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Machine gun prayer: the politics of embodied desire in Pentecostal worship

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Pentecostal embodiment through a study of the way prayer is spoken of and performed in a prominent Nigerian Deliverance church. It argues that the Deliverance churches' exaggerated emphasis on the demonic serves to re-purpose prayer as an embodied violent performance that is often as much directed to the devil as it is to God. This article thus reveals the ways in which the entanglement of divine and demonic beings in the Pentecostal body results in the production of a subject that does not just act upon itself, but in fact seeks to defeat and hence deliver itself. Moreover, in offering a detailed account of how the movement's theology of the body is made manifest in performances of prayer, the article argues for scholarly attention to the role that theological doctrines play in the constitution of embodied experience in the study of religions more generally.

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Introduction

That so many born-again Christians regard their bodies as a kind of medium through which to access the transcendent is a fact that is impressed upon any casual observer who is sensitive to the rhythms and moods of Pentecostal worship. It is also a natural corollary of the central axiom of the movement—that God can be experienced by Christians directly, personally, and intimately. In short, people *move* in Pentecostal services. They shake, dance, sing, cry, laugh, shout, and collapse on the floor. Pentecostal subject-making thus involves far more than just the internalisation of a particular scriptural hermeneutic or the memorisation of a set of doctrinal formulae. It is as much an embodied process as it is a cognitive one; it entails the gradual cultivation of particular bodily dispositions, passive and active, through performances of, for example, prayer, fasting, being anointed, and exorcism. Ruth Marshall's Foucauldian formulation of the Pentecostal process of subjectivation as an “active and free work of the self on the self” therefore not only incorporates “particular doctrinal, institutional, and discursive forms”, as Marshall herself suggests (Marshall 2009, 46), but also involves embodied forms,

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which she does not properly explore as her primary focus is the ‘body politic’.

Feeling and moving like a Pentecostal involves the mimetic cultivation of what Marcel Mauss famously called “bodily techniques”, which offer Pentecostals opportunities to “enter into a communion with God” as a “function” of their “taught” bodies (Mauss 1973; Asad 2003, 252). Tanya Luhmann’s more recent observation that becoming ‘born again’ is about “training” the self to “identify some thoughts as god’s voice, some images as god’s suggestions, [and] some sensations as god’s touch” offers a useful update to Marshall’s celebrated portrait of Pentecostal subject-making insofar as it draws attention to the sensorial dimensions of these processes (Luhmann 2012, xxi). This article explores the ways Deliverance Pentecostals think about and use their bodies in prayer. My sources derive from my experiences while conducting participant observation and semi-structured interviews in the Nigerian Pentecostal Deliverance church “Mountain of Fire and Miracles” (MFM) for my doctoral research as well as from discourse analysis of some of the church’s transcripts of sermons and published tracts.¹ My objective here is twofold. Firstly, to explore the ways in which the Deliverance strand of Pentecostalism, with its exaggerated emphasis on the demonic, serves to re-purpose prayer as an embodied violent performance that is just as much directed to the devil as it is to God. Secondly, to offer thick descriptions and granular analyses of the way an implicit theology of the body is made manifest in Pentecostal prayer practices. In so doing, I seek to demonstrate the heuristic value of giving serious and sustained attention to the role played by theology, not only in the constitution of embodied experience, but also in the formation of religious subjectivities, broadly speaking. This, I suggest, not only advances our understanding of the critical interplay between texts and bodies in the anthropological study of Christianity, but also brings to light the emerging contribution of a ‘theologically engaged anthropology’ to the study of religions more generally (Lemons 2018; Robbins 2006).

Divine and demonic selves

Problems in theorising Pentecostal embodiment

Scholarly interest in the Pentecostal body is progressing apace, reflecting a broad shift away from questions concerning the born-again subject’s negotiations with the forces of modernity and globalisation (Asamoah-Gyadu 2009; Brahinsky 2012; Jeannerat 2009; de Witte 2011; Singleton 2011). Caroline Jeannerat, for example, has argued that Pentecostalism has “reclaimed the physical body as a positive and active conduit of religious practice and experience” from Protestantism’s general “mistrust” of it, regarding it as a “reliable conduit through which to establish a connection with, and to

