

‘If this is of God’: Choosing to Curse in Ghanaian Charismatic Christianity

Mark S. Aidoo
ms.aidoo@trinity.edu.gh

Abstract

African Christianity takes the challenges from their enemies and the evil forces seriously. There is hardly a call to love the enemy. Moreover, it is about destroying physical or spiritual beings that oppose one’s wellbeing. In the African Pentecostal/Charismatic ministries, one finds pastors and prophets who are cursing their colleagues openly. This essay reflects on the cursing prayers of Bishop Dag Heward-Mills, the founder and Presiding Bishop of Lighthouse Chapel International, and Pastor Kelvin Elson Godson, founder of Zoe Outreach Embassy, Ogbodjo, Accra to explore their religious, ethical, and cultural justifications in contemporary neo-Charismatic ministries in Ghana in light of the African religious and cultural values. It uses the African cultural hermeneutics and paradigmatic approach in biblical ethics to show why the Akan of Ghana do not allow leaders of society to curse others. It shows that it is not only the motive and intention of the one at prayer but also the cultural and religious values that make cursing prayers legitimate or illegitimate.

Keywords: Pentecostal/Charismatic ministries, curse, African values, enemy, Charismatic leadership

Introduction

The task of this essay is to explore how African cultural and religious traditions abhor cursing in light of perceptions and justifications of two Ghanaian Charismatic pastors. It discusses the cases of Bishop Dag Heward-Mills, the founder and Presiding Bishop of Lighthouse Chapel International, and Pastor

Kelvin Elson Godson, the founder of Zoe Outreach Embassy, Ogbodjo, Accra, both belonging to Charismatic ministries, reflecting on the motivations toward curses and their religio-cultural relevance. It then examines such motivations from religious, ethical, and cultural views, expected from leaders of society. The issue under discussion is why some Ghanaian Charismatic leaders use curses while the African community and traditional leaders do not take it kindly.

The discussion is undergirded by the use of African cultural hermeneutics and biblical ethics. Musimbi Kanyoro explains that African cultural hermeneutics is ‘an analysis and interpretation of how culture conditions people’s understanding of reality at a particular time and location’ (Kanyoro 2002:9). It enables the interpreter to analyze and interpret beliefs and values within a particular context, as well as its impact on society. In my view, African cultural hermeneutics is a system of orientation that examines, from a particular African worldview the perceptions, thoughts, values, and actions of people to see how these actions define them to be part of society. It provides opportunities to arrive at meanings from particular actions that are constantly interpreted and reinterpreted, allowing space for the dynamic changing cultures and perspectives in different historical contexts over time.

The paradigmatic approach within biblical and theological ethics is used in the discussions on the cursing prayers. It assumes that what the Bible presents to us are but models or examples of appropriate and inappropriate conduct. Christopher Wright explains that the Old Testament (OT) paradigms provide us with ‘models’ or ‘objectives’, without requiring a ‘literal’ transposition of ancient Israelite practices into our contemporary society: ‘But at the same time the paradigmatic approach compels us to wrestle seriously with the texts themselves in order to understand fully the models we are seeking to apply’ (Wright 2004:184). Eryl Davies also points out that

the morality of the Hebrew Bible is embedded in certain foundational principles, and it should not be supposed for a moment that its ethical and religious directives must determine our beliefs and practices to the last detail. Rather, the biblical material provides us with broad, general principles that guide us in our ethical decision-making, and it establishes a standard to which we can appeal in order to justify the correctness of a position taken or to test the propriety of an action performed or contemplated (Davies 2010:101).

This indicates that it is unacceptable to lift the laws, sayings, admonitions, and actions of the biblical characters out of their historical contexts and apply it directly to our contemporary conditions. What ought to be done is to search for the underlying principles that reflect what God wanted from his people, to ascertain what God wants us to be in a dialogical way and to contextualize the principles in our contemporary life. The fact is that the world of ancient Israel is different from our world. It is in that light that ethical dilemmas and controversies that we face today which are not mentioned explicitly in the Bible, can be understood creatively. The significance of the cultural and paradigmatic approaches is that it will help to construct some agreeable structures of African personality and leadership.

When the Pastor Calls down a Curse upon Someone

Bishop Heward-Mills cursed his 'enemies' during a church worship service. The prayer circulated widely on social media and raised much criticism from the public. Heward-Mills heads one of the largest Charismatic denominations in Ghana, which is believed to be one of the fastest-growing Charismatic denominations with approximately 1,500 branches in over 92 countries on five continents (Dag Heward-Mills Ministries 2021). The denomination calls itself 'the Mega Church' and is composed of groups of churches. At one of its Good Friday Healing Services, it attracted more than 50,000 worshippers (Asamoah-Gyadu 2019:390).

Heward-Mills preaches that the Bible contains many examples of curses. These curses are appeals to a supernatural power to inflict evil on someone. To him, there are minor curses and wild ones. The wild curses take effect like a staircase: As it moves upwards, the effect becomes more intense (Dag Heward-Mills live 2020). A curse is a wish that is expressed by someone that some form of adversity will attach itself to someone else through a spell, magic, or witchcraft. It brings continual sorrow and causes one to sweat. It permanently downgrades people (Dag Heward-Mills live 2020).

