

# **African Pentecostalism and Mediatized Self-Branding in Catholic (Flanders) Belgium**

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## **Abstract**

Although scholarly research on African Pentecostalism's appropriation of the media is expanding, little has been done to analyse the faith's exuberant media self-branding by English-speaking West African Pentecostal actors in Catholic Flanders. While Belgium has a well-developed media infrastructure, limited studies have ascertained the extent to which the media is harnessed by migrant faith communities. However, for Belgium's English-speaking West African Pentecostals, the use of various media technologies has become a pivotal agency for recasting and self-branding migrant Pentecostalism. Mindful of the public's disaffection against its expressive spirituality and worship, this study accounts for how Pentecostal actors use the media to reinvigorate faith, transmit spiritual power and respond to the public's rumpus of its faith convictions.

## **Introduction, scope and methodology**

Catholic Flanders in the north of Belgium has seen a growing rise in minority religions brought by migrants (Juchtmans 2014: 55; Godwin 2013a: 90-94). African Pentecostalism, which benefitted from the spike in migration and return of Protestantism to Belgium is one such example (Godwin 2013a: 154-155; Maskens 2012: 397-409; Bundy 1986: 52). However, unlike Belgium's highly established and much studied Moroccan and Turkish communities (Timmerman et al. 2017; Lesthaeghe 2000), African Pentecostalism has not received sustained critical analysis even though the increasing presence of African Churches is poised to transform the nexus of migration and religion. Thus, even though minority religions are often exposed to stigmatization (Goffman 2014) and resistance as they agitate for visibility among dominant

host communities (Scott 1999; Horsely 2005), African Pentecostalism's mediatised self-branding has not been carefully studied, as are other ethnic minorities' uses of the media (Dhoest 2015; Dhoest et al. 2012; Sinardet/Mortelmans 2006). Africans are a global people (Castles/ Miller 2009: 148), for whom religion (especially Pentecostalism) helps to comprehend moments of departure from home, migration through rugged terrain and eventual integration in the receiving countries (Goždiak/ Shandy 2002: 129-130; Gerloff 2000: 277).

The scope of this essay is threefold: First it discusses how the emergence of African Pentecostalism coalesced with new media technologies to go global. Second, it articulates the Pentecostal uses of the media in a climate of parody to recast difficult migratory experiences, reinvigorate faith, transmit spiritual power and respond to the public's rumpus against its faith convictions. Third, mindful of the complexities of life for Africans in Belgium, the essay examines how Pentecostals use the media to achieve integration and prosperity in the land of their sojourns.

Finally, the methodology I used to collect and interpret data for this study requires clarification. First, this study grew out of my pastoral involvement in and research on African Pentecostal Churches in Brussels and Antwerp. This involvement, which began in 2010 and continues up to the present, allowed for the possibility to employ theological ethnography (Scharen 2015; Lord 2012; Ganzevoort/ Roeland 2014) so as to reflect upon the lived realities of English-speaking West African Pentecostal Churches in Belgium. As a trained theologian, I assessed through participant observation carried out during weekly church meetings and special events, how the sombre realities of life inspired Pentecostals to form habits that are necessary for integration and the negotiation of the unintended exigencies of life for migrants in Belgium. A second process that was used in the collection of data for this study is grounded in Belgium's complex political federation, which assigns the regulation of the media to the regional governing communities (Christians/ Wattier 2012). One needs no reminder that in situations of increased Islamic terrorism and radicalisation, the espousal of any religious faith and discourses they generate, are likely to incite intense public scrutiny. Accordingly, using primary sources obtained from key players such as *Vlaamse Radio en Televisieomroeporganisatie*, *Tertio* and the *Verbond van Vlaamse Pinkstergementen*, the study gauged public opinion in order to identify how those discourses reshaped interpretations of the broadcast of religious

programming in Flanders. Third, while the nomenclature African Pentecostalism is employed throughout this study, it is necessary that I delineate who the main actors are and the discursive perspectives they bring to the public media and religion debate in Flanders. Whereas Belgium attracts many African Pentecostals from its former colonies of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Rwanda and Burundi as well as from Latin America (Maskens 2012), this study focuses on Pentecostal actors from the English-speaking region of West Africa where Africa's new Pentecostalism is most buoyant (White 2007: 11). These West African Pentecostal actors who come from Cameroon, Liberia, Nigeria and Ghana, provide the research desideratum from which the story line is told. This study highlights how the use of media technologies by English-speaking West African Pentecostal actors and figures is meant to promote Pentecostalism as a viable faith that meets the needs of African compatriots who are now living in Belgium.

