

Are Religious Experiences Immediate Revelations? A Study of Pentecostal Hermeneutics

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Religious encounters are essential to every religious tradition in which the worshipper encounters the divine. Although religious experiences have been reported in many religious traditions, they occupy a premium place in Pentecostalism. Given the ontological distinction between humans and the transcendent, the Abrahamic religions speak about revelation, where the divine is revealed to the worshipper. This article explores the Pentecostal understanding of religious experiences, particularly in relation to whether religious experiences are immediate revelations. The article examines prophecies, words of knowledge and testimonies from personal encounters to ascertain whether they constitute immediate revelation. In other words, what is the epistemological relevance of such experiences? Further, if such expressions or personal encounters can be equated to immediate revelation, how should such revelations be understood in the broader context of divine revelation? This article argues that religious experiences are subjective and can only be valid if they do not contradict biblical teachings. Lastly, the article argues that religious encounters in Pentecostalism raise many theological questions and objections because they have been overemphasised, overgeneralised and inform its hermeneutics.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: The article contributes to the current discussion on discerning divine presence using the methods of analytic theology. The article looks at how Pentecostalism biblicised and appropriated its current spiritual experiences into redemptive history, especially with respect to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the book of Acts of the Apostles.

Keywords: Pentecostalism; religious experiences; charismatic gifts; Holy Spirit; sanctification; revelation and epistemology.

Introduction

It is argued that religious experience, when considered as '... rational–existential engagements with realities, is cognitive-affective¹ experience' (Veldsman 2019:3). Religious worshippers experienced the transcendent differently. Because of these differences, narratives of divine encounters produce different religious experiences depending on context. Because of its personal and variant nature, religious experiences, although they seem part of religious epistemology, have been doubted to produce objective knowledge in relation to the divine.²

Because of the ontological distinction between humans and the transcendent, many religious traditions, especially the Abrahamic religions, speak about revelation, where the divine is revealed to the worshippers. In Christianity, the purpose of God's revelation is for relationships and unveiling what ordinarily would have been hidden except for revelation (Davis 2019). The term revelation has a general and extraordinary sense. In the former, the creation is considered a revelation declaring the wonders of God. Calvin (1540) called creation the theatre of God's glory. However, God is said to appear to specific individuals extraordinarily in the latter. The Hebrew Bible is replete with this form of extraordinary instances. This unique sense is further divided into the spoken Word and the incarnate Word, the climax of divine revelation in the Bible. Revelation is the (Payne 1992):

1.The subject of affection in relation to religious encounters was central to Jonathan Edwards. According to Edwards (1957:96), 'the affections are no other, than the more vigorous and sensible exercises of the inclination and will of the soul'. Strobel (2020:298) argues that 'An affection, for Edwards, is not an emotion, but is a certain kind of willing (i.e. a vigorous and sensible willing)' towards God.

2.In this regard, Herman Bavinck argues that spiritual experiences are subjective and, therefore, must be authenticated by the written Word. He argues thus: 'The Holy Spirit is the great and powerful witness to Christ, objectively in Scripture, subjectively in the very hearts of human beings' (Bavinck 2003:503).

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[D]isclosure of some hidden truth, or the manifestation of some secret or mystery, as when God imparts [an] understanding of some truth to the intellect, or discloses one of His past, present, or future deeds. (p. 176)

Those who have religious encounters in contemporary times believe that their experiences are the same: a continuation or a test of what saints of old experienced. New spiritual encounters and the possibility of contradicting earlier revelations in the Judeo, Christian faith led to the close of the Canon to distinguish between authoritative religious encounters, which through the leadership of the Holy Spirit led to the composition of holy text from other ones which did not have the same authority. Although Christians receive the Holy Spirit through their union with Christ and, therefore, have unique spiritual encounters, such encounters, both personal and communal, are regarded as a fellowship of the Holy Spirit. Today, such encounters produce various effects in the lives of Christians in the form of prophecy, vision, discernment, dreams and healing. Because contemporary spiritual encounters seem to produce effects that are not always congruent with the written Word, it raises questions and objections regarding the sources of such encounters.

