

CHRISTIANITY AND ANTIFRAGILITY RE-VIEWING POPULAR CHRISTIANITY IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

The story of a life funds this essay. This man joined a Pentecostal group in his youth. He got convinced that ancestral spirits are against him such that economic success usually slipped through his fingers, which, in the popular religious lexicon, is termed the 'near-success' syndrome. Our protagonist had moved from one Pentecostal ministry to another in search of a powerful man or woman of God to expel the offending spirits. Now, he has given up. He no longer identifies with any Christian group. Worse, he no longer engages in any economic activity not for lack of opportunity. He has become a burden to his family. Regrettably, a review of his past business activities shows glaring instances of misplaced priorities and bad business decisions. Flaws in character, and the precarious Nigerian business terrain are implicated in this human tragedy as well as the version of Christianity that he bought into. With the help of Nassim Nicholas Taleb's concept of antifragility, we will map the configuration of elements of the Christian tradition that contributed to the human tragedy narrated above.

Keywords: Antifragility, popular Christianity, apocalypticism, cross, prosperity message

INTRODUCTION

The American physicist and philosopher, Thomas Kuhn, introduced the concept of paradigm shift in the Philosophy of Science (Kuhn, 1970). This highlights the fact that science did not progress by the addition of one truth to others. Rather, change in science takes place through a shift in the presuppositions that had hitherto guided the scientific endeavor or rearrangement of data according to a new framework. In other words, there is no unmediated access to reality. Even the scientific endeavor is guided by unstated and untested models, visions and presuppositions that shape observation, the way experiments are set up and theories arrived at. A shift in such paradigms gives rise to a groundswell in the scientific community because all observations were made with that bias. Gestalt psychology has also shown that perception is possible through an active structuring activity of the mind. This process is exposed when shifts occur from one frame to another while observing the same thing. This underlines the importance of a perceptual frame in the process of human understanding and practice.

The contention of Nassim Nicholas Taleb is that there is a perceptual frame that had been hidden in plain sight. According to him, "the idea of antifragility has not been part of our consciousness – but, luckily, it is part of our ancestral behavior, our biological apparatus, and a ubiquitous property of every system that has survived" (Taleb, 2012, p. 49). Because this idea has not been part of the perceptual frame, antifragility is a neologism. Taleb set out to clarify and bring this paradigm to consciousness and to foreground it.

As a way of looking at and engaging reality, antifragility resonates with what is at the heart of the Christian vision. It finds articulation in the attitude that Christianity recommends to her

followers in the face of the turbulence, uncertainties, and difficulties of life. However, a form of Popular Christianity, the Prosperity Message, has flattened the landscape. Instead of the Christian vision empowering people to ride the storm of life in faith that the storm could have a place in the inscrutable plan of God for their betterment, such storms are demonized, and God is mobilized to fight the purported hostile forces and reinstate abundance. The predominant vision of life is that of a warfare between God and the evil spirits who seek to frustrate God's plan for human prosperity (Boyd, 2001). God is presented as a doting father who intervenes to dislodge offending spirits and restore prosperity if the man or woman of God with the requisite spiritual powers mobilizes God.

This version of Christianity makes people dependent on the pastor or whomever they feel mediates the divine power. Moreover, economic wellbeing is not dependent on people's faith in God. If it were, atheists and non-Christians would rank lowest in the ladder of prosperity. This is, however, not the case. Rather, prosperity or economic wellbeing across the board depends on socio-economic and political factors at play in a country. Abstracting from these factors and mobilizing the power of God, with whom nothing is impossible, through the services of so-called men or women of God, often leads to disillusionment and frustration. This version of Christianity 'fragilizes.'

In the essay and against the backdrop of a configuration of Christianity that accords better with an antifragile frame, we shall attempt to trace the theological shifts that resulted in the emphases on fragilizing popular Christianity. We shall pay attention to the understanding of God, God's providence, and God's relationship with the world and with humanity.

The first step is to clarify the concept of the antifragile. The second step is to view the Judeo-Christian tradition in the light of the key emphases of antifragility. In this regard, apocalypticism, the Johannine theology of the Cross as glory, and the place of the cross in Christian discipleship shall be briefly explored. In a third move, we shall review the key elements of the Prosperity Message in the light of antifragility to highlight points of divergence. Finally, the theological issues raised by these divergences shall be raised as points for the ongoing conversation with this form of Christianity, which, in the guise of projecting divine power, enthrone fragility.