#### **African Pentecostalism – definition, taxonomies and characteristics**

Africa, Asia, Latin and Caribbean America have emerged as the most fertile terrain where Christian populations are budding and the faith is experiencing a buoyant resurgence (Walls 2011: 1). This prognosis implies that the future of global Christianity is poised to be shaped by its non-western compatriots whose theologies will be crucial in understanding the new allure of the faith (Sanneh/ Carpenter 2005: 4). In Africa, there is an upswing of adherents, who clearly identify with the spiritual impulses of Pentecostal and Charismatic movements (Hocken 2009: 29). Along with other Christian denominations such as Protestantism, Evangelicalism, Holiness Revivalism and Lutheranism, Pentecostalism (both in Africa and elsewhere) is often thought to be a new Christian movement which was founded a little over a century ago to bring what was perceived as Holy Spirit inspired revival and renewal to global Christianity (Robeck Jr. 2014: 15). However, unlike other movements such as those cited above, Pentecostalism does not have a centrally unified structure, which coordinates its ecclesiology and global missionary expansion. This new church phenomenon brought about much variety and features that widens the fortunes of the movement (Hocken 2009: 33). Individual actors, claiming to have received divine revelation and mandate from the Holy Spirit to engage in global missions, shape the multiple Pentecostal narratives associated with the movement (Anderson/ Hollenweger 1999).

African Pentecostalism, as this new development is now known (Anderson 2018), grew out of the Evangelical Bible study fellowships and campus ministries of the 1970s and 80s to become the most dominant posture of Christianity on the continent. Using a wide variety of taxonomies such as Pentecostalism, Neo-Pentecostalism, Charismatic and Neo-Charismatic to describe this development (Anderson 2014: 131-135), Pentecostalism is anchored among the young and highly educated African urban élite whose distinctive uses of new social media technologies is unmatched. Aware of this, the leaders of Africa's newer Pentecostalism, (who are themselves educated professionals), have embraced modern media technologies and cemented their growing influence on this media-savvy constituency (Kalu 2008: 103-108). For some of these Pentecostal prelates, maintaining a presence on the internet and mass media platforms exemplify entry into an arena where personal connections with diverse audiences could be forged (Wagner 2003: 120; Quebedeaux 1982: 10). It is also an indispensable marker of the progressive character of contemporary Pentecostals, whose use of the media engenders new domains for church and pastoral ministry (Hackett 2009; Asamoah-Gyadu 2007; Ukah 2003). Pentecostalism's online activity corresponds with the thesis that the internet has brought about a new way of "seeing and doing religion and spirituality" (Hoover 2006: 314).

In a postcolonial African context, Pentecostals desire to break free from the vestiges of missionary Evangelical Protestantism which did not engage effectively with lived pathologies and spiritual realities (Meyer 2004: 458). But, when Pentecostalism arose, it gave instantaneous form and meaning to existing cultural questions and provided responses that were harmonious with the religious sensibilities of African Christians (Anderson 2014: 135). Consequently, Africa's new Pentecostalism speaks of evil spirits, demons and witchcraft that are held suspect for the occurrence of evil. It prides itself in its ability to mediate human wellbeing and promises prosperity, health, wealth, and power to a people who are trapped in the dehumanizing misery of destitution. It claims to be able to fight and conquer evil enchantments and deliver people from the debilitating grip of demonic forces (Mitchell 2004: 107-111). It is this home-grown version of Christianity developed by Africans in Africa, for Africans everywhere, which is attracting many followers. By offering alternative spiritual discourses that resonate with African culture (McGrath 2002: 109), and by presenting its leaders as powerful prophets who can control evil spirits (White 2007: 11), African Pentecostalism seems to have

succeeded where other Christian denominations have failed. Pentecostalism's thriving popularity, cultural and spiritual timbre is cultivating theological nuances that creatively interface with traditional African cosmologies (Freeman 2012: 12-13).

Furthermore, African Pentecostals claim to mediate a revival of New Testament Apostolic Christianity, which in their estimation, had either been lost or nauseatingly compromised. Pentecostals do so by developing theologies based on the authority of the Bible, Charismatic revivals and the African cultural context (Clarke 2014: 35-36). This explains why African Pentecostalism is gravitating away from the perceived ineffectiveness they believe is embedded in missionary Christianity to a conscientious engagement with the cultural currents of African Christianity. This contextualized approach acquired by the faith impelled some observers to argue that this Church development has occurred "outside of and unconnected to the older denominations or to the Pentecostal Movement" (Hocken 2009: 29). For this reason, African Pentecostalism emphasizes the centrality of the Holy Spirit who is believed to reside in and transform individual Christians. Due to the accessibility of information and communication technologies, African Pentecostalism spread exponentially, with newly founded ecclesiastical centres in Africa attracting scores of faithful clientele to its rank and file. The increasing population of younger Africans engaged in global migration has given Pentecostalism an international posture which facilitated its swift export abroad where the faith is now reshaping Christian spirituality among the African Christian Diaspora in Europe and North America (Adogame/ Shankar 2013; Währisch-Oblau 2012; Ludwig/ Asamoah-Gyadu 2011). Thus, African Pentecostalism perceives globalization, mass media, the internet and jet travel, as offering tremendous opportunities to rebrand this new Christian movement into "God's end time army" (Ojo 2006). Spurred by the "blessed-reflex" principle, these new Pentecostals migrate from regions of Church renewal to strengthen Christian witness in the global north where the faith is steadily ebbing away (Ross 2003: 164-165).

