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God as a Servant of Magic? The Challenge of the Impersonalisation of God in Neo-Pentecostal Prophetic Responses to Human Agency and Transcendence in Africa

Collium Banda 

Unit for Reformational Theology and the Development of the South African Society, Faculty of Theology, North-West University, Potchefstroom 2520, South Africa; collium@gmail.com

Abstract: This article is a Christian theological evaluation of African neo-Pentecostal prophets' (ANPPs) projection of God as a servant of prophetic rituals in their solutions to poor human agency (power to act) and transcendence (power to overcome) in Africa. Instead of propagating a personal relational God who transforms the poor and empowers their agency and transcendence by personally engaging with them, ANPPs propagate a God who works by ritual manipulation. The main question answered in the article is: what is the notion of God that informs and guides the ANPPs' engagement with human agency and transcendence in Africa? The question is answered by first presenting a framework of God's personality. The ANPPs' impersonalized view of God is described. The basis of the impersonalisation of God in ATR is presented. The vulnerability of human agency and transcendence as a result of the impersonalisation of God is described. The article closes by proposing how a personal Trinitarian view of God rejects the ANPP impersonalisation of God and describes how the Trinitarian view can assist in addressing the problem of human agency and transcendence among poor Africans. The contribution of the article lies in challenging ANPPs to desist from addressing poor human agency and transcendence in Africa by propagating a version of God who is a servant of magical rituals instead of a relational God who is personally involved with the poor to empower them to overcome the hindrances to their human flourishing.

Keywords: transcendence; agency; Pentecostalism; spiritual vulnerability; personhood of God; vital force; Trinity



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1. Introduction

This article uses the Christian doctrinal understanding of God as a personal being to critique the impersonalisation of God in the African neo-Pentecostal prophetic (ANPP) responses to the problem of poor human agency (the power to act) and transcendence (the power to overcome). By African neo-Pentecostal prophetism (ANPP) or African neo-Pentecostal prophets (ANPPs) is referred to a “peculiar prophetic” (Kgatle 2022a, 2022b) movement that subscribes to common Pentecostal characteristics such as the manifestation of the Holy Spirit, speaking in tongues, prophecy and miracles, but differs by its prophetic ecclesiology that centres on self-appointed prophetic figures. These prophetic figures preach a gospel of material prosperity in this present life, sell anointed objects like anointed water and oil and practice prophecy that is more concerned with enabling people attain material prosperity and health.¹ Some ANPPs have performed controversial activities such as making people eat grass and reportedly committed criminal acts such as sexual exploitation of women in the name of healing and blessing them (Agazue 2016; Kgatle 2021; Resane 2017). ANPPs project themselves as military generals waging war against the evil spiritual powers that hinder people's human flourishing in this present life. It is a growing movement in Africa as a source of empowering Africans to overcome their context of suffering and poverty that has made hopelessness and powerlessness synonymous with Africanness.

Muhwati (2010, p. 152) defines agency and transcendence as “expressions that underscore the need for positive participation and contribution in life in order to overcome life-threatening forces and attain victory”. The two terms are different with agency pointing to taking responsibility and owning one’s action and transcendence referring to overcoming one’s undesirable situation in a way that enables a person to escape a life of victimhood and defeatism. The terms are however mutually inclusive in that they both emphasise that “life is a struggle to be tamed, thereby making defeatism, negativity and surrender unthinkable” (Magosvongwe 2012, p. 385). In their exclusive mutuality agency and transcendence speak of the resilience denoted by the Nguni proverb, *akulahlwa mbeleko ngokufelwa*, you do not throw away the baby sling wrap because the baby has died (Muhwati 2010).² Agency and transcendence mean that just as a mother who has lost a baby must not give up on having children and throw away the baby sling wrap, people must continue to wrestle with their hindrances to a meaningful life until they overcome.

ANPPs address the problem of poor human agency and transcendence in Africa by spiritual solutions that attempt to tap power from God through ritualistic [read: magical] manipulation instead of a transformative personal relationship that empowers the poor by changing their worldview of socioeconomic reality. Of concern to this article is that instead of providing fresh innovative theologically informed perspectives of addressing poor African human agency and transcendence, ANPPs recycle African Traditional Religious (ATR) systems (Biri 2012, 2020, 2021). ATR is human-centred and utilitarian, and therefore the turning point is an encounter with the power of magic or ritual instead of a relationship with a personal God. The use by ANPPs of prophetic systems such as anointed oil and armbands to receive God’s power raises questions about how God participates in human affairs to enable the poor to discover their agency and transcendence to overcome their poverty, suffering and pain. This leaves many Christians fearing that unless they possess the right spiritual objects to trap and control God’s power, they will not succeed in their life’s endeavours.

This raises the question, does God empower Christians to rise and overcome their problems through personal faith or through magical and ritual manipulation? Consequently, this article answers the question: what is the notion of God that informs and guides the African neo-Pentecostal prophets’ engagement with human agency and transcendence in Africa? In other words, what does the use of religious rituals and objects communicate about perceptions about God’s nature and how God empowers people to overcome their obstacles to human flourishing? This question is answered from a Christian systematic theology perspective that highlights the importance of doctrines in responding to people’s socioeconomic needs.