ANTIFRAGILE: THE OPPOSITE OF FRAGILE

According to Nassim Nicholas Taleb, the opposite of fragile is not robust or resilient. For him, this needs to be underlined. What is fragile is breakable, prone to damage from movement or instability, change and manhandling. What is robust or resilient is indifferent to or unaffected by change. It remains intact at the best or worst situation. But the antifragile, the opposite of the fragile, thrives and becomes better in instability, in change, in manhandling, in bad circumstances. Adversity is the condition for the growth and thriving of the antifragile. Stress gives rise to self-strengthening responses in a system that is antifragile. It is clear therefore that the antifragile is much more than what is resilient or robust.

The skeletal-muscular system is a prime example of antifragility. To spare the bone or the muscle from stress is a guaranteed way for the bone to lose density and for the muscle to atrophy. Putting them under stress strengthens them (Taleb, 2012, p. 80). That the bone does not break when under stress witnesses to its resilience and robustness. But that it gains in density from being put under stress, shows that the bone benefits from the stress. This is

antifragility. It is this aspect of reaping something positive, being self-strengthening from what is stressful, random, chaotic, and potentially harmful, that Taleb captures with the concept of antifragility.

Antifragility does not apply only to organic processes. It applies to other human-made processes and phenomena that have attained a level of complexity and self-organization such as the society, economic activities and markets, and cultural behavior. These may not be strictly biological, “but they resemble the biological” (Taleb, 2012, pp.76-77) because they have attained a complex rather than complicated self-organization.

According to Taleb, as systems become more complex, the less they are amenable to risk management approaches through control of the negative factors and imposition of order. A thousand and one factors can negatively affect a complex system. It is therefore impossible to employ a risk management approach that seeks to forestall such factors. Rather, lessons could be learnt from nature. The human body has an immune system that is stimulated by new pathogens to produce antibodies meant to fight this new threat. The versatility of the immune system to respond to any range of unknown and unforeseeable threats is what is interesting for the risk management approach being recommended by Taleb. Awareness of the inevitability of random threats or changes, small as well as big, and the fact that history has always been shaped by such events, necessitates, according to Taleb, a conscious effort to develop in-built mechanisms, “by which ...[a non-biological] system regenerates itself continuously by using rather than suffering from random events, unpredictable shocks, stresses and volatility” (Taleb, 2012, pp. 22-23). This is the basis of Taleb’s call for the creation of antifragile systems in response to the proneness of every system to chaos, volatility, randomness and unpredictability instead of focusing on calculating and anticipating risks. Such a system in his view is usually simple. “Less is more and usually more effective” (Taleb, 2007).

While Taleb is interested in the development of antifragile social systems, which includes the reshaping of the human mindset and mindscape, ours is more specific. What version of Christianity can contribute to antifragility? This has to be a form of Christianity, which in Taleb’s words, will help people “live in a world we don’t understand,” (Taleb, 2012, p.26) a world that is cold to human desires and calculations; a world in which anything could happen irrespective of the human wishes. Is Christianity compliant with this antifragility perspective? If so, how? If not, why?

CHRISTIANITY FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF ANTIFRAGILITY

The above caption is ambivalent. It can mean an assessment of whether Christianity as a system of belief is antifragile. That would entail reviewing how Christianity has responded and continues to respond to changes in society. Whether, despite changes in society, Christianity is waxing strong not only in terms of demography but also as regards the commitment of the Christians. This is not the line of our reflection. Our concern is whether Christianity helps people weather the storms of life in an antifragile way.

The story behind the popular Christian song, “It is Well with My Soul” shows at least one instance of Christianity serving antifragility. The hymn was written by Horatio G. Spafford (1828-1888), a lawyer and businessman from Chicago. He received a telegram from his wife giving him the news of the tragic loss of his four daughters when the ship his family was

traveling with, sank in the Atlantic. He boarded another ship to Europe to reunite with the wife. Out at sea, the possible location where the tragic event took place was pointed out to him. The words of the hymn came to him among which is the line: “when sorrows like sea billows roll, you have taught me to say, it is well with my soul” (Hawn, 2023). In other words, in his tragedy, his faith in God gave him peace. What element in the Christian vision worked this alchemy? This reminds one of St. Paul, who rejoiced in his suffering (Col 1:24) or of the missionaries who despite the high mortality rate due to malaria and other parasites volunteered to take Christianity to other climes; or of the martyrs who chose to die rather than deny their faith. What elements in the Christian vision helped individual Christians to shed their blood and face difficult challenges? What elements are helping many people today who go through socio-economic and political turmoil but are sustained by their faith? What configuration of the Christian faith contributes to people’s antifragile response to contemporary challenges?