A video that started circulating around January 2020 that generated much controversy in the public space, portrayed Heward-Mills as saying:

I say you are finished. In the name of Jesus Christ. Any form of wickedness in this church represented by criticisms, murmuring, speaking against authority, as Miriam became white with leprosy, so also may you be whitened with an incurable disease and never rise from your hospital bed, in the name of Jesus Christ. Let those that have made themselves opposers and accusers, let them wither like the fig tree withered when Jesus spoke against it, in the time of Jesus Christ. Let all forms of wickedness, conspiracy, secret meetings, whisperings, telephone messages, texts and WhatsApp messages of wickedness and conspiracies and phone calls, let it turn into an explosion, in the name of Jesus. We command thieves in our midst to be cursed. We say let them wither with an unrelenting curse. I curse my liars. I curse my deceivers. I curse my pretenders, in the name of Jesus (Heward-Mills 2020).

In the same year (2020), Pastor Godson pronounced a curse on his break-away pastors and former members of his church in Ghana. This prayer also trended on social media for some time and was condemned in the public court of opinion. He said in the prayer:

Lord, unto those who chose to scatter this ministry, especially the pastors who left this ministry and left with members of this ministry, which they do not account for as individuals, but the ministry accounts for them. Lord let their wives be barren. Let all fruitfulness be cut from them. I curse their generations. I curse their generations before them and after them. Let there be chaos in their families. Let your pestilence fall upon them from this day. Let there be sickness from the root of their family to the generations that are not born. Epilepsy, hypertension, HIV, madness; let it fall upon them (Godson 2020).

These prayers of Heward-Mills and Godson fall within generational curses that resonate with an African ethos. They follow the principle that the punishment of one person must also affect the person's family, including the unborn generations. To them, generational curses do not permit repentance, unless it is revoked.

African neo-Pentecostal and Charismatic spirituality take after the indigenous African worldview where, in traditional prayers of libation, curses play a key role. Libation is not an individual event, but a group event on behalf of a community. It therefore has collective aspirations (Agawu 2007:3-4 of 10).

The Charismatic ministries take these matters of spiritual warfare seriously. They bind and loosen all forces and even people that pose a danger to the growth and wellbeing of individuals and society. Salvation involves and implies liberation from all curses for people to enjoy life in its fulness. The common parlance is 'this nonsense (from the enemies) must stop' (Quayesi-Amakye 2015:7). They believe that a Christian can be under a curse when they do what is unacceptable. Being under a curse is being under the devil's control, signifying the withdrawal of God's protective presence (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005:165).

African Values and Cursing

African traditional societies value features like respect, integrity, and concern for one another (Nyirawung 2013:6 of 9). Despite the cultural diversity from place to place in Africa, these cultural and moral values are common to all societies on this continent. Moreover, Africans emphasize community life and believe that what happens to one person affects others. Individuals might have rights and can do what they want, but their actions can bring repercussions to others and their society. Individual rights can therefore be regarded within the obligations expected to be fulfilled in the community. Such obligations are not personally determined, but God-given, society-driven, and culturally shaped. Relationships between individuals ought to promote the worth of each other as human beings. Although obligations are founded on reciprocity, it does not mean that one can repay evil with evil. Hence, in many African communities, engaging in anything that disrupts life, destroys a person or kills a kinsman, and is not only a crime but also an abomination.

Kwame Gyekye defines communal values as the values that express appreciation of the worth and importance of the community. Such values underpin and guide the types of social relations, attitudes, and behavior that ought to exist between individuals who live together in a community, sharing a social life and having a sense of common good (Gyekye 1996:35-36).

Values are among the first things every parent ought to teach the children – whether explicitly or implicitly. It is the community that provides the context or cultural space for parents or authorities to develop the identity of others and to help them aspire to be the kind of person that their society expects of them. It is also the communal culture that shapes the values and forms the basic convictions of what is right and wrong, good and bad, important or unimportant. Diri Teilanyo posits that ‘while values constitute what should be judged as worthwhile or worthless, norms provide rules for behavior in specific situations. Values are abstract notions of what is important and respectable, while norms are specific behavioral patterns, rules and guides’ (Teilanyo 2015:66).

According to Idang, ‘African culture has a moral code that forbids doing harm to a relative, a kinsman, an in-law, a foreigner and a stranger, except when such a person is involved in an immoral act’, meaning harming is permitted in some cases (Idang 2015:104). There are limits for inflicting harm without being punished and not disintegrating the whole community. Since curses tend to bring an imbalance to society in cases where the punishment is extended to all members of the family and generations to come, then consideration should be given to the punishments being given.

Curses may come into effect through unintentional acts and statements. Some harmful exclamations of shock or pronouncements like ‘Aaah!’ and ‘hmm!’ – which were not meant as such – can turn into curses. John Mbiti explains more about the power of words:

There is mystical power in words, especially those of a senior person to a junior one, in terms of age, social status or office. The words of parents for example, carry ‘power’ when spoken to children: they ‘cause’ good fortune, curse, success, peace, sorrows or blessings, especially when spoken in moments of crisis (Mbiti 2002:197).

Teilanyo observes that insults and curses are sometimes considered normal, especially when one is emotionally upset or angry with someone else. However, the one who is insulted or cursed matters since the repercussions can fall on even the one who is cursing. Curses, like insults, function as a means of rebuke or reproof, or merely for the expression of frustration (Teilanyo 2015:76, 77).

Kofi Agyekum explains that the Akan term *duabo* (*curse*) refers to the act of using a stick to hit someone or something and is usually uttered when a person feels there is a lack of peace, love, or unity. It is expressed to admit conflict, social avoidance, and to eliminate enemies (Agyekum 1991: 358). Agyekum then mentions two types of curses: The first is the minor curse where a minor deity with no established sacerdotal system is invoked. The second is the major curse where a deity believed to be renowned and powerful and having established sacerdotal systems is invoked. Such a deity is believed to be unforgiving and may even kill the imprecates (Agyekum 1991:369-370).

