

Not by science, but by Spirit? African Pentecostal prophets and prosperity in the Fourth Industrial Revolution era

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Abstract

Many Africans rely on the spiritualistic solutions offered by the African neo-Pentecostal prophets (ANPPs) to navigate their socioeconomic realities. This article critically evaluates the efficacy of the ANPPs' spiritual approach within the economic landscape of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR). The essay delves into the extent to which these prophets' spiritual perspectives on economic matters equip Africans to meaningfully engage in the evolving 4IR economy, driven by artificial intelligence (AI) and scientific technologies. It seeks a theological framework for economic life that can guide ANPPs in offering avenues for economic engagement that empower Africans to participate effectively in the 4IR-based economy. It is argued that the ANPPs' spiritualistic approach to economic life disempowers Africans from effectively participating in the 4IR economy. ANPPs are thus urged to incorporate science and technology into their economic worldview.

Keywords

Prophets; Pentecostalism; Fourth Industrial Revolution; religion; science and technology; Africa and science

1. Introduction

This article was prompted by Maria Frahm-Arp's (2019:4) question, "Why at the start of the Fourth Industrial Revolution do we see a rise in cult-type Pentecostal churches in South Africa?" The question applies to most of Africa, and not just South Africa, where cult-type Pentecostal churches have increased to the extent that they are fast becoming the face of Christianity in Africa. Frahm-Arp's question suggests a correlation between the emergence of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) and the rise of the

cult-type churches, particularly those that can be described as African neo-Pentecostal prophets (ANPPs) in this article. The alienation of the masses caused by the 4IR stems from the fact that “machines now do the work of people, leaving them unemployed and destitute” (Frahm-Arp 2019:5). The question that comes to the fore is: With machines causing unemployment and destitution by taking over human tasks, what steps should the ANPPs take to assist their followers in overcoming the alienating impact of the 4IR, especially in the realm of economic life? In other words, how can ANPPs assist their followers to escape the impoverishing impact of the 4IR on marginalised people, as is often the case across most of Africa? Thus, the aim of this article is to establish a theological framework by which African Christians, as exemplified by African neo-Pentecostal prophetism, can effectively participate in the economic landscape of the 4IR. The goal is to navigate this revolution without being overwhelmed or left behind.

Scholars use different categories to classify and describe ANPPs, and often these categories depend on what a specific scholar seeks to address or what they see in the prophets. I have opted for the term “African neo-Pentecostal prophets” (using the abbreviation ANPPs) to describe these new emerging prophetic figures, who are mostly male.¹ They assert a unique divine calling as prophets and embrace Pentecostal practices, such as speaking in tongues, miraculous healing, and prophecy (Kgatle 2019; 2021).² The ANPPs exhibit a cultic nature, characterised by a hierarchical structure led by a supreme messianic-like charismatic leader. Claiming to hold all the answers, the leader strategically imparts only selected information to specific individuals (Frahm-Arp 2019:8). This cultic inclination has transformed the ANPPs into a nascent religious movement, appealing to those who feel socioeconomically marginalised and powerless to effectively address their state of dispossession (Frahm-Arp 2019:8). Therefore, it is

1 While there are women ANPPs, it is mostly male figures that have dominated media attention.

2 Within the ANPPs, prophecy takes on the form of “diagnostic prophecy” (Anderson 2013:126-127), encompassing elements outlined by Kgatle (2019:1) as “forensic prophecy, prophetic titles, prophetic objects, prophetic consultation, and prophetic miracles”. These components are employed to uncover the roots of individuals’ poverty and their inability to attain wealth, followed by the prescription of spiritual remedies aimed at achieving economic prosperity (Banda 2018; 2022; Bulla 2015; Rupapa & Shumba 2014).

mostly existential issues that push people “to find answers or a sense of belonging in a new religious movement or a re-shaped form of a religious tradition” (Frahm-Arp 2019:8). Therefore, I have continued to utilise the classification of ANPPs, even in the case of figures like South Africa’s Hamilton Qhoshangokwakhe Nala, who has renounced Christianity and the Bible. This is because he maintains a Pentecostal demeanour, and certain elements of his assertions as a quasi-divine human being (Nala, 2022) can be identified in numerous ANPPs who still adhere to the Christian faith. Furthermore, these ANPPs assert having a unique relationship with God that makes them superior to other Christians (Rukwati 2012; Bushiri 2019; BBC News 2018).