The Christian tradition is variegated. This is because the Christian message has shown itself to be translatable into many contexts (Sanneh, 1989). Strands of the Christian tradition can be retrieved and reordered to give different emphases. But the core Christian vision can be discerned. It is therefore our belief that it is possible to highlight a configuration of some elements of the Christian tradition that make Christians antifragile. The issue that stands out is divine providence vis-à-vis the flow of history. A corollary to this is the correlation between secular history and salvation history which raises the question of the theology of the world and the place of the human being in it.

Providence is about the divine governance of the world. This has often been discussed in philosophical theology in terms of how to reconcile divine foreknowledge and governance on the one hand, with human freedom on the other hand; how to uphold divine providence without lapsing into determinism as regards history – natural and human. But the faith of Christians is not nourished by such debates, important though they are, but by their experiences and interpretation of the Bible.

In the narratives of Scripture, God is said to feed the birds of the air and to clothe the flowers in the field (Matt 6:26-29). To raise the question of how God does this leads to the recognition of secondary causality. The farmer who cultivates corn or manures the ground on which the flower grows is like the instrument used by God to achieve a purpose. The farmer is not the only one cooperating with God in the growth of the flower. The water, the sunlight, the process of photosynthesis and other natural processes, studied in biochemistry or allied course, are also cooperating with God. The notion of divine governance through secondary causes allows one to hold human beings responsible for things that go wrong due to human freewill. But natural disasters raise deep questions for the faith in providence. Such experiences lead to the loss, as happened after the 1755 Lisbon Earthquake on All Saints Day, of a narrow anthropocentric understanding of providence as directed to the comfort and well-being of human beings (Voltaire, 2023). This directs one’s view to the large canvass of the history of the earth. This beautiful blue planet is one of the rocks floating at incredible speed in an ocean of space. It faces many threats starting from solar flares to asteroid hits. One such hit in the past had nearly wiped off life. From her bowels, volcanic eruptions and earthquakes can trigger Tsunamis. These catastrophes had taken place in the past. They can still take place at any time. One can therefore connect with the notion of the Black Swan presented by Taleb. In a split second, everything could change for the worse for anybody and maybe for

everybody. The diagnosis of a cancerous tumour can stand one's world on its head in a flash (Stoller, 2004).

The experiences of the universe as not particularly geared towards safeguarding human interest and needs challenge one's understanding of a providential God understood in the image of a shepherd who leads his flock to green pasture. Process Theology responds to this by rethinking God. God is conceived as in relation with and to everything, rather than over and above and unaffected by everything. Being in relation with creation, God is affected by as well as affects creation through divine persuasive power. "God creates with the world, not independently of the world. The world enters into something like a creative dance with God, emerging anew in every moment as it takes its past and God's own future into its becoming self" (Suchocki, 2003, pp 8-9).

But one can respond to the challenge pointed out above by reaffirming the value of the shepherd metaphor while reaffirming God's otherness and the limit of human knowledge. In summary, one can articulate a nuanced view of divine providence by presenting a view of the shepherd God as seen in Psalm 23. This inspires confidence that one is not alone. One is cared for by a benevolent power. However, God's thoughts are as high above human thought as the heavens are above the earth (Is55:9). Therefore, God could lead one through a valley of darkness (Ps 23:4). Because Christians walk by faith not by sight (2 Cor 5:7), such a treacherous journey will not inspire fear because one is assured of God's presence and support. Thus, in acknowledgement of God's mystery, one does not fear even when one walks in the valley of darkness. A lot of what is termed evil and why they take place are left within the purview of the mystery of God with an assurance in faith that God will be victorious.

One sees a transition in the Scriptures regarding the coordination of divine providence and history. In some layers of the Old Testament, the history of the Israelites is presented as shaped by covenant fidelity or lack thereof and the divine response thereto. This theology of history comes out clearly in Deuteronomy 28, where obedience to the covenant is seen as the condition for favourable fortunes in life and vice versa (Deut 28:1, 15). This view is also predominant in the prophets. In apocalypticism, history is presented as shaped by the conflicts and struggle for supremacy between potentates (Bauckham, 1978). This is clearly seen in the book of Daniel. In other apocalyptic writings such as the non-canonical Ethiopic Enoch, the Watchers, fallen angels, are implicated in the challenges faced by humanity (Paul, 2023). These writings, however, encourage the righteous who suffer the consequences of such quests for power by supra-human entities to remain steadfast in their resistance in the knowledge that God is on their side and would ultimately triumph and reward them with a glorious afterlife. It is therefore not coincidental that the belief in the afterlife bloomed fully with the rise of apocalypticism. In sum, what stands out in apocalyptic literature despite the imagery of life being shaped by spiritual conflicts, are an assurance of the certainty of divine victory over evil and an afterlife in which reward and punishment would be meted out. We will not explore other developments within the Second Temple Period that formed the background to the New Testament (Grabbe, 2004, p.2). Suffice it to say that these developments shed light on the teachings of Jesus Christ.