To the major and minor curses may be added sub-types such as oaths; inherited or generational curses intended to have endless limitations in terms of its effect even to unborn generations of the victim; treaty curses used when contracts are established; sacred cursed uttered by a traditional priest and religious functionary for offending the deities; ritual curses, which involve actions and rites meant to bring evil; and self-curses uttered by people to justify themselves.

Teilanyo further avers that in Africa, curses are mostly called down because of an 'egoistic anger or altruistic attack on vice', but misses the point when he states that curses do not always invoke supernatural evil on the addressees as to express anger and admonition (Teilanyo 2015:77). In fact, it takes supernatural beings like the ancestors and deities to determine the potency of actions, words, and act on them. Sometimes, the living can be invited to the spiritual world to assist the deities in determining whether the one who was cursed is guilty or not. In other words, in African traditional judicial matters, the power to 'judge' actions or words depends on the prerogative of supernatural beings who can take the matter to any level. They have the liberty to take punishment to limits that are not determined by the suppliant.

Although an individual can pronounce curses, there are legitimate and illegitimate curses. Traditionally, Africans believe that it is not virtuous to speak ill against elders and leaders of the community. With reference to permissive cursing, Mbiti (2002:211) argues,

The operative principle is that only a person of higher status can effectively curse one of lower status, but not vice versa. The most feared curses are those pronounced by parents, uncles, aunts or other

close relatives against their 'juniors' in the family. The worst is the curse uttered at the death-bed, for once the pronouncer of the curse has died, it is practically impossible to revoke it.

A curse is a religious taboo among the Akan of Ghana (Agyekum 1991:356). This does not form part of ordinary evil. The basic categories of evil are socio-religious evils, moral evils, physical evils, and other unusual events (Atiemo 1995:19-20). In Atiemo's view, anything that infringes on social and customary prohibition, disregarding customary responsibilities, and neglecting to attend to the gods and the ancestors are all considered as socio-religious evils (Atiemo 1995:19).

Chiefs and traditional leaders do not take it lightly when their subjects or people living in their community pronounce some form of curses (Aidoo 2009:122). The traditional leaders insist that anyone who curses someone illegitimately must recant the curse. The culprit will then have to offer sheep or fowls with drinks to appease the gods. Such a person will be shamed publicly. One who does not exhibit moral virtues and conduct cannot curse because they are not to be regarded as a person (Wiredu & Gyekye 1992:110). It is also on record that in June 2020, officers of the NPP, a Political party in Ghana, reprimanded their members and disowned them for pronouncing curses on whoever planned to rig the national elections in 2020. The chiefs were invited to lead the people to recant (Tawiah 2020). Again, in October 2020, some NDC party supporters pronounced curses on the Gender Minister and MP for the Agona West Constituency. Their curses were considered a civil offense. When it was reported to the police, they were arraigned before the court and remanded into police custody. Their leaders encouraged the culprits to recant and offer sacrifices to the gods so that the harm they have caused to society could be reversed (GhanaWeb 2020).

The next section discusses the behavior of the two pastors on a paradigmatic level from the Bible.

Reexamining the Basis

It is Prophetic

Both Heward-Mills and Godson argue that cursing is a prophetic mandate. Alex Luc has discussed the prophetic role of the psalmists and its parallels in the New Testament (NT). He explains that an imprecatory psalm as we find it in Psalm 41:9 is quoted in John 13:18 and Matthew 26:23-24, while Psalm 35:19 is quoted in John 15:25. It is interpreted as prophetic speeches concerning the life and work of Christ. Psalm 109:8, quoted in Acts 1:20, concerns those who opposed Christ. Others such as 'let your enemies be scattered' (Ez 12:14-15; cf. Nm 10:35; Jdg 5:31; 2 Chr 6:41) are also found in Psalms 68:1, 7:6-7, 92:9, and 132:9 (Luc 1999:402-404). Hence, interpreting the imprecations prophetically is not out of place (Hillers 2021:97-189).

However, the prophets did not pronounce curses for their own sake. They knew that the characteristics of lawsuit oracles were indictments, and therefore woe cries are founded on covenant curses (e.g., Is 3:10; Jer 23:1-4; Ez 34:1-16; Zech 11:17). Douglas Stuart explains that the prophets declaring woes were not egoistic or creating a new tradition by cursing. They were reminding the people of the covenant blessings and curses that had been given to the people at an earlier stage, which God swore to honor. He rightly states that the prophets

invent no types of curses or blessings. They simply make reference, either literally or allusively as inspired to do so, to what is already incorporated in the Sinai covenant...Nearly all of the content of the classical (writing) prophets' oracles revolve around the announcement of the near-time fulfillment of covenantal curses and the end-time fulfillment of covenantal restoration blessings (Stuart 1987: xxxii).

Thus, the prophets repeated what was already established, not because of what they personally desired but what God desired. Even though the wrath of God seems harsh in him upholding his word, the gracious and merciful nature of God is never compromised (Ex 24:7; Nm 14:18; Dt 5:9). The curses in the Psalms are not direct communications from God to the people – these curses are the words of the people to God. Thus, it cannot act as principles to be

taken in the same vein as the prophetic words from God. William Holladay is right when he points out that the imprecations in the Psalms exhibit ‘a very different spirit’ from the one outlined in the NT (Holladay 1995:302).