communicate with, the ultimate” (Jeannerat 2009, 257). Marleen de Witte also suggests that “the experience of being touched by the Spirit forms the basis of charismatic–Pentecostal subjecthood” and that “much of charismatic religious practice” is aimed towards “being ‘in touch’ with a divine presence” (de Witte 2011, 491). Such contributions have successfully shored up embodiment as a critically important lens through which to examine Pentecostal subjectivity, although they risk over-emphasising the ways in which the body is understood as an instrument of the divine, over and above the demonic, in the Pentecostal imaginary. By contrast, those who have spent time in churches dedicated to deliverance, where spiritual warfare is the order of the day, insist that even during Spirit-led practices like the ‘sacred swoon’ (being ‘slain in the Spirit’), the subject can in practice encounter his/her own body as “an experience of shock and disgust at being in obnoxious contact with the demonic”, as Richard Werbner has put it (Werbner 2011, 189; see also Haustein 2011; Bialecki 2017; Pype 2011). Thomas Csordas’s highly detailed and comprehensive ‘cultural phenomenology’ on healing and deliverance, published in 1997, therefore continues to serve as a helpful reminder of the importance of examining the complex and multi-pronged effects of demonic possession on embodied experience and subject-making for those who undergo it. Csordas’s ethnographic focus was, however, charismatic North America, not the Pentecostal Global South or Nigeria, where the figure of the devil and the role of deliverance practices have been invested with remarkable cultural significance, especially since the 1990s. In Nigeria in particular, the recent rise of Deliverance theology and the associated practices directed at exorcising the demonic seem to suggest that there is scope for more research into experiences of demonic as well as divine presence in Pentecostalism and, more broadly, its implications on matters of embodiment and selfhood.

In a Deliverance church, the omnipresent threat of demonic interference—from casual harassment, sometimes known as ‘demonic blockage’, to full-blown possession—means that what stands in for the ‘ultimate’ (to borrow Jeannerat’s phrasing) is in practice more often demonic than divine. It is true that a certain anxiety around discerning the sources of possession experiences has historically troubled the church more generally. In fact, some scholars have demonstrated that suspicion surrounding the authenticity of mystical experiences has for centuries served to keep some (female) mystics at arm’s length (Jantzen 1995; Bynum 1991).² Yet this dormant tension surfaces in Deliverance Pentecostalism where the threat of demonic oppression does not dissipate upon conversion.

Deliverance Pentecostals regard their departure from mainstream Pentecostalism to rest, crucially, in the emphasis they place on the doctrinal belief that being ‘born again’ does not protect a Christian from demonic possession. A person filled with the Holy Spirit, and having

undergone Spirit-Baptism, they maintain, can nonetheless continue to suffer from demonic affliction.³ This gives rise to the perennial need for deliverance and the movement's *raison d'être*. The author and practitioner Derek Prince, who is widely recognized as having been “the foundational figure for popular Charismatic Deliverance”, details this theological doctrine in *They Shall Expel Demons* (Collins 2009, 43–44; Prince 1998). “The Holy Spirit will dwell in a vessel that is not totally clean, provided that He has been given access to the central, controlling area of human personality: the heart”, Prince explains. “[He] does not come to indwell us because we are already perfect. He comes to help us so that we may become perfect.” (Prince 1998, 155–160) Prince states that part of the Spirit's role is to assist believers in sanctifying their bodily vessels by delivering them from the demons that bind them and wrestle with each another for control of the heart. He offers scriptural support for this doctrine by recounting the story of David's adultery with Bathsheba and murder of Uriah, her husband (2 Samuel 11). (ibid, 155) When David implores God to forgive him, Prince observes, he appears to be already filled with the Spirit as he says, “Do not take Your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of Your salvation.” (Psalm 51:11–12) This leads Prince to the conclusion that the Holy Spirit “continues to dwell in us, defiled though we are” (Prince 1998, 156). This doctrine is also at work in the preaching of Mountain of Fire and Miracles (MFM): in the sermon “Silencing Satanic Storms”, General Overseer Daniel Olukoya insists that “being born-again is a door way to being completely delivered, and not Deliverance itself” (2001a). Writing on Ethiopian deliverance, Jörg Haustein explains that the

assumption of personal unity is dismissed in favour of a segmented anthropology; partial control means that one or several parts of a believer are under demonic influence, whereas others may be controlled by the Holy Spirit (Haustein 2011, 541).