Further, given that the reception of the Bible is conceived under the inspiration of the Spirit of God, we need to emphasise the catalysing power of the Holy Spirit in hermeneutics, the science of Bible interpretation. Of course, rationalism believes that since the Bible contains several forms of genres, it should be read and interpreted as every other book.

In what follows, I will discuss religious encounters in Pentecostalism while considering the following questions:³ How does a Christian community or a nation know that the prophet is speaking through the Holy Spirit's power and not a foul spirit? Is it appropriate to consider Charismatic gifts valid evidence for genuine spiritual encounters? What is the purpose of religious experience or charismata to the community, and what epistemic authority do such experiences exert on the community with respect to biblical interpretation and the Christian life?

Pentecostalism

Pentecostalism today has a massive followership in Africa. Approximately 15% of African Christians are Pentecostals. Everything in Pentecostalism revolves around its understanding of the Holy Spirit, who empowers believers and grants them spiritual renewal. Pentecostals argue that the dramatic experience of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Acts of the Apostles has not changed. Taking Jesus's discussion in John 3 seriously as a point of departure, Pentecostalism emphasises being born again by water and the Spirit. Spiritual birth, in other words, sanctification and the notion of a second blessing, is a critical ingredient in the believers' lives. Every

³These questions are shaped by Leidenhag's (2021) chapter on 'Toward an Analytic Theology of Charismatic Gifts: Preliminary Questions', in James M. Arcadi and James T. Turner Jr., *T&T Clark Handbook of Analytic Theology*, pp. 281–294, London: Bloomsbury.

believer is expected to have this second blessing. The primary signs of being born or spiritual regeneration in Pentecostalism are speaking in tongues and prophecy. In other words, without these early signs, a Christian is not considered a Christian yet (Magbadelo 2004). It means every Christian today must experience the Holy Spirit personally. Apart from prophecy and speaking in tongues with which the devil is chased away, testimonies are another critical practice in Pentecostalism that climaxes spiritual experiences and the demonstration of faith (Anderson 2014).

The last and possibly the highest level of spiritual experience in Pentecostalism is the ability to perform miracles. As reiterated below, it is the fact that anointing breaks the yoke that marks one as a genuine man of God. Pentecostal pastors take it upon themselves that the proof of one's calling is the demonstration of power. Such pastors are dubbed 'miracle-working pastors'. These miracles are the centre of the Gospel in Pentecostalism. Some pastors specialise in delivering people from demons' possession, breaking generational curses and receiving word of knowledge and prophecy. Most Pentecostal pastors can boldly say, 'If I be a man of God' when prophesying or performing deliverance to demonstrate the authenticity of their pastoral calling to the extent that the emphasis is on the man or woman and not God. Beginning from Benson Idahosa,⁴ many pastors see themselves as embodying God's power. Today, most of these powerful men of God are tele-evangelists showcasing their powers (Magbadelo 2004). There have been many rumours that the so-called miracles and prophecies are staged to give credence to the pastor's authority. Some critics challenge the men of God to extend their gracious hands of healing to sick people in hospitals. However, to my knowledge, none have ever dared to do so. Of course, this does not discredit the authenticity of such dramatic religious experiences. However, it raises a few questions and objections.

Another medium through which the presence of the Holy Spirit is demonstrated is collective worship. During worship services, worshippers participate in lively singing and spontaneous prayers, eventually leading to speaking in tongues, prophecy, deliverance and testimonies. During deliverance, worshippers may exhibit dramatic signs like shaking uncontrollably and falling under the influence of the anointing. This explains the notion that *anointing breaks the yoke* in Pentecostalism. Ultimately, when the yokes are broken during deliverance, testimonies and thanksgiving become inevitable. Loveth (2011) argues that:

[T]elling of stories – the giving of testimonies – is central both to the tradition of black theology on the one hand and to Pentecostalism on the other...testimony...attests to the power of grace, healing, and transformation in the midst of adversity. (p. 153)