In the NT, Jesus uses the incident of the fig tree to teach critical lessons on prediction, faith, and prayer (Mk 11:12-25). Jesus’ judgment on the temple, using his prediction that the fig tree would wither, can be said to be prophetic. However, Jesus did not curse the tree out of anger or an irrational temper, but acted symbolically to show how judgment would fall upon those who do not bear fruit (Garland 2007:525; Collins 2007:525). Robert Stein also explains that the emotions of Jesus were not stated by the Gospel writer, and ‘this ‘cursing’ has nothing to do with profanity and obscenity but refers rather to a symbolic act of condemnation and judgment’ (Stein 2008:513).

Jesus commanded his disciples not to curse (Mt 5:17; Lk 6:28; cf. Rm 12:14), although cursing is not contrary to the NT teaching to love and forgiveness toward one’s enemies (cf. Lk 18:7–8; Ac 23:3; 2 Tim 4:14). The Epistle of Peter highlights Jesus’ example of not retaliating when insults were hurled at him and not making threats when he suffered but entrusting oneself to God who judges rightly. Peter teaches his audience not to retaliate at all and not to harbor a spirit of resentment. If someone does what is wrong, one should reciprocate by doing what is right (1 Pt 2:21-23).

Curses are Positive Confessions

Some Charismatics believe that curses are positive statements of faith. They believe in prayers that follow the principles towards liberation, wellbeing, and prosperity (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005:206,207). Asamoah-Gyadu alludes that ‘the principle of “positive confession” and “refusal” or “resistance” is especially noticeable in Ghanaian CMs [Charismatic ministries] during public prayer’ (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005:214). Since life is a war with anti-social forces, prayers of resistance take a large part of the ethos of Charismatic ministries. Hence, they take the imprecatory prayers in the Bible as a key to untangle the onslaught of their enemies. Such a view echoes the adage, ‘If your only tool is a hammer, you will see every problem as a nail’ (cf. McCullen 2018).

Heward-Mills agrees that curses have a magical element. Sigmund Mowinckel explains that curses were deeply rooted in Israel’s cult and worship, and that they tend to operate under magic (Mowinckel 2004:49).

The appeal to magic, however, was not permitted among the people of God (Dt 18:10; Is 8:19-22; cf. Lev 19:31).

When positive confessions and cries turn into hate speeches, it tends to operate under ethical and moral realms. Curses that exhibit hate speech, including verbal actions bring division into a community. Although the individual's will is not dissolved in the collectivity, it is the enhancement of the community that the individual must pursue. Words that are sensitive to others and promote their wellbeing are culturally acceptable in Akan traditions.

The line between retaliation and hate is usually blurred. Hate, motivated by anger can be a precursor to both crime and violent extremism (Vergani 2021). That is why all should be slow to become angry and never quick to speak (Jas 1:19-21). The writer of Ephesians also narrates: 'Do not let unwholesome talk come out your mouths, but only what helps to build up others according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen' (Eph 4:29). Here, the emphasis is on the effect of speech on the listeners. How power-laden words with the potential to harm others, impact on onlookers, should be a matter of concern.

Cursing prayers in the Bible are in the substantive mood, but whether these prayers are commands or wishes is not very easy to determine (Scharbert 1974:408). They may have the nuance of the conditional mood but invariably express the probable. They have the form of imperatives as in commanding God to act. The meanings of imperatives in English range from orders, commands, and demands to requests, pleas, advice, recommendations, warnings, instructions, invitations, and permissions. The prayers of Heward-Mills and Godson mentioned above do not contain the 'if'-clause. They sound like absolute commands. In biblical theology, the whole essence of imprecations is to allow God to be in control. Certainly, Christians have a right to lament and pray against their enemies whether they be historical or imaginary.

Although a curse is pronounced in an imperative form, it does not necessarily share all the syntactic properties of commanding or offering directives. It is merely a wish, while the right to act on it depends on God. It does not mean that once a curse is uttered it will surely come to pass (Pr 26:2), or that the cursed person is finished. However, when a curse is taken by deities that do not forgive or cannot be stopped, like *Pataanngye*, a deity in the central region of Ghana, one can say the cursed is finished.

James admonishes that those who are religious should keep their tongues in check, otherwise their religion is worthless (Jas 1:26). More so, selfish ambitions and hatred for the ‘enemy’ encourage hurt and a feeling of betrayal, leading to the upsurge of emotional outbursts, and cursing prayers in the church today. For the writer of Ecclesiastes, everyone in one way or the other pronounces curses. Ignoring one’s own utterances and focusing on the other’s are unacceptable (Ecc 7:21-23). No wonder the Akan elders say, *se panyin dzi nsem nyinara ekyi a obo man (if the elder takes into consideration all that people say, he brings division into society)*.

Curses are Useful in Warfare

Godson’s concern was about how the junior pastors were destroying the church of God. They were sheep-stealing and bringing division among the people of God. Certainly, they were not moving the members out of the Christian faith. The members were not first-generation Christians as they have joined that denomination from another church. Godson’s motivation was taken from the Psalmist: ‘Do I not hate those who hate you, o Lord? And do I not loathe those who rise up against you? I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies’ (Ps 139:21-22).