With this mercenary teaching in force, the effort to keep apart the divine and demonic aspects of the self becomes an ongoing existential preoccupation. In practice, submitting oneself to the demonic instead of the divine by accident during worship becomes a dangerously likely possibility. Opportunities for this transgression regularly present themselves in the widespread practice of spirit possession: the twin experiences of being slain in the Spirit and being possessed by an evil spirit are both marked by the subject's prostration on the floor and a loss of motor control—incidentally, both kinds of experience are more commonly undergone by females than males.⁴ It will thus become clear throughout the remainder of this article how the entanglement of divine and demonic beings in the Pentecostal body, a possibility that emerges from this distinctive theological anthropology, results in the production of a subject that does not just *act* upon itself, as Marshall states, but in fact seeks to *defeat* and *deliver* itself. The conditions for this self-work—the self-assault and

self-deliverance—are to be found in the demand on Pentecostals to open up their bodies (‘vessels’) to being ‘in-filled’ by the Holy Spirit, which also renders these bodies vulnerable to demonic attack.⁵ The bodily performance of prayer is therefore of critical importance to these Pentecostals, who regard it as a necessary step in the process of self-deliverance.

The weapon of prayer in spiritual warfare

The Mountain of Fire and Miracles (MFM) church calls itself “the largest single Christian congregation in Africa” (“History of MFM”, n.d.). Although very likely an exaggeration—the number of church members is notoriously difficult to ascertain in Nigeria, its reach and cultural influence across sub-Saharan Africa is noteworthy. It claims to attract between 100,000 and 200,000 worshippers to its weekly Sunday services at the headquarters in Lagos and it has over 500 branches worldwide. The head of the church, General Overseer and founder, Dr Daniel Olukoya, has published over 200 books on spiritual problems and deliverance, which are sold around the world and can be purchased online, on Amazon. In 1997, Olukoya acquired a 50-hectare plot of land on the Lagos–Ibadan expressway to build the privately managed “Prayer City”, modelled after the adjacent metropolis “Redemption Camp” of the Redeemed Christian Church of God’s (RCCG) church. When I visited the complex in 2018, it boasted a shopping mall, a university, a bank, a school, and an auditorium that can hold up to half a million worshippers at any given time, notwithstanding the continuous building construction taking place at the site.

The MFM church establishes its foothold in the crowded marketplace of Pentecostal churches by propounding a version of Pentecostalism that is physically and morally demanding on its adherents. Its rigorous approach appeals to those who, as people often say, “didn’t see results” in other churches and are therefore prepared to heighten their levels of self-discipline. The church consistently locates the source of material challenges—financial, reproductive, physiological—in the spiritual realm: “the spiritual controls the physical” is a phrase one constantly hears in MFM circles. In other words, the church explains that there are ongoing spiritual obstacles in people’s lives that take the form of malevolent spirits which they have contracted prior to them becoming born again or continue to attract through the habits they indulge in and the company they keep. Given the almost infinite number of ways one can contract a demon, this means that virtually everybody is afflicted by some type of Satanic spirit and in need of deliverance. In fact, Olukoya warns that as much as “90 percent of those who go to church in this country, to the best of my knowledge, need Deliverance” (Olukoya 2001a).

In practical terms, the practice of Deliverance largely involves prayer and fasting. The scriptural justification for this is taken from Matthew 17:21,