### **Belgium, African Pentecostalism and the Media**

Until the carefully choreographed arrival of Moroccan and Turkish workers in the 1960s, Belgium was not the preferred destination for migrants (Timmerman et al. 2017; Lesthaeghe 2000). However, after bilateral

agreements with Italian workers collapsed (Grimmeau 1992: 119), and following the strengthening of industrialization and the creation of the federal state in 1970, Belgium, especially Flanders, needed scores of unskilled migrant workers who would keep factory production up to speed with market demands (Sinardet/ Mortelmans 2006: 428). This situation gave rise to a migration policy that attracted Sub-Saharan Africans who chose to settle in the richer Flemish north where employment opportunities were higher than in the poorer Walloon south. Perhaps motivated by media reports circulating in countries of origin where images of the successes of African migrants are prominent, Belgium now hosts a variety of African immigrant populations, who came not just from its former colonies of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda and Burundi but from countries further afield such as Nigeria, Cameroon and Ghana. This diverse minority Sub-Saharan African populations challenge the migration systems theory which argues that migrants are more likely to emigrate to western countries with whom they had colonial ties (Castles/ Miller 2009: 27-28).

The choice of Belgium as the new destination to which many Sub-Saharan Africans emigrate relates to its relatively liberal policy on immigration that allow for quicker processing of family reunification applications (Mazzucato et al. 2015: 149). However, even if this inertia still attracts African migrants, many others with no existing filial ties to immigrants who are already living in Belgium, are still drawn to the country on an entirely different set of variables. Some came at the behest of a burden they claim to have received for missions, evangelism and Church planting. As the life history of Simon Khan, an English speaking Cameroonian pastor who in 2007 founded End Time Harvester International Ministries (ETHIM) in Antwerp does indicate (Bangura 2017a: 24-25), African migrants are coming as missionaries and Church planters. Although their initial intentions are to offer African migrants a safe place where they could experience spirituality and participate in corporate worship similar to those at home, they desire to evangelise other populations in Belgium. These transnational missions-minded Africans perceive Belgium, like the rest of western Europe, as being in a dare spiritual state because of the pervasive influence of secularisation and dismal waning of the influence of Christianity from public life (Adogame 2009: 488-490). Their prescriptions are corroborated by other observers who argue that Belgium is "one of the most needy countries in Europe, with great spiritual apathy and faith largely banished from the public sphere" (Mandryk 2010),

where affinity to Roman Catholicism has plummeted (Dobbelaere 2010: 75-76). Therefore, it is urgent that Christian missions to Belgium and Europe be relaunched because the continent is thought to have long drifted away from the very Christian faith European missionaries had brought to Africa. By immigrating to Europe and establishing migrant Churches, African Pentecostals hope to bring back Christianity to a secularized continent (Hanciles 2003: 148; Ter Haar 1998: 1-2; Walls 1996: 258).

In spite of its highly developed media infrastructure, Belgium's complex federation that came into effect in 1970 and culminated with the introduction of three communities (Flemish, French and German-speaking) and three regions (Flemish, Walloon and Brussels-capital region) in 1980, represents a multifarious legal source for the regulation of mass media. This federal amalgamation implies that European and state legislation have to be divulged to the communities and regions where they are enshrined into the local legal context. On the 8 August 1980, the special "Television and Radio Diffusion Act," transferred responsibility for the administration of cultural and teaching matters to the three regional communities that make up the federation. In Articles 4 and 5 of this legislation, the media which is seen as a cultural phenomenon, is independently regulated by the regional communities who assume responsibility and exercise control over broadcasting content (Christians/ Wattier 2012). This structure requires that regional parliamentary debates have to be held any time significant changes are to be made in media legislation.