Van Wyk (2019) has demonstrated that although South African ANPPs have risen to prominence by claiming to possess the power to make poor people rich, their membership does not only encompass the poor but also attracts a substantial number of affluent and highly educated individuals. This trend is consistent across Africa, where both the rich and the poor are united by their aspiration for a better and secure economic life, among other things. The ensuing contention is whether economic prosperity is the result of the power of Spirit, or scientific technologies, or a combination of both.

2. The Fourth Industrial Revolution as the context for the emergence of African neo-Pentecostal prophetism

As already noted by Frahm-Arp, the socioeconomic backdrop against which ANPPs have emerged is the 4IR. In simple terms, the 4IR entails new technologies that blur the line between the digital and physical worlds through the widespread integration of advancements such as artificial intelligence (AI), the Internet of Things (IoT), and Big Data “that are blended with our daily lives” (Oliver 2020:1; cf. Schwab 2016). The blurring of boundaries between the physical, digital, and biological worlds is through the fusion of AI, robotics, the IoT, Web3, blockchain, three-dimensional (3D) printing, genetic engineering, quantum computing, and other technologies resulting in products and services that “are fast becoming indispensable to modern life” (McGinnis 2023:n.p.). Examples include the Global Positioning System (GPS) that informs users of the fastest route to a

destination; voice-activated virtual assistants in cell phones; personalised recommendations in television channels; and Facebook’s ability to recognise individuals’ faces and tag them in photos of friends (McGinnis, 2023). Nell (2023:4) quotes Peckham (2021:17) who describes the 4IR as:

A cluster of technologies, such as AI, sensors, and communications infrastructure like 5G have converged to allow the creation of new ways of doing things. Smart cities are an example of how such technologies can be used to control traffic flow, alert authorities to empty rubbish bins when they are full, and spot potential criminal activity through facial recognition and gait analysis.

The remarks attributed to Peckham demonstrate the profound degree to which technologies have transitioned from being merely components of our lives to becoming integral to our daily existence. Our reliance on them has become essential. A chief proponent of the 4IR, Schwab (2016:n.p.), acknowledged the revolutionary and disruptive impact of the 4IR, describing it as “a technological revolution that will fundamentally alter the way we live, work, and relate to one another”.

Tshilidzi Marwala (2020b:10), a prominent advocate of the 4IR in South Africa, corroborates Frahm-Arp’s assertion that the latter is precipitating a substantial upheaval in the employment landscape. Marwala (2020b:10) posits that due to the advent of AI, “the world of work is shrinking while our productivity is increasing”. Marwala (2020b:10) goes on to emphasise that while the First, Second, and Third Industrial Revolutions created many high-paying industrial jobs, “the fourth industrial revolution is providing us with a mass of unemployed and unemployable people”. To say the least, the 4IR is resulting in extensive unemployment and diminished employability by making specific jobs redundant and rendering people’s skills outdated due to the constantly evolving machinery in workplaces. Marwala (2020a:n.p.) buttresses this point by saying, “[p]erhaps, the greatest worry around the 4IR is not that it will challenge our belief systems or spell the end of religion but will make humans irrelevant”.³ In

3 Marwala (2020a) states that the World Economic Forum (WEF) indicates that with each of the four industrial revolutions, there were significant forecasts of substantial job reductions; however, contrary to these predictions, each new revolution led to the creation of more jobs and also led to enhancements in living standards and various

other words, even though the 4IR is hailed as a technological and scientific breakthrough, it functions in a way that impoverishes and disempowers people, particularly those engaged in lower-skilled jobs that are now taken over by robotic machines. Furthermore, many people lack the basic scientific and technological capacity to participate equally with other well-skilled people. Nonetheless, Frahm-Arp's question about the growth of cult-type-churches at the beginning of the 4IR rejects Marwala's point about the possibility of the 4IR ending religion. It is thus argued here that the emergence of the 4IR has, in fact, reignited people's pursuit of religious experiences, especially in Africa (Frahm-Arp 2019:4).