where Jesus heals the demon-possessed boy, concluding that “this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting” (see also Mark 9:29). At a climactic point during a deliverance service, a demon may be aroused and manifest itself in a full-blown demonic possession of a praying subject, at which point a direct exorcism may be conducted. However, as dramatic manifestations cannot always be guaranteed, prayer retains its place as the central active practice in the process of deliverance and in worship more generally. In Olukoya’s theology, prayer is an “important part of that war” against Satan and his congregants are “prayer warriors” (Olukoya 2001b). Far from being a still and contemplative affair, it is a behaviour which engages and mobilises the body as a weapon, in what is known as the “ministry of violence” (Olukoya 2011a). Prince also describes prayer as a “weapon” and an “intercontinental ballistic missile” (Prince 2013, 17), making reference to the biblical figure of Daniel in his “battle in prayer” against “Satan’s hostile kingdom” (Daniel 10–12). Luhrmann has suggested a comparison between the theme of spiritual warfare in evangelical prayer and Ignatian spirituality (Luhrmann 2012, 172), but there is also scope to take this much further back in the Christian tradition, even to the Monastics of the fourth century who viewed prayer as a form of “spiritual combat” to be fought against evil spirits (Brakke 2006, 6). The Coptic desert fathers, for example, practised “direct” *antirrhēsis*, whereby a biblical verse was uttered as “a kind of exorcism which specifically negates or repels” demons (and the distracting thoughts they give rise to) (Dysinger 2005 131, 137; Evagrius and Brakke 2009). This ensured that the body as well as the spirit (and mind) were employed to exorcistic ends.⁶

At the MFM church, members usually pace up and down the pews and aisles when praying. They recite particular ‘prayer points’—performative commands which are broken down into segments by whoever is leading the service and repeated by the congregation, in a caller–response style.⁷ After this period of collective prayer, members may break off on their own to chant prayer points loudly and forcefully. As a point is repeated faster and faster, it becomes less articulate and worshippers may slip into glossolalia. The oft-quoted prayer point “scatter my enemies”, for instance, might be uttered in full a handful of times and then dissolve into the word ‘scatter’. The word ‘die!’—as in “death to the demonic”—is the most popular prayer formulation in the church. It is commonly chanted over and over again, in an emphatic and aggressive tone. Militaristic language in general is heavily employed, as adherents petition God with the points “Make me Your sharp battle axe”, “Let my hand become the sword of fire to cut down demonic trees”, and “Let the stamping of my feet defeat the camp of the enemy” (Olukoya 2001c). At the MFM church, believers are not simply soldiers in God’s army, but their very bodies, their hands and their feet, become valuable armoury in the battle against Satan. Usually, worshippers close

their eyes in concentration and energetically enact the physical motions of cutting, breaking, pounding, and stamping with their arms and legs. Sometimes, Olukoya instructs them physically to strike their own heads or the pain-stricken parts of their bodies, bellowing the words ‘die!’ and ‘get out!’. The moment whoever is leading the prayer points raises his/her voice to issue the phrase, “in Jesus’ mighty name we pray”, which is always announced with the same intonation—with a heavy accent on the first syllable of the word ‘Jesus’—the cacophony of movement and sound grinds to a halt. The congregation falls silent and the sense of disorder dissolves. Members automatically respond to the appropriate cues, having trained themselves in MFM’s bodily techniques of prayer.

Prayer points are, however, not only to be said at church. Adherents are advised to recite them in free moments at home or at work and in some cases even in the middle of the night (when evil spirits are most active). Like a physician, a pastor might prescribe the recitation of a particular prayer point a specific number of times and at specific points in the day, as a spiritual treatment to deliver the individual who is afflicted by the demonic. At the start of *Prayer Rain*, considered to be Olukoya’s most important book, he instructs the reader to conduct the prayers in the manual in the following prescribed manner:

A. Three days’ night vigil, i.e. praying from 10PM to 5AM ... B. Three days’ fast ... breaking the fast at 6.00PM or 9.00PM daily. C. Seven days’ night vigil ... D. Three or more days of dry fast. (Olukoya 2013, x)

This ‘technological’ style of prayer has historical resonances with the Aladura movement (meaning ‘Praying People’), a Yoruba-initiated Christian revival of the early twentieth century that arose in response to ideological and theological clashes with missionary Christians (Peel 1968, 119).

In the UK context, such techniques were explicitly compared with mindfulness or meditation practice by MFM members, serving as an example of the ways Pentecostals loosely draw on numerous themes and terms that emerge from Western psychotherapeutic discourses in their own practices, albeit inconsistently (Csordas 1997).⁸ Prayer points were likened to positive affirmations when I was in California, which one MFM member linked to the popularity of the film and book *The Secret* (Byrne 2006) among evangelicals more widely. *The Secret* is a pseudo-scientific self-help book which maintains that a concentrated effort to envisage what one wants is enough to make it materialise in reality. The scriptural verse of Matthew 21:22, “if you believe you will receive what you ask for in prayer”, is said to have had an impact on the development of the prayer style of the MFM church as well as on Rhonda Byrne, the author of *The Secret*. In fact, according to MFM members, prayer points themselves are directly lifted

from Scripture, making prayer the act of speaking the Word of God. Again, there is a striking parallel to the desert fathers' use of 'direct' *antirrhēsis*.