2. The Personality of God in Critiquing the African Neo-Pentecostal Prophetic Approach to Human Agency and Transcendence in Africa

The personality of God is used as a theoretical framework of critiquing the use of what can be termed extra-salvific prophetic systems to enhance African human agency and transcendence in ANPP. Extra-salvific prophetic systems refers to spiritual rituals such as deliverance and healing services as well as anointed objects such as holy oil and holy water and artefacts like wristbands, waistbands and portraits of the prophets (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005; Biri 2012, 2021). In ANPP, deliverance services liberate people from possession by evil spirits that cause them to fail and be poor. Anointed objects and artefacts bring God’s empowering and protective presence to the believer to drive away malevolent forces and enable Christians to overcome these malevolent forces that hinder their attainment of material prosperity. These systems are described as extra-salvific, because the ANPPs teach that salvation in Christ and being filled with the Holy Spirit, do not provide sufficient liberation and protection from demons and evil forces, especially generational curses (Meyer 1998, p. 328; 2007, p. 14). According to the sermons of the prophets and testimonies of people attending deliverance services, there is no limit on how the malevolent forces harm people’s human agency and transcendence, as it includes aspects such as lack or loss

of productivity in one's work, the unexplainable depletion of one's income leaving them poor, the loss of interest in better life and acquiescence with poverty, laziness and disinterest in work that result in poverty, unattractiveness to employers despite possessing suitable or better qualification, loss of customers in one's business or failure to attract them and many such crippling effects that make a person resign to defeatism, negativity, surrender, determinism and fatalism.³ These hindrances are generally spiritual and do not consider the structural issues such as the prevailing economic situation and government policies that are often beyond the control of many ordinary citizens. ANPPs also attract Christians from conservative mainline churches and people from African Traditional Religions (ATR) (Kroesbergen 2019, p. 9; Mlambo and Zimunya 2021, p. 34; Mochechane 2016, p. 4). This attraction of people from various church and religious backgrounds shows that the quest for human agency and transcendence in Africa affects all people both Christian and non-Christian.

However, the Bible presents God a personal being who blesses and empowers people by freely and consciously engaging them through their personal faith in him and not by being mastered and manipulated through religious [magical] practices (Erickson 2013, p. 241). The personal being of God is depicted in the Christian practice of prayer that is modelled on the relationship between a child and a parent and attributes of God such as love, trustworthiness and purpose, all which have strong personal associations (McGrath 2011, p. 118). God's personhood can also be seen in God's ability to distinguish true and false worship from people and can therefore not be manipulated by false religiosity. For example, God saw the false worship and sacrifices of the Israelites and rejected them despite their elaborateness and solemnity (Amos 5: 21–24). By rejecting Israel's hypocritical sacrifices and worship, God demonstrated several attributes of personhood such as self-consciousness (as the holy one, God rejected unholy sacrifices and hypocritical worship), will (God's will could not be subverted by the elegance of false worship), feeling (the unholiness of Israel displeased him), choosing (he maintained his holy stance), and having a reciprocal relationship with other personal and social beings (he wanted a true personal relationship with his people). God's personhood is primarily reflected in the commandment against making idols, because as a personal being, God will not be likened to an impersonal object. Erickson (2013, p. 241) argues that the names assumed by God primarily refer to his relationship with people rather than with nature. Furthermore, God's primary concern is not toward nature but toward directing and shaping the lives of his people, both individually and socially (Erickson 2013, p. 241).

God's personal nature is also demonstrated by the overarching biblical theme of promise and fulfilment as God enters covenants with people in which "they mutually bind themselves to each other" (McGrath 2011, p. 119). Concerning the basic idea underlying God's promise, "I will be their God, and they will be my people" (Jer 31:33), McGrath (2011, p. 119) says it reflects the personal commitment of God to God's people, and of God's people to their God. The awareness of God's personhood has serious implications in how believers should draw power from him for their human flourishing. Essentially, God's personhood means that:

God is to be treated as a being, not an object or force to be used or manipulated. While our thinking and practice may at times betray such a view, it is not consistent with the biblical picture. The idea that God is simply something to be used or to solve our problems and meet our needs is not religion. Such attempts to harness him belong rather to the realm of magic or technology. (Erickson 2013, p. 241)

The essence of Erickson's statement is that Christians should draw power from God relationally by having a personal relationship that transforms and empowers them.

Therefore, the personhood of God is an important theological framework of critiquing the African neo-Pentecostal prophetic approach to human transcendence and agency in Africa, because it stands against the prophets' tendency to present God as an impersonal being whose resources for human wellbeing are accessed by manipulating and controlling God through prophetic systems instead of relating with God through faith. Furthermore,

the personhood of God challenges poor people seeking God's upliftment to overcome their poverty to approach their poverty not in magical terms, but in personal terms that focus on structural issues to be overcome, personal attitudes to be changed and personal skills to be acquired and developed, instead of magical powers to be mastered and used to attain a better life. The impersonalisation of God creates an idolatrous religious system where an equal and just access to God's resources for human survival is replaced by the survival of those able to monopolise and control God to work for them and bless them. The impersonalisation of God creates a system where poverty and suffering are blamed on the poor people's own inability to develop a religiosity that enables them to tap into God's power and maintain their hold on this power. An approach to poor human agency and transcendence that is informed by God's personality realises that people's inability to rise and overcome their human problems is not only spiritual but also relational and socioeconomic and political structural.

3. God and the Vulnerability of African Human Agency and Transcendence in African Neo-Pentecostal Prophetism

African neo-Pentecostal prophetism projects human agency and transcendence as vulnerable to evil spiritual forces in ways that ultimately raise questions about its view of God. In ANPP God is presented as limited to secure the human agency and transcendence of people from evil spiritual powers unless assisted by the extra-salvific processes of the prophets. Asamoah-Gyadu (2005, p. 236) explains that Pentecostalism "has a very interventionist theology" that makes healing and exorcism or deliverance very important aspects of its spirituality. While in classical Pentecostalism interventionist theology addresses impediments to sanctification and spiritual revival, in ANPP interventionism is anthropocentric by primarily focusing on issues of the present earthly material life. In ANPP the interventionist theology thrives on projecting God as somehow limited in his power to empower Christians to act and overcome their impediments to flourish in their endeavours. For example, prophet Chiza (n.d.) from Zimbabwe states:

Some of you are very powerful, mighty, you are being used by God in business and many things, but the problem is there is a demon that is pulling you back. That demon has its connection through your mother.