3. The Fourth Industrial Revolution and scientific and technological powerlessness in Africa

The alienating effect of the 4IR that is causing the rise of ANPPs is the scientific and technological powerlessness of most Africans, who on account of colonialism, are already economically marginalised and exploited. The alienating nature of the 4IR arises from its capitalistic exploitative nature as a tool of the Western economic powers. Nyabola (2018:31, quoted by Nell 2023:5) describes the 4IR as an instrument of the global elites to divert attention away from the actual drivers of inequality, thereby promoting exclusion, exploitation, and expropriation. The latter aspects are at the heart of the alienation brought about by the 4IR. This sentiment is echoed by Mdingi (2020:6) who categorises the 4IR as an “armoury of the Western domination of the world”. Hlatshwayo (2019:27) elucidates this further, saying that the 4IR works by “increasing profit margins for capitalists” and granting the capitalists power and control over the production process. Therefore, as intimated by Frahm-Arp, the 4IR compels individuals to turn to ANPPs out of their state of desperation and hopelessness, seeking something that can empower them to cope with their state of alienation. Unfortunately, ANPPs exacerbate this sense of alienation through their inclination to provide spiritual remedies that amplify the disconnect, preventing individuals from effectively engaging with the scientific and technological dimensions of the 4IR in a substantial manner.

other social indicators. The WEF has predicted that while some jobs may disappear, the 4IR will pave the way for new occupations.

Hence, the fundamental cause of the alienation brought about by the 4IR in Africa lies in the widespread deficiency of scientific and technological knowledge and skills among the majority of the population. This lack hinders their capacity to engage effectively in the evolving and technology-driven economy. It is not just that the machines are replacing people at work, but many people in Africa do not have the skills to operate in 4IR economy. The predicament extends beyond mere widespread unemployment; it encompasses widespread unemployability due to the swift transformations in the economy that consistently demand new skillsets. However, the majority of people in Africa lack the means and opportunities to acquire these perpetually evolving skills. Describing this economic powerlessness, Nell (2020:191) remarks: “The great danger of what is described here as the Fourth Industrial Revolution landscape is that it can easily happen that the remarkable technological advances can simply *leave many people in our country behind*” (italics added). This abandonment of a considerable portion of the population amid technological progress is the driving force behind the African sense of alienation, compelling people to seek refuge in ANPPs for survival.

In many ways, the 4IR invalidates human beings, particularly in poorer contexts such as Africa. Nell (2020:191) adds,

The reasons are, firstly, because computers, digital technologies and robots are not available to or used by a major part of our country’s population. Secondly, even those for whom it is available and who can afford it expect to learn ordinary competencies and skills at an extraordinary pace.

Thus, a serious problem with the 4IR in Africa is the widespread lack of access to essential skills, effectively obstructing the majority of people from participating in the 4IR due to their technological and scientific incapacitation. Nell (2023:5) raises the question of whether the term “revolution” is truly fitting for the 4IR, given that “there is ample evidence of the unequal distribution of digital technologies”. This means that other people, who happen to be in the majority, are powerless to effectively participate in the 4IR. Furthermore, not only is there unequal access to the technologies of the 4IR, “these technologies were driven by an older generation of innovation that maintained the unequal social relations,

rather than transforming them” (Nell 2023:5), which means the historical inequalities rooted in the Western European conquest of Africa are not only maintained, but also further entrenched. In a context of historical racial inequality such as South Africa, where most black people have poorly resourced schools, the 4IR further entrenches structural inequality along racial lines.

Hence, the immediate concern lies in the imperative to empower those who currently lack scientific and technological proficiency, ensuring their active participation in the 4IR’s economy and preventing their exclusion from its progress. Marwala (2020b:1) aptly highlights the need to address the state of scientific and technological powerlessness by decrying Africa’s dire lagging behind in science and technology. Consequently, his book *Closing the Gap: The Fourth Industrial Revolution in Africa* (2020b) focuses on challenging Africa to embrace the 4IR and close the scientific and technological gap with other continents of the world. For Marwala (2020b:2), Africa can change its dismal scientific and technological powerlessness by adopting the 4IR, as it has “the potential to turbocharge socio-economic development across the continent”. Marwala (2020b:2) is concerned that just as the African continent was left behind in the first three industrial revolutions, it is certain to be left behind by the 4IR, unless something drastic happens. According to Marwala (2020b:9), the African tragedy is that countries such as South Africa that are viewed as the continent’s leaders in information technologies are lagging far behind the developed Western countries. Marwala (2020b:9) grounds his analysis on the premise that, even after approximately 70 years since the inception of the transistor, South Africa has not succeeded in establishing a home-grown computer or a semiconductor industry.

