the alarming Nigerian immigrant population make this town vulnerable to Pentecostalism. Most of the Churches are established by Nigerian immigrants or by Cameroonians who have lived in the USA or Nigeria.

One of the most important reasons for the high presence of Pentecostalism in the Anglophone region is the English language, which makes it easy for these missionaries mainly from English nations to communicate with the people. Another reason is that many people from this region go to the USA and Nigeria either for their studies or for economic reasons, and while there they join Pentecostal groups and when they return home they continue not only to manifest the faith but also to convert others. From my observation in Nigeria, a good number of Pentecostals in Cameroon who studied in Nigeria underwent conversion while there as students.

Pentecostalism is more pronounced in the urban than the rural areas. It starts in the urban area and then moves to the rural. In major cities, it flourishes very well with keen competition for members not only with the mainline churches but within Pentecostal groups as well. Some end up phasing themselves out because of the competition, like the Global Frontier Church. Many factors help to explain why Pentecostalism flourishes more in cities. Firstly, as will be discussed below, Pentecostalism is highly dominated by young people who, for economic, social and educational motives, leave their rural areas to live in the cities. This partly explains why cities in Africa are dominated by the youth. While living in the cities, and for obvious reasons, these young people join Pentecostal groups.

Secondly, when the young people migrate to the cities, the rural areas remain dominated by the adults and the aged. Often, these age groups are the most conservative concerning the doctrines of the mainline churches, and they would resist any attempt at defections from the church within which they have been brought up.

The bulk of the churches' adherents are young people, mostly university, secondary school students, and the unemployed. They are usually very active on the campuses and once in a while they organize very elaborate religious activities. They also run organisations at some of the Cameroon Universities called Christian Unions (CU). In addition to these there exists the Cameroon Youth for Jesus (CYJ), a movement founded by the Pentecostal youth and meant to be ecumenical, but in practice it operates only amongst Pentecostal young people. The mainline churches dissociate their young people from the

movement. Movements such as these, and their activities, have attracted a large number of young people into the faith in Cameroon.

The mainline churches are dominated by the older generation and the leadership is most often monopolized by this generation in a bid to keep the young people in their place. To a certain extent, young people see the Pentecostal churches as their own space where they can exercise some responsibility. The Pentecostals also address the problems facing young people more than others do. One such problem is that of marriage, and the Pentecostal churches have been places where it is believed that good partners might be obtained. Many have joined precisely for this reason or have been brought in by their partners (Gifford 1998; Marshall 1992; Van Dijk 1992; Meyer 1999b).

For women, particularly those less educated or poorer individuals, becoming 'born-again' is an assurance that their position in the family and their relationship with their husbands guarantees mutual respect, marital fidelity and sharing of family responsibilities. Husbands are less likely to abuse their wives or cheat on them, giving them, instead, respect, assisting in child rearing and spending plenty of time with the family, thereby avoiding unnecessary expenditure out of the home on drinking, entertainment, or other women. Marital problems are often taken to the pastor for adjudication. The Pentecostal stress on the nuclear family relieves the young couple of pressure from the In-laws, especially the young wife. The choice of marriage partner rests on the prospective couple rather than on the family, thereby liberating the young people from unwanted arrangements that might otherwise have been made by the family. The proscription of fornication is of advantage, particularly to the young girls, because it enables them resist unwanted sexual pressures, which are regularly brought to bear on them in case they need jobs, good grades or a secure relationship. Young women therefore find this community a space where they can move with relative freedom and dignity, as well as find psychological support.

Some of the music of the Pentecostals is influenced by western rhythms such as soul, rap, and reggae. This could be an opportunity for young people, who because of financial hardship cannot go to nightclubs, discos or concert for entertainment, to see these churches as providing a forum for parallel music. There is scarcely a funeral in the Northwest and Southwest Provinces where Pentecostal music from Nigeria does not dominate in the entertainment.

4. THE ECONOMIC MESSAGE OF THE PENTECOSTALS

When an individual or a group is deprived of certain things considered important to society such as education, food, nourishment, money (as is the case in Cameroon as a result of the economic crisis), two religious doctrinal alternatives could be used to help overcome deprivation:

- a) The implementation of a doctrine in which some or all of these are considered meaningless or of low value could be adopted.

- b) The implementation of religious doctrines through which these are considered important and can be acquired.

The economic message of the Pentecostals revolves around the above alternatives. Each Pentecostal group adopts either of the two methods as an economic message and for the accumulation of wealth. The two approaches have for a long time persuaded the Pentecostals to shun liberation theology, with the first making them believe that earthly things or struggles are unimportant and the second making them argue that God provides a solution to every problem depending on the faith of the individual or people in general.