In this statement Chiza presents God as limited to empower, and even protect the agency and transcendence of believers. The demons are presented as possessing the power to hinder people from fulfilling their calling, for as expressed by Chiza, one is being used by God, but a demon is pulling them back. This presents demons as so powerful that they can defeat God's plans for the believer. It is significant that Chiza's statement does not attribute Christians' limited fruitfulness to sin, or lack of faith in God or poor relationship with God which limits the active presence of God in the believer (Isa 59:2). Rather, Chiza points to the presence of demons in a Christian's life.

The same perspective is shared by another Zimbabwean prophet, Makandiwa (2018b) who says:

So you can be a liberated man, the man inside born of the Spirit can be so powerful and yet he is limited by the physical body that is yet to experience another dimension of the power of God which comes at a different time depending on who is teaching you the word of God.

Just like Chiza, Makandiwa's words are directed to Christians and tells them that it is not enough to be born again and be full of the Holy Spirit because the Christian new birth is a spiritual reality that does not change things in their bloodline; therefore, they remain with generational curses in their blood. Interestingly Makandiwa says Christians can only be freed from the demons blocking their progress in life if a powerful prophetic figure teaches them the word of God. The implication is that Makandiwa himself is that prophet that can lead people into a higher dimension of the power of God. As will be seen in a preceding section, this is a reflection of ATR that projects some spiritual healers as

more powerful than others and that some people have more of God's power than other people (Magesa 1997, pp. 51–52).

Makandiwa emphasises his point that believers remain bound by evil powers until they undergo special deliverance from ANPPs by using the example of two of the foremost heroes of faith in Christianity, Abraham and Paul. Makandiwa (2018b), says,

You can be a child of God, born again in the Spirit and have a demon tormenting you in your flesh. Abraham had a demon [. . .] called barrenness [. . .]. He was a friend of God, but there was a demon in his flesh. Apostle Paul had a demon (2 Cor 12:7). He was born again, he had an anointing, he would heal the sick because all that is required [to heal the sick] is to be spiritual. But in his flesh he had a demon.

It is important to note that according to Genesis 11:30, only Sarah was barren, not Abraham, that is why Sarah arranged for Abraham to have a child with Hagar, her maid-servant. Furthermore, the Bible does not describe what the “thorn” in Paul's flesh was and does not present it as a demon, but only that it was a “messenger of Satan to torment me” and as something that demonstrated God's presence, power and sovereignty in Paul's life and suffering (2 Cor 12:7–9). The assertions by ANPPs that spirit-filled believers, even those enjoying a special relationship with God such as Abraham and Paul, remain vulnerable to evil spirits raises questions about God's power to fully save his people and fully protect them from the devil. Makandiwa's assertion that a Christian can be spirit-filled and yet be possessed by demons raises questions about his understanding of the extent of the indwelling presence and power of the Holy Spirit in the believer.

On the impact of the awareness that even people chosen by God can have demons, Makandiwa (2018b) says:

This helped me to understand that being a man of God, I would still have to deal with certain physical things because I can preach fire and be physically broke. I can be a prophet and die outside prosperity not because that is the will of God but because I have failed to understand the communication of the blood.

The gist of Makandiwa's message is that even specially chosen servants of God are vulnerable to demons that hinder them from attaining a life of prosperity. By the communication of blood, Makandiwa refers to the belief in bloodline curses to imply that even born again believers must first be delivered from demons if they want to prosper in their entrepreneurial activities. One of the many problems that arise from this ANPP projection of Christians as continually vulnerable to malevolent spirits is that God is ultimately presented as limited in his power to protect the Christian from evil powers. Furthermore, ANPPs preach the vulnerability of Christians to suffering without bringing into perspective essential Christian doctrines such as the fallen nature of the present world that allows suffering and poverty to exist, the question of good and evil and eschatological hope that assures Christians that ultimately God will end all suffering and pain (Jn 16:33). Furthermore, ANPPs speak about the power of demons without any reference to Christ's victory at the cross and the biblical perspective that Satan and his kingdom stand defeated because of Christ's death and resurrection (Col 2:15). The ANPPs assertion that God is limited to completely save and secure the Christian from evil spirits resembles a notion of God as an impersonal limited cosmic good that is prevalent in ATR. The following section will therefore describe God's impersonal and limited nature and their effect on human agency and transcendence in ATR.

4. Human Agency and Transcendence in the Impersonal Transcendent Realm in African Traditional Religion

African Traditional Religion (ATR) functions as a dominant background in the religious consciousness of many African Christians, including ANPP (Nel 2019). In ATR there is a deep reliance on religious rituals and magical charms to connect with God and draw from him the spiritual resources needed to prosper in life because he is viewed in a distant and

impersonal term. Therefore, this section will examine this ATR reliance on religious rituals and magical charms to strengthen people's human agency and transcendence.

4.1. God and the Impersonal Transcendent Realm in African Traditional Religion

In ATR, the ability to exercise human agency and transcendence depends on one's ability to navigate the dualistic cosmos. ATR is dualistic and comprises of the *invisible* spiritual and the *visible* material realms that are interconnected, interdependent and influence each other in a hierarchical manner with the invisible realm as the transcendent realm (Magesa 1997, p. 39; Mbiti 1990, pp. 15–16). The spiritual realm has on its apex God, the Supreme Being, the creator and sustainer of all things including humanity. Below the Supreme Being is the hierarchy of ancestral spirits and various forms of non-human spirits that function as God's viceroys (Taringa and Sipeyiye 2018, pp. 201–2). The material world comprises of human beings, animate elements such as animals and plants, and non-animate elements like trees, mountains and rivers. Magesa (1997, p. 36) describes the hierarchical relationship by saying "God, the ancestors, and the spirits are all powers that impinge on human life in one way or another". This impingement demonstrates the absolute power of their transcendence. Therefore, the power for human agency and transcendence lies in the transcendent invisible realm, and human beings must submit to it to tap into the power needed to act productively. Lazarus (2019, p. 6) explains that in ATR all aspects of life reflect the spiritual world and are determined by it; consequently, the spiritual world is "the base of society, upon which sits the superstructure, comprised of all aspects of life such as material wealth" (Lazarus 2019, p. 6). This emphasises that in ATR existence is a spiritual journey.