From the OT, curses are usually pronounced 1) to enforce social order and compliance to contractual relationships and agreements (e.g., Gn 12:2; 27:29; Lev 26:3-39; Dt 8:1, 19-20; 11:13, 16, 26-28, 28-29) (Lehmann 2009:74; Anderson 1998:226; Stuart 1992:1218); 2) to articulate specific statements (e.g., Gn 9:24-27; Jer 17:5-7) (Lundbom 1985:589-601); 3) to express contrasting ideas (e.g., Ps 37:22; Pr 3:33; 11:26; 24:24-25; Zech 8:13); 4) as threats and to prevent behavior which is deemed harmful to the community (Nm 5:18-31; 1 Kg 8:31ff; Jdg 17:2) (Anderson 1998:225); 5) to explain the setbacks which one faces in life, and why a particular calamity has befallen a victim; 6) to convey and teach social values (Anderson 1998:229-230); 7) to justify oneself (Gn 27:13); and 8) as a protective condition for the vulnerable (Dt 14:29; Job 29:13; Pr 22:9; Jer 22:3). The idea of pronouncing curses on those who destroy social order, echoes the principle of an ‘eye for an eye’ (Ex 21:23-25; Lev 24:19-21). Such retaliation may be used to check selfish conduct and help to keep the miscreant in line. It gives an idea that we receive what we give. However, there are also admonitions not to retaliate (Dt 32:35; Pr 24:29; Mt 5:28-29; Rm 12:19).

The enemy, witches, demonized spirits, and antisocial forces bring discomfort and raise problems for the traditional African. Warfare is a strong tool in Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity. The view is that enemies do not speak peaceably and are used to speak untruths about others – they therefore should be addressed with equal force. The enemies cause a person to walk in a path of darkness, traverse through valleys of shadows of death, climb rocky mountains with biers and thorns, and breathe poisonous air that chokes the heart and burns the body. An African adage goes, 'Even if you dance in the water, your enemies will accuse you of causing dust'. There is always a frantic search for practical ways to expel them or protect oneself from their influences.

For Heward-Mills and Godson, any word that comes out of the mouth of the enemies should turn back upon them. In a sense, all is about retributive justice, yet an explosive bomb may destroy far more people than the words of the enemies. Edwin Ardener states, 'A man begins his life with enemies; as he succeeds, they grow in number' (Ardener 1993:109). It means that there can never be a time when we do not have any enemies. Asamoah-Gyadu also explains, 'In the Ghanaian Christian context, the forces of evil include not just Satan and his cohorts the demons, but also witchcraft, sorcery, magic, evil eye, ancestral spirits and traditional deities who may make their presence felt in the lives of people in order to oppress them' (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005:177). More so, Glenn Adams admits that 'enemyship are a set of practices referred to in English as *sorcery*, *juju*, or *witchcraft*. Although the specifics of these phenomena vary across cultural settings, the unifying theme is the belief that people can harm each other through supernatural means' (Adams 2005:949). Superstition about these forces is a major cause of the upsurge of imprecatory prayer in African churches (Sarpong 1971:103; Ayegboyi & Isola 1997:66).

Evil attacks from enemies, as Walter Brueggemann opines, should awaken the church to use imprecatory prayers as 'an opportunity for realism that gives freedom of expression to those raw edges of our life that do not so easily submit to the religious conviction we profess on good days' (Brueggemann 1984:85). However, the imprecations should not be wretched pleas for vengeance, but genuine pleas for God's salvation from physical distress. It is not prayers uttered out of anger or personal desire for revenge. Vindictiveness and permissiveness in our postmodern society have contributed to the lowering of standards of ethical behavior and may be responsible for

the upsurge of imprecatory prayers. The Akan maxim, *papa annye hwee a bone so nnye hwee* (if good amounts to nothing, evil also amounts to nothing) may not find its relevance here. It means that if the good acts are paid back with evil, then one might as well do what is evil. Pastors cannot accept this maxim, assuming that perpetrating evil is nothing.

When one points a finger at others, four fingers point back to oneself. Therefore, seeing a person as an enemy means that others are seeing you as an enemy. To consider oneself as belonging to God's side, counted among the righteous and innocent, makes it easy to treat others differently. As such, a contest between 'I' and the 'others' who are enemies and not part of the people of God must end with curses. As long as the righteous belong to the covenant of Yahweh, the enemy cannot be under the covenant. Such classifications do not promote communality. According to the Psalmist, if they are of God, they would know what cursing means (Ps 86:14; 109:2-6, 17-20).

Within the cultural principle of honor/shame, originating in the ancient Mediterranean world, it is a public matter for people to usually defend their honor. Riposte thus becomes an option for those whose honor is at stake (Bartusch 2009:458 cf. also Neyrey & Malina 1991). Therefore, to challenge those who oppose you is not dishonorable. However, how one goes about in the riposte matters, for doing the right thing using the wrong method, makes everything wrong.

Touch not My Anointed

Agyekum posits that there are two reasons why curses are considered as taboos: First, the name of the deity has been used in vain if no malefactor is determined in the pronouncement. Since the deities love to act, they will visit the punishment requested for on anyone, since no malefactor can be identified. The second is when the one uttering the curse is using potent words to their personal advantage at the expense of the whole society (Agyekum 1991:364).