Studies reveal that the new wave of Pentecostal groups in Cameroon have now adopted the second alternative. Early Pentecostal groups in the country such as The Apostolic Church and the Full Gospel Church, introduced in 1949 and 1960 respectively, had placed their emphases on the first alternative, but with the arrival of the economic crisis they have shifted their attention to the second. Before the economic crisis, popular Bible verses such as “Blessed are the poor” were frequently made use of in sermons. Churches were rich because they received donations from abroad and from the Government, and they could easily carry out their missionary activities without asking for assistance from their own members. With the crisis, and with less financial support coming from abroad and the government, these churches are unable to meet with their objectives. As a solution, emphasis have been shifted to the second alternative, and Bible verses such as “Jesus came to bring abundant life and prosperity” are made use of in sermons. In an interview with Billy Lubansa (an international Pentecostal evangelist in Cameroon and one of the new wave of prosperity preachers) I was told that “Jesus came to bring abundant life, prosperity and money is not evil. People must be taught to give it for the spread of the kingdom of God”. This change of emphasis explains why most Pentecostal business establishments in Cameroon started only when the economy was in a state of crisis.

(a) Regarding the first alternative of placing a low value on material things or considering them as meaningless, this was based on the rigorous and ethical provisions of the Bible. A believer was not expected to go to the cinema or nightclub, but to dress modestly, with the women avoiding the use of make-up. A man should not taste alcohol or smoke. The biblical citation: “It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” was often made use of by some Pentecostals to defend this position and to discourage the accumulation of wealth. These Pentecostals made poverty more tolerable by offering a reward for suffering, and promising redress for injustice in the afterlife. Talcott Parsons (Haralambos 1985) makes this clear when he argues that one of the major functions of religion is to ‘make sense’ of all experiences, no matter how contradictory they may appear. An example is suffering, “Why must man endure deprivation and pain and so unequally and haphazardly, if indeed at all?” The Bible provides a range of answers, e.g., suffering is imposed by God to test a person’s faith; it is punishment for sin,

suffering with fortitude will bring its reward in heaven. Suffering thus become meaningful (Haralambos 1985). On the university campuses where there are many Pentecostals, it is easy to identify those who still adhere firmly to all or some of these teachings, by their simple way of life and abstention from certain practices considered evil, such as smoking, drinking and going to nightclubs.

(b) With regard to the second alternative, the Pentecostals adopt a method by which they believe they can have possession of whatever they want, a belief which is based on prosperity theology. This theology teaches that the spiritual and material fortunes of a 'believer' are dependent on faith and on how much he gives spiritually and materially to God or his representatives (Marshall 1992: 2-32; Gifford 1991: 10-20). This implies that the riches of a 'believer' will be a consequence of his faith in God (Mk 11: 23, Deut. 20: 30, Phil. 4: 19, etc. are texts usually used in support of this message). One needs only to believe and spend money on material things in the service of God and the special gift of the Pastor or God will provide him with everything. It is like saying: "you prosper by planting a seed in faith, the return on which will meet all your needs".

The prosperity gospel is an American creation, its historical development is traceable through well-known evangelists like E.W. Kenyon, A.A. Allen, Oral Roberts, T.L. Osborn, Kenneth Hagin, Kenneth Copeland, etc. Its rapid rise and diffusion in the 1970s can be explained by its role in establishing the empires of the media evangelists. In the USA during the 1960s and early 1970s, when the economy was booming and there were many job opportunities, Pentecostal leaders propagated the gospel as a means of gaining funds for evangelization, to build media empires and churches, and in support of their leaders. This proved very successful because enormous resources were made available to meet the above objectives (Gifford 1998: 39). The prosperity gospel has become widespread in Africa, not only among the Pentecostals but also with the mainline churches. Marshall (1992), in her study of the Pentecostals of Nigeria, reveals that it is associated with the outreach of American evangelism in the continent because many Pentecostal pastors received their training from the Bible Colleges run by the prosperity preachers in America, on either a full-time or correspondence basis, e.g., the Rhema Bible College of Kenneth Hagin.

This theology is disseminated through literature diffusion, Bible Schools, preaching during crusades or at churches, and by any other available means considered proper in the face of God. To the Church leaders, the gospel is important because it provides revenue through which they can survive economic hardship. It is widely made use of by celebrated Pentecostal leaders in Africa like Archbishop Idahosa of Nigeria, Handel Leslie of Uganda, and Duncan William of Ghana. It has proved successful in persuading people to meet the expenses of very costly ministries and to raise money for church projects throughout Africa.