However, a problem faced by human agency and transcendence in ATR is that the transcendental realm is bound by an impersonal mystical power. Mbiti affirms the African belief that the universe has power or force. Mbiti (1990, p. 192) says. "To my knowledge there is no African society which does not hold belief in mystical power of one type or another. It shows itself, or it is experienced, in many ways". Following the Belgian missionary to the Congo, Tempels (1959), in his controversial book *Bantu Philosophy*, this mystical power has been described as the "vital force(s)" or "force(s) of life" (Magesa 1997, p. 46; Tempels 1959, p. 30).⁴ Impersonal refers to the idea that God, the principal source and power of the transcendent realm does not relate with people and the material creation on direct personal terms, but through the hierarchy of spirits that function as viceroys and mediators between God and humanity (Taringa and Sipeyiye 2018, pp. 201–2). Impersonality essentially emphasises that the transcendent mystical power is not sovereignly independent because worshippers can manipulate it to do good or to do evil according to their wish (Turaki 2019, p. 25). This impersonal nature imposes a great fear among Africans because, the "existence of wicked human beings and wicked spirit beings, who also have access to the mysterious powers, makes life full of uncertainties—rife with unpredictable wickedness and evil and dangerous to human beings" (Turaki 2019, p. 25). The belief in impersonal power leaves many Africans feeling that they are "at the mercy of benevolent or wicked users of these powers" (Turaki 2019, p. 25).

The issue of impersonal power in ATR leads to contentions about whether God in ATR is a personal deity or an impersonal one—that is, whether God is a person or a force/power. Several African scholars argue that in ATR God is a personal being who has a personal relationship with his creation and people (Magesa 1997, pp. 41, 45).⁵ According to Mungwini (2019, p. 80), when the various names given to God in Shona are looked at, "it is clear that the Shona shared a belief in God who was both transcendent and immanent". However, besides basic descriptions about what God does, the problem is that while there are indeed no atheists in traditional Africa (Mbiti 1990, p. 29), there is however no body of theological details about God. This is why Kroesbergen (2019, p. 4) says,

Religion in Africa used to be, and is again, in many ways not about truth-claim adhered to by a particular group, but about what works. Religion in Africa is not about beliefs and community, but about power and pragmatic ways to use it.

Essentially, this means that religion in Africa is not so much concerned with gaining a deeper understanding of who and what God is, but more about effectively performing rituals that open access to powers for healing, protection and possessions (Kroesbergen 2019, p. 5). This controversial statement does not dispute that traditional Africans do have a belief in God, but asserts that God is not viewed ontologically but functionally. However, notwithstanding many firm assertions of a personal deity in ATR, there is an audible expression of a huge distance between God and humanity that is only closed by the hierarchy of spirits and God seems more interested in large communal affairs than in the personal affairs of individuals (Mungwini 2019, p. 81).

Furthermore, while the personality of God can be argued in ATR, the problem is that the absence of explicit texts in ATR and the dominance of the Bible in Africa, many traditional beliefs such as beliefs about God have become combined with Christian ideas (Podolecka and White 2021, p. 67). Moreover, many traditional Africans generally respond to their offense at the Christian claim that it has a superior personal knowledge of God by saying such knowledge is also the ATR view of God, even when it is incongruous with the ATR cosmology. When the position and the mediatory function of the ancestors and the spirits between humanity and God is taken into account it seems favourable to follow Turaki's (2019, p. 34) assertion that:

[T]he overwhelming facts do show that, even though Africans generally have an awareness and belief in the Supreme Being, the truth is, this Supreme Being is not known to have been exclusively worshipped by traditional Africans. Instead, the African divinities and the ancestors, who are the lesser beings, have been actively involved in the everyday religious life of the traditional Africans. They directly receive sacrifices, offerings and prayers offered by the traditional Africans.

This contentiously creates a strong notion of an impersonal transcendent realm where according to Steyne as quoted by Turaki (2019, p. 34), the supreme God seems not to be intimately involved or concerned with human affairs, which ultimately motivates people to rely on the lower lesser spiritual powers such as the ancestors to meet their desires. Furthermore, as pointed out by Taringa and Sipeyiye (2018, p. 204), "Africans do not seek for abstract spiritual goods or personal relationship with God, but tangible salvific good for their well-being". In other words, God is not related with personally but functionally for present existential purposes and not promises for heavenly future. However, Magesa's (1997) primary argument is that God is immanent to his people through the moral code, which means people personally relate with God by obeying his moral code which he has given through the ancestors who are the closest to him. It can also be argued that devotion to God is demonstrated by the way in which the mediators are approached (Beyers 2010, p. 4). However, the personality of God in the African quest for human agency and transcendence remains challenged by the fact that the "Supreme Being seems to be far remote or less functional in the traditional African everyday life" (Turaki 2019, p. 35). As the following subsections will show, this felt remoteness of God creates a gape that promotes the vulnerability of human agency and transcendence in many traditional Africans, which eventually leads to high reliance on religiosity and magical charms.

4.2. The Vulnerability of Human Agency and Transcendence Because of the Impersonal Nature of the Vital Force

The impersonal nature of the transcendent realm in ATR leaves human agency and transcendence vulnerable to malevolent spiritual forces. The sense of vulnerability arises from the transcendent realm's perceived limited nature because it does not seem to be independent and sovereign since human beings can through religious rituals and magical charms monopolise it and engineer the exclusion of other people from power needed for life so that they remain poor economically or in poor health.