Relevant to this article is Marwala’s (2020b:201) concern that Africa’s economic powerlessness is caused by the high preference of non-scientific superstitious problem-solving methods, instead of evidence-based problem-solving methods that use science and technology. To exemplify this concept of superstition, Marwala (2020b:201) recounts an incident in which a woman lost her life due to a lightning strike. In response, the woman’s son attributed her death to bewitchment by his own father (the deceased woman’s husband). The son subsequently avenged his mother’s death by killing his father. Marwala (2020b:201) explains that scientifically

informed evidence-based decision-making would have informed the man that lightning is caused by electromagnetism and not by witchcraft. Consequently, the man might not have taken drastic actions such as accusing and harming his father, which could have led to a presumably prolonged prison sentence.

Marwala's critique of superstition in Africa holds significance as it also extends to the inclination of ANPPs to attribute poverty to malevolent spirits or divine curses. His comparison between superstitious thinking and scientific thinking highlights the contrasting approaches to socioeconomic matters: one upheld by spiritualistic ANPPs and the other by the science and technology-focused 4IR. Essentially, science and technological empowerment are needed in Africa, because a non-evidenced superstitious approach to life, that just relies on spiritual powers, will not be able to address the resilient problems of poverty, unemployment, and socioeconomic inequality in Africa.

4. The progressive African neo-Pentecostal prophets in the Fourth Industrial Revolution

In a sense, ANPPs are relevant in the 4IR era because they have a progressive socioeconomic approach to economic life. They embrace contemporary advancements and frequently serve as trailblazers for modern development within impoverished African communities. When analysing the role of the ANPPs in the African economic life, one must begin by acknowledging the progressive role they play in poor African communities. ANPPs are in many ways citadels of socioeconomic progress because they reject poverty and promote entrepreneurship, among many other developmental aspects (Taru 2020:285; Berger 2008; Banda 2020).

ANPPs follow the prosperity gospel that “undertakes grand efforts to theologise material richness, and to manifest and keep the spiritual control over money” (Heuser 2016:3). According to Marshall-Fratani (1998:286), in some poor African contexts, prosperity Pentecostalism is “the only way people can be connected to the modern world of commodities, media and financial flows without being overrun by it”. Similarly, this holds true for the ANPPs, as they serve as agents of modernisation, encouraging Africans to pursue material prosperity and perfect health in this present life. Their

gospel resonates with numerous impoverished Africans as it embodies a message of advancement, furnishing spiritual and theological tools that empower individuals to directly challenge and overcome their poverty (Taru 2020:286).

Moreover, ANPPs exemplify material prosperity through their own affluent lifestyles and accumulation of wealth (Balcomb 2007). It can be argued that it was in the Pentecostal churches that many Africans were first introduced to the world of information communications technologies such as computers. As an illustration, numerous Pentecostal churches adopted overhead projectors, PowerPoint presentations, and rudimentary Internet functionalities in their worship and evangelistic endeavours. This was occurring concurrently with traditional churches still relying on hymn books and many educational institutions using chalkboards and outdated typewriters. Additionally, while conservatives were worried about the emergence of social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter, ANPPs rapidly embraced and promoted these platforms for evangelistic and pastoral purposes. Pentecostals assumed a forefront position in emphasising the advantages of digital platforms for the propagation and fortification of the church, rather than viewing them as curses. The adoption of information communication technologies is widespread, encompassing not only ANPPs but also a significant portion of the Pentecostal community. Therefore, in many ways, Pentecostals have acted as pioneers of modern progress and modern technology.

Moreover, ANPPs are citadels of progress through their entrepreneurial response to poverty and approaches to wealth-accumulation that attempt to engage the dynamics of the economy. Often, ANPPs engage the world of finance and affluence in a way that provides their adherents with an edge over the general populace, offering them a more profound understanding of socioeconomic realities compared to more conventional churches. Unlike traditional conservative environments where the prevalent discourse regarding money and wealth revolves around cautioning against their potential perils, in a neo-Pentecostal prophetic church believers are exposed to a more positive perspective on money and wealth, along with guidance on methods for acquiring and accumulating them. As an example, Tarugarira and Moyo (2020:2) show that in Ezekiel Guti's Zimbabwe Assemblies of God of Africa (ZAOGA), the church's gospel of prosperity through Talents

(*Matarenda*) has birthed, nurtured, and moulded women into successful businesspeople and consequently empowered them to overcome their socioeconomic marginalisation. ZAOGA's Talents, which has been called "penny-capitalism", is an entrepreneurial principle derived from Matthew 25:14-30, but reworked into the African context, and is predominantly aimed at women, although children and men also volunteer to participate (Tarugarira & Moyo 2020:10). This entrepreneurial principle exemplifies how some African Pentecostal churches transcend being just spiritual or religious organisations, evolving into entrepreneurial communities that attempt to practice biblical entrepreneurial teachings, such as Proverbs 10:4, which teaches that lazy hands make a woman poor but diligent hands bring wealth (Tarugarira & Moyo 2020:2).