For Pentecostals, the scriptural source plays a crucial role in differentiating prayer points from a kind of spell or incantation that might be associated with witchcraft and occult practices that are seen as demonic. However, the fine line that separates them can be seen in the following prayer point that Olukoya offers in his sermon "The Principles of Prayer": "Let all incantations against me be cancelled, in Jesus' name", which is to be recited as a kind of incantation (and is not extracted from Scripture) (Olukoya 2001c). Pastor Joshua of an MFM branch in Nigeria elaborated on this position, saying:

If somebody wants to attack you now, maybe the person is an herbalist and he begins to chant incantations in order to harm you, you can say, "I cover myself in the blood of Jesus!" It's our own incantation as a Christian . . . So this Word, this Bible, is our own incantation, our own enchantment! But the confidence we have is that this word supersedes any other word. (Joshua, personal interview, 20 August 2018)

Here, we see laid bare the complex entanglement of this Christian discourse with that of its evil cosmic or Satanic counterpart. Yet, at the same time, there is a certain conviction in the supremacy of the former over the latter with regards to supernatural efficacy and moral authenticity.

Spiritual arbitration: an analysis

A preoccupation with the extrication of the self from a demonic past is a constant looming concern among Pentecostals, but the belief unique to Deliverance Pentecostals that Spirit-Baptism is an insufficient condition for the expulsion of evil spirits heightens this anxiety further. At times, MFM worshippers call upon the Spirit to help them overcome 'demonic control' in prayer. By way of explaining how to "defeat bewitchment", Olukoya describes the 'proper' way to pray:

When you talk about aggressive and prevailing prayers, it must involve your entire being and faculty. That is why a person who is praying prevailing prayer does not even know whether there is mosquito [sic] around because the whole of his body, soul and spirit are involved. Your totality is put into that prayer. . . Prevailing prayer is like a woman in labour who keeps labouring until she is delivered. . . If somebody has been bewitched from the womb and has been under demonic control for 45 years, and the person wants to break free, it will be very fraudulent for a preacher to tell that person, "Just believe God, two minutes prayers and you will be through." No, he may be on it for six hours because many things have piled up. The Holy Spirit needs to put oil into the screws in some people's lives so that they can be loosened easily. (Olukoya 2011a)

The first point to observe here is that prayer is understood to be a bodily act as much as it is spiritual and mental. It is an all-encompassing experience

that uses the ‘whole’ of the body, taking the worshipper out of his/her immediate surroundings. Olukoya’s metaphor of the woman in labour draws attention to the visceral and violent nature of prayer as it should be ‘properly’ performed, where the product of one’s efforts is new life or being the new creation in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17). Olukoya makes a pun of the word ‘delivered’ to refer to both the (spiritual) delivery of the new-born child and the practice of self-deliverance which guarantees salvation, of which prayer is an essential component. The groans of the childbearing woman presumably echo the glossolalic “groans”—prayers that are “too deep for words”—in expectation of the coming Kingdom (Romans 8:26) (Macchia 1998; Chan 2011, 70). Here, Pentecostalism’s post-millennial agenda serves to endow prayer with a sense of eschatological magnitude. Unlike other evangelical denominations, those which prioritise deliverance, believe that they “have a mandate proactively to root out demons to advance the victorious Kingdom”, rendering the performance of prayer a fundamental exercise within a much larger teleological and apocalyptic vision of history (Collins 2009, 68; see also Hammond and Hammond 1973).