Consequently, the impersonal nature of the transcendent power in the spiritual realm functions in a way characterised by Van Rooy (1999, pp. 238–40) as "limited cosmic good". By limited cosmic good, Van Rooy meant that the power is not independent, but can be

manipulated and harnessed by worshippers to be benevolent or malevolent, as the same spirits can be employed benevolently or malevolently. Furthermore, the power needed to succeed in life is limited in the sense of its elusiveness, as other people monopolise it and block others from accessing it to keep them poor. Hence, when people prosper they are “almost automatically suspected of drawing away the life-force of someone else” (Van Rooy 1999, p. 238). Conversely, when people fail, they automatically suspect that the life-force has been drawn away from them. As Magesa (1997, pp. 51–52) explains,

This life, this power, is as a rule concentrated in certain beings or certain parts of the body. But it is also diminished or fortified in certain situations of existence. Illness is obviously a diminishment of vital power, and so is fatigue, worry, lack of certain material resources, and so on. Parched land indicates a loss of vital force, as do floods that result in the destruction of plants and animals. Plenty of food and livestock in the village, on the other hand, is evidence of the presence of a strong force of life.

This highlights the extent of spiritual insecurity in which many Africans live. Life is marked with the fear of the loss of connection to the vital force. In this context, Magesa (1997, p. 52) says, “The sole purpose of existence, however, is to seek life, to see to it that human life continues and grows to its full capacity”. This search for power and security is what Kroesbergen (2019, p. 3) means when he says ATR is “pragmatic in nature and that their emphasis is on power and protection”.

4.3. The Consequent Reliance on Magic and Religiosity for the Power for Human Agency and Transcendence

In the light of the impersonal nature of the transcendent power in ATR, the emerging question is: how do traditional Africans access the power needed for life from the impersonal transcendent force into their personal lives and human affairs? In other words, since, “all life, and the power that is life or existence, flows from God” (Magesa 1997, p. 47), how then is this power transmitted from God to human beings to enable them to rise and act (agency) and overcome impediments to prosperity (transcendence)? It can be stated that in ATR, the economy is an occultic reality that thrives on deployment, real or imagined, of magical means for material ends (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; Lazarus 2019, p. 5). Success in ATR is generally reflective of the power of ancestral spirits, the power of the magical powers used by the individual in their business and the power of the spiritual practitioner providing the magical medicines.

Thus in ATR, the quest for connection with vital forces and the fear of losing connection with these essential forces promotes a high usage and reliance on religiosity and magical charms as a means of staying connected to vital forces and drawing from them the power of life. As Turaki (2019, p. 25) explains, that that spirit beings cannot be easily reached by ordinary people, and that supernatural powers are impersonal, unseen and unpredictable, creates a desire to have access to them so as to obtain the spirit-power. Quoting Steyne (1990, p. 60); Turaki (2019, p. 52) describes the desire for power in such Africans situations as follows:

Life’s essential quest is to secure power and use it. Not to have power or access to it produces great anxiety in the face of spirit caprice and the rigors of life. A life without power is not worth living . . . Power offers man control of his uncertain world (sic.).

Because of the high vulnerability to malevolent spiritual powers, the impersonal and capricious nature of the spiritual realm, ATR is a power-seeking religion. The power is sought because as already noted from Magesa (1997, p. 52) the sole purpose of existence is to seek life, to see to it that human life is protected and continues and grows to its full capacity. Thus the ATR worldview is a dynamic one governed by the law of power because people ultimately define the meaning of life in terms of their ability to make the impersonal (mystical) powers work for them (Turaki 2019, p. 121). In other words, progress and success in life are not so much a testimony of one’s diligent hard work and wisdom, but a testimony of the spiritual powers at work in one’s life. In this regard, the rich and powerful people

are feared because their riches and social status indicate the triumphant power of their spiritual power over the competing spiritual powers from other people. In other words, material success can be achieved in two ways, your spiritual power prevails over other people's spiritual powers for you to be on top and/or your spiritual power fought and won against the malevolent spirits sent to stop you from progressing.

Therefore, there is a high reliance on magic and religious ritual to access, control and manipulate the spiritual realm for one's good. Hence, traditional Africans "are accompanied by various appropriate magical medicines everywhere they go and in every significant course of action they take" (Banda 2019b, p. 3). This is what Magesa (1997, p. 33) means when he says: "For Africans, religion is quite literally life and life is religion".

Furthermore, the sense of vulnerability and resultant urgent need for power are demonstrated by how this power "is secured is a secondary concern. It must be acquired whatever the cost" (Turaki 2019, p. 52). Therefore, there is no morality and limit in the pursuit of spiritual power as there is no end to where and how people may seek magical power to enhance their agency and transcendence. In many African communities, stories are told of people who pull all stops to get rich, even sacrificing immediate relatives or even their body parts as some magical powers require the person sacrifice a body part resulting in the loss of function of a hand or limb, for example. It can therefore be concluded that the ATR quest for human agency and transcendence thrives on the anthropocentric approach to religion, where the spiritual realm is worshipped not for its intrinsic transcendence but for its extrinsic benefits on humankind. Nyamiti (1997, p. 59) points out, "the African religious behaviour is centred mainly on [hu]man's life in this world, with the consequence that religion is chiefly functional, or a means to serve people to acquire earthly goods (life, health, fecundity, wealth, power and the like) and to maintain social cohesion and order". He adds that traditional Africans do have a "deep sense of the sacred as a supernatural and cosmic reality, and [their] cultural effort is dominated by [their] desire to appropriate sacred forces" (Nyamiti 1997, p. 59).

The aspects of agency and transcendence in ATR are further emphasised by the fact that the vital force is the power that enables individuals to live a dignified life that is worthy of authentic human existence described as ubuntu (Banda 2019a). Therefore, the role of spiritual power through charms is not just ensuring the functionality of the life force, but ultimately the protection of one's ubuntu in the sense of humanness and personhood, that makes it possible to live as an authentic functional human being (Banda 2019a). Matolino (2011, p. 338) follows Didier Kaphagawani's view that Africans see force as the capacity for doing something.