Some ANPPs operate at a higher level than penny-capitalism and attempt to introduce their followers into the cogs of the formal economy. Taru (2020:286) highlights a Zimbabwean ANPP church that claimed on its website to seek to "enact a revolution" by equipping members with skills, knowledge, and information "relevant to every 21st Century Believer". Such ANPPs host conferences on investments, savings, wealth-creation, and wealth-accumulation. Some ANPPs have useful knowledge about the economy and try to bring their people to enter and participate in the formal economy. Taru (2019:130) describes a Zimbabwean church run by a ANPP that invited financial service advisors from Old Mutual to teach congregants about financial literacy, business management principles, and investment strategies. Taru (2019:130–131) further notes that the church takes the initiative to arrange a multitude of events, including business and empowerment conferences, business luncheons, golf tournaments, and dinner galas. These events are conducted regularly throughout the year. The prioritisation of entrepreneurship, business acumen, and financial literacy serves as compelling evidence that ANPPs possess an awareness and comprehension of the essential market conditions required to eradicate poverty and achieve economic prosperity.

In contrast to conservative churches, where sermons often approach wealth and those who seek it with suspicion, ANPPs actively motivate their adherents to pursue affluence, initiate their own enterprises, and strive for success as entrepreneurs. Building upon the illustration provided by Taru, it can be asserted that an ANPP church functions as more than just a place

of worship – it also takes on the role of a business school or vocational training centre, introducing individuals to fundamental concepts within the economic sphere. To exemplify, allegations of fraud and money laundering directed at Shepherd Bushiri in South Africa are linked to funds he collected from his congregation, disguising them as investment portfolios (Mashego 2019).

The transformation of the church into an investment hub is further exemplified through the case of Dr Hamilton Qhoshangokwakhe Nala, the esteemed leader of Nala Mandate.⁴ Nala admonishes his followers to be entrepreneurs, to learn about making a profit, saving, and investing money (Nala 2021b). He says the benefits of employment deceive people with false comfort that keeps them from using their creativity to start new businesses. Nala champions the need for Africans to own land and work for themselves. He affirms the value of owning land and being self-employed by saying:

As long as you still think waking up in the morning and putting on your boots to herd cattle is harder than sitting in an office with air condition and earn R2 000 instead of herding your cattle that you can sell for between R12 000 to R1 5000, you are stupid! (Nala 2021a:n.p.).

Nala's teachings exemplify Taru's (2020:292) assessment that prophetic churches serve as "incubators for nurturing small businesses owned by members".

In Africa, where numerous governments implement inadequate economic policies resulting in sluggish economic growth and subsequent high unemployment rates (Maluleke, 2014), ANPPs assume a significant role in empowering their adherents to foster self-sufficiency rather than relying on governmental intervention. According to Taru (2020:292), Zimbabwean ANPPs play the important role of addressing the problems created by the corrupt actions and poor policies of the government that destroyed the national economy. In many African cities, there is a significant portion of the economy that is run by followers of the ANPPs using the business

⁴ Although Nala has recanted Christianity, his plentian (philosophy of plenty) continues to have biblical basis and he still refers to the Bible for many of his teachings.

principles learnt from them. Many street vendors and home-based entrepreneurs attempt to practice the skills and principles taught by their prophets.

However, despite such a high emphasis on entrepreneurship among the churches of the ANPPs and their functioning as hubs of economic knowledge and investment for many poor people, the prophets' spiritualistic approach to economic life undermines the place of science and technology. This undermining of science and technology hinders Africa from meaningfully engaging the new 4IR-empowered economy. The below section will highlight how the spiritualistic approach to economic life in the ANPPs undermines the scientific and technological elements in a way that promotes exclusion from the emerging 4IR era.