In the New Testament, divine involvement and victory over evil is concretized in the Jesus event. In a demonstration of antifragility, death which was supposed to be the ultimate

stressor for the human being, was not only anticipated but also accepted by Jesus in obedience to God the Father. The self-emptying of the second person of the Blessed Trinity reached its highest point in His death on the cross (Phil 2:7-8). This vision also permeates the Gospel of John. The purpose of the incarnation is presented as the adoption of those who believe in the Son (Jn 1:11-13), the formation of a community of believers which was achieved on the cross. The Hour of Jesus (Jn 2:4) for his glorification (Jn 17:1) came on the cross. It was by being raised as Moses raised the snake that his identity was revealed (Jn 8:28) and that he drew all people to himself (Jn 12:32; 3:14). He formed a community of those drawn into the divine expression of love (Jn 15:13) through the cross. By His example of total surrender to the will of the Father to the point of death and the divine seal of approval through the resurrection, Jesus revaluated suffering, pain, and death. Instead of being unqualified evil, these acquired new meaning as means to glory if united with the cross of Jesus and undergone in obedience to God's will.

Jesus gave as the condition for discipleship, the carrying of one's cross (Matt 16:24). Death became the gateway to life so much so that the agricultural metaphor of a grain of wheat dying to multiply was presented by Jesus (Jn 12:24) as a vision of life. He also challenged his disciples with the paradox that it is by losing one's life that one gains it (Matt 16:25). St. Paul carried further this vision. Suffering, pain, and even death, were given new and positive meanings in the divine purpose. St. Paul invited the Romans to exult in their hardships and see them as having positive effects in their lives and above all, opening them up to the love of God poured into their hearts (Rom 5:3-5). Similarly, St. Peter presented the suffering of Jesus as an example for the Christian to follow (1 Pet 2:21). The phrase "washing in the blood of the lamb", although understood in terms of purification by the merits of Christ's redeeming death, is also an invitation to shed one's own blood in imitation of Jesus. Thus, the penal substitution theory of salvation needs to be complemented (Col 1:24) so that trusting in God's love, the Christian accepts whatever negative experiences, uniting them with the suffering of Christ for the salvation of the world. In this perspective, the Christian is better prepared to ask with St. Paul, "if God is for us, who can be against us? Can anything cut us off from the love of Christ?" Rhetorically, Paul then asked: can hardships or distress, or persecution, or lack of food and clothing or threats or violence? In response, Paul proclaimed that "we come through all these things triumphantly victorious, by the power of him who loved us. For I am certain of this: neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities.... Will be able to come between us and the love of God, known to us in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:31-39). This calls to mind another line in the song written by Horatio G. Spencer, "whatever my lot thou has taught me to say, it is well with my soul." Undoubtedly, this version of Christianity supports antifragility.

CHRISTIANITY IN THE SERVICE OF FRAGILITY

It is paradoxical that a form of Christianity, that has become popular, is breeding fragility. This is not strange because Christianity is a tradition with many faces. A hermeneutical retrieval and selective emphases or re-arrangement of some elements of the tradition, give rise to new configuration of the same Christianity. This is what has happened. Popular Christianity in Nigeria, that is, the form of Christianity that is shared commonly by many people, especially the Prosperity Message, presents a version of Christianity which does not support antifragility. Let us trace some of the elements of this new configuration.

The tragic life recounted in the abstract above represents a version of Christianity that fragilizes. Let us draw attention to some of the emphases in this configuration. First is a presumption that the will of God is fully known. For them, the will of God is that all persons should prosper, that is, enjoy inner worldly fulfilment – health, wealth, longevity, career success, etc. Jesus' statement that he has come that all may have life in full (Jn 10:10) is quoted in support of this interpretation of God's will as if full life necessarily must refer to inner worldly life. This identification of life with the inner worldly shows inadequate nuancing of the operative theology of the world. Similarly, the presumption that the mind of God is fully known contrasts with the version of Christianity explored above that emphasizes God as mystery. Despite divine revelation and the gift of the Holy Spirit to believers (1 Cor 2:9), there is so much about God that is not known to humans (Rom 11:33; Is 40:13). Revelation is for human salvation and does not exhaust the mystery of God.