Pentecostal order of service, according to Pentecostal worshippers, is spirit-led and not mechanical as done in most

⁴Arch Bishop Idahosa is arguably one of the earliest televangelists in Africa. He founded the Church of Misson International around the 1960s and started his televangelism around the 1980s. He performed many miraculous signs, including raising people from death. He is a pace-setter for contemporary televangelists in Africa.

mainstream Christian denominations. They believe that such things as the liturgical order of service hinder the operation of the Holy Spirit. The revolving factor in Pentecostalism is the notion of the spirit of liberty. This notion leads to egalitarianism in worship, gives rise to spontaneity, and, in the end, the emphasis seems to be on feelings. The music, singing loudly, and the outpouring of joy are the heart of the worship. Without the aforementioned dramatic experiences, which are often absent in some mainstream Christian denominations, especially during worship, those churches are considered spiritually dead churches by Pentecostal preachers (Robbins 2004).

Pentecostal hermeneutics

As an essential wing of mainstream Christianity, Pentecostalism emphasises emotions, affection and ecstatic worship. The 'Holy Spirit possessed people ecstatically and gave them the inner strength and self-affirmation to survive' (Turner 2011:169). Associating hermeneutic as a science of biblical interpretation to Pentecostalism raises a few objections, given that Pentecostalism holds that the Bible contains the answers to every question humans can imagine and, therefore, was to be read, believed and obeyed without any need for serious exegetical interpretation because of their emphasis on perpetual spiritual encounters (Fee & Stuart 2004). However, the role of experience, when carefully observed, shapes how Pentecostals understand the meaning of a biblical text and how the whole of life is lived under the ever-present power of the Holy Spirit. 'The experience is formed by the expectation that what people in biblical times experienced with God is to be repeated in the contemporary experience' (Nel 2018: XI).

From the foregoing, one can deduce Pentecostal hermeneutics. This hermeneutics stems from the interpreter's personal experience with the Holy Spirit. Therefore, it is correct to refer to this hermeneutics as a Spirit-led Hermeneutics, which reads the Bible from '... the vantage of the day of Pentecost and the experience of the Spirit and Spirit baptism...' (Nel 2018:3). This Hermeneutic is different from the traditional science of interpretation because it is not rationally reflective, but a product of lived experience (Ellington 1996). Though not finely written in authoritative works of literature, there seems to be a universal consensus among Pentecostals that they read the Bible within a 'faith community that acknowledges the revelatory activity of the [Holy] Spirit' (Nel 2018:6).

Although one of the characteristics of the Bible is perspicuity, contemporary readers face tensions while reading it: the eternal relevance and its historical particularity. As such, hermeneutics as a science is valuable in understanding the message of the Bible. However, Pentecostalism, because of its insistence on the role of personal experience in understanding the message of the Bible, collapsed the author - context distinction with the *now*. In so doing, authorial intention and how the original audience understood the message are overlooked. Pentecostals are right to take the message of the

Bible at a firsthand value, but the Bible seems to teach various dispensations of God's relationship with humans. In that case, the dispensations need to be taken seriously in biblical interpretation (Fee & Stuart 2014).

Reuben Abati (2001) is believed to have stated that in Pentecostalism, the pastor:

[D]oesn't need to have attended any Bible College, as long as he can quote passages from the Bible and report to a bewildered congregation about what his *Daddy told him in the night*.⁵ (n.p.)

This conclusion has a serious theological implication. The centrality of the message is not about what the Bible says but what the pastor received in the night. In other words, it is about the pastor's spiritual encounter with God. These pastors argue that one only needs to tarry in the presence of the Lord to receive counsel from him on what to do or say. In what follows, I will analyse a few of these sayings in line with some biblical passages to see whether such experiences are epistemologically relevant to the Body of Christ.