5. The prophets' spiritualist economy and the Fourth Industrial Revolution

The previous section affirmatively described ANPPs as agents and allies of modernity in poor African contexts. While the economic progressive nature of the ANPPs is admirable, their fundamental approach to socioeconomic issues does not, however, prioritise the scientific and technological elements. It is argued that this lack of prioritisation of scientific and technological elements of economic life leads to serious shortcomings in empowering Christians to successfully negotiate their economic way in the modern 4IR empowered economy. In a highly scientific and technological environment, an exclusive focus on spiritualistic interventions does not empower Africans to effectively participate in the economy that relies on science and technology in the 4IR era. As will be seen in this section, sometimes ANPPs acknowledge the importance of science and technology, but give the impression that a sound economic system can be built on spiritual principles only.

A core issue lies in the fact that ANPPs' entrepreneurial emphasis is shaped by a viewpoint that regards poverty as a spiritual dilemma rather than a matter rooted in science and technology. Consequently, this stance leads to the predominance of spiritual remedies, focused on eliminating perceived negative spiritual forces believed to hinder individuals from achieving material affluence. The emphasis leans more towards acquiring wealth

rather than comprehending the scientific and technological intricacies of its generation. This predicament arises from an approach to economic life that adopts a primitivistic perspective, prioritising the acquisition of power over spiritual forces believed to bestow wealth. This primitivistic focus overlooks the necessity of prioritising science and technology in building people's higher economic capacities and capabilities. By higher economic capacities and capabilities is meant entrepreneurial interventions that go beyond the micro-focussed survival skills of the penny-capitalism to the macro-focussed systematic approach that begins by realising that the economy is primarily a scientific and technological reality.

Many ANPPs subscribe to a socioeconomic view that thrives on dominion theology, which conflicts with and even invalidates the place of science and technology. Dominion theology asserts that believers' prosperity is contingent on employing their faith to assume control over the world and reshape it in manners that channel God's power and blessings, ultimately leading to the accumulation of wealth (Taru 2020:286). This culminates in beliefs such as "miracle-money", where the conviction is that wealth can be immediately acquired through spiritual practices that prompt God to miraculously deposit money into a believer's bank account. Such tendencies are further illustrated by instances of business endeavours and high-risk investments pursued without thorough research or disregarding expert guidance. Notably, adverse factors that could lead to business failure are often overlooked due to the belief that one's faith will ensure success and prosperity. For instance, in countries like Zimbabwe, it is accurate that ANPPs have fostered an entrepreneurial culture that has propelled certain individuals to material prosperity. Nevertheless, their entrepreneurial approaches have not contributed to the establishment of a structured economy or sustainable investments grounded in sound economic principles.

Contrarily, the ANPPs, as stated by Banda (2023:6), "promote haphazard hustling that mainly focuses on quick accumulation of wealth". In lieu of fostering sustainability, ANPPs cultivate an environment of what Banda (2023:6) describes as "haphazard hustling", akin to the Zimbabwean isiNdebele concept of *ukukhiyakhiya* economy, where individuals capitalise on immediate opportunities to swiftly amass wealth (Jones 2010). The ANPPs advocate for a *ukukhiyakhiya* economy that emphasises

consumption over production, which is “fuelled by promises of material well-being interpreted as an outward sign of God’s favour, celebrates consumption rather than production” (Heuser 2016:4).

In the context of the 4IR which demands an evidence-based, scientific, and technological approach, the weakness of the ANPPs is their emphasis on a miracle approach. This approach does not advocate for the establishment of sustainable systems, as it emphasises that the pivotal factor is not systems but rather unwavering faith in a God capable of bringing prosperity to those who place their trust in him. As proclaimed by Prophet Angel in a devotion on 21 January 2014, “Don’t get entangled by facts, speak truth and act upon it” (Angel & Angel 2014). This declaration implies that individuals should disregard the scientific and technological *facts* pertaining to business or life in general, and instead, operate based on God’s *truth* – his promises of blessings and prosperity for believers in all their endeavours. Thus, when undertaking a business adventure, the believer should declare the following:

I am what God says I am; I have what He says I have. I claim my wealth today. God delights in my prosperity and his cities shall be built by my prosperity. He gives me power to get wealth and He may establish his covenant upon the earth. In the name of Jesus (Angel & Angel 2014:2, January 2014).