Media portrayals of African Pentecostalism heightened in Belgium after Gilles Rémiche released his 2006 blockbuster documentary titled *Marchands de Miracle* [Miracle Sellers] (Rémiche 2006). While the film is set in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (a former Belgian colony) where bad governance, endemic poverty and social inequalities are thought to have beguiled people into Pentecostalism, it did not clarify, from a sociology of religion perspective, what constitutes Pentecostalism. The documentary played on public suspicions of the supposed fraudulence ingrained in African Pentecostalism, which could have infiltrated Belgium through the minority Congolese Pentecostal Churches. However, as Stewart Hoover makes plain, media products meant for public consumption, must be subjected to vigorous fact-based analysis, which takes three parameters into consideration: First it must be evaluated from the perspective of the institutions, structures and professional cohorts responsible for producing

media. Second, the content, messaging systems, or texts they produce need to be assessed. And third, the effects of those messages on various audiences need to be impartially ascertained (Hoover 2010: 306). What Hoover's scheme does suggest is that Remiche's documentary perhaps represents a certain institution for whom a specific message was crafted to produce a desired impact on audiences. Therefore, even though it is not surprising that such media representations heightened suspicion against African Pentecostalism in Belgium, they have been challenged.

Oliver Barlet, for instance, does not hide his antipathy but expresses misgivings about Remiche's generalized representations of African Pentecostalism. In his response to the documentary, Barlet relates his objections by using the perspective of the followers of African Pentecostalism. Barlet's central criticism argues,

[...] if these Pentecostal churches are so popular, it is not due to the pseudo-naïveté of the followers, but rather to their appeal to the popular imagination, offering people not only hope amidst the harshness of their living conditions, but also integrity [...] (Barlet 2016, chapter 2.4.4. A Moral Relationship to the Sacred).

Even if African Pentecostalism is not convergent with the needs of secular Belgium, the fact that Sub-Saharan Africans are drawn to it, should have restrained the producers to a fairer cinematographic analysis. Similarly, in a context of Islamic radicalization, the legal provisions available to migrant religions for the broadcast of religious programming are rather fuzzy (Geybels et al. 2009: 17). The implications are that minority religions are not only underrepresented in public media, but they now have to deal with stigmatization (Shiramizu 2000: 283) as well as public resistance and consternation (Feld/ Manco 2000: 28) in a context where the laicisation of civil society has long challenged institutionalized Catholicism (Dobbelaere 2010: 75-78). Contending with such media polarisation impacts negatively on the efforts of minority religions to clarify the purposes of their faith, participate in the weekly corporate worship services undisturbed and to strive for visibility in dominant and sometimes hostile host communities.

In a recent Flemish parliamentary debate, questions were brought against the editorial decision taken by the *Vlaamse Radio en Televisieomroeporganisatie* (VRT or Flemish Radio and Television Broadcasting Organization) to air two



Islamic religious worship services on public television each year.<sup>1</sup> The VRT defended its planned broadcast on the grounds, that it both contributed to inter-philosophical dialogue and provided an open space for the public examination and verification of different faith convictions. This, they argue, will offer the public an unabridged access into religious practices and the theological thinking that informs them and result in public understanding of the religious other. Through its longstanding tradition of broadcasting religious services, VRT maintains that people who, due to ill health, age and other unforeseen circumstances, are unavoidably absent from the weekly worship services, could still participate through television and benefit from their preferred philosophies of life, as if they were present. However, the Flemish Media minister called into question the rationale for the VRT's judgement. In his statement to the Flemish parliament given on the 5 December 2017, Sven Gatz is said to have observed:

[...] the broadcasting of religious services is not the 'core tasks, nor the autonomous decision-making power' of the VRT. Broadcasting a worship service is not an editorial program. (Celis 2017)

This objection was justified by severe budgetary constraints, low viewing figures and lack of quality from some of the religious players who were featured on these broadcasts (Delpoorte 2017), as well as the historic rancour between liberals and institutionalized religion (Dobbelaere 2010: 73-75). However, the potential impact of the Flemish minister's comment were that this was probably hinting at a possible discontinuation of the broadcast of all religious programming on the VRT, not just those connected with Islam. In response, Emmanuel Van Lierde, Editor in Chief of the Flemish Christian weekly magazine *Tertio*, released a statement in which he implored Flemish parliamentarians to reconsider discontinuing religious broadcasts from the VRT. Part of Van Lierde's statement avers:

Islamophobia encourages Islam bashing. The aversion and resistance to Islam lead to the sacrifice of everything that has to do

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<sup>1</sup> The first of these Islamic worship services was broadcasted on 11 December 2017 and attracted 60,000 viewers. See, "Eerste islamitische eredienst haalt meer dan 60.000 kijkers op VRT," <https://www.hln.be/nieuws/binnenland/eerste-islamitische-eredienst-haalt-meer-dan-60-000-kijkers-op-vrt~a4c8d5cc/> (Accessed 12 January 2018).

with religion, on the 'altar of neutrality'. Yes, the worship services are the victims today. Religion regulated to the private sphere, behind the front door, to the cellars and the garages of society, only feeds polarization and radicalization. Believers deepen and strengthen their identity just because they feel threatened and to defend themselves against the critics. To oppress the other and to fall into we-side stories do not benefit an open society. We cannot allow that. Dear politicians, give space to the philosophies of life. What is visible is verifiable. Hopefully, next Thursday, December 14th, the Flemish Parliament's committee for Culture, Youth, Sport and Media will prevail common sense and not the fear or 'dogmatism of the secularists' so that dialogue wins over polarization and hostility. (Emmanuel Van Lierde, Editor in Chief, *Tertio*, 2017)