Pentecostal religious experiences

Bishop David Oyedepo: Prosperity mandate

David Oyedepo is undoubtedly one of the most influential tele-evangelists of the 21st century. The Nigerian-born Bishop has this to say about his calling, especially the task of making people rich. Oyedepo (1992) argues that:

Specifically in the early hours of 26 August 1987, while getting out of bed to begin my morning devotion, the Spirit of the Lord spoke clearly to me, saying: 'Arise, get back home [talking of Africa] and make my people rich. (p. 7)

He has undoubtedly made himself rich because he is the second richest pastor in the world after Kenneth Copeland, according to Forbes.⁶ Oyedepo's worth is \$ 200 million. However, whether he has made people rich is a complex subject not explored through this article.

Oyedepo is said to have performed uncountable miracles, including raising at least three or so people from the dead. From the prosperity mandate, Oyedepo argues that no one is supposed to be poor, sick or suffer any loss when they are born again (Antombikums 2022). For instance, Oyedepo (2004) argues that:

You have been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb. The same mosquito that bits you, bits a sinner who lives in the kingdom of darkness, and he doesn't have malaria. Why is it then you that is born again, redeemed by the blood, that is suffering from

5. See Magbadelo Olushola (2004:22 [author's own emphasis]; cf. Abati 2001). Abati is not the only that has this impression about Pentecostal pastors in Nigeria. Except for recent developments, most Pentecostal preachers referred to the Seminaries and Bible Colleges as *Cemeteries* where the Holy is quenched and buried. A senior minister in my denomination who attended one of the Pentecostal Bible Colleges cautioned me against attending the premium Theological Institution in my context because he felt I would lose my spirituality in the pool of rigorous and rational academic debates.

6. Currently, there is no report on the richest pastors in the world in 2023. The last previous one, connected to Forbes, was in 2011. In that year, Oyedepo's worth was to be \$150 million. Whatsoever is his actual worth at the moment, there is no doubt that Oyedepo is a prosperous pastor.

malaria? That means it's an oppression. It's not [the] mosquito that has given you malaria, but the devil that is oppressing your health, so as to make you a victim of life. (p. 16)

As far as Oyedepo is concerned, sickness is a curse from the devil and/or a lack of faith. After being born again, everything related to the believer has to be positive. There are no hypothetical statements; the believers are expected to declare with faith that all is well, and it will certainly be so. It is a matter of 'name it, claim it' (Oyedepo n.d.). As shown below, there is no doubt that Christianity can only be lived by faith because it is impossible to please God without it. However, the prosperity mandate raises a few questions and objections. For instance, was there an actual rise from the dead? Are people as wealthy as Oyedepo believed to be his mandate? Are sickness curses from the devil? Why does the Christian community believe God is making it prosperous financially and healthwise through Oyedepo? We shall attempt to answer these questions towards the end of the article.

Prophecies: the state of nations

Between 2014 and 2022, Rev. Fr. Ejike Mbaka,⁷ a popular Nigerian Catholic Cleric of the Adoration Ministry (a charismatic wing of the Catholic Church), made many headlines for his prophecies concerning the nation's state. He argued in early 2015 that the then-presidential flag bearer of the All Progressive Congress (APC), Muhammadu Buhari, was God-sent to deliver Nigeria from the failure of the past administrations, especially Dr Goodluck Jonathan. He argues that Buhari was the Cyrus of our time and, therefore, was the only one qualified to lead Nigeria (Ezeamalu 2015).

Mbaka's rejection of Jonathan, a Catholic and his endorsement of Buhari, a Muslim, was one of the most shocking actions one would expect of a priest, given that Nigeria has been heavily polarised along religious lines. Why did Mbaka endorse Buhari and not Jonathan? It looks pretty obvious that God had probably spoken to Mbaka to reject a Southerner and Christian but to endorse a Northerner and a Muslim. Of course, his prophecy and campaign for Buhari yielded positive results, and Buhari became the President of Nigeria in 2015. However, a few years into Buhari's regime, Mbaka called for President Buhari's impeachment on security grounds (Njoku 2021:1).⁸ Buhari administration has come and gone, and people still wonder whether God spoke to Mbaka. In what way was or is Buhari a saviour of Nigeria? It is generally agreed that since the formation of Nigeria, it has never witnessed division as it did in the past 8 years under Buhari's administration. More Nigerians have become poor