This approach undermines the place of science and technology in socioeconomic life because it creates the impression that it is possible to be wealthy and healthy just by creating certain optimum spiritual conditions. Consequently, many ANPPs generally attribute the problem of poverty and lack of development in Africa to poor spiritual conditions and not poor knowledge of science and technology. This dominion spiritualistic approach to socioeconomic life fails to realise that the leading Western nations have attained remarkable wealth and progress primarily by developing their science and technological knowledge, rather than being more spiritual (Mugambi 1995:33).

The ANPPs’ view of poverty and economic development in spiritual terms does not mean that they are not aware of the scientific and technological elements of a sound economy. Otherwise, they would not be teaching entrepreneurship and investment to their followers, considering these

aspects as “facts”. However, the prophets maintain that faith in the transcendent power of God, capable of surpassing all limitations, and His promise to grant prosperity to all believers, are the fundamental “truths” that individuals should abide by.

6. Promoting an interdisciplinary Christian economic approach that prioritises science and technology

If a substantial number of Africans have gravitated towards cult-type Pentecostal churches at the beginning of the 4IR due to the alienation caused by machines displacing them from work, leaving them unemployed and destitute (Frahm-Arp 2019), the question emerges: How can ANPPs assist their marginalised adherents in effectively participating in economic activities during the 4IR era? A pivotal facet of addressing this query is to empower impoverished individuals in Africa by addressing their lack of scientific and technological proficiency. Consequently, ANPPs are confronted with the task of recognising the multifaceted nature of poverty in scientific and technological powerlessness. Therefore, the ANPPs are challenged to respond to people’s alienation caused by the 4IR without resorting to an escapist stance that attributes poverty solely to a lack of spiritual power. Instead, they must adopt an interdisciplinary approach that priorities the scientific and technological empowerment of the African people. An escapist approach sidesteps addressing genuine matters related to science and technology, attributing people’s impoverished circumstances to their spiritual states, rather than acknowledging the significant influence of scientific and technological factors that contribute to their economic challenges.

Marwala challenges ANPPs to think of poverty in a multidimensional manner by narrating that when he became the vice-chancellor and principal of the University of Johannesburg (UJ) in 2018, he saw his “mission” as “mov[ing] our people from superstitious to scientific thinking” (Marwala 2020b:202). By “superstitious thinking”, Marwala could be referring to uninformed primitivism in primal African cultures, as is evident in his earlier illustration involving a man who accused his father of causing his mother’s death, reflecting a belief rooted in superstition rather than rational understanding. However, there is a sense to which it also includes Christian

approaches to poverty that are not based on evidence and critical reasoning. This perspective overlooks glaring systemic inequalities that marginalise some segments of society, depriving them of the needed scientific and technological skills and aptitude to thrive in the everchanging economy of the 4IR. According to Marwala (2020b:202), transitioning individuals from superstitious to scientific thinking involves emphasising the significance of “innovative and ground-breaking research and to produce graduates who are agile and curious and able to be active participants in a technology-driven and digital environment”. This involves a practical search for meaningful solutions by incorporating science and technology. He adds that creating a society that makes decisions based on evidence using scientific principles “is vital if we are to tackle the intractable problems of poverty, unemployment and inequality” (Marwala 2020b:202). This assertion underscores the fact that poverty, unemployment, and inequality cannot be effectively addressed through spiritual commands or the use of anointed objects by prophets – a message that ANPPs should consider in their spiritualistic efforts to eradicate poverty in Africa.

Theologian David Ngong (2013:129) calls for an interdisciplinary spiritual approach that recognises the importance of science and technology to the economy in Africa. Oliver (2016:2) argues that theology was classified as the queen of science because it was recognised that the knowledge of God is rational enough to interact with other sciences and with society. Ngong’s interdisciplinary piety demonstrates that theology can work with other sciences to address human problems in an informed multi-dimensional manner. In interdisciplinary spirituality, “the spiritual and material dimensions of human beings and the rest of creation are seen as equally important” (Ngong 2013:129). In other words, an interdisciplinary spirituality is “a holistic spirituality because it treats all dimensions of human beings, communities, and the cosmos as equally important” (Ngong 2013:129). This interdisciplinary approach is what ANPPs need to empower African Christians to engage in economic reality meaningfully in the 4IR era.