Van Lierde's argument raises serious concerns that have far reaching implications which could probably hamper attempts to help stem the hatching of religious radicalization that could cause terrorism. If religion constitutes a major source of individual solidarity and cohesion within society (Durkheim/ Bellah 1973: 159; Durkheim 2005: 35-45), and if religion is useful in the preservation of ethnic and cultural boundaries among immigrant communities (Warner 2016: 123-134), then as Van Lierde's argument does make clear, inter-philosophical understanding should not be compromised by religious phobia. When the theological thinking that informs minority religions become visible, the public could use that visibility to evaluate the faith against the backdrop of preserving social cohesion within the state (Sinardet/ Mortelmans 2006: 429-430). Consequently, while several commentators have pleaded for reason to prevail over fear (Stembrouck 2017; Debaets/ Delva 2017),<sup>2</sup> *Tertio* went further and developed an online petition in which it calls for the retention of religious broadcasts on

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<sup>2</sup> Wide spectrums of people have weighed in on the issue, urging caution on the part of the Flemish parliament. See for instance: Jurgen Stembrouck, "Laat VRT zich voor de kar van de gelovigen spannen?" *Opinie, Knack* 20 December 2017. <http://www.knack.be/nieuws/belgie/laat-vrt-zich-voor-de-kar-van-de-gelovigen-spannen/article-opinion-941685.html> (Accessed 10 January 2018); Bianca Debaets & Paul Delva, "Erediensten VRT: 'Waarom grijze neutraliteit boven kleurrijke diversiteit verkiezen?'" *Opinie, Knack*, 17 December 2017. <http://www.knack.be/nieuws/belgie/erediensten-vrt-waarom-grijze-neutraliteit-boven-kleurrijke-diversiteit-verkiezen/article-opinion-940225.html> (Accessed 10 January 2018).

the VRT. *Tertio* hopes that by gathering enough signatures, it could persuade the Flemish parliament from rescinding religious broadcasts on the VRT. Although the parliamentary debate was not aimed at other philosophies such as Pentecostalism, however, the *Verbond van Vlaamse Pinkstergemeenten* (Flemish Pentecostal Union) circulated *Tertio's* petition, urging its membership to sign it. This move is meant to protect the right to broadcast religious programs faith communities have enjoyed on the VRT (Celis 2017).<sup>3</sup> It must be noted however that unlike Islam, African Pentecostalism is not perceived as a public danger. Nevertheless, the regulatory conditions for the broadcast of religious programming are still restricted. Because the media and religion are not mutually exclusive, African Pentecostals believe that the role of the media is to represent appropriately the religious convictions of all peoples, not just Africans. Accordingly, African Pentecostals anticipate a change in the public's portrayal of its leadership and lampooning of its expressive worship liturgies (Bangura 2017a: 17-18). Pentecostals believe that such media caricatures paint an unfair picture of the movement's spiritual impulses. For this reason, African Pentecostals are compelled to strengthen their use of the various social media technologies to reframe the leaders' personality and Churches. Further, by its live online broadcasts of healing and deliverance rituals, the movement intends to contrast the vibrancy of Pentecostalism among African Diaspora communities with a disenchanting European public where institutionalized religion has long dissipated and lost influence.

### **African Pentecostal Media Appropriations in Belgium**

In a conflated media climate where any religious broadcasts are likely to aggravate public anger, African Pentecostalism is using various media outlets to recast difficult migratory experiences, to reinvigorate faith, to transmit spiritual power, and to respond to the public's rumpus against its faith convictions and practices. It is to a discussion of these intertwining particularities and the key African Pentecostal figures that mirror them, that I now turn the attention of this essay.

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<sup>3</sup> For more information on *Tertio's* call to sign the petition, see: [www.tertio.be/petitie-erediensten](http://www.tertio.be/petitie-erediensten) (Accessed 12 January 2018).