Because popular Christianity delineates what it considers God's will for humanity, the absence of the abundance of life demands explanation. Abstracting from all inner worldly explanations such as personal, socio-economic, and cultural factors, explanation is done in terms of evil spirits. This is the second emphasis of this version of Christianity. By invoking evil spirits, the understanding of the exercise of divine providence through secondary causality is dispensed with and a theology of history in which history is seen as the outcome of the power encounter between divine and infernal forces is enthroned. The advantage of this line of explanation is that it resonates with elements in the African traditional religious world-view. But, it obfuscates reality. Instead of calling out the socio-economic and political processes responsible for the challenges people face, it displaces the blame to the spirit world so that a solution would be sought for in the realm of religion. In reality, however, there are no less evil spirits in those climes where society is organized such that citizens enjoy the basic necessities of life. What is clear is that institutions and social processes in such societies are run more efficiently.

Having diverted attention to the realm of spirits, the version of Christianity under discussion offers its solution – the mobilization of divine power by powerful men or women of God to dislodge the offending spirit. This is the third emphasis – the prominence of a scheme of mediation appropriated to those who claim the power to move God. Some of these succeed in infiltrating and hijacking the psyche of their clients so that they must be consulted before any step, either in the business, travel, or home of these clients, is taken. There are *ad hoc* hypotheses for the failure of the promises made so much so that there is no accountability by these religious figures. The non-realization of the promise of abundance and prosperity is blamed either on the lack of faith on the part of the client or the shoddy observance of the prescribed religious ritual. After repeated failures, the option left for the client caught up in this version of Christianity is to seek out another powerful man or woman of God, who supposedly is better adept, to bring about the hoped-for-situation. The roller-coaster from one man or woman of God to another continues till the situation changes or the individual gets frustrated.

What is conspicuously absent in this version of Christianity is the cross. Rather than being a symbol of the unconditional love of God and the pledge of divine presence even in difficult circumstances, the cross serves as means to the restoration of the paradisiacal state of abundance. Implicit is the thought process that as the disobedience of Adam brought about expulsion from Paradise, the obedience of one man effected humanity's re-admission to

Paradise. The default setting of human life after the Jesus event is therefore prosperity and abundance in this mortal life. Having said this, it is pertinent to note that there is no scriptural warrant for an understanding of soteriology in terms of the restoration of paradise. The reference to Adam as a type for Jesus in Rom 5:19 is meant to highlight the disobedience of the first and the obedience of Jesus. Such does not imply an understanding of the Jesus event in terms of the restoration of the paradisiacal state. It is, indeed, this foregrounding of abundance as the default setting that weakens the ability of this version of Christianity to help people find meaning in the pains and sufferings that are the daily lot of humanity.

The foregrounding of abundance in this world fails to take seriously the nuanced theology of the world that one finds in the Scriptures. On one hand, the world is the theater of God's salvific acts and interventions. The incarnation affirms the world as good and as the context for the divine-human encounter. On the other hand, the world is also presented as being under a ruler, the god of this world (2 Cor 4:4). This ruler of the world has been judged (Jn 12:31; 14:30; 16:11) and the world is to be dissolved by fire (1 Pet 3:10). Granted that affirmations of faith do not translate without reminder, into scientific propositions. In the case under consideration, the vision of the destruction of the earth shows the relative importance of the physical world. The vision in the Book of Revelation of a new heaven and new earth (Rev. 21:1) warns against any uncritical valorization of the known world. The salvific work of Jesus cannot be reduced to the restoration of abundance of health, wealth, fertility, and longevity in this life that is transient. It is this vision that is at the root of the weakness of this version of Christianity. Paradoxically, it is the source of its attraction because it resonates with what Chukwudum B. Okolo calls the anthropocentricity of traditional African Religion (Chukwudum B.O., 1995, Maimela, 1985). Unfortunately, the life context within which the traditional religious beliefs were forged had changed drastically and the in-built checks and balances in that system thrown out of sync.

CONCLUSION

It seems that a correlation can be established between the worsening socio-economic and political situation in Nigeria and the rise of the Prosperity Message as the popular expression of Christianity. As has been shown above, this version of Christianity fragilizes. It does not help adherents generate inner strength to thrive despite their bad circumstances. It only succeeds in providing temporal relief through the promise of divine intervention through the prayers of the powerful man or woman of God. When the promised abundance fails to materialize, some people lapse into disillusionment or take the further step of renouncing Christianity. There is however a version of Christianity that not only enables people to give meaning to the pains and sorrows in their lives, but also to tap into their inner strength to transcend and engage in transformative action. This is the version of Christianity that supports antifragility and which preserves the integrity of the Christian tradition.

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