The following section will show how African neo-Pentecostal prophets operate according to the ATR worldview of mastering God's presence in the lives of people through religious rituals and magical charms. In many ways the prophets replace the spiritual specialists in ATR and their prophetic rituals of exorcism and the anointed objects such as anointed oil replace ATR rituals and magical charms.

5. The Vulnerability of Human Agency and Transcendence by Projecting God as a Servant of Magical Rituals in African Neo-Prophetic Pentecostalism

In their response to the African quest for human agency and transcendence ANPP employ a notion of God that derives from the impersonal nature of God in ATR than from biblical sources. To a large extent the ANPP prophetic rituals and holy objects like anointed oil function in similar ways as the ATR magical rituals designed to master and control God's power. Nyamiti (1997, p. 58) observes that in ATR God is "sometimes believed to be the Lord of magic, and Himself subject to its influence". There is a strong sense in which in ANPP God is viewed as a servant of magical rituals because his blessings and power in the life of the believer are presented as only accessible through prophetic rituals. This can be described as a problem of poor theology of God. In other words, ANPP preach an ATR derived theology of God than a biblically derived one.

The notion of God as an impersonal power strictly denotes the reduction of God to a supernatural force, transmitted to the Christian through the prophets and their prophetic systems. In this impersonalised view of God, doctrinal details about God's ontology (who God is and what he is like) are replaced with functional details (what people must do to receive God's blessings). Ultimately, personal faith in God is replaced by ritualistic mastering and manipulation of God, because he is primarily understood as a power to possess, master and set in motion to work for the believer and not a personal deity to serve and obey.

This criticism does not deny that ANPPs do preach about God in personal terms. Indeed, in their preaching ANPPs do make personal statements about God, like: "You are a child of God", "God knows you by name", "God has a special plan for you specifically", "God has a special miracle just for you" and many other such related statements. Yet, in ANPP, such statements are not premised on a personal view of God that will, for example, cause the believer to grow in their sanctification, or hold on to their faith in God in the middle of suffering, or persevere in the hope for heaven. Rather, in ANPP, such seemingly personal statements of God knowing the believer and making a way for her are often intended to stir Christians into a transactional relationship with God denoted by giving money or material gifts. These gifts are intended to make God function in a way that is favourable to the believer. As an example, in his sermon on bloodline curses, [Makandiwa \(2018a\)](#) says for people to know about the curses in their bloodline they need to pay the price. He says:

For you to know there is a curse there is a need for you to start the investigations. Why most people live under a curse, and they don't know, it is because of what the research itself requires. There is a price for you to get that kind of information. You need to pay the price for you to know what happened in your lineage. There is a cost. ([Makandiwa 2018a](#))

He then cites the example of Daniel who fasted 21 days to gain understanding for his people in Daniel 10. [Makandiwa \(2018a\)](#) then says: "So knowing what is happening in your family is going to require that you dedicate yourself. You will have to pay the price. *At some point you will have to pay money*" (italics author's). In this Makandiwa is employing language and perspective that are familiar in ATR where traditional specialists can charge exorbitant prices to reveal a person's source of curse.

Makandiwa's use of Daniel's 21-day prayer to illustrate the dedication of oneself and paying the price to know the curses in their bloodline appears to indicate a deeper relationship with God through fasting and fervently seeking his revelation. Yet, he has in mind a dedication that involves the actual payment of money. This is a transactional relationship similar to the appeasing of ancestors in ATR. The idea is that when God is happy with one's offering, he will reveal to the troubled believer the source of their troubles. This effectively means giving money to the prophet and is part of what is involved in the one-to-one sessions between the prophets and people in need ([Mochechane 2016](#), p. 4). It is interesting that Makandiwa's reference to Daniel only ends in his fasting and praying but does not follow through to the corrective steps Daniel took of confession of sin, repentance and repairing the broken relationship with God. For Daniel and his people, the step towards liberation, transformation and restoration of his nation lay in returning to God and repenting of sin because the cause of Israel's "curse" was the broken personal relationship with God because of their disobedience. It could not be solved by giving money but by repentance and mending the broken relationship between God and his people. In fact, the prophets kept warning disobedient Israel that her offerings and perfunctory religiosity could not save her against God's wrath against their sin. Daniel's prayer was based on truth-claims of God as sovereign, holy and righteous, and therefore could not tolerate the idolatry of his people. For Daniel, God was not an impersonal transcendent power to be mastered and manipulated by offerings, but a personal being requiring a broken personal relationship with his people to be mended through their repentance and his forgiveness of their sins.

The impersonalisation of God in the ANPPs is further demonstrated by their method of interpreting the Bible that follows a “praxis-oriented” approach since their main interest is not arriving at truth-claims about God, but extracting motivational aspects that can transform people’s lives (Kalu 2003, p. 99; Kroesbergen 2019, p. 5). ANPPs use a praxis-oriented hermeneutical approach because their main purpose is not deepening people’s faith in doctrinal theoretical matters but in providing steps, principles and laws to follow in order to get God to do things for the believer (Kgatle 2021, p. 143; Kroesbergen 2019, p. 6). This is reflected in the motivational way of preaching that tends to focus on steps to be followed to make God bless the believer (Kgatle 2021, p. 143). In ANPPs, there is less attention to rigorous doctrinal or in-depth exegetical preaching. Their preaching “serve[s] as a counselling discourse; a means for individual transformation; as motivational, self-help, teaching resources that change lifestyles; and a source for achieving progress and social uplift” (Kalu 2008, p. 109). In Meyer’s (2007, p. 15) analysis, for these ANPPs,

[F]aith is not a matter of meandering about one’s inner state, and the prospect of salvation after death. Faith is deliberately called upon so as to improve a person’s situation in the world, to seize God’s miracle. Faith, circumscribed as spiritual eye and spiritual hand, is a device, rather than an inner attitude, which promises the Born Again believer to be assured of God’s blessing.