The Reverend Billy Lubansa has played a great role in spreading prosperity theology amongst the Pentecostals in Cameroon (he gives as his 'spiritual mentors' Ray McCauley, Rienhard Bonnke, Kenneth Copeland and Kenneth

Hagin). Nevertheless, he has complained that the people of Cameroon were never taught about giving:

At the offering they would give brown coins (5,10,25 CFA); “God would not mind”, the pastors used to tell them. I started breaking that teaching. I gave a seminar “Being delivered from the power of poverty” (for which he used the books of Copeland). An Apostolic Church pastor told me that the missionaries had told them, “You don't need education, or big Churches, because you are going to heaven”. This was implanted in them. We have to uproot all those things. They used to preach “Blessed are the poor”. They must change to “Jesus came to bring abundant life, prosperity”. They taught that money was evil. We need to have it to spread the kingdom.

Lubansa accomplishes the uprooting of the old teaching through his programme on the local radio station, Buea, through conventions that are usually highly attended, with international guest-speakers, and through invitations to speak at other Pentecostal churches.

The new wave of Pentecostal churches is arriving with the same message of prosperity. The Nigeria Assemblies of God, which calls itself The Pentecostal Assemblies of God in Cameroon, is dominated by young Nigerian businessmen. The prosperity message is widely preached by their pastors. This message certainly seems geared to such people. In his preaching in Oct 1995 on the theme ‘Determine to change’, from the text Dan. 1: 8, the Yaounde pastor said:

If you are determined to come out of poverty, work. And work can be anything, even selling plantains, and God starts blessing you. Your business can be cleaning floors. God does not bless empty hands. [...] Do everything to become rich. Do everything God says you should do and become rich. [...] You go to a night club all night, and you are too sleepy the next day. You have a new girl, a bottle of beer, a stick of cigarettes everyday, what is your gain? Say “I am determined to change today”. When you turn to Jesus, Jesus walks in with salvation, forgiveness, prosperity, blessing, anointing, the presence and power of the King of kings.

The new wave of Pentecostals now encourage ‘believers’ to work hard and accumulate wealth that could be used to prosper the Church. The gospel has encouraged church members to engage in competitive business ventures with ‘unbelievers’ on both a national and an international level. The women get involved in small enterprises. Some go from one office to another selling snacks, house decoration items prepared by themselves, cosmetics, jewelry etc. Some of the Pentecostal women in the civil service, who do not have the opportunity to go from office to office, keep their own business items in their offices where customers come for them. They place no restrictions on their own dressing and on the accumulation of wealth. Members dress up gorgeously for church, the men with expensive wristwatches and the women with elaborate hairstyles.

'Believers' can drive nice cars and own expensive foreign goods. When the ambition of accumulation is achieved and manifested in daily life, it is regarded as the goodness of God to his people because of their faith.

The Churches have now, unlike before the crisis, gone into business ventures ranging from banking, printing, the sale of Christian literature, and education, to the general area of health. The Zion Credit-Financing Bank with branches in many part of the country is run and owned by the Pentecostals. The Gospel Press in Bamenda, run by the Full Gospel Church, started before the crisis and was solely for the printing of Christian literature that was distributed free of charge, but now it does work on a commercial basis for the general public. The Full Gospel Church runs a Technical College in Muyuka, a secondary grammar school in Bamenda, a teacher-training college in Mbengwi, and three primary/nursery schools in the South West Province. It also runs four health establishments (two in the South West Province, one in Yaounde and another in Garoua) The Apostolic Church runs a secondary school in Bamenda and a hospital in Banga. All of these establishments started during the period of the economic crisis and only 'believers' are employed to work at them. The Apostolic and the Full Gospel Churches have been emphasized here because they constitute the old wave of Pentecostal groups that adopted the first alternative to begin with, and later shifted to the second with the arrival of the economic crisis. The prosperity gospel has motivated the Pentecostals to engage in various business ventures in a bid to overcome the full impact of the economic crisis.

In addition to the accumulation of wealth through the performance of economic activities, certain Pentecostal beliefs and practices place them at an advantage over non-Pentecostals in such accumulation. Firstly, the Pentecostals' emphasis on making a complete break with the 'past' (Gifford 1992; Marshall 1998; Van Dijk 1992; Maxwell 1997) has gone a long way in making it possible for them to accumulate large amounts of wealth for overcoming the economic crisis. Since the government can no longer carry out development in most areas, most communities form cultural and development associations to mobilize members towards self-reliance development. This entails providing resources that could be used in carrying out local development projects such as bridges, roads, cultural halls, water supply, electricity, schools and hospitals. Contributions from and levies on members in support of such programmes are often very high. A greater number of the Pentecostals do not associate with these groups and make no contribution. The reasons for not joining range from turning their backs on African culture, often included in development programmes, to avoiding association with 'unbelievers'. Some do not associate with family members considered 'unbelievers' and as such have no financial obligations towards their own needy ones, despite the African extended family structure in which members are usually mobilized to assist everyone. This abstention reduces their financial burden as compared to those who have to provide for such things.