7. Fr. Ejike Mbaka is an exception in the list because he is not a Pentecostal but a Catholic priest. However, Mbaka's views on charismatic, prophetism and emphasis on personal religious encounters, the fulfilment of prophecies as marks of true prophetism (of course, this is biblical) as argued by the Pentecostal pastors to authenticate their calling, are the same. The only difference between Mbaka and the Pentecostal pastors in Nigeria is denominational and not theological. See #Nigeria2015: Catholic priest, Ejike Mbaka, attacks Jonathan; wants President out (Ezeamalu 2015).

8. There is another claim that Mbaka turned against Buhari because he requested a contract, but Buhari refused to award, nor did he give any monetary gift to the ministry (Enugu 2021).

and lived below the poverty level since the inception of Nigeria (World Bank 2014).⁹ The country's security challenges deteriorated to the extent that it is estimated that about 15 Nigerians, especially Christians, died daily because of religious persecution, according to Open Doors 2021 (World Watch List 2023). The foregoing challenged Mbaka's understanding of salvation in the light of Christianity and all religions in Nigeria.

In the just-concluded Nigerian presidential elections, many prophecies also came up. Every presidential candidate had a prophecy favouring them. Each prophet claimed to have spoken as they heard from the Lord during a spiritual encounter. Oyakhilome (2023) argued that he had no choice but to bring God's message to the people as God directed him. He asserted that he saw one of the presidential candidates with a biblical name who was doubtful about winning the election, and he prayed for him in the vision to win the election.

Another pastor gave a contrary prophecy. He argued that it was Atiku Abubakar who was going to win the election. This pastor has been known by the name *onye ruo uka ofu nanya*, which means, *if you doubt it, you will see it with your eyes*. Such a name indicates that every prophetic utterance made by this prophet must come to pass. However, the current reality negates this assertion (Jungle Journalist Media 2023).

On another side, a Kenyan pastor named Wiseman Daniel prophesied the outcome of the Kenyan presidential election, which turned out accurately. Daniel argued that he does not speak if God has not spoken; as a result, he was hesitant to speak but in riddles. He stated that he saw the Kenyan flag flying in a new dimension. On one side of the flag, there was a gap between the alphabet's V and X; on the other, there was a gap between the alphabet's Q and S. The interpretation is that William Ruto was to win the election, and he won. Is the fulfilment of the prophecy an indication that God spoke to Daniel? Probably yes and no. The devil also performs miracles. The only difference is the source and the prophet's relationship with God.

Prophets and pastors in Africa: strange instructions

Through the reception of the word of knowledge, many prophets and pastors in Africa can now tell what is one's mobile number and bank account, mention names of relatives or friends and reveal much personal information that ordinarily should not be known to the prophets. In addition, they started to give strange instructions to their community or congregation recently. For instance, Legeso Daniel (Lesego 2014a), a South African pastor, asked his church members to drink petrol and, on another occasion, asked them to eat grasses since God said that all herbs were given as food for human consumption (Lesego 2014b).

9. Between 2013 and 2014, because Boko Haram intensified its efforts and other challenges, the poverty rate was as follows: South: 16%, West: 28%, North West: 45% and North East: 50%. There was also a slighter increase in the economy before the end of Goodluck Jonathan's administration (cf. Worldbank 2021).

One cannot deny that different *grasses* mean different things to different people. However, asking someone to eat what was traditionally given to goats is objectionable, not minding the medical implications of such an act. As for drinking petrol, that is a different issue entirely.

Further in the list of strange commands is the call by a Ghanaian pastor (Kansiime 2022, 07:00–11:45), to female congregants to strip naked during cross-over service for him to bathe them in preparation for the new year, and they did, and he bathed them at the altar. Another Ghanaian pastor also asked his members to make room for the Holy Spirit by stripping themselves of all their clothing and praying naked in the church (2022). Further, a Nigerian pastor sucked women's breasts during deliverance in the church because that was the only way to deliver them from demonic possession. He *sucks out the demons* through their breasts (Wayua 2023).