This analysis shows that the interest is to gain a functional view of God instead of an ontological view. This religious utilitarianism and anthropocentrism is foundational in ATR (Nyamiti 1997, p. 59). Therefore, although ANPPs introduce a cosmological horizon based on the mighty God for whom nothing is impossible, it retains the ATR cosmology of an impersonal God who is accessible to the believer through religious systems and not personal faith.

6. The Resultant Weakening of African Human Agency and Transcendence by Projecting God as an Impersonal Power

The emerging question is: how is the ANPP adoption of the ATR view of God as an impersonal force detrimental to African human agency and transcendence? This question is answered by pointing out that in ATR the impersonal nature of God turns God into a capricious deity that cannot be trusted to be always available to help his people. The caprice of the transcendent realm in ATR has a detrimental effect on economic development in Africa. For example, Bourdillon (1983, p. 40) narrates a story told by R.J. Theisen of a Zimbabwean rural farmer that befriended an agricultural demonstrator working in his area, and began to follow the officially preferred methods of crop rotation and fertilization. However, during the trial stage, one of the African farmer’s children became seriously ill, and this was interpreted as displeasure from the ancestral spirits for his close co-operation with White people. Consequently, the farmer ended his friendship with the agricultural officer and reverted to old traditional agricultural methods. It is difficult to contest the possibility of the displeasure of the spiritual realm towards the farmer for abandoning traditional African ways of farming and taking those of White people. However, the unpredictable nature of the spirit world in traditional Africa, often prohibits venturing into the new unfamiliar territories because of fear of offending the spirits or venturing into areas where the spirits will not be there to protect or guide the individual. For instance, many Africans continue to live in unproductive ancestral lands out of fear that their ancestral spirits will punish them or not bless them because of leaving the graves of their ancestors behind. Related to this is the fear that improving one’s life will agitate malevolent spirits to harm them. Consequently, poverty and un(der)development end up being acceptable because people do not want to stir up witchcraft from jealous people. This fear of the devil and witchcraft which functions as if God is limited or unable to protect believers produces justification for mediocre and lack of innovation in many African communities.

The ANPP’s adoption of the ATR’s view of God as an impersonal force is detrimental to African human agency and transcendence, by making God’s power to the believers elusive and only available to those with appropriate prophetic systems to master it. In ANPP, just

like in ATR, religiosity is focused on capturing the power of God and maintaining one's grip on it. Hence, there is an endless search for deliverance services and use of anointed objects.

This is harmful to human agency and transcendence because it produces a deep sense of determinism and fatalism because poverty and failure are uncritically accepted as results of one's lack of ability to effectively get hold of God's power and maintain one's grip on it. In times of failure, people move to the next prophet hoping to get better deliverance and more efficacious anointed objects. Since solving poverty in Africa remains elusive because of bad economic and political policies that hinder economic growth, the persistence of poverty induces fatalistic feelings that Africans are doomed to suffer and they will never be able to entice God to release his blessings of material prosperity on them.

Furthermore, ANPPs limit human agency and transcendence in Africa by promoting a life that has a higher consciousness of the devil than the ever present power of God in the believer. This creates a dualism that makes demons as enormously powerful and possessing an interminable unshakable hold on people. God's power in the believer is presented as limited by the anointed objects possessed by the believer and other ANPPs are promoted as being able to supply higher dosages of God's power than other prophets.

The impersonalisation of God hinders human agency and transcendence by uncritically privileging the prophets' uninformed over-spiritualised opinions about economic matters over the informed opinions of trained experts. In many African communities, because the prophets appear to have a monopoly of God's power and wisdom, their simplistic opinions often override the informed opinions of trained experts in economics. For instance, in countries like Zimbabwe, prophets have been in the forefront in condemning the advice of economists and business experts that unless fundamental political changes are made, the country is doomed to fail. Despite the failure of the ruling ZANU-PF government to rule justly and implement good economic policies, many prophets say the nation is blessed and the governing ZANU-PF party has been anointed by God to rule the country (Share 2018; Wutawunashe 2014). Chitando (2007) condemns this attitude of silencing and marginalising technical experts that is found in many churches which proved detrimental to the fight against HIV and AIDS and recently COVID-19 disease. Chitando (2007, p. 16) says:

An ecclesiology that dwells on ordained members prevents most members from realizing that the church is home to people from various walks of life. This is a remarkable fact that needs to be fully appreciated. The church in Africa enjoys the membership of people with different areas of specialization. These include artisans, medical personnel, politicians, economists and theologians. It is unfortunate that the church rarely calls upon their expertise in a direct way. In most instances, their membership is appreciated only to the extent that they make financial contributions and help to support the church's activities.

The sidelining of professional experts reinforces the notion that the clergy, in this case the ANPPs, have a special proximity to God that gives them the power to function even in areas they are not trained in. However, a fair assessment of this problem must also recognise that there are many African scientists and professional experts who discard their professional and scientific knowledge and rely on ANPPs. One can find economists, or investment analysts that neglect the knowledge they have learnt and trust in the anointed objects of the prophets. While this could be viewed as a sign of faith in God or desperate use of anything that promises to work, it fundamentally reflects a deep belief that God's power is limited to prophets.