On the individual level, Olukoya encourages his worshippers to *kenotically* self-empty their bodily vessels of demonic pollutants on the road to deliverance. This makes space for the Holy Spirit to pour the anointing ‘oil’ into the openings of the body, a process that requires the Spirit’s assistance in slackening the grasp of the demonic and points towards the implicit Pentecostal distinction between the Spirit within and the Spirit without. The believer learns to recognize the Spirit within and enjoin it to participate in the effort to ‘clean’ the vessel so that the Spirit without can seize and saturate it. Worshippers must therefore keep their bodily vessels open to infiltration by the Spirit without, in order to encourage a divinely initiated exorcism, but this, incidentally, also renders the body vulnerable to demonic intrusion. Prayer requires the assumption of a mode of embodied hostility towards the parts of the self that are inhabited by demons, the demonic within. It becomes a battle that is fought within one’s own divided self, in the greater spiritual duel between God and Satan. As a bodily operation of the self upon the self, prayer aspires to deliver the subject from itself, as in the childbirth metaphor. Nevertheless, prayer always necessitates the deployment of the body in attaining self-deliverance, rather than demanding the flight from the body or even its suppression.

Even though prayer is customarily performed as a kind of embodied combat, the target is not always the demonic. In another sermon, titled “The Power of Violent Prayer and Violent Faith”, Olukoya presents prayer as a confrontation with God, which is motivated by a desire for him:

Violent prayer is aggressive prayer, that is, hard-hitting and bold. It is demanding prayer, that is, pressing for immediate response; it is expectant prayer filled with

aggressive anticipation of victory; it is militant prayer, that is, combative and fighting prayer; compelling prayer; urgent prayer; persevering prayer; prayer to give God no alternative but to answer; it is machine gun prayer; prayer that gives Jehovah no peace; undeviating prayer; obstinate prayer; seizeless and heaven bombarding prayer. (Olukoya 2014)

Olukoya suggests in this passage that prayer needs to be aggressive if it is to reach the ears of God. Elsewhere, he writes, “when we pray, our prayers have to go up, passes [sic] through the headquarters of evil before getting to the third heaven ... this is why prayer is hard work”. God resides in the third heaven, where the first is the “firmament which we can see” and the second is the demonic realm. (Olukoya 2001a) In this cosmology, the devil acts to frustrate Christian efforts to communicate with God, standing literally between him and his creation. It is not uncommon for those leading prayer at MFM services to chastise the congregation if it is felt that they are not praying violently enough, encouraging them to use their voices and bodies more intensely. At the MFM “Prayer City” campus in Nigeria, “prayer goes on 24 hours a day, 7 days a week non-stop” and bears a strong resemblance to the act of “soaking prayer” that is characteristic of charismatic worship (“About MFM” 2015; Wilkenson and Althouse 2014). In ‘soaking prayer’, as Csordas describes it, language becomes “virtually a ritual substance in which the supplicant is immersed” (Csordas 1997, 46).

Once again, the prayerful person is imagined to be female as Olukoya later draws on Luke’s parable of the persistent widow (Luke 18:1–8) for scriptural inspiration (Olukoya 2011b). His exegesis of this tale makes use of his own ritualistic inventions, as he explains that the widow approached the judge “hammering on one prayer point: ‘Avenge me of my adversary.’” Olukoya concludes that just as the widow “strategically pressurized that unjust judge ... equally God appreciates those who pester Him with their prayers” (ibid). Prayer is not necessarily an act of adoration towards God but is petitionary, a legitimate way of bullying him into giving us what he wants. In this libidinal struggle, the ‘machine gun’ is the power that resides within the body, launched to shoot God with a bullet (or arrow) of desire. The praying person pursues God like a sexually persistent lover, affording him “no alternative but to answer” (Olukoya 2014).

Further, God is imagined to take pleasure in being ‘pestered’ by his devotees. This seems to be a sexual–spiritual violent fantasy about the nature of female desire, but actually imagined from a male perspective. However, to assume that the pursuer is male and that God plays the role of the coquettish female who feigns sexual disinterest would be to overlook the fact that the sermon is written by a man and that this very dynamic is a feature of a discourse that is predominantly composed and sanctioned by men. Olukoya in fact encourages both male and female worshippers to embody the fervour that is associated with feminine piety and devotion,

so that they may experience the presence of the Spirit within their bodies and convert that sense of empowerment into spiritual lust for the divine.

Conclusion

Three summarising observations emerge from this exploration of prayer. The first is that prayer is an act of spiritual warfare that is played out upon the battlefield of the Pentecostal body. It brings the 'prayer warrior' into a larger cosmological duel and eschatological trajectory that is connected to the imminence of the coming Kingdom. Its linguistic and embodied dimensions fold into one another as prayer must be not only spoken but also enacted. In contributing to the petitioner's own self-deliverance, prayer demands the full animation and engagement of the body, which involves performing a kind of *kenosis* in order to make space in the vessel for the Spirit's in-filling.