Pentecostal and Charismatic pastors teach their members that it is out of place to oppose, question, or do something wrong against the pastor. An unquestioned loyalty must always be present with the members. The literal view of 'do not touch my anointed ones, and do my prophets no harm' (1 Chr

16:22; Ps 105:15) is upheld in Charismatic ministries to counter criticism against them. The verses become ideal as a manipulative tactic and a defensive weapon to silence those who question the leadership of their pastors. The belief is that God promises to protect his people who are set apart through anointing for various leadership roles such as kings, priests, and prophets (2 Sam 22:51; Jer 1:19; Hab 3:13; cf. Ps 18:50; 20:6; 28:8). Cursing the Lord's anointed, attracts a punishment of death (2 Sam 19:21). Proverbs 24:24 does not permit anyone to curse the judge who acquits the guilty (Ben-Dov 2006:438). At the very least, one is not to curse the leader (Ex 22:28; Eccl 10:20).

Significantly, the priests are not the only ones anointed in contemporary Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity. All the people of God and members of the church are supposed to be anointed. Usually, pastors anoint their members with oil during prayer sessions because the anointing breaks every yoke upon them (Is 10:27; cf. Lk 4:18). Moreover, there is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus (Rm 8:1). Balaam acknowledged that all who have been blessed by the Lord cannot be cursed (Nm 22:12) and that the prophet cannot curse those whom the Lord has not cursed (Nm 23:8).

The decalogue cautions against using the Name of the Lord in vain (Ex 20:7). Walter Harrelson avers:

The cursing of the deity is strictly prohibited (Exod. 22:27; Lev. 24:23; Job 2:9). In fact, such a crime is so serious that the standard verbs for 'cursing' are never found with 'Yahweh' as their object... The prohibition against the use of the divine name in vain (Exod. 20:7; Deut. 5:11) probably indicates that the name of the deity must not be used in pronouncing maledictions upon one's enemies or otherwise wielding the power contained in the name (Harrelson 1962:447).

If Harrelson's view is anything to go by, then the people of God do not have a right to curse. David refused to kill Saul in the caves because he regarded him as God's anointed king (1 Sam 26:9-23). He also wondered why the young man who reported Saul's death to him was not afraid to lift his hand against Saul (2 Sam 1:14). In the NT, however, the prophet John the Baptist was killed and so was Jesus, the Messiah and anointed one of God.

King David was cursed by Shemei (2 Sam 16:5-13). When Shemei repented and asked for forgiveness, David swore to the Lord not to retaliate (2 Sam 19:16-20). Although David kept his promise not to put Shemei to death by the sword, he did not forgive him. David asked his son Solomon to kill Shemei for what he did to him, and Solomon found a way to obey his father's wishes (1 Ki 2:44).

The story about the prophet Elisha cursing the youngsters at Bethel who jeered at him, resulting in two bears that came out of the woods and mauled 42 of them, seems to echo the command not to touch the Lord's anointed (2 Ki 2:23-24). Perhaps it was a means of bringing instant justice to bad behavior of children. Generally, a child does not have the right to curse their parents (Ex 21:17; Lev 20:9).

Among the Akan of Ghana, children can utter a curse. It is rather traditional leaders and religious leaders that are not allowed to utter a curse. Agyekum makes a critical statement worth noting:

Among the Akan, *duabɔ* can be employed by any person. The only exceptions are certain sacred persons in the Akan community who are prohibited from incurring the dangerous risks associated with *duabɔ*. Among the Akan, traditional priests, chiefs, and kings should neither imprecate, nor be imprecated. Such people are the custodians of the deities and should therefore revere them and are restrained from using their names in vain so as to defile them (Agyekum 1991:377).

Therefore, when a leader of society utters a curse to propitiate a deity, the leader would be disgraced when asked to recant or reverse the curse. Such a demand would be an indictment on the sacredness of the priest or chief. Sarpong (1971:39) notes that a chief will be stripped off their regal powers and destooled when they curse or pronounce an oath unreasonably. Society leaders are to ensure harmony. When there are curses, the harmony of society tilts and life hangs in a balance.

The ultimate goal of all spiritual and pastoral leadership is that other people might come to worship and glorify God. Therefore, a spiritual leader must be a person who has a strong confidence in the sovereign goodness of God to do everything for the good of all. The spiritual leader may also have a holy discontentment with wrongdoing but does not have the power to move God to destroy wrongdoers. God hates sin but loves the sinner. As such, evil

must be condemned and addressed while the sinner is pastored to restoration. Retaliation and vindictiveness do not promote community and destroys kingdom business. Spiritual leaders are not to foment division in the organization but should aim at sharing the concerns, values, and vision of God.

Max Weber explains that charismatic leadership rests 'on the devotion to the specific and exceptional sanctity, heroism, or exemplary character of an individual person, and of the normative patterns or order revealed or ordained by him [sic.] (charismatic authority)' (Weber 1968:46). Charismatic leaders are those who exhibit among others, 1) an idealized influence, which is the leader's ability to be a positive (and moral) role model for followers, and 2) the ability to inspire and motivate followers to perform at high levels, and to be committed to the organization or the cause. Charismatic leaders have an infectious personality that can spur up-and-coming followers to be closely attached to them and emulate them. Since they are skilled communicators, they can easily influence their followers to believe that they are justified in whatever they say through articulated and compelling reasoning. They always tend to dominate and become revolutionaries (Weber 1947:361-362). The tendency for the behaviors of these leaders to take on a trickle-down effect and become a part of a follower's lifestyle cannot be overestimated. That is why the moral life of the pastor is very important.