7. Towards a Shift from the View of God as a Servant of Magic to a Personal Deity Engaged in Empowering African Human Agency and Transcendence

African neo-Pentecostal prophets are challenged to shift from projecting God as a servant of magic. Instead, they must present God as a personal deity who relationally empowers his people's agency and transcendence. Just as the impersonalisation of God in ATR leads to a view of God as a servant of magic, a similar thing can be seen ANPP as God's presence and power become controlled by the prophetic rituals and anointed objects. While it can be argued that prophetic rituals and anointed objects function by faith, it is

however difficult to view faith produced using prophetic rituals and anointed objects as faith in God. Instead of being faith in God, it is faith in the power of the prophets and their prophetic systems. For example, Zimbabwe's prophet [Magaya \(2015\)](#) once stated, "Even in church if you were anointed in 2014 it does not mean that you are still anointed in 2015". In other words, the power of anointing diminishes with time and needs to be renewed—this is a common belief in ATR where the power of charms must constantly be renewed. This indicates that faith in ANPP is not really in God but in the prophetic systems that need continuous renewal. Hence, there is high mobility in ANPP as people are in constant search for more powerful prophets. In an earlier section, Prophet [Makandiwa \(2018b\)](#) was quoted saying that a person's spiritual liberation is determined by the prophet teaching them God's word. This shows that in ANPP faith is not really placed in God, but in the prophet's power to make God bless the believer. This promotes an anthropocentric and utilitarian view of God in ATR in which God exists to benefit humankind and religious rituals function as means of making God his blessings on people. Therefore, ANPPs must shift from the tendency to turn God into a servant of magic by recognising God's divine personhood which should lead African Christians to seek God to empower their agency and transcendence through relational faith in him.

A shift from viewing God as a servant of magic that will empower Africans to realise their agency and transcendence must start with a Trinitarian understanding of God. Space does not allow for detailed descriptions of the intricacies of the Trinity. The Christian doctrine of the Trinity basically describes how God is one and yet three distinct equal and eternal persons, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, who indwell each other. Trinity essentially means that salvation in Christ and the empowering of the church by the Holy Spirit are Trinitarian realities. By the Holy Spirit's indwelling of the believers, they experience the presence and work of the triune God. The point is explained by the New Testament scholar, [Fee \(1994, p. 8\)](#) as follows:

We are not left on our own as far as our relationship with God is concerned; neither are we left on our own to 'slug it out in the trenches', as it were, with regard to the Christian life. Life in the present is empowered by the God who dwells among us and in us. As the personal presence of God, the Spirit is not merely some 'force' or 'influence'. The living God is a God of power and by his Spirit the power of the living God is present with and for us.

[Fee](#) points out that through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, the triune God is present and at work in the life of the believer. Once a Christian has been saved by Christ, they enter into relationship with God that does not empower them through magical manipulation, but through the life-changing obedience to God. The Holy Spirit transforms and empowers believers by filling and leading them in their life of faith in God (Eph 5:18). From multiple biblical evidence, [Grudem \(1994, pp. 634–53\)](#) says the Holy Spirit brings God's presence and blessing to the believer by *empowering* the believers for service, by *purification* that sanctifies the believers, by *teaching and revealing* God's truth to the believers and by *uniting* the believers in the church as the body of Christ. [Grudem \(1994, p. 647\)](#) then reminds Christians that the biblical commands to not grieve and not quench the Holy Spirit mean that when Christians actively obey the Holy Spirit their lives will be productive and reflect God's blessed presence in them. As argued by [Kakwata \(2018\)](#) the work of the Holy Spirit is not only in terms of spiritual gifts for use in the church, but also empowers Christians to live holistic God-honouring lives which include socioeconomic issues. Since the Spirit empowers Christians to abstain from sins such as greed and laziness, it follows that the Spirit enables Christians' human agency and transcendence by empowering them to think meaningfully about economic issues and discover their human creative power and solve problems that hinder their human flourishing. Being filled with the Holy Spirit includes seeking the Spirit's guidance and empowering in socioeconomic matters. This is what is entailed in human agency and transcendence.

8. Conclusions

This article used a theological view of God's personal nature to evaluate ANPPs' propagation of an impersonalised view of God who empowers the poor through magical manipulation. The article acknowledged the significant influence of ANPPs in challenging many poor Africans to rise and overcome their poverty and suffering. However, instead of helping poor African people to regain and re-energise their human agency and transcendence, the prophets cripple it by promoting a notion of an impersonal God who only helps people that rely on the extra-salvific systems of prophets. Such a God, although appearing all-powerful, is limited because his power in the believer is limited by the status of the prophets and the quality of their anointed objects. Therefore, the ANPPs are challenged to discard their ATR shaped view of God and adopt a biblically informed view of God that emphasises God's personhood that challenges Africans to take responsibility for their problems. Instead of endorsing the ATR view of God in impersonal terms resulting in subjecting poor Africans Christians to endless post-salvific prophetic rituals, ANPPs should first inform their theology with the God's personhood.

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Notes

- ¹ For a detailed analysis on the peculiarities of African neo-Pentecostal prophets see [Resane \(2017\)](#); [Chitando et al. \(2013\)](#); ([Kgatle 2021, 2022a](#))
- ² Itai Muhwati's article 'Cultural Dialogues of Agency and Transcendence: The Shona and Ndebele Example' ([Muhwati 2010](#)) usefully highlights how African proverbs are resources of instilling agency and transcendence in society.
- ³ Many of these are aspects that can be found in ATR, for example the Ndebele of Zimbabwe say a person can be possessed by a spirit of laziness, *idlozi lobuvila*, a spirit of poverty, *idlozi lobuyanga*, bad luck, *umnyama*, and many other, all which bring poverty to people because they cripple one's ability to be productive.
- ⁴ [Tempels \(1959, p. 30\)](#) contended, 'The Bantu say, in respect of a number of strange practices, in which we see neither rime nor reason, that their purpose is to acquire strength, or vital force, to live strongly, that they are to make life stronger, or to assure that force shall remain perpetually in one's posterity'.
- ⁵ As opined by [Magesa \(1997, p. 74\)](#). 'In the final analysis, however, God, acting through the ancestors, but never completely absent from the scene, is the ultimate point of departure and arrival in human ethical life'.

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