### *Recasting difficult migratory experiences*

The use of the media among African Pentecostals is intended to recast difficult migratory experiences. Unlike Africans who emigrate to Europe through legal routes, there are the desperate migrants who take the perilous journey across the horrors of the Saharan desert to North Africa. From there, they hop onto vessels, whose sea worthiness leaves much to be desired to venture across the Mediterranean Sea, for the hope of a new life in Europe. But on arrival, the realization sinks in that there are bills to be paid, siblings to support at home and other costs to be met that are directly related to their stay in Europe. The illusions of life that one experiences in the 'Promised Land' tend to crush whatever hopes and aspirations migrants may have conceived prior to their taking the journey (Bangura 2017b: 190). But African Pentecostals are not oblivious of these migratory worries. Even though immigrating to Belgium is essential in realizing envisaged dreams, there are still battles to be fought. If anything, their coming to Belgium (as are other countries in Europe) marks the beginning of a new phase which could be riddled with enormous trials such as language acquisition, negotiating the intractable ordeals involved in the regularisation of one's legal immigration status and the intense pressure to send money back home (Arhinful 2003: 157). To make sure that one succeeds in their new host communities, these challenges have to be addressed headlong through a process they consider impregnable prayer and spiritual warfare. Migrants are to persist in prayers, both for the acquisition of visas (Van Dijk 1997: 145), and the struggle to survive the hassles of life in Belgium. It is to this spiritual quagmire, that Pentecostalism offers an abstraction, with which African immigrants make sense of their new social reality, and intelligibly derive meaning from its attendant complexities.

A key figure whose life mirrors this narrative is Sandy William. A Liberian pastor who fled war-torn Liberia to seek asylum in Belgium in the early 1990s, William frequently uses the narratives of the Saharan desert, Mediterranean Sea and asylum processes in Belgium as a symbolic Red Sea crossing unto a life of prosperity. From his home in Ghent, William uses Pentecostal media outlets to challenge African Pentecostal immigrants not to lament over present predicament, but to conceptualize those traumatic experiences as a necessary crossing of the Red Sea on their way to their place of rest. This according to William is because whatever challenges, they now face in Europe, cannot be compared with the captivity of their countries of origin

where individual creativity, political and social freedom and the agency of progress are stifled. In this way, African Pentecostals use the media to recast difficult migratory experiences so that they become useful narratives which preserve the African imagination that speaks of success in a highly complex and competitive world (Adogame 2005: 231).

### *Reinvigoration of the Pentecostal faith*

Although global Pentecostalism grew from marginalized people (White 2007: 7-8), this Church development reinvented itself to attain a new social status that adds prestige to its educated urban African followers. For this educated urban constituency, international travel by both leaders and members is highly cherished because it is seen, as indicative of the blessings bestowed upon the community by God (Asamoah-Gyadu 2004: 70). As the faithful travel overseas, they do so spurred by a Pentecostal self-understanding, where images of the successful transnational African nuclear family give the faith its dynamic impetus. For instance, at Word Communication Ministries' annual women's thanksgiving service held in Brussels in November 2017, the women constituted a panel of four to discuss the theme: "The Christian woman in an African migrant family." The program, which was streamed live on Facebook, catalogued a repertoire of the successes made by transnational African nuclear families and reflected on the need to preserve family values which African Pentecostalism models. When Christian African husbands collaborate with wives to raise children, manage finances, help with house chores and better communicate with each other, the panel believes that the dream of prosperity will be achieved. According to "Mama" Deaconess Bridget Fokum<sup>4</sup> (a naturalized Belgian citizen who emigrated from Cameroon on family reunification procedure and is now leader of the women's fellowship at Word Communication Ministries), such programmes are meant to send an unequivocal message that rebrands the public posture of African Pentecostalism in Belgium.<sup>5</sup> For these transnational African women at Word Communication Ministries, a reinvigorated Pentecostal faith

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<sup>4</sup> For African Pentecostals, the wife of the pastor is called the "Mama." This title bestows honour and indicates the important pastoral roles both the pastor and their spouse play among African Pentecostal Churches.

<sup>5</sup> Handbill, 2nd Annual Women's Thanksgiving Service and Panel Discussion, Word Communication Ministries, Uyttenhovestraat 49, 1090 Jette, Brussels, Sunday 26 November 2017. Members of the panel included: "Mama" Deaconess Bridget Fokum (chairperson), Deaconess Peace Ibuluya, Sister Favour Eposi and Sister Alice Arrey.

offers spiritual and practical guidance to African Diaspora families in ways that coheres with biblical and Christian family values. In this way, Africa's new Pentecostalism lends credence to the life affirming nature of marriage and family life.