Paradoxically, Charismatic leadership thrives in crises situations, but the leaders find it difficult to maintain healthy relationships. The charisma of Charismatic leaders usually makes them egoistic, self-centered and brutally exploitative (Raelin 2003:46-51). In the words of Robert House (1977:205-206), they tend to have 'a strong conviction in their moral righteousness of his or her belief'. They can also be revolutionaries, rejecting the *status quo* and finding reasons to go against the values and norms of society. To Weber, followers accept the actions of the Charismatic leader, not because of rational convictions but because of an effective belief in the leader's extraordinary qualities, miracles, and successes (Burrow 2008:32-33). One wonders what would become of society when followers copy their cursing leaders who curse others, and everybody begins to do the same.

Some Christians believe that the curses which are found in the Bible, are handed over to us, but we cannot use them against those who are habitual wrongdoers. The interpreter is bound to encounter problems when trying to 'Christianize' or use the imprecatory elements in the OT and NT as

examples, bearing in mind the ancient language and theology in the ancient Near Eastern frameworks and its historical context (Doyle 2004:41). Charismatic Christianity cannot take the curses in the Bible literally. The lament Psalms, where many imprecations are found, depict real-life situations in their messages and are motivated to apply it.

Conclusion

The misuse of the Christian religion to legitimize curses, demonstrates the twofold manner in which both African cultures and religion are often used to reinforce domination and dehumanize people. Leaders in the church are anointed but not inviolate beyond reproach and cannot be questioned. It does not mean that one should always agree with them or not speak out when they go wrong. Addressing wrong teaching or manipulative leadership does not constitute harming the Lord's anointed. Hence, the perception that only the pastor can curse members of the flock or the subordinate, is not legitimate. The question about love for the enemy hardly finds grounds in the worldview of the African. Values are not static. It may change as society changes. Values require an appropriate and necessary amendment and refinement to be relevant to the African society. It is perhaps the breakdown of African values that makes African Christian pastors find cursing appropriate. The paucity of acceptable options makes cursing an easy way out.

Taking a position from the Bible on whether one should curse or not, depends on one's approach to interpretation. The prayers of cursing may portray a theology of prayer that is effective in bringing about the judgment and power of God over evildoers. The cursing prayers may be prophetic, positive confessions and ammunitions for spiritual warfare, but are culturally illegitimate. Charismatic pastors sometimes use these arguments to freely justify cursing prayers in the Bible and call it legitimate in Christian praxis. However, human emotions are called to play especially during moments of crisis, pain, terror, cruelty, and ingratitude. After all, if the pastors are anointed and cannot be cursed, the Christians are also anointed and cannot be cursed. Reading the Bible paradigmatically and in light of Akan traditional values and culture, have revealed that not everything in scripture is meant for Christian leaders to emulate. African church leaders should be exemplary and not show that they are above the ethos of culture and tradition. When

authoritative figures in society, such as pastors who are worth emulating, resort to cursing and followers copy them, one can imagine what society would turn out to be.

References

- Adams, G. 2005. The cultural grounding of personal relationship: Enemyship in North American and West African worlds. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 88, 6: 948-968.
- Agawu, K. 2007. The communal ethos on Africa performance: Ritual, narrative and music among the northern Ewe. *Transcultural Music Review* 11. 10 pages. URL: <https://www.redalyc.org/pdf/822/82201108.pdf>.
- Agyekum, K. 1991. The pragmatics of *duabo* 'grievance imprecation' taboo among the Akan. *Pragmatics* 9, 3: 357-382.
- Aidoo, M.S. 2009. The imprecations of the Psalmist: An exegetical study of selected Psalms and its cultural implication for some Mfantse communities in Ghana. MTh dissertation, Theological Seminary, Legon.
- Anderson, J.S. 1998, The social function of curses in the Hebrew Bible. *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 110: 223-237.
- Ardener, E. 1993. The 'personal enemy' in African politics. *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford* 24, 2: 105-110.
- Asamoah-Gyadu, J.K. 2005. *African Charismatics: Currents within Independent Indigenous Pentecostalism in Ghana*. Leiden: Brill.
- Asamoah-Gyadu, J.K. 2019. God is big in Africa: Pentecostal mega churches and a changing religious landscape. *Material Religion: The Journal of Objects, Art, and Belief* 15, 3: 390-392.
- Atiemo, A.O. 1995. Mmusuyi and deliverance: A study of conflict and consensus in the encounter between African Traditional Religion and Christianity. MPhil dissertation, Department of the Study of Religions, University of Ghana, Legon.
- Ayegboyi, D. & A.S. Isola 1997. *African Indigenous Churches in historical perspectives*. Lagos: Greater Height Publications.

- Bartusch, M.W. 2009. From honor challenge to false prophecy: Rereading Jeremiah 28's story of prophetic conflict in light of social-science models. *Currents in Theology and Mission* 36, 6: 455-463.
- Ben-Dov, J. 2006. The poor's curse: Exodus xxii 20-26 and curse literature in the Ancient World. *Vetus Testamentum* 56, 4: 431-451.
- Brueggemann, W. 1984. *The message of the Psalms*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House.
- Burrow, R. Jr. 2008. The sociological transformation of religious organisations: Part 2: Charismatic leader stage. *Encounters* 69, 4: 25-45.
- Collins, A.Y. 2007. *Mark: A commentary*. Hermeneia. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House.
- Dag Heward-Mills live. 2020. Neutralising curses and activating blessings. *YouTube*. January 5, 2020. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wakwjTO1gVo>. (Accessed on February 25, 2020.)
- Dag Heward-Mills Ministries. 2021. About Dag Heward-Mills. Available at: <https://www.daghewardmills.org/new/>. (Accessed on March 30, 2020.)
- Davies, E.W. 2010. *The immoral Bible: Approaches to Old Testament ethics*. London: T&T Clark.
- Doyle, B. 2004. Words with teeth and childbearing men: Metaphors in Psalm 7. In Human, DJ. & CJA. Vos (eds.): *Psalms and liturgy*. JSOT Supp. 410. London: T&T Clark.
- Garland, D.E. 2007. *Mark*. NIVAC. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
- GhanaWeb. 2020. NDC supporters curse false accusers over plot to kill Gender Minister. October 33, 2020. Available at: <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/NDC-supporters-curse-false-accusers-over-plot-to-kill-Gender-Minister-1090564>. (Accessed on September 10, 2021.)
- Godson, K.E. 2020. Calling down a curse on his opponents. Unpublished video.
- Gyekye, K. 1996. *African cultural values: An introduction*. Accra: Sankofa Publishing.
- Harrelson, W.J. 1962. Blessings and cursings. In Buttrick, G.A., J. Knox, H.G. May, & S. Terrien (eds.): *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible: An illustrated encyclopedia*. Nashville: Abingdon Press.
- Heward-Mills, D. 2020. Calling down a curse on his opponents. Unpublished video.