Although the three pastors seem to portray the Holy Spirit as incapable of operating where humans are appropriately dressed, others seem to demonstrate the contrary, as seen above. One Zimbabwean pastor, Paul Sanyangore (2017), called God during Church worship through a mobile phone, and they were seen conversing with God, while another pastor, sold tickets to members so that he could take them to Heaven (Egypt Today 2018). Why are the pastors giving conflicting prophecies in the case of Nigeria? Are different spirits speaking to them, or are they speaking by one Holy Spirit? In the case of the other prophets, why are they also giving us conflicting impressions about the Holy Spirit and God's power? In other words, is there unity in the Spirit? Before answering these numerous questions, let's start with critical observations.

Critical observations

One aspect of Pentecostalism is the notion of the progressiveness of divine revelation. Notwithstanding one's position on the notion of progressive revelation, we cannot deny the fact that 'Scripture [*is*] available to address each new generation with promises, warnings, exhortations, laments, and so on that can count as continuing divine speech' (Green 2021:25). In that case, religious experiences are a continual aspect of the Christian faith because every time a believer reads the Bible, she is expected to hear God speaking to her as it was the case in when such speech was made to the earlier recipient in a new illocutionary act. The Spirit has always been part of communicating God's word to humans. This explains the notion of biblical inspiration (understood differently today), which insists that the Bible has two authors: divine and human. The nature of the relationship between these two authors is a different subject altogether. According to Davis (2019), inspiration is:

[T]hat influence of the Holy Spirit on the writing of the Bible that ensures that the words of its various texts are appropriate both for the role that they play in Scripture and for the overall salvific purpose of Scripture itself. (p. 48)

Pentecostalism is right to hold that every believer can experience the Holy Spirit personally because he exists dynamically in the world. The argument that the Holy is active is true and aligns with biblical testimony. However, the problem arises when certain gifts and not the fruit of the Spirit, as referred to by the apostle Paul in Galatians 5, are chiefly viewed as the early and continual signs of spiritual regeneration. Signs of the Baptism in the Holy Spirit in Pentecostalism are limited to speaking in tongues, prophecy and healing (Anderson 2014).

It is more meaningful to see the Holy Spirit's role in the Christian life and the interpretation of the Bible as that of a *map-maker*, remapping an ancient Library of God's work in the world (Green 2021). Our experiences of the divine in secret or corporate worship should guide us into the biblical text's meaning. They are not meant to be a *stand-alone* revelation. When this happens, our experiences tend to undermine the revealed Word, which the Incarnate Word promised to send the *Map-maker* to provide a new illocutionary role.

Notably, prophecy in the New Testament is viewed from a subjective point of view and, therefore, the subjectivity of the prophet's spirit to the prophet. In I Thessalonians 5:19–22, Romans 12:6–8 and I Corinthians 12:28;14:1, prophecy was discussed in the context of unity because spirituality or being filled with the same spirit means unity in the spirit. Prophecies in Paul are associated with intelligibility, wisdom, knowledge, discernment and testing because the prophet's spirit is subject to the prophet (Hogeterp 2018). Further, the notion of second blessings or doctrine of consequence and subsequence extrapolated from the dramatic experience of the Acts of apostles (Ac 2:4), the testimony of the Samaritans (Ac 8:4–19), Cornelius (Ac 10:44–8) and the Ephesian disciples (Ac 19:1–7) do not present a normative model of the charismata for all Christians in all generations. This assertion is over-generalised and has led to falsifications. After all, there were also those who used familiar spirits, and the apostles could differentiate between such spirits and the Spirit of God.