### *Transmission of spiritual power*

Pentecostal uses of the media are meant to transmit spiritual power to its clientele. It is no denying that English speaking West Africa is the epicentre from which Pentecostalism is distributed across the globe. A significant aspect of this story is the region's burgeoning film industry which "feature the power of Pentecostal evangelists to control these evil spirits - in contrast to the weakness of the mainline Protestant Christian churches" (White 2007: 11). These media products are marketed by Nigerian and Ghanaian Pentecostal clerics and are believed to possess anointing through which virtual spiritual power could be transmitted. The Nigerian cleric and founder of New Life Assembly Berchem (RCCG), Mike Nwanegbo, is famous in Antwerp for his monthly healing and anointing program dubbed "Solution Hour." Having founded New Life Assembly Berchem in 2002, Nwanegbo's online platform promises solutions to every foreseeable problem affecting clients. From his Redemption House auditorium, Nwanegbo organizes series of anointing, healing and deliverance services which are streamed live online. Outlining the vision for organizing "Solution Hour," Nwanegbo explains:

The world is full of problems and men are running to and fro in search of solution. So many are so desperate for solution to their problems that they are ready to pay anything and go anywhere to get solution to their problems. In their desperation, they fall into the hands of people who make merchandise of them. Permit me to introduce you to the one that can solve all your problems free of charge. [...] If your problem is *spiritual*, he will not be moved because he is the head of all spirits. He can say to any spirit "leave" and they will leave. Everything on earth obeys him. If your problem is *medical*, you do not need to worry because he does not need to do any diagnosis because he know (*sic*) every disease by name and they all obey him when he gives the order. He can make you whole. He has the spare parts of your body in his store house. [...] his name is our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus has mandated me to organize

Solution Hour and he promised to be in every Solution Hour. He promised to give solution to whosoever that comes without doubt. His word is sure and has never failed. Something is about to happen to you. Come and see for yourself. I want to welcome you to Solution Hour.<sup>6</sup>

Such reasoning bodes well with the cultural and spiritual sensibilities of his mainly Nigerian congregants. In addition, Nwanegbo's live television program, "Just before You Go to Bed" and "Harvest Media Radio" programs aim to prepare souls for heaven. Visitors on his website are shown pictures, video clips, audio clips, pamphlets and motivational resources that are clearly meant to embolden his stature and authenticate his credentials for pastoral ministry. Linked to the website are his booklets and the sites where they could be purchased. Online appointments for personal problems could be booked by clients on the webpage.<sup>7</sup> Thus, this quest for the transmission of spiritual power is a central concern taken over from African culture into African Pentecostalism. By applying a biblical interpretation of healing, deliverance and exorcism to African Christianity, Pentecostalism appears successful in responding more adequately to the challenges that emerge from Africanizing Christianity (Kalu 2003: 215; Ojo 2006: 87-90; Hocken 2009: 16).

### *Responding to public consternation*

In industrialized western nations, institutionalized religious frameworks, which used to structure perceptions of reality have been eroded (White 2007: 16; Brown 2001: 1). Religion, with its attendant rapport of church attendance, liturgical practices and belonging to a faith community, either plummeted or was privatised. Although Belgium has retained its gothic Catholic infrastructure, its churches are empty with sacred places used only as centres of pilgrimages or for the observance of important life cycle events. Religion, especially Catholicism, has lost its traditional influence on public life (Godwin 2013a: 90; Norris/ Inglehart 2011: 87). Meanwhile, Protestantism is making a steady comeback along with other minority religions. Hit by a series of terrorist attacks, Belgium was forced to re-examine the place of migrant religions in the consolidation of public safety and civil cohesion. In this

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<sup>6</sup> Mike Nwanegbo, "Solution Hour, Solution Is Sure, Get Solution Today," <http://www.mikenwanegbo.com/> (Accessed 21 December 2017).

<sup>7</sup> Mike Nwanegbo, "About," <http://www.mikenwanegbo.com/> (Accessed 20 December 2017).

Islamophobic context, African Pentecostalism is contrasted to Islam and presented as a user-friendly, family-cohesive and community enhancing faith. Prayer sessions for peace, security and for the safety of law enforcement officials are streamed live online to prove that Pentecostalism cares about public safety. Frequent campaigns for peaceful coexistence and social cohesion are held by individual Pentecostal Churches and newly established ecumenical bodies.

The African-Caribbean Pastors Association (ACPA)<sup>8</sup> founded on 13<sup>th</sup> September 2014 in Antwerp, is at the forefront of exploring how, in a context of public resistance, African pastors could contribute to social relevance in Belgium through involvement in community projects. Although ACPA was founded to respond to the underrepresentation of African Pentecostal pastors in existing church organizations in Belgium, it now seeks to foster unity, edification, care and prosperity among African pastors in the Antwerp area where its core membership are based. ACPA urges its member churches to make worship services accessible to the wider public. Moreover, because ACPA takes cognisance of the dangers of Islamic terrorism, it desires to leverage this situation by promoting peaceful coexistence. Accordingly, ACPA advocates for African immigrant Pentecostalism, offering the Belgian public a quick, fair and balanced perspective of its faith convictions. Therefore, ACPA's uses of social media are meant to rebrand African Pentecostalism and improve its public stature by connecting its work with the needs of local communities.<sup>9</sup>

### **Evaluative synthesis and discussion**

In the preceding section, I presented four particularities that discuss the context in which African Pentecostal actors have used various media outlets to portray Pentecostalism as religious species that is suited for enhancing the hopes and aspirations of English-speaking West African Pentecostal

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<sup>8</sup> Although this organization describes itself as African-Caribbean Pastors Association that represents the interests of pastors and ministry leaders of African and Caribbean origin working in Belgium, all the members of the organization are mainly English-speaking Nigerian Pentecostal pastors who have established Pentecostal/ Charismatic Churches in the Antwerp area of Belgium. This discovery was made when I was invited to attend one of its preparatory meetings in January 2014.