Secondly, the Pentecostal belief in re-orientating one's life by abstaining from certain practices considered vices permits the accumulation of resources. These vices include high expenditure on drinking, smoking, going to discos, cinemas, and theatres. It is obvious that the prosperity gospel is having a socio-political impact on Cameroon. By telling the people that material prosperity is provided by a 'miracle'-working God or, alternatively, through the spiritual law of prior giving, it simply ignores the numerous political and economic problems that have brought poverty to the country. These include corruption, dependency economy, fluctuating prices, deforestation, military spending and overpopulation. This does little or no good in the search for solutions to these problems.

The doctrine implies that only 'believers' will prosper materially in society. This, in turn, does not encourage a wider social responsibility in society, as everyone's success is a function of his or her personal relationship with God. The 'believer' would have it as a duty therefore, to convert the 'unbeliever' so that through his or her own faith she/he will also be able to prosper materially.

5. CONCLUSION

From the foregoing discussion, the shift in emphasis from the first alternative to the second was inevitable for Pentecostalism to succeed in the 'competitive market' of religion in present-day Cameroon. The first alternative was more fundamentalist and has very little place in a country plagued with problems and with an obvious need for socio-economic and political transformation. In the first alternative, the Pentecostals approached the Bible uncritically. In general, they loved quoting the Bible, and they referred to it and supported any position by alluding to it. This is also true of the mainline Churches, though in more moderated tones than was the case with the Pentecostals. The Pentecostals adopted a fundamentalist position on the accumulation of wealth just as they did on the use of alcohol and on associating with 'unbelievers'. In Cameroon such a position cannot face up to the realities of society, and for social reasons it cannot work. Very few Cameroonians would abstain from such 'vices' for religious motives, an observation that would imply that the majority would have been unable to opt for Pentecostalism. A greater majority would want to accumulate wealth, drink alcohol, and for various reasons associate with other members of society. Pentecostalism was unattractive to many because of its stance on these. Hence, in order to attract members it had become obvious to a large number of Pentecostal groups that such activities should be accepted in moderation and with supportive passages from the Bible in their defence. For example, on alcohol, a little could be taken, and on the accumulation of wealth, various reasons were discussed as to why it should not be seen as evil. This moderation has shifted the emphasis from the first theological alternative to the second, giving Pentecostalism a new and attractive look in Cameroon.

On the issue of non-involvement in politics, the Pentecostals realized that it would not pay off if they wished to succeed in attracting a large following in Cameroon. To succeed they would have to join together other forces to speak out on political issues, which is what they have started doing. It has been argued that the social, political and economic problems facing Cameroon are the result of bad governance. Our leaders do very little in support of the interests of Cameroonians and care less about their sufferings. For reasons such as these, Cameroonians tend to support any religion or group that speaks out in the interest of the suffering masses. The mainline churches originally became popular because they played this role through sermons and pastoral letters. The Pentecostals have now started involving themselves in politics for obvious reasons:

(a) They acknowledge that most of the socio-economic and political problems in the country are caused by poor leadership and they believe that, in addition to praying for the nation, it is necessary to join in the fight for good leadership through other means, such as participating in political elections. They believe a God-fearing leader would rule well and it is important to support such a candidate. Some of their leaders still teach that a Christian should have no concern with politics, but they nevertheless subscribe to political debate through biblical allusions, such as “God himself is the greatest politician -- He gives position to whom He wills” (Dan. 4:25). Some have expressed through their preaching the idea that “Cameroon will not experience the glory of God until the leaders become ‘born-again’”.

(b) They have realized that joining the masses in the struggle would produce more members rather by sitting in an opposing camp, which would simply antagonize the ‘unbelievers’ whom they want to convert.

It is very likely that the longer the economic crisis persists in Cameroon, the higher will be the number of people opting for Pentecostalism. A greater majority of Cameroonians find it difficult in the present economic crisis to afford Western medical care, and if an illness persists they tend to turn to spiritual healing, which is believed to be best performed by Pentecostalism. Another important factor is the AIDS epidemic, which is ravaging the country at a terrific rate. A sizeable number of Cameroonians have yet to believe in the existence of AIDS. Most frequently, they attribute such an incurable disease to witchcraft, which they also believe can be treated spiritually by the Pentecostals. Some of the victims who believe in the existence of the disease join the Pentecostals for spiritual healing after moving from one hospital to another with no success. This helps to explain why Pentecostalism has scored a remarkable success during this period of crisis in the country. It also suggests that the greater the number of people subsisting at poverty level (and the longer the crisis persists), the greater will be the number of people who will opt for Pentecostalism. It is very likely that when the economy of the country improves and the rate of AIDS reduced, Pentecostalism would not be as significant as it is at this moment.

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