John Locke (1975, IV, 19) argues that 'the doxastic gifts (e.g. prophecy, dreams, visions, words of knowledge and wisdom) required further evidence from publicly available gifts (healings, miracles)' (Leidenhag 2021:290). Every religious adherent would want this to be the case, just as Pentecostalism insists that true signs of Christianity are miracles. However, what about the message of the cross? Christianity is not always about the demonstration of power. God also demonstrates himself in weakness and subtlety. Paul argues in 1 Corinthians 1:18 that the message of the cross is foolishness to the Greeks and a stumbling block to the Jews who demanded *miraculous signs*. We may need to ask ourselves if we are better than the Jews in the time of Jesus for demanding miraculous signs to authenticate our faith.

Although Pentecostalism believes in spontaneity in church worship because the Holy Spirit is leading and, therefore,

tends to be flexible and rejects any mechanical form of worship, there seems to be a negation to this notion. A few contemporary preachers dictate how the Holy Spirit should work during deliverance. They decide when people should fall to the ground under the influence of the anointing.

The foregoing has presented us with a conflict: Is it a cooperation between the Holy Spirit and the man God? Alternatively, is the Holy Spirit leading or the man of God? It seems the answer is probably the latter, given that Pentecostalism emphasises freedom of expression in worship. Encountering the Holy Spirit in Pentecostalism is a source of knowledge. In other words, since Christianity is a revealed religion and the Holy Spirit is the greatest teacher as promised by Christ, a Pentecostal notion of epistemology has the Holy Spirit as its point of departure. Because religious experiences in Pentecostalism are essentially the basis of knowledge, they are more than merely subjective emotions or feelings but genuine encounters with God, the giver of all knowledge. In that case, such religious experiences are immediate revelations from God (Robbins 2014).

The Christian community: the validity of a prophet's communication by the Holy Spirit

It is obvious that although religious encounters are personal, they do not belong to the one who experiences them. The Holy Spirit is the primary agent of charismatic gifts; as seen above, the human agent is not always wholly passive. It is a cooperation between the Holy Spirit and the human whose faculties are fully functioning (Leidenhag 2021). As argued above, the Spirit guided the human authors of the Bible to ensure truthfulness and faithfulness to the will of God. It seems this is not the case, as seen in the spiritual experiences mentioned above.

With the recent studies in psychology, especially in autism, which revolves around the notion of shared or joint attention, we can imagine how a community can, as a single organism, listen to the voice of the Spirit and, therefore, determine when the Holy Spirit speaks. Analytic theologians have begun to rely on such proposals to develop second-person epistemological accounts of religious experiences (Leidenhag 2021):

In the case of charismatic gifts, attention may be shared dyadically with the Holy Spirit, such that the congregation becomes aware of the Spirit's presence, love, or voice, or triadically as the Spirit may prompt a person's attention toward a third object, such as, a person in need, the persistence of a certain sin in one's life, or a passage of scripture. (p. 282)

As stated above, Paul emphasised the unity of the Spirit in his discussion on prophecy and charismatism. Further, one of the characteristics of the written Word is perspicuity and congruity. Therefore, when the prophet whose spirit is subjected to him speaks unintelligibly, and his prophecy contradicts a vast amount of the testimony of the Scripture, their prophecy is questionable. However, a community that

believes such a prophet without testing the prophet's spirit is not less questionable than the prophet. For instance, the conflicting prophecies of the Nigerian Church and the acceptance of such prophecies raise many questions and objections. Further, obeying the instructions of stripping naked for the Holy Spirit to indwell the believer or sucking the demons out of the worshipper through her breast and commanding the worshippers to eat grass and drink gasoline are unintelligible and incongruent with common sense. One has no reason to doubt that such faith communities are either unknowledgeable about the scriptural teachings or do not possess the Holy Spirit to discern when the prophet is speaking by a strange spirit.

Biblical interpretation and Christian life: purpose and epistemic authority of religious experiences in the community

Undoubtedly, religious experiences, especially revelatory forms of experiences, have epistemic values to those with such experiences. Such experiences could enhance the affectivity of worshippers, like having peace of mind and absolute dependence on the transcendent. However, such experiences will likely not provide valid grounds for the existence of the transcendent for those who do not have such encounters. For instance, that the risen Lord appeared to his disciples and spent many days with them before ascending to Heaven has been considered hallucinatory (Wiebe 2006). Notwithstanding, if such experiences do not contradict the written word, they could be complementary in *biblicising* our current experiences into salvation history.