This leads to the second observation: the kind of pious and embodied devotion that this style of prayer requires is implicitly aligned with a perception of the female appetite for the spiritual. A masculine perspective that is hidden in plain sight aligns the kind of pious and embodied devotion that this style of prayer demands with a perception of the female spiritual appetite. Both male and female worshippers are encouraged to nurture their desire for, and to embody, a stance of receptivity towards the Spirit. However, being spiritual and being embodied are both spiritually dangerous existential states, as the yearning for divine presence so often summons the devil instead.

Thirdly, as a theological battle, prayer is, strictly speaking, fought against the devil within and the devil without, not against God. Yet, because prayer is an embodied mode of violence, it becomes an interaction of confrontation, regardless of whether it is invoked in incessant adoration of God or in rage against the demonic. The rhetoric of spiritual warfare strives to stretch the divine pole away from the demonic, but this in fact accomplishes the opposite, entangling them instead both linguistically and libidinally. A preoccupation with expunging the demonic from the body reformulates the ritual act of prayer as a somatically violent performance which is often directed at one's inner demons. Overall, being a Deliverance Pentecostal entails far more than the cultivation of technologies of the self that encourage theophanous encounters to be sensed within and upon the surface of the body. Attending to the movement's theological anthropology reveals that this version of Pentecostalism encourages subjects to divest themselves of the darkness they uncover within, on the road to self-deliverance. Here we thus clearly see the role that specific theological doctrines can play in the formation of embodied religious subjects.

Notes

1. Thirteen months of ethnographic fieldwork, including participant observation and 37 semi-structured interviews, were carried out between 2015 and 2018 at MFM branches in Nigeria, Oxford, and California. The General Overseer, Dr Daniel Olukoya has made many of his sermons available online (see <https://www.sermoncentral.com/contributors/daniel-olukoya-sermons-57287>, accessed 20 September 2020) and the church publishes and broadcasts extensively on the internet. Names have been changed to protect informants' identities.
2. Nancy Caciola and Moshe Sluhovsky document the preoccupation with the discernment of spirits during the European Middle Ages and the early modern period. They note that, in the medieval period, "the external etiologies of the two syndromes—divine and demonic possessions or seizures—were represented in such similar terms as to be indistinguishable" and were most likely experienced by women "who entered into immobile and insensible trance states" (Caciola and Sluhovsky 2012, 6).
3. James Collins's work traces the particularity of the Deliverance strand of Pentecostalism, observing that some early Pentecostal characters like the exorcist John Dowie (1847–1907) already differentiated themselves from the mainstream by virtue of Dowie's insistence that the demonic *could* possess the life of even the Spirit-filled Christian, contra the claims of many of his Pentecostal peers at the time. This view was particularly revived in the work of Derek Prince (1915–2003) who, after undergoing an experience of deliverance from the demon of heaviness, felt compelled to leave the Pentecostal ministry of which he was a member, on the grounds of their refusal to entertain the possibility of demonic possession for a born-again and Spirit-filled Christian (Collins 2009, 43–47).
4. Scholars have long documented the preponderance of women who undergo spirit possession worldwide. Csordas suggests that, while "the preponderance of women appears to be the rule in devotional religions", the frequency of being slain is comparable across the genders (Csordas 1997, 31–33). This does not, however, accord with my own observations among Nigerian Pentecostals, where women underwent spirit possession far more frequently than men.
5. Interestingly, the General Overseer of MFM calls the church a 'Do-It-Yourself ministry'.
6. The turn away from the gnosis of the mind to a kind of embodied and experiential knowledge can, for Pentecostals, be traced at least as far back as the German Pietist movements of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century, which in turn took inspiration from Catholic mystics (see Anderson 2004, 25).
7. For example, the prayer point "Let the stamping of my feet defeat the camp of the enemy" becomes "Let the stamping/Of my feet/defeat the camp of the enemy" where each phrase is issued by the leader and then repeated by the congregation.
8. Meditation practices have, of course, roots in South Asian yogic traditions.

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