Instead of a one-sided spiritual approach to addressing economic poverty, there is need to recognise that “economic development happens where science and technology rather than belief in witchcraft are encouraged” (Ngong 2012:147). Ngong underscores the notion that attributing the lack

of economic progress to witchcraft or spiritual factors is misguided; rather, the absence of economic development should be attributed to the dearth of science and technology. The interdisciplinary approach is important in empowering Christians to engage their poverty in the era of the 4IR because it avoids the one-sided spiritualist approach that promotes superstitious primitivism and encourages Christians to value evidence-based approaches to economic life that incorporate scientific ways of solving problems.

An interdisciplinary approach recognises the lordship of God over all things, including science and technology (Ps 103:19; Col 1:27). This approach acknowledges God's presence in science and technology. Consequently, it urges Christians to appreciate science and technology as divine endowments for resolving life's challenges. Science and technology can be seen as one of the processes through which humans exercise dominion over the world and express their being in the image of God (Gen 1:28). Instead of equating prosperity with the miraculous accumulation of possessions, an interdisciplinary spiritual perspective redefines prosperity as innovation, enabling Christians to stay relevant to contemporary times, even in the technology-driven and digital environment of the 4IR era.

When elucidating the comprehensive essence of interdisciplinary spirituality, Ngong (2013:133) expounds that it “teaches Christians that God works through prayer and science and not only through one or the other”. This form of spirituality acknowledges that God's response to people's prayers isn't confined to merely sending miraculous sustenance like manna, as exemplified in the Exodus narrative, but extends to encompass scientific and technological advancements as well. Thus:

It is interdisciplinary because it sees God as working through more than just what is thought of as the supernatural. It is a spirituality that sees the sacred as multidimensional. In fact, in interdisciplinary spirituality everything is sacred thus making the sacred multidimensional. Thus, in interdisciplinary spirituality, the religious perspective is broadened to include science and technology and helpful appropriation of science and technology is seen as a spiritual exercise (Ngong 2013:133).

Therefore, in their progressive entrepreneurial response to poverty in Africa, the ANPPs stand challenged by Marwala and Ngong to shift from

non-evidenced-based approaches (read: superstition) to evidenced-based solutions that pay attention to the scientific and technological elements of the economy. In other words, ANPPs need to realise that Africans are poor not because they are cursed or because of poor spirituality, but because of scientific and technological marginalisation.

An interdisciplinary Christian must be guided by the cultural mandate, or the creation mandate taught in Genesis 1:26–28: after God created human beings in his image, he commanded them to fill the earth, subdue it, and rule over all creation. According to Lindsley (2013:n.p.), in the cultural mandate, people are called “to work with the things God has made – ruling over, ordering, classifying, reshaping, developing, and unfolding the potential which we have been given”. This entails developing appropriate scientific and technological skills. Thus, the cultural mandate demands that people be resilient in the face of their invalidation by the 4IR so that they maintain God’s mandate to them to rule the world.

An interdisciplinary approach demands that prophets and pastors acknowledge their scientific and technological limitations. While some prophets and pastors often possess professional training in fields such as economics, finance, and medicine, their technical expertise in these specialised domains might be limited. Rather than asserting authority in areas where their knowledge is restricted, they should consider involving church members who are experts in these fields to contribute their insights. Hence, the ANPPs should utilise their influence to establish an environment that fosters scientific and technological advancement, while entrusting the task to trained lay leaders who possess the necessary professional expertise (Ngong 2013:134).

7. Conclusion

Maria Frahm-Arp’s (2019:4) question, “Why at the start of the Fourth Industrial Revolution do we see a rise in cult-type Pentecostal churches in South Africa?”, served as the impetus for this article. Her question highlights a potential link between the adverse effects of the 4IR on the economy and the emergence of cult-type churches, notably the ANPPs explored in this article. This article contends that solely relying on the spiritualistic methods of ANPPs is inadequate to address the estranging

impact of the 4IR on impoverished communities. Instead, the promotion of science and technology becomes imperative. It is further argued that the promotion of science and technology demands an interdisciplinary approach that incorporates lay people who are trained in these domains. Unlike a purely spiritualist approach that centres around prophets, an interdisciplinary approach embraces the whole body of Christ, facilitating the active participation of trained specialists in the pursuit of sustainable development within impoverished African contexts. This interdisciplinary approach holds particular significance within the 4IR era, as it emphasises that alleviating poverty isn't solely reliant on the spiritual authority of prophets. Rather, it underscores the pivotal role played by science and technology in driving transformative change.

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