- Hillers, D.R. 2021. 10 treaty-curses and the Old Testament. In Dobbs-Allsopp, F.W. (ed.): *Poets before Homer: Collected essays on ancient literature*. University Park: Penn State University Press.
- Holladay, W.L. 1995. *Long ago God spoke: How Christians may hear the Old Testament today*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House.
- House, R.J. 1977. A 1976 theory of Charismatic leadership. In Hunt, J.G. & LL. Larson (eds.): *Leadership: The cutting edge*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Idang, G.E. 2015. African culture and values. *Phronimon* 16, 2: 97-111.
- Kanyoro, M.R.A. 2002. *Introducing feminist cultural hermeneutics: An African perspective*. Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press.
- Lehmann, M.R. 2009. Biblical oaths. *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 81, 1:74-92.
- Luc, A. 1999. Interpreting the curses in the Psalms. *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 42, 3: 395-410.
- Lundbom, JR. 1985. The double curse in Jeremiah 20:14-18. *Journal of Biblical Literature* 104: 589-601.
- Mbiti, J.S. 2002. *African religions and philosophy*. Rev. ed. Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers.
- McCullen, A. 2018. When all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail — The Einstellung effect on organisational transformation. *The Thursday Thought*. June 7, 2018. Available at: <https://medium.com/thethursdaythought/when-all-you-have-is-a-hammer-everything-looks-like-a-nail-the-einstellung-effect-on-67ee8449f740>. (Accessed on June 24, 2021.)
- Mowinckel, S. 2004. *The Psalms in Israel's worship*. Biblical Resource Series. Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans.
- Neyrey, J.H. & B. Malina 1991. Honor and shame in Luke/Acts: Pivotal values of the Mediterranean World. In Neyrey, J.H. (ed.): *Social world of Luke and Acts: Models for interpretation*. Peabody: Hendrickson.
- Nyirawung, M.D. 2013. Contextualising biblical exegesis: What is the African biblical hermeneutic approach? *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 69, 1. Art. #2011. 9 pages. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v69i1.2011>.
- Quayesi-Amakye, J. 2015. This nonsense must stop! Pentecostal negotiation of Evil. *Journal of Australasian Pentecostal Studies* 17: 1-29. URL: <http://aps-journal.com/aps/index.php/APS/article/view/9480>.

Mark S. Aidoo

- Raelin, J.A. 2003. The myth of Charismatic leaders. *Training and Development* 57, 3: 46-54.
- Sarpong, P.K. 1971. *The sacred stool of the Akan*. Accra: Ghana Publishing Company.
- Scharbert, J. 1974. m^eerah. In Botterweck, G.J. & H. Ringgren (eds.): *Theological dictionary of the Old Testament*. Vol. I. Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans.
- Stein, R.H. 2008. *Mark*. BECNT. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
- Stuart, D.K. 1987. *Hosea-Jonah*. WBC 31. Waco: Word Books.
- Stuart, D.K. 1992. Curse. In Freedman, DN. (ed.): *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*. Vol. 1. New York: Doubleday.
- Tawiah, O. 2020. Juaben NPP supporters invoke curses on party executives over primaries. *JoyOnline*. June 5, 2020. Available at: <https://www.myjoyonline.com/juaben-npp-supporters-invoke-curses-on-party-executives-over-primaries/?param=>. (Accessed on September 10, 2021.)
- Teilanyo, D.I. 2015. Cultural values and norms in intercultural communication: Insights from *Icheoku* and *Masquerade*. *Intercultural Communication Studies* 24, 1: 66-81.
- Vergani, M. 2021. Defining hate, violent extremism and terrorism: Issues and perspectives. Available at: <https://tacklinghate.org/trainingmodule/defining-hate-incidents-hate-crime-and-hateful-extremism-issues-and-perspectives/>. (Accessed on May 10, 2021).
- Weber, M. 1947. *The theory of social and economic organization*. Henderson, AM. & T. Parsons (trans.). New York: Free Press.
- Weber, M. 1968. *Economy and society: An outline of interpretive sociology*. New York: Bedminster Press.
- Wiredu, K. & K. Gyekye 1992. *Person and community*. Ghanaian Philosophical Studies. Washington DC: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy.
- Wright, C.J. 2004. *Old Testament ethics for the people of God*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press.

Dr Mark S. Aidoo
Trinity Theological Seminary, Legon, Ghana
ms.aidoo@trinity.edu.gh