<sup>9</sup> "About," African-Caribbean Pastors Association. [https://www.facebook.com/pg/African-Caribbean-Pastors-Association-523803891054595/about/?ref=page\\_internal](https://www.facebook.com/pg/African-Caribbean-Pastors-Association-523803891054595/about/?ref=page_internal) (Accessed 21 December 2017).



immigrants in Flemish Belgium. Whereas I have made clear in this expose that such portrayals offer the African Pentecostal interlocutors a safe religious space for positive self-definition, there is need to offer a careful evaluative discussion of the outstanding implications arising from this context.

The first of these concern the recurring theological narrative used by English-speaking West African Pentecostal actors to frame their understanding of the migration process. As shown in this paper, two actors (Simon Khan and Mike Nwanegbo) immigrated to Belgium for missionary and church planting purposes; one actor (Mama Bridget Fokum) immigrated through the family reunification route; and one actor (Sandy William) immigrated to seek asylum. This diversified immigration paths are important in understanding the Pentecostal theology that underpins this migratory narrative. Each of these African Pentecostal actors are constrained to interpret their particular migratory trajectories using language reminiscent of the biblical pilgrimages that God's people engaged on when they journeyed from their Egyptian bondage (in this case Africa) to the Promised Land (in this case Belgium). This biblical imagery both percolate the retelling of stories of the journey, attainment of legal residential status and the management of disappointed expectations which remain unfulfilled even after arriving in Belgium. Therefore, while difficulties of various kinds are never excluded on the journey, those difficult experiences are however given new biblical interpretations so that they are made to look a necessary part of the overall journey. Because migrants often feel that they no longer belong to the place and culture around them (Währisch-Oblau 2012: 316), African Pentecostals are urged not to lament over present predicament, because such experiences are transitory and are intended to prepare the faithful for the eventual success they will acquire in their country of sojourn (Adogame 2005: 231). This Pentecostal theological narrative of migration is a necessary tool used by actors to inspire hope and encourage fortitude among African congregants whose lives is often a nightmare. African Pentecostals understand this theology to be one that presents clear, practical and discursive connections between migration, integration and religious commitment in Belgium.

Second, long before Europe's migration crises occurred, Belgium's federal arrangement had conferred upon its regional communities the responsibility to regulate content broadcasted on public media outlets. Seen as a cultural phenomenon, the three regional communities have the right to determine what religious content is to be aired for public consumption. However, the

unprecedented influx of undocumented migrants ignited a humanitarian crisis that challenged Europe to strike a balance between defending its security against terrorist infiltration and responding to the crisis with compassionate hospitality (Glazer 2015). As the crises deepened, opponents of this form of migration began to push for the adoption of stricter anti-immigration legislations. This move resulted in increased political involvement through the surprising electoral gains these campaigners continue to achieve. In this context, even though European democracies continue to insist that religious broadcasts must adhere to principles of neutrality and impartiality, however, because institutionalised religion has receded and Islamic terrorism has correspondingly risen, legislations are now being considered that aim to curtail religious broadcasts. As the recent parliamentary debate in Flanders does indicate, Belgium has not only experienced series of terrorist attacks by Islamic radicals, regional communities are now taking interest in the broadcast of religion on public media outlets. It can be argued that such developments challenge commitment to human rights conventions (Gearty 2016), and indicate a kind of public phobia about the precise motives served by minority religions. For this reason, English-speaking West African Pentecostal migrants will have to contend with a media climate that is gravitating toward suspicion of the motives served by minority faiths in Belgium.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, in spite of its marginal representation on mainstream Belgian media, I have suggested that West African Pentecostals have used a variety of internet and social media webcasts to redress the public's consternation of its religious practices. By its creative reorientation of the migrant's perceived expectations against the backdrop of migratory predicaments, Pentecostals are using its mediatised self-branding to provide a functional grid upon which African migrants negotiate the unintended exigencies that have arisen from their immigration to Belgium. Whereas Pentecostalism's media uses appear to be appealing to the popular African imagination and reaffirming of the African's capacity to rise above spatial limitations to achieve prosperity, they have not yet reduced the public's raucous criticisms. Nevertheless, the African Pentecostal media usage should not be discounted, but carefully reviewed in order to ascertain the faith's mediatised self-branding and engagement with the Flemish public in Belgium.

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