There is no doubt that apart from the epistemological significance of religious encounters, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on every individual has present and teleological significance to the Body of Christ. This is the case when Paul argues that:

There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work. Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the *common good*.¹⁰ (1 Cor 12:4-7 [NIV])

Paul argues that prophecy, wisdom and knowledge, including tongues, are eschatologically limited because they will pass away, and only love is eternal (1 Cor 13). In other words, love is the litmus test of the charismata because their overall purpose is to build, encourage and console members of the body of Christ (Hogeterp 2018). No matter one's level of *building* the Body of Christ, such effort might be in vain without love because love is the litmus test of charismatism. Further, since the gifts are for building the Body of Christ,

¹⁰Emphasis added. A host of spiritual gifts have been associated with the Bible, and the list may not be exhaustive. Some of these gifts include: Serving, hospitality, administration, apostle, discernment, evangelism, prophecy, preaching, exhortation, comforting, giving, healing, knowledge, teaching, speaking in tongues, mercy and the like. Emphasising a few of these gifts without emphasising the fruit of the spirit (love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and *self-control* Gal 5:22-23) is reductionistic.

they must agree with each other and the Bible, intelligible and clear enough for everyone to understand.

Further, Paul stated that: 'But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law' (Gal 5:22–23). In that case, when a Christian community is short of the *fruit* of the Spirit but exhibits a high level of the other charismatic gifts, one wonders if such a community has learned anything from Christ. Calvin (1965) argues that:

Christ washes us that we may live a holy and unblameable life before God and not to return to the rolling of our pollution but that we may retain through our life the purity which we once received; the true beauty of the Church consists in this conjugal chastity that is, in holiness and innocence; not in the opinion of men but in the eyes of the Lord. (p. 207)

This follows that, through regeneration, the Church as a community of Christ followers should differ from a decaying and perverse society.

However, this seems to be the contrary in our society today. Moral decadence and the African climate of corruption are negative indicators against the said multiple religious experiences. Is there true revivalism in the African Church? In my interaction with some businessmen who are themselves members of Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches, I was shocked to find out that when Church members buy items, the buyer determines what is written on the receipt. In most cases, the figures are always highly inflated. This way of corruption is not limited to Church members but pastors. Many Christians in Nigeria will always want to cheat. In his book, *The Trouble with Nigeria*, Achebe (1983) argues that 'stopping an average Nigerian from being corrupt is like stopping a goat from eating Yam'. Firstly, corruption is not food, so an average Nigerian should be able to live without it. Secondly, is the statement exaggerated? I do not think so. The level of corruption, despite multiple religious encounters and prophetic voices, reveals that those experiences are probably not genuine. This is because, as seen in Acts 2, after the dramatic experiences, the timid disciples became bold to intimidate tyranny, darkness and all forms of abnormality. One of the greatest signs was that they acted like Christ; they loved each other and shared everything in common. In other words, they died in the flesh and lived for Christ and their neighbours. Whether this is the case in Africa is left for the reader to decide.

Conclusion

No doubt, religious encounters are essential to the Christian faith, and it is impossible not to witness them in Christianity, however subjective they may be. Further, charismatic gifts, which are products of religious encounters, are essential for building the Body of Christ. In fact, spiritual encounters are revelatory and constitute immediate revelation and part of God's divine providence. In other words, spiritual encounters have epistemic relevance when appropriated congruently to the Bible. However, we have argued that,

obviously, they cannot stand alone. They have to complement the written Word because the Holy Spirit, who acts as a *Map-maker*, does so to provide a new illocutionary act. These gifts are meant to edify the Body of Christ and not to promote the interest of the one possessing them. In the end, these gifts must be tested by love and holiness. The Christian community is justified in believing in spiritual gifts, especially prophecies, words of knowledge or wisdom, only when the foregoing are considered.

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